

BUILD WORLDS, NOT CAMPAIGNS

HOW TO CREATE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES THAT FANS WILL NEVER FORGET

STEVE COULSON, MIKE KNOWLTON, AND MIKE MONELLO

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the members of the extended Campfire family we've lost along the way.

Your presence shaped us, and your absence is still felt.

Paul Adler
Chris Baker
Brian Cain
Brian Clark
Elena Parker
Dave Szulborski

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We are grateful to the many clients, partners, and collaborators who entrusted us with their worlds and stories.

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INTRODUCTION
IS THIS THE REAL LIFE?

An introduction to immersive storyworlds and why they hold the key to engaging audiences and fans.

5

CHAPTER 1
LIGHTING THE FIRE

In which we explore the origins of Campfire and some of our early pioneering work.

13





CHAPTER 2
TELL STORIES THAT SPREAD

We explore the psychology of why people share online and how to use that to create buzz.

43

CHAPTER 3
CREATE WORLDS, NOT CAMPAIGNS

In which we visit our favorite immersive space, the tiki bar, to get a masterclass from Don the Beachcomber.

71





CHAPTER 4
MEET FANS WHERE THEY ARE

Introducing one of our core philosophies: the concept of "Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers" and how to create something for them all.

109

CHAPTER 5
DESIGN FOR DISCOVERY

From treasure hunts to escape rooms, we'll explore how turning fans into detectives can reap rewards.

141





CHAPTER 6
DON'T INTERRUPT

In which we learn about format subversion and how to hide a story where no one thinks to look.

173

CHAPTER 7
CAPTURE THE CROWD

Let's run away to the circus to explore what we can learn from the greatest show on Earth.

197





CHAPTER 8
THINK LIKE A FORGER

Mastering the art of forgery: antique boxes, nostalgic scents, and pirate radio.

229

CHAPTER 9
CREATE MOMENTS OF MAGIC

In which we pay homage to the great magicians and learn how sleight-of-hand applies to immersive entertainment.

275





CHAPTER 10
BEHIND THE CURTAIN

How to deploy cutting-edge tech without it getting in the way.

311

CONCLUSION
IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

Final thoughts from the Campfire team on how best to apply all this theory to your own projects.

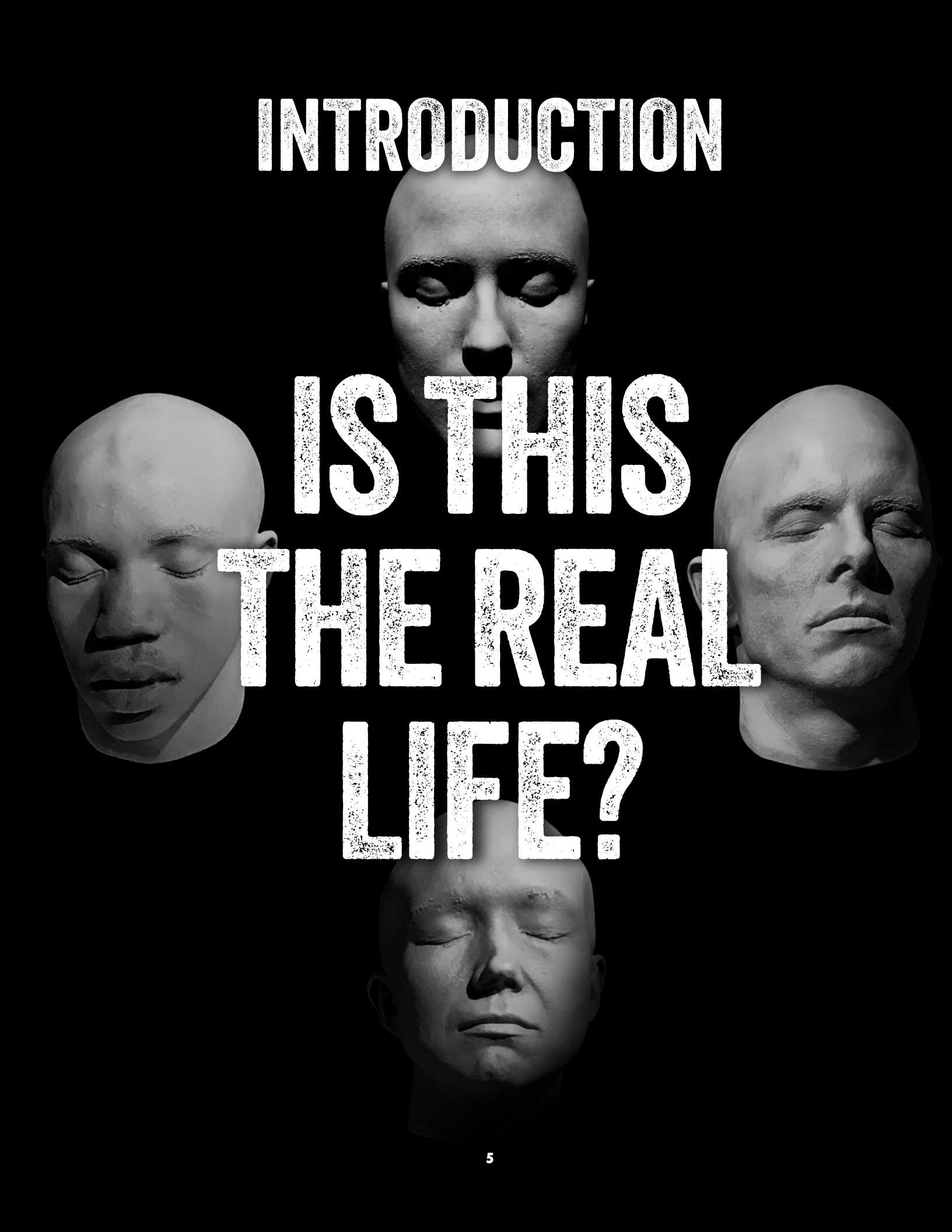
341



"If you design anything—absolutely anything—that other people experience, you become a participant in their process."

— Brian Clark (1969–2015)
Foundations of Experience Design (unpublished)

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

IS THIS THE REAL LIFE?

She stepped into the room, uncertain of what awaited her. Everything was unsettlingly precise: the flicker of lights overhead, the soft murmur of distant voices, the faint scent of dust and leather lingering in the air. The people around her were engrossed in their own worlds, simultaneously scripted and somehow very real, as though waiting for her to make the first move.

She hesitated, feeling as though she'd already crossed some invisible threshold. In this space, there could be no sitting back to observe. Here, she was part of the story, though it wasn't entirely clear how or why. A man approached from across the room, his movements slow, deliberate. There was something in his eyes: a knowing look, the edge of a secret she hadn't yet uncovered.

Her pulse quickened. Should she speak? Play along? Was it too late to remain at arm's length from this experience? He stepped closer, his gaze steady. When he spoke at last, his voice was low and calm but undeniably compelling.

"Welcome to Westworld."







At **The Westworld Experience**, created for our client HBO®, participants didn't watch a story. They were drawn into it. The boundaries between performance and reality blurred as fans and journalists alike found themselves cast as unsuspecting guests. Moments of uncertainty and vulnerability were carefully shaped by trained performers and an unseen safety net, allowing participants to explore the experience without ever feeling unsupported or adrift.

Two questions sat at the center of that activation, and they still speak to something much larger: *"Is it real?"* and *"If you can't tell the difference, does it matter?"* At Campfire, those questions drive every project we take on: an immersive pop-up, an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), or a themed VIP event. The aim is always the same: to create a world so authentic, so thoroughly woven into reality, that attendees stop caring if it's real or not.

For those lucky enough to gain entry, **The Westworld Experience** proved both entertaining and disorienting, prompting fans to question the very nature of their own reality, and to love every minute of it.

THE ART OF IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

For over two decades, we've been building immersive experiences that invite fans to step inside new worlds, discover hidden layers, and become active participants in the stories they love. From the viral grassroots momentum of our early projects to fully realized worlds at San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), the pattern holds: the most compelling stories are the ones fans help to build, share, and claim as their own.

Our work builds worlds, not advertisements.

WHY IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES MATTER

This book is an account of how we think. It's also, inevitably, a how-to guide (though we'd rather you absorb the philosophy and then develop your own methods). What you'll find here is our approach to telling stories, building worlds, and engaging with fans in ways that stay with them long after other marketing campaigns end.

The best fan experiences are lived, not watched. But fans engage at different depths. Some peel back every layer, others skim the surface, and most fall somewhere in between. We design for them all: the casual observers, the curious explorers, and the superfans who will devour every detail. Understanding that spectrum is central to everything in this book.

THE SPARK THAT STARTED CAMPFIRE

Campfire's story began in 1999 with *The Blair Witch Project*, a film that changed how marketing could engage with audiences. Both the film and the world built around it blurred the lines between fiction and reality, drawing fans into a narrative that extended far beyond the screen. For the first time, fans had real agency in the success of a movie.

This was six years before YouTube and what we now call social media. The nascent internet afforded two-way interaction, a brand-new conversation between filmmakers and their audience. Instead of relying on trailers or posters, fans were actively invited to participate in *The Blair Witch Project* storyworld. A community coalesced around an unknown property, and fans felt so empowered to propel its success that they would call theaters asking for the movie to be shown in their town. A small indie distributor booked thousands of screens in the middle of the summer blockbuster season.

Before *Blair Witch*, movie marketing was a one-way bet: studios pushed out trailers and one-sheets, and audiences either showed up or didn't. *Blair Witch*

changed the equation. The fans *became* the storytellers. They felt ownership, and that ownership drove the film's success.

That dynamic has only intensified. Social media has made fan culture the default mode of engagement. Platforms like Reddit, TikTok, and Discord give fans direct access to each other and to the stories that shaped them. Joining a fan community no longer requires signing up. it happens the moment you follow, comment, or share.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL CONNECTION

And yet, as our lives have moved further onto screens, a shift the pandemic accelerated but didn't start, the hunger for physical, in-person experiences has grown. The hunger for physical, in-person experiences has grown. Fans want to gather, share a moment together, and engage with stories using all of their senses. The demand for pop-up activations and immersive installations has surged as a result. People reach out and touch the story as it comes to life around them.

We believe that creating these sensory experiences is the way to engage today's fans. Immersive moments transcend content to provide experiences that fans can share, talk about, and take home with them. In an era of infinite scrolling, that kind of engagement lasts.

THE POWER OF MAGIC IN STORYTELLING

One of our guiding principles is the idea of **magic**. We mean it the way a good magician means it, creating moments of wonder that make the impossible feel real. Magic is about making people question what they know and inviting them to suspend their disbelief.

That's what we strive for with every experience. We want fans to believe in the world we're building, if only for a moment, one where they are drawn

deeper into the story because they can't quite believe what's happening. An interactive prop, a hidden puzzle, a room that smells like the storyworld: whatever makes fans forget, even briefly, that they are taking part in a marketing campaign.

OUR INSPIRATION

Campfire's philosophy didn't emerge in isolation. We've been shaped by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's *Spreadable Media* (2013), which gave us a framework for how stories take root and travel across platforms. The thinking of our late friend and transmedia pioneer Brian Clark influenced the way we map and design experiences. Magicians like Derren Brown, Eugene Burger, and Ricky Jay taught us how misdirection and illusion can create genuine wonder. And the pioneers of immersive entertainment, Punchdrunk®'s *Sleep No More*, Cirque du Soleil®, and Disney Imagineering®, showed us what's possible when the audience stops watching and starts participating.

You'll encounter all of these influences, and more, throughout this book.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In the chapters that follow, we'll take you inside the worlds Campfire has built. You'll see how we work, how we approach storytelling, and how we use everything from hand-crafted props to cutting-edge technology to bring ideas to life. Each chapter introduces a principle, grounds it in real projects, and closes with questions you can apply to your own work.

This is what immersion makes possible: moments so real, so absorbing, that they become part of you.

Welcome to *Build Worlds, Not Campaigns*.



CHAPTER 1

LIGHTING THE FIRE

THE RISE OF A NEW KIND OF STORYTELLING

CHAPTER 1
LIGHTING THE FIRE
THE RISE OF A NEW KIND OF STORYTELLING

It was the summer of 1998 and something mysterious had started to bubble up across the internet. Rumors were flying across early forums, newsgroups, and message boards; they murmured that a cache of videotapes believed to belong to a trio of missing film students had been unearthed. Film enthusiasts and curiosity seekers buzzed with questions. What was on those tapes? What had happened to them in those woods? And most urgently: Was this real?

The mystique of *The Blair Witch Project* spread like wildfire. The internet brimmed with speculation, fueled by cryptic websites and whispers of missing persons. People leaned in, wanting to know more, scouring every detail for clues, discussing theories in chat rooms and fleetingly convincing themselves that maybe, just maybe, this was a true story, being told through lost footage that had been rediscovered.

Mike Monello, co-founder of Campfire and one of the film's creators, remembers that moment well. "I was sitting in front of the computer screen, watching the forums light up with theories about *The Blair Witch Project*," he recalls. "That's when I realized we weren't just filmmakers anymore; we were facilitators of an experience."

Audiences were becoming part of something much bigger. They were co-creators of the myth, diving headfirst into a world that was being revealed to them.

For Mike, that realization changed everything. It wasn't about the movie anymore; it was about discovery, participation, and immersion. In *The Blair Witch Project*'s captivating success, he glimpsed a form of storytelling where audiences lived the story instead of consuming it.



The creators of The Blair Witch Project, 1999.
L-R: Dan Myrick, Mike Monello, Eduardo Sánchez, Robin Cowie, Gregg Hale.

CAMPFIRE: A NEW KIND OF AGENCY

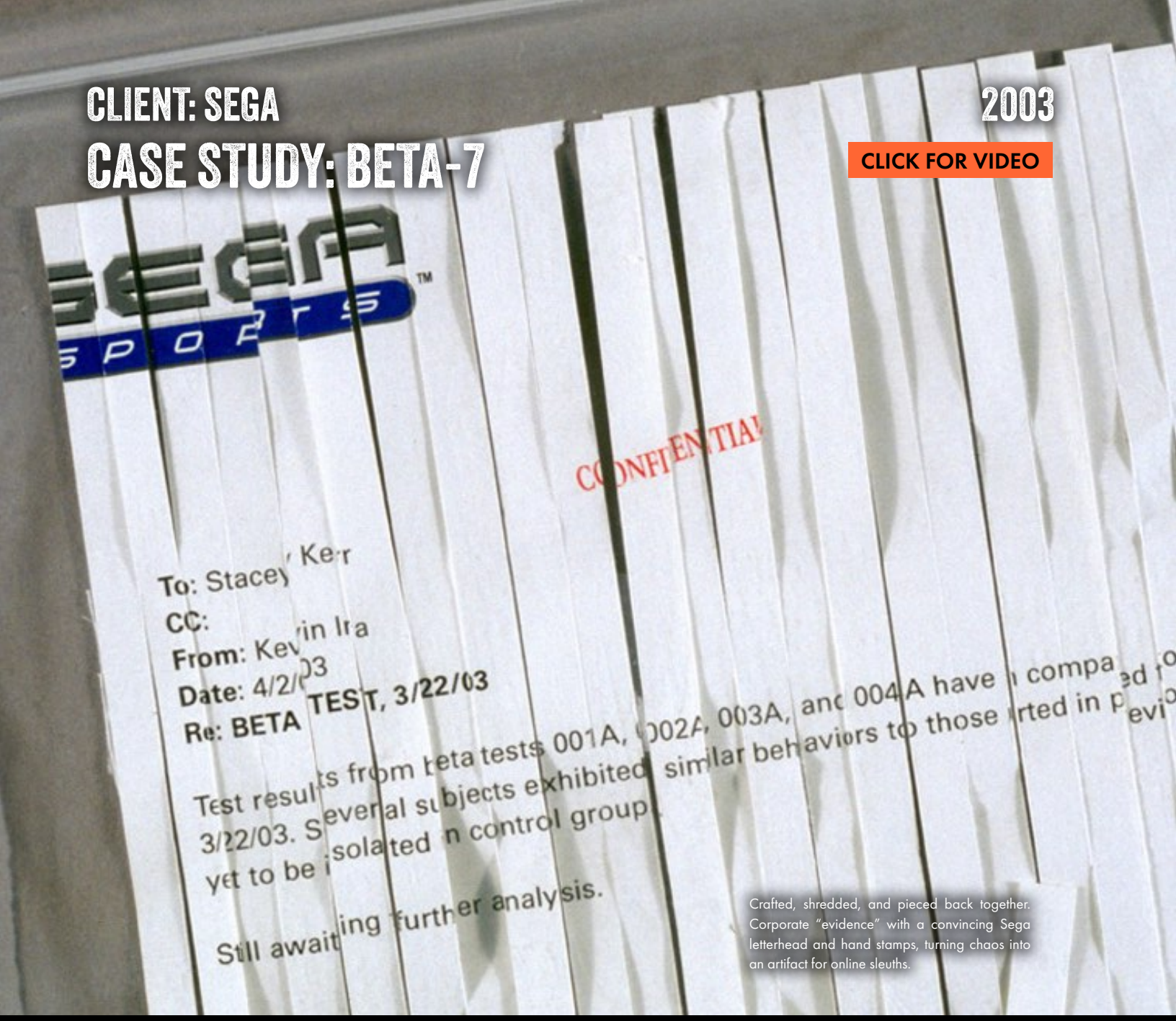
What excited Mike was the way this kind of storytelling could spread across platforms, becoming a thing fans could engage with, remix, and expand upon. This distributed narrative, whereby the audience actively sought out pieces of the story, put them together, and shared them with others, was unlike anything that had been seen before. It was dynamic. It was interactive. And it felt revolutionary.

From this insight, Campfire would be born. Mike realized what the same storytelling techniques could wield in marketing, particularly for brands and entertainment companies looking to connect more deeply with their audiences. So in 2003 Mike and Eduardo Sánchez, *The Blair Witch Project* co-director, teamed up with Steve Wax's production company, Chelsea Pictures, under which banner they created Sega®'s **Beta-7**.

As with *Blair Witch*, **Beta-7**'s mysterious narrative unfolded across different platforms. The story focused on a console game beta tester who claimed to be suffering violent blackouts after playing an early test version of Sega's ESPN NFL Football 2K4, the first football video game to feature an in-helmet point of view. Fans pieced the mystery together online from blog posts, fake medical documents, and "found" footage. The audience was hooked: debating, sharing rumors, and dissecting every clue.



Beta-7 was an award-winning success that showed just how engaging transmedia storytelling could be. Yet for Mike, something was still missing. While the audience members were captivated, they were still on the outside, trying to figure the story out. The team knew they had to go further. They had to let people step into the narrative and *shape* it themselves.



Crafted, shredded, and pieced back together. Corporate "evidence" with a convincing Sega letterhead and hand stamps, turning chaos into an artifact for online sleuths.

CLIENT: SEGA

2003

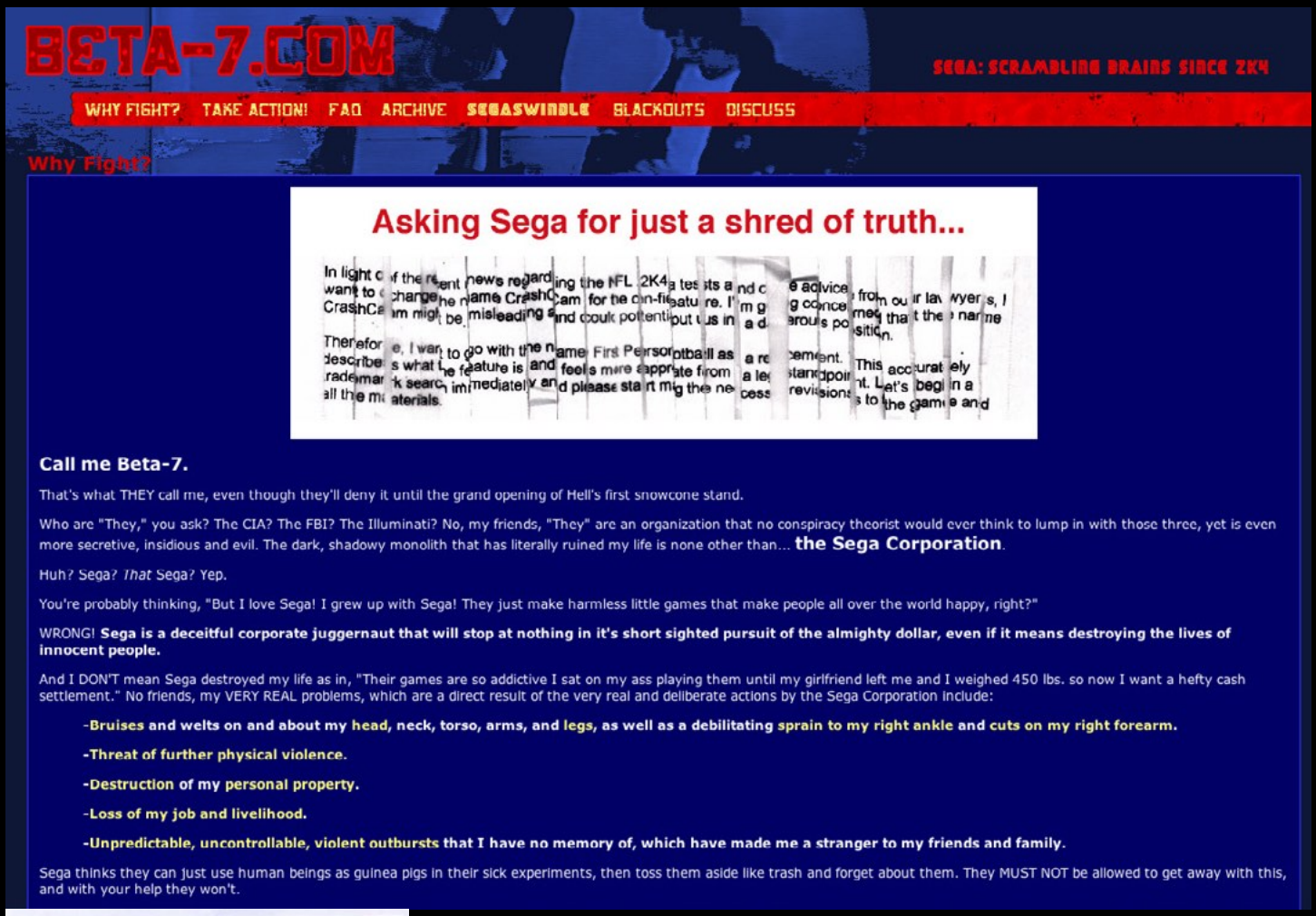
CASE STUDY: BETA-7

CLICK FOR VIDEO

WHERE DOES REALITY END AND FICTION BEGIN?

When we launched **Beta-7** for Sega® in 2003, it was one of the earliest viral marketing experiences and we got the internet buzzing. Promoting Sega's *ESPN NFL Football 2K4* was a wild ride. But this wasn't your typical video game ad. Instead, it centered on a beta tester codenamed Beta-7 who claimed that he suffered violent blackouts after play testing the game's new "CrashCam" feature.

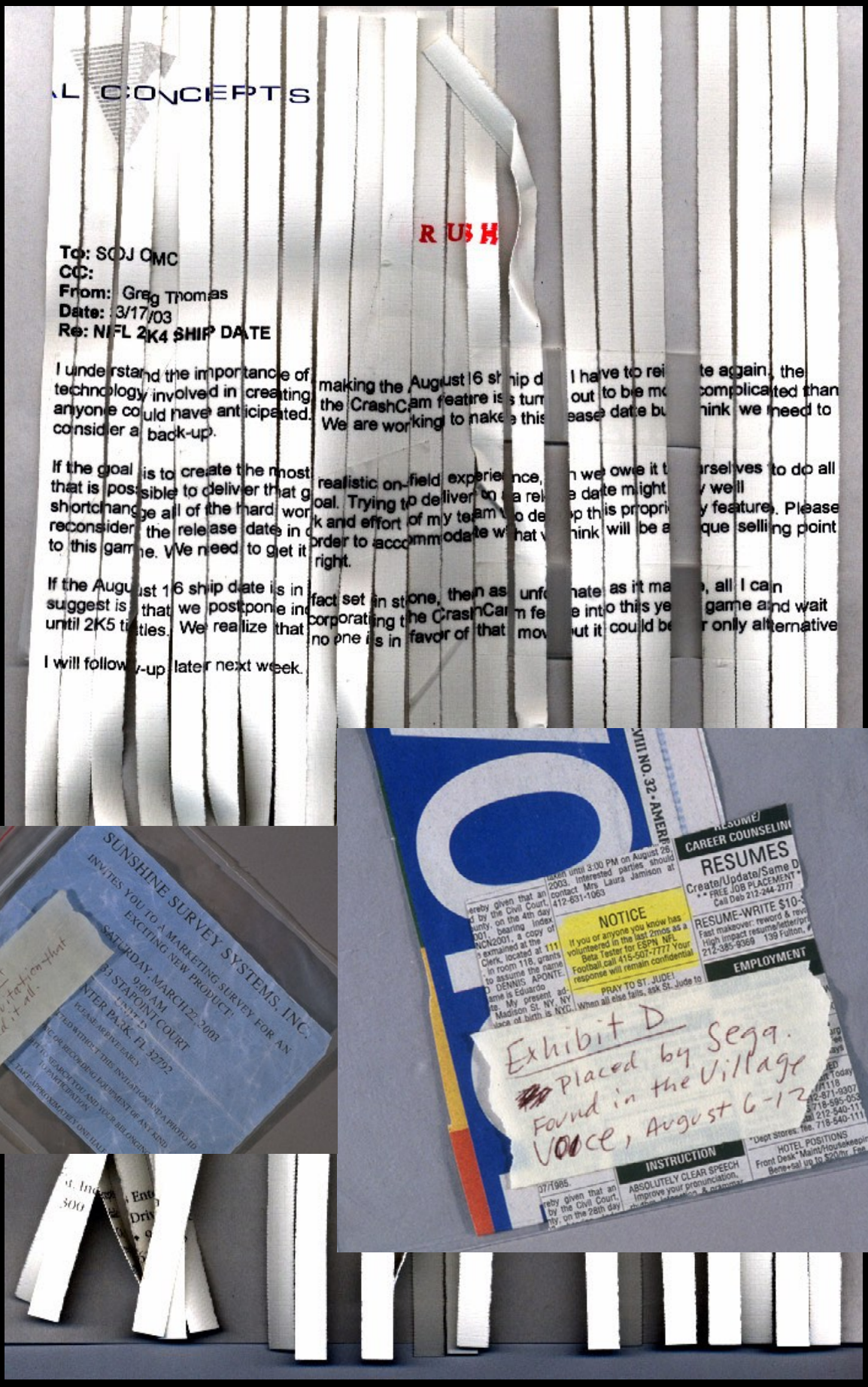
The narrative unfolded over four months in a series of cryptic blogs, fake websites, hacked documents, and video footage. Beta-7's story drew people in as he documented every blackout and injury, releasing content that suggested some kind of corporate cover-up by Sega. Beta-7 responded to emails from fans at all hours and incorporated gamers' suggestions into his alleged attempt to shut Sega down before the release of the game. Other characters popped up, fueling debates online. One, GamerChuck, was a fellow tester who defended Sega but was written as an obvious corporate shill rather than a real person. Fans became obsessed, chasing every lead to figure out if the story was real or just a hoax.







