

"Suspension of disbelief" is a concept that describes how, in order to become emotionally involved in a narrative, audiences must react as if the characters are real and the situation/events they find themselves in are happening now, even though they know it is only a fictional story. The willing suspension of disbelief for the moment was how the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge phrased it in 1817, with reference to the audiences for literary works.³

As a storyteller, Walt understood that he had to acknowledge the role of the audience and "invite them to play." Using his masterful storytelling skills, he designed Disney-land to draw out his guests' emotions based on their wish fulfillment and their willingness to suspend their disbelief.

WHAT IS IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING?



Immersive storytelling describes creating a space using different kinds of technology to build a sense of presence for the visitor/audience. The space can be a combination of physical, digital, and/or virtual elements, and ultimately, it gives the visitor a transportive feeling within an emotionally-compelling story as if they "are really there." An immersive space is designed to be so compelling that it makes visitors feel like they're part of that world and hopefully, make them believe that they belong in it. It's an impactful technique that captures the emotion and wish fulfillment of that experience.

Immersive storytelling can also be referred to as experience design, themed experience, immersive experience, and in its most extreme form — worldbuilding. The story can take place in many physical and digital environments: a theme park, museum, house, small exhibit, corporate center, restaurant, store, online learning site, virtual reality experience, game, or other forms.

Immersive stories can be original, or adapted from a different format, such as a book, toy, video game, film, theme park ride, or television series. They can be cultural and educational, like what you would experience in a national park

³<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100544310>

exhibit, historical foundation, art museum, or science center. They can be inviting and customer-bonding, like what you would see in a pop-up event to introduce a new brand.

Immersive experiences can be small and intimate, like the Thea-award winning, *The Nest*, created by two former Imagineers, Jeff Leinenveber & Jarrett Lantz. On their website, they describe the show as

an intimate, live experience for two audience members at a time, combining elements of immersive theater, narrative video games, serialized podcasts, and escape rooms into a new way to experience a story. Equipped with a flashlight, search through personal effects, explore your surroundings, and listen to audio cassettes to piece together the dramatic narrative of Josie's life.*

I experienced this little gem and loved the deceptively simple setup, yet every single detail of the story is meticulously designed to immerse visitors in this woman's life.



The Nest. Photo: Jeremy Connors courtesy of Scout Expedition Co.

*<http://www.thenestshow.com>

Immersive experiences may not necessarily follow a clear plot or storyline. They can be emotional and visceral, like *Rain Room*⁵ by Hannes Koch and Florian Ortakrass, of the London-based art collective Random International, an immersive light and sound installation that is featured in multiple locations around the world, that simulates a storm and invites visitors to "control the weather" without getting wet.



Random International's *Rain Room* at Jackalope Pavilion Melbourne. Photo: Jolly Yau on Unsplash.

⁵<https://www.jackalopehotels.com/art/rainroom>

They can be fun and whimsical, like Yayoi Kusama's mirror-based art installation *Infinity Mirrored Room — The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013)⁶ or her art installation titled *with all my love for the tulips, I pray forever* (2011),⁷ a room completely covered in huge polka dots.

One of my personal favorites, Korean artist Do Ho Suh's magnificent life-sized fabric sculptures of building interiors, like *348 West 22nd Street* (2011–15),⁸ allows visitors to walk through a full-scale, ephemeral representation of the artist's former apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City.

They can be playful, immersive, and interactive, like the various teamLab art installations found around the world, which encourage visitors to explore, wander, discover, and interact with works of art that respond to touch and movement.

