

Physical Spaces for Virtual Realities: Forging Legitimacy of Immersive Social Documentaries

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1. Introduction

The use of immersive-technology media for documentary-style experiences is not new. Its ability to foster interaction enables users to form emotional bonds with the setting and characters, as well as engage in perspective-taking processes (Bailenson et al. 2018). Widespread enthusiasm highlights the medium's educational and didactic potential, as well as recognizing that it can be especially valuable as a tool for preserving cultural heritage and oral testimonies through the creation of user-centered experiences.

The purpose of this study is to look into one of the most accessible and effective manifestations of this phenomenon, the *immersive social documentary* – a type of immersive experience that belongs to the larger *cinematic virtual reality* (Cine-VR or CVR) tradition. This article will first provide a quick overview of the peculiarities of these works before turning its attention to a little-researched subject, namely, the distribution of VR social documentaries. It will be addressed from two interrelated perspectives. First, I will assess the lifecycle of these works, their distribution strategies, and the role of festivals in their promotion. The lifespan of VR pieces usually ends in a few venues that are culturally significant but not financially profitable. I will use the theoretical framework of film-festival studies to analyze how the exhibition of these works in culturally legitimizing contexts has a profound impact on the development of their definition and identity. Second, using two distinct case studies, I will examine the success of their different distribution tactics as well as the impact of a still-weak market.

2. Genesis and Features of Immersive Social Documentary

Cinematic virtual reality is one of the many categories used to organize the chaotic world of extended reality (XR) technology and related languages. However, this label brings together several issues, suggesting a broad

application of the language of cinema to VR, while excluding a priori all other forms of extended realities. On the other hand, these forms can easily become hybridized on both an expressive and creative level thanks to the creation of hardware and software that support constant connections.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to regard Cine-VR as mainly 360° videos, a single category among many that form the range of possibilities of VR itself. This perspective suggests an ideal overlap between film and 3DoF (3 degrees of freedom) experiences, or ones that are nearly entirely devoid of interactivity (Mateer 2017, Dooley 2021). To overcome this constraint, and thereby unwittingly justify its bounds, Reyes has suggested introducing the notion of Interactive Fiction in Cinematic Virtual Reality (IFcVR), “an Interactive Digital Narrative (IDN), placed at the intersection of Interactive Fiction (IF), the computer-mediated interactive fictional narratives and Cinematic VR (cVR), the creation of virtual experiences that have a cinematic interface” (Reyes 2019). According to the definition suggested by Reyes, Cine-VR could encompass any VR experience, including 6DoF (6 degrees of freedom) works, as long as the user is unable to manipulate them. The limitations of this viewpoint are acknowledged by the author herself, who suggests that an immersive experience devoid of interaction is incongruous and that the manipulative element may even be valuable in works with a strong cinematic structure.

Despite this and other intriguing proposals, we can try to use the concept of Cine-VR more loosely. While XR experiences may vary widely from one another in terms of the degree of freedom and the interaction between the user and the environment, the term *cinematic virtual reality* is useful in characterizing the entire set of VR experiences that rework components, structures, and styles of cinematic language.

Within the wide scope of Cine-VR, however, currents have emerged that are in part native to immersive realities or appropriated from film or other media, including video games, theater, dance, live-action role-playing games, and sculpture as well (Tricart 2018). This remediation process tries to gradually hide the perception of the medium, resulting in an illusory overlap between user experience and message content (Grusin and Bolter 1999). To achieve this goal, the user’s body and how it interacts with the virtual world become essential components of the storytelling. With regard to genre, the so-called *immersive social documentary* is one of the most successful forms in the immersive-arts field.

The practice of immersive social documentary has its roots in the history of interactive documentaries, a “communicative artifact that makes use of digital media [...] and requires a form of participation on the part of the

user that goes beyond the act of cognitive interpretation, an interaction more akin to the notion of *embodied cognition*” (Calogero 2020, 22). Since the proliferation of digital media into the contemporary media ecosystem, interaction has been more relevant in nonfiction narratives, so the emphasis of scholars has shifted away from the scopical-interpretive relationship of the filmic image toward a performative one. This paradigm shift includes significant changes in the way the epistemological, ethical, and communicative functions of documentary filmmaking are understood. Specifically, as suggested by Calogero’s definition, scholars are starting to consider the performative function of the user-spectator’s physical body in the cognitive process related to the nonfiction work.

