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ENTERTAINMENT

Immersive Writing Lab – Storyworld Writing Competition

Part 4 – Audience User-Journeys

Active Audiences

Whilst all forms of narrative writing share common elements, interactive and immersive experiences have particular demands that are quite unique; demands that will shape and influence the way such stories are constructed. Such forms change the nature of the relationship between the audience and the work.

We often hear traditional media such as books, film and TV referred to as 'passive' media, and interactive formats such as video games, as 'active'. But these terms are a misnomer and largely unhelpful. There is nothing 'passive' about watching a movie, unless it's a very bad and boring movie! Any good narrative is very consciously engaging the audience in an active mental process. In the previous article we referred to Dramatic Questions and the implication of an audience posing questions to themselves, as they are watching, results in them being compelled to speculate on possible outcomes and assemble the story for themselves. This is very much an active audience.

We also looked previously at the idea of Role-Play and the specific roles assigned to audiences within the storyworld. It is this idea of a an active role in the telling of the story, and which can effect the chain of causality in the narrative, that results in the real measure of an interactive and immersive experience; the User-Journey.

User-Journey

In an interactive story form, or one that moves across different mediums rather than a single medium, the user-journey is the mapping of the paths the audience may take through the storyworld - the actions they take, the choices they make and the platforms they move through. The key questions to ask are;

Is there a single entry point where every audience person starts? Or are there multiple entry points for different types of audiences?

Is there a single ultimate conclusion? Or are their multiple possible conclusions to the experience?

How do the audience's choices effect the possible conclusions?

The answers to these questions will inform the shape of the User-Journeys as a document that informs both the development and the execution of an interactive and immersive storyworld.

A typical user-journey map shows the branching paths of the experience and how choices and actions effect the path an audience member is following. Such maps are most commonly shown as flow-charts and as such are very visual tools for being able to trace the movement of an audience member against the events of the plot and timeline.

Importantly, undertaking the process of creating a user-journey map also allows you to recognise that not all audiences are the same and there may be different archetypal users within the experience. Open-world sandbox computer games deal with this by providing scope to satisfy different user demands and expectations in different ways. A clear goal orientated plot with very specific prescribed tasks will appeal to one type of player, but would frustrate others who wish to explore in a more free-form and self-directed way. Conversely, a storyworld that is pure exploration without dynamic motivations may feel very un-dramatic and unmotivated. Such immersive worlds therefore often offer a clear motivated plot but which is also able to be completed in stages and doesn't lock the player in to completing within a specific time frame. Some players will bang through the main plot, others will meander.

A simple scenario like this can be seen in numerous video game storyworlds such as *Borderlands*, *Skyrim* or even *Heavy Rain*; all have room for free exploration whilst still including a central motivated narrative spine. This principle of recognising different user types and the different paths they may follow is as applicable in transmedia and multi-platform experiences well beyond self-contained video games.

A very useful exercise therefore for storyworld creators is to begin by articulating two different user journeys through your storyworld; one as a highly involved audience member and the other for an audience that is more reluctant. These two extremes will shape the extents of interactivity within your storyworld and allow you to design specific motivations for each type.

For example, lets say you have story where the audience is engaged directly by a fictional character and is asked to perform a specific action - e.g. to lie or steal. Some audiences will jump right into that role play and explore the ramifications of the illicit or illegal action. A different audience type however may baulk at performing the action and choose to resist; wishing to observe rather than partake in the lying and the stealing.

This 'reluctant' audience member is now on a different user-journey and the choice they make should have ramifications. Rather than being pushed out of the experience or into a lesser version of the experience, you have the opportunity to create an alternate pathway of story elements to lead that audience through a parallel branching narrative. Such a pathway may lead back to the same or a different end point but within the storyworld's plot of timeline events, the two users will have had two different experiences.

