Chapter 13

Immersive Storytelling:
Leveraging the Benefits and Avoiding the Pitfalls of Immersive Media in Domes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter compares and contrasts the development of traditional cinema and fulldome cinema, describing the way their origins shaped not only their current success and potential as unique cinematic mediums, but also how their cinematic languages developed. There is a vastly different approach to storytelling that filmmakers must understand when creating shows for immersive digital dome theaters versus the approach they would take to tell stories in a traditional film. This chapter identifies key differences between cinema and fulldome and provides a primer for immersive storytelling on the dome from understanding the technology to understanding how most effectively to use the strengths of fulldome while avoiding its weaknesses. Ultimately, this discussion is designed to help creative artists become more effective immersive filmmakers for the fulldome canvas.

INTRODUCTION

Modern society is experiencing an explosion of immersive media in a nearly overwhelming number of forms: Virtual Reality (VR) that requires a headset that feeds 360° imagery in the user’s eyes and pours immersive audio into their ears; Augmented Reality (AR) that creates visual and auditory overlays on top of reality using a smart phone or a semi-transparent pair of glasses; Mixed Reality (MR), that uses a combination of VR and AR to create new and unexpected experiences through a headset that can change from fully transparent to fully opaque based on the content creator’s design. Then there are hybrid forms of immersive media that blend theatrical stagecraft with a VR system that allows free roaming through physical spaces with walls people can see virtually and touch in reality, props they can use, and other tactile sensations that powerfully blur the lines between virtual and reality. These are just some examples of immersive media that involve some sort of device that the audience must either use.

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or wear, and more times than not, these “vehicles to immersion” create a sense of isolation, not a shared community experience.

On a more basic level there is 3D stereo technology that exists in cinema, VR, home theater, video games, lenticular stereo printing, giant screen theaters, and even giant 3D dome theaters to add visual depth to the experiences. In a completely different type of experience, interactive media platforms like Twitch add to the viewer’s sense of agency and therefore immersion.

These “new media” experiences have brought with them new ways of telling stories and a new type of cinematic and aesthetic language that creatives and consumers alike are still trying to understand and unravel. New media storytellers are experimenting with new ways of immersive expression and developing and inventing a new lexicon of techniques and understanding how to speak this immersive visual language. It is an exciting time as creatives are blazing a trail through this largely undiscovered country. Exploring the art of immersive storytelling opens a deep well that branches in nearly infinite directions that would overwhelm this chapter and spill over into a series of books.

This chapter focuses on a specific type of immersive medium: digital fulldome theaters (Figure 1). From their origins as planetarium spaces to their continuing growth into VR Theaters of the future, this exciting medium has developed its own cinematic language that is part traditional cinema, part live theater, and a lot of something magical that when leveraged effectively can transport audiences as a small community into shared virtual experiences. Technological advancements and system features still
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