The theory of embodied cognition highlights how crucial the interaction between the body of the user-spectator and the digital environment is for processing meanings (Parisi 2019). In fact, since the 1980s, the school of classical cognitivism has accepted new theories that seek to acknowledge the significance of the organic body in cognitive processes. The enactive theory, which puts the mind-body-space triangle at the heart of the cognitive process, has proved particularly insightful (Varela, Thompson, and Rosh 1992). These factors have been shown to help examine the audience’s role in interactive flat-screen media, but they have gained even more significance in light of the so-called *immersive turn* of nonfiction works. This concept has been covered extensively by Mandy Rose, who recognizes a “rapid uptake of VR as a medium for nonfiction” (Rose 2018, 3), delving into the details of how the emerging Cine-VR experience blends with the interactive documentary tradition.

Immersive documentary therefore integrates Cine-VR’s structural qualities into nonfiction, bringing the interactive dimension previously experienced with flat-screen media. Specifically, the concept of environmental storytelling is reinforced once more, wherein the link between the user’s body and the virtual environment determines how the narrative experience takes shape and compels the writer to reconsider the traditional linearity of the story. This change in viewpoint has enabled the production of highly creative immersive documentaries that challenge the documentary genre itself by merging it with a variety of different media. Focusing on interactive documentary, Nash notes that there has already been a move toward the entertainment dimension, but without losing sight of the social roles of classical documentary, at least “at the level of practitioner communities, institutions, and as a field of inquiry” (Nash 2022, 5). She strongly believes that audience participation would increase the social and political possibilities of documentary filmmaking. Thus, the same perspective can

be applied to immersive documentaries, particularly those dealing with social issues. Critics and scholars show deep confidence in the educational and expressive potential of the immersive medium (Makransky and Peterson 2021; MacDowell and Lock 2022), viewing it as a privileged tool for the performative reproduction of real social experiences, as well as the preservation of historic memory.

There is a thriving literature about these pioneering forms of documentaries, as well as some creative interest in them. However, structural challenges relating to the market and production chain have received less attention. The immersive social documentary takes on some of the problems of Cine-VR in general. I specifically point to the complicated technical requirements for experiencing the works, the lack of clear and institutionalized distribution paths, and the creation of marginal contexts for their exhibition. Nevertheless, the documentary has emerged as one of Cine-VR's most active genres, thereby indirectly aiding the process of cultural legitimization. The creation of physical spaces for viewing and enjoying these works raises crucial issues about the circulation of immersive documentaries, their role in the legitimization of immersive works in general, and the unavoidable distortions of this system.

3. The System and Its Challenges. Spaces of Cinematic Virtual Reality

The distribution of immersive VR works generates many significant challenges. Referring back to the notion of remediation (Grusin and Bolter 1999), the creation of a new medium is influenced by the traditions of those that came before it – not just from a narrative, expressive, and esthetic standpoint, but also an economic and creative one. Cine-VR includes techniques inherited from cinematic and theatrical experiences, as well as, in very different ways, video games (Bolter, Engberg, and MacIntyre 2021). The most obvious explanation is that professionals of immersive arts themselves often start training in more traditional media settings, bringing to the new system professional habits acquired in other contexts. Moreover, because the technologies required to experience VR works are still in their early stages of implementation, they lend themselves to a style of storytelling that is still linked to the event, the incredible, and wonder (Dalpozzo 2018). The focus on the medium's spectacularism continues to hide the possibility of institutionalization, which will only occur as a result of habit consolidation.

To summarize a much more complex system made up of exceptions rather than rules, we could say that there are now two main forms of distri-

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bution for Cine-VR works. The first, which is online distribution, makes use of devices that consumers already have in their homes – head mounted displays (HMDs) – for personal use. However, this type of circulation is limited by several issues. First, not enough consumers own these kinds of displays to allow an aggressive online platform distribution effort. Second, the final audience is further reduced by the fact that different HMDs grant access to different products, but most consumers have only one kind of display. Last, because gamers are the main target audience for the content libraries of the most widely used HMDs, these sources often include playful works with somewhat longer runs and game dynamics. However, because of their connection to the cinematic heritage, Cine-VR works are typically shorter in duration and do not allow the user's choices to significantly impact the story's progression. Because of this, accessing online catalogues is both difficult and ineffective.

