

Steye Hallema

Case Study: Story Design / Virtual Reality – *Ashes to Ashes* (NL 2016)

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STEYE HALLEMA Hello everybody, so good you are here. I was almost afraid no one would come. A scientific study was done that found that when people sit in the front of the classroom, they learn better than the people in the back of the class. The good thing about VR is that everyone can sit in the front of the class. But there are empty seats here so please come a bit closer. It's nicer for me. [sound of chairs moving] ah Very good students – an extra point.



I've done many things in my life as an artist. I've been making music; I've been making theatre, music videos, documentaries. Depending on the project, I call myself either a composer or a director. But this year, I've decided to call myself a story designer. I hope to explain why that is in this talk. [pointing at slide] This is the Smartphone Orchestra that my team and I developed: a method to synchronise smart phones and distribute multiple parts to them.

The audience becomes this musical sound field, a new medium with which to tell stories. As opposed to VR when you're all alone in one room, with this technique, the audience becomes a group again – sort of the same, but different.

And now, let's talk about virtual reality.

The most important thing about VR is to tell a good story – the most important thing in any medium of course. But I think we have to look at what VR really is first in order to tell a good story with it. VR is nothing more than a little screen in front of your eyes that moves perspectively fitting with the rotation of your head.

It's actually very simple, but the cool thing is that the viewer really has the feeling of being present in another place. After millions of years of evolution, we're built to process space around us. It would be really hard to unlearn that. Because of this, there is a completely different role for the viewer in the story. I think it's precisely this role that needs to be designed and that's why I call myself a story designer.

In VR, storytelling tends to lean towards sharing experiences. [shows a still] This is not my own work; this is an experiment that's about two years old. But I like it very much. A boy can experience

what it's like to have a female body, and the other way around. They have cameras in their VR goggles and their movements are synchronised. When the guy feels his own chest, it looks like he's feeling the boobs of a woman, and vice versa. I'm definitely not an evangelist in VR as some call themselves, but I do feel it's a wonderful medium to get something across between us in a completely different and new way and, who knows, maybe understand each other better.

To get a better understanding of what VR really is, I find it also very fruitful to compare it to film. They share a lot of similarities. There's a camera, a frame rate, a crew. The one big difference that's really big is that in VR, there's no frame. The viewer is free to look where he wants. In the last one hundred years, we've been conditioned to think in frames. I love film but it's another expression of how we as humans love squares. We love squares, man. Look at this room – everything is square. We are a species that creates squares. But in VR, there's no square. It's all around you. Don't get me wrong. I think film is a really wonderful medium and it's developed itself into such a powerful storytelling device that really carries us along. And it does that by putting squares behind each other in the edit making a sort of domino thread of focus on where you as storyteller want the viewer to look. We then process it as a story. The only shitty thing with VR is that that doesn't really work. With VR, you move someone's consciousness around the room.

You can definitely cut in VR but it has a different effect than in film. I was always against cutting in VR, but I just saw a very commercial film that took place on a boat in Bermuda, and they edited very quickly while this boat was sailing and everyone's jumping around and I thought it was really cool. I want to do a re-make of *Raging Bull* and cut the hell out of it. But it doesn't have the same effect as in film. So for VR, we have to create a new kind of domino to make the thread.

I really like to make up new stuff. I'd like to show you an example of a music video I made in which I found new ways of transitioning in VR. I am showing you now not the VR movie, but a linear render that I made for the occasion, so we all can be the viewer. You can dance if you want. [Music video *What Do We Care 4* video plays]

Those mirrors that came close to the camera were moved that way so that everyone can stand in front of them and put on different costumes, stopping and starting the camera to go further. That was a really cool trick with the mirror. This is the first time I've watched it after a month, and what I really like is that you have the mirrors and the words with the echo – I didn't even think about that when I made the music video and now it's really, like, wow, good combination! The hula-hoops were really a nice find.

