360 Degrees: Best Practices for Immersive Storytelling

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At Vrse, we’ve been experimenting with cinematic VR and how to create the best narrative experiences in this new medium. For us, every new project is a chance to explore more uncharted territory. We hope to share a few of the things we’ve learned along the way and open a conversation as we know there is still much to be discovered.

Thinking About Cinematic VR vs. 360 Degree Video

For this article we’ll use “VR” to refer to both immersive headset virtual reality, as well as 360 degree video. Generally speaking, all of the same techniques and opinions apply. That said, there are some differences:

- **Accessibility:** We’re passionate and excited about the future of in-headset VR, but it’s still early in this space and VR headsets are only just beginning to be broadly available. 360 degree video is far more accessible right now, as it’s easy to consume and share on many platforms.

- **Motion:** For viewers, nausea is barely an issue with 360 video although it’s often reported when viewing content in VR. As a creator, this means you are free to experiment with camera motion and other techniques in 360 Video. Keep in mind, though, that large distances may be cumbersome to traverse quickly as a viewer and reaction times are lower.

- **Presence:** Although 360 degree video allows people to move around within a scene, it offers less of a sense of presence when compared to VR. VR headsets allow people to step inside the scene and experience visual, auditory, and haptic cues.
Creating An Experience in VR

Creators of cinema incorporate elements of composition, editing, sound, and score to show their audiences an experience. The fundamental nature of VR, however, requires us to think beyond the rectangular screen and consider how we will transport audiences elsewhere.

VR is essentially a teleportation machine. We’re trying to bring our audience real presence and, as a result, the experience needs to be at the heart of crafting a story. As you begin ask yourself: What would be an amazing experience in real life? How can I capture interesting people, beautiful places, and unique experiences in a way that feels authentic?

Playing with Perspective

VR offers the opportunity to play with perspective. When VR audiences put on a headset or begin watching a 360 Video, they feel a sense of control over what they see. It can be interesting to tell an entire story through one character’s perspective, so that your audience can “see” through the main character’s eyes. For instance in Guy Shelmerdine’s ‘Catatonic’ you watch the film from the confined first person perspective of someone strapped into a wheel chair in an insane asylum.

Maintaining a ‘role’ in the film helps viewers understand their relationship to the story, but first-person perspective can also pose challenges when there is no visible body or true agency. We’re excited to see stories told from different perspectives and how they can shape the experience of the story.

Crafting Transitions: Smooth Wipes and Fades

Editing is a part of our visual language and has become second nature in everything we watch. However, transitions act differently in VR and 360 degree video. There is so much to explore in the virtual sphere that cutting too quickly causes the viewer’s whole world to change, creating an unpleasant experience. Flat cuts have also have the potential to feel distracting. Imagine blinking, and when you open your eyes you’re suddenly somewhere else. It’s a bit shocking.

Instead, try fades and other smooth transitions. In the U2 music video, “Song for Someone,” we utilized wipes, which is the effect of one shot replacing another from behind a moving line.

Acting in VR: The Role of Distance

Actors in VR also need to employ new techniques. Audiences are now more intimately connected to actors as they can better perceive movements and physical details. Like stage actors, actors in VR will often need to use their whole body to communicate, but instead of projecting their character across vast theatre distances, the director can control how far or close characters are to the viewer. And, as viewers get closer, subtle movements are magnified. Rule of thumb, if the acting feels un-natural on set, it will feel un-natural in VR.
The Role of the Camera in VR

Camera Motion

Smooth controlled camera movements are important to creating an enjoyable VR experience. When a viewer is fully immersed, their senses convince the brain that the experience is real. We like to compare this to travel on a train; when it accelerates or slows down, you feel momentum pulling you. When the train is traveling at a constant speed, you don’t feel it. In the New York Times ‘The Displaced’ we attach the camera to a child’s moving bicycle but we cut in and out of the show while it’s in constant motion.

If you’re going to employ movement to the camera, try smooth, constant movement. Try not to show the camera accelerating or decelerating. Rotation is handled by the viewer, so adding additional rotation, pitch, or yaw is not strongly discouraged.

Distance Between Camera and Subject

You should carefully consider the spatial relationship between camera and subject. Staging the camera close to characters may make them feel imposing, while staging the camera further away and at an angle, may convey shyness. The audience’s natural reaction will be a desire to know more about them.

Camera Height

We’ve generally found that experiences work best when the height of the camera is the same height as the person or people you want the audience to connect to. If your story is about kids, or you want the viewer to feel like a child, then perhaps set the camera at their height.

Continuing the Conversation

We’ve found there are no hard and fast rules to creating the best stories in VR. We recommend considering a variety of these tips and techniques when you approach your next production, but don’t forget to experiment and explore. We look forward to hearing and seeing more about this exciting new form of storytelling.