The second form of distribution is referred to as *location-based events* (LBE) – a technique for circulating works in specific physical location-based entertainment. There are three main kinds of LBE spaces. The first, and least common, involves permanent places set aside expressly for experiencing immersive works. Most of these are VR arcades, namely, locations where people may play games together using HMDs, carrying on the tradition of video-game arcades (D'Aloia 2019). The second scenario entails transforming preexisting physical locations into spaces where viewers can enjoy Cine-VR works. Museums and other cultural institutions are examples of organizations that may permanently or temporarily alter part of their space to meet these needs. Lastly, crucial LBE spaces are associated with temporary and extraordinary events, such as festivals, that often are devoted only to immersive works.

While works with significant gaming content are more likely to be distributed online or through arcades, different kinds of LBEs operate better for immersive experiences that draw inspiration from cinematic or theatrical traditions. Festivals play one of the most significant roles in the system for circulating immersive works, which brings up at least two considerations. The first is related to the market's weakness, which makes it difficult to distribute immersive works and lacks established avenues for making profits. Festivals usually bring works to a close rather than serving as a platform for their continued commercial existence. The second consideration is related to the impact of film tradition. The importance of festivals for immersive works is tied to their historic role in the film industry. It is no surprise that the most important Cine-VR festivals emerge as independent sections or exhibition spaces within traditional film festivals.

The process of giving immersive works cultural legitimacy also revolves around this principle. As a result, it is worth discussing the role of festivals in the dissemination of Cine-VR, as well as how immersive social documentaries are one of the most relevant genres.

4. The Visibility Dilemma. Festivals as Spaces of Cultural Legitimization

Film festivals originated in Europe as vehicles for establishing national cultural identities, eventually expanding into spaces for the creation and validation of new expressive trends (de Valck 2007). They offer an alternative circuit to the mainstream film industry, establishing their own identity based on a set of authorial and creative principles that should not be influenced by monetary success. Adopting a Bourdieu-inspired approach, de Valck recalls how festivals have a strong symbolic capital. Consequently, according to her, they

[...] occupy nodal roles both as gatekeepers and as tastemakers. Festivals' gatekeeping function refers to the objective structures; filmmakers must "pass" festivals to secure exposure (opportunities for exhibition), recognition (judged as worthy for presentation), and ideally prestige (selection for esteemed programs, prizes, or other honors). As tastemakers, film festivals are also integrated into the established structures that contribute to upholding the belief in art cinema's autonomous values, thereby perpetuating the ongoing production and reproduction of the "game" of art cinema. (de Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016, 109.)

The emerging tradition of immersive art festivals is still very influenced by conventional film-festival structures and occurs on at least two levels. The first one is concerned with the geographical distribution of these events, while the second is associated with their cultural significance. For example, renowned A-tier festivals have been crucial in legitimizing immersive media. Some of them introduced a VR or XR section alongside the main competition, to reflect how their identities have been shaped over decades-long histories. Following Stringer's theories on the importance of geographic spaces in defining power dynamics among film festivals, we can argue that these XR sections within the traditional festival circuit have contributed to creating a new parallel network – "an allegorization of space and its power relationships" that "operates through the transfer of value between and within distinct geographic localities" (Stringer 2001, 138). Stated differently, they support the emergence of a new festival geography for immersive works. This circuit moves the entire industrial setup, not just a single event, by acting as a source of symbolic capital.

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Immersive festivals serve crucial gatekeeping and tastemaking roles, just as film festivals do. These events are privileged settings for establishing a shared esthetic sensibility and defining what might legitimately be called *art*.

With this in mind, gaming – which is favored by online distribution or arcades – is the (still small) mainstream market. Film festivals, on the other hand, clearly play a promotional role that might encourage financial exploitation of the work, but immersive works have difficulty finding profitable distributions. Through a review of works chosen and awarded at festivals, it is possible to identify the traits common to works that are currently deemed culturally elevated and thus worthy of prestige. I did this by examining the immersive programs of four festivals that took place between 2021 and 2023 – the Venice Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Kaohsiung Film Festival, and BFI London Film Festival. Seventy-six of the 250 pieces that were chosen from the four case studies are classified as documentaries. Six of them have a natural subject, and the remaining seventy a historical or social topic.