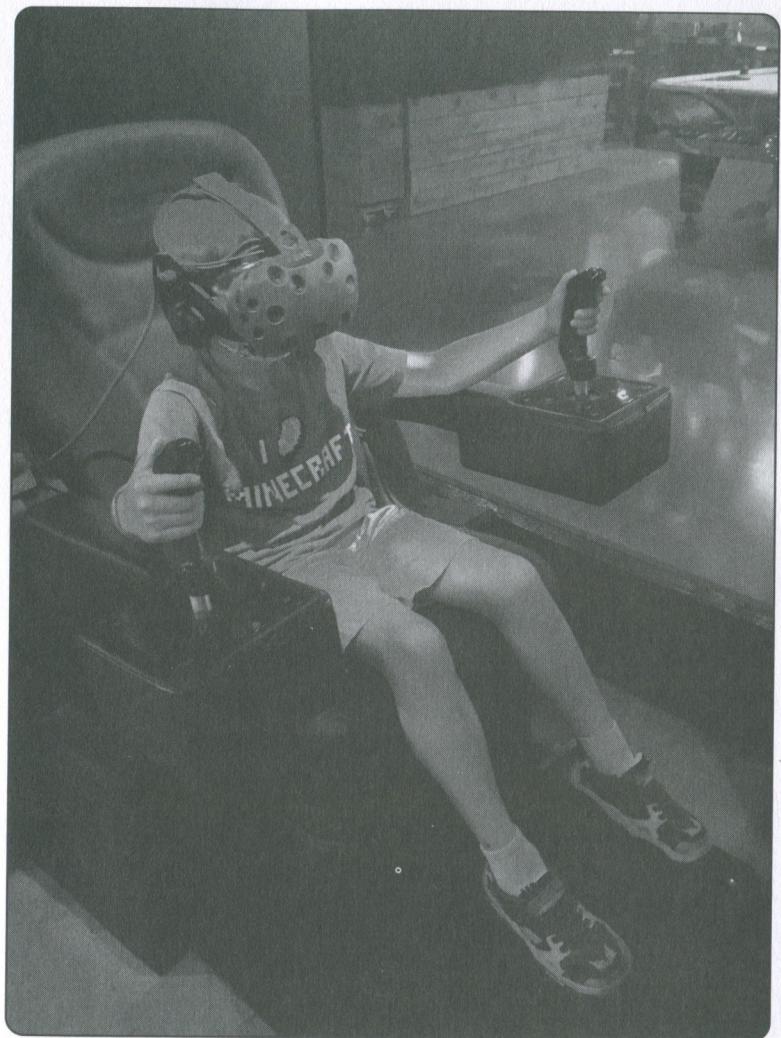
Immersive experiences can simply be fun, like a virtual reality experience or escape room found in places like Two Bit Circus, an “interactive digital playground of amusement for all ages”⁹ where you can work together to blast aliens, ride on a roller coaster, or defend your raft from supernatural creatures.

⁶<https://www.thebroad.org/art/yayoi-kusama>

⁷<https://www.worldartfoundations.com/marciano-art-foundation-yayoi-kusama-love-tulips-pray-forever-2011/>

⁸<https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/do-ho-suh-348-west-22nd-street>

⁹<https://twobitcircus.com>



My son going on a virtual roller coaster ride in Two Bit Circus. Photo: Margaret Kerrison

They can take form in varying scales, from small intimate rooms to expansive multi-acre lands. The most extreme form of themed experiences will engage all of your senses — sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. The most compelling experiences inspire a change in you.



YOU ARE THE STORY CHAMPION

Writing for immersive storytelling requires you to be the story champion and subject matter expert for the story of the experience. Does that mean that if you're working on an historical exhibit, you have to know everything a historian does? Not quite, but you do have to understand and appreciate the content, so that you can draw out the most compelling stories that will engage your audience. Like the writer of a good book or film, you have to appreciate what makes a story compelling to someone who doesn't know anything about the subject. You have to find the why of the experience; the deeper meaning and importance of the story.

THE S.T.O.R.Y. METHOD – THE FIRST FIVE QUESTIONS

At the start of every project, I always ask myself five questions. This is my personal method, in which I start to think about the most important elements of story. I use the word "story" as an acronym to remind me of the questions.

S — Share: Why share this story with the world?

If you, as the storyteller, don't know why you're sharing this story with the world, then no one will care about your story. Finding the why of the story is the most important question to ask. Storytelling is universal when you are honest. Honesty always finds the truth. With truth, comes the opportunity to open your audience's minds.

T — Theme: What's the theme of the experience? Like any good story, your experience needs a theme. Once you understand why you're sharing this story with

the world, then you can develop the theme, or meaning, of the experience. The theme drives the narrative thrust of your experience. The narrative thrust is the building of main story beats (identifiable moments of change) that move your story forward in a dramatic way.

O — One-of-a-Kind: How can I make this experience unique?

I consider the many ways I can make the experience something that isn't already out there. The competition for your visitor's attention is immense. You want to ensure that your experience is memorable and one-of-a-kind; something that will quickly capture the imagination of the visitor.

R — Reflect: Why am I the best person to tell this story? This is a big one. Why? Because knowing who you are as a storyteller will help give your experience a perspective. I've been asked to work on various projects based in Southeast Asia because I spent my childhood there. However, I've also had to work on many topics that I knew very little about. Finding your unique perspective is key to developing a compelling story.

Y — Yearn: What will visitors yearn to experience? What is their wish fulfillment?

Last but not least, questioning your visitor's greatest fantasy is something you must always consider. In order to do that, you have to understand what they are longing for. Is it belonging, connection, love, adventure, escape, transformation? Is it a chance for them to follow in the footsteps of their heroes? Is it to become heroes themselves?