I was scratching my head about how to transition in VR. In my computer, I was trying wipes like you see in *Star Wars*. It all looked horrific, really terrible. And then my costume designer came walking by with a hula-hoop over her shoulder. I took the hula-hoop and put it over the camera, put it in the computer and looked at it with my virtual reality glasses and it was magic. It was transitioning and progressing the story. There was a person with the hula-hoop putting it over my face. I got involved even though I wasn't doing anything. Someone was doing something to me in the film. That was really exciting. This is a medium about you; you are in the middle. That hula-hoop transition worked so well, it gave me another idea and that was that we can use a virtual reality headset as a transition.

After doing the music video, we made an installation for a music festival in Holland called the Peep Show where VR-onica would lure you in and you would sit on this stool and she would tell you how nice you were, even nicer than the last guy that came in. She would tell you that you should really wear the virtual reality headset if you wanted it really kinky, and put the headset on you. You would be in the same room and she would say the same thing and then you would put another virtual reality headset on, a virtual virtual reality headset. In this story, we descended deeper and deeper, layers of reality, until the glasses were taken off and you were in another room. I really liked this

because it had reality as a subject. We lured people with sex because sex sells but you end up with a philosophical story about reality. Let me show you a little bit of it. [video plays]

I said before that in VR, there is no frame. But that is actually not true. There is a frame and it's the field of view of the viewer because you're creating your own frame. And if there's a field of view, there's a point of view and that's going to be a bigger and bigger thing in media in general in the coming years. These are Snapchat Spectacles, a pair of glasses where you can film ten seconds of your point of view to share with your friends. I find that a super philosophical way of telling story. And now there's this big corporation in the States that wants to make money that's giving us devices to tell point-of-view stories.

Here is a list of movies that I could find on Wikipedia that use point-of-view to a great extent to tell a story, a much smaller list than I thought there would be. *Hardcore Henry* is a horrific film but it's great at the same time, all told from first person point-of-view. We all know *Being John Malkovich*, of course. That's a very, very interesting movie and could be a very interesting re-make for VR, perhaps. Someday, I would really like to have a festival where all the films are point-of-view. But back to that we are obviously sharing someone else's point of view, brings me back to that person in the middle of the story, and that person may be a new kind of main character. If this is the main character, what are we going to do with him or her?

I'm not a scientist but I tried to make my own ordering system to get a grip on that. I'm looking at how we address this main character. The first way to address a person is not to address that person, the zero-person. That person is there but not acknowledged at all in the VR film. There are some VR films in which this can really work. But I think you should ask yourself if you should not make a normal 'flat film' because this is easier than making a VR film, but nevertheless, it's very usable. I did see a film where you were a ghost or a memory going through that world. But you always have to think very clearly about your viewer in the VR story, much more than in a film. You really have to think about who this zero-st person is.

Third-person is very rare. You are in the story and there are characters in the story that talk about you but you are not addressed directly. I've seen this twice and the funny thing is I felt left out. I feel left out while I'm only looking at a small screen that rotates with my head. So that really shows the power of VR.

The next one in this order is second-person point of view where you, as a viewer, are addressed directly by the characters in the story. For this, it's even more important to know who your viewer is because you are going to talk to him or her. This works well in documentary, but also in fiction. But dramaturgically you have to let the viewer know who she or he is. You can hit that in the dialogue where you can explain what one can do or what one can't do in the film. [plays video] This guy, on the set, made me squeal with laughter, but when I watch him in this part, I don't think he's funny at all. That's really weird. But it's really powerful in this kind of 3-D effect when someone comes at you.

The last in the order is the first person, of course, and this is when you are a character and have a voice in your head, which is you. I really like this one because I think it opens up the medium in a new way and I will talk about that later after I've shown you an example. [plays video with a Donald Trump character] We made this in October, and at the time thought it was funny. Now it's just completely absurd. Worse than that, it's kind of our reality now, my God. Here, you can hear Trump's voice expressing his inner thoughts, and it has a kind of reverb on it to make it sound more spacious, and then the character's voice when it's speaking to someone. They can be in conflict with one another and that makes a character interesting. If what he's thinking and what he's saying are conflicting, I want to know why he's acting like that.