We built everything the way the character would have: websites designed as he'd design them, instant photos that look like classified lab evidence, and an ambush on the real game developers in their office parking lot to catch their baffled reactions.



We used real internal code words like "CrashCam" in our memos from Virtual Concepts to Sega Japan and even ran ads in *The Village Voice*, turning them into "evidence" for the story.

Beta-7: Conspiracy or Hoax?

Is Beta-7 a conspiracy perpetrated by a major corporation against gamers, a hoax perpetrated by an insane (but creative) individual, or a grassroots marketing campaign for the game ESPN NFL Football? There are many arguments and theories, including my own, but so far no actual proof has surfaced.

I have attempted to summarize the events as best I can but I recommend you explore the sites yourself for all the details.

Please email me if you have any evidence that either proves this as a genuine conspiracy or a hoax!

THE BEGINNING

BETA-7.COM

Back in July, someone sent me a link to a video of a guy tackling another guy in an office.



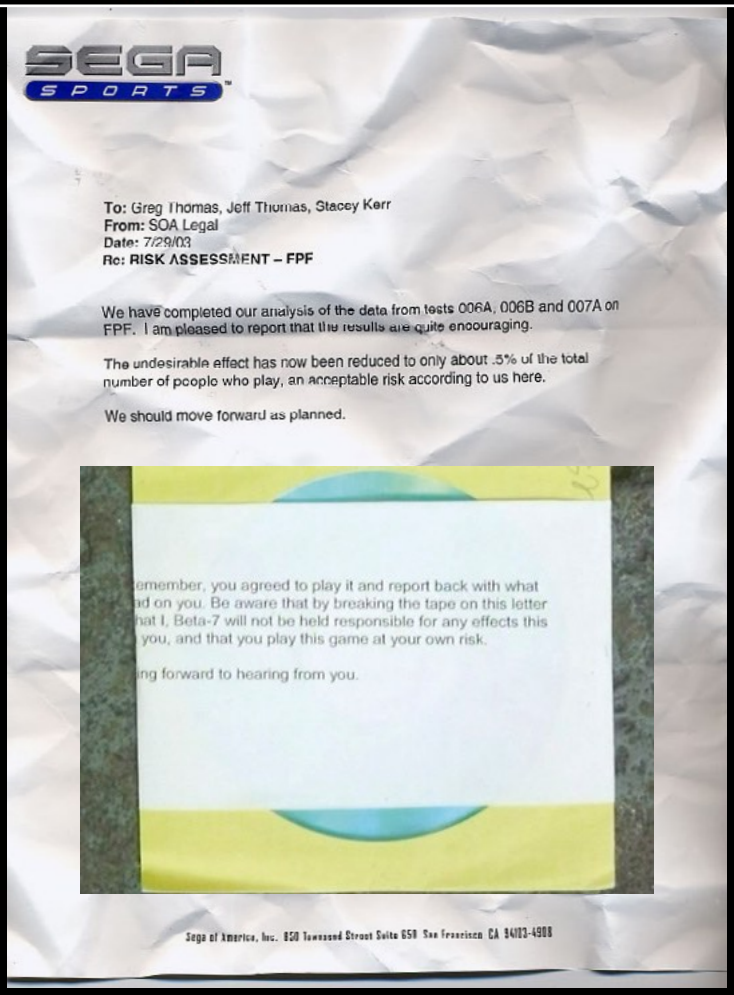
At first I thought it was absolutely hilarious, but when I started reading the blog on that site I got a whole different take on it. This guy, calling himself "Beta-7" claims that he beta-tested a game called ESPN NFL Football and that the game somehow affected him and other beta testers, causing them to go into "Unpredictable, uncontrollable, violent outbursts that I have no memory of, which have made me a stranger to my friends and family."

This guy was making some pretty outrageous claims. At first, I wasn't sure what to think because the videos were so funny. Many people thought he was a grassroots marketing campaign for Sega, the company responsible for the game. Some people investigated for proof that it was a campaign, but nobody came up with any actual proof, and most of what was floated as evidence was refuted by others. Many people were very hostile towards him, which I found odd. Almost immediately threads began popping up on gamer forums like Operation Sports, nfl2ks, Football-Gaming, and IGN.

I wasn't sure of anything, but it was entertaining so I followed the story.

THE PLOT THICKENS

GAMERCHUCK.com



SEGA SPORTS

To: Greg Thomas, Jeff Thomas, Stacey Kerr
From: SOA Legal
Date: 7/29/03
Re: RISK ASSESSMENT – FPF

We have completed our analysis of the data from tests 006A, 006B and 007A on FPF. I am pleased to report that the results are quite encouraging.

The undesirable effect has now been reduced to only about .5% of the total number of people who play, an acceptable risk according to us here.

We should move forward as planned.

emember, you agreed to play it and report back with what
d on you. Be aware that by breaking the tape on this letter
hat I, Beta-7 will not be held responsible for any effects this
you, and that you play this game at your own risk.

ng forward to hearing from you.

Sega of America, Inc. 650 Townsend Street Suite 650 San Francisco CA 94103-4908

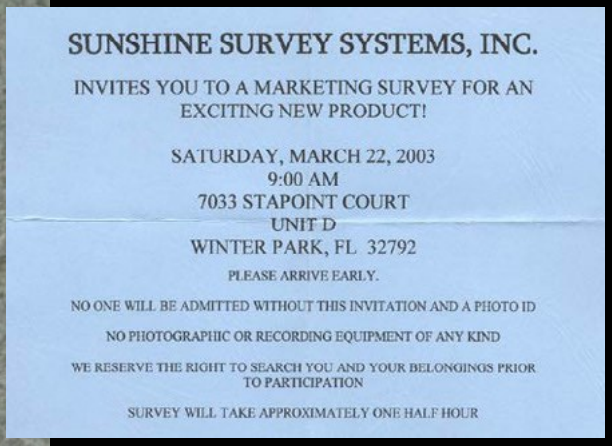


In researching the fan communities around football video games, we learned that pre-release screenshots and footage as well as unfinished "bootlegs" of unreleased games were highly sought after by many fans. So, Beta-7 fueled the debate with hidden messages in previously unseen screengrabs, and by mailing bootleg copies of the game to the apparent leaders of these communities. Those players posted gameplay footage and images to all the major video game fan sites. This rare, unfiltered access made fans feel truly part of the story.



Though the story played out online, everything had been made by hand, not Photoshop. Guerrilla objects and amateur photos made for 100% analog authenticity.




SUNSHINE SURVEY SYSTEMS, INC.

INVITES YOU TO A MARKETING SURVEY FOR AN EXCITING NEW PRODUCT!

SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 2003
9:00 AM
7033 STAPOINT COURT
UNIT D
WINTER PARK, FL 32792

PLEASE ARRIVE EARLY.

NO ONE WILL BE ADMITTED WITHOUT THIS INVITATION AND A PHOTO ID

NO PHOTOGRAPHIC OR RECORDING EQUIPMENT OF ANY KIND

WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO SEARCH YOU AND YOUR BELONGINGS PRIOR TO PARTICIPATION

SURVEY WILL TAKE APPROXIMATELY ONE HALF HOUR

What made **Beta-7** special was how it melded reality and fiction so convincingly that many people genuinely believed there was some truth to the story. Gamers across the internet shared it, debated it, and got swept up in the mystery.

Ultimately, **Beta-7** helped Sega beats its sales projections by 20%. By forging realistic evidence, we made it easy to believe. It was a huge success and won numerous awards, including a Grand Clio award, a Gold Pencil at *The One Show* Interactive, and a "Big Idea Chair" at the ANDYs.

The opportunity to invite audiences to mold the narrative themselves came in 2005 with Audi®'s **Art of the Heist**. The idea was simple: invite audiences *into* the story, so they could take part in it.

Art of the Heist (which we'll dig into a little deeper in Chapter Five) kicked off with the staged theft of the only Audi A3 in America from the New York Auto Show. The model was set for launch the following year, and hype was building. Over the next few months, fans became detectives, solving puzzles, interacting with characters, even attending live events. It turned the marketing of a new car into a shared experience, something that people felt on a level that TV ads never reached.

Art of the Heist was so successful it was named *Campaign of the Year* by *Advertising Age* and it won an Effie Award for effectiveness. Mike and the team were convinced they were onto something big. But if they kept working as a production resource for larger agencies, they'd be limited by the creative constraints of standard advertising. They wanted more freedom. That year Mike, along with fellow *Blair Witch* filmmaker Gregg Hale and Chelsea Pictures' Steve Wax, took a leap of faith and formed **Campfire**, an agency built around the idea of immersive, participatory storytelling.

Its mission was clear: build worlds that audiences could step into, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, and letting people engage with stories in ways that hadn't been done before.

CAMPFIRE: THE EARLY YEARS

Once Campfire had become its own independent agency, the possibilities seemed endless. We were free to experiment, push boundaries, and innovate in ways traditional advertising agencies couldn't. Our early work sought to blend digital storytelling with real-world experiences, inviting fans to step inside and live a story.


DOWN the RABBIT HOLE

MAKING *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* TAUGHT **CAMPFIRE** HOW TO TAP THE POWER OF CURIOSITY. MEET THE PUPPET MASTERS OF VIRAL MARKETING.

VIROLOGY 101: THE CAMPFIRE METHOD "Chaos demands a nimble response."

By Danielle Sacks

Wax Monello Hale

He woke up in a pool of sweat, with bruises on his arms, his ankle badly swollen. He'd had another terrifying blackout, the kind he'd been experiencing ever since he began beta-testing Sega's soon-to-be-released ESPN NFL FOOTBALL 2K4 *video game. Now his neighbor was banging on his front door: "My wife's been crying all night! Why don't you try a move like that with me, tough guy?" One more innocent victim. No doubt he'd attacked her, too, like an animal going in for the kill. Beta-7, as the twentysomething man came to be known, could find no explanation for his horrifying behavior, unless the Sega game was somehow torquing his brain.* ¶ *And so Beta-7 began his*

desperate attempt to prevent the game's release and expose the company's conspiracy and lies. As he searched for a reason for his sudden violent surges—his compulsion to tackle perfect strangers—he found himself tracing a labyrinthine trail of evidence. He hacked into a Web site that contained medical records of twisted experiments performed on fellow gamers. He found and reconstructed shredded Sega memos that admitted the game should not be released. He even unearthed video outtakes of spokesman Warren Sapp insisting that the game would not cause violence in its players. Beta-7 spent three months searching for answers, answers that never arrived. A week after Sega released the game, Beta-7—along with his computer and Xbox—disappeared, leaving behind only a few photographs of his ransacked apartment, uploaded to his blog by a distraught friend.

IT'S A DARK AND DISTURBING TALE. And, of course, it's utterly bogus, a fiction engineered in a strip mall in Orlando. There, surrounded by tiki mugs and other high kitsch, Mike Monello, a hefty 37-year-old with bulbous hazel eyes, and Jim Gunshanan, a local writer he'd hired to play Beta-7 day and night, lived the charade in real time for 90 days. The elaborate 2003 stunt was a viral marketing campaign dreamed up at Monello's post-modern geoduction shop, now called Campfire, and ESPN's ad agency, Worden-Kennedy, to help their client mount a challenge to Electronic Arts' *Madden NFL*, the most popular sports video game on the market. By creating a pseudo-controversy among gamers about the new Sega release, they figured, they might be able to carve off a little name recognition and jump-start sales.

Monello and his partners at Campfire, Gregg Hale and Steve Wax, have become the high-wire stuntmen of viral marketing. In the past few years, the tiny outfit with offices in Orlando and New York has been the invisible force behind the country's most groundbreaking viral campaigns—nonlinear, interactive advertising that starts out niche and then metastasizes. Besides "Beta-7," their work includes Audi's "The Art of the Heist," as well as campaigns for Levi's, Sharp, Hewlett-Packard, and MSN. And now the Campfire trio is trying to spread a bug for its latest client, Pontiac.

These days, creating a successful viral campaign—that addictive, self-propagating advertainment that lives on Web sites, blogs, cell phones, message boards, and even in real-world stunts—is the dream of every marketer and ad shop. It's a way to reach an

Fast Company magazine feature on Campfire, Nov 2006.

One of Campfire's first big successes was in 2008 with HBO's *True Blood*. Before the show had even aired, we launched a program that illustrated just how powerfully an immersive storyworld could capture an audience's imagination. The buzz it created helped define Campfire's identity as a studio committed to expanding the very idea of what storytelling in entertainment marketing could be.

CLIENT: HBO
CASE STUDY:
TRUE BLOOD: REVELATIONS

2008

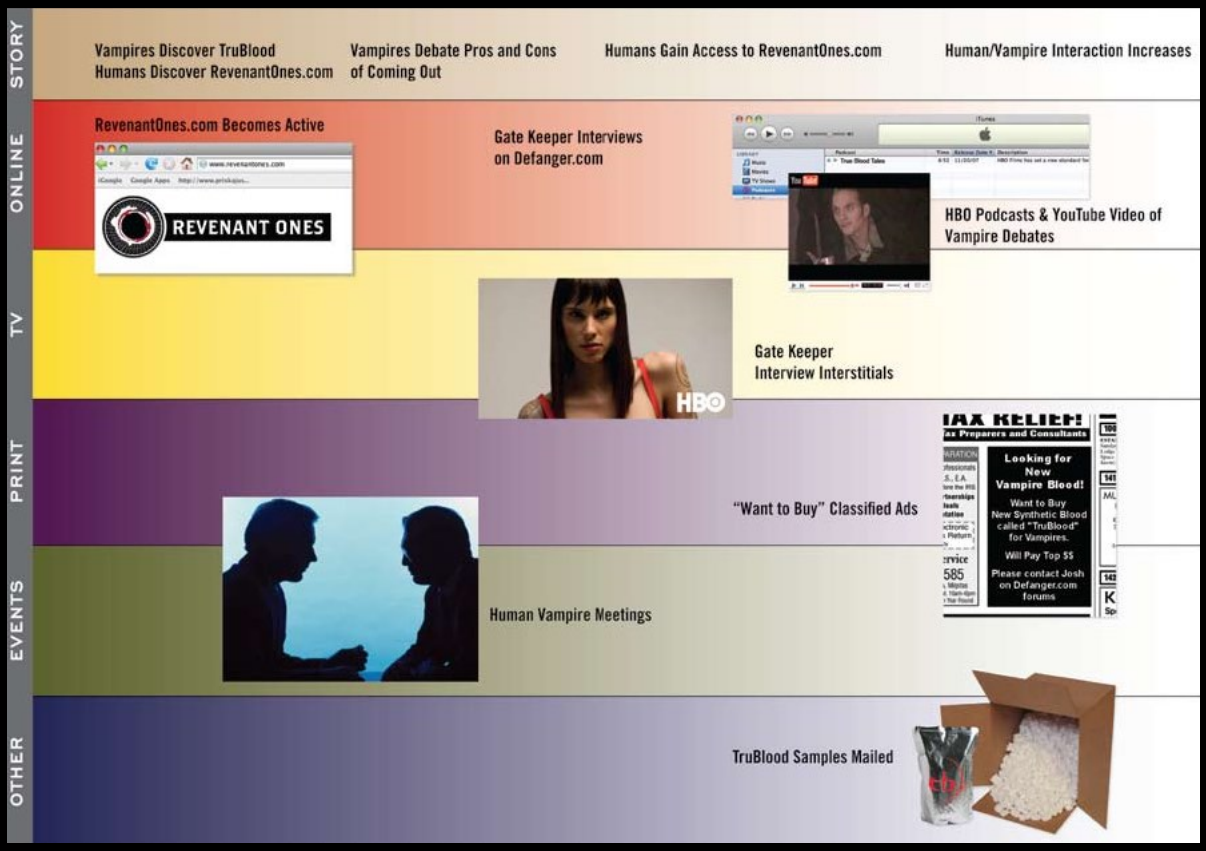
CLICK FOR VIDEO



The "Tru Blood samples" sent to influencers, vampire fans, and others felt so real that we received a concerned call from the Postmaster General of the United States.
Fortunately, it was just a warning!

CREATING A WORLD BEFORE THE SHOW EVEN AIRS

When HBO® was gearing up to launch *True Blood* in 2008, it knew it had something special, a vampire drama with a unique twist, but it needed a way to introduce this dark, mysterious world to audiences before the show even hit the airwaves. That's where we came in. With **True Blood: Revelations**, we created one of the most ambitious pre-premiere transmedia projects audiences had seen to date.



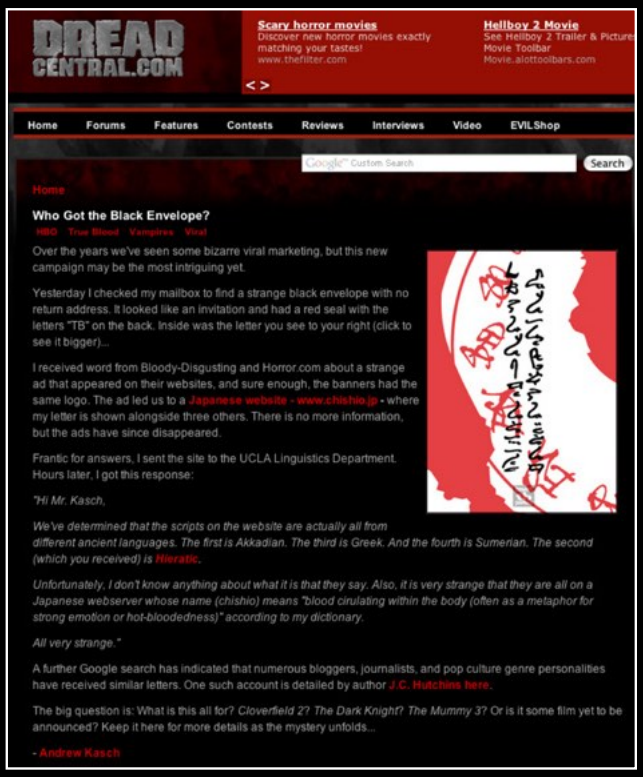


This early behind-the-scenes project timeline shows how **True Blood: Revelations** invited fans into the dark origins of the titular synthetic blood and the vampires' choice to reveal themselves to humanity. The five-month transmedia prequel spanned online, TV, print, live events, and more, priming fans with countless ways to discover and explore the world of *True Blood* before it hit HBO.

The premise of *True Blood* was fascinating: vampires had come out of the coffin and were trying to integrate into human society, living on a synthetic blood substitute called Tru Blood that could sustain vampires without the need to kill humans. Our aim was to make that world feel real, to immerse fans in it before they saw a single episode, and to and to blur the line between the show's fiction and the real world.

It began with cryptic black envelopes, sealed with red wax, mailed to influential figures in the horror and goth communities. These letters, written in an ancient language that was at the time impossible to translate using online tools, hinted at a bigger mystery involving vampires. As recipients decoded a message that was purportedly intended to be read by vampires only, they received a follow-up package: an actual sample of Tru Blood to taste (the thick red liquid inside was in fact candy). These mailings led to secret websites, vampire-only forums, and fictional blogs, such as **BloodCopy.com**, where characters, both vampire and human, debated whether it was time for vampires to reveal their identity to the world.





The prequel told the whole story: the discovery of Tru Blood, and the vampires' decision to reveal themselves in an attempt to assimilate into human society.

Corner stores displayed empty shelves marked by Tru Blood shelf talkers, hinting at the imaginary drink's popularity and sold-out status. In major cities across the U.S., delivery trucks were wrapped to resemble Tru Blood shipments, while billboards and wild postings, apparently designed to appeal to vampires, marketed the drink like a mainstream beer.







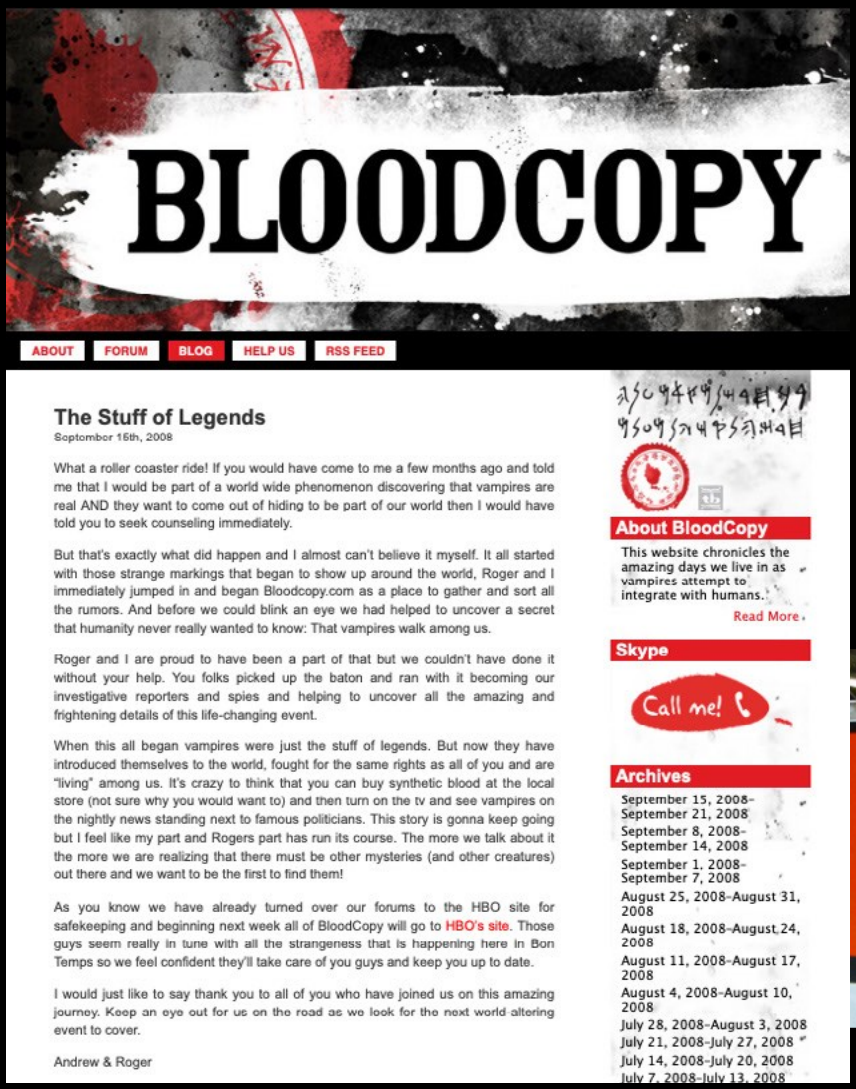


Out-of-home ads and wild postings were crafted as if they came straight from True Blood's universe, creating a surreal, double-take moment that stopped people in their tracks.





As the controversy heated up, we sent pro- and anti-vampire street teams out to gather signatures for and against vampire rights. Signatories received campaign-style buttons to proudly show their allegiance.





Delivery trucks wrapped to look like they were stocked with bottles of Tru Blood, made the story tangible, even in its wildest moments. This kind of surprise made the show unforgettable, even before the premiere.



At San Diego Comic-Con 2008 we took it to the next level with *True Blood: The Great Revelation*, an exclusive comic that expanded the lore of the show. This gave the growing fanbase its first look at some of the show's key characters and storylines.

Maintaining consistency across all elements is key to amplifying imaginary storyworlds. At far right, you can see the Dead Language Mailer and the secret vampire website fans found after decoding the dead language.



By the time *True Blood* premiered on HBO, **Revelations** had built a considerable online following. The videos alone pulled in nearly 6 million views, and viral engagement went through the roof. "Newscasts" covering the story became popular video-on-demand content via HBO's cable partners. This created the perfect storm of anticipation, and 6.5 million viewers watched the first episode.

True Blood would go on to become a cultural phenomenon, with the pre-launch immersive world playing a huge role in setting the stage for its success.

Around that time we also started to explore how our storytelling techniques could be applied to branded content. The **My Home 2.0** program for Verizon FiOS® was a significant step for us. It showed that our vision didn't have to be limited to entertainment properties. By integrating real families and communities into a branded technology makeover show, we built an experience that was both engaging and personal. It connected with people on an emotional level, while showcasing the potential of Verizon FiOS in a way that felt natural and human. (See Chapter Six for more details.)



