



MARGARET KERRISON

IMMERSIVE STORY TELLING FOR REAL AND IMAGINED WORLDS

A Writer's Guide

"When I began at Walt Disney Imagineering, almost everything about the business was conveyed through oral tradition. That was forty years ago. Margaret Kerrison has created a source with this book, *Immersive Storytelling*. The communal wisdom, experience, and real-world examples collected here represent a career's worth of exposure. Immerse yourself."

— Joe Rohde, Veteran Executive of Walt Disney Imagineering

"Margaret invites every writer or would-be writer to consider their world building from a 360 degree vantage point. She also dares to make it personal. Margaret's belief is that the personal, if handled correctly, can be universal, and is an invitation for all of us, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or gender to investigate why the stories we want to tell matter."

— Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony, Vice President Creative & Advanced Development, Disney Live Entertainment

"Immersive storytelling in themed environments is an evolving, audience-driven, and play-focused medium that has lacked serious, practical, and conversational dissection. Until now. Throughout this book, Margaret Kerrison illustrates the artistry of so-called escapism, making the case that the entertainment we experience will continue to blur the lines between the storyteller and story participant. Entering a story is no mere escape; it's how we make sense of the world around us."

— Todd Martens, theme park journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*

"Margaret Kerrison's 'guide' is the first and most clearly laid out exploration of next gen storytelling that I've encountered. It serves both as an overview for the curious and a manual for the professional. It is in and of itself, a story well told."

— Danny Bilson, Chair, Interactive Media and Games Division, University of Southern California

"Margaret Kerrison's voice as a storyteller, as an expert, and as a woman of color is critically valuable to this industry. Her stories have been transformed into epic landscapes and deeply emotional experiences across galaxies, eras, and genres. And that world-building power is all right here at your fingertips. Use it well."

— Amber Samdahl, Former Executive Creative Director, Walt Disney Imagineering

"Peeking behind the curtain often zaps all the magic out of whatever's behind it. Excitingly, *Immersive Storytelling* offers a rare exception, where its insights, guidance, and wisdom combine to shine an even brighter light on the incredible sorcery underlying the world-building process."

— David Baronoff, Founder, Chief Cross-Media Officer, Bad Robot Games

"There is very little more important or more foundational to our lives than storytelling. Whether you are writing a screenplay, curating a museum, designing a theme park ride, or reinventing a retail experience — in fact, anyone curious about how to create the best possible immersive experience, you will find this book friendly, useful, and very interesting."

— Catherine Powell, Global Head of Hosting - Airbnb, Former President of the Disney Parks, Western Region

"Creating stories for location-based, interactive experiences comes with a completely unique set of challenges than other narrative fiction, and there is no better guide book to mastering this relatively new medium than Margaret Kerrison's amazing *Immersive Storytelling*. From theme to worldbuilding to breaking into the industry, this book has everything you need to become an expert interactive storyteller!"

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"Driven by an approach to storytelling rooted in genuine curiosity, empathy, and a deep interest in what speaks to the hearts of audiences, Margaret's book invites readers on a journey of discovery. Through clear explanation, she illustrates the interdependence between story and design, demystifying our artform, from the biggest ideas down to the ever-critical details. I wish I had this book when I was just starting out, but I am delighted to have it now. Illuminating!"

— Nancy Seruto, Creative Executive, Recipient of 2020 Buzz Price Lifetime Achievement Award

"Margaret Kerrison's brilliant book, *Immersive Storytelling*, at last gives us a definitive guide to story-making for location-based entertainment, backed by her real-world experience in story craftsmanship. No matter what field you are in, this book will help you create compelling stories that capture and hold the hearts and the attention of your audience."

— Bob Rogers, Founder & CEO, BRC Imagination Arts

"Margaret Kerrison's *Immersive Storytelling* is written like an immersive experience. Her unique abilities and personal experience combined with a love of universal storytelling create a roadmap for the reader to find their space and comfort within this book."

— Diana Williams, Award-winning Producer, Co-Founder of Kinetic Energy Entertainment

"Immersive storytelling is the art of the extraordinary, taking our minds to other places, to something new, exciting. Story is all around us and part of us. This book helps us better understand how to see and to map the process that makes story possible. It is a testament to that art and work of giving voice and form to stories that matter."

