This Vital Storytelling Principle Is the Key to Producing Great VR and AR Content

Our brains are hardwired to see narrative. That’s what makes the potential of VR and AR for content so exciting.

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By now, we’ve all heard of the immense possibilities of virtual and augmented reality storytelling. If the response to *Pokemon GO* is any indication, when these technologies go fully mainstream, they will completely revolutionize entertainment content and how it’s delivered.

For millennia, whether it’s a painting, book, film or video game, we’ve been “flattening” our three-dimensional world into 2D stories. VR and AR are ushering in a global 3D media infrastructure, which means immersive content at mass-scale. This marks an unprecedented opportunity for creators of all types – from artists to advertisers –but to find success, all will need to understand is a core storytelling principle called “Narrative Potential.”

What is Narrative Potential?

Narrative potential refers to the opportunities in immersive environments that invite user engagement.

Media like film and literature offer us stories with predetermined outcomes; it's the job of writers and filmmakers to fully deliver the world and the story. But immersive technologies are ushering in a totally new paradigm. Now, it's the job of creators to build worlds that invite audience participation, which allows them to "create" the story for themselves.

This is true from the lightweight mobile apps to deep-immersion virtual experiences. Every scene, space and object is an opportunity for the creator to make a choice about user engagement. In a film, an object in a room is a visual prop. In VR/AR that same object is a chance for the creator to drive interaction.

It's important to note here that "narrative potential" is not confined to story-driven experiences; it applies to all types of content, ranging from apps to advertisements. The name has to do with the inherent narrative tendencies of our minds. As was discovered in the Heider-Simmel study seven decades ago, your brain will project story even where none exists. Narrative potential simply puts that to use. Here are three ways you can use narrative potential to ensure that your AR or VR application resonates with audiences.

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1. Let space propel story.

Ask any architect or interior designer: every space tells a story. When you walk into a typical classroom, what's communicated to you? Orderly rows of desks indicate that a group of people will all focus in one direction, rather than talk as a group. Fluorescent lighting and bookshelves imply a space intended for focus and scholarship. These embedded details drive us to make automatic assumptions about what to expect, how we act and ultimately become our "story" of that

space in time.

In building our own virtual spaces, we can use these assumptions to further the aims of the experience. If our goal is to make users feel confined, for instance, maybe we tap those childhood memories of never-ending school days by incorporating elements of the classroom – those fluorescent lights, hard angles, tightly packed desks. For good measure we also shrink the scale just a bit, framing participants as too-tall kids in an otherwise normally sized space.

This consideration of users' relationship with space also applies to AR experiences. If you're making a tabletop AR game, its size could mean the difference between users playing it from the comfort of their beds or needing to run around a kitchen table. Understanding your target audience's desires and habits empowers you to use narrative potential effectively – and thereby produce content that appeals to them.

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2. Think small. It's in the details.

Not every immersive app is meant to be a whole world; and even when it is, you'll win your audience in the details.

Say you're tasked with building an AR advertisement for a vase company. If you position their flagship vase precariously close to the edge of a table when users begin, you'll probably make them think about it falling and shattering. This is narrative potential at work, but certainly not in service of selling the vase and generating positive brand association. Had you positioned it in the center of the table you'd be tapping narrative potential differently, letting participants comfortably imagine what the case would look like in their

home.

On the other hand, say you're trying to make an offbeat mobile game. You might again use a vase, but this time imbue it with unexpected properties. What if instead of shattering when it hits the ground, it bounces with a funky "boink" sound? You could make a whole game that involves bouncing vases back-and-forth like basketballs. Here, narrative potential is used to subvert expectations to establish a brand identity that's quirky and rebellious.

These are just two examples among many; the point is to think deeply about the properties of objects so they can be used to your advantage.

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3. Invite interaction, don't direct behavior.

So many immersive creators have wondered how to "direct" audience attention in immersive experiences, but a better consideration is how to invite engagement. More than ever, creators need to anticipate audience desires to create resonant experiences.

Where film can rely on cuts, zooms, and camera moves to dictate story, VR and AR grant participants too much agency for these techniques to work. Instead, "guiding cues" and "points of interest" can be used to invite participation. For example, if you hear a sound behind you, odds are you'll turn around to look. Same goes if someone gasps and points in a certain direction. These are examples of guiding cues, and why characters who function as "hosts" can be extremely helpful, though they're not the right solution for many experiences.

Meanwhile, awareness of how audiences respond to shapes,

colors, and patterns will lead you to use points of interest (POIs) in service of your creative goals. As Jessica Brillhart writes, “[POIs] could be extremely obvious, like bright red dots, or more nuanced, like lone mountaineers climbing Icelandic glaciers.” You want to mine these attention-grabbing features for the greatest impact. Sometimes that will mean positioning other information around them to be certain audiences noticed it, other times it will mean letting them stand alone to avoid overcrowding.

In a broader sense, inviting interaction comes down to a simple question: is this an experience audiences could have had any other way? If the answer is “yes,” you might need to go back to the drawing board. Movies aren’t just “plays on film” – they’re a totally separate medium. By the same token, VR and AR are new media that bring novel opportunities.

In particular, VR and AR can spark interactions among people that could never occur IRL. If you’re in a VR journey with your dad and he’s a tiny blue bear with a high-pitched voice, you’ll both be adapting your understandings of each other to fit the current reality. He’ll be toying with his new identity, exploring parts of himself that maybe don’t emerge in real life. If he’s five times smaller than you, the two of you will have to discover ways to interact that couldn’t occur in reality. The outcome of the experience that you’ll both leave with will still factor in to your understandings of each other.

Even though all the options in these emerging formats can seem overwhelming, the good news is that everybody is still learning the rules on the fly. At the end of the day, your best bet is to start experimenting while the bar is still low. And by keeping these three basic tenets in mind, you’re outfitting yourself with the potential to one day create unforgettable experiences.

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