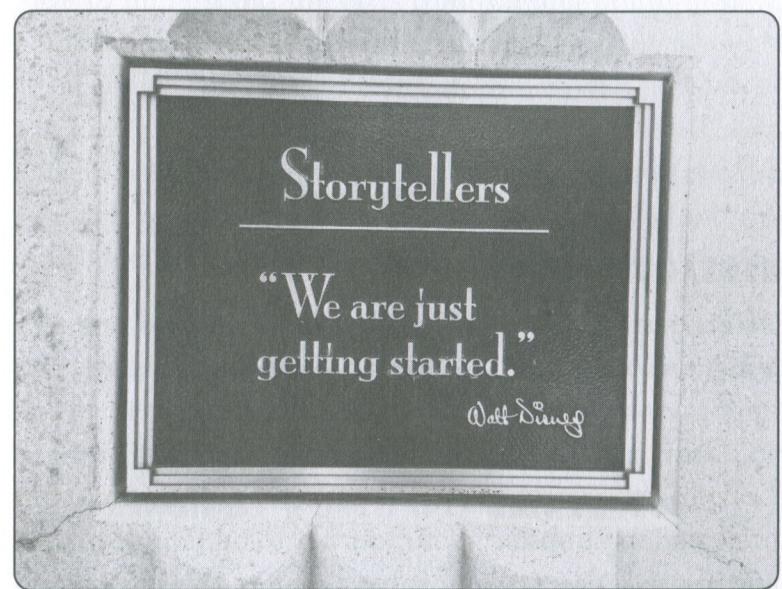
If I can't answer these five questions, then I'm in trouble. If I, as the writer and storyteller, don't know why I'm sharing the story with the world, what's the theme, what makes it unique, why I'm the best storyteller for it, and what the audience yearns, then the project will struggle.

There will be many times in your career that you'll find yourself working on a subject, intellectual property, or brand that you're not very excited about. The most important thing is to find *your* connection to the story. You have to become a fan in order to reach the fans, which brings me to this very important fact:

**Find a little bit of yourself in the story,
and your audience will find a little bit of the story in
themselves.**

Find what makes you excited about the subject and it will most likely be the reason that others will be drawn to that subject. Talk to other people who have great passion for the subject, so you can develop a deeper understanding and connection to it. We are all unique in our perspectives, approaches, and storytelling abilities. Find your connection to the subject, and you'll have an easier time developing your unique perspective and approach in sharing the story with your audience.

Ultimately, if you, as the story champion, don't care about the experience, then why should your audience? Once you have found your unique connection and have fully committed to the project, then you give it everything you've got. If your heart and mind are behind the project every step of the way, there's no stopping you. Reach for the stars and DREAM BIG.



"Storytellers" plaque at Disney California Adventure Park. Photo: Margaret Kerrison

THE CREATIVE PROCESS



“The first step is to research. Read the books, watch the media, listen to the scholars. You need to listen first. Then you can build empathy.”

— Nancy Seruto

RESEARCH

Before you start any project, the first step is to research and educate yourself on your project’s subject matter. It’s important that you take a scholarly approach to it, so that you may talk intelligently about the topic with others. Learning the vocabulary and gathering all the relevant information jumpstarts your journey to building empathy and appreciation for your subject matter. Educating yourself on the subject also demonstrates that you are giving the topic the respect and dedication that it deserves.

The process for creating a real world versus an imagined world is quite different. As I learned from Nancy Seruto, award-winning producer, design consultant, and former Creative Executive at Walt Disney Imagineering, the process for the museum exhibition industry (real world) starts with understanding the details before building up to the Big Idea.

REAL WORLD DESIGN PROCESS

Details



Big Idea

In the process of designing a *real world* experience, you have to understand the facts from varying points-of-view. Gone are the days of authoring a story from one person’s perspective. You have to bring in the experts and scholars and learn as much as possible about the details of a subject before attempting to shape the narrative. In the research process, you collect all of the significant and relevant details that begin to shape your Big Idea.

The process for creating an *imagined world*, however, is the reverse. You begin with the Big Idea and then you build the details.

IMAGINED WORLD DESIGN PROCESS

Big Idea



Details

In creating an imagined world, you start with the Big Idea. You want to visit a *Star Wars* planet. You want to visit the world of *Harry Potter*. You want to step into a dream world. You want to become a spy. Once you’ve established the Big Idea, then you develop the details. What does it mean to visit a *Star Wars* planet? Which planet do you choose?



What's the significance of this planet? What will visitors do there? Who will they meet?

For your visitors, a *real world* experience builds their understanding of a topic before they walk away with a new appreciation, understanding, and empathy for a topic. In an *imagined world* experience, your visitors begin their journey based on the promise of the experience and discover all the wonderful details it has to offer. In both worlds, your visitor should ultimately walk away, transformed.

BRAINSTORMING

After the research period, a project kicks off with a brainstorming session, otherwise known in the industry as a design “charrette.” It’s a multi-disciplinary work session that runs for one or more days and involves all the key team members including, but not limited to, the producer, creative director, writer, artist, designer, and others. Traditionally, a design charrette serves as an intense period of design for a group of designers to draft a solution to a design problem. This period of time is also when the team develops the Big Idea. The Big Idea is the intent and mission of the project and answers the big questions of the experience. There may be mood boards (images of the subject matter, the location of the experience, the characters, and whatever else is relevant to the project) hung around the room to spark ideas and promote discussion.