— Zach Riddley, Creative Portfolio Executive, Walt Disney Imagineering

"For those of us who have forged long careers in the world of immersive storytelling, we have come to understand that our path is not a choice, but what we were put on this earth to do. *Immersive Storytelling* offers indispensable tools for all storytellers across disciplines. Whatever the problem you are faced with, no matter how challenging or in what industry, the bottom line to any solution is story. Identifying a compelling story and realizing it in a way that will touch the human spirit, never fails to provide the answer."

— Valerie Faithorn, Principal, Storyspace Design, Inc.

"Regardless of whether one works to create memorable experiences drawn from history or fantasy, is a veteran storyteller or just beginning to explore story's power, Margaret has provided a wonderfully readable book that lays down a firm framework to actively enable us to build the kind of unique connections through stories that help us understand ourselves and each other."

— Taylor Stoermer, Lecturer in Museum and Heritage Studies, Advanced Academic Programs, Johns Hopkins University

"I can think of no better guide through the world of immersive storytelling than Margaret Kerrison. This book is like having her as your personal mentor right by your side, dispensing her insights and drawing on her collected wisdom and experience in this industry. Whether you're looking to break into this exciting medium or even if you're a seasoned veteran, you will find much to inspire you here. Follow Margaret's lead and you will not regret it!"

— Steven Spiegel, Story Editor Executive, Walt Disney Imagineering

"After attending a great immersive production, many people are inspired to try their hand at crafting one. The vast majority quickly find themselves at a loss as to where to even begin. Finally, Margaret Kerrison has given them an answer. Here. With this book. They start here."

— Noah J. Nelson, Publisher of *No Proscenium*

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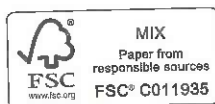
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writers, Kerrison lays out the craft of immersive storytelling. She uses
case studies to show what works, and highlights the essential role of
the writer on a complex creative team. Ready to take the kernel of an
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DEDICATION

To Foster and Bryce, the love and joy of my life.

FOREWORD

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE

I have been a ghost, a space-warrior, a time-traveler, a detective, and a refugee. I have traveled to the far reaches of the galaxy, stepped inside someone else's imagination, and saw "myself" through the critical eyes of a third-party observer.

Well, at least I have participated in carefully crafted experiences designed to help me *believe* that I have done those things. All that, and more, is possible through the artful creation of authored environments, events, and journeys that we collectively label *immersive experiences*. And even if the events were artificial simulations or fabrications, the experience, the discoveries, and the emotional responses were, and still are, decidedly real.

Everywhere you look today, you can find experiences designed to immerse yourself in an imagined reality, or to provide a specific encounter with an alternate perspective of reality. And as the experience economy continues to expand, there are more and more categories of immersive experience than ever before. Going well beyond theme parks and museums, immersive experience design is influencing restaurants, brand experiences, retail experiences, corporate visitor centers, escape rooms, sports venues, social media venues, airlines, site-specific music, and theatrical performances

to name a few. And every day, this very incomplete list is growing.

Accelerating this growth are entirely new modes of technology-driven immersion that didn't exist just a few years ago; at home virtual-reality headsets, location based virtual-reality experiences, phone-based augmented or "mixed" reality experiences. All of these emerging, tech-driven media utilize many of the same principals, and rely on the same fundamental and universally human forms of interaction, relationship, and meaning that immersive experiences and stories characterize so well.

And if that wasn't enough, these core techniques, principles, and benefits of immersive experience design are increasingly relied upon outside of entertainment and education as well; from helping you navigate a complex city transit system to providing a narrative framework to help somebody process a stressful personal experience. The benefits derived from understanding and deliberately designing the way someone progresses through an experience, and the relationships and connections involved, are adding value in more unexpected, and important, venues. As an example, I think most people would be surprised at the amount of design and story thinking currently underway to improve the modern medical patient experience.

The primary driver at the heart of all of these experiences, or at least should be, is the concept of STORY. It is that thing we call *story* that gives the participants, the location, the events, and our relationship to all of these factors, a framework for relating, discovering, and understanding. When successful, it provides meaning

and even personal transformation. Story has been at the heart of how we see ourselves and the world around us (whether real or imagined), from the first time a group gathered around a campfire to hear tales of the hunt, to the most modern, state of the art tech-driven immersive experience.

