

THE ART OF IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING

or WITHOUT A GOOD STORY
IT'S JUST FANCY TECHNOLOGY



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1. CREATE A CAMPFIRE

Do you remember the feeling of staring into the flames, feeling the warmth of a campfire, and listening to a funny anecdote or exciting story of a friend sitting across from you?

You drift away, dreaming, while listening to the anecdote. An immersive experience often is just these few elements. This most basic technology, fire, helps you move into thoughts, or into a new space or feel connected. Whenever you start working with new technology to create a new kind of narrative experience -- keep this in mind.

Whatever you do, no matter how many cool tools you have: it should be as inviting and enchanting as a campfire.

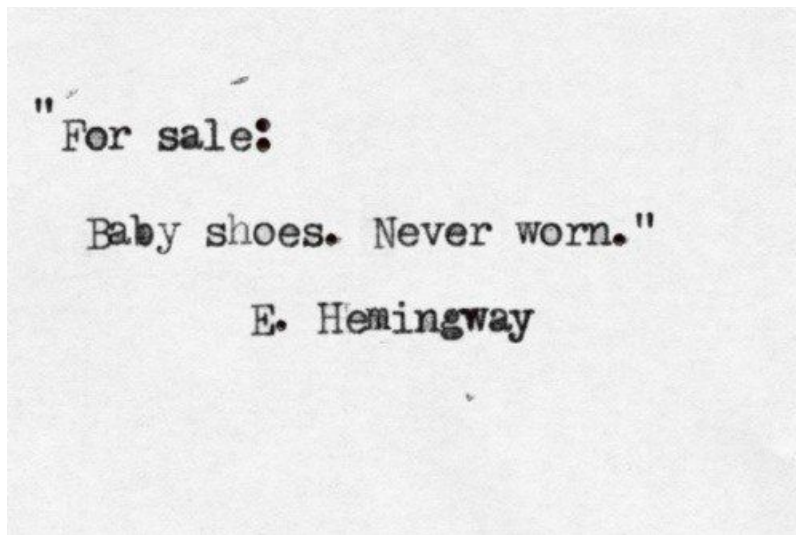
The magic is basically making someone help move from:

1. Just **looking at** things
2. Feeling like you are **being there**
3. **Being it**, or becoming it through someone else's eyes or memories

Working with VR and 360°-video creates opportunities to be at places that are difficult to reach like the ancient [Caves of Lascaux 360](#). Or be in the middle of a [musicvideo clip that happens all around you](#). A VR camera literally can give you the perspective of someone else, experience what [it is like to be blind and be able to listen very well!](#)

2. SIX WORD STORY

Stories, even the shortest ones, have the ability to carry a lot of weight. A very long time ago, the famous writer Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a very short, but very big and heavy story. He was told he could only use six words. This is what he wrote: 'For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.' This six-word-story is a famous one, and it's powerful too. It can tell something about a couple losing a child at birth; a man or woman dreaming to



become a parent, but never finding the right partner; lovers who split up or even: an abortion. This story means: love, family, life, loss. These are big themes. And all of these themes can be part of six words. Every word or sentence has a universe behind it. Keep this in mind, when you create stories.

The point with storytelling is that, no matter how small or short stories are,

they carry a bigger load, tell something about a bigger storyworld, a bigger picture. All the elements of a story you show, should create more images in the head of a listener, a viewer, a reader. Stories should expand in the mind of the people who hear them.

'Longed for him. Got him. Shit.' - Margaret Atwood

'All those pages in the fire.' - Janet Burroway

3. WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR AUDIENCE TO CARE FOR?

Stories are amazing tools.

But what is it that we do when we talk about telling stories?

The thing we do by sharing stories, is to transfer an experience you had, to someone else. Often we want to bring a specific part of that experience to someone's attention. So you have to edit it a little bit to make your point. Also, that one thing that other person needs to understand was experienced by you with six senses. Plus emotion. We use [this clip from *Mad Men*](#) in the workshop to show this.

That's quite a package to transfer.

So to communicate to another person, you need to strategize a bit which medium suits best to deliver that package. Let's say, a medium is like a cake tin. It will highlight different parts of your 'dough'. To find the right treatment for your dough and the right 'tin', there are four questions you can always ask yourself to check what your storytelling should do for your listener, user or spectator.

Answer these VR design questions:

What do you want your audience to care about?

What do you want your audience to do?

What do you want your audience to feel?

What do you want your audience to understand?

