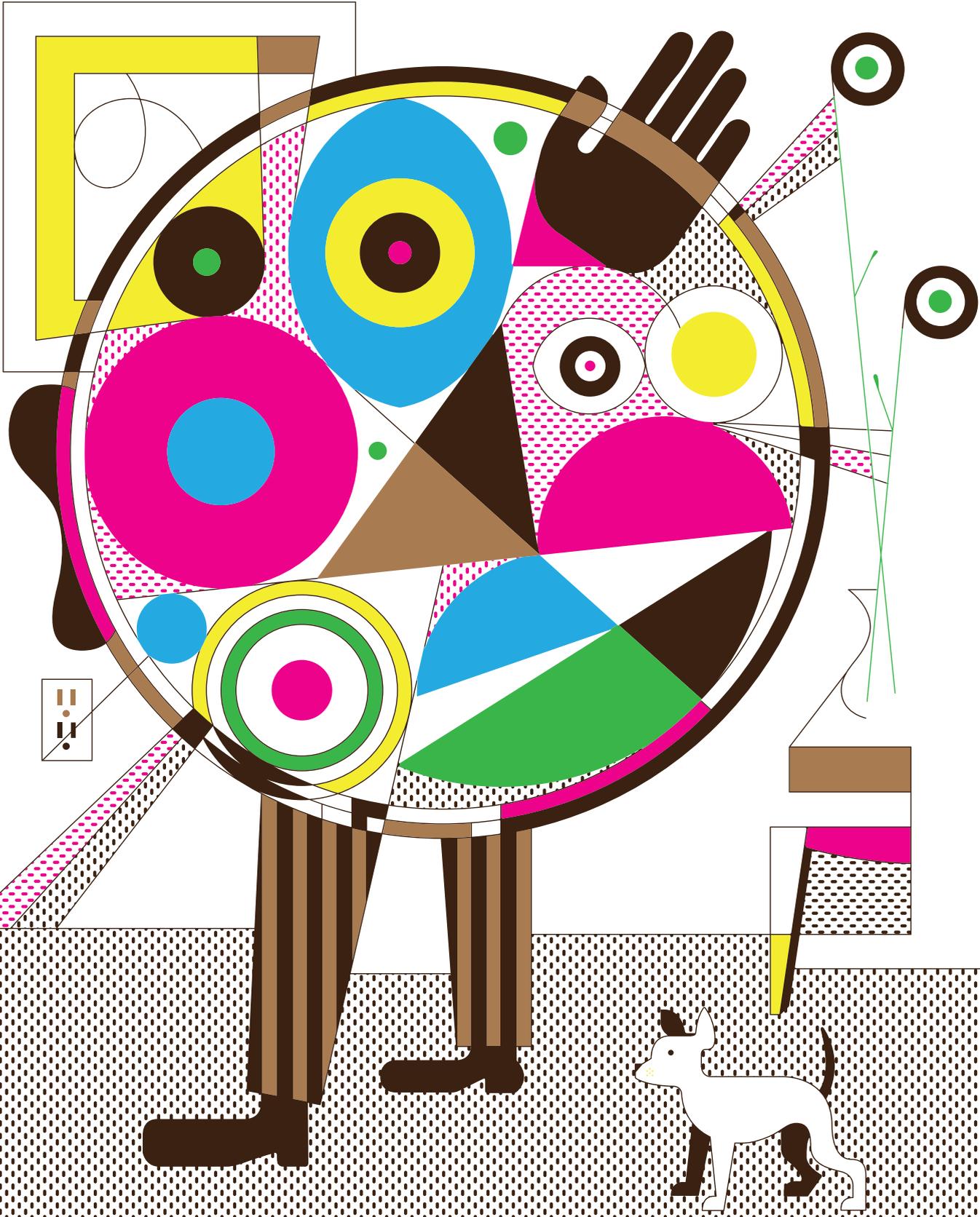


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The Power of Immersive Media

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takes on the qualities of real experience.

BY FRANK ROSE



THE PROMOVER OF IMMERSIVE MEDIA

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In the early 1990s, a young *Mademoiselle* editor named Kate Brosnahan and her soon-to-be-husband, Andy Spade, launched a company they called Kate Spade Handbags. Like most startups, this one didn't have money to advertise. But as it turned out, the company had something better than ads: It had a story.