But what makes a story or an experience “immersive”? That’s the million-dollar question. There are no set rules around it so the adage of “you know it when you see it” could be modified to “you know it when you’re in it” and eventually to “you know it when you believe it.” There might be one over-arching conceptual question one can use to distinguish between immersive and presentational experiences, and it is critical to the understanding of how to craft story and narrative for these experiences. That distinction is the point-of-view of the audience.

Is your audience’s experiential context distinct from the characters or participants? Is the audience intentionally separated from them by some element like the rectangle of a cinema or television screen or a theatrical proscenium? Or is your experience mediated by artificially arranged seating or staging intended to differentiate audience from participant? Conversely, is the experience designed to have the audience and the other participants share the same contextual reality? It’s the difference between being within or separate, a spectator or a participant. This might seem an overly intellectual question if all you are wanting to do is create a cool brand experience for a client, but understanding this framing choice and its incumbent pros and cons, is the first crucial step to crafting story and narrative for this strange, complex,

always-doing-things-for-the-first-time, quirky, delightful and POWERFUL medium. If seeing is believing, then doing is understanding.

I have had the privilege of working alongside storytellers that have authored some of the most beloved stories of recent generations. And in doing so, I have seen the difference that is made when you put a strong, relatable story at the heart of an experience vs when that story, narrative, or thematic core is weak or missing. It is as true of any movie as it is of a theme park attraction or corporate visitor center. Story drives meaning. Story creates connection. Story allows us to transcend through the intellectual into the emotional. And from the specifics of accuracy into the bigger shared truths that reflect our humanity.

While the basics of story are universal no matter the medium, the specifics of crafting story for immersive experiences are quite quirky and challenging. They serve up a collection of unique opportunities:

- How to construct a frame for your story (every story has one).
- How to invite and connect with an audience.
- How to communicate expectations and establish the ground rules of participation.
- How to accommodate the inputs of participants in the narrative without breaking it.
- How to determine what is and isn't actually important in your story.
- And, not to be dismissed, how to get this all done in the context of a professional workplace and as part of a dynamic team.

The craft and profession of writing for this broad category of immersive experiences offers no shortage of challenges and discoveries, but also no shortage of fun.

I have had the privilege of working alongside Margaret for the last six years. I have seen firsthand just what it takes to meld the mechanics of narrative structure, the peculiar nuances of participatory experiences, and to shape it all into the service of meaningful and relevant overarching themes and goals. Many times, as we've sat around our own campfire, crafting the stories and experiences we want to tell, we have come to rely on some of the tips, tricks, exercises, and insights that Margaret has collected in this book — of course, it was usually a messy conference room and not a campfire.

There is no guaranteed method to creating great stories. Every project has its own collection of unique opportunities, constraints, audience, and intent. However, the ideas contained in this book can hopefully convey some version of the alchemy of wisdom, inspiration, experience, and perseverance that Margaret has provided to every project that we've worked on together. This book can provide a valuable service to the prospective professional by outlining just what the expectations, deliverables, working dynamics, and rewards are for those who choose to craft immersive stories and experiences as a profession.

I firmly believe that a story well-told can change the world. I believe that a story well-lived through immersive experience can motivate and personalize transformational change. I've been working to make that true for most of my professional life, and I've been lucky enough to do that

in the company of so many amazing colleagues. And while I realize that I'm lucky enough to have Margaret return my texts when I bother her at midnight, I hope that this book and the ideas, insights, and prompts it offers, can provide some of that same benefit for you. And, if that doesn't work, just do what I do. Text Margaret. 24/7. Her number is "(xxx) xxx-xxxx."

INTRODUCTION

From the time I learned how to read and write, I loved to tell stories. First, it came in the form of journaling in first grade, then writing short stories, then drawing my own comic books, making my own puppets and board-games, videorecording my own skits, taping my own radio show, designing costumes, drawing elaborate plans for my future home, and writing fantastical poems and macabre plays. I was that kid who was doodling or writing when I should've paid more attention in science or math class. I absolutely had to create. It was something that came naturally to me and it was a pastime I enjoyed.

