

The Role of Narrative Structure in Location-Based Experiences

Introduction

One of the primary responsibilities of creatives in the entertainment industry is to innovate new methods to engage and appeal to a wider audience. This can be especially challenging when designing location-based experiences (LBEs) such as museum exhibits, escape games, theme park rides, and interactive art installations. These destination experiences have dramatically risen in popularity in recent years, as up to 78% of millennial consumers have trended toward spending money on experiences rather than commercial goods (Eventbrite). This rise in popularity and access to LBEs means that these experiences are competing for guests' attention. Creative teams already face the challenge of creating a permanent or semi-permanent structure, which cannot be easily changed, within a limited budget and space. Now, they must also consider how to design an experience that will solicit the broadest audience appeal possible. While there are several critical design factors to consider when designing an LBE, the narrative aspect of the experience has the most potential for making the experience engaging for the broadest audience.

There are multiple ways to incorporate narrative elements in an LBE that can be transferred from the narrative structures of video games. Incorporating these structures allows guests to interact with the experience in a variety of ways. This optionality allows guests with diverse desires and expectations to interact with the experience in a way that is fulfilling specifically for them. Omega Mart, the art installation created by Meow Wolf, is an example of an LBE that uses multiple narrative structures within the experience as a method of appealing

to a broad audience. The installation can serve as a case study of how to successfully integrate multiple narrative structures within a singular experience.

Narrative and Interactivity

A possible reason for the rise of LBEs may be the interactivity of these spaces. The very nature of an LBE requires engagement and exploration by guests in order for the experience to continue evolving. For example, in an escape game, guests must interact with the environment to solve the puzzles and advance to the next stage of the game. Recent generations of guests are more accustomed to and have come to expect interactive experiences more than generations past, as they were raised surrounded by interactive narratives through video games (Alfieri & Madison, "Part 1"). This platform not only evolved the delivery of a narrative but also transformed the consumer of the narrative from a passive to an active participant (Rose). Subsequent generations have had easy access to an ever-growing array of technology that often responds to user input, such as tablet and computer games. These technologies place the user at the center of the experience and include high levels of interactivity. Their popularity has led to the continued development of user-generated narrative technology such as Virtual and Augmented Reality games (Riggs).

It is important to remember that interactivity in itself does not produce meaningful experiences. Simply pressing buttons and turning knobs does not often lead to a lasting impression (Westbrook). For interactivity to have meaning, it must be situated within a greater context. Narratives provide that context. It is equally important to make the distinction between interactive stories and interactive engagement around linear stories. Interactive

stories respond directly to the guest's actions and choices, similar to the multi-branching tree narrative structure of a "Choose Your Own Adventure" novel. Because LBEs occupy a physical space rather than a digital space, this type of experience would be difficult to implement because it would require designers to plan for a variety of contingencies and outcomes resulting from the high level of guest input and choice (Alfieri and Madison, "Multi-Branching Narratives"). The most effective way to incorporate a narrative into an LBE is by creating interactive engagement around a linear story that allows for guest interactivity and choice but within the confines of a predetermined narrative that cannot be changed by the guest (Westbrook). This type of narrative provides the context for the guests' interaction and participation in the experience without requiring extensive planning for any and every possible outcome that could result from the guests' interactivity.

Guest Types

Levels of interactivity with an LBE will vary depending on guests' age, attention span, ability, desires, and expectations for the experience among many other factors. These interactions can range from brief, surface-level interactions, to deeper, more intensive explorations. Writers within the themed entertainment industry have begun categorizing guests according to their preferred level of interaction with an LBE. In her book *Immersive Storytelling for Real and Imagined Worlds*, Margaret Kerrison describes George McDonald's idea of streakers, strollers, and scholars. Streakers move through experiences quickly; they get a general idea of the experience but do not linger on the details. Strollers take more time to observe information about the things that they are interested in, but do not necessarily care

about all of the small details and will move on to something new once their interest changes. Kerrison describes the scholars as the “super fans” who are “not only familiar with the subject matter, but passionate about it” (51). They want to absorb everything that they can about the experience (Kerrison 50-51).

