

Hicks, Sarah. Review of *The End of Storytelling: The Future of Narrative in the Storyplex*, by Stephanie Riggs. Beat Media Group, 2019.

Stephanie Riggs' *The End of Storytelling: The Future of Narrative in the Storyplex* is an examination and deconstruction of the typical narrative formula used when creating immersive, interactive experiences. *Storytelling* specifically focuses on how to develop engaging narratives in Extended Reality (XR). XR is a term used to cover Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR), and Virtual Reality (VR). Riggs argues that for narratives in these spaces to be successful and engaging, experience designers must reconceptualize how they approach storytelling. Riggs presents her argument by discussing what parts of a narrative do work in this virtual space, explaining how to think immersively when designing, examining the tools available to experience designers, and providing practical tips on how to develop immersive and interactive projects.

Many of Riggs' examples come directly from her personal experience, which will inevitably contain personal bias, but the sheer volume of her work indicates her success in the field. Riggs has an extensive portfolio in the XR field, from working as an Imagineer at Disney to filming former president Barack Obama in 360 for a VR experience. She has worked on theatrical shows, documentaries, films, and brand experiences -- all in XR. Her more than 20 years of experience in this industry provide valuable insight into the best practices for creating interactive experiences. Riggs also makes use of several widely recognized and esteemed sources in the industry such as *Designing Disney: The Art of Show* by John Hench and *The*

*Experience Economy* by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore. All of Riggs' sources are meticulously recorded in the endnotes of the book.

*Storytelling* has an obvious application for those looking to create immersive and interactive experiences in XR, however, Riggs' principles of narrative could be applied to other immersive experiences such as museum exhibits, theme parks, escape games, video games, and perhaps theater. By examining the strengths of the current narrative structure and proposing alternatives to include audience participation and interaction, Riggs opens the door for new kinds of experiences in multiple mediums.

Riggs begins her argument by examining how society reacts to new technologies. Historically, investors and consumers have responded to new technology or the advancement of previous technology with resistance and, occasionally, fear. It takes significant time and demonstration for companies to begin to invest in these technologies, and even longer for the public to integrate them into society. Immersive technology (XR technology) had previously been resigned to the imitation stage, meaning that the technology has been successfully demonstrated, but access was restricted to smaller groups due to scarcity and price. Now, XR technology is entering the exploration stage and we are starting to see this technology become more accessible to the public through Head Mounted Devices (HMDs) like the Oculus.

While we have seen massive advancements in storytelling technology, Riggs observes that traditional storytelling structure has remained relatively unchanged. While the mediums for storytelling have developed, the rituals, components, and overall structure have stagnated since they were identified by Aristotle. One aspect of storytelling that has remained undeveloped is the use of frames. We see these frames in the form of books, screens, audio

speakers, and prosceniums. By presenting our stories in frames, we restrict how the audience can interact with the story, reducing the audience member to a passive role. Riggs proposes immersive and interactive experiences as a way to remove those frames and change the audience's relationship to the content by inviting them into the story as guests and giving them agency within the narrative. This can be seen to an extent in stories with branching narratives, but Riggs notes that even those stories and experiences have a pre-scripted and controlled ending. She poses the question, what would it look like to advance our storytelling and technology so that the guest has a deep agency which can truly impact the characters and outcome of the story?

Riggs proposes saving the basic concepts of ritual, components, and structure, but adapting them in a way to enhance the Storyplex – the Storyplex being “a dynamic network that balances the traditions of storytelling, human psychology, and the affordances of computational systems to create an immersive narrative” (Riggs 139). While traditional storytelling is primarily concerned with conveying the events of the story, the experiences in the Storyplex are built around the feelings and actions of the guest. The guest experience is central to the Storyplex. This transition in narrative involves the creator placing themselves in the place of the guest and creating an environment where the guests can create their own experiences in a world that reacts to and was created for them. Once you have identified how you want the guest to feel within the experience, then you can begin considering how to use story elements to bring them to that feeling. While this work may feel very conceptual, Riggs also provides practical advice for the implementation of these types of projects, such as considering scope, diversifying the team, and creating a spatial map before turning to programming, building, testing, and distributing.

In the first chapter of her book, Riggs describes how early advancements in technology “defied... expectations of how the world should or did function” (30). Similarly, Riggs sets out to defy audience expectations about how a book should function by breaking the standard conventions associated with instructional writing. Riggs makes use of full-page pictures and graphics as the background of the text. She blends an assortment of decorative fonts on single pages, especially in the Prologue chapter. One has to assume that in a book about breaking the standard conventions associated with storytelling, this decision to break with the standard book formatting is intentional. While some may find the visuals distracting, I found that they provided clear divisions between the sections of content and accented important points in the text. The color-coded chapters and graphics made it easier to remember the location of certain content during later reference. However, it should be noted that some of these visuals do not translate as well to the digital version of the text.

Concerning the validity of Riggs’ methods and argument for how to develop narratives in the Storyplex, it is hard to argue against the years of experience and successful projects that Riggs refers to in her book. Riggs does not solely rely on her own projects and accomplishments; she also utilizes examples of other projects and theories from successful and notable figures in the industry (such as Donald A. Norman’s *The Design of Everyday Things*) to lend support to her theory. While these examples lend to Rigg’s overall concept and argument, they suffer from inconsistency. For example, while discussing the Storyplex Spectrum, Riggs uses explanations in conjunction with short and specific examples of existing projects to illustrate the different categories of immersive technology. This combination of explanation and examples lends itself well to the readers' understanding of the differences in technology. When discussing the stages

of social integration of technology, Riggs relies much more heavily on examples than explanations, resulting in eleven pages of discourse before connecting how the stages of integration connect to immersive experiences. Conversely, in the section titled “Principles for Creating Immersive Experiences,” there are no examples or applications of the principles to previous projects, which seems odd since these principles provide key insights for those just learning about immersive experiences. Including examples would have provided the reader references to how these principles are realistically implemented.

As far as content, Riggs weaves together a compelling argument for a new kind of storytelling for immersive and interactive experiences. Her argument is straightforward, cohesive, and understandable. By beginning with historical examples of the evolution of technology, she convinces her readers that something as longstanding as the approach to narrative can and should evolve as well. Riggs lays out a clear direction and goal for her text and guides her reader through each of her points. Through her argument, she maintains her authority on the subject by incorporating her real-life experiences and including other outside sources and examples.

Riggs’ argument is further corroborated by the implementation and success of these concepts in real-world examples, the most recent of which is the Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser experience. While not strictly an XR experience as it takes place on a set with live actors, the experience still uses many of the concepts presented by Riggs. Specifically, there is no one entry point for the experience, which meets the requirement of Riggs’ non-linear storytelling. The experience also gives the guests complete agency, allowing them to interact with the environment in whatever way they decide, and those decisions affect future opportunities later

in the experience. However, that agency is still limited in that there are still designated story moments that are scripted and will not change based on guest interaction. In any case, the Starcruiser experience reflects many of the concepts presented by Riggs and proves that these concepts can be successfully adopted and used even outside the XR field.

As previously stated, *Storytelling* has an obvious application for those looking to create immersive and interactive experiences in XR, but the principles do not have to be limited to this one area. *Storytelling* can act as a guide for creative directors, business visionaries, producers, designers, and engineers who are interested in creating unique, guest-driven experiences.