The Verizon **My Home 2.0** Bus.

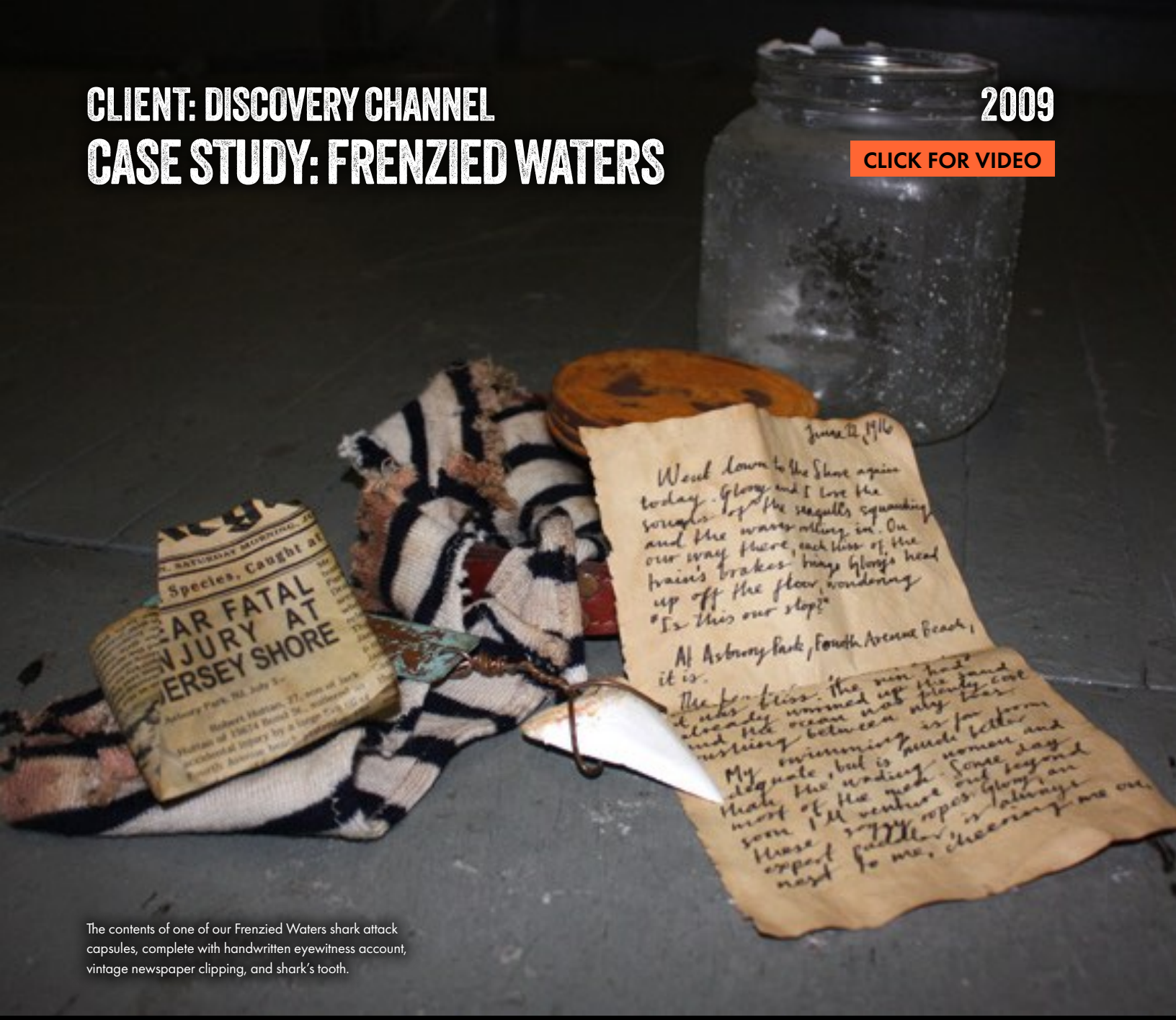
Next came **Frenzied Waters**. Revisiting our horror roots, we imbued Discovery Channel®'s *Shark Week* with the thrill of a summer blockbuster. By blending online storytelling with physical objects, the experience we created explored visceral terror through crime-scene-style evidence, encouraging our audience to become forensic detectives.

CLIENT: DISCOVERY CHANNEL

CASE STUDY: FRENZIED WATERS

2009

CLICK FOR VIDEO



The contents of one of our Frenzied Waters shark attack capsules, complete with handwritten eyewitness account, vintage newspaper clipping, and shark's tooth.

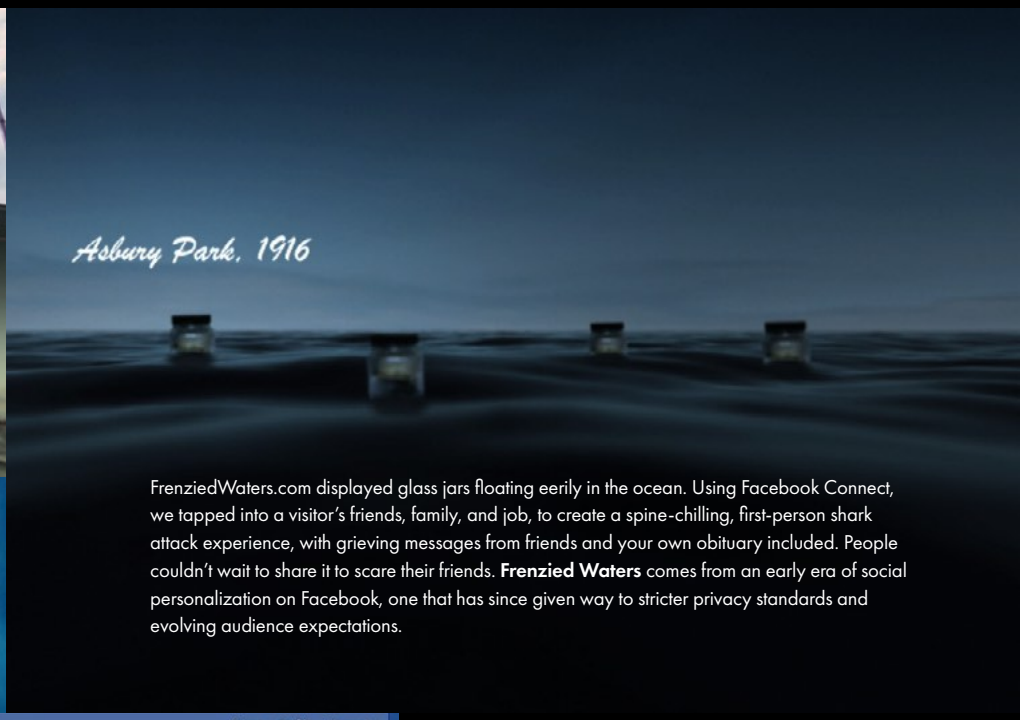
MAKING SHARK WEEK FEEL LIKE A HORROR MOVIE

By 2009, Shark Week had become a beloved staple of summer TV, but after two decades of playful, interchangeable promos, Discovery Channel® wanted to give it a fresh, thrilling edge. Our response was **Frenzied Waters**, an experience that made Shark Week feel like the summer's scariest blockbuster.

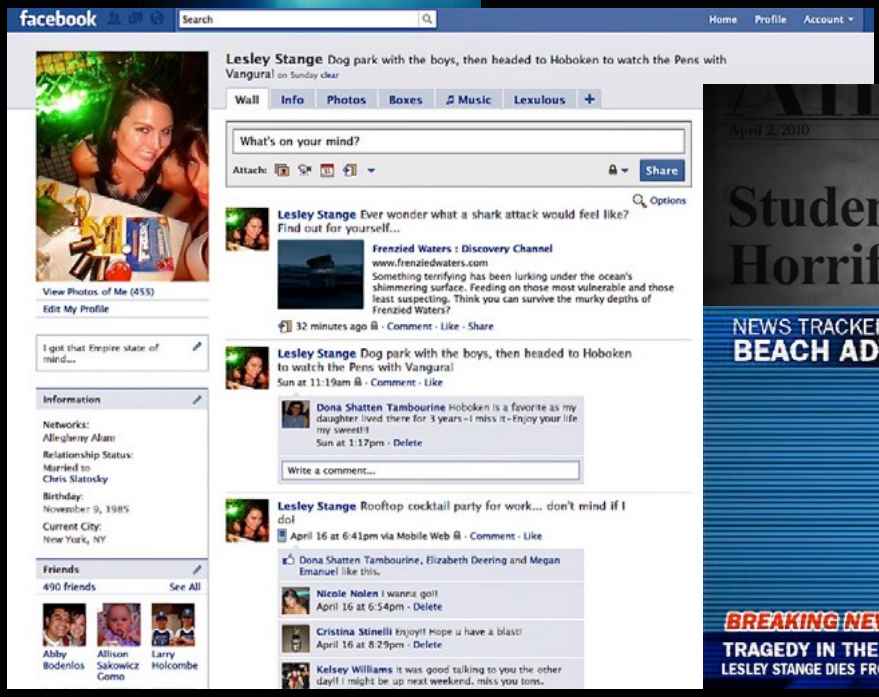
The challenge was how to take something that audiences already know and love, and make it feel *new* and *terrifying* again. So we went back to our roots in horror storytelling to bring that sense of visceral terror to life. The goal was simple: make viewers feel like they were inches from a shark attack, no matter where they were watching from.

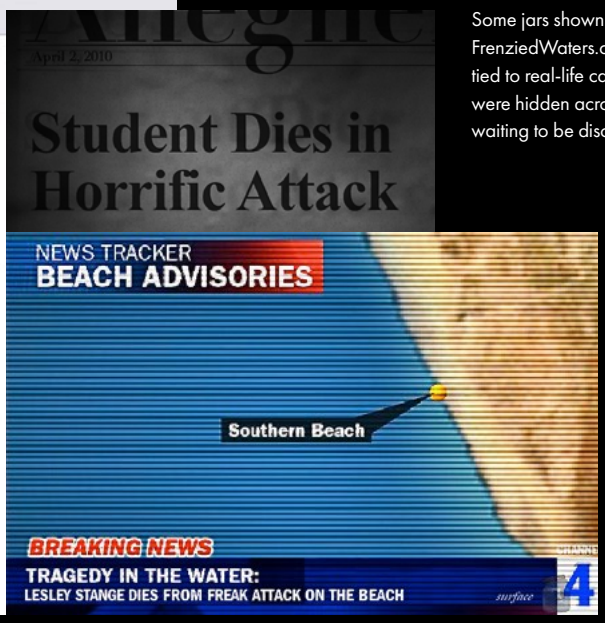
Starting with an interactive website, we used Facebook Connect to offer fans personalized shark attack scenarios. By integrating real user data, we made the experience feel incredibly personal. Visitors who opted in would find themselves in first-person narratives, navigating life-or-death shark encounters, complete with eerily specific details that felt *way* too real.





FrenziedWaters.com displayed glass jars floating eerily in the ocean. Using Facebook Connect, we tapped into a visitor's friends, family, and job, to create a spine-chilling, first-person shark attack experience, with grieving messages from friends and your own obituary included. People couldn't wait to share it to scare their friends. **Frenzied Waters** comes from an early era of social personalization on Facebook, one that has since given way to stricter privacy standards and evolving audience expectations.





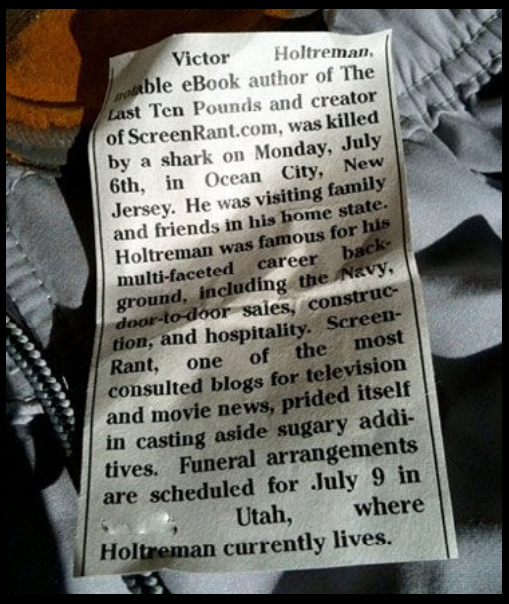
Some jars shown on FrenziedWaters.com were tied to real-life capsules that were hidden across the U.S., waiting to be discovered.



Each capsule was handcrafted to feel like it had drifted in the sea for decades, even releasing a briny ocean scent when opened.

At launch, we sent mysterious capsules to radio hosts nationwide. Instead of a typical ad read, they opened their "special package" live on-air, only to discover their own shark attack obituary! The unscripted reactions and eerie storytelling gave Discovery extended airtime and captivated listeners, driving them to our website to experience their own terrifying shark attack.

We then began releasing a series of cryptic codes, which were clues to the locations of additional capsules, triggering an immersive treasure hunt as people uncovered more and more pieces of the narrative, and unlocked the interactive versions online.


Victor Holtreman, [illegible] eBook author of The Last Ten Pounds and creator of ScreenRant.com, was killed by a shark on Monday, July 6th, in Ocean City, New Jersey. He was visiting family and friends in his home state. Holtreman was famous for his multi-faceted career background, including the Navy, door-to-door sales, construction, and hospitality. ScreenRant, one of the most consulted blogs for television and movie news, prided itself in casting aside sugary additives. Funeral arrangements are scheduled for July 9 in [illegible], Utah, where Holtreman currently lives.

To spook influencers, press, and drive-time radio DJs, we included personalized obituaries in newsprint, adding a frisson to each capsule.







Additional capsules, filled with clues from historical shark attacks, photos, obits, ripped clothing, were hidden across the country. Discovery released cryptic codes to reveal each location, sparking a nationwide scavenger hunt. Fans who found a capsule entered a unique code online, unlocking that story for everyone to see. Each find unveiled the next story, keeping everyone in on the thrill, even from afar.



Frenzied Waters generated massive online buzz leading up to *Shark Week* that year, successfully drawing in both new and returning audiences. It proved that even over two decades later, *Shark Week* could still capture the public's imagination, and tap into our shared primal fear of the ocean's greatest predators.

Campfire's early days felt more punk rock than traditional advertising. We stripped away formal layers of approvals, processes, and silos, opting for a freer, more experimental approach. Our creative teams came from backgrounds far removed from marketing, bringing together people trained in storytelling through physical design: art directors and prop makers, haunted house designers, futurists, technologists, and narrative experts.

By 2007 we had opened our first office in Tribeca, where we had the chance to put our early principles into action. We wanted a strong culture that reflected the values embedded in our work. Naturally, the solution was unconventional: we transformed a conference room into a tiki-themed escape, complete with bamboo walls, intricate carvings, artwork, and pufferfish lamps. This immersive space became a living representation of our philosophy: if you want to change how people behave, change the space they're in.



Fostering a shared love of stories and fan communities became central to our culture. That's where *Thirsty Thursdays* came in: a weekly gathering where people took turns mixing cocktails and shared a personal passion or fandom. Comic art collecting, architecture, whatever it happened to be. These were more than casual talks, these were more than casual talks; they were glimpses into the obsessions that fueled us, helping us better understand fandom from the inside out.

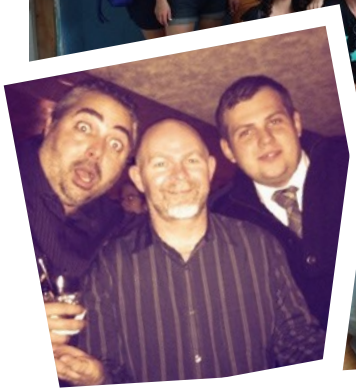


And we never stopped drawing inspiration from outside the advertising world, looking to theme park design, experimental theater, performance art, and more. By living those principles day to day, we cultivated an authenticity that has endured.

In 2009 we brought in Steve Coulson, a seasoned creative director from the advertising industry. Steve believes in "earning eyeballs with great ideas, not buying them with cash." One of his early projects at Campfire was to launch a little show you might have heard of: *Game of Thrones*. **The Maester's Path** unveiled the series in a way that was as epic and immersive as the show itself.















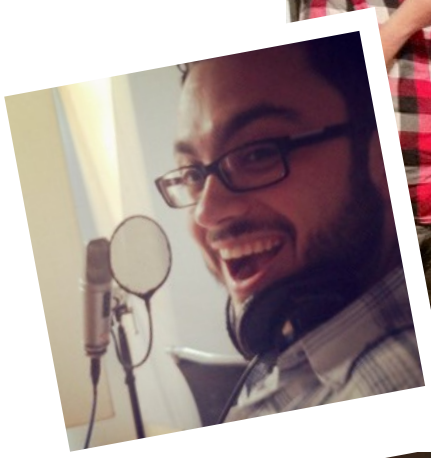




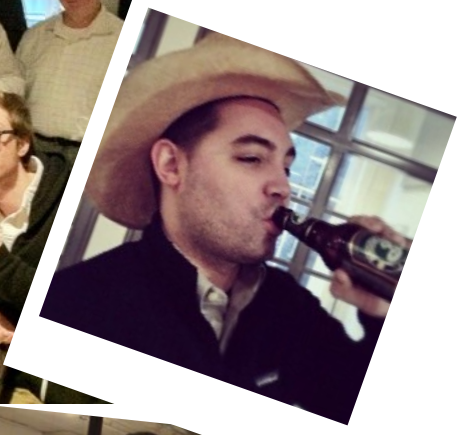




ABOVE & RIGHT: The Campfire team throughout the years.












KRYLON





EVOLUTION AND EXPANSION: FROM EARLY SUCCESSES TO PRESENT DAY

With the success of *Game of Thrones*, which we'll revisit in Chapter Eight, Campfire had established itself as a pioneer in immersive storytelling. We moved beyond campaigns to create experiences that lived across multiple platforms and tapped into people's emotions, letting people engage with stories on their own terms.



Game of Thrones author George R. R. Martin and the Campfire team.

And as the media around us has changed, our approach has become even more relevant. Social media and streaming services have exploded, radically changing how people consume entertainment. Nobody just wants to sit back and watch a story unfold anymore. We all want to *interact* with it, share it, feel like we are part of it. Our work provides that platform.

The case studies of our most successful projects illustrate how the principles of immersive storytelling can come to life across a broad range of projects: an interactive film for Nissan®'s Infiniti **Deja View**, where viewers directed the characters from their phones while watching; and an audio drama, **Resistance Radio** for Amazon Prime Video®'s *The Man in the High Castle*, which earned us an Emmy nomination, Grand Clios, Cannes Lions, and a spot on Conan O'Brien's show.

Then came **The Westworld Experience**.



THE IMPACT OF THE WESTWORLD EXPERIENCE

The Westworld Experience at San Diego Comic-Con in 2017 (and restaged later that year at New York Comic-Con) marked a major evolution in our work. Over several days we invited fans to explore a fully interactive re-creation of Delos Inc., the mysterious fictional company behind the Westworld theme park in the HBO series.

Unlike our previous projects, which had blended digital elements with real-world experiences, this was a live theatrical event that fans could step into. Leading pop-culture site *Polygon* said that the activation "redefined what a live activation can be."

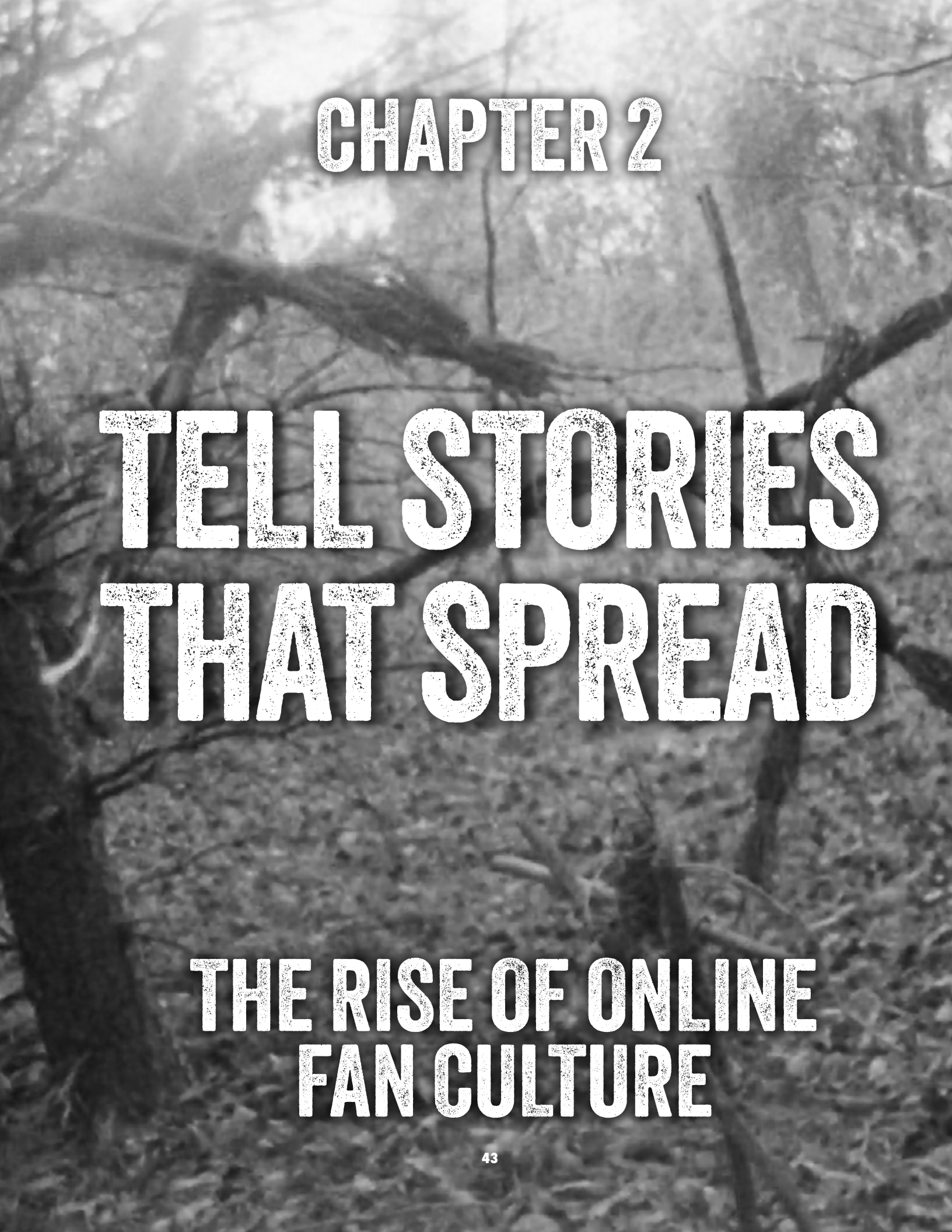
That success showed us something powerful: in an age dominated by digital interaction, people will always crave real, physical experiences that engage all their senses. This realization has helped us expand our core offering to include more live theater, creating the tangible, sensory-driven experiences that leave lasting memories.

WHY WE ARE WRITING THIS BOOK NOW

In the years since **The Westworld Experience**, demand for in-person, immersive experiences has only grown. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 may have temporarily halted live activations, but it also renewed our hunger for real-life interaction. As we all spent months isolated at home, consuming content through our screens, who didn't begin to long for in-person experiences again? Digital solutions, including Zoom calls, virtual events, and streaming platforms are helpful, but they can never fully replace the magic of being physically *there*, in the moment.

Audiences have grown more eager than ever to engage with stories in real life, with a newfound appreciation for physical objects, tactile experiences, and sensory immersion. People want more than a selfie; they want a meaningful experience.

We're writing this book at a pivotal time. We've spent two decades learning these lessons, first through early experiments with transmedia storytelling, and now through the participatory experiences we create. These lessons have never been more relevant. We want to share these insights, to help you understand how to craft stories that stick, both online and in the real world.



CHAPTER 2

TELL STORIES THAT SPREAD

THE RISE OF ONLINE FAN CULTURE

PREVIOUS: The infamous *Blair Witch* Stickman became a shorthand for the film's deep mythology, captivating fans and fueling their curiosity months before the movie's release.

CHAPTER 2
TELL STORIES THAT SPREAD
THE RISE OF ONLINE FAN CULTURE

In the summer of 1998 something unusual started. A clip from what was to become famous as *The Blair Witch Project* was shown on *Split Screen*, a Bravo® show hosted by longtime indie movie champion John Pierson. This was the first public glimpse of the eerie footage and it captivated viewers immediately. The shaky, raw, and unsettling nature of the material made it hard to determine whether this was a documentary or something more sinister. Those who saw it were left with more questions than answers: *Could it be real?*

Shortly after that **Blairwitch.com** launched, a website that further deepened the mystery. Fabricated police reports, journal entries, and photos filled the site, framing the film as genuine found footage of a group of missing students. Early internet chat rooms and message boards became hubs for people to discuss the film and its cryptic backstory. Fans debated its authenticity, with some wanting to believe that what they were seeing was real, even if just for a moment. Many suspected it was simply a movie, albeit a terrifying one, but they leaned into the mystery nonetheless, collectively suspending their disbelief. *What if something really had happened in those woods?* The speculation itself became a kind of role-play, a shared experience that turned watching the film into something bigger, a new kind of community.

This combination of mystery, speculation, and word-of-mouth helped *The Blair Witch Project* evolve from a small independent film into a cultural sensation. Fans did more than watch the movie; they spread its myth. So widespread was it, that estimates suggest that 11% of **ALL internet users** at the time had visited the website.