Both types of audience are valid - some like to interact more than others. The user-journey map allows you not only to consider the needs of these two types of users but also to create specific motivations for each type to compel them forward. One type of user might respond well to action motivations - choices that offer them greater visceral experiences. Other types of audiences will respond best to emotional motivations, pathways that offer more emotional complexity or compel them forward through emotional dramatics.

In any of these cases the storyworld, its events, plot and timeline remains consistent, but the pathways through those events may vary for different users across different platforms.

Returnable Elements

Just as important as the pathway of choices for a user within a given medium, is the pathway of their experience across platforms. If I watch the TV series of your Storyworld, what is it that makes me want to go to the interactive website? If I play the video game, what compels me to read the graphic novel? If I watch the movie, what drives me to sign up to play the Alternate Reality Game?

In a multi-platform project each medium will bring its own type experience, its own perspectives and paths through the shared storyworld. What we need to consider as a crucial part of the user-journey is how the audience is motivated and compelled to move between platforms. The 'trans' part of the world 'transmedia' means to move; but audiences do not move unless they are motivated.

If we recognise that multi-platform storytelling is essentially Episodic Storytelling (stories told in pieces) then we can think of these user-journey motivations across platforms as Returnable Elements - ie. the element that compels us to Return to the storyworld.

There can be all manner of different forms of returnable elements but there are 3 major types that can help us articulate the user-journeys.

Anticipation:
When an audience is motivated by anticipation they are compelled to come back simply to discover 'what happens next?'. This is the long standing idea of a 'cliff-hanger' and is very common in episodic television or in a chapterised novel. In essence Anticipation is created by an un-answered dramatic question for which the audience must return to get the answer. But the same idea can apply across platforms as well as within them. A TV series for example may leave big questions for a specific character un-answered and so compel the audience to play the online game version to uncover what happened to them after the series.

Character:
A cliff-hanger isn't the only way to bring an audience back or motivate them on. If you think of a common TV sitcom like *The IT Crowd*, there is very little in the way of continuing storylines so the reason to come back for another episode - the returnable element - is not anticipation of what happens next. Rather the compelling reason to return is to spend time with those characters and see how they will deal with new circumstances that befall them. In the case of immersive and interactive media different platforms and different user choices will create different circumstances for the character to respond to. The characters need to be strong enough, their responses and reactions varied and interesting enough to sustain and motivate an audience return.

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Feeling States:

The third major returnable element type deals with the emotional expectations of audiences; how they expect to be made to feel? Some storyworlds are built neither on recurring characters nor on-going storylines. If we think of a TV series such as *The Twilight Zone* we have a storyworld that is unified by common themes, ideas and structures but which otherwise has no ongoing plot or characters. In such a case the reason to return for more is to 'feel' a certain way. No matter what the story is or who the characters are, the audience for *The Twilight Zone* knows how they expect to feel and the storyworld is designed to elicit those specific emotional responses. Now if we imagine *The Twilight Zone* as an interactive multi-platform project we can see how each medium may present a different aspect of supernatural occurrences and yet the reason to come back for more remains a desire to satisfy a certain Feeling State. Each individual platform, whether interactive or not, will succeed on its own merits if it delivers on that audience expectation.

Anticipation, Character and Feeling States, three very different motivations for your audience to return to, or move through, a Storyworld. Of course, these three elements do not exist in isolation. Any given storyworld may employ aspects of all three together. What is important is to see these three as tools in a development process to allow you to be specific, rather than abstract, about the experience of the user and their journey.

The narrative-based user-journey map should articulate not only what happens and the branching paths of choices an audience may make, but also what is compelling the audience, why they are moving, why will they come back, what is driving them to interact?

Dont expect the audience to be driven by curiosity alone, nor should you assume your audience Want to interact or even that they will. All these things require clear motivation and consequences. Don't be afraid to light a fire under the arses of your audience and make their journey through your storyworld and the choices they make, the platforms they visit, matter.

In the final part we'll look at Memories, Rituals and Procedures…. be sure to follow @portalIWL