

Immersion strategies in nonfiction digital narratives: A *Short History of the Highrise, a case study*

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Abstract. This presentation introduces an ongoing PhD research about the application of immersive digital narratives to non-fiction subjects. Relying on Ryan's theoretical framing, the presentation examines the potential of immersion to engage audiences of nonfiction narratives. The proposed case study focuses on a web-documentary. The study is part in a process towards developing a taxonomy of immersive digital narratives to be applied to a broader corpus of research. Based on Ryan's poetics of immersion, the presentation examines said web-documentary's narrative structure in order to determine how the three varieties of immersion, namely spatial, temporal and emotional, can be used to promote an immersive state in a nonfiction context.

Keywords: Digital storytelling; Immersion; Interactivity; Nonfiction.

1 Introduction.

The emergence of practices such as gamification, virtual reality and playful journalism evidence that media developers are expanding their arsenal of narrative strategies.

Applied to attract audience attention in advertising and entertainment, gamification, virtual reality and playful journalism are now challenging established views on media strategies. More specifically, they have been reshaping storytelling techniques and opening new possibilities to nonfictional narratives. One example of such is the increased output in those narratives that, although not explicitly pedagogical, have undeniable educational concerns.

This reshaping trend can be observed in cyberspace, a fertile ground for practices such as transmedia, virtual reality, and playful thinking. Innovative media developers are producing narratives that take on an array of new storytelling shapes: interactive documentaries; newsgames and immersive journalism are but a sample. No matter how varied these novel shapes are, they all, nonetheless, share a common objective: engaging audiences to the point of narrative immersion.

2 Ongoing research

My PhD research focuses on immersive digital narratives applied to non-fiction subjects. It intends to determine the digital storytelling practices that are being used to engage the public and hold its attention in non-fictional narratives. The research relies on the theoretical framework developed by Ryan's narratology studies. Empirically speaking, the investigation will analyze a corpus of research made up of two digital projects, namely (1) the *Highrise* web-documentaries; and (2) La Pena's immersive journalism pieces (the "Projects"), where each of the Projects is composed of several narratives spanning an array of different levels of immersion and interactivity.

3 *A Short History of the Highrise: a case study*

The research's analytical effort encompasses the Projects in their entirety. However, the current presentation focuses on a single web-documentary among the many that compose the *Highrise Project*, namely, the one entitled *A Short History of the Highrise* (the "Web-Documentary"). This presentation is part of my initial research towards developing a taxonomy of the different levels of narrative immersion in nonfiction contexts. It examines the structure of the Web-Documentary to answer how the three varieties of immersion identified in Marie Laure Ryan's poetics of immersion (Ryan, 2015), namely spatial, temporal and emotional, can be used to promote an immersive state in a nonfiction context.

The proposed examination begins by analyzing the very opening moments of the Web-Documentary: the director's voice inviting the audience to "sit back and relax". Then follows some brief information about navigating the system. Next, the gradual silencing of a dramatic soundtrack suggests that an outstanding experience is about to begin. The scene is evocative of the "proper ceremony" (Ryan, 2015 - 62) where Italo Calvino invites the readers of *Winter's Night a Traveller* to transit from an ordinary to a different reality. As in Calvino's book, Katerina Cizek – the director – offers *A Short History of Highrise* as a plunge into an alternative world – Ryan's "text world" – that is ultimately a source of mental pleasure. From then on, the Web-Documentary's storybook explores the 2500-year history of human life in vertical spaces.

In my presentation, I do not only indicate the elements of Ryan's poetics of immersion that are present in the Web-Documentary, but also elaborate on their potential use in attempting to engage the audience in a nonfiction context.

4 References

A Short History of the Highrise. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/high-rise/>.

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