It is feasible to classify most of them as immersive social documentaries, even though they frequently take on a hybrid form and incorporate elements of fiction. Thus, immersive documentary is a particularly popular form within the culturally elevated festival circuit, especially in its social application. Apart from its potential educational, informative, and memory-preserving functions, immersive social documentaries are a fundamental element of the emerging artistic taste for Cine-VR as an art form. There is a two-fold influence. On the one hand, the festival provides a cultural-capital resource to filmmakers and works that overcome their entry barriers, thereby accessing the prestige-building cycle. In contrast to conventional immersive experiences, these selected immersive social documentaries are instantly perceived to be culturally relevant by audience and gatekeepers. On the other hand, the repeated presence of works with similar themes and purposes contributes to the development of a cultural taste that extends beyond festivals, motivating the creation of other works in the same genre or style.

One result is that, even in works that are not based on true events, the social documentary process often is simulated. This increases the number of works in which authors present the theme of testimony in conjunction with identification and empathy toward social situations. However, immersive festivals rarely succeed in turning the symbolic value of selected works into economic capital. This demonstrates a structural flaw in the system, putting works made by individual authors or small production companies

in a particularly vulnerable position. For this purpose, it may be instructive to analyze two archetypal case studies based on their contrasts.

The first of these case studies is *The Key*, a 2019 immersive experience that combines social documentary with an experimental and dreamy component. It is directed and produced by Celine Tricart in cooperation with Meta Platforms. The second is *All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost*, a VR film directed and produced by French artist Mélanie Courtinat in 2022. It is a small VR production distributed by Diversion Cinema. In this second example, the piece draws inspiration from stories and memories about a horrific incident to create a melancholy and experimental journey that hybridizes documentary and fiction. Therefore, from an esthetic and narrative point of view, both Tricart and Courtinat's works confirm the introduction of the stylistic elements of immersive social documentary within the creative milieu related to festivals. Both pieces were shown at the Venice Film Festival. *The Key* went on to win the festival's 2019 edition, while *All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost* proceeded to various festivals until winning the Best VR award at the World Festival of Animated Film – Animafest Zagreb.

The Key was made by Lucid Dreams Productions, a production company based in Paris and Los Angeles, led by Celine Tricart herself and her colleague Gloria Bradbury. Following several documentary productions for both traditional cinema and 360-degree videos, Tricart directed *The Key* with the support of Oculus VR for Good – a Meta initiative designed to support socially impactful immersive projects – and the social organization Friends of Refugees. Since its early stages, *The Key* was destined for release on the Oculus store, one of the main online distribution channels for VR works, where it is still available for free. Simultaneously, its success has been enhanced by a meticulously planned distribution effort within the festival circuit. Benefiting from its Los Angeles base, *The Key* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, where it received the renowned Storyscape Award. Its international premiere, however, was at the Venice Film Festival, where it was awarded the prestigious Grand Jury Prize. Both Tribeca and Venice host privileged events in the festival environment, so this dual acknowledgment demonstrates the work's deep symbolic capital. Immersive works are difficult to pick at both festivals due to entrance criteria that, in the case of the Venice Film Festival, relate at least to their international premiere. The symbolic capital thus gained was reinforced by its performance at two other significant international festivals in Taiwan and Canada.

The Key, then, already had a foundation of cultural legitimacy when it

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was released on the Oculus store on April 16, 2020. Although this online library is the pinnacle of commercial mainstream distribution, *The Key* is a co-production with VR for Good and is offered without charge because of its humanitarian and social goals. At the same time, the work's widespread popularity on the festival circuit, as well as its impressive number of downloads from the Oculus store, bolstered Meta and Lucid Dreams Production's collaboration, resulting in a second project. *Fight Back*, released in 2022, is a gaming experience with social undertones directed by Celine Tricart. It followed a similar path as *The Key*, with an international premiere in Venice and efficient commercial distribution.

