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Immersive Writing Lab – Storyworld Writing Competition

Part 5 – Memories, Rituals and Emotional States

We watch, read or play Stories in order to feel something. We might feel inspired or excited, we might feel moved, intrigued or challenged, we might feel thrilled, joyous or terrified. Not only do we hope for and allow story experiences to effect us in this way but we Expect them to do so. These feeling-states are part of the contract of expectations we have with the story we pay to see, read or play. For creators of multi-platform, immersive and interactive Storyworlds this contract with the viewer is no less important, and moreover it prompts us to think in an Audience-Centric way, focused first on their experience of the story rather than our internal conceptualisation of it.

Emotional-States

Genre, mood, tone, style, theme are all tools we can employ that shape not only how an audience feels about the story they are experiencing but also how they Expect to be made to feel even before they enter. If I sign up to engage a Romantic-Comedy based storyworld my expectations are that it will make me feel a certain way - happy, excited, nervous and elated. If that storyworld turns out to be more scary than funny, more tragic than joyous; then the audience is going to be very unsatisfied because their emotional expectations haven't been met.

In the storyworld bible for Battlestar Galactica - which informs the broadcast series, tele-movie, web-series, comics and video game incarnations of the BSG storyworld - creator, Ronald D. Moore, writes;

"The Battlestar Galactica lives in a perpetual state of crisis, one in which the Cylons can appear at any moment, and where terrorist bombs, murders, rebellions, accidents, and plagues are the unfortunate routines of day to day life. There are no days for our characters, no safe havens, nothing approaching the quiet normal existence they once knew. They are on the run for their very lives. This series is about a chase. Let the chase begin."

In this simple paragraph he has summed up the core emotional states that underpin the BSG storyworld and are consistent right across any and all platform incarnations of BSG - crisis, paranoia, terror, tension, the feeling of being chased and hounded. Each and any story told in the BSG universe is predicated on eliciting these emotions. They are not only what we get, they are what audiences expect.

So there are two key questions we should ask at the front of our storyworld development process.

How do I want my audience to feel whilst they are in the storyworld?

How do I want my audience to feel after they have left the storyworld?

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The two are not the same and indeed can vary widely. Whilst I'm within the Storyworld I may feel frightened, thrilled or confused. But once outside of it, at the completion of all or part of it, I might feel differently - satisfied, intrigued, relieved or hopeful. This idea of movement between emotional states is fundamental to good storytelling on any medium. If I were writing a story where I wanted the audience to be moved to feel sorrow and sadness I could write a scene showing a character very sad and crying. But this is going to be very dull and not nearly as effective as a scene that shows the same person as joyous and happy but who then loses the thing that made them so and they fall into sadness. It's the movement between two different - and often opposite - emotional states that makes an audience emotionally engage. And this goes as much for the macro level of a storyworld as it does at a micro scene by scene level of an individual story.

What we need to ask then is, what are the dominant emotional states of your Storyworld experience and how do they change for the viewer as they move between platforms, in and out of the storyworld. A good story is not disposable, it's not simply felt in the moment of the experience and then forgotten. Great story experiences continue to effect us long after they are over. And long-form episodic stories - those that demand we return to watch, play or read more - effect us most profoundly of all. How do you want your audience to feel before, during and after the experience? What are the different emotions they move through? How do different platforms bring out or emphasise different emotional states and their variations?

Memories

A way of developing a Storyworld that can effect audiences in this way is to focus on articulating the Memories the storyworld generates for the audience. The definition of a 'memory' is simply something retained and recounted in the mind. So as the creator of a Storyworld you need to ask what memories do you want to create for the audience...? We can think of these in two ways; What will the audience be Prompted to remember? And, What will they Need to remember?

The former encompasses the experience of the Storyworld, what images and imagery, what actions that were taken (by characters or by themselves), what ideas, what emotions? The later question is more connected to activity and action in the Storyworld and speaks to plot and returnability; what thing do the audience need to remember in order to comprehend or take action within the storyworld? What events, circumstances and relationships do they need to be able to recall in order to advance the story? What memories need to be planted in order for the audience to make clear connections between plot and thematic elements? What 'objects' do you give the audience as a way for them to retain the memory?