Over the past fourteen years, I've written stories and consulted for independent artists, theme parks, museums, children's animated shows, independent feature films, TV shows, documentaries, small design agencies, and *Fortune* 500 companies. My most recent projects at Walt Disney Imagineering include *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge*, *Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser*, *Avengers Campus*, *Guardians of the Galaxy: Cosmic Rewind*, and National Geographic HQ.

I discovered the world of immersive storytelling when I was working towards a graduate screenwriting degree at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. I was in my thesis class working on a feature film script inspired by the story of the only female emperor of China, named Wu Zetian. It was a few months before graduation and I was experiencing a looming anxiety to find a job in the entertainment industry.

Our professor, Pam Douglas, motivated us to find work in other industries besides film and television. She started to list examples of all the writing jobs we can pursue in other industries, such as gaming, animation, and theme parks. I remember thinking, they need writers to write stories for theme parks? Who does that? That sounds awesome. I've always been a fan of theme parks, but I never thought a writer could ever have a career in it. My curiosity was piqued.

That evening at home, I searched for “designing theme parks” and found the exciting world of immersive storytelling. I found a website for a group called Themed Entertainment Association, an “international non-profit association representing the world’s leading creators, developers, designers and producers of compelling places and experiences.”¹

One day when I was visiting the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, I found myself wandering around the South and Southeast Asian Paintings and Sculpture collection. It was an intimate, serene, and thoughtfully-designed space that reminded me of home. I wondered who designed this beautiful space. I sat down on a bench and looked out at the garden behind the window, where a large granite Buddha statue sat across from me.

Surely, someone or a group of people were responsible for designing this experience and deciding what went where and why. They must have also considered how the visitor walked through the space and what objects they would encounter first before turning the corner and discovering

¹ <https://www.teaconnect.org/index.cfm>

a new object. That notion excited me. Could there be a storyteller that helped to define and design these spaces? How did they do it?

After visiting the museum, I went back to the TEA website and found a wealth of information, news, mentoring, networking, and job opportunities. One of the links provided a Member Directory, which I promptly clicked. I searched for companies located in California and started emailing the companies that I found interesting. In the e-mail, I introduced myself as a student who was finishing my graduate degree in screenwriting from USC, and provided my internship and freelance work experiences while I was a student.

Many months later, I finally received a reply to one of my query emails, from a company called BRC Imagination Arts based in Burbank, California. They asked to meet with me based on my writing samples. Even though I didn't have any experience working for an experience design company, they took a chance on me.

I started working with them promptly after I wrapped up with a freelance TV gig, and worked on a project called the Heineken Experience, a historic brewery attraction and corporate visitor center for the internationally distributed Dutch pilsner, Heineken. I loved everything about the work and enjoyed collaborating with multiple disciplines in the same team, but most importantly, I was paid to be a writer. It was inspiring to work with nice, passionate, and talented people who were so committed to creating experiences based on a strong story foundation.

BRC kept me on for many projects after the Heineken Experience. I will be forever grateful to them and to

their founder, Bob Rogers, for taking me under their wing and shaping me into the writer and creator that I am today. With BRC, I worked on many other projects, including the Louisiana Old State Capitol (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), NASA Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex (Cape Canaveral, Florida), AMOREPACIFIC Story Garden (Osan, South Korea), and the Information and Communications Pavilion for the Shanghai World Expo 2010 (Shanghai, China). I was a writer on three projects that earned Thea Awards during my four years working at BRC.

I was a freelance consultant for four more years, working with a variety of companies until I noticed a job posting from Walt Disney Imagineering for a Show Writer position. I knew I had to get my foot in the door, and sent messages on LinkedIn to the hiring manager of the story department at the time, and found a couple of Imagineers in my network to put in a good word for me. I knew that I had to do everything in my power to get that job. I got glowing recommendation letters from my previous employers, worked hard to revise my best writing samples, and rehearsed my interviews. After many months of emails and phone calls, waiting, and a few rounds of interviews, I was devastated to find out that I didn't get the position.

I tried to move on with my life, and continued to work on other freelance projects. It hurt that I was so close to my dream that I could touch it, but I wasn't "good enough" to make the cut. Even with the disappointing news, I didn't give up. I continued to email and keep in touch with the hiring manager. It pays to be persistent.

