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SPACE EXPLORERS: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING

Abstract

The rise of virtual and augmented reality technologies combined with a growing multi platform distribution network opens new possibilities for public outreach in space exploration. Immersive content shows great potential to engage worldwide audiences. Firstly, because well-produced immersive media content generates a sense of presence, making audiences feel like participating crewmembers (instead of spectators) transported at the heart of space missions with a deeper, more visceral level of engagement. Secondly, because filming in ultra-high-definition 3D 360 Virtual Reality (VR) format allows for global distribution to billions of people across a vast array of digital platforms (VR, AR, 5G-enabled 360 video, 2D video for mobile and streaming TV) and out-of-home venues (theatrical distribution, giant screens, domes and planetariums, interactive traveling exhibition) - while being efficient from an operational and crew involvement standpoint.

After the successful launch of the Emmy-nominated Space Explorers: The Journey Begins in 2018, Felix and Paul Studios (FPS) and its partners have built and flown VR camera systems to the International Space Station (ISS) and filmed more than 200 hours of virtual reality footage over two years of production - working closely with 8 international astronauts as our story protagonists and on-set film crew, while documenting historic milestones in the history of human spaceflight (first-all women spacewalk, arrival of the SpaceX Demo-2 and Crew-1 astronauts aboard the ISS, etc.). In 2021, a virtual reality camera was deployed for the first time outside of the ISS and operated from the robotic arm to capture a spacewalk in ultra-high-definition 3D 360 Virtual Reality (VR) format. This paper presents Felix and Paul studios' 4-year journey pioneering immersive storytelling to create the Space Explorers series, the largest media production ever filmed in space. The paper summarizes the achieved impact and demonstrates the potential of this type of content to reach the general public in the years to come. Alternate uses of these technologies in supporting mission operations is also discussed. The paper concludes with FPS' vision for the use of immersive content production in support of future exploration missions to the Moon, Mars and beyond.