The way *The Blair Witch Project* was shared was a glimpse into a new form of storytelling in the digital age. Fans had become the story's torchbearers. The way it resonated with people invited them to become part of its narrative and connect with others who were equally haunted by its spine-tingling realism, eager to dive deeper and unravel its layers.

At Campfire, we've always been fascinated by this process. And we're not alone. Our thinking about why stories spread has been heavily influenced by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's concept of **Spreadable Media** as outlined in their 2013 book of the same name. The authors argue that in today's world, stories thrive when they invite audience participation, interaction, and personal engagement.

Building on the theory's three core reasons why people share stories: **to strengthen bonds**, **define collective identity**, and **gain status**, these tenets have become the backbone of our immersive storytelling practice.

THE POWER OF SHARING THROUGHOUT HISTORY

The reasons we share stories aren't new. They've been around as long as humans have gathered around fires to tell tales (which is why, of course, we chose **Campfire** as our company name). Storytelling allows us to connect with other people, forge bonds, and pass knowledge down. From ancient oral traditions to

the serialized novels of the 19th century and current digital forms, stories have always been shared to entertain, teach, and strengthen communities. And this is about more than the stories themselves. The real power lies in the connections that form when people share them.



Consider, for example, the **Amateur Press Associations** that appeared in the late 1800s. Scattered across the globe, these groups connected people with niche interests through newsletters, building communities around shared values and ideas a century before the internet. Fast-forward to the early 20th century, and science fiction fandom started to organize around conventions and publications with the launch of the **Fantasy Amateur Press Association** in 1937. This cemented the idea that shared stories can be the basis of vibrant, self-sustaining communities.

As the underlying technology has become more sophisticated, so too has this kind of participatory engagement with media. For decades, fans have been creating zines, newsletters, and conventions, finding ways to share their passions and form connections around stories.

THE RISE OF THE INTERNET AND THE AGE OF FAN CULTURE

Then the internet sprang to life, upending everything. Suddenly, the ability to share stories became instant and global. Social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and Facebook supercharged how we convey content. What was once the domain of niche fan clubs has exploded into the mainstream. Now, we're all participants in fan culture, often without even realizing it. Sharing a meme, uploading a TikTok about a TV show, creating fan art: once reserved for the most dedicated fans, these behaviors are now part of everyday life. Platforms like Reddit and Discord have become the world's biggest fan clubs.

The evolution of fan culture has fundamentally reshaped how stories are told and promoted. As a result, franchises like **Star Wars**, the **DC Universe**, and the **Marvel Cinematic Universe** no longer rely solely on traditional marketing. Instead, they rely on the might of fandom itself, counting on us, the fans, to spread the word, keep the conversation going, and build excitement. It should come as no surprise that events like **San Diego Comic-Con**, once a niche gathering for comic book collectors, have become massive cultural touchpoints. Studios use them to unveil new projects, hold panels featuring talent, launch immersive offsite activations, and give fans a first look at what's coming next. Fan engagement is now so crucial to the entertainment industry's marketing machine that it helps to drive the success of everything from major blockbusters to indie projects.



Campfire's Mike Monello with his brother, early'80s

WHY WE SHARE

This transformation from passive consumption to active participation reflects a deeper set of motivations that have remained constant throughout history. *Spreadable Media*'s model reveals that people primarily share stories for three key reasons. They tap into something fundamental about human nature: our need to connect, express ourselves, and establish our place in the world. Let's look at each in turn below.

1. TO STRENGTHEN BONDS

One of the most powerful reasons we share stories is to create and strengthen relationships. Whether it's recanting a ghost story around a campfire or chatting about last night's episode of *Game of Thrones* around the water cooler, the act of sharing allows us to build common ground.

In the digital world, this drive has only intensified. Social media platforms offer endless opportunities to share content, from personal anecdotes to viral videos. But what really matters is the connection that sharing fosters. When we share something that resonates (a story, a song, a meme, a TikTok), we're inviting others to engage with us, to relate on a personal level. Sharing is a way of saying, *I love this, and I hope you feel the same*. It has potential to create connection, whether it's between friends, family, or even strangers on the internet.

The way rumors around *The Blair Witch Project* spread in the early days of the internet shows how this dynamic can play out on a large scale. The mutual experience of viewing the film did more than spark intrigue. It created a community. Fans turned to each other to process what they'd seen, exchanging theories and debating the film's reality. The mythology of *The Blair Witch Project* became a communal puzzle, one that could only be solved through collective engagement. Suddenly, sharing wasn't just about having seen a great film, it was about creating bonds through the joint process of discovery.

And it was that very legion of fans who organized themselves, each calling their local theaters to request this self-financed indie film play in *their* town. A true viral success.

CASE STUDY

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

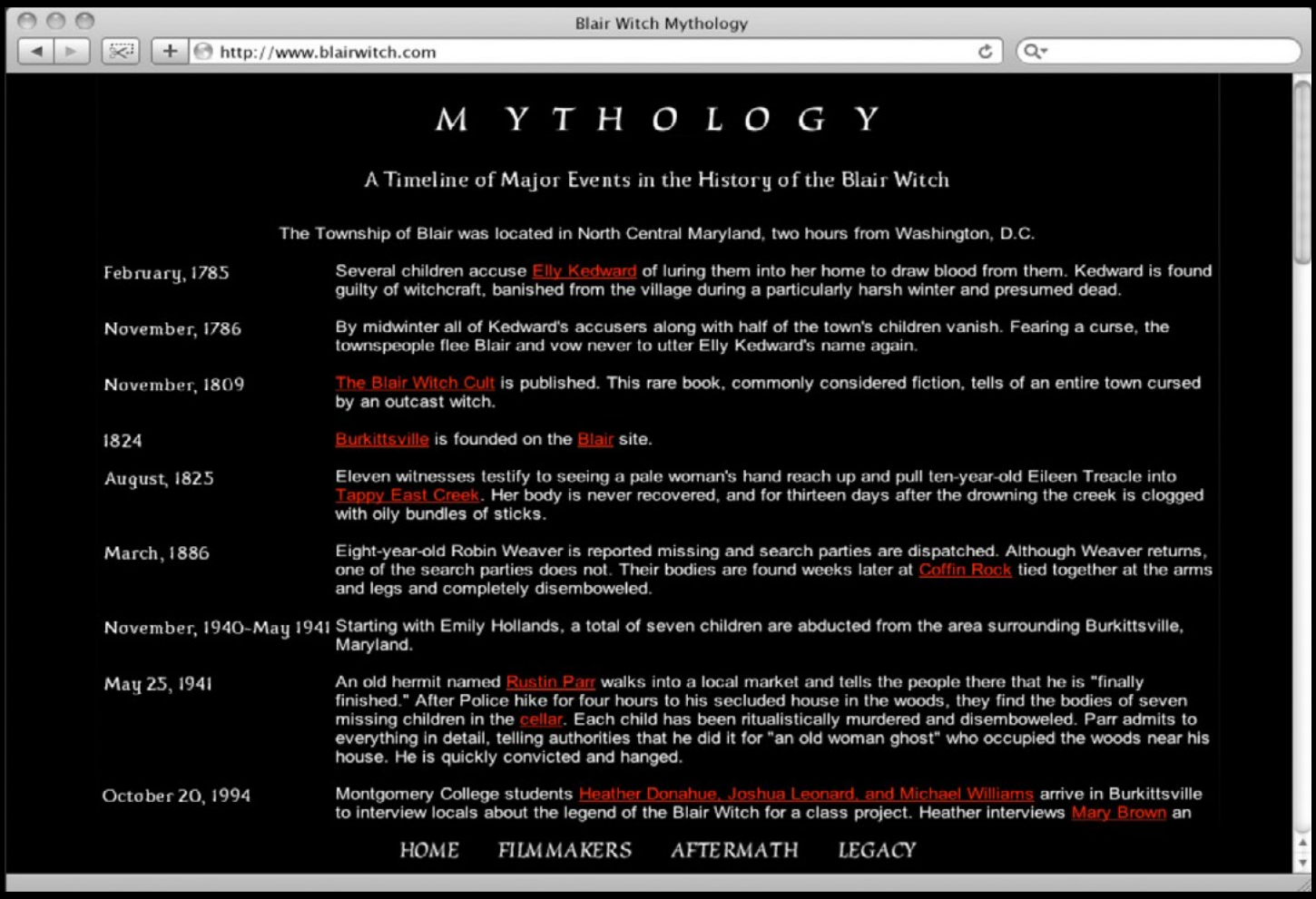
1999



The unforgettable close-up from *The Blair Witch Project* as a marketing ploy was totally unplanned. With no promo shots to hand when Sundance came calling, screenshots from the grainy Hi-8 footage had to be rush drum scanned for printing at high resolution, a laborious and expensive process especially for filmmakers on a budget. Talk about a good investment!

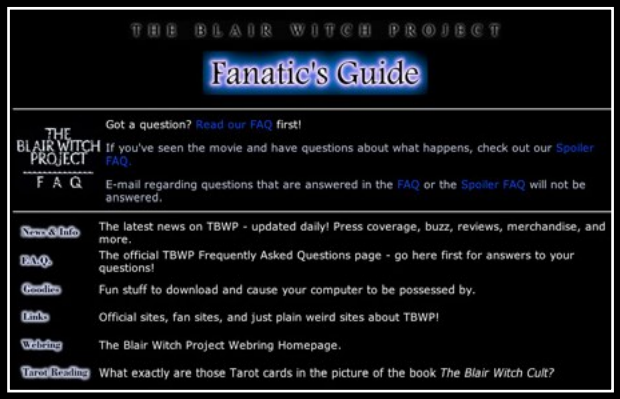
BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND PARTICIPANT

In 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* became a cultural phenomenon driven by an extensive mythology that hovered between fiction and reality. The film was presented as found footage that documented the disappearance of three students investigating the Blair Witch legend. To reinforce the story, the filmmakers launched **Blairwitch.com**, a website littered with fabricated evidence, including police reports, interviews, a timeline of events, and photos, prompting audiences to question whether the events really happened.



ABOVE: The Mythology page from the original blairwitch.com website. The red links led to related photos and drawings, many of which were added over time in response to fan speculation about the mythology on our message boards.
RIGHT: Fan-made sites launched even before the film's release. Some extended the fiction through in-story fan encounters, while others existed outside the narrative, spaces where fans compared notes, shared discoveries, and coordinated their exploration. Together, these parallel spaces helped fans navigate the mythology and engage more fully with the in-story websites.





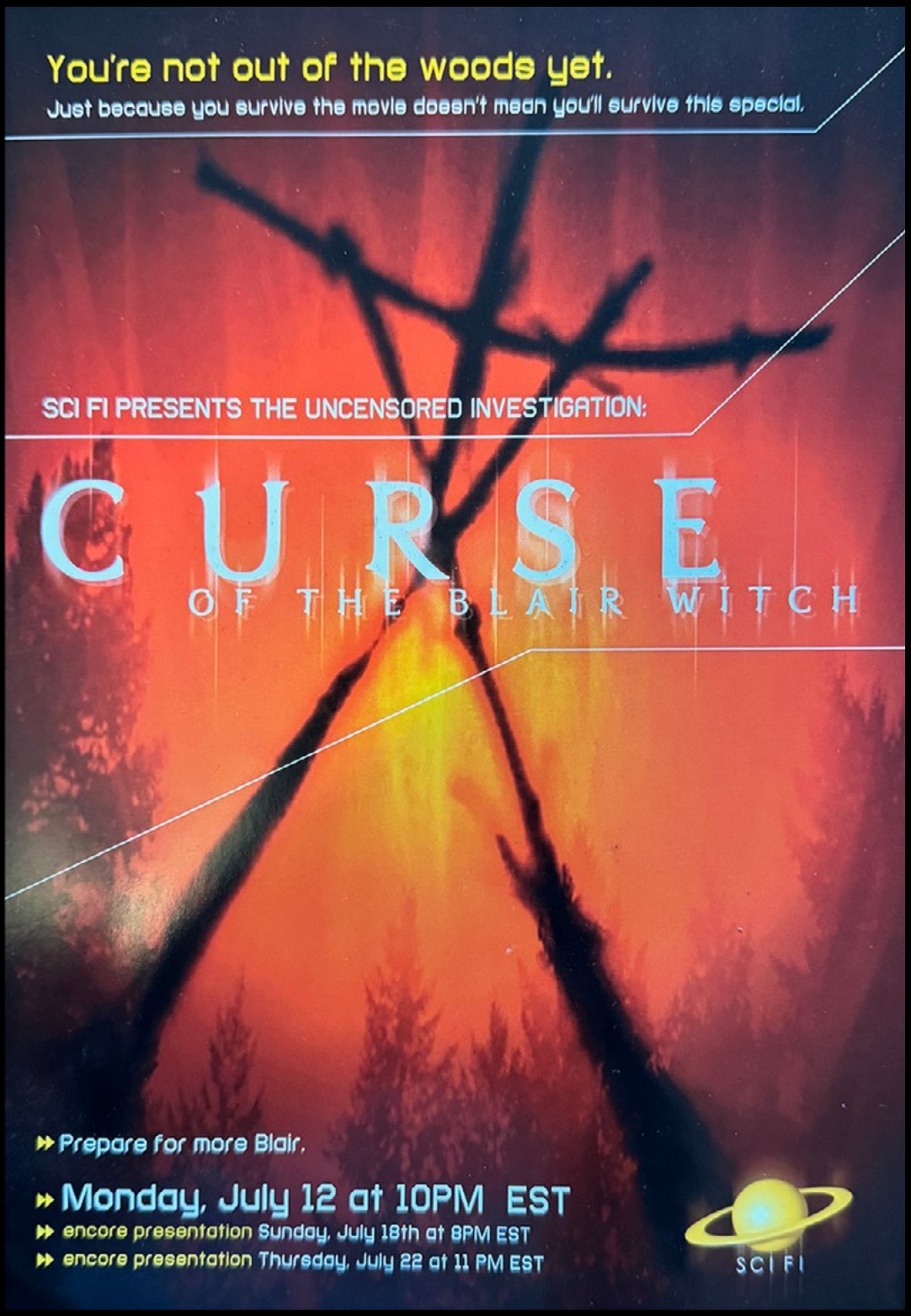


The viral success of *The Blair Witch Project* lay in how it engaged fans in a shared mystery. In the early days of the internet, chat rooms and forums rapidly became community hubs where fans debated, theorized, and even created their own stories within the Blair Witch mythology. These shared discoveries turned spectators into participants. Fans were piecing together a puzzle, creating new stories, strengthening their connection to Blair Witch and to each other.



16mm film cans, Hi-8 tapes, and DAT cassettes aged to look long-buried. These were originally created for Phase II of the original production, but after subsequently being cut from the film, they found their way into promo trailers and the companion *Curse of the Blair Witch* pseudo-documentary.

A flyer for Curse *of the Blair Witch* four days before the theatrical premiere. The showings did so well in the ratings that the Sci-Fi Channel aired it several more times, bringing the mythology to larger, more mainstream audiences.



Another pivotal element in the success of *The Blair Witch Project* was the release of the pseudo-documentary **Curse of the Blair Witch**, which aired on Syfy® (then known as the Sci-Fi Channel) just before the film's limited release. It examined the legend of the Blair Witch, blending real historical references with fabricated interviews and re-enactments. Following the form of a TV documentary, it added to the illusion that the film's events were based on real disappearances and a local legend from Burkittsville, Maryland. It became the network's most-watched special at the time, building anticipation beyond the website and priming audiences to participate in the narrative.



LEFT: The infamous "Missing Flyers" were adapted from a prop made for a Phase II scene of "Heather's Mom" posting them while being interviewed.

BOTTOM LEFT: A Sundance badge granting access to the hospitality suite, an excellent perk for broke and hungry filmmakers.
BOTTOM RIGHT: With just five months between Artisan acquiring *The Blair Witch Project* at Sundance and its theatrical release, the pre-built mythology enabled unique deals, like a comic series exploring the lore that was released while the film was still in theaters.

The film finally premiered at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival to palpable curiosity and buzz generated by its mysterious marketing. Fans who had been attracted by its authenticity eagerly spread the word through chat rooms, early forums, and face-to-face discussions. Showings expanded from 27 screens to over 2,000 within weeks. The communal storytelling had become an organic marketing machine.



TOP: Studios once ran Variety ads to boast about box office numbers. This double-page spread boldly cited "Internet Hits," highlighting the mythology's role in driving the film's success.
BOTTOM: So important was the off-screen mythology that as the film went global, distributors created promotional materials that translated the lore into multiple languages.

The success of *Blair Witch* showed Mike Monello, a co-producer on the film and later a founder of Campfire, what was possible in immersive storyworlds where fans could become part of the narrative. By creating elements with which fans could actively engage, the filmmakers had unlocked the power of sharing control with audiences. Fans propelled it forward and since then, Campfire has applied these lessons in all our projects, encouraging collective discovery and interaction to deepen the narrative and connect fans across platforms.

APPLYING PRINCIPLE ONE IN CAMPFIRE'S WORK

As demonstrated, strengthening bonds is key to how we design our projects. We don't only work with our clients to create experiences around their brands and properties; we create opportunities for their fans to connect with one another through shared passions. Whether it's a live immersive event, an interactive digital experience, or a narrative that spans multiple platforms, we focus on building moments that encourage fans to engage positively, discuss, and collaborate.

In practice this might mean crafting story elements that are meant to be discovered and shared in communities. These might be clues that require collective problem-solving or content that sparks conversation online. Or it might mean turning a live event into a fan meet-up featuring key touchpoints for the most passionate to participate in a meaningful way. Our projects are designed to bring people together, creating a sense of community around the story itself. We know this because the response we get from fans, the press, and the clients who entrust us with their worlds reflects this. At its best, our work fosters connections between people who want to dive deeper, share their experiences, and keep the conversation going long after the experience ends, sometimes for years.

2. TO DEFINE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Stories define who we are as people. The stories we share say a lot about us because they reflect our values, interests, and the way we see the world. When posting a piece of content about a book, a film, a meme, or a political update, that content becomes an extension of ourselves, a way to communicate our identity to others. This has always been true, whether through the music we listen to, the clothes we wear, or the narratives we love to tell.

Now that social media platforms allow us to curate public digital versions of ourselves, this desire to express identity through storytelling is even more pronounced. Sharing is a way of saying, *"Here, this is who I am. These are the things that matter to me."*

The notion of defining identity through story is central to why certain narratives spread so quickly. Take **The WOW! Reply** that we created for National Geographic®'s *Chasing UFOs*. Fans and celebrities united to send messages to the stars, reflecting humanity's collective desire to tell the universe about us. For many participants, this was a way to express their membership of the human race on a planetary scale, contributing to something that felt intensely personal yet larger than themselves. By attempting to tweet to aliens, fans expressed the values of curiosity, exploration, and connection with the cosmos.

This motivation to share stories that reflect who we are goes beyond fandom, extending to how we engage with culture as a whole. There is a sense of urgency to re-affirming what connects to our personal values, whether it's a documentary that aligns with our beliefs, a viral video that reflects our sense of humor, or a cause we feel strongly about. It's part of how we navigate the digital world, using stories to signal what we stand for and where we belong.



CLIENT: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CHANNEL

2012

CASE STUDY: CHASING UFOs: THE WOW! REPLY

CLICK FOR VIDEO

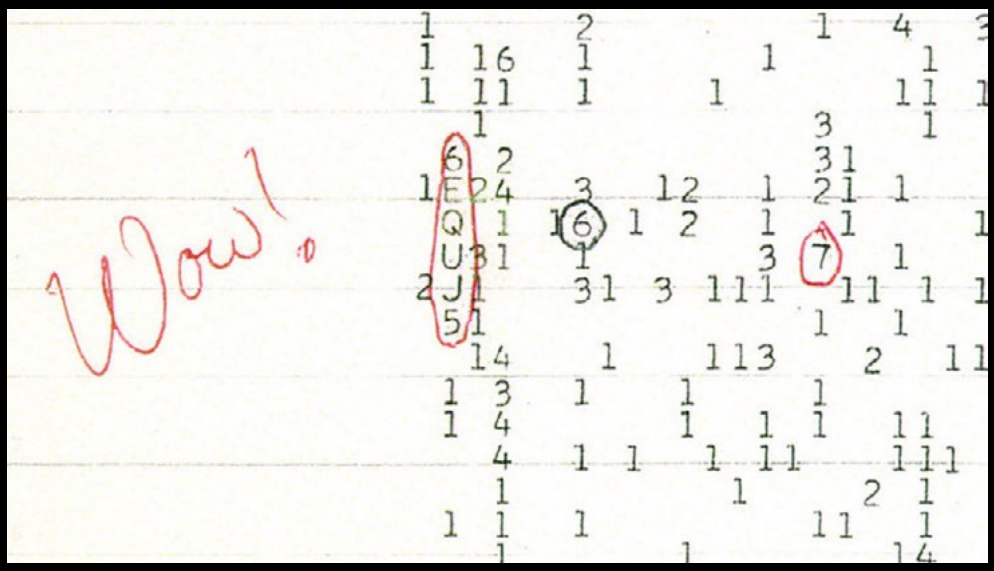
Seen in this shot taken during our visit in 2012, the Arecibo Telescope was once the world's largest radio telescope. Sadly, it collapsed in 2020.

IS ANYONE OUT THERE?

In 2012 National Geographic® launched *Chasing UFOs*, a series exploring extraterrestrial phenomena. To promote the show, Campfire created **The WOW! Reply**, inviting fans to participate in a crowdsourced message to extraterrestrials. The story built on what was known as the WOW! Signal, a mysterious 72-second radio transmission that scientists picked up in 1977 from outer space.

The **WOW! signal** was a strong narrowband radio signal detected on August 15, 1977, by Ohio State University's Big Ear radio telescope in the United States, then used to support **SETI**, or the **S**earch for **E**xtra**T**errestrial **I**ntelligence. The signal appeared to come from the direction of the constellation Sagittarius and bore what were seen as the hallmarks of extraterrestrial origin.

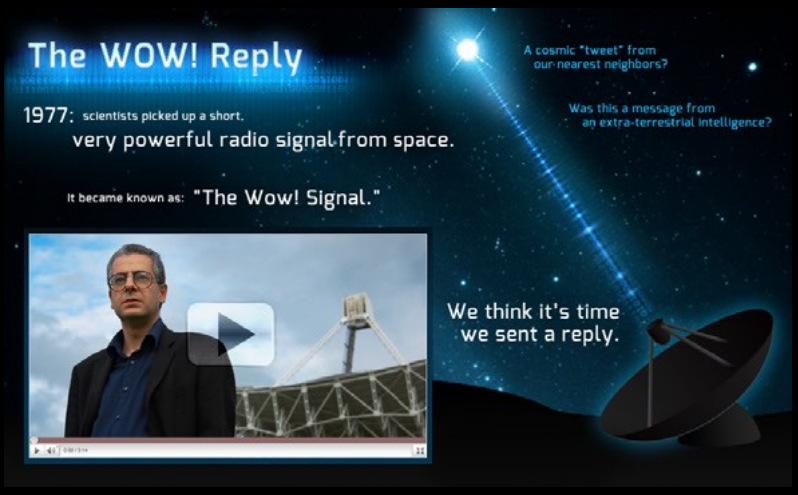
Astronomer Jerry R. Ehman discovered the anomaly a few days later while reviewing the recorded data. He was so impressed that he circled on the computer printout the reading of the signal's intensity, "6EQUJ5", and wrote the comment "WOW!" beside it, leading to the event's widely used nickname.



The WOW! Reply invited the public to tweet messages to aliens, which were later transmitted into space on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the original signal. In a way, this was a reply to what was possibly the first Direct Message from another civilization.

For participants, **The WOW! Reply** was more than a marketing stunt, it was a way to connect with a much larger, cosmic narrative. We were inviting people to share their reflections on humanity and the possibility of alien life. Celebrities such as Stephen Colbert contributed messages, while fans joined in with over 20,000 tweets. This project allowed people to express both their identity and curiosity about the universe, making them feel like active participants in a global, even interstellar, conversation.



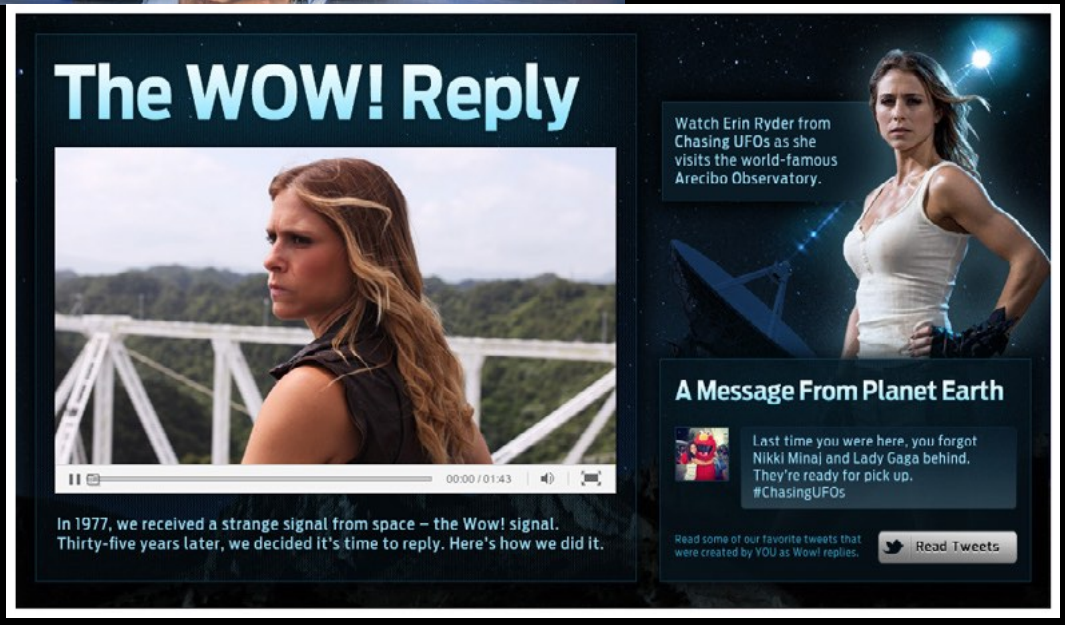








RIGHT: Television host and comedian Stephen Colbert recording a personal message to be sent into space.