Louis Alfieri, Amy Kole, and Tim Madison identify four categories of guests that are similar to Kerrison’s: sunbathers, who want to observe the experience from a comfortable distance; waders, who skim the surface of an experience; swimmers, who immerse themselves fully in the experience; and divers, who want to experience every minute detail possible (Alfieri and Kole; Alfieri and Madison, “Part 1”). This description draws an important distinction between the two types of “scholars.” Kerrison’s definition of scholars accounts for the “super fans,” or divers, whose passion for the subject matter may be even greater than the original experience designers (Kerrison 51). However, the term does not account for the swimmers who are willing to immerse themselves and interact with the experience but not to the same level as the divers. For this reason, the terms used by Alfieri, Kole, and Madison seem to be a more accurate description of the different guest types. Considering these guest types, the challenge for the experience and narrative designers is to create an experience that will engage each of these visitors.

Narrative Structures for Different Guest Types

Spatial architecture, as described by media scholar Henry Jenkins, refers to how video game designers use world design to structure the narrative of the game. His findings can also be applied to the physical architecture and design of LBEs. Jenkins draws distinctions between four

categories of spatial storytelling. Evoked narratives create immersion by drawing on a familiar genre, style, or story that is easily recognized (Jenkins). An example of this kind of spatial design applied to an LBE would be the areas in Disneyland that are themed to specific movies, like *Alice in Wonderland*, or genres, like Frontierland. Enacted narratives allow the user to act out or witness narrative events, and the story may be contingent on the user's actions within the space (Jenkins). Escape games are an example of an LBE with enacted narratives since the guests' progression through the story and literal room are contingent on the guests' actions. Embedded narratives require the guest to decipher or discover the narrative by investigating the explorable space (Jenkins). Omega Mart is a fantastic example of an embedded narrative in an LBE and will be discussed in depth later. Emergent narratives host a controlled environment with narrative potential, but it is up to the user to create their own goals, stories, and experiences (Jenkins). An LBE that uses an emergent narrative might be a replicated archeological dig site with pre-buried artifacts or a stage in a children's museum equipped with sets and costumes but no scripts. Jenkins' categories provide a framework that can be used to identify and analyze the narrative components of an LBE.

Jenkins' distinctions between narrative structures closely align with the distinct guest categories, in that each structure can fulfill the needs and desires of a different type of guest. Evoked narratives capture the sense of a place and create immersion while not requiring interaction from the guests. It is an ambiance to be enjoyed, which can be appreciated by the sunbathers who want to be in the experience, but not necessarily a part of it. Enacted narratives provide an entry point for waders. These guests are willing to get involved but tend to interact with the experience at the surface level only. Since an enacted narrative requires

participation from guests in order to progress, it creates a space where waders are encouraged to interact and engage with the experience at a rudimentary level. Embedded narratives are what primarily appeal to swimmers and divers. These types of narratives require guests to engage with the minute details of the experience and reward the guests for their interactivity with more knowledge about the experience. Emergent narratives are reserved for the highest level of divers and super fans. In these spaces, the guests create their characters and stories. This requires significant dedication from the guests, which is why only the super fans and divers are likely to become involved at this level.

The narrative structure or structures used in an LBE will have a direct correlation to which types of visitors the experience will be appealing to. If the goal of experience and narrative designers is to create an experience that is appealing to a broad audience, they will want to include multiple narrative structures within the experience. If the goal is to create an experience that will appeal to every guest, no matter what category they fall into, then the experience and narrative designers must find a way to incorporate all four narrative structures within the experience, such as what is seen at Omega Mart.

Omega Mart: A Case Study

This understanding of narrative structures and their functions yields a better appreciation and opportunity for analysis of the narrative components in Omega Mart, the art installation created by Meow Wolf. Ever since the artist collective formed in 2008, their installations have included some sort of narrative component. While each space or room in the installations may seem unique in its theme, they are all unified by their contributions to one,

overarching narrative. Vince Kadlubek, one of the company's founders, stated that the inclusion of a narrative is an intentional decision because it can act as an "access point" for guests who might not usually visit an art installation or gallery (*Origin Story*). Narratives are powerful, recognizable patterns that the brain recognizes and uses to find meaning and make sense of the world (Rose). By including a narrative in the art installation, the designers are providing all guests with something to engage with that is familiar and helps to provide further context for the installation itself.

