

25.2.2 Signifiers

Some affordances are perceivable, others are not. To be effective, an affordance should be perceivable. A signifier is any perceivable indicator (a signal) that communicates appropriate purpose, structure, operation, and behavior of an object to a user. A good signifier informs a user what is possible before she interacts with its corresponding affordance.

Examples of signifiers are signs, labels, or images placed in the environment indicating what is to be acted upon, which direction to gesture, or where to navigate toward. Other signifiers directly represent an affordance, such as the handle on a door or the visual and/or physical feel of a button on a controller. A misleading signifier can be ambiguous or not represent an affordance—something may look like a drawer to be opened when in fact it cannot be opened. Such a false signifier is usually accidental or not yet implemented. But a misleading signifier can also be purposeful—such as to motivate users to find a key in order to turn the non-accessible drawer into something that can be opened. In such cases, the content creator should be aware of such anti-signifiers and be careful not to frustrate users.

Signifiers are most often intentional, but, as mentioned above, they may also be accidental. An example of an intentional signifier is a sign giving directions. In the real world, an example of an accidental and unintentional (but useful) signifier is garbage on a beach representing unhealthy conditions. At first thought, we might think signifiers are only intentionally created in VR, for the VR creator created everything from that which does not actually exist. However, this is not always the case. An unintended VR signifier might be an object that looks like it is designed to be picked up to be placed into a puzzle, but it can also be perceived as an object that can be picked up and thrown (a common occurrence much to the frustration of content creators). Or an unintended signifier in a social VR experience might be a gathering of users at an area of interest, signifying to others to navigate to that location to investigate what is happening and what affordance might be available there. Signifiers might not be attached to a specific object.

Signifiers can be general information. Conveying what interaction mode a user is currently using can help prevent confusion.

Regardless of how and why signifiers are created, signifiers are important for communicating to users whether or not action is possible, and what those actions are. Good VR design ensures signifiers are effectively discoverable through signifiers that are well communicated and intelligible.