

Script Writing for VR

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Introduction

When we first think about script writing, we tend to imagine that of a screen play or feature film; TV or Advertisement. We don't often think towards gaming, or the virtual world.

This thesis aims to explore exactly that. How does the process of script writing change when applied to virtual reality? Are there similarities to current gaming processes, and if not, then how does our process adapt when working in a 360 space?

1.1

In a UNCSA article, they discuss 'Slam', a virtual reality poetry experience. They mention how script writing for virtual reality consists of six different planes, as opposed to the traditional two-dimensional film (Luthy, 2017).

Which begs the question. How do we utilise the flexibility of a virtual world?

Writers of 'Slam', Tiece and Cooper, discussed their process of writing for VR, and how they broke their scripts down into quadrants, even going so far as to colour co-ordinate them for ease of understanding localisation in the virtual space. (Fig .1)

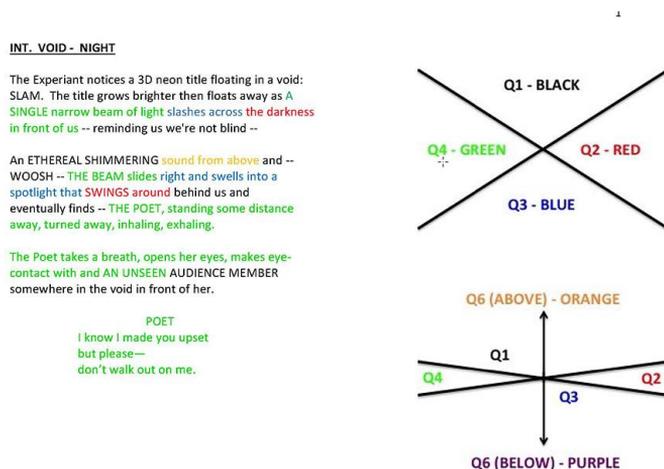


Fig.1 – 'Slam' sample page, Aja Cooper and Gary Tiece.

This method of adaption explored a more visual application to how we understand a virtual space on paper. Through this method, we are given the opportunity to visualise, clearly, where an action is taking place.

Evette Vargas argues that this method is not an accessible option on the basis that it ‘impedes the momentum towards creating an industry standard’, and proposed to bring script writing for VR into a formal industry consensus (Justine, 2018).

Evette’s method would see that the quadrant method replaces its colour co-ordination, with the standard black and white, utilising only purple to highlight interactions, and argues that the contrast with black is ‘easier on the eye’. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 – Sample page, Final Draft Template, Evette Vargas.

I would argue that both methods have their flaws in terms of accessibility, providing issues amongst neurodivergent and colour-blind writers in terms of too much colour, or colours that are too similar in shade.

However, I find that Evette’s proposed method also fails to explore the possibilities of working with a 360 mindset, and as this is a new development in the technical application of script writing, it would serve only to prove detrimental to ‘standardise’ the writing process so early on in this new era of storytelling.

As Tieche said: “We are still discovering the limitations, what we can and cannot do with this technology.” (Luthy, 2017)

1.2

With new technical applications being developed through VR, there now exist a large playground in which creatives have the room to explore new styles of writing. By giving

this area the room to breathe, there may yet develop a writing method which comes to suit the process of writing for VR, that we would otherwise miss if we shackle the process this early on.

However, we have to consider how to guide the viewers' attention within a 360 space, and how, in turn, we guide the story they're experiencing. We also have to consider the fields in which writers are coming from into VR, as this stretches beyond gaming, as seen with Teiche's poetry experience 'Slam'.

Chelebourg, in an interview with the BBC, had the right of it when he stressed that there are no rules and that experimentation is vital. (Watson, 2018)

There is absolutely a need for more experimentation in order to create compelling VR content. There is a large sandpit for writers outside of the gaming industry to explore. Theatre, Film, Radio, and Drama, by utilising these perspectives, we can truly explore the wider limits that VR has opened up to us as creatives. (Watson, 2018)

1.3

Building on this, something that should be kept in mind, is 'flow', or 'pacing'. It's all well and good to develop some form of structured format, but as writers we also have to consider how the story flows. Used to as we are with the standard script writing formats, to write in relation to the location of a VR user, is new ground.