Erin Ryder, the host of *Chasing UFOs,* recording an exclusive video at Arecibo Observatory as the tweets and messages were transmitted into space.

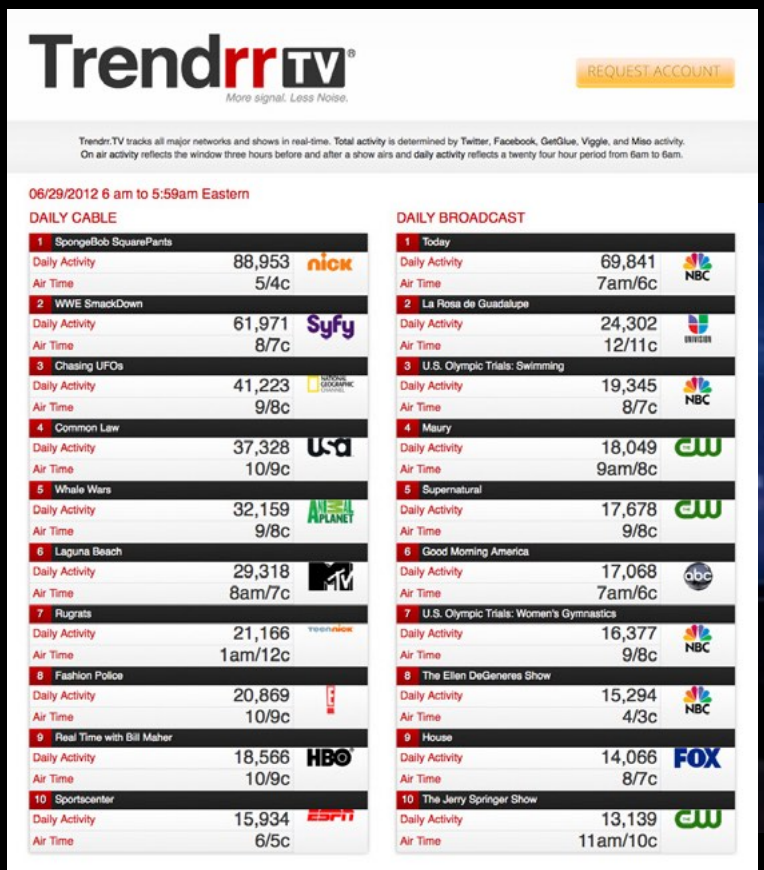












Trendrr TV
More signal. Less Noise.
REQUEST ACCOUNT

Trendrr.TV tracks all major networks and shows in real-time. Total activity is determined by Twitter, Facebook, GetGlue, Viggle, and Miso activity. On air activity reflects the window three hours before and after a show airs and daily activity reflects a twenty four hour period from 6am to 6am.

06/29/2012 6 am to 5:59am Eastern

DAILY CABLE

1	SpongeBob SquarePants		
	Daily Activity	88,953	nick
	Air Time	5/4c	
2	WWE SmackDown		
	Daily Activity	61,971	Syfy
	Air Time	8/7c	
3	Chasing UFOs		
	Daily Activity	41,223	
	Air Time	9/8c	
4	Common Law		
	Daily Activity	37,328	usa
	Air Time	10/9c	
5	Whale Wars		
	Daily Activity	32,159	Animal Planet
	Air Time	9/8c	
6	Laguna Beach		
	Daily Activity	29,318	MTV
	Air Time	8am/7c	
7	Rugrats		
	Daily Activity	21,166	
	Air Time	1am/12c	
8	Fashion Police		
	Daily Activity	20,869	
	Air Time	10/9c	
9	Real Time with Bill Maher		
	Daily Activity	18,566	HBO
	Air Time	10/9c	
10	Sportscenter		
	Daily Activity	15,934	ESPN
	Air Time	6/5c	

DAILY BROADCAST

1	Today		
	Daily Activity	69,841	NBC
	Air Time	7am/6c	
2	La Rosa de Guadalupe		
	Daily Activity	24,302	
	Air Time	12/11c	
3	U.S. Olympic Trials: Swimming		
	Daily Activity	19,345	NBC
	Air Time	8/7c	
4	Maury		
	Daily Activity	18,049	
	Air Time	9am/8c	
5	Supernatural		
	Daily Activity	17,678	
	Air Time	9/8c	
6	Good Morning America		
	Daily Activity	17,068	abc
	Air Time	7am/6c	
7	U.S. Olympic Trials: Women's Gymnastics		
	Daily Activity	16,377	NBC
	Air Time	9/8c	
8	The Ellen DeGeneres Show		
	Daily Activity	15,294	NBC
	Air Time	4/3c	
9	House		
	Daily Activity	14,066	FOX
	Air Time	8/7c	
10	The Jerry Springer Show		
	Daily Activity	13,139	
	Air Time	11am/10c	

On the night of the premiere of *Chasing UFOs*, activity on Twitter caused by **The WOW! Reply** led to the show trending across the U.S., becoming the third most watched show on cable. Late-night shows also recorded monologue segments about the project.



The experience launched on social media platforms alongside the premiere of *Chasing UFOs*. Fans were encouraged to tweet their thoughts and questions to extraterrestrials using a special hashtag. On August 15, 2012, to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the "WOW! Signal," all these tweets were transmitted into space from the **Arecibo Observatory**, the world's largest radio telescope at the time. This turned the event into a de facto social experiment, drawing attention to the show while creating a sense of global participation in an extraordinary attempt at cosmic dialogue.

APPLYING PRINCIPLE TWO IN CAMPFIRE'S WORK

This principle plays a crucial role in how we design experiences. Our aim is to create opportunities for fans to *see themselves* in our stories and want to actively participate in shaping them. This could mean developing characters or themes to which fans can personally relate to. Equally, it might be creating interactive elements where they can express their opinions, vote on outcomes, or step into a role themselves.

In other words, we introduce **white space** in our work, deliberate gaps in the narrative that we invite fans to bridge. Our experiences aren't really complete until people inhabit them. By leaving room for interpretation and personal input, fans can project their own identities onto the story and become co-creators. This gives them a sense of ownership over the narrative, further reinforcing the connection. As fans invest emotionally and personally in these stories, they feel motivated to share them as a reflection of who they are.

This, in turn, amplifies the story's reach, as fans take pride in advocating for a narrative they have contributed to, and which means something to them on a personal level. It's this that drives positive word of mouth, and both fans and the press testify how deeply connected audiences become to the storyworlds we create.

3. TO GAIN STATUS

We share stories to connect with others and to express who we are, and we share them to stand out. Sharing can be a way to elevate our status within a community, to show that we're in the know, ahead of the curve, or tapped into something exclusive. Remember the thrill of discovering a hidden gem before everyone else did? That's the power of sharing to gain status. Whether

it's a new trailer, a hidden detail in a story, or an insightful theory, sharing becomes a way to showcase expertise and gain recognition.

And "winning my feed" only compounds this effect, whereby people share content to gain likes and shares, engaging in friendly competition. In the case of social media influencers, engagement is even a badge of professional honor.

In ancient times, storytellers were revered figures within their communities. Priests, scholars, and oracles alike possessed a valuable ability to captivate an audience and spread important knowledge, thus elevating their status. Today's social media platforms are little different. Sharing digital content, especially when it's rare or hard to find, signals that we have exclusive access to something, instilling that much-desired sense of Fear of Missing Out in others. It's about social capital: sharing a story before it goes viral, being in on the latest cultural moment, or bringing valuable insights to a fan community.

In fan culture, the desire for status often drives us to be hyper-engaged with the stories we love. We dissect them, we discuss them, we hunt for secrets within them to unlock. We want to be the ones who find the hidden meaning, post the next viral theory, or lead the conversation. And in return, we gain recognition and influence within our community.

Campfire's project for National Geographic called **Expedition Granted** is a great example of how sharing for status can drive engagement. The project invited aspiring explorers to share their visions for expeditions, with the public voting on the winner. By rallying support and votes, participants were seeking recognition. The more votes they garnered, the more status they gained as leaders within their communities. Sharing their ideas meant standing out as pioneers, pushing the boundaries of exploration and innovation.

CLIENT: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

2014

CASE STUDY: EXPEDITION GRANTED

CLICK FOR VIDEO



REDEFINING EXPLORATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2014, National Geographic® and Campfire launched **Expedition Granted**, a competition designed to find the next generation of explorers. Budding adventurers were invited to submit plans for their dream expeditions, with the chance to win a $50,000 grant to make their vision a reality. The program aimed to redefine exploration for a modern audience by crowdsourcing ideas from everyday people, offering a platform for innovation and discovery.



For contestants, **Expedition Granted** wasn't just about the prize. It was about being recognized as a pioneer. This was an opportunity to showcase their expertise and passion to a global audience. To win, they needed to rally support and votes, transforming the competition into a status-building opportunity. Each participant was motivated to stand out, not only by proposing creative expeditions but by building their own community of followers who would support their vision.



WYLIE DUFRESNE
CHEF



CASEY NEISTAT
FILMMAKER



KENZO DIGITAL
DIRECTOR



MARINA GORBIS
FUTURIST



AINISSA G. RAMIREZ
MATERIALS SCIENTIST



RAGHAVA KK
ARTIST, ENTREPRENEUR



THOMAS DOLBY
MUSICIAN



THAYER WALKER
JOURNALIST, EXPLORER



SIR BERTRAND PICCARD
PSYCHIATRIST, BALLOONIST



GREGG TREINISH
OUTDOORSMAN

Our team of pioneers and entrepreneurs that came together as an advisory council for the young explorers.



Behind-the-scenes with chef Wylie Dufresne and filmmaker Casey Neistat.

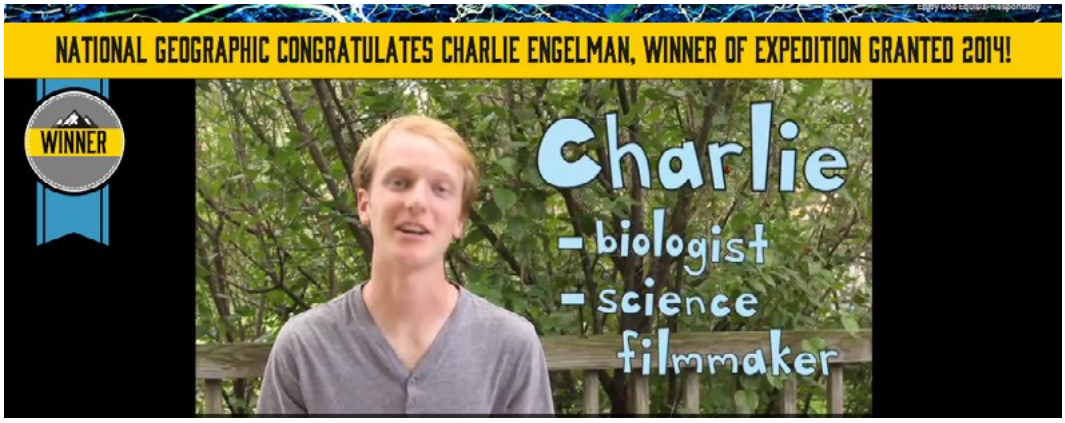


The program featured a team of advisors, including filmmaker **Casey Neistat**, musician **Thomas Dolby**, and chef **Wylie Dufresne**, offering credibility and guidance. Contestants submitted their ideas and the public voted on their favorites over a 12-week period. The competition drew over a million visitors to the website, with 300,000 votes cast for the finalists. **Jeep**® and **Dos Equis**® were folded into the experieence, adding further visibility and excitement around the contest. Ultimately, the winner was selected from a pool of diverse and creative participants, showing the breadth of what modern exploration could mean.

APPLYING PRINCIPLE THREE IN CAMPFIRE'S WORK

At Campfire, we recognize how powerful the drive for status can be, so we strive to design experiences that give fans the opportunity to be seen as leaders or insiders within their communities. This might involve offering early access to an exclusive event, crafting hidden layers within a story that only the most engaged fans can uncover, or creating interactive moments where fans can influence the direction of the narrative.

We also encourage competition and collaboration in our projects, providing ways for fans to contribute something unique. These moments give fans a sense of pride and ownership, allowing them to gain status among the fan community. Just as **Expedition Granted** tapped the competitive spirit of its participants, our projects tap into fans' desire to share something valuable and earn recognition for their efforts.



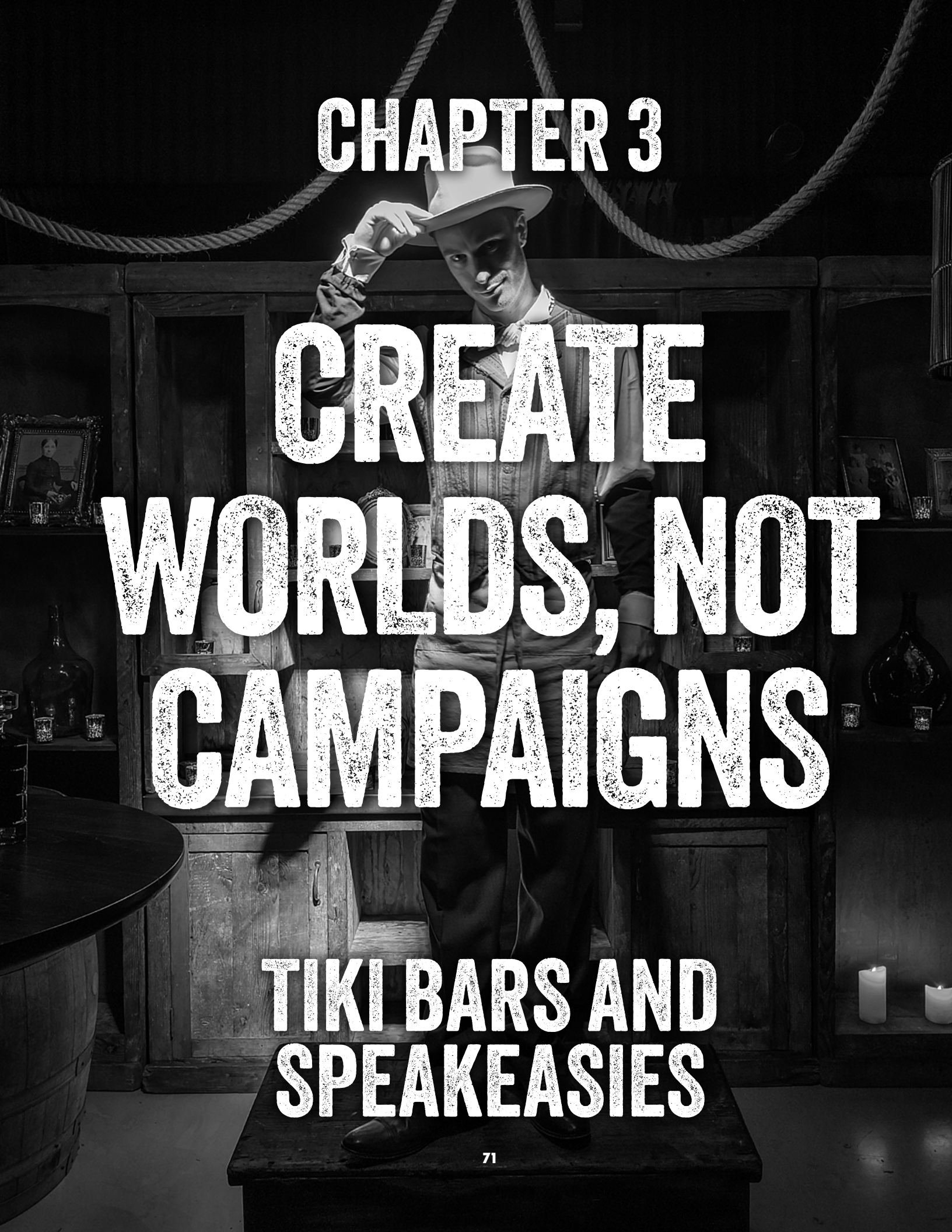
When fans have the chance to shine, not only are they more likely to share the story, they're more likely to lead others to it. This drives engagement, generates buzz, and creates powerful advocates for the narratives we create.

STORIES THAT SPREAD, MATTER

We've seen firsthand how stories mean very little on their own. They only thrive when people share them. Whether it's to **strengthen bonds**, **define identity**, or **gain status**, these are the core motivations why stories spread. By tapping into these deep human impulses, we can create narratives that are embraced, shared, and carried forward by fans themselves.

The beauty of this approach is that it turns audiences into participants and, ultimately, into loyal fans. It gives them a personal stake in the story's success. This participatory engagement is at the heart of Campfire's storytelling philosophy. We build communities around our narratives, turning stories into experiences that live far beyond the screen, stage, or page.

Stories have more potential platforms now than ever before. The ability to make something that spreads on its own, carried by the passion and enthusiasm of fans, is one of the most powerful tools a storyteller can have. Build stories people are eager to share, and *you can start movements*.



CHAPTER 3

CREATE WORLDS, NOT CAMPAIGNS

TIKI BARS AND SPEAKEASIES

PREVIOUS: A somewhat untrustworthy charlatan (played by actor Tate McMillan) offers audiences a taste of The Elixir of Immortality at our 2023 SDCC activation celebrating *Anne Rice's Immortal Universe* for AMC Networks®.

CHAPTER 3
CREATE WORLDS, NOT CAMPAIGNS
TIKI BARS AND SPEAKEASIES

WALT DISNEY'S DREAM OF DISNEYLAND

It's said that Walt Disney once had a simple yet transformative idea. While watching his daughters ride a carousel, he grew frustrated with the uninspired and chaotic state of amusement parks at the time. He envisioned a place where children and adults could share magical experiences together, an environment where every detail told a story and transported visitors to another time and place.

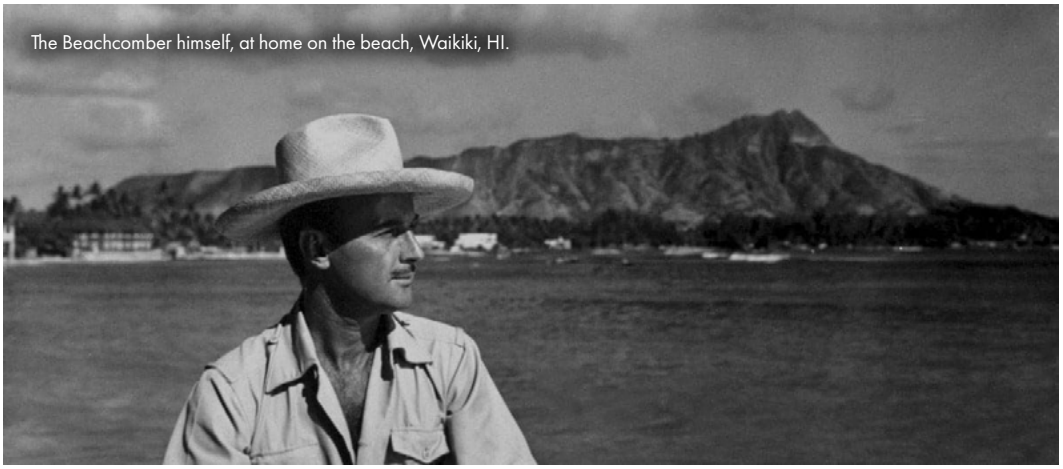
That dream, of course, materialized as Disneyland®, a place where the park itself became part of the story. Every interaction, no matter how small, is designed to keep the magic alive. Visitors are transported into immersive stories in which they become active participants. In 1955, Disneyland set a new standard for immersive world-building, inspiring countless others to create experiences that go beyond mere entertainment.



Campfire's Mike Monello and his brother, lifelong Disney fans.

When it comes to immersive design, Disney is rightly hailed as the ultimate imagineer.

His influence is undeniable. Still, another visionary also deserves recognition for popularizing the art of creating immersive environments, someone whose real name you might not know but whose impact has been felt worldwide. That man was **Ernest Gantt**, better known as **Donn Beach**, the creator of Don the Beachcomber, the first true tiki bar.



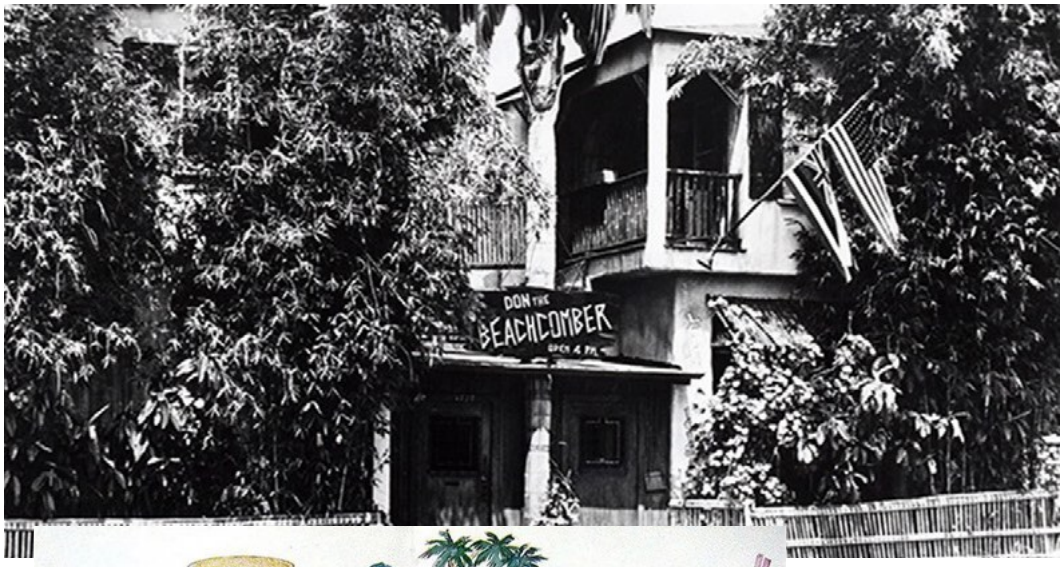
The Beachcomber himself, at home on the beach, Waikiki, HI.

THE TIKI FANTASY: DON THE BEACHCOMBER AND IMMERSIVE DESIGN

By 1934, in the depths of the Great Depression, people were hungry for an escape from their troubles. Enter Ernest Gantt, a young adventurer with a treasure trove of exotic artifacts collected on his travels through the Caribbean and South Pacific. Gantt had initially set up a business renting his collection of shells, bamboo sculptures, and tiki carvings to Hollywood film studios for set dressing. But then he had a revelation: *Why not use them to create a place where people could step right into a movie themselves?*

And so, Don the Beachcomber was born. With its rich tropical design and decor, Don's was a gateway to a fantasy island paradise brought to life

through rum, bamboo, and a dash of pure escapism. Planted in the heart of Hollywood, the land of make-believe, Don the Beachcomber quickly became the epicenter of an entirely new cultural movement. Actors and filmmakers flocked to this immersive environment, fully aware that "tiki" was an invented storyworld, a mix of Caribbean rum and Polynesian decor with little connection to real life. Authenticity was never the appeal. It was a watering hole where reality took a back seat to imagination, just like the town in which it was based.





ABOVE: The first Don the Beachcomber, located on McCadden Place in Hollywood, CA, circa 1937.
LEFT: The cocktail menu, including the Zombie, from The Luau, Steve Crane's Beverly Hills tiki bar (and haunt of the Hollywood celebrity crowd), circa 1955.

TIKI BARS: SET PIECES FOR ESCAPISM

From the start, Gantt's approach was rooted in **world-building**. With his drinks, he sold the fantasy of a South Seas adventure. The bar was filled with tiki statues, bamboo furniture, and tropical plants, all arranged to evoke a mythical island getaway. Soft Hawaiian music played in the background, and the sweet aroma of tropical fruits and spices filled the air. The cocktails themselves, like the legendary **Zombie**, were tall tales in a glass, each with its own colorful backstory. Don himself would move from table to table, regaling guests with gripping yarns about his adventures in the South Seas. Soon, he would open a string of bars that all offered this magical experience.

This multi-sensory approach is something designers of immersive experiences still strive for today. Gantt understood that to truly transport people, you have to engage all their senses. His tiki bars looked, felt, smelled, and

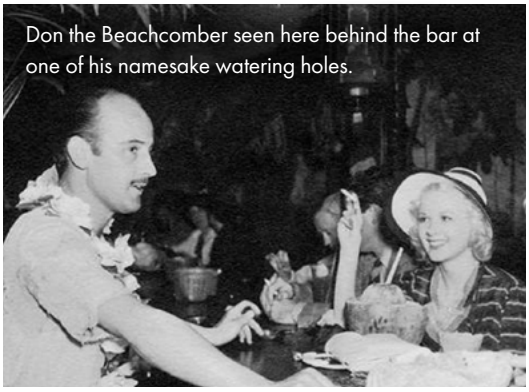


tasted like another world. And for the patrons, it was about escape, the chance to step into a world that felt far removed from the everyday grind.

WHERE FANTASY AND REALITY COLLIDE

It's no coincidence that Don the Beachcomber was created in Hollywood, a city built on imagined worlds. Filmmakers and actors, who spent their days crafting alternative realities on screen, recognized and embraced the artifice at play in Gantt's tiki bars.