Many VR films I see are way too literal and quite boring. It's a big problem in VR. I'm still trying to figure out the right way of directing acting in VR. We're not there yet. Actors feel like they should be acting as they might in a theatre where there's a specific focus on something happening, like in a Rembrandt painting.

The last example I would like to show you is from *Ashes to Ashes*; here we turn the relationship around. Here the character is going to control you as the viewer, and that's the little joke in the film, but I love it. I think it's the best part of the movie. [plays video] So this is a nice bridge for talking about *Ashes to Ashes*.

When I was asked to participate, the idea was to have a theatre maker, a film director and a VR director – and that was to be me, apparently. We were all to direct the same film. We would all do our own versions of the same script. I didn't want to do it at first because I didn't think the script was very good for VR at all. I didn't find it interesting enough. As opportunistic as I am, I proposed that all three of us make one film. The producer was thrilled in terms of how that would impact the budget. [laughter] I thought it would be less work for me, but it was twice as much work. But it was a really nice project, and wonderful to direct something where three people need to think everything through and make choices based on this dialogue. We joked that we directed it back-to-back, and so what resulted was a 360 movie. So this is why I am calling myself a story designer. I would like to show you the making-of film of *Ashes to Ashes* and afterwards, we can have a discussion about the film, whether you saw it or not. Or maybe someone has a question now?

AUDIENCE It seems as if VR is just from one side, even though it's a very wide angle. Or are you going around in a room? We only saw someone sitting at a desk looking in one direction.

HALLEMA Yes, but that's because it's a linear render of a 360 film. I can't show everyone a virtual reality film.

AUDIENCE But what happens behind him?

HALLEMA Ah, okay. In this film, hardly anything happens. We chose to make it 180.

AUDIENCE Then why make it VR?

HALLEMA Because we wanted the viewer to feel as if he or she was there. You're still free to look. I made that music video at the end of 2014, and that music video is actually five music videos because everything is happening around you and really suits a busy track. But for a story, it's a dead end where you might be trying to get everything to happen everywhere and it ends up not making much sense. There are different types of viewers where someone might look at a very specific scene happening. But there are those that start to look around and notice other things, adding a layer of suspense. It's a nice balance when you can add an element but still keep the story very clear.

The majority of my job as a virtual reality director is similar to an old theatre craft, and that is directing where someone is supposed to be looking. When I'm shooting, I have an overview shot of the location. I have these little coloured puppets and place them. I have corresponding colours in the script so I can place the actors in the *mise-en-scène*. The viewer has a very precise path where to look. I love creating story worlds where you can look around and make discoveries like a detective. That can also be VR. There's also VR without any story at all. But in cinematic VR, I tend to direct more 180.

AUDIENCE You go back to normal cinema. (laughter)

HALLEMA In a small way, yeah. But you're still immersed, and have the feeling of being present.

AUDIENCE Have you been working the whole time with cameras and actors, or do you also work in 3-D and animation?

HALLEMA I did work on one project that I wanted to put in my talk as well, but I haven't found the time yet, an opera that was a singing game. There were sixty audience members in a church where the performance was. Thirty of them would get a virtual reality headset with a big mask and headphones, and then they were taught how to sing. There was a voice in your head that would tell you, "Now breathe", etc. The visuals in the film would react to your voice. The other thirty people experienced a synchronised choir effect. The storyteller would know when people would be singing or moving their arms and would tell the story. It was the only real CG thing I did in VR. I would really like to go into that.

The thing is, of course, is that it looks really gamey. Either the concept is really strong so that doesn't matter, or you have to find something else. There are also new techniques like fullometric video, where you can scan someone with video then you can look around. But it's in the very early stages and it's hard to use. It has its own aesthetic that I like but it's not suitable for every story.