Often times, there’s one person who runs the charrette, either a creative director, or creative producer, and they guide the team in mapping out the experience by asking questions and leading ideation sessions. Charrettes are

collaborative and interactive. They start with the understanding that there’s “no stupid idea.” The point of the charrette is to capture *all* of the ideas, big and small.

THE BIG IDEA

How do you formulate your Big Idea? It’s important that the charrette leader starts with the big questions. I start by asking my big five S.T.O.R.Y. questions: Why share this story with the world? What’s the theme (or possible themes) of this experience? How can we make this experience unique? Why are we the best people to share this story? What is the visitor’s wish fulfillment?

There are many other questions to consider: Where will they go? Who will they meet? What will they see? What are the “must-do” activities and experiences for our visitors? What do we want our visitors to feel? What are the big “wow” moments (the “Instagrammable” moments)? What’s their emotional takeaway? How do we have them talking about this experience long after they leave? How do we stay connected with them?

These ideas are captured on index cards pinned to a board, or on large pieces of paper hung around the room. Team members can write ideas and walk over to the areas that they have ideas for, or the charrette leader can post them up for everyone to see and discuss. Artists can start drawing some rough sketches for their ideas and pin them up along with the written ideas.

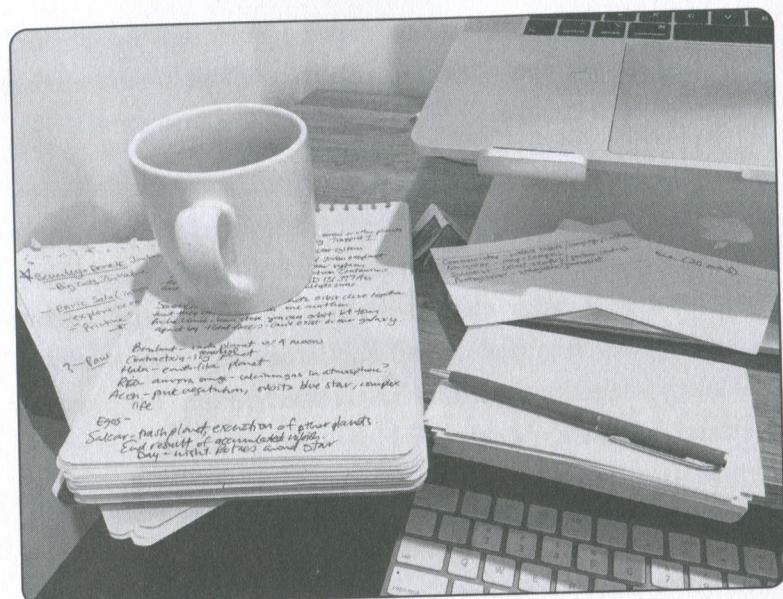


Photo: Margaret Kerrison

After some ideas are shared, we typically see a pattern of themes and ideas. The leader can start separating some of the ideas into individual spaces/rooms for the visitors to experience. We start thinking about the visitor experience and flow. What do they see when they first walk in? Where do they go next? And where will they go after that?

An artist or the creative director will start to draw a bubble diagram on the board, large piece of paper, or write/draw from their computer, to roughly capture the ideas and start developing the visitor flow of the experience.

WHAT'S A VISITOR FLOW?

A visitor flow describes the volume and movement of visitors to, and within, the buildings and spaces around and between them. The visitor flow considers how many

visitors can be contained in the entire experience, in each individual space, what direction the visitors are moving towards, and the patterns of their movements. Understanding and maintaining a good visitor flow will provide an optimal experience for the visitor; one with fewer wait times, less crowding, and easier wayfinding, among other factors.

Each bubble is rough in concept and captures the scale of the space relative to the other spaces. The bigger bubbles show that these spaces will be larger compared to the smaller ones. It's a quick and fundamental way to capture the identity of the space without delving too deeply into the details. These spaces may change and iterate during the course of the project, but for the purposes of the charrette, it's a way for the team to visualize and prioritize the stories and spaces in the experience.