Interaction Around a Linear Story

The narrative built into "Omega Mart" is an example of interactive engagement around a linear story. The linear narrative revolves around the conflict between Dramcorp, the fictional owners of Omega Mart, and the citizens of Seven Monolith Village, a town affected by Dramcorp's hazardous mining process. Guests have the opportunity to interact with this narrative by choosing a side of the conflict, either with Dramcorp or the Resistance from the village, and completing missions for that group. There are additional, interactive ways for guests to discover more details that accentuate the narrative. Throughout the exhibit are journals, fliers, coded religious texts, computer files, and audio and visual elements that can be manipulated and analyzed by guests. Interacting with these components allows guests to uncover additional details about the conflict and other subplots hidden in the installation. The more that guests interact with the narrative elements in the installation, the more they learn about the narrative itself. However, these guest interactions cannot affect the overarching narrative. By creating opportunities for interaction that revolve around a linear story, the

installation provides meaningful context to the guests' actions without requiring extensive planning for any and every possible outcome that could result from the guests' interactivity.

An interesting aspect of Omega Mart is that even though the experience is location-based and fully self-guided, it still makes use of a loose, three-act narrative structure. As guests enter the experience, they also enter the first act. The status quo is established as each guest is welcomed to the store as a shopper. Then, the inciting incident occurs as guests are given "boop" cards and invited to complete the basic employee training. The second act begins when guests leave the store through one of the portals and begin to learn more about the confrontation between Dramcorp and The Resistance. Guests then have the option of engaging in this conflict by completing missions for either group. The third act occurs when guests complete their missions, ultimately learning the truth behind Dramcorp, Seven Monolith Village, and the Omega Mart store. However, the third act does not have a defined ending as the experience itself does not have a defined ending. After guests complete their missions, the experience doesn't abruptly end. Rather, guests are given access to even more information about the narrative and are able to stay in the installation to continue exploring. Although the acts are not rigidly enforced, since guests have the freedom to experience the installation in whatever order they choose, it is clear that these acts provide some narrative structure to the overall experience.

Narrative Structures

Aside from the traditional three-act structure, the Omega Mart installation also makes use of all four narrative structures identified by Jenkins, which means that all guest types have

the opportunity to engage with the experience in a way that is meaningful to them. Many of the rooms accessed through the portals in the store draw from familiar genres such as fantasy and science fiction, while the village draws inspiration from a desert town. These thematic elements contribute to the evoked narrative structure of the installation. These evocative spaces are not simply themed afterthoughts; each room has been created by an individual artist in accordance with Meow Wolf's philosophy of maximalism (*Origin Story*). This results in larger-than-life, extremely detailed, immersive environments which will appeal to the stalker or sunbather who just wants to explore the space as an art installation. They do not have to engage with any of the interactive features but are still able to be immersed in the experience from a comfortable distance. These guests can enjoy the ambiance of the experience without necessarily becoming part of the story.

The boop cards that allow guests to access the employee training provide the foundation for the enacted narrative structure. As guests use the cards around the installation to complete employee training and specific missions, they become a character in the story acting out narrative events. Completing the training and the missions also allows guests to witness narrative details that add to the backstory of the experience. The level of interactivity involved in this narrative structure acts as an entry point for the waders and strollers. These guests are willing to get involved in the experience and having a predetermined set of actions to follow invites them to begin to interact with the experience. Because of the rich narrative detail embedded in Omega Mart, completing the training and the missions only scrapes the surface of the experience. The enacted narrative allows guests to interact with the narrative without becoming overwhelmed by the numerous details.

