Transmedia Storytelling, Immersive Storyworlds, and Virtual Reality

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Keywords—Include up to 8 keywords that give context for your submission.

This paper considers the role of virtual reality (VR) experiences in major media franchises’ storyworlds, including Star Wars, the Marvel Universe, the DC Extended Universe, Game of Thrones, and Harry Potter. The paper opens with a brief description of transmedia storyworlds and the concept of narrative extensions, which are new stories that are added to existing narratives across a range of media. To distinguish different types of experiences, I use four categories to describe fifteen VR experiences across these five major: sneak peeks, short demos, action games, and narrative experiences. For each experience, I consider the types of user interactions offered, the overall length and replay value of these experiences, cost at launch, and the overall success or failure of these experiences based on critics’ and fans’ comments and reviews. While the strategy of incorporating VR experiences into existing media franchise storyworlds is still very much in its infancy, there are identifiable trends in what kinds of experiences fans most appreciate, what experiences generally fall flat or underwhelm fans. I conclude with some encouraging prospects for the future for sophisticated VR storytelling.

I. TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND VR

Media theorist Henry Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling as a process in which “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (2007), as when one part of an ongoing story is shown in a film, another part in a novel, and a third part in a comic book. Jenkins states that the growth in transmedia storytelling “reflects the economics of media consolidation or what industry observers call ‘synergy’” where “a media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible” and that “the current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise” (2007). As fans seek to experience their favorite fictional worlds through videogames and other types of tabletop games. Thus it should come as no surprise that immersive VR experiences set in transmedia storyworlds are an attractive prospect for fans and creators alike.

II. CONCLUSION

VR experiences do not yet offer a significant number of transmedia storyworld extensions compared to other media such as television, film, comics, games, and print fiction. The DC Extended Universe, Harry Potter, and Game of Thrones franchises have only dabbled in this medium with mostly disappointing results. The Marvel Universe’s most successful attempts to develop VR content consists of two short demos to promote upcoming Spider-Man films, though the AR title Dimensions of Heroes may point to more ambitious efforts in the future. The Star Wars franchise leads the pack in terms of both quantity and quality of VR experiences, learning from early disappointments and improving upon mechanics with each new release. Star Wars is also the only franchise attempting to create genuine narrative extensions into the transmedia storyworld using VR experiences, using the innovative team experience Secrets of the Empire at their theme parks and through their impressive narrative experience Vader Immoral, both of which tie into canon content in other forms of media.

III. SELECT REFERENCES