The couple had met years before while working in a clothing store in Arizona. After moving to New York separately, they met again and fell in love. They had a shared aspiration: to live a luxurious but unpretentious life, surrounded by congenial things. Both were attractive and well connected—Andy the brother of actor David Spade, Kate an intrepid but preppy girl who had

Frank Rose

frank@frankrose.com

is a senior fellow at the Columbia University School of the Arts and the author of *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (Norton, 2011).

once worn pink crewneck sweaters while waitressing at a motorcycle bar—and they had given their all to finance their startup, emptying out Andy’s 401(k) account and using their apartment as a warehouse. But although they cheerfully put themselves forward, their new company’s story was not primarily about them. It was about a way of life they knew, and that they could help others enter.

Every decision they made—where to open their first store (downtown Manhattan, in SoHo, in 1996), what color soap to put in the bathrooms, whether to just sell handbags or to also sell flowers in the shop—was part of this story. “It was about this world we were creating, which was about graciousness,” Andy Spade told *Inc.* magazine in 2013. “We built it around Kate’s personality.”

Because they knew how to consistently evoke that feeling of graciousness, they were able to expand their company’s product line beyond handbags to include such diverse items as stationery, clothing, jewelry, shoes, beauty products, eyewear, china, and wallpaper. The Spades sold majority ownership of the company to Neiman Marcus in 1999, after which they moved on to other ventures. But the company kept using their story, and kept growing as well. Today, Kate Spade & Co. is a US\$740 million operation with nearly 200 stores around the world.

Kate Spade was hardly the first fashion brand to inhabit a self-generated fantasy environment; Ralph Lauren had been doing as much since the late 1960s. Nor would fashion be the only product category to benefit from an all-encompassing approach to retail and product design—as companies such as Apple and Nike have demonstrated. These enterprises don’t just sell products;

they sell an experience. But many others have tried to take the same approach and failed, because the requirements for success with this kind of experience are seldom fully understood or appreciated.

Immersion is the experience of losing oneself in a fictional world. It’s what happens when people are not merely informed or entertained but actually slip into a manufactured reality. J.R.R. Tolkien, who created one of the most immersive tales of all time in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, described it as “the enchanted state,” the frame of mind in which we are so in thrall to a story as to have entered a world of the author’s creation. The power of this kind of experience is sometimes overlooked because it defies empirical assessment. Not only is it inherently subjective—how do you quantify enchantment?—but the term *immersion* is a metaphor derived from an entirely different state, the physical experience of being underwater. To be immersed, as Georgia Tech digital media professor Janet Murray observed in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Free Press, 1997), is to be “surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air.”

Immersion is not engagement. Engagement takes place when a story, or a marketing message, provokes some sort of action among the audience—a tweet, a post, a face-to-face conversation over the watercooler. Immersion takes place when the audience forgets that it’s an audience at all. Immersion blurs the lines—between story and marketing, storyteller and audience, illusion and reality. That gives it enormous impact.

Today, storytelling is colonizing realms of commerce, such as branding and retailing, that traditionally have had little to do with the actual telling of stories. Meanwhile, observers have noted a growing predilec-

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tion for immersive behavior, especially among millennials. People are increasingly interested in stepping willfully inside an artificial world—as *Star Wars* fans have done for decades, and as the audience for the *Hunger Games* movies appears to be doing today through such online extensions as the fashion site Capitol Couture. After poll findings showed that three-quarters of millennials in the U.S. and U.K. crave sensory involvement and respond to it in both marketing and entertainment, JWT Intelligence named “immersive experiences” one of its top 10 trends for 2014 and beyond.

Marketers who understand the immersive potential of stories have a considerable edge over those who try to connect with their audience in less sophisticated ways. But how can strategists and marketers use this tool to their advantage? How can they develop the techniques of verisimilitude reliably, in a way that not only immerses people, but engages them as well? The answer starts with a better understanding of two aspects of immersion: how it evolved, and how it works.

The Enchanted State

The current taste for immersion is largely a by-product of the digital age. Video games and the Internet have taught people to be active participants rather than passive observers; just looking is no longer enough. People expect to dive in, and companies as disparate as Disney, Facebook, and Burberry have been scrambling to oblige them.

