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Real and Unreal Things: Virtual Reality at the 2018 Adelaide Film Festival

Kath Dooley

After fifteen years of successful operation, in 2018 the Adelaide Film Festival (AFF) cemented its position as Australia's leading festival supporter of virtual-reality (VR) screen media. This mostly biennial international festival, which is held over two weeks in October, was the first in the country (and arguably one of the first in the world) to offer a VR programme alongside more traditional film fare in 2015.¹ Two years later, the 2017 edition saw the introduction of an international VR award (also a first for Australia), with ten projects in competition. Equally notable that year was the choice of a VR programme to replace the traditional opening night feature film of the festival. Sadly, this event was disrupted by technical glitches, but nonetheless the programming choice propelled the VR form into the limelight as a "main event" rather than festival "value add". "Let's raise a glass to risking taking", declared festival director Amanda Duthie at this moment, acknowledging the difficulty of working with emerging technologies (Buckmaster). Duthie's attitude and championing of VR storytelling reflects the festival's vision statement, which proposes to "reflect current and future trends in the film and screen-based industries".

In 2018 the AFF continued to support and celebrate the work of innovative Australian and international VR practitioners, with a VR programme consisting of fifteen works. Fourteen of these were viewed using a variety of head-mounted display (HMD) goggles (Oculus Rift, Oculus Go, HTC Vive) in the purpose-built Jumpgate VR Lounge in the foyer of the festival's cinema complex. In this setting viewers could experience and/or interact with each project as either witnesses or participants in story events. Some technical glitches remained, mostly in relation to the initial set-up of each viewing experience, with festival volunteers working hard to wrangle unfamiliar technology. The line-up included a number of Australian premieres among experimental, documentary and dramatic works, many of which blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between cinema and games. Projects encompassed the full spectrum of VR possibilities, from cinematic 360-degree live-action video works that allow the viewer to choose their point of view, to fully computer-generated imagery that features interactive "action-points", these being moments where the viewer can interact with the story via hand controls. The 2018 selection of films reflects the fact that the narrative VR form is maturing, meaning that the stories told are becoming longer, more diverse and complex. In parallel, the mechanics of creating, shooting and/or editing the various VR forms and the resultant effect on viewer immersion continues to be a site for exploration.

John Mateer defines cinematic virtual reality as "VR with media fidelity approaches found in feature film" (15). This prerendered video form gives rise to an experience where "individual users can look around synthetic worlds in 360°, often with stereoscopic views, and hear spatialized audio specifically designed to reinforce the veracity of the virtual environment" (Mateer 15).

Several 2018 AFF works, such as *Dinner Party* (Angel Manuel Soto, 2018), *Borderline* (Assaf Machnes, 2018) and *The Real Thing* (Benoit Felici, 2018), fall into this category, which sits on the less interactive end of the VR spectrum. The themes explored in these projects—out of body experiences, isolation and alienation, and immersion in “fake worlds”—are particularly well suited to the cinematic VR form, increasing possibilities for audience engagement and contemplation of the storylines presented. I will briefly outline the key features of these works so as to demonstrate some of the innovative aspects and the challenges associated with current cinematic VR production, as reflected by the festival selection.

The high-end video work *Dinner Party* chronicles the first reported UFO abduction case in the United States, that of interracial couple Betty and Barney Hill. In doing so, it transports the viewer from a suburban 1960s-style living room (portrayed using live action) to a black, computer-generated void. The idea of drifting into another world is introduced at the opening of the work, when the viewer slowly descends from a star-filled void into the Hill's living room dinner party in God's-eye view. A transition through the living room window takes the viewer outdoors at night, racing along a dark, deserted road that is surrounded by forest: the site of the alien abduction. The project uses 360-degree vision to great advantage in this scene by allowing the viewer to turn 180-degrees and see a car approaching behind them. Anticipation builds as the car moves closer and closer, until the viewer crosses over the bonnet and finds themselves sitting next to the Hills in the front cabin of the car. Whereas a traditional short film might cut between shots of the protagonists and their point of view of the road ahead, the 360-degree VR viewer is left to perform this action themselves by turning back and forth in anticipation of the next story event, an action that can be harnessed by the VR creator so as to build suspense. Bright lights then transition the viewer from the car to the dark CGI setting in which both protagonists are reduced to floating clusters of humanoid-shaped particles. This experience is both thrilling and chaotic, with the sound of both characters' distressed or awe-stuck voices anchoring this abstract experience to the more tangible world that was presented earlier. At this moment, both the characters and the viewer inhabit virtual bodies, a commonality that generates empathy for the film subjects. By aligning us to the protagonists in this way, *Dinner Party* allows us to experience the abduction and its aftermath in an intense and vicarious manner.

Borderline, a dramatic live action work that is also based around true events, follows two young Israeli soldiers that are on guard along an unnamed border. When the protagonist, Abraham, spots a border crosser hiding nearby he is faced with a difficult decision: should he arrest the man or allow him to flee? The VR form presents a novel way to explore this dilemma. The 360-degree camera used to capture the action in this work offers a majestic view of the barren desert landscape that surrounds the border. The slowly paced staging of action and spare sound design offer few cues to attract the viewer's attention until the climax of the work, leaving the viewer turning circles in the search for signs of impending plot developments. In a sense this action mirrors that of Abraham, as he too combs the landscape for signs of the untoward. The camera is largely static; however, hard cut edits abruptly move the viewer from one vantage point to another. It takes some time to reacclimatise one's perspective to these new positions, as the monotone setting offers few markers through which to locate oneself. For this reason, the use of traditional editing techniques can be jarring and disorientating in the cinematic VR environment. As Celine Tricart observes, “every time there is a cut, the participants are forcibly removed from the location where they were standing and transported somewhere else. This can throw them out of the experience as they have to re-assess their surroundings and settle into the new scene” (108). Tricart notes, however, that editing may also be a powerful tool to challenge viewers, if used as a disruptive force (108).