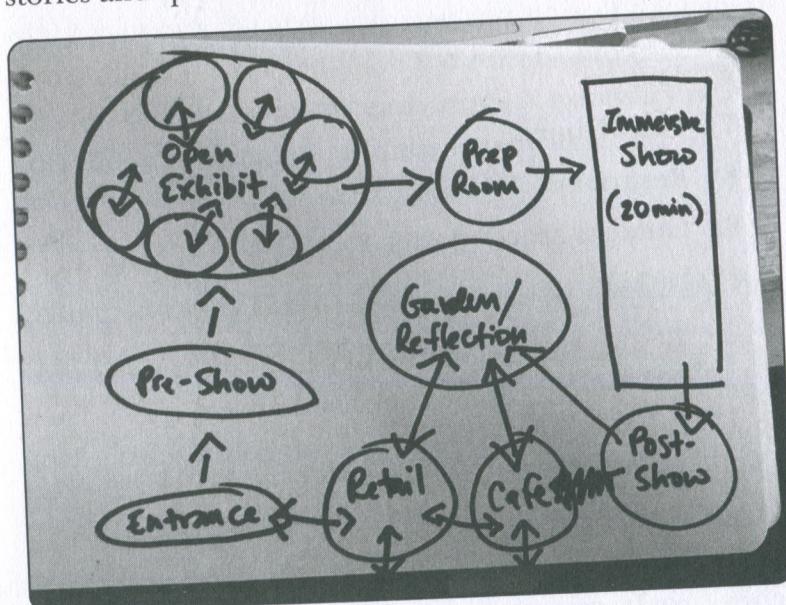


Photo: Margaret Kerrison



Depending on whether the flow of the visitor experience is linear or non-linear, it can be captured in different ways. You can use arrows to show the visitor flow if it's a more linear experience (e.g. virtual reality, escape rooms, rides, attractions, and other timed experiences), or your experience may be more open-ended in terms of how the visitor will explore the spaces. Ultimately, the bubble diagram shows all of the spaces/rooms that the visitors can discover and how they are connected to one another.

Here's an example of bubble headings for a linear experience:

- 1) Welcome/Lobby
- 2) Pre-show
- 3) Main show
- 4) Post-show
- 5) Retail
- 6) Exit
- 7) Café/Dining
- 8) Restrooms
- 9) Outdoor space
- 10) Parking

Here's an example of bubble headings for a non-linear experience (typical of museums and art galleries). Each room can be defined by different categories. This is typical in museums where objects are grouped by the objects' origin (country, region, etc.), artist, time period, format (photography, etc.) theme or story, or by the objects themselves (masks, ceramics, etc.).

- 1) Welcome/Lobby
- 2) First room/gallery
- 3) Second room/gallery
- 4) Third room/gallery
- 5) Fourth room/gallery
- 6) Retail
- 7) Exit
- 8) Café/Dining
- 9) Restrooms
- 10) Outdoor space
- 11) Parking

As you develop the identity for each bubble/space, it's important to remind yourself to tell one story at a time. Each of the bubbles warrants its own subplot or storyline, which supports the greater theme and story of the experience. You don't have to delve too deeply into each space just yet, but consider why each space is necessary to support the story foundation of the experience.

TELL ONE STORY AT A TIME

Telling one story at a time is not a new concept, but one that was clearly highlighted as one of *Mickey's Ten Commandments* by Disney Legend Marty Sklar. Consider the purpose of a logline for a movie or television series. In just one sentence, you should be able to describe your story succinctly. In film school, we learned that screenwriters reveal one new piece of information per scene. Put all the scenes together and you have a movie. The same goes with designing themed experiences. Tell one story/



establish one goal for each scene and you have an experience that feels emotionally engaging. Don't overthink it. Keep it simple so that even a five-year old kid understands what's going on.



Haunted Mansion Holiday in Disneyland, Photo: Margaret Kerrison

Determining the story for each scene requires the storyteller to first understand the emotion of the experience. It's no surprise that when the creators developed the Haunted Mansion in Disneyland, they wanted the audience to feel scared. But how do you scare the audience without merely doing jump-scares and loud sound effects? The team did their research and were inspired by real stories, such as the creepy story of Sarah Winchester from the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. They also made up their own stories, such as a tale of a ghostly sea captain who killed his bride.

The question, then, was which scary stories did they want to tell and how did they all relate to the Haunted Mansion? They came up with the brilliant idea of creating a "Ghost Host" character who challenged visitors to find a way out ... or join the other ghosts as their 1,000th "happy haunt." As they iterated their idea, Walt and his team added humor into the attraction, so that it could be fun for all ages.

Walt knew early on that he wanted his "guests" (how Walt referred to the park visitors) to feel like they were part of the story; that they weren't mere observers, but rather, participants in the plot. He had the foresight to appreciate the advantage of having a guest come to a physical attraction. Unlike traditional rides like the carousel or roller coasters in amusement parks, the visitor's presence is acknowledged. Not only that, but the guest had a role to play. Now that's good storytelling!

In thinking about your visitor flow, consider how the story unfolds from one space to the next. Take a shot at the big idea of each scene and write them down for each bubble.

The Haunted Mansion attraction is the perfect example of telling one story at a time per scene/room.

SCENE BREAKDOWN:

The Foyer

Guests meander through a creepy courtyard before arriving inside a dark foyer where candles flicker and an unseen organ plays a haunting tune. The voice of a "Ghost Host" welcomes its visitors, beginning with the now famous words, "When hinges creak in doorless chambers...."

The Story — Welcome to this spooky mansion.