There are countless games that take the viewer through guided, or exploratory stories, with goaled objects and trigger cues such as the various methods discussed by Kody Dillman, et al. in a paper breaking down these elements from 'subtle', 'integrated', and 'emphasized' cues that relied on triggers based around whether it would be discovered, looked for, or acted upon (Dillman et al. 2018). Player goes to location A, when a trigger cue comes from that direction in the form of audio through the headset, or animated cues in eyeline.

One thing we can count on, is that players want to explore. This is something shown repeatedly across multiple content creators such as Youtubers like 'Markiplier', and 'JackscepticEye', as well as Twitch streamers, who take an active interest in seeking out information on the world setting. This is true for the majority of players who seek out 'easter eggs' within their games.

Andy Hays explains that, "There are plenty of tricks to use to navigate this pitfall, and their use depends on the autonomy you wish to relinquish to your audience." (NYFA, 2018)

1.4

Within a 360 space, this brings the challenge that a player could 'miss their cue' and lose an object or a story point that's playing. This, however, is not a new challenge, especially

when we pull from real-life scenarios like ‘Escape Room’s’. These are real-time games, held in a real-world (and therefore 360) space, with multiple players needed to seek out information, and react to game triggers and prompts. A key feature is that the staff can provide hint’s or prompts when the players are stuck. And this is mirrored in several ways in an immersive game environment. Often times this is utilised through narration as seen in *The Stanley Parable* (2013). This can also be achieved through on-screen prompts, either dialogue audio or visual. This also provides a range of accessibility for players, if the way these cues are presented are customisable.

However, it’s here I’d bring your attention to how the discussion here revolves around the idea of gaming, and objectives. Well, what if we’re trying to tell a different story? In a situation where we’ve created a world in which the audience leans more towards a passive experience?

Examples of this can be seen in ‘games’ such as *Dear Esther* (2012), and *Firewatch* (2016), as well as Virtual museum tours like those online at the Louvre. In these cases, the audience is not entirely an ‘active player’, but they still have the full range and capacity to interact with the world they’re exploring. As such, I would call this an ‘interactive audience’, as opposed to a player, or passive-audience.

1.5

So, this brings us back to the question of guidance. How do we direct a story that leans more towards a passive interactive experience, than it does towards an objective-focused game with clear check points and goals? How do we write a script for something that is reliant on pushing the story and experience forward, without rushing the audience?

Well, we already have those answers. They’re in the way we use our sense, and the environments we provide to stimulate that. These are our focus when directing the story and planning out our scripts.

We can take examples from the games mentioned above, as well as others such as *Endless Ocean* (2007), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017). If we break these experiences down, we can divide them into a few key elements. First, and rightly, is the story. From that, we can break it down further: Location, time, interactions. Then lastly: How do we use these as guides.

In this case, my co-workers and I aimed to convert our animated story, *Terra Terra*, into VR from its original television design. For our Demo, we aimed to keep it as a short scene from the start of the trailer. Through this, we could determine that 1) The story would be the introduction sequence, 2) The story would take place inside of a spaceship, creating a limited world setting to interact within, and 3) That staging within this space would lend itself to some key areas – Interactions with characters, items, and view ports.

These interactions would be decided by whose view point the audience chose to explore through, giving them the ability to have multiple perspectives, including their own, of how the story would play out.

Were they to play through their own perspective, they would be a member of the family, yet omniscient in what they opted to see. Were they to play as the mother, or the son, they would have the chance to alter the story in terms of dialogue, and a narrative priority system.

As a parent, they would have the option to steer the ship, gaining scenic views of planetary systems, and the chance to learn more about the area. As a child, or their own self, they would have the experience of a passenger, and be treated to a similar experience with a shift in perspective.