After World War II, returning soldiers, especially those who had served in the Pacific theater, found themselves longing for places that could recapture the tropical lifestyle they had experienced during their deployments. Tiki bars like Don the Beachcomber and copycat rivals like Trader Vic's offered them a way to relive those moments of escape.



Don the Beachcomber seen here behind the bar at one of his namesake watering holes.



This influx of veterans helped cement tiki culture in postwar America. By blending reality and fantasy, tiki bars became powerful immersive experiences, where patrons could imagine themselves as explorers, castaways, or adventurers. This is the essence of immersive design: not just storytelling but story*giving*. That is, offering people a participatory role to play in a fantasy world.

THE RISE OF REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Both **Walt Disney** and **Donn Beach** understood the incredible power of immersion, so it figures that one of Disneyland's most beloved early attractions is the Enchanted Tiki Room. They anticipated something that's even more evident today, especially in a world dominated by digital experiences. As more of our work, social interactions, and entertainment shift online, the value of real-world, in-person experiences has never been greater.



The Bula Bula, a private tiki bar built by Campfire's Steve Coulson in his garage in New Jersey.

Today's fans want to engage with stories both digitally *and* physically. We may be more connected online than ever, but there's something special about stepping into a real-world environment. Physically walking through a world, touching the objects, hearing the sounds, even smelling the atmosphere: that's what deepens our emotional connection to the story. Real-world experiences give people something they can't get from a screen: the chance to *live* the story, not just watch it.

By creating deep sensory memories, these experiences anchor participants emotionally to the narrative in ways that digital content simply can't. When you interact with a physical world, the emotions you experience are more immediate, intense, and lasting.

CRAFTSMANSHIP AND FABRICATION: THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY

In any successful immersive experience, every detail should support the overall story. **Craftsmanship and authenticity** are key. Participants need to feel that they've truly stepped into a real world and that requires meticulous attention to quality. From the smallest props to the design of the entire environment, each element must feel as though it belongs.

This goes beyond aesthetics. It's about maintaining the illusion and not allowing something that feels out of place to pull participants out of the experience. A guiding principle in immersive design is to craft environments with the same care and detail you'd expect from a movie set, spaces that feel *lived-in*. Whether it's adding weathered details to a building's walls or ensuring props reflect that world's backstory, nothing should break the spell. The level of attention to design it requires is different from dressing a venue for a themed party.

For example, in our **Hunters Grindhouse Experience** for Amazon Prime Video, we custom-fabricated a theater marquee for the entrance. From the period lettering to the retro light bulbs, every detail was meant to transport participants back to that era as they walked beneath it.



Immersive actors and fans gather outside the grindhouse-style theater before the *Hunters* premiere screening.

CLIENT: AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

CASE STUDY: HUNTERS GRINDHOUSE EXPERIENCE

2020

CLICK FOR VIDEO

TRANSPORTING FANS TO '70s NEW YORK

For the Amazon Prime Video® series *Hunters*, Campfire transformed an entire block of Highland Park, Los Angeles, into gritty, 1970s New York City with the **Hunters Grindhouse Experience**. The activation was a recreated grindhouse cinema, where guests were treated to an exclusive screening of the *Hunters* pilot, followed by an immersive afterparty hosted by **Grandmaster Flash**, one of the most iconic DJs of the 1970s, spinning the hits of the era and keeping the energy high.

On the street itself, cars from the decade parked along the curb while street performers engaged guests in spontaneous, in-character interactions with over 40 improv actors, portraying characters from taxi drivers, street musicians, and hustlers to streetwalkers. Sixteen local **stores took part**, transforming their spaces with'70s decor and offering *Hunters*-themed cocktails and other promotions.



The Empire Theater and Highland Park Bowl were transformed into sets from the period show. Actors taking on 1970s personas completed the immersive scene both inside and outside the venues.







1970s cars being delivered to the activation site. The cars lined the street between the venues, dropping fans into another era.







TOP LEFT: An early render of the plan for the Empire Theater marquee.
TOP RIGHT: A more detailed, 3-D render of the marquee for use on site.
RIGHT: A behind-the-scenes shot of the production team putting the final touches on the marquee.

One of the most striking aspects of the event was the **custom-fabricated Empire Theater marquee**, inspired by the iconic grindhouse cinemas of 1970s Times Square. It gave the experience an entrance you couldn't walk past, and pulled attendees into the world of *Hunters*.







Every detail of the experience was authentic to the era, even the period-accurate movie candies and *Hunters* branded popcorn and soda.





Interior views of the epic afterparty at Highland Park Bowl, rebranded **Hunters Alley** for the occasion.







Fans enjoyed an immersive screening of the premiere before heading to the afterparty for bowling, cocktails, and tunes from DJ Grandmaster Flash.







The success of the **Hunters Grindhouse Experience** was immediate and overwhelming. Tickets sold out within 24 hours, prompting an extension of the activation, with overall attendance exceeding 5,000. Alone, this activation generated over 3.5 billion media impressions and captured the attention of major outlets including *Deadline*, *Variety*, *Us Weekly, Star Magazine,* and *Yahoo*. The combination of street performances, local store participation, period cars, and authentic'70s music created a cultural buzz that extended beyond the attendees, sparking widespread sharing on social media.

Of course, not every immersive environment needs to be recreated from scratch. Sometimes, the **location** itself plays a key role in telling the story. Just as with real estate, "location, location, location" is everything. In immersive design, the right location can often heighten the sense of immersion by providing an emotional connection to a space. Iconic or historic venues, for example, bring their own atmosphere and story, which can enhance the feeling of being immersed in ways a newly built set cannot. By naturally supporting the story's world, a location becomes part of the narrative, adding to the emotional impact on participants.

A good location can also eliminate distractions. Casinos were traditionally built without windows or clocks, so that gamblers would pay no mind to the passing of time and instead focus their attention on the games and machines. An immersive venue should work the same way, enclosing the audience, if not literally, then by capturing attention through sensory immersion.

When planning an event, we like to assess venues' potential as "attention Faraday cages", where the urge to check your phone notifications or reply to texts will dissolve for the brief time you spend in our storyworld. This is why pop-up experiences and physical venues have become all-important for experiential marketing. Enticing your audience away from a screen and into a physical world is the best way to command attention.

By blending expertly crafted environments with carefully chosen real-world settings, immersive designers can create experiences that feel compelling and long-lasting. Whether building a world from scratch or working within an existing space, it is attention to detail and narrative consistency that ensure participants remain fully engaged.

PARTICIPANTS AS CO-CREATORS: LETTING THE STORY EVOLVE

One of the most exciting aspects of immersive design is allowing participants to shape their own story. When given the chance to make choices that affect the narrative, people feel more deeply connected to an experience. This sense of agency transforms the story from something we're simply told into something we can help create.

At San Diego Comic-Con in 2018, Campfire created **Purge City** for our client USA Network®, a store where fans could shop inside the world of Blumhouse®'s *The Purge*. They felt like active citizens of the imagined neighborhood, even contributing to the overall narrative by selecting tools for their own survival.

There's always a balance to strike in large-scale commercial experiences. While we want participants to feel free to explore, we also need everything to run smoothly, especially with big crowds. That's where the concept of **freedom on rails** comes in. It's about giving participants the *illusion* of endless choice while gently guiding them along a path that keeps the experience efficient and immersive.

As we've established, perceived control over a storyline strengthens people's emotional connection to it. Whether it's choosing which path to take or how to interact with the environment, every decision must entice you deeper into the narrative.

CLIENT: USA NETWORK
CASE STUDY: PURGE CITY

2018

CLICK FOR VIDEO

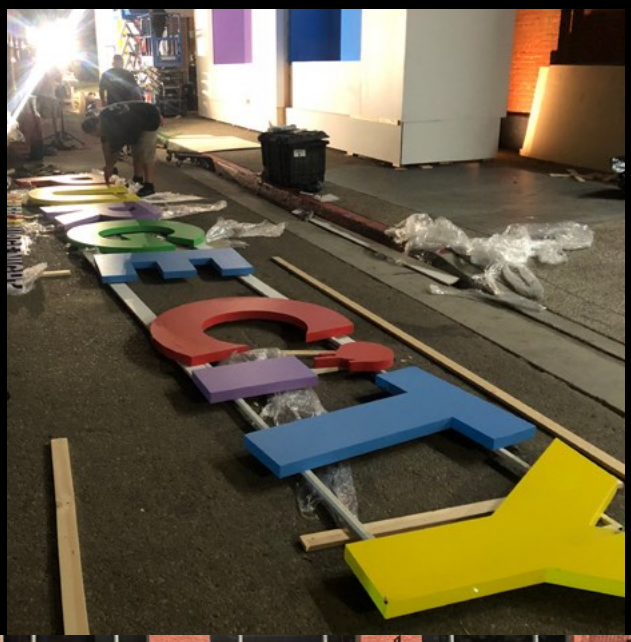


A uniformed store employee welcomes shoppers to "Purge City: your one-stop shop for the perfect Purge Night."

CELEBRATING A NIGHT OF HORROR

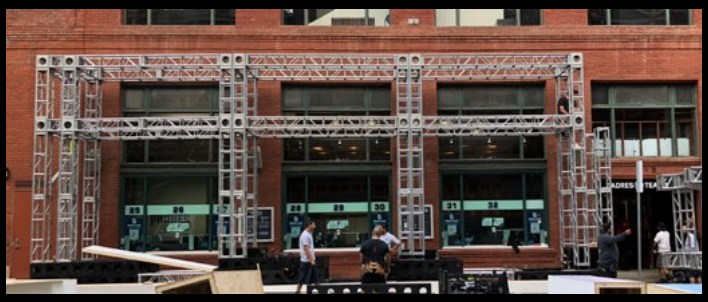
At SDCC in 2018, we brought USA Network®'s TV series *The Purge* to life with **Purge City**, a pop-up store where fans could prepare for Purge Night, an imagined national holiday in which all crime is legal for twelve hours, as though it were real, in a carefully crafted world where reality and horror collided.





ON THIS PAGE: A concept mock-up from our original pitch deck, a 3-D render used for construction planning and clearing permissions, and behind the scenes shots of on-site facade construction.







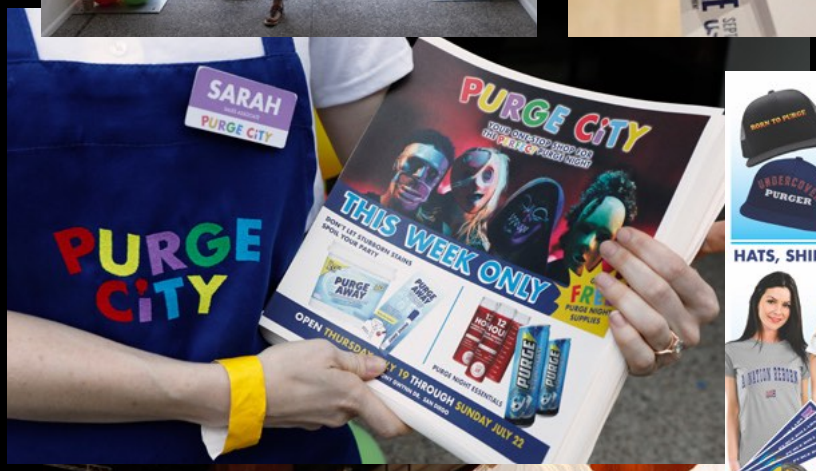


In world-building, power lies in the small details that anchor an experience in reality. **Purge City** was stocked with seemingly mundane products, including cleaning supplies, greeting cards, and candles that took on dark, new meanings in the context of Purge Night. Fans could buy "Purge Away" stain remover (for bloodstains, of course) or browse greeting cards that celebrated the chaos of Purge Night. Every product felt disturbingly real, enhancing the immersive quality of the experience.





On entering, fans received a branded shopping basket and 20 Purge dollars. We built a working economy inside the activation, so fans had to budget their Purge dollars against the swag they really wanted.







While waiting in line outside, fans were handed a promotional flyer that previewed the store and helped them plan their shopping before entering.



Taking cues from real-world store layouts, Our "departments" took cues from real-world store layouts, arranged to tell a twisted narrative: the origins of Purge Night, protecting yourself and your family, celebrating the "holiday," and cleaning up the morning after.











LEFT: Real cop, fake window display.
BELOW: An in-store demo of how to cut a commemorative cake.



What made **Purge City** so effective was how it blurred the lines between everyday life and horror. By turning familiar items into something sinister, this dramatic experience became unsettlingly believable. Fans lived and breathed the world of *The Purge*.





The Purge's producer, Jason Blum, participates in an in-store "Purge Away" cleaning demonstration.

Each product that filled the shelves of **Purge City** was designed to feel like an artifact pulled straight from a dystopian alternate reality.





















Greeting cards are a commercial staple of every holiday, so we imagined Purge Night would be no different.

Another major part of this program was The Purge Shopping Channel, a QVC-like on-air show with perky presenters hawking our branded wares.













Segments from The Purge Shopping Channel were released on social media and edited together to air as a full show on USA Network in the traditional infomercial graveyard slot.













Purge City was the hit of SDCC that year, drawing press, influencers, and long lines of cosplaying *Purge* fans.

One of the keys to successful world-building is giving participants artifacts they can take away with them, extending the narrative beyond the immediate experience and into their lives. In **Purge City**, items like "Purge Away" and emergency candles became narrative tools, allowing fans to continue the story on their own. These objects were pieces of the fictional world, crafted with enough authenticity to make participants feel like they'd walked out of **Purge City** with a piece of that universe in their hands.

LINE MANAGEMENT AND AUDIENCE FLOW: KEEPING THINGS IMMERSIVE AND SMOOTH

Managing the **flow of participants** through a storyworld is as much a part of the immersive experience as any set or story. From Disney's **FastPass** system to interactive queues that build anticipation, every moment should serve the larger narrative. Whether through timed tickets or by giving the line something to do, the goal is always to ensure that participants feel connected, even when they're not yet inside the main event.

When it comes to best practice, we've learned a lot from Disney's approach to managing lines. Disney theme parks are famous for making even the waiting part of the experience engaging. Interactive elements in queues and virtual waiting rooms keep guests excited before they've even reached the attraction. In our own projects, we've found that timed tickets and priority entry are great for keeping things moving smoothly, but they're not always an option, especially at pop-up events. At our San Diego Comic-Con 2023 immersive experience for AMC Networks®' *Interview with the Vampire*, we instead employed a pre-event reservation system alongside standby lines and participation in the daily lottery, allowing us to guide thousands of fans efficiently through the street. This system ensured minimal wait times while maintaining high throughput, which was praised by attendees for keeping the experience seamless.

When standby lines are unavoidable, we have to get creative. The goal is to make the waiting part of the story. Whether that means offering pre-show moments that build anticipation or giving participants a chance to interact with the environment, we strive to keep people immersed from the moment they arrive.

The aim is to balance efficiency with immersion. Whether people are waiting in line or walking through the experience, we want to keep them connected to the



Actors in character as Host androids interacting with guests in line at **The Westworld Experience** at SDCC (see Chapter Nine).



Brand ambassadors handing out flyers and giving guests a preview of the items for sale inside **Purge City** at SDCC.



In the line for **The Street of Immortality**, Brand ambassadors pointed out must-see stops on the Visitor's Guide.



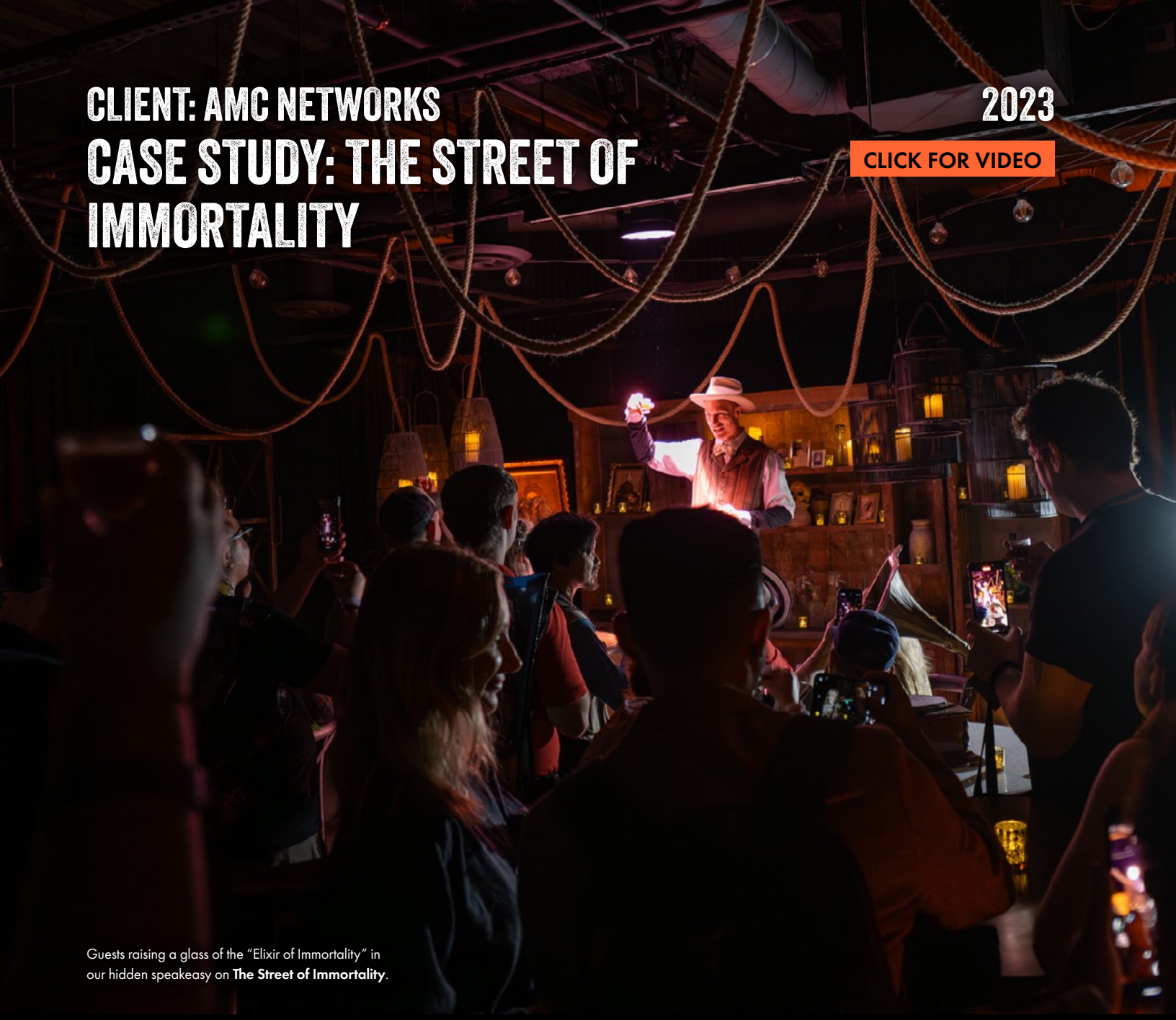
incredible world we've built. By managing the flow thoughtfully, we can keep the experience frictionless from start to finish, making sure the logistics are invisible while the magic stays front and center.

CLIENT: AMC NETWORKS

CASE STUDY: THE STREET OF IMMORTALITY

2023

CLICK FOR VIDEO



Guests raising a glass of the "Elixir of Immortality" in our hidden speakeasy on **The Street of Immortality**.

WALKING INTO THE VAMPIRE WORLD OF NEW ORLEANS

At **San Diego Comic-Con 2023**, we took fans of AMC Networks®' *Interview with the Vampire* on an unforgettable journey into **Storyville**, New Orleans' infamous red-light district as it would have been at the turn of the twentieth century, in celebration of *Anne Rice's Immortal Universe*.

Every detail was designed to evoke the eerie beauty of turn-of-the-century New Orleans. We used the existing architecture to inform the design, transforming a long, outdoor courtyard into the street by adding meticulously detailed storefronts on either side. The focal point of the experience at the end of the courtyard was a recreation of a New Orleans townhouse that fans would recognize as Lestat's. Each storefront design incorporated references to the series as well as historical research about the city. They included a shuttered **Speakeasy**, a debauched Hot**el Iberville**, a **Talamasca Office** (the secret society investigating the supernatural), a **Nawlins Records** store, and the **Mayfair Talismans** shop. While the street was being designed, we were writing the interactive scripts that would bring it to life and create openings for guests to engage with the world.





From renders to reality: **The Street of Immortality**.





LEFT: A detailed Visitor's Guide to the activation with hand-drawn sketches of each location. The Visitor's Guide acted as a punch card so that guests could be sure to collect each item of memorabilia that was given away at different storefronts. Guides were distributed to fans waiting in line, giving them an opportunity to plan their visit even before entering the street.

As guests walked up the stairs to the courtyard, they were greeted by actors welcoming them to Storyville and then ushered into a shuttered **Speakeasy**. Once inside, the doors were locked, and a charlatan began a sales pitch, inviting the guests to try a taste of the **Elixir of Immortality**, a drink that looked suspiciously like blood. After everybody had raised a glass "to immortality," a police officer threw open the doors, and the guests were free to explore the street. This ten-minute performance acted as a pre-show for the event, allowing guests to leave reality behind and travel back in time.











BELOW: The **Elixir of Immortality** mocktail created with **Pom Wonderful**® pomegranate juice, a sponsor of the event.





TOP TO BOTTOM: The interior of the Speakeasy, and the facades of the Talamasca Office and the Hotel Iberville, with the renders of the final designs.









At the **Hotel Iberville,** an expert magician worked as a **hustler** performing the classic Three-Card Monte, two **streetwalkers** told stories of strange disappearances, a **sketch artist** captured the scene, and a **tap dancer** worked the street.



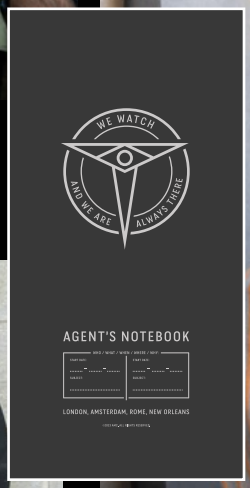






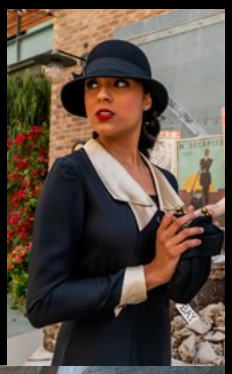
At the **Talamasca Office**, **Talamasca agents** offered guests notebooks to record any supernatural activity they witnessed.





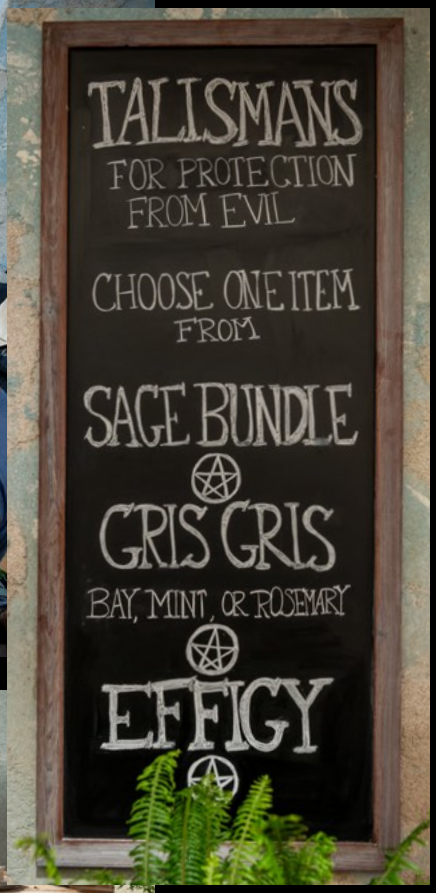






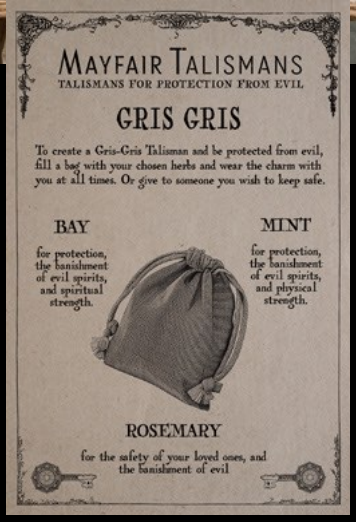
At **Mayfair Talismans**, characters inspired by the series *Mayfair Witches* taught guests how to perform protection rituals and gave them a choice of a **sage bundle**, a **gris-gris** filled with herbs, or an **effigy**.















Each talisman had an instruction card designed to feel period-appropriate, with descriptions of spells from the series.

TOP TO BOTTOM: The facades of **Mayfair Talismans**, **Nawlins Records**, and **Lestat's Townhouse** with the renders of the final designs.











At **Nawlins Records,** guests received sheet music of the song *"Come to Me,"* written by Lestat. A **jazz singer** desperately asked guests if they could play the song to help her rehearse, since her **pianist** had gone missing. Throughout the event, many guests were able to sight-read the music and accompany the singer as crowds gathered around, creating unforgettable moments of magic. Of course, our own pianist would appear periodically to ensure that all the guests could enjoy a live professional performance of the song.









At **Lestat's Townhouse**, fans were invited to leave offerings for their beloved anti-hero. The opportunity was announced on social media before the event, so fans brought everything from letters to flowers and even created their own props from the series to leave behind.





LEFT: A fan-made prop of the record *Come to Me* from **Nawlins Records** left as an offering.

RIGHT: Two members of the Théâtre des Vampires, a traveling theater troupe from Paris who posed for photos with fans. They handed out posters teasing the second season of the show whose plot centers on the theater company of vampires.