Portrait Gallery (The Stretching Room)

The Ghost Host continues speaking as the guests enter a dimly lit portrait gallery and the secret panel slides shut, disappearing into the wall. The room stretches, revealing morbid, but also comical portraits, of former residents. The Ghost Host challenges us to find a way out of the doorless and windowless chamber. Of course, there's always *his* way.

The Story — Find a way out.

Portrait Hallway

Guests walk out into a hallway where they find a series of portraits revealing a haunting outcome. At the end of the hallway, they find white carved faces of busts that seem to follow them. Then the guests arrive at the moving platform of black “Doom Buggy” vehicles to take them on the rest of their “visit.”

The Story — You’re being watched.

Endless Hallway

After climbing a Grand Staircase, the journey continues as guests pass by a dark and misty hallway that reveals hidden wings of the mansion. Guests pass a creepy suit of armor, a candelabra floating in a hallway, door knockers banging, glowing eyes, skeletal hands behind doors, and a ghostly clock spinning uncontrollably.

The Story — You’re going deeper and deeper into the mansion.

Conservatory

Guests observe a casket of a recently deceased member of the mansion’s family. The skeletal hands of the deceased try to open the casket lid as he cries out to be released.

The Story — There is no escape.

Séance Circle

Guests enter a circular room where a séance is taking place. A glowing crystal ball floats in the air with a ghostly apparition of the face of a medium, Madame Leota. She chants mysterious incantations while objects and musical instruments float around the room.

The Story — You’re entering a spiritual world where anything can happen.

The Ballroom

Guests climb a walkway and witness a ghostly party in a grand ballroom. Despite being dead, the ghosts seem to be having a grand old time; blowing out candles on a cake, dancing, eating, drinking, singing, and dueling.

The Story — Come join us.

Attic

Guests enter the attic filled with trunks, antiques, portraits of dead grooms, and other forgotten items. This is the private haunting ground of a long dead bride, whom we meet at the end of the room.

The Story — Not every story ends in “happily ever after.”



Graveyard

Guests exit the mansion and enter the graveyard where they encounter all manner of ghosts singing "...grim grinning ghosts come out to socialize...."

The Story — We may be dead, but we're grinning. (In other words, "Don't feel sorry for us. It's not so bad being dead.")

Mausoleum Entrance (Hitchhiking Ghosts)

As guests enter the mausoleum and leave the graveyard behind, three ghosts are standing, looking to hitchhike. Guests see their reflection in a mirror and seated next to them is one of the hitchhiking ghosts, ready to follow them home.

The Story — We may follow you home.

Mausoleum Hallway

As guests move down a walkway, they come upon a physical manifestation of "Little Leota" who gives them a haunting message: "Hurry back, hurry back! Be sure to bring your death certificate if you decide to join us ... make final arrangements now ... we've been dying to have you."

The Story — You're *always* welcome back.

By telling one story at a time per scene/room, the Haunted Mansion successfully breaks down the guest journey in engaging and dramatic chapters, while still maintaining the emotional hook of "family fun spookiness." Notice how the journey never gets too scary. Guests are given "breaks" between moments of scariness by enjoying more light-hearted and, often times, comical moments.

A good story has peaks and valleys, meaning that it's not consistently focused on one "feeling." There is a "driving feeling" throughout the experience, but your audience could very well experience a spectrum of emotions. Ultimately, you want your audience to be emotionally moved by your experience, and hopefully, changed by the experience.

RESEARCH TRIPS

During a charrette, you may be fortunate enough to travel with your team to the project's location or to destinations that will bring inspiration to your project. My projects have taken me all over the world, from Beijing to Orlando. Often times, these trips are a way to meet and collaborate with the client team and immerse yourself in their culture, company, and environment.

I remember traveling to Beijing and Shanghai while working with BRC Imagination Arts to meet with experts in the telecommunications industry as we were working on the Information and Communications Pavilion for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. We visited with the Shanghai Dianxin (Telecom) Museum, met with representatives from China Mobile and China Telecom, and even interviewed multiple generations of people in their homes regarding their cellphone usage. It was a research and fact-finding mission, as well as an inspirational trip. We had to immerse ourselves in the country, culture, and lifestyle to paint an authentic picture of China's history and future of telecommunications.



POST-CHARRETTE

After the charrette and research trip, the team returns to their respective offices and work spaces to start developing their work. The designers start their designs, the artists begin illustrating storyboards and other key scenes, the writers start writing, and the creative director ensures that everyone has what they need for their next steps into the concept/design phase.