But although digital technology seems to encourage it, immersion can be triggered by almost any form of media, starting with books and theater. People have been immersing themselves in stories for centuries. In the classic early-17th-century satire by Miguel de

Cervantes, Don Quixote goes tilting at windmills because he has so immersed himself in tales of chivalry that he loses his mind and thinks he is living in a bygone age. More than two centuries after the publication of *Don Quixote*, critics attacked Charles Dickens for publishing his novels in serial form, causing the “delirium of feverish interest” they induced to bleed into his readers’ daily lives, where they would leave little time for other, presumably more useful pursuits. Given the enormous international popularity of the true-crime podcast *Serial*, which achieved 5 million downloads and streams from Apple’s app store in record time, Dickens’s critics may have had a point.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new technologies yielded experiences that were even more immersive than serialized novels. Lithographs gave way to photographs, which in turn gave rise to stereographs—cards with twin photos, viewed with a headset for a 3D effect. After the Civil War, there was a brief vogue for cycloramas, which were massively scaled reproductions of battles, volcanic eruptions, even the Crucifixion. Then moving pictures were invented, creating an effect so realistic that these static illusions came to appear superficial and tawdry. In 1938, Orson Welles inadvertently demonstrated the immersive power of radio drama when his broadcast of H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* triggered panic among listeners. Meanwhile, John D. Rockefeller Jr. was pouring millions into the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, a once-sleepy Virginia town that would soon offer time travel to pre-Revolutionary America.

A significant inflection point came with the arrival of *Star Wars*. George Lucas’s 1977 movie and the five sequels and prequels that followed it took place in

a meticulously detailed fictional world, and they generated massive sales of ancillary products—comics, novelizations, TV shows, action figures, video games—that deepened fans’ involvement. This inspired an entire generation of current-day Hollywood writers and directors who saw *Star Wars* as kids—among them Joss Whedon, writer-director of *The Avengers*, and *Lost* co-creators J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. For people like these, says television writer-producer Adam Horowitz, “*Star Wars* was a gateway drug.”

Certainly it was for James Cameron, who saw *Star Wars* when he was a 22-year-old truck driver and credits it with inspiring him to become a movie director. By 2009, when he released *Avatar*, all those *Star Wars* products had been transformed from a string of uncoordinated one-offs to a family of product lines that told a coherent story spread over thousands of years. Not only did the products fuel fan loyalty that spanned generations; they were also enormously successful commercially, far more so than even the movies. Cameron took note.

“I think the role of this type of film should be to create a kind of fractal-like complexity,” he told me when *Avatar* was still in development. “The casual viewer can enjoy it without having to drill down to the secondary and tertiary levels of detail. But for a real fan, you go in an order of magnitude and, boom! There’s a whole set of new patterns.” Around the same time, Cameron championed 3D because he sought another form of immersion—a cinematic effect that would eliminate the audience’s perception that they were looking at a screen, which he viewed not as a window but as a barrier.

At the moment, however, it seems that 3D is about

to be eclipsed by virtual reality (VR), an even more immersive technology that provides a computer-simulated environment in a totally enclosed stereoscopic software-driven headset. Given the current, highly advanced state of computer graphics, the effect of virtual reality can be startlingly realistic. To experience a *Game of Thrones* demo for the Oculus Rift—a still-in-development headset produced by Oculus VR (a Kickstarter-funded startup that Facebook bought in March 2014 for \$2 billion)—you step into an iron cage and “ride” a primitive, hand-winch, simulated elevator rising up a 700-foot-high wall of ice. This sort of thing is a far cry from old-fashioned TV, but it can have its downside: People testing an Oculus Rift game based on *Alien*, Ridley Scott’s 1979 sci-fi/horror film, have been known to rip off their headsets and run screaming out of the room in fear.

Another new form of immersion is almost the opposite of virtual reality. Known as “ubiquitous technology” or the Internet of Things, it involves placing electronic devices in real-world settings, where they interact with people and with one another. (See “A Strategist’s Guide to the Internet of Things,” by Frank Burkitt, *s+b*, Winter 2014.) Retail stores, for example, use RFID tags and other devices to respond to shoppers directly, immersing them in a manufactured reality as detailed and sometimes as surreal as any you would find in a headset.