All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost followed a different path. Unlike *The Key*, it was not developed in conjunction with big production companies. Mélanie Courtinat was the sole creator, director, and producer. To handle distribution, she teamed with Diversion Cinema, a well-known VR events agency with an important distribution department. The company developed a distribution strategy for the experience, which began in 2022 at the Venice Film Festival and is still tightly aligned with the festival circuit. Notably, Courtinat's work has been shown throughout a wider geographical area than *The Key*, involving sixteen different festivals by August 2023. Due to the lack of a solid online distribution network, such as that supplied by a partner like Meta, the main strategy for the circulation of the work centers on the festival circuit. The process provided a significant accumulation of symbolic capital, which increased the allure and commercial potential of *All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost*. By acquiring visibility through festival exhibits, the work may increase its chances of being acquired by other kinds of LBE venues, such as museums. In fact, the VR film has been purchased by Le Cube, a cultural center in Garges-lès-Gonesse. The distribution process for *All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost* is still ongoing. These two case studies provide vital insights into the physical spaces of immersive films.

Festivals are crucial as privileged platforms and sources of cultural legitimization because a mainstream market for Cine-VR does not exist. Indeed, there is a clear tendency for festivals to promote fiction or nonfiction works above gaming-oriented experiences, especially in the immersive social documentary genre. Moreover, social and humanitarian topics are often the focus of these immersive documentaries, which prioritize the preservation of their subjects' direct or indirect testimonies. Even when an experience has an opportunity for online distribution, as *The Key* does, the symbolic capital associated with its physical presentation at festivals is still important.

It is no coincidence that Meta's official website states unequivocally that *The Key* is not a game. This distinction is required to set it apart from typically marketable experiences, raising important questions about whether *The Key* and *All Unsaved Progress Will Be Lost* could still be deemed non-games if they hadn't been shown at festivals. What cultural distinctions exist between these two pieces and those found on more mainstream circuits? Their documentary style could be one possible answer, but it is incomplete. These kinds of works are associated with a high level of cultural awareness because of their frequent display in highly symbolic capital locations, like festivals, museums, and other similar institutions. There are no genre restrictions on the requirements for accessing online platforms like the Oculus store, for example. Accessibility barriers include those pertaining to length, technical requirements, and adherence to specific regulations about acceptable material. Indeed, *The Key* is easily accessible by Meta's users, but it is also displayed as something unique and different from the usual catalogue offerings.

The most likely answer is that VR films are not defined solely by intrinsic esthetic and content qualities. The attribution of a value label is related to their exhibition venues. As suggested by de Valck, "all manifestations of Capital [...] are used by groups and individuals to advance their positions. What counts as legitimate capital is determined by the norms in those social spaces, but everyone is driven by at least one form of capital" (de Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016, 105). Therefore, the cultural and symbolic capital of the artworks themselves develops as a result of the assimilation of the same capital that exists in the social spaces where these works are exhibited. Further, the kinds of works that are chosen and exhibited in these venues also have an impact on the places themselves. The imagery connected with immersive social documentary is thus a reflection of the esthetic and content codification that occurs in these venues.

5. Conclusions

The evolution of the cinema documentary tradition and its more modern interactive application, which centers the experience on the viewer/user, has given rise to immersive social documentaries. As a result, it serves a prominent social and political function. The work's educational and informational aspects are further enhanced by the acknowledged capacity of VR and other XR technologies to encourage empathy and identification, thereby expanding the pedagogical and informative elements of the piece.

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This makes immersive social documentaries a valuable means of preserving memory and cultural heritage.

The process of creating these pieces is inextricably related to the weaknesses of their market, however, which risks undermining production efforts due to limited potential for distribution and remuneration. Immersive social documentary carves out a privileged niche in specific contexts of content circulation that has been provided with dominant symbolic capital. This is related to the circuit of festivals – on which I have chosen to focus during my research – but there are also LBE venues, such as museums and cultural institutions. However, as an alternate circuit to the mainstream network, which is now mostly committed to the gaming business, there are some difficulties in transforming symbolic capital into economic capital. This structural weakness has major significance. There is great attention on the potential of immersive technology for efficiently preserving social and cultural heritage by stimulating user experience, but these works can have a very short lifespan. The immersive social documentary case study, which is used here as a key example, is just one feasible facet of this phenomenon.

In conclusion, the spaces in which works circulate influence their perception and their social definition, particularly considering the hybridization of original documentary elements with esthetic and content experimentation, making it more difficult to identify the genre's boundaries. However, the short economic life cycle and technological obsolescence make the circulation system quite weak, posing a problem for which there is currently no solution.

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