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Being specific about how you want your audience to feel allows you, as a writer, to connect emotions to writing choices in character, plot, platform, design, tone, style and mood. When we can answer these questions about memories - being specific about the memories we want to construct for the audience - we can start to build and make decisions about how the Storyworld is presented, how it is narrated and experienced. How can iconography, colour or particular imagery be used to connect memories for the viewer? How do you highlight specific things that need to be remembered by the audience? What mood or tonal aspects do need you put in place to ensure audience is feeling a particular way? What locations and settings best provide a space to deliver on these feeling states? If you want to move your the audience from feeling claustrophobic and trapped to feeling free and liberated, then you will need a storyworld that naturally encompasses these two types of spaces - confined and expansive vs closed and open - and dramatise these two spaces as opposites that motivate characters to seek one space over another.

Rituals

Memories are best shaped not by what happens but by what you 'do'. Even when watching a traditional movie the moments that stand out will be the moments that made us emotionally active or compelled us to think about our own lives in a particular way.

"I'll never forget when i first saw X because after that I... it was the first time I realised... it changed the way I..." etc

With this idea of a link between Action and Memory - the things we do and the things we remember - we can observe that deep memories are shaped and perpetuated by Ritual. Ritual is set of actions learned and repeated and which have emotional weight, significance or necessity attached to them. Religious services around weddings and funerals are forms of Ritual, but so to are the personal habits and patterns of behaviour that people perform around certain events - things they always do on their birthday or the sequence of tasks they perform before going to bed in order to get a good night sleep.

So, if we think about childhood memories they are often recalled as part of a pattern rather than in isolation; "As kids my Dad and I would always X when we did Y" - and we remember such ritual memories by place, repetition, and significance.

Ritual requires 'investment', that objects and activities are invested with significance. This is the basis of Narrative Suspense - allowing the audience privileged information to know that an object, event or person is MORE than just an object, event or person, but a harbinger of something Bigger.

In an immersive and interactive Storyworld, considering Rituals is a useful way of thinking about the embedding of memories into actions and investing objects and spaces with significance. What Rituals, repeatable actions, are your audience introduced to and asked to perform? Are there specific activities they have to repeatedly undertake? Are there certain tasks they have to do before they can advance? Do they have to Collect, Gather, Find, Assemble, Decode or Arrange? Do they have to change or manipulate the environment in particular ways or follow defined procedures.

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An open world video game like L.A. Noire has very specific rituals around interviewing suspects. These rituals are clearly defined, have a repeatable pattern and must be performed over and over to achieve different outcomes. The ritual of interviewing is a key part of the immersion and role-play of the storyworld. More importantly, it both generates memories and compels audiences to recall memories in order to solve cases and advance the story. More than just a game mechanic, it is one that demands the viewer to immerse themselves by compelling memory and ritual.

The central idea is that powerful memories are constructed by engaging the audience with rituals they can perform. This puts the onus of the writer to embed their Storyworld with repeatable actions that are loaded with significance. At the same time, Rituals become powerful tools for escalating narrative drama. High dramatic stakes come when established Rituals are broken or threatened because such threats are directly to the memories the audience has built up around those rituals.

Summary of requirements for the Immersive Writing Lab Storyworld Competition.

In the five parts of the IWL writers guide we have looked at a toolkit for helping to build viable, dynamic and compelling storyworlds that can move across platforms, involve the viewer to take part in the story and generate rich narrative experiences.

On a practical level, these guides cover the 5 key areas all submissions for the IWL Competition should address in order to demonstrate an holistic approach that is audience-focused and viable as an immersive experience.

1. WORLD - Logline, Timeline, Dramatic Pressures and Genre
2. CHARACTERS - Protagonists, Antagonists, Communities and Points-of-view
3. MULTI-STRANDED PLOT - Dramatic Questions, Events, Thresholds, Inversions
4. AUDIENCE - User-Journey, active and reluctant pathways
5. MEMORIES - Rituals and emotional-states.

In no more than 10pages total we want you to explore these 5 elements to present a Storyworld that is naturally dramatic, full of potential across platforms and succinct and efficiently presented.

In addition here are 5 tips to a good submission.

1. **Put Your Name on it with the projects Title clearly stated.** (you would be amazed how often this is forgotten...)
2. **Loglines should be short and to the point.** A logline is not an outline. It is a distillation of the central idea. 3-4 sentences at most.

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3. **Succinct and Focused.** Don't make your submission the bucket for every idea you've ever had. Make it enjoyable to read, not a hard slog.

4. **Motivated Interaction.** DO NOT write things like *"the audience can interact with the characters online"* unless you can clearly state; a) What the Interaction is? and b) Why the audience would Want to or Need interact?

5. **Think Digital.** If your storyworld is made up only of a feature film, comic book and a novel then you've missed the point.

Get your proposals in and Good Luck!

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