Many months later, the hiring manager set up a meeting for me to chat with the Executive Producer and the Executive Creative Director regarding a freelance consultant gig as the land writer for a confidential project. That secret project turned out to be the “*Star Wars* project.” When one door closes, another one opens.

That was seven years ago. Little did I know that one day I would be the overall story lead for one of the most ambitious lands ever built by Walt Disney Imagineering. I feel like the last seven years at Imagineering have been a masterclass in designing immersive spaces and experiences. Not only have I met some of the most talented people I’ve ever met in my life, everyone from graphic designers to audio engineers, I’ve also discovered this burning desire to continually improve and perfect my craft. Being around so many talented people made me want to be better. I was inspired by their work ethic, their passion and enthusiasm, and their unwavering spirit in some of the most challenging times. These Imagineers led by example and showed me what it meant to be the best in class for creating memorable experiences for the whole family.

I wondered what it would be like to write a book for aspiring writers in this industry. There’s so much to share, and I want to pass on my learnings and insights to the next generation of storytellers. As a fan of experiences, I’m curious to see where this medium of storytelling leads, and hope to impart some helpful tips and tools that will take this medium to the next level.

When I was in the early stages of writing this book, I was reminded of the many e-mails and LinkedIn messages

from aspiring writers and creatives looking to break into the industry. They were asking for my advice and were curious to know what I did in my job. They also asked how I do what I do, especially after seeing me (with many other talented Imagineers I'm fortunate enough to call my friends) appear in our free online course *Imagineering in a Box*, a wonderful series we developed in collaboration with Kahn Academy and the Pixar in a Box team.

IMAGINEERING IN A BOX

If you've never heard of this free online series before, check it out! *Imagineering in a Box* is designed to pull back the curtain to show you how writers, artists, designers and engineers work together to create theme parks and other immersive experiences. Go behind the scenes with Disney Imagineers and complete project-based exercises to design a theme park of your very own. It's perfect for middle and high school students looking to design their own project in a lesson-by-lesson program that includes video content as well as multidisciplinary exercises.

I was getting e-mails from middle school kids who wanted nothing more than to be an Imagineer one day. They were girls who loved science and engineering, boys who loved to build things out of LEGO bricks, and adults who never stopped dreaming. They wanted to pick my brain and chat with me about my career.

For all those people who reached out to me and for those who thought about reaching out to me but never did, I'm



writing this book for you. Hopefully, I can impart some wisdom from my experiences working in this exciting industry.

The first tip: there are no hard and fast rules. This is not a textbook nor is it a “how to” book. I would regard this book as a “guide” of helpful tips and tools. Each individual and company approaches their processes and projects differently. I will share my collected wisdom and best practices, which will hopefully help you find your own approach.

Seek out mentors, find opportunities that interest you, and be persistent in going for what you want. It’s important to create a daily habit to improve your craft and constantly learn from others. You should never stop writing (even when you have bad writing days), and you should never stop learning (even when you’re on projects that you’re not as excited about). With more experience, you’ll have the confidence to “break the rules” so that you can create something truly unique and innovative. Ultimately, you want to find a style and method that is most appealing to you.

This is a very rewarding industry to work in as a writer. Those of us who are fortunate enough to work as writers in creating experiences that connect people often feel like that this isn’t “work.” We are given an incredible opportunity to create stories and spaces for people to play together. As storytellers, we strive to create experiences that are moving, compelling, and meaningful. We design spaces so that visitors can escape and leave their ordinary lives behind. We make places where the audience can see

themselves and feel a sense of connection and belonging. We make experiences full of magic so that we are reminded that our lives are magical in themselves.

As a creator, storyteller, and writer, there is nothing more satisfying than to see audiences engage and immerse themselves in stories I helped to shape. To know that I bring magic into people's lives is the greatest reward I can hope for. To see families, friends, and couples create memories in experiences that I helped to create is in one word – everything.

I hope that you find some tidbits and inspiration in this book to create your stories so that I may have the privilege of experiencing them one day. I look forward to seeing what the future generations create in the world of immersive storytelling. Please be sure to invite me!

Margaret Kerrison