The writer's work is to make sure that all of the big ideas captured in the charrette will now be integrated into the story of the experience. Working closely with the creative director, the writers serve as the "narrative glue" between all of the disciplines, to ensure that everyone is designing to one holistic experience. This is when the writer starts developing answers to the fundamental questions.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING QUESTION (ISQ) WHEEL

Like any good story, the writer/storyteller must ask the Why, What, Who, When, Where, and How of the experience. This method of inquiry can be traced back to Aristotle's work on ethics, which helps to understand the "elements of a circumstance." Although Aristotle developed his system to examine the voluntary or involuntary action of a person,¹⁰ many people have used this method to explore the particular elements of a story. Journalists, the police, and investigators use this in their research, reporting, and writing to paint a full picture of a particular circumstance.

We can also apply this useful tool in immersive storytelling with a simple diagram I call the "Immersive Storytelling Question (ISQ) Wheel." If we're using a bicycle wheel as the analogy, the WHY of the experience is the focal point (the hub) in the wheel, as it informs every other element, especially the WHAT, WHO, WHERE, and WHEN (the spokes). The HOW (rim) serves as the wrapper to the experience which begs the question of how visitors will

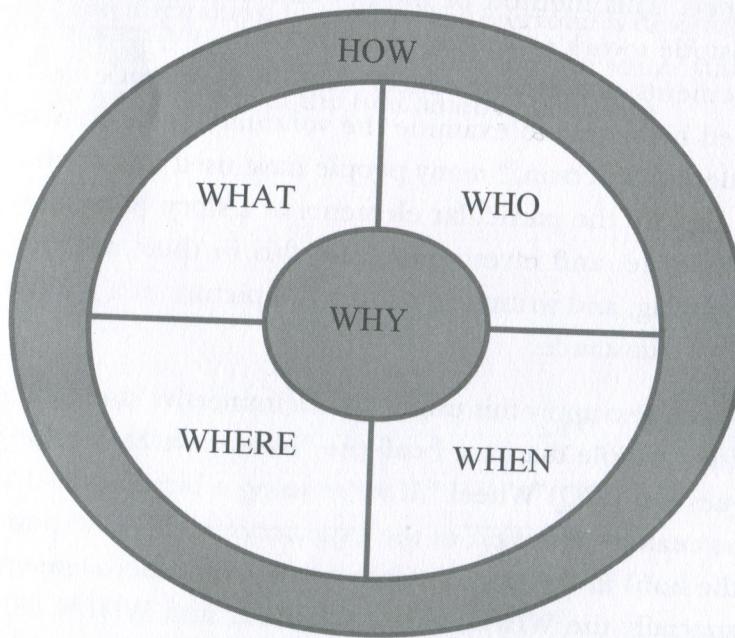
¹⁰Aquinas, Thomas (1952). Sullivan, Daniel J. (ed.). *The Summa Theologica. Great Books of the Western World*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Encyclopedia Britannica. pp. Q7. Art. 3. Obj. 3.



experience your story, as well as how your visitors will feel. Each of these elements can be further divided into more questions. Together, every element has an important part to play in the entire story experience.

I'll discuss each of these elements in more detail. Each of these elements may have more than one question (and ultimately, definition), so it's up to you to decide which of these questions you'd like to consider for your experience wheel.

ISQ WHEEL



IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING QUESTIONS

These are the questions I pose for every experience. Here, I've grouped them into their categories, but in the following chapters, I will approach each of these questions in a different order than listed below.

WHY

- Why share this story with the world?

WHO

- Who is your audience?
- Who are the characters in your story?

WHAT

- What is the transformation you want to create in your audience?
- What is your theme?
- What is the wish fulfillment of your story?
- What are the mood and tone of your experience?
- What is the role of your audience?
- What are the rules of engagement?
- What are the emotional anchors of your experience?
- What are the comparables?

HOW

- How will your audience feel?
- How will your audience experience your story?

WHERE

- Where is the authenticity in your story?
- Where is your story set?

WHEN

- When does your story take place?



WHY SHARE THIS STORY WITH THE WORLD?

“Just as the brain detects patterns in the visual forms of nature — a face, a figure, a flower — and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning. We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise. So powerful is our impulse to detect story patterns that we see them even when they’re not there.”

— Frank Rose, “The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?”¹¹

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the WHY of the ISQ Wheel is the most important question to ask. The answer is what will hold your experience together. As the storyteller, you must understand the meaning of your story. What’s the message you’re trying to convey about life and the human condition?

Answering the WHY starts your journey to build the core foundation and narrative thrust of your story. The narrative thrust compels your audience to move forward in your experience in an emotionally compelling and dramatic way. The process is very similar to screenwriting, but so much more complex, because you have to engage all of the senses in, often times, a non-linear format. The secret to engaging your audience is to understand how your experience will make them feel.

As designers are purposeful in their design, so too, must storytellers be purposeful in their story. An architect doesn’t randomly place a brick on a building. A designer doesn’t randomly place a design element in their work.

¹¹ <https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/>

Writers must be just as purposeful in selecting their theme, world, characters, activities, and other story elements in order to give it meaning. Everything should belong in the experience. They are parts of a whole that support the theme of the story. They belong because they support and add important layers to the greater story. If a design element doesn’t support the theme, then it doesn’t belong in the experience.