I'm really Marshall McLuhan-like: the medium is the message. I try to look at what the medium is already saying. I think VR tells us something about reality, space, intimacy, point-of-view. If stories have something to do with that, I think it's a good choice to tell them in VR. If I make a game, I will probably make a story about playing a game. So, do you want to see the making-of? [plays video]

Last year, I was working as the creative director for Jaunt VR, a horrible commercial company from the States. There are wonderful people working there but it's very commercial. They have invested heavily and expect returns on those investments. For them, it's really important that a lot of people watch these films. The problem is in order to watch them you have to wear the clumsy headset. To me, that's the bottleneck in VR. VR cinemas are a very good start, because you can go to the cinema, have a drink and have a cool experience. It could be movies or more arcade kinds of stuff. That's a business model in itself because people buy tickets to see or experience something.

AUDIENCE Do they buy a ticket to watch one movie?

HALLEMA I think you have a program usually. But they're popping up everywhere. The VR cinema in Amsterdam just made a big deal with China. In Paris, there's a really nice cinema. If you want to start a business, this would be it. I think there is the interest, and if you have a good place where you can sell drinks, there's a business model there that's been working for decades.

AUDIENCE Are VR and drinks actually compatible? There can be dizziness even without drinks.

HALLEMA That's a good question. I've spent a lot of time in virtual reality and sometimes I had a drink. I think it's the same with any medium. If there's music involved and beautiful people dancing, then if you're drunk, it's great. In terms of the nausea, for me it doesn't really matter, but that's a very personal thing. Some people have motion sickness and some don't. But we can speak about digital drugs, which is a very interesting concept and VR could be some sort of digital drug. I would like to become a digital drug dealer, in that sense – to make something that people really want. You're in the middle of it. Technology grows so fast. If you go to a place and there are algorithmic friends that sort of know you, every time you go there, they will know you better. They become your best friends, an interesting thought.

AUDIENCE What about the future of interactive technologies?

HALLEMA In essence, VR *is* interactive. There are already games where you have virtual hands where you can touch things with a wand like with the HTC Vive. As a storyteller, I have a preference for psychological stories and I like speech more. Interactively, I would love to work with speech recognition, more than with hands, like with a computer that hears what you say and understands it and reacts. Things involving your hands have much more to do with games.

AUDIENCE What about the field of medicine?

HALLEMA I think some of the origins of all this came from that, actually. It started as a flight simulator, but it's used in health care a lot. For example, people feel less pain if they are in a VR state. This has been used with conditions such as arthritis where you can take a virtual forest walk.

AUDIENCE There have been some experiments done for people with Alzheimer's.

HALLEMA Yes, and also work done with trauma where you might be able to re-live something in a therapeutic way. I just saw a really good documentary from VPRO, the Dutch broadcaster, about this walking therapy called *Mind of the Universe*. It's growing in the medical industry, but it's not really my field so I don't know so much about all this. I also don't consider myself a virtual reality expert. For me, I work with that relationship with the viewer when they are in VR to tell stories.

AUDIENCE What's the most difficult thing working in VR?

HALLEMA I think the most difficult thing is to create a good story that works in VR. Yes, the techniques can be difficult, but you can put a couple of smart monkeys in the room and they find a way. Really good stories that make sense in VR are the most difficult thing to do well. But it is definitely a hassle technologically.

AUDIENCE I have also seen works that are not well done where you can even see the camera. It takes you right out of the experience.

HALLEMA It's a fine line, definitely.

AUDIENCE I'm curious about the budget for *Ashes to Ashes*.

HALLEMA I was not a producer on the project but I think it was around €200,000. I also think a lot of people worked for very little money because it was a huge production.

AUDIENCE Can you talk about your experiences as a viewer in VR because I assume you watch much more than the average person? How was your own evolution where you started to look around and focus on the story in different ways, in a way developing a discipline in how you know what might be expected from you as a viewer and you could get the most out of the story?

HALLEMA For every VR movie I see, I try to be as pure a receiver as possible and not focus on what they're doing. I try to shut that off. It doesn't always work. It's like any good theatre. My father is a magician and his art is the art of attention. You make it look like something's happening here but you're doing something over there. In that sense, I'm doing the same thing by trying to grab the attention of the viewer.

