

Q&A: A documentarian working in virtual reality

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In this Jan. 7, 2014 file photo, show attendees play a video game wearing Oculus Rift virtual reality headsets at the Intel booth at the International Consumer Electronics Show(CES), in Las Vegas. Filmmaker Danfung Dennis' latest project: a virtual reality documentary, "Zero Point," will be the first movie released for the Oculus Rift, a VR headset that provides an immersive 110-degree field of view with high-definition stereoscopic 3D and low-latency head tracking. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Forget 3-D glasses. Oscar-nominated documentarian Danfung Dennis

believes the next evolution in filmmaking will be to surround viewers with images in 360 degrees—directly on their noggins.

Dennis, whose gripping 2012 film "Hell and Back Again" told of a soldier's battle with [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), is creating his next film project especially for the Oculus Rift, a [virtual reality headset](#) still in development. The device provides wearers with an immersive, wrap-around view that doesn't make them queasy.

So far, the prototype technology has mostly been tinkered with by [video game developers](#) and is a year or two away from being available to consumers.

"This is obviously going to take off," said Dennis, who founded the visual technology company Condition One. "No one who tries this denies it's going to work, but there's a potential it could just stay with gamers. There needs to be experiences that don't require you to know how to use a 20-button gamepad. Everyone knows how to look around in a world."

Enter Dennis' documentary "Zero Point," which is set on a computer-generated [space station](#) with each room transporting viewers to different realms representing various developments of VR technology, akin to the fictional holodeck from "Star Trek."

The film will be available later this year to developers working with the Oculus Rift. Dennis hopes the project will position Condition One as the first provider for premium content to owners of the Oculus Rift, once it's released.

After a demonstration of three clips from "Zero Point"—a sweep of the space station, a glimpse inside a mock Afghan village and a stroll through a crowded convention hall—Dennis discussed the challenges of creating a film in 360 degrees:



In this Jan. 29, 2011 file photo, director Danfung Dennis accepts the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Documentary for "Hell and Back Again" during the 2011 Sundance Film Festival Awards Ceremony in Park City, Utah. Dennis' latest project: a virtual reality documentary, "Zero Point," will be the first movie released for the Oculus Rift, a VR headset that provides an immersive 110-degree field of view with high-definition stereoscopic 3D and low-latency head tracking. (AP Photo/Danny Moloshok, File)

Associated Press: How do you compose shots when everything is surrounding the viewer?

Dennis: All the traditional rules of cinematography and editing are gone. The frame no longer exists. You're inside the frame. The cut—the most basic technique of editing—is too abrupt and doesn't work here. If you try to cut from one scene to another, it's too disorienting. Nowhere in our waking life do we teleport, except make when we wake up. I'm finding

that a new generation of storytellers inspired by gaming and cinema will have to create a new visual language with the syntax and grammar of how to tell a story with this technology. We're just beginning down that path right now.

AP: "Zero Point" is a documentary, but could you see this [technology](#) being used for a fictional film?

Dennis: Absolutely. I think a fictional narrative film is probably an easier place to start. You have to really think about each shot to be able to convey a narrative, instead of just a pure experience. There needs to be a lot of thought about where the camera is and what type of cues can be used to guide people through a story. I think audio will be key to drawing people where to look. Otherwise, they might miss something. The challenges in setting up a scene would be incredible, but it would still be easier than the documentary method of shooting hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage to edit later.

AP: As a filmmaker, it seems like you have to give up a large amount of control to the viewer. How do you manage that creatively?

Dennis: It's less about what the viewer sees and more about their position. As storytellers, we have to deliver viewers a raw experience and let them decide what the frame will be. They're going to choose what's interesting to them within that vantage point. We won't know where they're going to look. Yes, you do lose control as a traditional filmmaker, but I think what's going to happen is that it'll be more like gaming. You can still have deep narrative in first-person games. Ultimately, I think this shift will give birth to an entirely new medium communicated through virtual reality.

More information: www.conditionone.com/zeropoint

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