The embedded narrative structure in the Omega Mart installation is what distinguishes this experience from other LBEs. Throughout the installation are journals, computers, glyphs, posters, and flyers that reveal more information about the controversy surrounding Dramcorp, the history of The Source, the founding of Seven Monolith Village, and the backstory of the characters. The creative team went as far as to develop an entire language that guests can learn and decode. As guests explore these items, they are drawn deeper into the narrative lore that is physically interwoven into the experience through the set pieces. There is enough narrative content embedded in the installation that guests can spend hours looking through and deciphering all the texts and still not uncover the full narrative of the experience. The amount of narrative content embedded in this experience is so vast that repeat guests still find new information with each visit. This level of detail and amount of narrative information provides ample stimulation for both the swimmers and divers, who can completely immerse themselves in the narrative details of the experience. They are also rewarded for their interactivity with a better understanding of the history and events that have led up to the current state of the fictional town.

The use of evoked, enacted, and embedded narrative structures in Omega Mart also makes the experience intrinsically emergent. Emergent narratives are programmed with pre-existing narrative elements to help guests create an individual narrative experience, but the experience itself is not pre-structured. This means that there is no singular way to interact with an emergent narrative and guests have the freedom to explore the narrative space and pre-existing narrative elements in their own time and way. While Omega Mart contains several narrative elements, there is no map or guide for the experience because it is meant to be self-

guided. There is no specific, pre-structured way to experience the installation. Guests effectively become characters in the story as they explore the narrative space (evoked narrative), act out tasks (enacted), and learn about the backstory (embedded). Each of these narrative elements has been “pre-programmed” into the experience, but guests have complete agency when exploring these elements which allow them to create their own, individual narrative experience. This emergent narrative has even extended beyond the walls of the LBE. There are now online communities and forums dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of Omega Mart. In these virtual spaces, guests are working together and sharing their individual experiences with others. They have the goal of piecing together the full narrative of Omega Mart, including all of the subplots revealed through the embedded narrative. There is also a working theory in these groups that the code to unlock the Source door is hidden within the installation and that unlocking the door will produce a chain reaction that will unveil more narrative content (“Supermarket”). Discovering this code has become a primary goal for these guests.

Conclusion

Narratives are extremely powerful. They have the power to chronicle life, communicate information, exemplify social norms, and entertain and inspire (Rutledge). Just like the television and the printing press before it, LBEs are the next iteration of storytelling (Riggs 21-32; Rose; Rutledge). However, LBEs are unique in that the storytelling techniques used in the medium are completely immersive. This means that guests can interact with and experience stories in a transformative way that has not been previously seen. Storytelling through LBEs

allows guests to feel connected to one another through the shared experience (Kerrison 67). It also provides guests the opportunity to connect with universal truths that connect individuals to the rest of humanity (Kerrison 56-57). LBEs become a place where the guests can experience the stories of others in a way that is personal and transformative because it brings the story “up close and personal” to the guest (Kerrison 60-61). Experiencing the stories of others, whether real or fictitious, in a way that engages all of the senses is an incredible tool for building empathy.

This ability for stories to form connections with others and build empathy may be interrelated to how the brain processes and responds to stories. Stories are an easily recognizable pattern that the human brain can process through pre-existing schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, and metaphors (Rutledge). Because of this, the brain uses narrative structures to make sense of the world (Rose; Rutledge). When the brain recognizes a pattern, emotionally charged event, or resolution to a conflict it responds by releasing dopamine, a neurotransmitter that causes feelings of pleasure and excitement (Rutledge). The brain also releases oxytocin in response to the three-act narrative structure which increases empathy, connection, compassion, and trust (Riggs 128; Rutledge).

Including multiple narrative structures in an LBE ensures that all guests experience the benefits of storytelling. Omega Mart has shown that it is possible to include all four narrative structures described by Henry Jenkins within a singular experience. The response to Omega Mart demonstrates how successful this type of narrative experience can be. Omega Mart opened in February 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and still welcomed over one million visitors during its first year of operation (Forrest). While the narrative behind Omega Mart may

present as just a wild story about a company utilizing alien resources to make their products addicting, it is actually a commentary on resource exploitation and environmental damage caused by large companies and capitalistic consumerism. This can be a highly charged and controversial topic, but presenting it as an interactive and immersive narrative allows guests to develop an awareness of the situation and empathy for those who are affected by it. When location-based experiences utilize the multi-narrative structure model described by Jenkins and seen in Omega Mart, they will be able to connect with and ultimately transform the broadest range of guests possible through experiential storytelling.

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