All of this leading up towards their arrival towards Earth, where the credits would play with a promise of the next chapter in the experience to follow.

The New York Film Academy, discusses how for the vast majority, VR will be an entirely new experience, and recommend how the Oculus Story Studio suggests a 30-second settling period to help them adjust before delving into the experience. (NYFA, 2018)

When converting Terra Terra, this was something to bear in mind, and so this became something we could implement with the player, or audience, spawning into the room with an initial period of adjustment following the opening cut scene. They would have the chance to be informed how they can switch between cameras to choose whose POV they wished to see the story through, or whether they wished to view it as their own character within the family. This would be their tutorial start to get used to the camera, controls, and the navigation.

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE - PRESENT

A SPACESHIP that resembles a mixture of a Rocket ship, a campervan, and a seaplane, flies over the rings of Saturn. MUSIC can be heard emitting from the spaceship as it echoes through space.

CUT TO: Spaceship INT.

INT. SPACESHIP - PRESENT

PLAYER spawns into an empty chair. Through animation, they lift a TABLET from their side, and swipe open the screen.

// SCREEN DISPLAY - TUTORIAL

The TUTORIAL, utilising both AUDIO and TEXT, explains how to access the TABLET, and encourages the PLAYER to replicate the instructions.

The PLAYER is guided through the controls, and settings to adjust for accessibility.

The tutorial then offers the PLAYER a choice in what P.O.V they can play through: Mother (ELARA), Father (PERSEUS), Sister (MEL), Brother (KELVIN), Themselves (PLAYER).

After POV Selection, a transition scene triggers, handing over full autonomy to the PLAYER.

Fig. 3 - Terra Terra, VR Sample Script - Stedman, S. (2020)

1.6

When altering the script for this, I found the quadrant method to be great, but soon found myself exploring a variety of options in which these things could be tackled and started to fuse the best qualities of both Tieche and Vargas's methods. Rather than having each line of text multi-coloured and hard to read, I highlighted those quadrants through brackets. Q1, Q2, and so on.

I also highlighted the interactive elements in a similar way to the proposed ‘standardised’ method. However, instead of relying on purple, I opted to create clarity by using them as Action Titles. They would list the interactive options below, clearly on one line, to avoid cluttered paragraphs.

```
// PLAYER P.O.V
```

```
The PLAYER looks around the room. They are able to see their parents, PERSEUS and ELARA, pushing buttons and pulling levers as they fly the spaceship (Q1).
```

```
Laughter from the back of the ship (Q3), reveals their 3-year-old twin siblings, ALLIE and IAN, floating in the air, laughing and giggling.
```

```
As they turn their heads from (Q1) to (Q3), they see their SIBLINGS, KELVIN and MEL, sitting in the seats next to them (Q4, and Q2).
```

```
The PLAYER is free to leave their seat, and move autonomously around the room.
```

```
PLAYER
```

```
(Approaches: Either PARENT - Q1)
```

```
PARENT
```

```
(ELARA, or PERSEUS)
```

```
Hey, (NAME). You getting restless back there?
```

```
// DIALOGUE PROMPT:
```

```
> Why are we moving so far from home?
```

```
> Are we there yet?
```

```
> Can we fly past something cool?
```

```
> I want something to do.
```

```
> Say Nothing.
```

Fig. 4 - Terra Terra, VR Sample Script - Stedman, S. (2020)

Conclusion

So, are these methods of script writing for VR practical as a story telling method outside the realm of gaming? Yes, I would say they were. This is because the utilisation of varied perspectives coming from so many creatives, has given us the space to explore the way in which we tell stories. These perspective shifts, allow us to create an immersive world to exist within as both audience, player, and interactive viewer.

With that in mind, I would conclude that script writing has plenty of room to develop in terms of audience direction, interaction, and narrative. The sandbox in which we have to play is vast, and VR allows us to have a very open world exploration for how we can achieve story telling in 360. I would encourage the continued development into how we learn to direct the story, as new methods may continue to develop and surprise us.

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