From 3D to VR, the goal is to eliminate any barrier between person and experience. It’s worth remembering that *media* is derived from the Latin for *middle*: A medium is what comes between us and the information it conveys. What if we could have an unmediated experience—movies without a screen, theater without a pro-

Our innate desire to immerse ourselves in stories is not some frivolous impulse but a **fundamental adaptive response**.

scenium, art without a frame? “We’re never going to be totally immersive as long as we’re looking at a square,” Steven Spielberg said in 2013 in a discussion with Lucas at the University of Southern California. “We’ve got to get rid of that and put the player inside the experience, where no matter where you look, you’re surrounded by a three-dimensional experience. That’s the future.”

The Neuroscience of Immersion

It is often assumed that the more advanced the technology, the more immersive the experience. Not so. Even with VR, the immersive quality of a story depends less on technology than on the artistry with which the story is told and the technology deployed. We become immersed because that artistry taps into an aspect of human nature that goes far beyond the mere desire to be entertained.

Recent brain studies suggest that stories, whether written or staged or viewed on a screen, provide a rehearsal for real-life events and interactions. In a 2009 paper in the journal *Psychological Science*, for example, psychologists at Washington University in St. Louis described a neuroimaging experiment that involved people reading stories about a 7-year-old schoolboy named Raymond. Functional MRIs revealed that when test subjects reached a passage in which Raymond picked up his workbook, they experienced activity in regions of the brain that are associated with grasping motions. When he shook his head no, the part of the brain that’s believed to deal with goal-directed activity lit up. When he walked up to his teacher’s desk, areas thought to deal with location in space were activated.

According to Toronto-based cognitive psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, such studies

show that, like computer simulations, “stories model and abstract the human social world.” In a landmark paper called “The Function of Fiction,” the two asserted that stories, far from representing the simple retelling of events, are highly selective accounts. They have to be, since even “the most trivial of experiences, such as going to buy a newspaper, is replete with details that could fill volumes.” Because they are abstractions, stories demand that readers “project themselves into the represented events” in order to understand what’s going on. If this analysis is correct, then immersion would simply be an extreme form of that projection.

In his book *On the Origin of Stories*, University of Auckland professor Brian Boyd argues that this bent for immersion is rooted deep in the human psyche. Fiction, he asserts, trains us to quickly understand real-life social situations, to make inferences, to see situations from other people’s point of view—and it encourages us to do this not just once, but over and over. This last point is critical: “Because it entices us again and again to immerse ourselves in story,” Boyd maintains, fiction “helps us over time to rehearse and refine our apprehension of events.” Stories contain lessons, and by immersing themselves in stories people learn those lessons more effectively, just as they would a foreign language. This suggests that our innate desire to immerse ourselves in stories is not some frivolous impulse but a fundamental adaptive response.

It also turns out to be extraordinarily effective at altering attitudes and beliefs. People have always suspected as much—why else would books be banned or burned?—but until social psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock started conducting experiments at Ohio State in the late 1990s, little had been done to de-

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termine how or even whether stories affect people's feelings about events, issues, or products in the real world.

To investigate the issue, Green and Brock asked test subjects to read a story about a little girl in a shopping mall being randomly and brutally stabbed to death by a psychiatric patient. The story is vividly told and intensely engrossing, all the more so because it is recounted in a dispassionate manner. Some participants were told it was true, others that it was fiction. Some were questioned, well before they read it, about the issues it raised—whether psychiatric patients should be allowed in the community, how likely violence is to occur in public places, whether we live in a fundamentally just world. And all were asked these questions after they'd read it. The researchers wanted to know if people who were deeply immersed in the story would react differently from those who were not.

First, of course, they had to figure out which readers were immersed—or “transported,” as they called it. They had to quantify enchantment. To do that, Green and Brock developed a “transportation scale” that has since become the standard measure of immersion. Participants are given 15 statements on the order of “I wanted to learn how the narrative ended” and “While reading the narrative I had a vivid image” of a particular scene or character. For each statement, they are asked to rank their responses on a seven-point scale, from “not at all” to “very much.” Emotional involvement is a key factor in the final score, as is how readily people can project themselves into the story.