Purposeful storytelling signals to your audience that your story is intentional and every detail is not randomly included. It shows that the design of your experience isn’t merely superficial “eye candy” for fun selfies and social media posts, but rather, one that speaks to a greater purpose. With purpose, you have meaning, and with meaning, you have change.

“If you want somebody to change their mind ... you've got to reach the heart.”

— Jane Goodall¹²

To help explore the question of why you want to share your unique story, you must understand why we tell stories in the first place. There are plenty of reasons why we tell stories. We tell stories to inform and educate. We tell stories to heal. We tell stories because we don’t want to feel alone. We want to share our experiences with others so that *they* don’t feel alone. We want to connect with others and feel like we belong. We want to make sense of the world. We want to find meaning in our lives. We want to pass down stories to future generations. We tell stories

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/francesbridges/2020/04/30/jane-goodall-champions-pragmatism-for-progress-in-national-geographic-documentary-jane-goodall-the-hope/?sh=67b3df241d3c>



because we will die one day. Stories, that if not told, may wither and be forgotten. We tell stories to be empathetic. By putting ourselves in the shoes of another person, we see a story unfold through another person's eyes. Last but not least, we tell stories to create a change in our audience. We tell stories to inspire and empower them.

As a storyteller, you have the power to influence your viewers and visitors. You can shape a generation. You can change a mindset. You can motivate people to do what they thought was impossible. You can inspire people to pursue their passions. You can educate the ill-informed and empower the helpless. A powerful emotional story can do anything.

As a storyteller, you want to reveal and share something with the world that is important and unique enough to warrant your audience's time (and money). In addition to creating something unforgettable and compelling, you should aspire to tell a story that is meaningful to your audience. If you believe that you have the power and responsibility to change, influence, and inspire the minds of your audience, you can take your storytelling to a higher level. You can change the world, one person at a time.

The Peranakan Museum (Singapore)

I visited the Peranakan Museum¹³ in Singapore for the first time a few years ago, based on a recommendation from a friend. I didn't really know what to expect since many of the museums I visited in Singapore were interesting, but not very meaningful to me. That was until I visited the Peranakan Museum. The Museum's website describes

itself as a museum that "explores the culture of Peranakan communities in Southeast Asia, and possesses one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Peranakan objects." Peranakan is an Indo-Malay word which means "descendent," "native-born," or even "cross-breed." Anak means "child" in Bahasa Indonesia.

What is Peranakan history? Chinese traders were already flocking to Malaya (the Malay Peninsula and the island of Singapore) since the 10th century; but it was really in the 15th century when the Chinese emperor reopened Chinese-Malay trade relations, that large numbers of mainland Chinese traders permanently migrated to this region. Most of these traders married local women, and their children grew up in households that were neither fully Chinese nor Malay nor Indonesian, speaking more than one language. Over the next few decades, a unique culture emerged which combined Chinese and local traditions, cultures, and cuisines. The offspring of these Chinese traders and local women are known as the Peranakans.

Why was this museum experience meaningful to me? Because I'm an Indonesian-born, Chinese-American woman. On my mother's side, at least four generations of my family were already living in Indonesia. My maternal great-grandfather came from China to marry a "local woman," my great-grandmother. My maternal grandmother and her siblings were the first Peranakans in our family.

This museum spoke to me in so many ways. For the first time in my life, I went to a museum that told my history. I've been to Indonesian history museums, Chinese

¹³ <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/peranakanmuseum/>



history museums, Chinese-American history museums, and American history museums. The Peranakan Museum was unique because it told the story of a specific group of people that were straddling multiple cultures. It was the first time I saw people that looked like me hanging on the walls. The experience struck me with such a strong sense of belonging. I understood and appreciated what it meant to be Peranakan and felt a swelling sense of pride. The experience changed me and my outlook. I didn't feel excluded anymore because this museum represented my people's history. I didn't feel like an outsider in this experience. It brought a mirror to my face and said, "Look, this is who you are." (Please see the color photo section.)

HOW WILL YOUR AUDIENCE FEEL?



"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."

— Helen Keller¹⁴

The first HOW question of the ISQ Experience Wheel asks the very important question of how your audience will feel. Your audience enters your experience feeling a certain way. This is their status quo, which represents their ordinary lives and original mindset. As they enter the experience, hopefully their feelings start to change. In the middle of the experience, perhaps they are moved to question or wonder or imagine. What does it mean to influence what your audience will feel?

Think about the last favorite film you watched. How did certain characters make you feel? How did certain scenes make you feel? Did some of the characters and situations stay with you long after the movie ended? Have you ever wondered why? Maybe they resonated with you in some meaningful way. Maybe the film provoked something inside you that had never been provoked before. Maybe it reminded you of someone or something. Maybe it simply

¹⁴ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/07/18/best-not-seen/>