BELOW: A cast of 28 performers brought the street to life, each working from a written backstory that made them a resident of Storyville



What set this activation apart was its **authenticity**. The artisans behind it carefully recreated historical Storyville, with attention devoted to every prop, costume, and set piece. The effect was that the environment itself became a character, helping tell the story of decadence and danger that defines the vampire universe.

By focusing on craftsmanship and allowing fans to **co-create** moments through interaction, **The Street of Immortality** provided a deeply personal experience that was named Best Activation at SDCC 2023 by attendees.

WORLDS THAT STAY WITH US

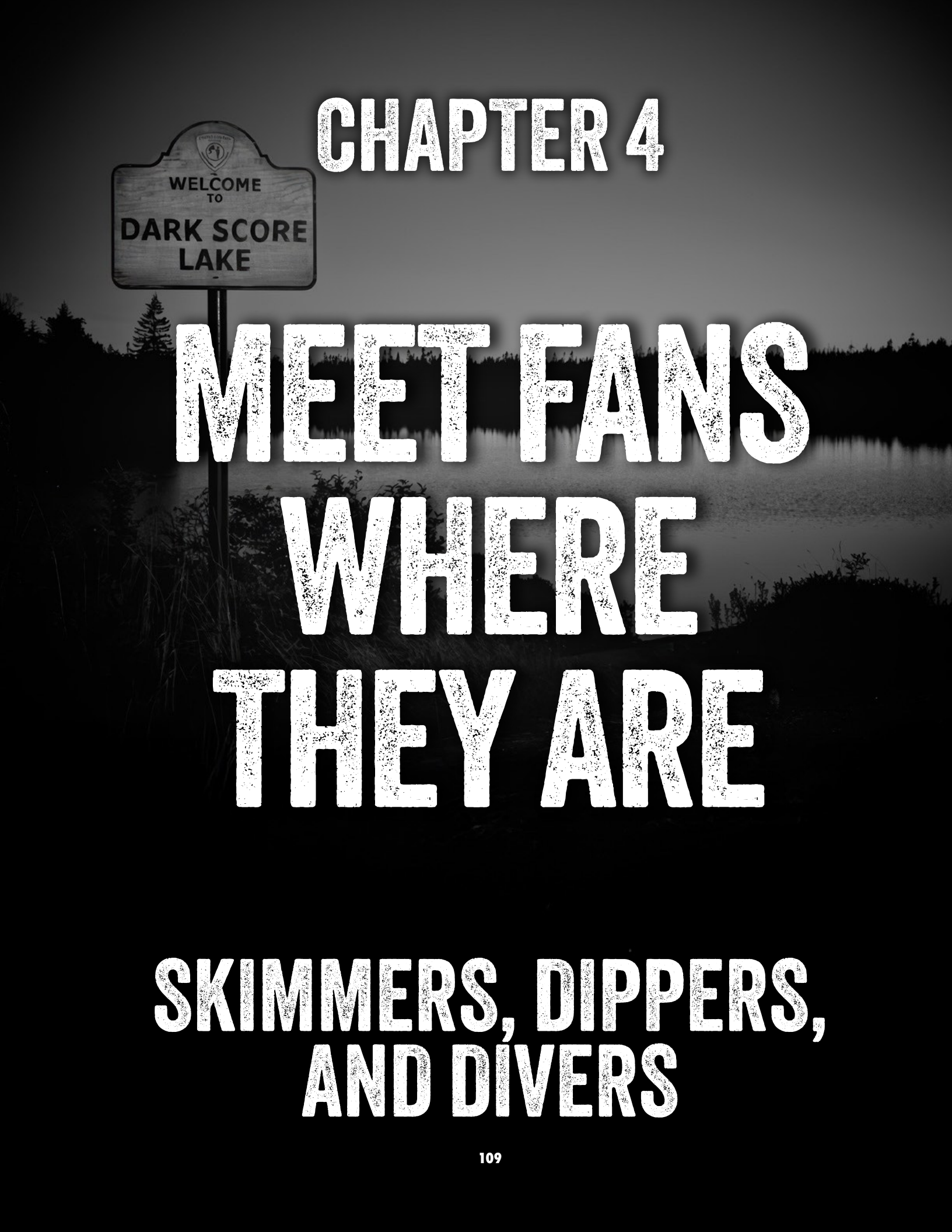
Immersive storytelling is about more than crafting environments or managing crowds; it's about creating worlds that connect on an emotional level. Walt Disney and Donn Beach understood intuitively that the most powerful stories are experienced firsthand, lived through our senses and our actions. Today's immersive design practitioners carry this legacy forward by meticulously curating sensory-rich spaces, inviting participants to step into active roles that shape their own journeys.



Yet perhaps the greatest power of immersion lies beyond the immediacy of these experiences. When thoughtfully designed, storyworlds don't end when participants exit through the gift shop; they persist as memories, lived narratives that blend with personal identity and linger long after the moment has passed. Immersive experiences have become a necessary counterbalance to a screen-saturated world, providing meaningful connections through in-person interactions, environments built with real care, and moments of genuine choice.

Ultimately, what Disney, Beach, and all contemporary immersive creators share is a conviction: that storytelling can shape how participants see the world, and can send people home with part of that magic. When executed well, immersive design does more than just transport us temporarily; it subtly changes us, reminding us that reality and imagination are never truly separate, and each keeps informing and enriching the other.





CHAPTER 4

MEET FANS WHERE THEY ARE

SKIMMERS, DIPPERS, AND DIVERS

PREVIOUS: From the mind of Stephen King, the murky waters of Dark Score Lake, as captured by award-winning photojournalist Joachim Ladefoged for Campfire's **Dark Score Stories**.

CHAPTER 4
MEET FANS WHERE THEY ARE
SKIMMERS, DIPPERS, AND DIVERS

FANS, NOT CONSUMERS

In May 2007, something rippled across fandom. CBS announced it was canceling *Jericho*, a post-apocalyptic drama with a small but fiercely loyal following. The show had ended its run on a cliffhanger, leaving fans waiting to learn the fate of the eponymous town. For many fans, this was devastating. The show had struck a deep emotional chord, especially one moment in the final episode when the protagonist, Jake Green, shouted "Nuts!" in defiance, mirroring General McAuliffe's famous retort during the Battle of the Bulge. This single word became a rallying cry for fans.

An idea started circulating on *Jericho*'s online forums, first suggested by one dedicated fan, Jeff Knoll: What about sending peanuts to CBS as a form of protest? The idea quickly ignited. In a matter of days, fans were organizing across social media and message boards. Over *20 tons* of peanuts were delivered to CBS's studios, all carrying the same cheeky message: "Nuts to the cancellation!" The protest caught the attention of the national media, and CBS, overwhelmed by the fan response, announced it would bring *Jericho* back for a second season.

This wasn't the first time fans had banded together to save a show they loved. Back in the late 1960s, *Star Trek* was on the chopping block after only two seasons. Fans rallied with a massive letter-writing campaign, flooding NBC with messages of support. Their grassroots movement worked. The show was renewed for a third season, eventually becoming one of the most iconic franchises in TV history. And in 2013, fans of *Veronica Mars* took to Kickstarter to fund a movie revival, raising $2 million in under a day and $5.7 million by the end of the campaign, demonstrating the ability of fan culture in the digital age to directly influence the creation of content.



A franchise isn't really a franchise without its fans. Often, the most powerful way to engage both existing and potential audiences is by celebrating the fandom itself. Holding fan-focused events and parties sends a clear signal: this fandom matters. It's this recognition from the creators and companies behind the story that can make fans feel seen, valued, and energized. It amplifies the passion within the community. Franchises like *Game of Thrones*, *Ted Lasso*, and *The Walking Dead* have all left a lasting mark on pop culture by spotlighting the dedication of their fan bases.



CLIENT: APPLE TV+

2021

CASE STUDY: TED LASSO "BELIEVE" FAN EXPERIENCE

Ted Lasso cast members Cristo Fernández and Brendan Hunt aboard the Ted Lasso Believe Bus; Hunt not only stars as Coach Beard but also co-created and writes for the series.

FOOTBALL IS LIFE!

In celebration of the second season of Apple TV+®'s *Ted Lasso*, the **Ted Lasso "Believe" Fan Experience** was an immersive tailgate event held at the LAFC vs. Sporting KC match at what was then Banc of California Stadium. The event not only excited fans of *Ted Lasso* but also connected with the wider soccer community, one of the largest global fanbases.

Set against the backdrop of a live soccer match, the experience blended *Ted Lasso*'s world with the LAFC fan community. The tailgate-style event took over a large grass field adjacent to the stadium, creating an atmosphere that welcomed both *Ted Lasso* fans and passionate soccer supporters. The event celebrated the show's spirit of optimism while paying tribute to soccer culture.











Fans could participate in a variety of soccer-themed games for a chance to win Ted Lasso swag.



Fans were handed exclusive Ted *Lasso* merchandise, including the show's iconic "Believe" banners, distributed by Believe Ambassadors. A highlight of the activation were the Ted Lasso-themed double-decker Believe Bus and the photo installations where fans could capture memories. Interactive soccer-themed games, such as Soccer Darts, plus freestyle trick performances, kept fans entertained, while British food, trivia games, and a live DJ spinning *Ted Lasso*-inspired playlists added to the festive atmosphere.









Two of the show's stars even came along to meet and greet their fans.

To extend the experience beyond the stadium, additional pop-up activations in Santa Monica and Downtown LA, the following weekend, offered more fans interactive moments and exclusive giveaways.







This series of events rewarded supporters of the show, aligning with its core themes of kindness, teamwork, and belief. The LAFC match provided the perfect setting to bring *Ted Lasso* and soccer fans together, creating a shared sense of community that bridged the love for the sport with the heart of the show. The best part was taking that to the streets in a citywide celebration of all things *Ted Lasso*.

The evolution of fan activism from small, passionate groups to massive, influential movements shows what a dynamic and exciting space this is. Modern fandom pr*edates the Star Trek* campaign by decades. It traces back to the early twentieth century, when communities started to form around serialized sci-fi stories in pulp magazines. From there, fandom blossomed, with *Planet of the Apes*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Wars* fans, among others, creating art, writing fan fiction, and organizing conventions. Over the years, the relationship between fans and creators has shifted from passive appreciation to active participation.

By the 1990s, this was well underway. Media fandoms had grown from niche communities into global movements. As we discussed in **Chapter Two**, the internet has given fans new tools not only to consume content but to share, remix, and expand it. Fan-created works, including fan fiction, art, and even video, have become an important way for people to engage. Instead of just watching or reading, fans can actively shape stories. This participatory culture enables stories to spread organically, via social platforms, giving fans the ability to connect and create.

The rise of the internet connected fans and turned them into a powerful force capable of sustaining or even reviving beloved franchises. They had become *stakeholders*, able to influence the direction of the franchises they loved.

Today, fandom is a cultural phenomenon, a collective force that shapes what gets made. Fan culture, especially in the digital age, has connected creators to consumers, making fans indispensable to the future of storytelling.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FAN

When we talk about fans, we're talking about something more than audiences who tune in or stream regularly. Fans inhabit the story and it inhabits them. Have you ever found yourself thinking about the characters long after the credits have rolled or playing a song on repeat because it connects with something deeper? Fans might even see themselves in the stories they love, claiming them as part of their identity.

For a fan, stories are more than entertainment. They're personal touchstones that can help shape identity, form relationships, and build community. Take *Harry Potter* fans, for example, who truly embody the wizarding world. For many, identifying as a *Gryffindor*, *Ravenclaw*, *Hufflepuff*, or *Slytherin* becomes a marker of personality, a way to express how they see themselves. This is the kind of connection that separates a true fan from a casual viewer.



It's this sense of belonging that helps to make fandom so powerful. Lining up for a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, attending conventions in costume, or debating plot twists in online forums, is about finding your tribe. That's why long-standing fandoms like *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who* continue to thrive

decades after the shows premiered. These fans are participating in a cultural conversation that fosters connection and meaning.

But what turns a casual viewer into a true fan? At its heart, fandom is driven by emotion. You care about the characters, the stakes, and the storylines, so when your favorite show is canceled, it feels like a personal loss. The emotions are real because the investment is real. Fans on the verge of losing a show are fighting for something they've made part of their lives.

The magic of fandom lies in how it transforms the relationship between a viewer



For Season Two of *Game of Thrones,* we asked fans to pledge their allegiance by getting a *Game of Thrones* tattoo from Ami James.

and a story. Fans do a lot more than consume: they invest, advocate, and even create. Understanding this connection reveals how differently true fans engage with what they love, and what that means for anyone designing content meant to reach them.

CLIENT: AMC NETWORKS

2022

CASE STUDY: THE WALKING DEAD FAN CELEBRATION

CLICK FOR VIDEO



The packed courtyard full of *The Walking Dead* fans during the one-night-only celebration.

A PARTY TO WAKE THE DEAD!

The Walking Dead Fan Celebration was a one-night-only event to honor the loyalty of the show's long-term fans. This fan base had followed the series for years, so we wanted to reward that loyalty and create a meaningful connection between the fans, AMC Networks®, and *The Walking Dead*.

From its early seasons, *The Walking Dead* has built one of the most passionate fan communities in television, and our client imagined this event as a way to thank those who had been invested for years. The exclusive, one-night-only nature of the event reinforced this focus on rewarding long-term loyalty and creating a sense of community among those who had kept the show alive through every season and plot twist.



Concept art of the celebration design compared with the actual event.





Re-creations of iconic settings from the series anchored the event, allowing fans to physically step into the world they'd been following. Interactive elements brought these settings to life, with live-action role-play experiences and actors portraying walkers. Fans were encouraged to engage, deepening their connection to the show's narrative.







The walkers for the evening rehearsed their movements and their noises to honor the unique style of the undead in the series. Special effects make-up included prosthetic faces, teeth, and hands, plus contact lenses and dyes to make the actors' mouths drip with blood.









To make the outdoor courtyard feel post-apocalyptic, we brought in live greens and styled them as if nature had reclaimed the space. Prop signs from locations in the series were installed, and haunting warnings painted onto existing surfaces among wax sculptures of fan-favorite characters and walkers. Even flower arrangements incorporated debris and the body parts of the undead.













Early in the night, the cast and producers appeared on a balcony and thanked the fans for their support, leading them all in a toast to celebrate the final season of the series.

Cast appearances added to the personal nature of the event, where attendees could meet the stars of the show. Ultimately, this event was about rewarding the fans.

Not only could fans meet their heroes, but they were also treated to exclusive content, including early access to unreleased footage and behind-the-scenes clips. With special access like this, they felt like insiders, party to something unique that no casual viewer could ever experience.





The cast and producers joined in the celebration, mingling with fans, taking selfies, signing autographs, and chatting over drinks.

LEFT: An in-world ice cream cart offered some of the characters' favorite flavors.
BELOW: Make-up artists transformed fans into the undead throughout the night.









ABOVE: A relics archive featured props from the series and sculptures of the most iconic walker designs.
RIGHT: Fans could choose from a range of T-shirt designs for the evening and have them screen-printed on demand.





Every fan received a selection from the twelve pins designed to commemorate the night. Naturally, fans began trading during the party to get their favorite design.









In a nod to events in the series, lottery numbers were called, and a few lucky fans claimed additional memorabilia.

This event exemplified the importance of fan culture in sustaining a long-running series. This community had stuck by the show for years, so this gesture of appreciation recognized that without them, *The Walking Dead* would not have enjoyed such enduring success.

LEVELS OF FANDOM: A SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT

Fandom doesn't divide neatly into casual and hardcore fans. It's a sliding scale. Some people dabble, reading a book or catching an episode when they have time. Others are fully immersed, planning their schedules, relationships, and even creative work around a story. These different levels of involvement can coexist, with fans constantly moving between them, depending on interest, time, and relative connection to the content.

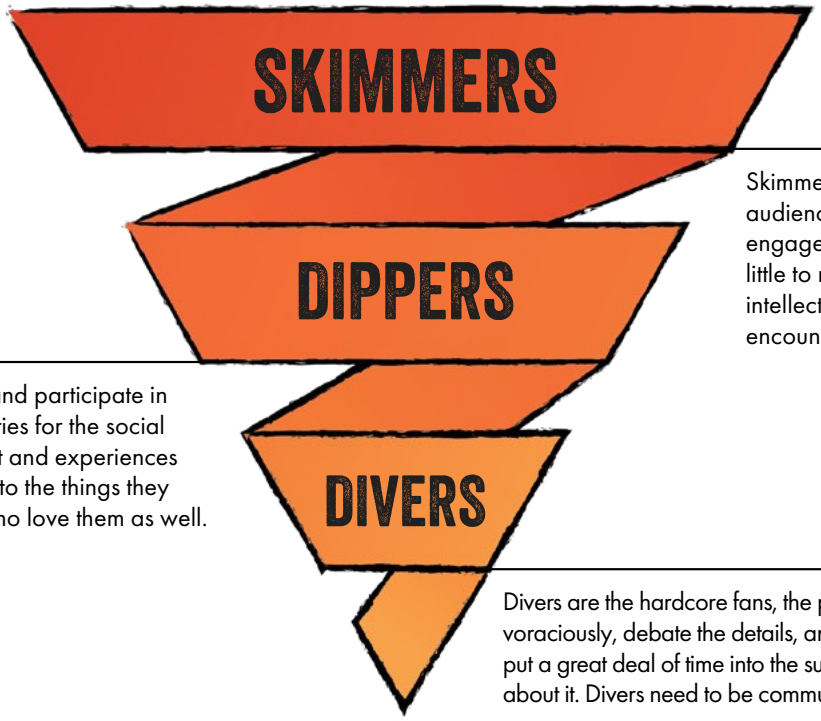
A casual fan might not spend hours analyzing every plot twist or character arc, but that doesn't make them any less important. They're the ones who enjoy the big moments, follow the buzz, and maybe jump into a fan discussion when something particularly exciting happens. Casual fans are crucial for keeping fandoms open and welcoming to newcomers. Without them, fan bases can become too exclusive, intimidating even, making it hard for new people to join in.

At the other end of the spectrum are the hardcore fans. These are the people who invest emotionally and creatively in the story, sometimes contributing their own fan fiction or artwork, role-playing at conventions, or diving into the lore. They sustain the community between seasons or releases. Even within this group, however, engagement can ebb and flow. Hardcore fans don't spend *every* moment at full throttle. Sometimes they too dip in and out, depending on what has captured their interest at the time.

INTRODUCING SKIMMERS, DIPPERS, AND DIVERS: A BEHAVIORAL FRAMEWORK

A fan's engagement moves up and down that scale, so it's important to recognize that a fan's level of engagement can change over time. Rather than permanently labeling somebody, we need a more flexible approach. To help us tailor our work to different degrees of engagement, we developed a behavioral framework we call **Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers**. We introduced this taxonomy in 2005, and we still use these categories to describe *how* fans might engage with content at any given moment.

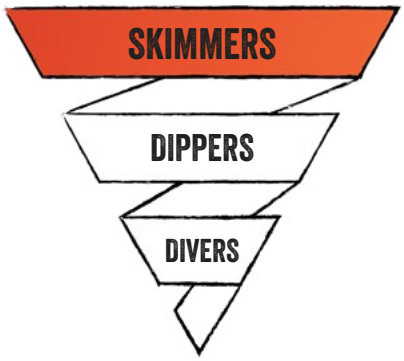
A BEHAVIORAL FRAMEWORK



Skimmers form the broadest audience and, at first, the least engaged one. They will have little to no awareness of an intellectual property before encountering it via mass media.

Dippers engage casually and participate in fan communities and activities for the social rewards. They seek content and experiences that connect them not only to the things they love but to other people who love them as well.

Divers are the hardcore fans, the people who consume voraciously, debate the details, and know everything. They put a great deal of time into the subject and care deeply about it. Divers need to be communicated with as insiders.

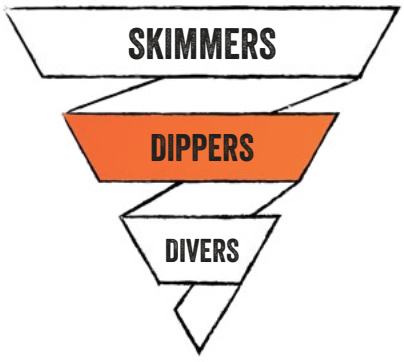


SKIMMERS: LIGHT ENGAGEMENT

Skimmers are fans who have chosen that moment to engage at a surface level. They're drawn to the spectacle, the major beats, and the big moments, but they're not looking to dive deep into every detail. Skimmers might watch a TikTok, like a photo, or walk through a pop-up installation out of curiosity. No matter how much or little they know about the story, they engage because it's easy, accessible, and entertaining.

In our experience, this group typically enjoys the eye-catching elements: a visually striking installation, a quick interactive quiz, or well-designed swag that gives them a taste of the story without requiring a big investment of time or energy. These experiences are crafted to be exciting and shareable without asking for deep commitment.

Even hardcore fans can exhibit Skimmer behavior when they're busy or just want to check in briefly. At these times they appreciate content that's easy to access, something that piques their interest without demanding too much. The goal is to quickly capture Skimmers' imagination, convey information in a concise yet compelling format, and perhaps inspire them to dig deeper.



DIPPERS: THE SOCIAL LAYER

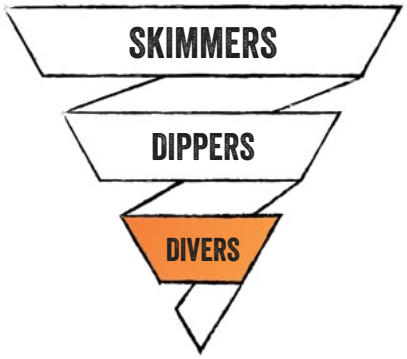
Dippers engage on a moderate level. They're curious and willing to dive in a little deeper, but still selectively. These are participants, not observers, but that participation is driven by the social side, and they often use shared fandom to find compatible new connections.

Dippers really love sharing their participation with others, whether that means posting photos from an event, tweeting about a discovery, or telling friends about what they've experienced. By turning their engagement into something others can see, they spread the word and grow the fan base.

When we design for Dippers, we focus on creating Instagram- or TikTok-worthy moments that invite fans to snap and share. Dippers thrive on experiences that are socially rewarding, that perhaps induce FOMO in their friends and followers or help them to "win their feed" for the day. Everybody benefits because their participation in turn helps build buzz and make the experience more visible.

And it's often Dippers who bring new fans into the fold. They recognize they are a part of something bigger, and encourage others to get involved in a way that also reflects their own identities (as we explored in Chapter Two).

DIVERS: FULL IMMERSION



Divers are the fans who go all-in. For them, it's not enough to watch a video or visit an installation. They need to explore every hidden detail, decode puzzles, and piece together the deeper narrative. They love complexity and depth, and often find connections that others might overlook. More than consuming content, they're interacting with it and contributing their own interpretations.

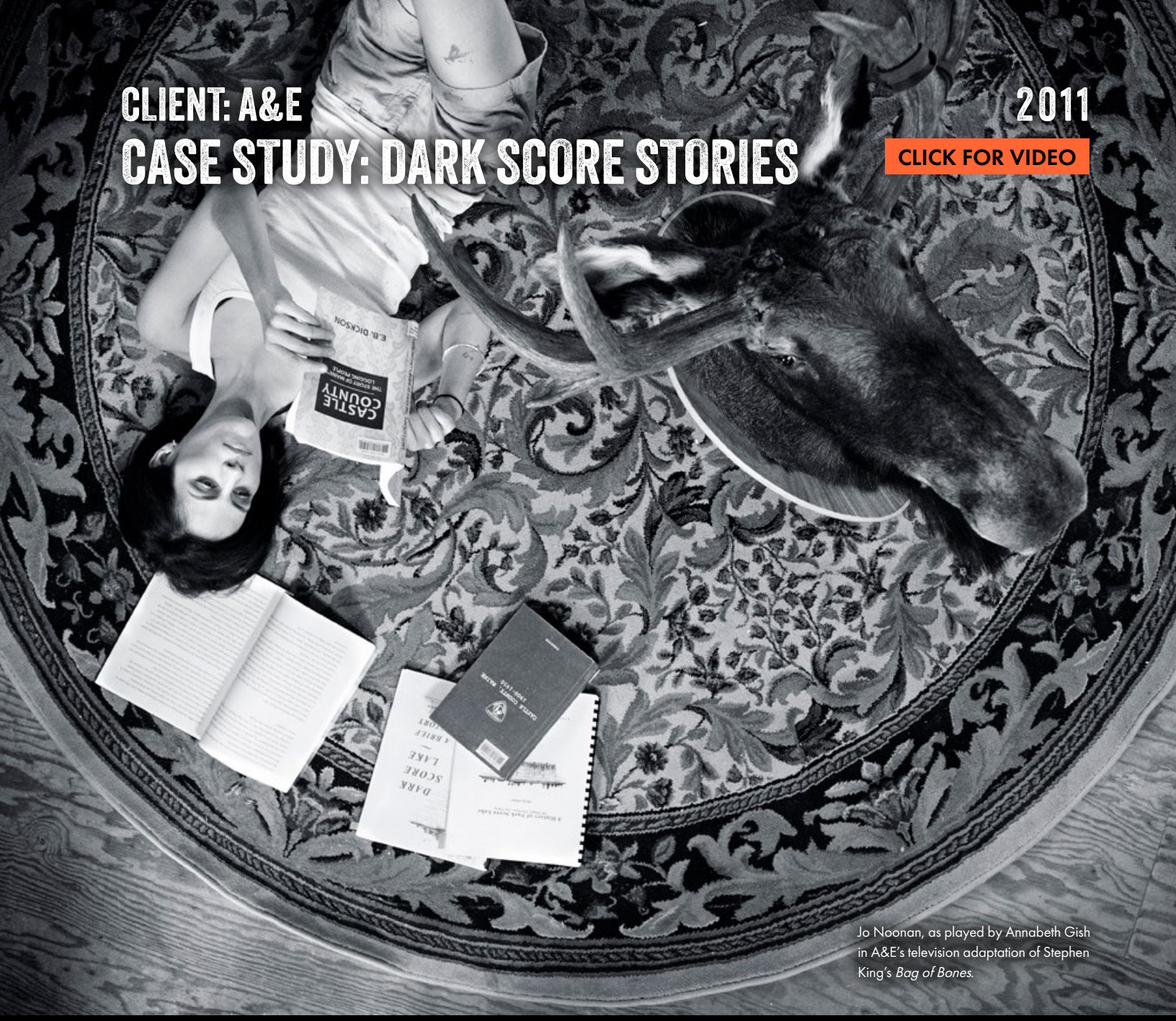
At our events, Divers are the ones who dig into the lore, revisiting elements multiple times and seeking out connections across both physical and digital spaces. Their passion often extends to creating their own content:

fan fiction, artwork, or long discussions with other like-minded fans, for example. They enjoy being part of a close-knit community that understands the story on the same level they do. Divers feed on complexity, whereas Skimmers might be repelled if confronted with it immediately.