In contrast to the two dramatised works described above, *The Real Thing* employs an observational documentary style to explore life in a series of Chinese “fake cities”, these being newly constructed neighbourhoods that mimic foreign destinations such as Paris, London and Venice and their iconic landmarks and buildings. This impressive 16-minute work uses high-resolution images to create a vivid picture of these beautiful, replica cities. The narrative is bookended with CGI sequences that reduce the familiar buildings and streets to a series of wireframe outlines. Much like the ersatz cities themselves, these outlines are missing the details that bring the original cities to life, a subject acknowledged by the film’s participants. Looking out from her doorway into a sparsely populated and rain-swept imitation Avenue des Champs-Élysées, one female interviewee comments that “you can replicate the place but not the way of life”. It is fitting that these cities should become the subject of a VR documentary, a medium that fosters “virtual tourism” in its own right. Much like the visitors to these fake cities, the viewer is immersed in the experience of “being there” without actually being there, and is left to ponder the value of this virtual experience.

These three cinematic VR works demonstrate the considerable recent development of the VR form when compared to content exhibited only a few years’ prior at the AFF. For example, works such as *Madeleine* (which debuted at AFF in 2015), a four-minute horror genre piece originally conceived as a teaser promo for the feature film *Scare Campaign* (Colin and Cameron Cairnes, 2016), can be considered gimmicky by comparison, although it did reflect the state of VR development at the time. Like *Madeleine*, many early cinematic VR works were set in a single location, with limited narrative events unfolding. Such an approach may well have been fostered by the desire to create an immersive, real-time environment, for as Gödde et al. note, “jumps in space and time break the immersion and the feeling of presence, since such experiences do not exist in reality” (8). However, the slate of projects on display at AFF 2018 show that VR practitioners have moved on to adopt a variety of approaches to storytelling, and that jumps in space and time form part of their experimentation.

Works from the more interactive end of the VR spectrum—those composed of fully computer-generated imagery and including game-like elements—were also well represented at the AFF in 2018, although fewer in number than the cinematic VR works. The immersive horror/thriller *Kobold* (Max Sacker, 2018) a 25-minute VR experience that draws on the conventions of 360-degree, first-person-narrative computer games, required the user to utilise a handset controller to navigate through the virtual environment and retrieve objects in the world of the story. There is much to enjoy about the *Kobold* experience. The use of a torch to illuminate rooms and other forms of interaction are good fun, and the mise en scène and sound design create a genuinely hair-raising experience. The length of this work perhaps reflects a maturation of VR technology, resulting in increased audience tolerance for time spent wearing a HMD, and fewer uncomfortable side effects.

Like *Kobold*, *The Unknown Patient* (Michael Beets, 2018) demanded that the viewer engage with story events via a hand controller. This eerie ten-minute work invites the audience to navigate childhood memories and other flashbacks to piece together the identity of the unknown protagonist. The visceral work, which won the 2018 International VR Award, is also based on true events.

In addition to the fourteen works viewed in the Jumpgate VR Lounge, *The Waiting Room* (Molly Reynolds, 2018), an installation that explores the fragile state of the earth, as colonised by “alien” humans, was viewed in the nearby Samstag Museum. This three-dimensional VR moving image work involved the projection of video onto the four walls of a small room, viewed in the round by audiences wearing 3D glasses. Such a work attempts to remove the cumbersome HMD from the 360-degree VR experience, but loses some measure of immersion in the process. Standing on a wooden viewing platform in the centre of the room, it was difficult to process the work without noting the gentle shuffles and mutterings of fellow well-meaning audience members.

The Waiting Room was supported by the AFF’s Art & The Moving Image fund, one of several categories of the AU\$ 1 million in production funding that is attached to the festival. Established by the South Australian Premier, Mike Rann, in 2003, the Adelaide Film Festival Investment Fund aims to support bold and innovative filmmaking that contributes culturally and economically to South Australia. This fund is one other means by which the festival also differentiates itself from its Australian counterparts. It previously commissioned Lynette Wallworth’s groundbreaking VR work *Collisions* (2016) in collaboration with the Sundance Institute’s New Frontier programme, further evidencing the AFF’s commitment to the development (as well as the exhibition) of cutting-edge VR work. By providing equity finance for projects, the festival is able to stimulate innovative production and foster the careers of practitioners such as Reynolds and Wallworth.

Overall, the diverse collection of projects at AFF 2018 present a challenging and distinct screen programme that hints at the future of VR storytelling. The array of creative approaches on show demonstrates that “the screen grammar of narrative virtual reality is still very much in the process of being developed”, as I have argued previously (Dooley 164). While more experimentation is needed to address the challenges of the form and to move beyond storytelling and editing techniques that have migrated from more traditional forms of media, it is clear that there has been significant progress made in recent times, and that the AFF as both funder and exhibitor is a significant player in the development of Australian talent. The AFF 2018 shows that the medium is gaining traction with content makers and audiences alike, yet that the full spectrum of possibilities for audience engagement with VR is still becoming apparent.

Note

¹ The AFF ran biennially from 2003 to 2017, with a one-off “rogue” mini festival (AFF GOES ROGUE) occurring in 2016. A 2018 edition was funded by the Labour government, which moved to make the festival an annual event. A change of government in 2018 has resulted in a return to the biennial format.

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