

StoryLab Symposium, *Movement and Memory* Panel - By Anna Salamon

Can multi-modal storytelling via immersive technologies help to foster greater empathy in our conversations about current, complex societal issues?

Immersive technologies open up new artistic and aesthetic possibilities, the specifics of which are yet to be researched in a systematic manner. Two things, however, are certain: technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and AR augmented reality (AR) physically incorporate the viewers' bodies, provoking very direct, visceral responses. Secondly, these emerging technologies incite new ways of telling stories: multi-modal and non-linear, often necessitating the audiences' input. These two aspects have been reported to induce greater empathy. Considering this, are multi-modal narratives more suited to reflect sensitive or contested issues, such as migration and climate change? Is traditional storytelling obsolete? And what ethical questions bear on practitioners who employ immersive technologies to tell stories on others' behalf? These were some of the questions that emerged from presentations and discussions during *Movement and Memory* panel of the StoryLab Symposium held on 26th November 2019.

This mid-day panel featured contributions from three practitioners and one philosopher. Prof. Rob Toulson, a composer also active in the field of sound engineering; Ben Fredericks, an artist; and Felix Gaedtke, a filmmaker, have all discussed their respective projects, whereas Dr Sarah Fine of King's College, London, offered her perspective grounded in political philosophy. The conversations held following these presentations centred around the challenges and opportunities of multi-modal storytelling in relation to ethics of representation.

The visceral impact of immersive storytelling

To kick-start the panel, Prof. Rob Toulson presented his sound design for *The Crossing*, a multi-screen film on human trafficking directed by Dr. Shreepali Patel. This 12-minute, fact-based feature involves a female protagonist narrating her own, unspeakable, real-life experience of being traded. The emotional impact of her story becomes amplified by sound designed in such a way that it acts as another "voice" in the story (whereas, traditionally, sound merely echoes what is presented by the moving image). This approach stemmed from Rob's interest in the emotional impact of sound in filmmaking: "Fact-based storytelling is not the same as factual storytelling", Rob offered in support of his subversive approach. Many abstract sound elements were layered to give a sonic art piece alongside the cinematography and narrative. On top of that, combinations of dialogue and choreographed location sounds were mixed with looped sound clips that represent and reinforce aspects of the film's story and environment. Soundtrack in *The Crossing* is both hyperreal and immersive.

In the second presentation, a Newcastle-based artist Ben Fredericks discussed his recent work, *Playing God*. In the words of its maker, *Playing God* is "an interactive VR thought-experiment which allows you to imagine that you are a captain of a space ship facing a humanitarian crisis". Crucial for this work is the use of branched narrative, that is, a narrative offering the audience a possibility of interference at several points in the plot. Effecting these choices causes the story to bifurcate, effectively positioning the audience members as co-creators of the work. By using a non-traditional, non-linear narrative Ben wished to "engage the audience in their critical thinking in response to a humanitarian crisis". The implied proposition is that active and involved participation in a tough ethical dilemma offers an emphatic experience of humanitarian crisis.

The ethics of telling stories on others' behalf

The next panellist, filmmaker Felix Gaedtke, spoke about openly the sensitivities involved in exposing another person's lived experience of violence and displacement. Felix revealed behind-the-scenes of making *Home after War*, a room-scale, interactive VR experience that takes the audience to Fallujah, Iraq. Fallujah was, until recently, under Islamic State (IS) control, and even though the war against Islamic State has ended, the city is still unsafe. After narrating the spine-chilling task of carrying suspiciously looking, high-tech film equipment through the military check-points on a daily basis, Felix admitted that finding the

protagonist of his VR work has not been easy. Important ethical questions need to be considered when telling sensitive stories on other's behalf, particularly when the subject in question is excluded systemically, or otherwise rendered voiceless.

Dr Sarah Fine articulated these questions in her presentation. "Does who I am matter for the kind of story I am telling? Does who the audience is matter for what story ends up being plotted up?" These kinds of questions come to the forefront particularly when narrating a sensitive topic, such as migration. "Should there be something like human right to migrate?", Sarah asked, reflecting on her own experience of collaborating with artists around the themes of movement and migration¹. In her concluding thoughts, Dr Fine suggested that VR experiences are potentially less confrontational, thus enabling conflicting arguments to sit next to each other. In other words, can multi-modal storytelling via immersive technologies help expand our capacity for empathy, enabling more nuanced dialogues on complex, contested social issues?

It is important to highlight that none of the works exhibited², or presented in the symposium, used immersive technologies to simply shock audience's sensory apparatus. Most, if not all, represented a missing voice, or sought to illuminate a sensitive issue from multiple or previously unexposed angles. The philosophical questions articulated by Dr Fine revoke the initial brief for this Symposium, instigated to probe *stewardship and empathy* in the 4th Industrial Revolution.

To find out more about the StoryLab Research Institute and upcoming events visit: <http://www.storylabresearch.com/>.

1 These collaborations included work with ice&fire Theatre Company and choreographer [Sivan Rubinstein](#) on her project [MAPS](#), exploring an imagined world without borders through music and dance.

2 The symposium was organised in conjunction with an exhibition in the Ruskin Gallery. An illustrated catalogue is available at: <https://storylabresearch.com/events/exhibition-storytelling-in-the-4th-industrial-revolution/>