

Atypical Reality: Exploring the narrative potentials of an immersive environment

Keywords

Graphic novel, Virtual reality, Near-death experience, Storytelling, Autoethnography.

This research considers how a storyteller might employ virtual reality (VR) in the creation of an immersive narrative that communicates an experience of both conscious and atypical consciousness (near-death experience). The study emanates from a post-positivist paradigm and the research design employs autoethnography supported by heuristic inquiry. It explores personal experiences in connection with other people, using self-reflection as a means of understanding a wider range of social, historical, cultural, and political conditions. A near-death experience (NDE) is defined as a profound subjective experience that may occur after severe health threat and can be described as an atypical state of consciousness in conditions that are usually defined as unconsciousness. People who report NDE may experience a bright light that permeates space; feeling happiness, peace, joy, and a sense of unconditional love; hearing unusual sound; being in a tunnel; seeing deceased relatives or friends; experiencing a life review; seeing their own body from above; and encountering a conscious return back into the body. NDEs are linked to profound and long-lasting changes that can dramatically alter a person's attitude to life, their beliefs, and values. Not only people who have experienced NDE are affected by it, but also people who hear or read about it may experience similar, positive effects. Initially this project started as a traditional graphic

novel and only later moved into VR. This happened as a response to my search for a better way to describe what it might feel like to have a near-death experience. This project uses VR's inherent disadvantage as an advantage, allowing the viewer to be present in a scene and at the same time not have a physical body. In addition VR is currently changing the way we tell and 'read' stories, offering an opportunity for creating more impactful storytelling. In this realm, a viewer can become a witness inside a story, and gain a subjective first-hand perspective, rather than a third-person view. It might be more challenging for creators to direct a viewer's attention, however this also allows for more authentic interaction with a story as the viewer has a choice of what to focus on, noticing or ignoring certain details of the story, thus creating their own version of it. By using Oculus Quill to produce the visuals I have been able to illustrate and animate material inside virtual space. This approach differs from conventional 3D experiences because work is completely rendered inside VR. The Quill application allows for an organic, hand drawn feel, which was very important for me as stylistically it is closer to the traditional graphic novel medium. The Quill application felt the best choice for me, however with the rapid software development it is possible that a different platform will create even more advanced tools.