4. FILL THE GAP

Your brain is an amazing machine. It does not need 100% of the story, it can do fine with 50%, as long as you show the brain the right parts of the story. To fill a gap is nothing more than to add what is necessary for something to become complete.

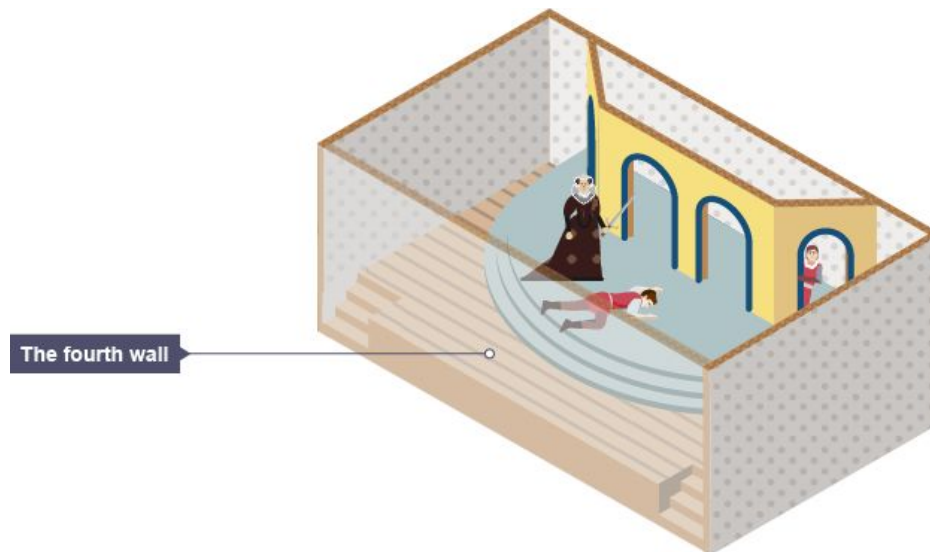
For example, in film: if Sam looks to the right in shot A and Jean looks to the left in shot B, we as viewers can tell there is a relationship between the two. Our brain looks for connections between images, sounds and sentences that follow up on each other.

If you want to know more about this, check out the short film, now known for the famous [Kuleshov effect](#). Kuleshov used this film experiment to indicate the usefulness and effectiveness of editing in film. The implication is that viewers brought their own emotional reactions to this sequence of images, and attributed those reactions to the actor, investing his impassive face with their own feelings. Filling the gap and using this technique when telling stories in film, photography and writing is a really effective method if you use it well and wisely.

In the case of Kuleshov, the story is short and sweet, filling the gaps is quite easy to do for a viewer. But some stories need a little more patience, like the film [Babel](#) for example. In this film four different storylines of different characters interlock. The film is edited in segments and patterned in a specific order, until towards the end of the film, at which point the order becomes more randomized. This way, watching stories and reading stories can be a puzzle you have to solve, looking for patterns and connections, on a deeper level than a simple *gap-fill-game*.

5. BREAK THE RULES

There are many rules, but rules do not always apply to new ways or different ways of storytelling.



In theatre, *breaking the fourth wall* (the artificial border between the actors, or the story and the audience) started as a way to 'break the rules' in storytelling. Even though it is a relative old method, it is very effective and fun to adapt when you use it well. *Breaking the fourth wall* changes the relationship between the audience and the characters. It can immerse people, make them feel more involved in a different way. Secrets can be shared with the audience, but kept from other characters: as an audience you are in the know, but not able to share your knowledge within the story. This way a director or actor can manipulate the story in a very effective way and turn up the tension more and more. In the series [House of Cards](#), there is a lot of breaking of the fourth wall. In this series, Frank Underwood shares his secret plans and political persuasion techniques with the viewer.

6. ENTER A NEW WORLD

“Virtual reality is a medium where you can give someone an experience that they can generate their own stories from.”

- Eric Darnell (Baobab Studios)

Baobab Studio is one of the VR production studios that makes amazing animated VR experiences. Like [Invasion](#), [Asteroids](#) and [The Crow](#). Baobab Studios' [Eric Darnell made the distinction](#) that film is a medium where someone can share the story of an experience, whereas virtual reality is a medium where you can give someone an experience they can generate their own stories from.

So this means that spaces and the way we feel when we're in them -- in VR (or other immersive forms) -- should be as interesting as the plot you'd like to develop. Before you fix your storyline, play more with the different ways someone can enjoy watching around himself or feel like a character in a situation.

