Virtual reality gets starring role at Venice film festival

Description

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By Vanessa Thorpe

There will be a special salon at the event for viewing increasingly ambitious productions in the new immersive format.

Jesus VR – the Story of Christ will make its debut at the festival. Photograph: autumnvr.com

Venice, first of the big autumn film festivals, is the most glamorous, attracting big stars to Europeâ??s most beguiling location. But this year, virtual reality technology could steal the limelight from all the talent posing on the Rialto.

The film, Jesus VR- The Story of Christ, is too be unveiled at the festival on Thursday, marks the biggest investment so far in bringing the immersive world of virtual reality to mainstream cinema. The US-backed film will be 90 minutes long when it is released this Christmas, but 40 minutes are to be previewed in Venice for anyone quick enough to grab a headset. Filmed in 360 degrees, it places its audience as spectators at the nativity, and takes them right through to the resurrection. The film is Venice festivalâ??s way of saying that the future has arrived.

â??Just as 3D cinema offered a way to draw audiences that had been lost to television back to the cinema, in the 1950s, so VR provides a unique selling point in the battle against the ubiquity and accessibility of online content,â?• said film and gaming expert Michael Pigott of Warwick University. â??VR certainly offers a form of entertainment experience that is new and striking, but perhaps of equal importance is the fact it is tied to technology. Entertainment companies can market a unique experience that audiences can only have if they go to a VR-capable cinema or purchase the requisite headset and hardware.â?•

Although Imax cinemas are billing their VR theatres as alternatives to the solitary headset experience, up until now consumers have had to shell out for a VR system like Oculus Rift, Google Cardboard or the HTC Vive.

Invasion!, according to Madagascar co-director Eric Darnell, is in a 'brand new language'. Photograph: Baobab Studios

This spring, the Cannes film festival also gave more space than usual to VR, showing more than 35 new short films. But it is Venice that has really welcomed the format, setting up a special viewing salon. So, despite deciding to call off the festivalâ??s opening celebrations out of respect for the Umbrian earthquake victims, Venice will still be watched closely in the wider film world to see how sceptical critics react to VR.

The big question remains: does anything yet bridge the divide between the worlds of gaming and cinema? At Cannes, Steven Spielberg was not convinced. He said he felt VR was even potentially â??dangerousâ?• because it let the viewer â??forget the storyâ?•. Alongside naysayers like Spielberg is Pixarâ??s co-founder, Ed Catmull: â??Itâ??s not storytelling. People have been trying to do [VR] storytelling for 40 years. They havenâ??t succeeded,â?• he said last year.

Videogaming, he believes, is the natural home for the technology. â??Itâ??s its own art form, though, and itâ??s not the same as a linear narrative.â?•

Yet Pigott points out there are two ways that VR is already providing new kinds of storytelling: experiments in a kind of â??lightâ?• interactivity that allows the viewer limited control over their point of view within a film; and a stronger version, where the viewer can explore a fictional world â?? something that many video games, such as GTA 5 or The Last of Us, already permit, if only in an animated form, rather than a photographic world.

Lucasfilm has played around with Googleâ??s Cardboard headset kit, making a short VR video called *Jakku Spy*, which it released before *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, while newcomer Baobab Studios has made a six-minute film called *Invasion!* It was presented at Cannes by Eric Darnell, the co-director of animated hit *Madagascar*, who told reporters it was not an extension of cinema, but â??a brand new languageâ?•.

Oculus owner Mark Zuckerberg emphasises VR's impact on health, education and watching sport. Photograph: Lluis Gene/AFP/Getty Images

This month, a pop-up event in Los Angeles showcased *The Turning Forest*, an adventure made by Oscar Raby in which the viewer partners up with strange creatures to activate musical cues together. Another new short film, Tendril Studiosâ?? *Sankhara*, makes the viewer a space traveller who returns to Earth, inspired by TS Eliotâ??s poem Four Quartets.

Oculus, bought by Facebook for $2Billion, has set up a Story Studio division and followed up on a release last year, *Lost*, with *Henry* â?? â??a heartwarming comedy about a loveable hedgehogâ?•.

Oculusâ??s new owner, Mark Zuckerberg, has no doubts about the importance of VR, but emphasises its impact on health and education, and watching sport, rather than film. â??Imagine enjoying a courtside seat at a game, or studying in a [global] classroom of students and teachers all over the

world, or consulting a doctor â?? just by putting on goggles in your home,â?• he wrote.

Optimists about the potential influence of VR on cinema believe it is a matter of learn to tell a story in a more complex way, something that great novelists have always done and that immersive theatre companies like Punchdrunk now also practice successfully.

Ultimately, Pigott suspects that both VR and conventional film will find a way to coexist, like cinema and TV have. â??These were two very different mediums, and it turned out there was room for both. It is less a question of technologies, than of different modes of storytelling and spectacle, and â?¦ one is unlikely to simply replace the other,â?• he said.

(Source:www.theguardian.com)

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