For people reading about the little girl being stabbed, the immersion score ranged from 31 to 99, out of a potential high of 105. The more they were transported by the story, the more likely readers were to ex-

press opinions that were consistent with it—that mental patients should not be let out unsupervised, for example—and the less likely they were to find fault with its point of view. It made no difference whether they'd been told the story was fact or fiction.

Subsequent research has led to similar results. A series of experiments at Dartmouth, for example, showed that people tend to spontaneously assume the identity of the main character in a story they are immersed in—and the more thoroughly they do so, the more likely they are to change their attitudes and behavior in the aftermath. Those with low self-awareness—extroverts, in other words—were more likely than others to project themselves into the story, and all test subjects were more inclined to merge identities with characters who resembled them in some way. But the way the story was told made a big difference. Whites reading about a black person or straights reading about a gay person were more likely to emerge with a favorable attitude about that character if they didn't find out the character was black or gay until well into the story. Prejudice could block immersion—but immersion, once achieved, trumped prejudice.

It's not hard to see why stories are so powerful. Advocacy messages, whether for a cause or a brand, automatically invite scrutiny. They prompt us to put our guard up. Stories are different. Not only do stories encourage people to identify with the characters they portray, but by inducing the willing suspension of disbelief they leave the audience predisposed to accept their premise, at least temporarily. We leave our day-to-day existence behind when we enter a story—and when we return to the “primary world,” as Tolkien called it in an essay called “On Fairy-Stories,” we come

back altered by the experience.

This has ramifications far beyond fairy tales. “Given the implications of stories for the narrative persuasion of consumers,” notes Tom van Laer, a lecturer in marketing at Cass Business School in London, “nothing is less innocent than a story.” And the more immersive the story, the less innocent it is.

The Conspiratorial Whisper

In the 38 years since the premiere of *Star Wars*, digital technology—in the form of video games and the Internet in particular—has increasingly conditioned people to want to immerse themselves in stories. Meanwhile, the advertising industry has developed a problem: Consumers have stopped responding to their traditional approach. According to Nielsen’s most recent “Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages” report (published September 2013), more than half of Europeans and a third of Americans distrust ads in any medium. Young people are particularly resistant. A 2014 survey by the McCarthy Group, a public relations and strategic marketing firm, found that 84 percent of U.S. millennials dislike advertising and are unlikely to be persuaded by it.

This is, of course, the same generation that JWT found so responsive to immersive experiences. But immersion is not achieved through assault; it’s achieved by inducing surrender. What’s needed, then, is a new approach. “Signals that evolve through competition tend to be costly, as arms races develop between insistent senders and resistant receivers,” writes Boyd. “Signals used for cooperative purposes, by contrast—‘conspiratorial whispers’—will be energetically cheap and informationally rich.”

With the advent of social media, the hard sell and even the soft sell are giving way to Boyd’s conspiratorial whisper. Storytelling is key, but as with any key it only gets you in the door. What people really want is to merge their identity with something larger. They want to enter the world the story lives in.

To some, this was apparent decades ago: Walt Disney began encouraging people to step into his stories when he opened Disneyland in 1955. So it is entirely in character that the Walt Disney Company now offers a product line designed to “allow families to immerse themselves,” as the press release put it, in its 3D animated hit *Frozen*, a movie that pulled in nearly \$1.3 billion worldwide at the box office. The studio has surrounded the film with consumer products that evoke it, including costumes that encourage role-play and a mobile app that brings kids into the narrative from the point of view of either of the two sisters at the heart of the story. For grown-up animation fans, Disney has the Art of Animation Resort in Florida, a hotel designed (as the website puts it) to “immerse you in the magic”—quite literally, since it features an enormous swimming pool with underwater speakers that play audio from *Finding Nemo*.

Meanwhile, Bloomberg Media has opened what it calls “an immersive, technology-driven brand experience” at London City Airport, a major hub for European business travelers. Rather than slap up some ads in the airport’s desultory lounge—the default solution—Bloomberg opted to turn the lounge itself into an ad, with free Wi-Fi and a huge electronic media wall with a digital ticker carrying a constant stream of data. Walking into the lounge is like entering a Bloomberg-branded corner of cyberspace, a spot where you can

merge with the endless stream of digital information.