Tips to read & watch

- △ [27 ways to tell a story in VR](#)
- △ [The Guide to VR storytelling](#)
- △ Editing VR on *points of interest* (p.o.i's) | [Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#)

7. GOLDEN DETAIL

Dave Eggers is a wonderful writer, who cares very much about details in a story. Eggers knows: observation is key and creating original images are very important. You have to be a good observer to tell good stories with interesting details. Making up everything in a story it's impossible. Your mind, full of sharp observations and memories, is a well you have to dive into, in order to tell better stories. The more **golden** and less **cliche** a story is concerning images, conversations and sayings, the better the story gets. It takes some time to train yourself and your eyes and ears. We all have to get through the cliches before we understand what is **not so good, useful** or **golden**.

When you tell a story in film, prose or podcast, ask yourself: 'are the details, the sentences, the images, the sounds ...

- △ **GOLDEN**
- △ **USEFUL**
- △ **NOT SO GOOD**

The following image contains an example of these three distinctions.

The feeling of traveling at 100 miles an hour.

The students in one of my classes came up with these:

Not-so-good: like flying; like being on a rollercoaster; so fast you want to puke; like being shot out of a cannon.

Useful: terrifying; dizzying; nerve-racking; hurtling.

Golden: like being dropped down a well; as the speed grew, I heard death's whisper growing louder and louder.

In [this video](#) from the film *500 days of Summer* you see how the feeling of being in love is expressed in a very original way, while using all the cliché images of being in love we know.

8. SHOW DON'T TELL

**Don't tell me the moon is shining;
show me the glint of light on broken glass.**

- Anton Chekhov

In storytelling, we as an audience do not like it when everything is explained to us. We are not stupid, we have our eyes and ears to understand and figure out stories. Show us the action, show us what a character feels, but leave all the explanatory stuff. In film, literature, theatre and VR showing instead of telling is KEY. For example: if someone is angry, they should not express this in words, but tear down the house, drive to someone's house to punch them in the face, not talk for weeks after a fight. These are all expressive ways and actions to show what is going on on a deeper level and in another language: the language of image, movement and action.

Here are some examples:

[The Master](#) (anger)

[The Godfather](#) (the feeling that something's not right)

Showing things like particular behaviour by a character or the way the interior of a house looks like, what a person wears, which car someone drives, in which part of a city someone lives, if the blinds in a room are open or closed, also show a lot about a situation or person, while not explaining anything in an explicit way.

Here's an [example of Pixar studios](#) and how this studio master of *show don't tell*.

In virtual reality (if this is 360 or roomscale) it is really important to think of what you show and what you do not show. Every little thing you add, will add to the story. Like which kind of coffeecup someone uses, what kind of cat someone has, if the colors are dark red or light blue. It all shows and thus means something which can be translated into a story that is told. And remember: like in photography, everything that's left **out** of the frame, also tells a story.

People love images and are better at processing images, so even if you write: serve your reader images, not just sentences.

9. TEST IT EARLY

Before playing with the best tools, play with the simplest tools you can find.

Particularly paper and cardboard are the best tech you can use to start a new immersive story project.

Paper is patient. When you make mistakes, you feel free to get a new piece, and start over.

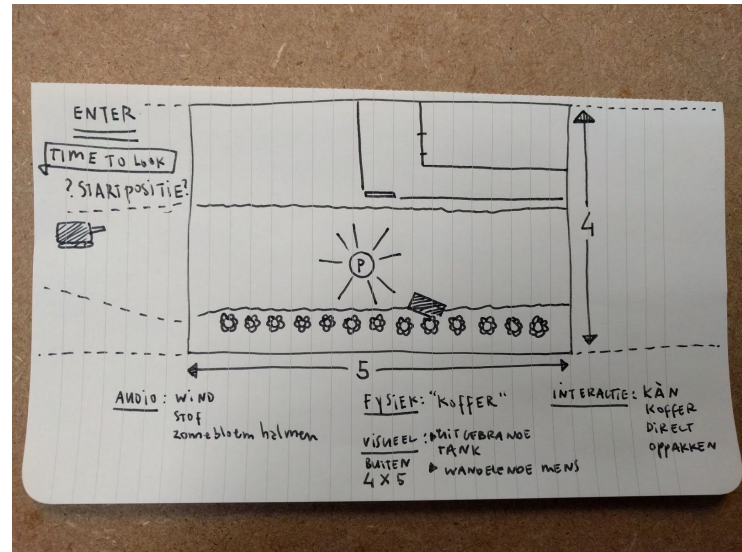
Paper also helps to test early and often. Which helps you to keep the team on track (if you have one), also your idea has room to develop in smaller steps, which gives a feeling of oversight and creates room for play. Our VR project ROZSY PNE started on paper and cardboard. (See pictures). This was essential to understand each other's design ideas.

