

Workshop 2: Writing IDN for cinematic VR

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1 Introduction

In this 4-hour workshop, we will challenge you to not just talk about the theoretical implications of interactive digital narratives, but take a deep dive and actually write a scene that should be suitable to be filmed in 360°. For this exercise, we will provide you with a Classic Short Story. In small teams, you will be challenged to adapt this story (or a scene or sequence from it) into a VR film-script.

The workshop set-up:

- Introduction: about practical issues of writing for 360°: how do you write down what happens in all 4 directions? What about perspective in VR – who is the camera point of view? How do you draw the attention of the viewer to a certain direction? Can we use a voice-over, in 1st, 2nd or 3rd person perspective? How can we make the story interactive? Should we give additional instructions for the viewer and how should these be communicated? (30 minutes)
- Break, participants read the Classic Short Story (30 minutes)
- Discussion: what is the story about, what is the story perspective, can we identify a Hero's Journey? (15 minutes)
- Teams work on film-scripts (90 minutes)
- Teams present scripts + discussion (90 minutes)
- Drawing conclusions (15 minutes)

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2 Backgrounds

A scene that is intended to be watched from 360° may take different viewer perspectives into account. For instance, the story could be told in such a way that the camera is not part of the narrative, but just registers the scene like a fly on the wall. Another option however, would be to include the viewer position within the story, and have characters react towards the camera as if it is another character participating in the scene. Experiments like these, in which actors react to a camera, are of course known within traditional cinema as well. As a media of attraction, VR draws on interdisciplinary practices to produce experiences, for which also the use of applied theater methodologies is being studied. Thus, experiments with new ways of storytelling are imaginable in which the option of the viewer to look around within the scene - and for

instance discover pieces of information and new interpretations - could be essential to the way a plot unfolds [1, 2, 3].

2.1 Who are you?

‘Who are you?’ this question is a literary classic, as posed to Alice by the stern Caterpillar during her adventures in Wonderland. For VR scriptwriters, however, this question is also the starting point for an intriguing investigation into the user perspective of VR experiences. ‘Do you see me?’ is one of the first issues that users are confronted with when entering a virtual world. Sometimes their only way of making themselves known to the characters inhabiting the virtual world is by handling simple mechanical interactions in the role of an invisible observer. In other cases they may be highly involved in the story, by embodying the main character and interacting with both the storyworld and the characters. ‘What am I doing here..?’ is another compelling issue that VR users are confronted with. [4]

2.2 Voice-over

Two particular advantages of using voice-over can be identified: the first is the unique opportunity for intimacy that it provides, by offering insight into the character’s mind. The second is the possibility to create irony through the clash of verbal comments with the visual track. By directly addressing the viewer, the protagonist steps out of the frame of the narrative. A first person narrator can be either a character within the film that addresses the viewer from his or her particular point of view, but it can also be a nameless, omniscient narrator. The third person is often also omniscient, and both can add new insights, intimacy and irony to the scene. [5]

2.3 Interaction

To allow for interaction in a surround video, small elements of code can be implemented in the application that allow the viewer to have some degree of agency over the events that happen on the screen. By looking towards one of these so-called hot-spots the user can activate the next part of the scene. In the field of Interactive Storytelling, research has often focused on the freedom that may be given to users, by letting them choose alternative outcomes for the narrative. A second option for an interactive story structure, however, is what has been referred to as ‘string of pearls’. This is essentially a linear structure, made up of a string of small episodes, in which the user may need to perform a specific action that will allow them to advance to the next section of the story. With this kind of structure, users follow only one possible route through the storyline, with just one final outcome. [6]

2.4 The filmmakers’ toolbox revisited

In cinema, the four techniques that have traditionally make up the toolbox that filmmakers rely on to tell their stories are cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound and editing. For cinematic VR however, these tools need reconsideration, as the medium

requires the development of new cinematic constructs and film language. Filmmakers not only need to let go of control over the frame, they also can no longer direct what it is that their audience is looking at, at any specific moment during a viewing of their film. Because the image is projected in 360°, the viewer has the freedom to look around in the scene and focus their attention on the people, objects and details that she chooses, instead of the ones that are pointed out to her by the creator of the film. This inability to control the audience's attention poses a problem when a filmmaker intends to present a narrative that relies on a specific sequence of events to unfold the plot in the most effective way. But while the director can't use camera movement or frame to guide the viewers' attention, there still are a number of other tools available that can be used for this purpose. Actors themselves, for instance, can give all kinds of signals to the viewer, by looking, pointing or walking in a certain direction. Use of light and shade can be manipulated to direct the user's glance and also sound is also a powerful tool to direct the viewers' attention. [7]

References

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SHORT BIO OF ORGANIZERS

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