But one of the best examples of an immersive brand experience is provided by Burberry, the once-moribund British fashion label. Two years ago, after creating a highly successful online environment called “Burberry World,” the company brought it to life in its new flagship store on London’s Regent Street. Set in an impeccably restored 19th-century retail emporium, the store consciously blurs the digital and the physical, with mirrors that turn into screens, RFID tags that trigger pop-up videos about craftsmanship, enormous screens that pulse with celebrations of old-fashioned British tailoring, and live shows from the likes of Jake Bugg, a 20-year-old folk singer from the council houses of Nottingham. Music and craft become part of a saga that acts as the fabric of the brand. As Burberry creative director and CEO Christopher Bailey said in a 2013 interview, “It’s not just a coat. That coat has a story”—and that story serves as an entry point for the Burberry sensibility. “People want the soul in things. They want to understand the whys and the whats and the values that surround it.”

Kate Spade, Disney, Bloomberg, Burberry—for each of these companies, the meaning of the brand is conveyed not through ad messaging but through an immersive environment. The most compelling of these environments are rich with detail, but the stories they carry are often implicit, communicated by subtle cues and left for the audience to piece together.

In an environment such as this, suspension of disbelief is critical. All stories involve a partnership between author and audience: As the author tells the story, those in the audience conjure it up, even—if current neuroscience theories are correct—running a simulation in their

head. For the simulation to work, all the details count; they either reinforce our belief in the artificial world or diminish it.

Authenticity is equally crucial. If the story world does not reflect the genuine identity of the company, it will be as obvious as an ill-fitting wig. When the Virgin Group—an idiosyncratic conglomerate made up of businesses that include health clubs, banking, air travel, and space tourism—tried to sort out its corporate identity a few years ago, its leaders realized that there was a paradox at the heart of the company. This paradox is personified by Virgin’s maverick founder, Sir Richard Branson: hippie adventurer, successful businessman, campaigner for social good, profit-driven capitalist. Codified as the “Virgin Way,” that essential insight became the story the company tells itself to make sure it’s on the right path. Companies whose leaders can’t quite decide “who we are” will not have such a guidepost.

Beyond that, stories need to offer multiple opportunities for social engagement. Audiences today are assuming the role they had before the advent of mass media in the 19th century: They are becoming active participants in the storytelling process rather than passive consumers. They expect to share their involvement online, and smart marketers will come up with innovative ways to encourage them.

Lionsgate’s tremendous success with the *Hunger Games* franchise—the first two films took in nearly \$1.6 billion in worldwide box office receipts, and a third film opened to massive numbers in November 2014—is due in large part to its adroit use of social media as an information channel to keep fans continually engaged. With 2 million Facebook fans and nearly 1.3 million

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Twitter followers, even conventional marketing moves, like the release of a poster or trailer, become major events. In fact, the person in charge of social media for the franchise is known within the company as “the fan whisperer.”

But fans’ involvement goes far deeper than Facebook and Twitter. To encourage people to register with the franchise, Lionsgate invites them to sign up as residents of one of the 12 outlying districts that provide the teenage combatants for the annual fight-to-the-death competition that is the film’s namesake. Fans are then assigned roles—district organizer, for example—and set in competition against fans from other districts. By the time the first movie opened, more than 800,000 people had gotten their ID cards. So thoroughly has the fictional world of *The Hunger Games* bled into the real world that this past summer, protesters against the military coup in Thailand adopted the three-fingered mockingjay salute used by the rebels in the story. And as in the fictional world, the salute was promptly forbidden by the real-life authorities.

At the same time, any immersive experience has to work at varying levels of depth. Story worlds can’t be hermetic; they need to be porous enough for people to pass in and out of them at will. A fair number of *Hunger Games* fans are only going to want to see the movie—and many Burberry customers will be happy just to purchase a trench coat. They should have that option.

But the most fundamental requirement for immersion may also be the hardest to achieve: the conspiratorial whisper. The time when brand marketers and entertainment executives could dictate what people see, hear, and think is long past, if it ever existed at

all. Now they invite people into their world and hope enough will stay to make the effort worthwhile. “Fantasy,” Tolkien wrote, “is a natural human activity.” But like Tinker Bell, it can survive only so long as people believe. When the spell is broken, the audience snaps back to reality. The job of the 21st-century marketer is to make sure that does not happen. +

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Resources

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