Now....you might think: 'doesn't digital do this better?' No.

Digital spaces invite you to edit endlessly, individually, without looking up from your screen. You are tempted to perfect everything first before you consider testing or collaborating on a new or better solution. Digital is great for the next step. But first, start simple: start on paper.

Nowadays there are plenty of resources for all kinds of testing and prototyping. Here are our 3 recommended sites to look for tips and tools:

1. [Hackastory Tools](#)
2. [Strategies for VR prototyping](#)
3. [Quickly simulate VR experiences for testing](#)



OUR SEVEN FAVOURITE VR STORIES

1. Ocean of Air
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WVN8lchIVI>
2. The Dinner Party
<https://www.with.in/watch/dinner-party>
3. SENS VR
<http://sens.arte.tv/en>
4. What Do We Care 4
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdCAGKb5_3c
5. PEARL
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqCH4DNQBUA>
6. MEET THE SOLDIER
<http://www.meetthesoldier.com>
7. The Enemy
<http://theenemyishere.org>

Why would you ever decide to make an immersive story?

- in VR or 360° video -

1. Feel as if you discover by looking yourself
2. You let your user be the editor of the experience
3. You want to play with space and presence

The best places to discover excellent VR experiences:

WITHIN <https://www.with.in/>

GOOGLE SPOTLIGHT <https://atap.google.com/intl/nl/spotlight-stories/>

NEW YORK TIMES VR <http://www.nytimes.com/marketing/nytvr/>

WEVR <https://www.transportvr.com/explore>

JOURNALISM 360

<https://medium.com/journalism360/top-ten-vr-stories-49db2fa5e3ae>

And of course in the online catalogues of HTC VIVE, OCULUS and SAMSUNG GEAR

Transmedia producer **Nienke Huitenga** (1984) blends media strategy, digital concepts and immersive experiences. Since 2010, she has been developing campaign strategies for filmmaker Floris Kaayk for, among others, the product *Human Birdwings* (2011) and *The Modular Body* (2015). In 2016, *The Modular Body* was awarded the first ever *Gouden Kalf* in the *Best Interactive* category, where the jury also praised Huitenga's share for the project: engagement with an international audience, "a production that goes beyond the website." "The common story is set on various social media. [...] He stimulates discussion playfully and makes people think about new technologies, [...] and manages to engage a wide international audience with his work.' In 2013, she founded *Hackastory*: a company that guides local and international media platforms in finding their balance for renewal, independence and reaching their audience in this digital age. Until 2018 she was a teacher in the *Communication & Multimedia Design* course at Avans University of Applied Sciences, where she was head of the *Immersive Story* program, among other things.

Nienke Huitenga | *media strategy, digital concepts and immersive experiences*

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Lisa Weeda (1989) writes, moderates, makes literary programs and podcasts, develops transmedia concepts. She teaches *Transmedia Storytelling* and *Writing for Virtual Reality* at ArtEZ University of the Arts. Her prose is published in *Das Magazin*, *Tirade*, *Revisor* and *Theaterkrant*. In 2015-2016 she was part of *Slow Writing Lab*, the talent program of the *Dutch Foundation for Literature*. In the summer of 2016 she participated in the *Paris residency* of *deBuren*. Since 2014, she has been a writer at the talent agency *Wintertuin* | *De Nieuwe Oost*, which published her literary non-fiction novella *Petrovski's Legs* at the end of 2016. The novella was praised in the national paper NRC by Elsbeth Ety: "Weeda masters the art of omitting like no other, causing the reader to put himself to work." May 2017 Lisa signed with publishing house *De Bezige Bij* for her debut novel. In 2018 she participated in the *History of Tomorrow* residency of *SLAA*. In 2018 she and photographer Robin Alysha Clemens launched the interdisciplinary documentary photo project *OSELYATA*, about a former homeless community Emmaus Oselya in Ukraine. In 2019 she was *Writer in Residence* in the UK, a program by *TaalUnie*.

Lisa Weeda | *LITERATURE Δ VR Δ TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING*

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