

The AFI FEST Interview: Wevrâ??s James Kaelan on Virtual Reality Storytelling

Description

Each year, AFI FEST presented by Audi highlights cutting-edge virtual reality (VR) storytelling with the State of the Art Technology Showcase. I attended last year and heard Keynote Speaker, Anthony Blatt, Co-Founder of Wevr, at the AFI FEST 2016 State of the Art Technology Showcase. Like it or not VR is here to stay. Moreover, VR offers some substantial benefits.

AFI spoke with James Kaelan, current Director of Development + Acquisitions at VR creative studio and production company Wevr, about his work in VR and the future of the medium. Formerly Creative Director at Seed&Spark, Kaelan brought his immersive short-film horror experience THE VISITOR to AFI FEST last year for the Showcase.

AFI: What got you interested in creating VR work in the first place?

JK: Iâ??m as surprised as anyone to find myself working in VR. Iâ??ve always considered myself something of a Luddite â?? skeptical, generally, of the advance of technology. But back at the end of

2014, Anthony Batt, whoâ??s a co-founder of Wevr, was advising at Seed&Spark (which I helped co-found), and invited our team to visit their offices and watch some of the preliminary 360 video and CGI work they were producing. I remember sitting in the conference room and putting on the prototype of the Samsung Gear VR, and being immediately shocked by the potential of the technology. This wasnâ??t some shiny new feature grafted onto cinema â?? like 3D or a rumble pack in your theater chair. This was a new medium, requiring a brand new language.

James KaelanJames Kaelan

AFI: What misconceptions do you think are out there among audiences when they first encounter VR work?

JK: I think audiences, rightfully, expect a lot from the medium. Most people whoâ??ve had any direct contact with the very broad array of experiences that we broadly group together as â??VRâ?• have still only seen monoscopic 360 video, either on a Google Cardboard or a Gear. And with such work, after youâ??ve gotten over the initial thrill of discovering that you can look around, essentially, the inside of a sphere, your expectations accelerate. Two years ago we were still at the LumiÃ¨re brothers stage of VR. Workers leaving a factory? Awesome. Train pulling into a station? Super awesome. But unlike with cinema in its early years, the audience for VR has extremely high expectations about narrative complexity and image fidelity gleaned from the last 130 years of film. They wonâ??t tolerate inferior quality for very long. So those of us on the creative â?? and technical â?? side of the medium have to find a way to meet those assumptions. Some creators, in a rush to find a viable language in VR, have resorted to jamming it into the paradigm of framed storytelling, force-mediating the viewerâ??s perspective through edits, and teaching the audience to remain passive. And I donâ??t want to dismiss those techniques out of hand. But I think itâ??s our job to actually forget the rules we apply to other media, and continue striving to invent a brand new way of telling stories. When we begin to master that new language, audiences will come in droves.

AFI: Whatâ??s the biggest challenge documentary filmmakers encounter when creating something for the VR space?

JK: I would actually say that documentary filmmakers are better equipped, naturally, to transition into VR â?? or at least the 360 video element of it. And I say this because, without painting â??nonfictionâ?• storytellers with too broad a brush (and without sinking into the mire of the objectivity versus subjectivity debate), documentary filmmakers engage with existing subjects, rather than inventing new ones from scratch. Certainly when you look to the vÃ©ritÃ© side of documentary film, where the goal is observation rather than participation or investigation, 360 should feel quite natural to those artists â?? because itâ??s actually closer (I say with great trepidation) to a purer strain of objectivity: because youâ??ve gotten rid of the frame. Youâ??ve chosen where to place the camera and when, but youâ??re capturing the entirety of the environment simultaneously. Fiction filmmakers are probably less likely to encounter â?? or invent â?? story-worlds that unfold in both halves of the sphere simultaneously. All of that is to say, I literally wish Iâ??d spent more time making long-take docs before moving into VR!

AFI: What types of artists are you looking to work with at Wevr?

JK: Wevr is in this unique place where weâ??ve made a name for ourselves making some of the most phenomenal, intricate, interactive, CG, room-scale VR â?? like theBlu and Gnomes & Goblins â?? while

simultaneously making, and being recognized on the international film festival circuit, for 360 monoscopic video work that has cost less than $10,000 to produce. So I donâ??t want to pigeonhole Wevr. We make simulations with Jon Favreau on one end, and on the other, we work with college students who are interning with us during the summer. What unites those two groups is that both maximize, or exceed, whatâ??s capable within the constraints of their given budgets. Within reason, you give any artist enough time and money and sheâ??ll make something incredible. More impressive â?? and more attractive to us â?? is the artist who can innovate in times of scarcity and abundance. At this moment in the history of VR, if you can tell stories dynamically without having to hire a team of engineers to execute your vision, youâ??ll get more work done. Youâ??ll actually get to practice your craft. Later you can have a team of 100, and a budget of a million times that.

AFI: Whatâ??s a common mistake you see new artists making when they first start creating work for the VR space?

JK: Artists working in VR try to replicate whatâ??s already familiar to them. And ironically, itâ??s the filmmakers who have the toughest time transitioning â?? myself included. We miss the frame. We miss the authorial hand that mediates perspective and attention. We miss the freedom to juxtapose through editing. And because we miss those things, our first inclination is to figure out how to port them into VR. The best â?? and least possible â?? approach is to forget everything you know, like Pierre Menard trying to write the Quixote. Whereas artists from theater, from the gallery and museum installation world, come to VR almost naturally. They think about physical navigation and multi-sensory experience. They think about how things feel to the touch. They think about how things smell. They think about how the viewer moves, most importantly. Thatâ??s an invaluable perspective to have at this still-early stage in VR.

AFI: What was your experience like showcasing VR work at AFI FEST?

JK: For me â?? and for my collaborators on the project, Blessing Yen and Eve Cohen â?? showing THE VISITOR at AFI FEST last year was an honor. In order to earn a living while being a filmmaker, Iâ??ve done a lot of different jobs. In the beginning I bussed tables. Later I got to write about film for living. Now I get to create, and help others create, VR. But during that entire time, from clearing dishes at Mohawk Bend in Echo Park six years ago to working at Wevr now, AFI FEST has been the same: a free festival, stocked with the most discerning slate of films (and now VR) from around the world. And Iâ??ve gone every year since Iâ??ve lived in LA. So, it meant a lot to me to be included last year. On top of that, the presentation of the VR experiences themselves, spread around multiple dedicated spaces that never felt oppressively crowded or loud, made AFI one of my favorite stops on the circuit last year.

Interactive and virtual reality entries for AFI FEST 2017 presented by Audi are now being accepted for the State of the Art Technology Showcase, which highlights one-of-a-kind projects and events at the intersection of technology, cinema and innovation. The deadline to submit your projects is August 31, 2017. Submit today at AFI.com/AFIFEST or Withoutabox.com.



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