AUDIENCE Yes, I understand that as the creator, you learn how to grab attention, but you are also a viewer. Do you find yourself paying more attention to what the director is hoping for?

HALLEMA Yes, it's a good question but really hard to answer. I do. Every VR movie I see does make me more aware of how it's all working and what I can use as a creator to make it work right.

But there's a lot of very, very shitty VR out there. I think it's important to be honest with each other as makers. When it's shit, let's just say it's shit. Otherwise we don't progress fast enough.

AUDIENCE You must also be very aware of when an audience is prepared to receive something. I'm working on a VR project, and we have a 360-degree wall around our set.

HALLEMA CG or film?

AUDIENCE CG. It's almost finished so we are showing our families and some relatives that have never experienced it before, and you realise how different an experience it is, especially for certain generations. My six-year-old son begins to speak directly to the dinosaur and it's amazing for him. He wants to stay there! My mother and father just kind of look around, but they don't really notice or see a lot of what's there because it's so new and they don't really know how to use it. We must be aware of that in our storytelling.

HALLEMA We do have to communicate with our viewers and encourage them to look around. There is a composer I work with who has a very fresh mind and plays with lots of technical stuff. I put the Oculus on him and told him to look all around him. And he insisted: "Yeah, yeah, I can see the circle. Yeah, I can see it." But he wasn't looking around. I wanted to hit him. It has to do with levels. I like the expression about the horseless carriage. When the first car was invented, how do you think it looked to people? Like a carriage without a horse because people didn't know what a car looked like. That's what you see on all levels with VR. That's why I like to compare it with film. It might seem like the most natural thing for a film director to step into making VR, but they make a lot of mistakes because of all the assumptions they have that it's going to work similarly and it doesn't.

AUDIENCE I noticed this in the video you showed where you might see a bit of a wall, but it's not clear what's underneath you.

HALLEMA In the making-of video, it is clear what's underneath. It's the dolly.

AUDIENCE Yes, I see it now, but when you look at it, it wasn't very clear. But my question is, is there a world underneath you that's not the dolly but something virtual, something in another dimension?

HALLEMA It can be anything. It depends on the story. I'm quite opposed to seeing a body because I think it's phoney. Although next week I'm directing a commercial where I have to do that because it's not possible to do it otherwise. But basically I like to create this feeling of being a spirit when you look down. In the music video and in a couple of other movies I did, the task was to make some sort of a mirror by flipping the image. But I like to keep that out so you're just a spirit and what's underneath you is just part of the world.

AUDIENCE Say you are walking barefoot in the grass and you want that feeling, then you have to see your feet.

HALLEMA Why? If it is an installation, it would be really cool if there was real grass and you're barefoot so you can feel it. I don't think you necessarily have to see your feet. If you see your feet, then they're someone else's feet. An exception would be if something is touching your body, and you replace it with a virtual feeling. Your body is translucent. I had this experience where my body was translucent and I was on a snowboard going through space. There was really cheesy techno music playing but I really liked it. I was flying through space. It felt like I was on drugs; it was wonderful. But in lieu of my body, there was some illustration of my body instead of trying to represent something real. It's a fine line. In most animation movies, the characters don't look like

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real people. Because if animated creatures looked too real, they'd freak us out. If it's just a bit off of what is authentic, we find it a bit scary.

AUDIENCE This snowboard experience was all VR where you were in a room?

HALLEMA Yes, it was a game, not a movie. So I was on the board flying through space, which is cool in itself. Then there was the projection where I could see my body flying through space. I could do that for hours. So I think bodies do work, but if I find a 3-D artist to work on a music video or movie, I don't want to work with someone who's the most realistic shader. I go for the punker that makes 3-D look what-the-fuck. Then you get away with it. Otherwise, it's just cheesy shit. Sorry for my language.

AUDIENCE But did you think of replacing being able to see the dolly with just the floor?

HALLEMA We thought about it but then we chose not to because we were on a film set. It made sense to be on a dolly. It was a logical choice. And it saved money. [laughter]
Thank you all for listening.

APPLAUSE