

Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue on E-Politics of Immersion - Immersive Storytelling in Digital Ecosystems: 'Down the Rabbit Hole'

Christian Stiegler, Brunel University London, United Kingdom

Immersion is a defining element for the understanding of mass media in the 21st century. In the age of digitally mediated environments, we create, consume, and share immersive stories. We act, move, and communicate in immersive spaces and mediated realities, ultimately co-creating them in dialogical processes. On social media and entertainment platforms, in online role-playing games, and virtual and augmented realities (VR/AR), we are constantly falling down the rabbit hole to be surrounded by all-encompassing hyperrealities, which determine the intersections, mutations, and transmutations of the virtual and the real. Emerging, interactive content strategies, in which both authors and audiences contribute meaning, embodiment, and emotions, reframe immersive storytelling as a site for the production of new, alternative, and inclusive content ideas, where old identities and new social formations are contested and 'worked out'. But what does it mean to be fully immersed within a narrative?

This issue is mainly concerned with this phenomenon and must be regarded as the commencement of a more expansive effort for understanding immersion and immersive storytelling. The current hysteria for VR technology, 360° videos, and interactive narratives in VR can be seen as a long history of immersive environments, and immersive narratives in cinematic, theatrical, and literary research, but especially in interactive, transmedia, virtual, and augmented content productions. Those ultimately have an influence on our media consumption, and the powers, logics, and tactics of the digital ecosystems in which they are embedded.

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In this regard, the first article is devoted to the politics and underlying principles of immersive storytelling in VR on digital ecosystems. It provides an understanding of how the grounding principles of immersive narratives are intertwined with the logics of digital ecosystems such as Facebook (Oculus) and Google (Daydream VR). The example of the *Mr. Robot* VR experience helps to understand programmability, user experience, popularity, and platform sociality as grounding principles in the commanding discourse of immersive technologies in the 21st century.

The second article positions the implications of immersive narratives in the context of fake news as a sociocultural and political phenomenon. By outlining that individuals merely serve as a conduit for the curation of news stories, be they fake or real, the article analyzes the 2016 U.S. Presidential

campaign and election, in which fact and fiction become difficult to distinguish in relation to the Trump administration. The results show how immersive narratology creates different universes of discourse, which intermingle and overlap.

The third article, on the basis of conducting interviews with artists, explores and discusses two immersive worlds in detail. Blast Theory's *A Machine to See With* and Dennis Del Favero's art project *Scenario* are both offering distinctive ways to wire participants to virtual worlds through the performance of movement and user's mobility. Both artworks create environments through convergence of the human body with technological hardware to engage and immerse their audiences.

The last article, stressing the ontological problem of describing VR in narrative terms, provides an urgent clarification to the undertheorised phenomenon of the 360° film in VR. By analyzing the current environment and infrastructure for the 360° film, as well as its narrative dimensions, authorship, framing and space, temporality, and repetition, the article provides some of the structures and codes for immersive narratives. It claims that the passive three-dimensional exploration of mediated narratives is not a barrier for immersion and many of its restrictions are likely to become narrative conventions for future VR experiences.

CONCLUSION

Such discussions cover a broad scope across different fields such as VR, transmedia storytelling, film, television, social media, journalism, and digital art, and posit the urgent need for an international dialogue that discusses the implications of immersive storytelling in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary arena. Immersive narratives are changing the conditions and rules of media consumption, redefining the role of audiences, and the dynamics of storytelling norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies.

That means that audiences, more than ever, need to reflect on what media they are consuming and how they are consuming it. With immersive technologies such as VR and AR, our perception of mediated realities is changing drastically; the barriers for audiences to develop a sense of presence in mediated spaces soon will be practically non-existent, which ultimately will impact on the rules and conditions of social interaction, social activism, politics, and so forth. For immersive technologies in the 21st century it is not enough to extend the human body with technological hardware, or trigger emotional reactions off their audiences through gripping content; instead these 'empathy machines' are actually building up the ability to replace the 'real' and (re)create it in digitally mediated environments. This raises questions such as: How do immersive narratives modify our understanding of the world, realities, and identities? Are users really able to act autonomously when they are fully embraced by mediated realities governed by someone else? In which way are privacy and rights issues affected if new data such as physical movement is passed on to third parties through VR devices? How do we reimagine our understanding of the 'real' when presence, involvement, and engagement exist only in virtual spaces? What happens to our memories, stories, and ideas, if the virtual becomes the new real?

Answering these questions requires an ongoing discourse on immersion and immersive storytelling across disciplines such as narratology, computational science, media studies and media production, drama and performance studies, game studies and games design, semiotics, interactive arts, cognitive science, human-computer interaction and transmedia studies. But more importantly, it needs a new approach to media literacy to make sure audiences gain enough knowledge to reflect immersive narratives in economic, political, and cultural areas of social life.