Cosplaying and custom prop creation are typical Diver behaviors. For these fans, creating or wearing a costume is a path to physically inhabiting the world they love. Whether attending a convention or sharing their work online, cosplaying or crafting props requires a deep understanding of the visual and thematic elements of the story, as well as a significant investment of time. For Divers, cosplay is about inhabiting the story, not just representing it. We've learned that Divers really welcome intricately crafted story boxes and influencer packages for this reason.

However, Divers risk becoming too immersed. They can be so entrenched in the details and fan culture that they struggle to connect with casual fans or newcomers. They're so fluent in the language, references, and nuances of the story that it can be hard to convey that passion to someone whose knowledge is less complete. This intensity may unintentionally alienate Skimmers or Dippers, just because Divers are so embedded in the world.

That's why, when we design for Divers, we need to give them tools to share their passion in ways that are accessible to others. If we create spaces where Divers can act as ambassadors, they will help newcomers feel welcome in these intricate worlds. By helping Divers bridge the gap with the broader audience, we ensure the experience grows organically, welcoming new participants without diluting the complexity that hardcore fans love.



Jo Noonan, as played by Annabeth Gish in A&E's television adaptation of Stephen King's *Bag of Bones*.

CLIENT: A&E

2011

CASE STUDY: DARK SCORE STORIES

CLICK FOR VIDEO

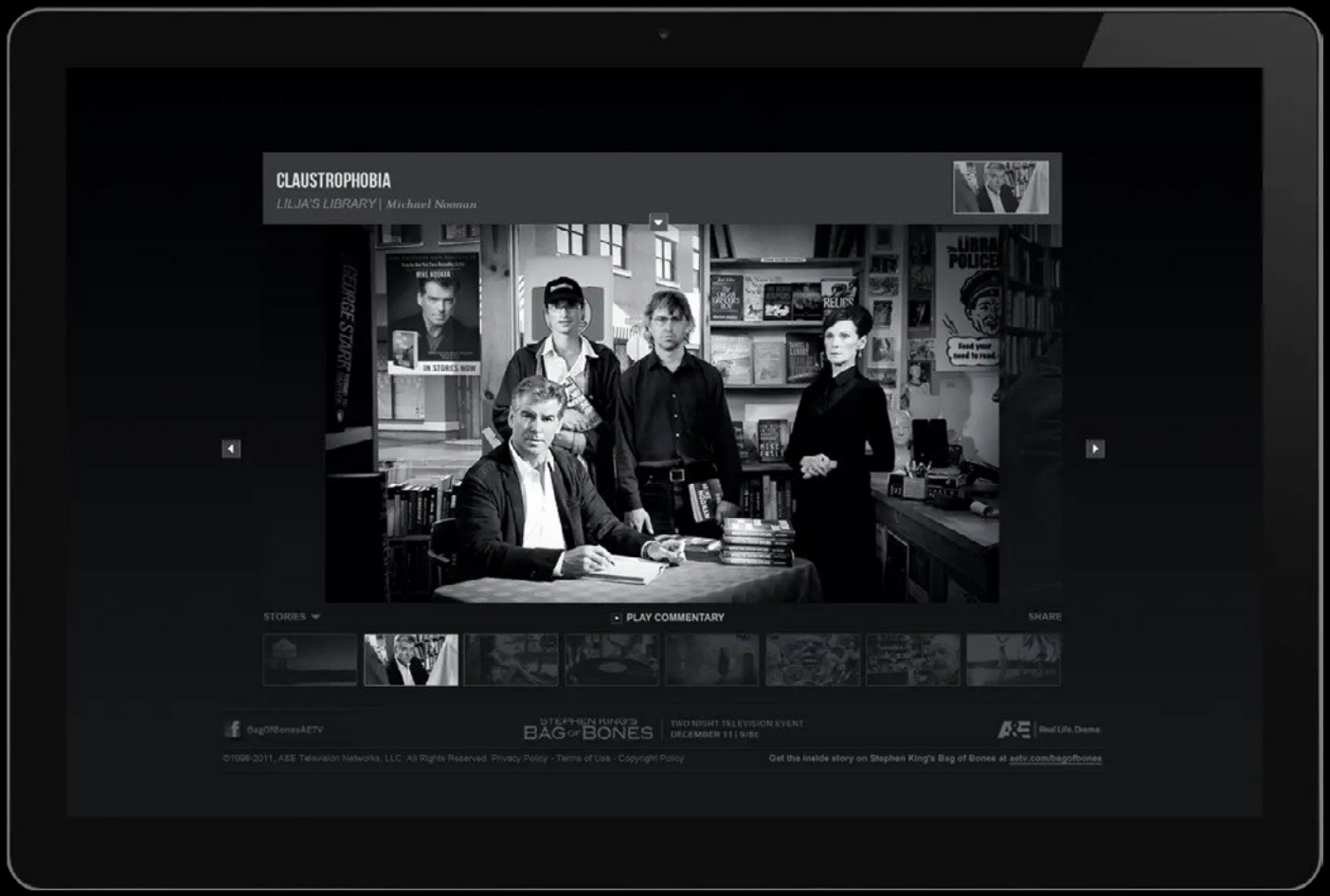
BEWARE THE LAKE

When we set out to create **Dark Score Stories**, a transmedia experience designed to accompany the release of Stephen King's *Bag of Bones* miniseries on A&E®, we wanted to introduce audiences to the eerie world of Dark Score Lake across multiple levels of engagement. The project needed to be accessible for casual viewers while also providing a compelling experience for hardcore Stephen King enthusiasts.

ENGAGING CASUAL FANS WITH STAR POWER, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND CINEMAGRAPHS

To draw in casual audiences and those less familiar with Stephen King's broader works, we built **Dark Score Stories** around a portfolio of haunting photographs by celebrated photojournalist Joachim Ladefoged. Each image was paired with voiceover narration by the stars of the miniseries, such as Pierce Brosnan, Annabeth Gish, and Melissa George, who reprised their roles from the show. These Hollywood names helped attract casual browsers who were intrigued by the celebrity involvement. The actors' presence, combined with the eerie beauty of the visuals, created a low-barrier entry point for viewers to engage with the story.

Adding to the haunting atmosphere, several of the photographs were "haunted" through the use of cinemagraphs, a technique that incorporates subtle, looping motion within an otherwise still image. Whether it was the slight nod of a head or mists drifting through a graveyard, this subtle animation deepened the sense of unease and made the visuals more dynamic, pulling potential new fans into the world of *Bag of Bones* without overwhelming them with too much detail or backstory.











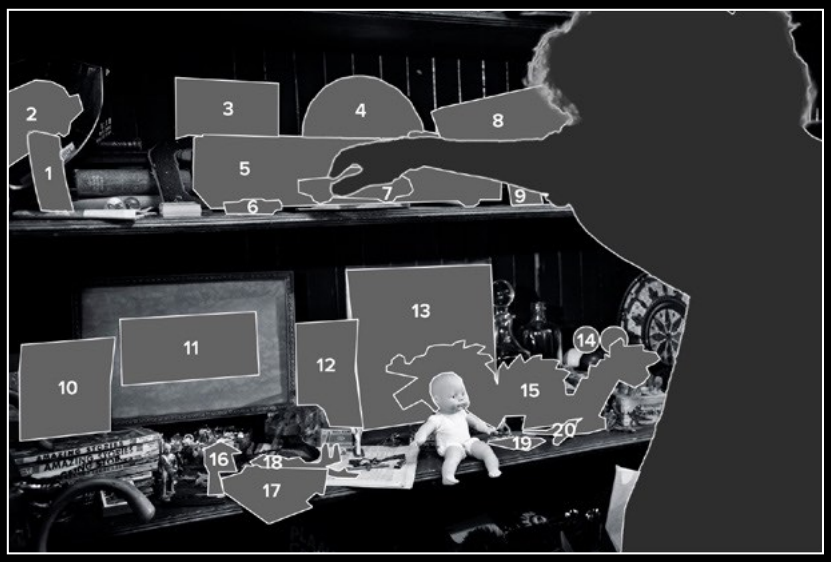

CREATING DEEPER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EASTER EGGS

For fans looking to engage more actively, we hid a deeper layer of content within the imagery. Each photograph contained Easter eggs and references to Stephen King's broader universe, small clues that attentive fans could spot and share. These included thematic nods to King's earlier works, and details buried in the backgrounds of the photos that tied **Dark Score Stories** to the larger King universe.

This Easter egg hunt added a layer of interactivity that encouraged fan collaboration. Enthusiasts shared their discoveries in online forums and on social media, creating a sense of community as they worked together to uncover every hidden reference. These elements were designed to reward fans who were willing to invest more time and attention in exploring the world, providing them with a richer experience beneath the surface.



1. Twin girls (*The Shining*)
2. 1954 Buick Roadmaster (*From a Buick 8*)
3. American Pride Airlines (*The Langoliers*)
4. GS&WM Railroad (*Cycle of the Werewolf*)
5. Orinco Truck (*Pet Sematary*)
6. 1958 Plymouth Fury (*Christine*)
7. Ford Pinto (*Cujo*)
8. Blaine The Monorail Game (*The Waste Lands*)
9. Earl Candleton Baseball Card (*Kingdom Hospital*)
10. Compromising photograph of Norris (*The Ledge*)
11. Framed Check (*Dolores Claiborne*)
12. #47 Runner's Tag (*The Long Walk*)
13. Reference to Jake Chambers (*The Dark Tower*)
14. "19" Billiard Balls (*The Dark Tower*)
15. Japanese Dragon Statue (*The Eyes of the Dragon*)
16. Green Army Men (*Battleground*)
17. Five Tarot Cards (*The Gunslinger*)
18. Rosary & Silver Bullets (*Cycle of the Werewolf*)
19. Baseball cards (*The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*)
20. Bloody corkscrew (*Needful Things*)









Campfire's art department created hundreds of props that were placed in the background of every photograph for Dippers and Divers to discover.
LEFT: A shelf full of book covers, all fictional, that are referenced in or appear in various Stephen King stories.
BELOW: We printed a limited run of hardcover photobooks, sent to journalists and given away to fans on Stephen King's website.



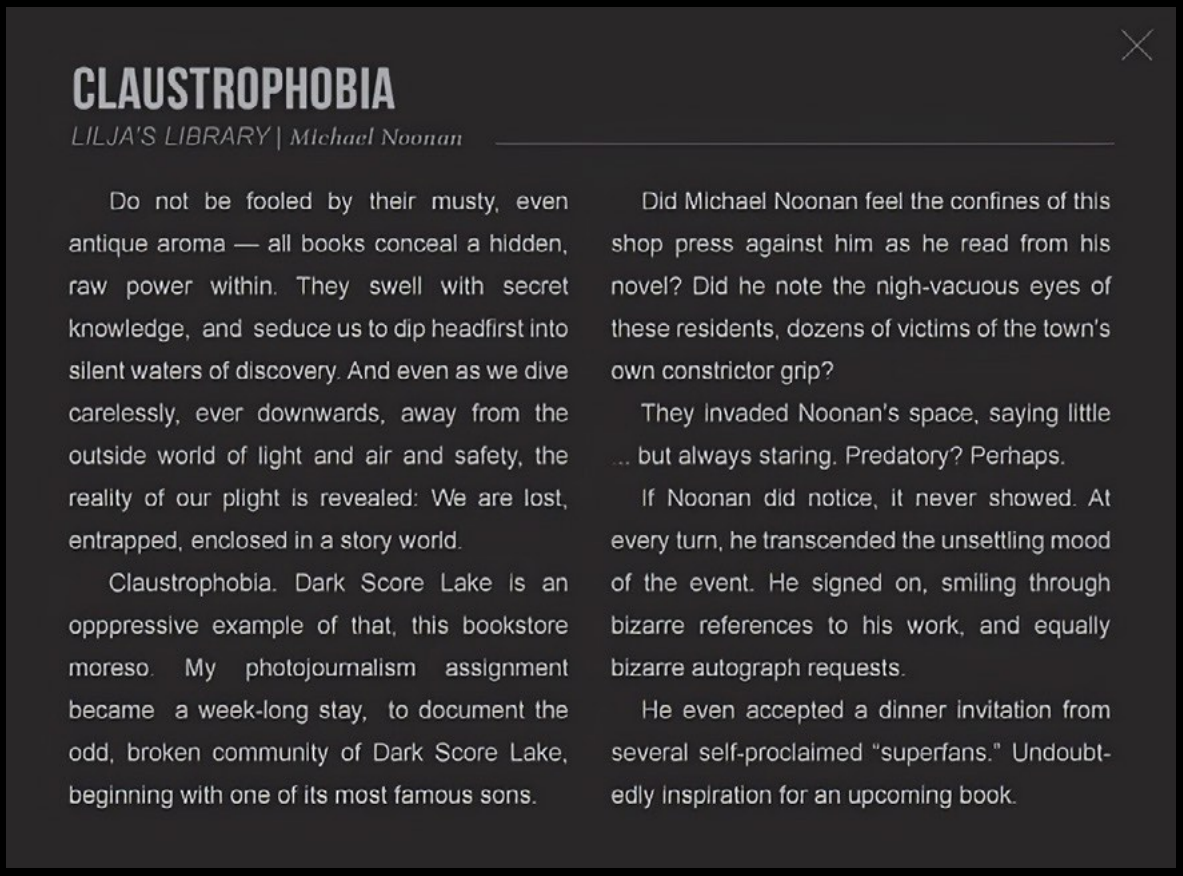




COMPLEX PUZZLES FOR HARDCORE FANS

For the most dedicated and engaged fans, we embedded intricate puzzles and codes within the commentary that accompanied the photos. These puzzles were designed for hardcore participants who thrived on solving challenges and decoding hidden meanings. Some required deep knowledge of Stephen King's works, while others involved cracking complex ciphers or solving multi-layered clues that linked back to the larger narrative of **Dark Score Stories**.

These puzzle elements were deliberately hidden from casual viewers to avoid repelling them with complexity or opacity. Only the most dedicated fans would uncover them, and those who solved the puzzles discovered premium video content they could then share, thereby increasing their social capital and allowing them to communicate their passion to more casual observers.



CLAUSTROPHOBIA

LILJA'S LIBRARY | Michael Noonan

Do not be fooled by their musty, even antique aroma — all books conceal a hidden, raw power within. They swell with secret knowledge, and seduce us to dip headfirst into silent waters of discovery. And even as we dive carelessly, ever downwards, away from the outside world of light and air and safety, the reality of our plight is revealed: We are lost, entrapped, enclosed in a story world.

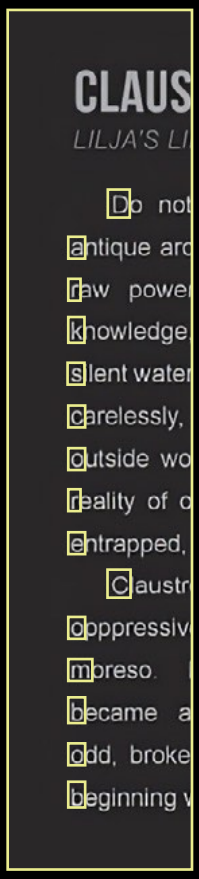
Claustrophobia. Dark Score Lake is an opppressive example of that, this bookstore moreso. My photojournalism assignment became a week-long stay, to document the odd, broken community of Dark Score Lake, beginning with one of its most famous sons.

Did Michael Noonan feel the confines of this shop press against him as he read from his novel? Did he note the nigh-vacuous eyes of these residents, dozens of victims of the town's own constrictor grip?

They invaded Noonan's space, saying little ... but always staring. Predatory? Perhaps.

If Noonan did notice, it never showed. At every turn, he transcended the unsettling mood of the event. He signed on, smiling through bizarre references to his work, and equally bizarre autograph requests.

He even accepted a dinner invitation from several self-proclaimed "superfans." Undoubtedly inspiration for an upcoming book.



CLAUS

LILJA'S LI

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In the first (and easiest) puzzle, fans could discover that the first letter of each line spelled out a web address that held exclusive digital content.

REVERBERATIONS

DARK LAND MUSIC | Edgar Owen

Nearly all of us have heard songs that are *incessant*, vibrating within our minds after the notes fade from our ears. Sometimes these enduring melodies live in our minds for days. Truthfully, sometimes even longer than that.

Exceptional art often inspires love, but its effect can also acidify into zeal. Edgar Owen's neverending affection for singer Sara Tidwell is a symbol of the latter kind.

Frankly, the man mythologizes the woman to the point of hero worship. It's doubtful that he even thinks of her as a person anymore.

Regrettably, he is unaware of this.

Basic discussion topics in Edgar's store always hail back to Tidwell. He has rows of terrific blues records over there ... however, most are hers. That fiddle may have been used in a Tidwell recording. Here is a harmonica brand she made her music with in the 1930s.

Even his establishment feels like more a taxidermy than music store. Instruments hang from the walls, revered like safari trophies. A wing of the shop is reserved for guitar repair; their broken necks abide, maimed, on worktables, a morgue for music once living.

Tidwell is of an era before this modernity dismaying Edgar so. And by keeping Tidwell here as a living presence, Edgar may have gone mad.

HOLY GROUND

CHIZMAR MEMORIAL CEMETERY | Brenda Meserve

A dreary north wind keeps the noise of the prayer closeby. The somber woman in black recites grimly. Again and again she speaks her incantation, with methodical stride from monument to monument, offering peace to the dead.

Each hymn reaffirms her, providing more devotion to her grim task. She refuses to cite a purpose for her monthly rituals — only an unflagging desire to honor the souls under the mossy earth. These are blameless, she says.

Placing her fingers on the nearby small stone, she leaves a rose. Another child's grave.

No memorials are inscribed with cause of death — but Brenda Meserve's heartbroken appearance suggests dark business indeed.

She says she's a housekeeper. She says men make messes. It takes a long time to mop up what's been spilled.

She recognizes my lack of understanding. She tells me to be grateful I don't understand.

She goes back to the stones, and roses, and her mantra about the Lord's protection.

As the story progressed, the puzzles became increasingly obscure.
TOP: An instruction to count every 19th letter after the first B.
BOTTOM: An instruction to count out letters based on the sequence of prime numbers.

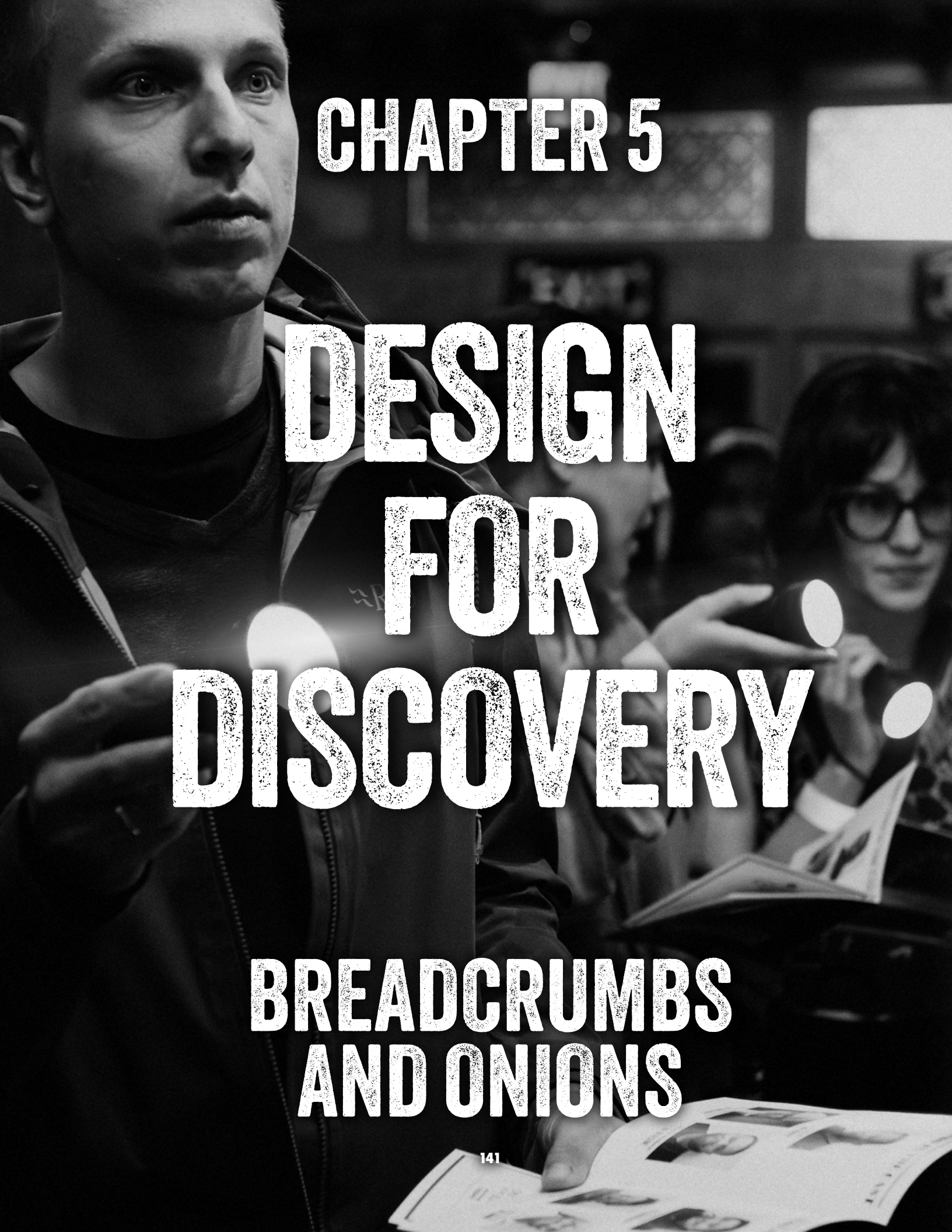
BALANCING EXPERIENCES FOR SKIMMERS, DIPPERS, AND DIVERS

We design experiences that cater to all levels of engagement, whether that means Skimmers, Dippers, or Divers. Each group interacts with the content in different ways, meaning that the success of an experience depends on striking the right balance.

At Campfire, the outcome we're after shapes our strategy. Skimmers are the broadest audience, so they're essential for driving visibility. Reaching them involves creating large-scale, visually compelling experiences that will capture attention. Dippers help amplify the reach of a story through social sharing, creating a buzz that will extend the life of the project. Divers are the heartbeat of participatory storytelling, despite being the smallest of the three groups. Their deep engagement not only sustains the story through content lulls but also enriches the community by drawing others in with their creativity and insights.

Recognizing that each group plays a unique role is key. Skimmers represent mass attention, but designing for them alone can lead to a shallow experience. On the flip side, investing too much in Divers can limit a project's reach. The trick is to design layered experiences that let each group engage on its own terms.

By creating high-level moments for Skimmers; shareable, socially rewarding experiences for Dippers; and complex, in-depth content for Divers, we ensure that the experience resonates with every fan, no matter how they choose to engage.



CHAPTER 5

DESIGN FOR DISCOVERY

BREADCRUMBS AND ONIONS

PREVIOUS: Fans of Hulu's *Only Murders in the Building* search for invisible clues with UV flashlights at **Backstage at the Goosebury**.

CHAPTER 5
DESIGN FOR DISCOVERY
BREADCRUMBS AND ONIONS

THE THRILL OF DISCOVERY: MASQUERADE AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN TREASURE HUNTS

In 1979, a mysterious tome appeared on bookshelves across England. That August, British artist Kit Williams published *Masquerade*, a beautifully illustrated children's book that turned out to be much more than just bedtime stories. Hidden within its intricate artwork was a real-world treasure hunt. Williams had subtly embedded cryptic clues to the location of a golden hare that was buried somewhere in the English countryside. Almost as one, the British people resolved to find it.

Masquerade invited readers to go beyond the page and become *treasure hunters*, working to solve puzzles by decoding its symbolism, before embarking on a quest for a hidden cache. This was pre-internet, so treasure hunters had to rely on their wits, keen eyes, and maybe even letters to newspapers to share hints. Collaboration was rare, which made each personal breakthrough feel that



Cover of the book *Masquerade* by Kit Williams.

much more exhilarating.

Thousands of people worldwide were drawn into the hunt. They pored over every detail, hoping to unlock the secrets concealed in the pages. The quest lasted nearly three years before someone finally unearthed the golden hare. And as much as readers were excited for the discovery itself, *Masquerade* showed us something even more important: the joy was in the thrill of the chase.

Masquerade's legacy endures. It shows that when passive readers become active participants, the experience can be a powerful one, laying the groundwork for alternate reality games (ARGs) and interactive scavenger hunts. When invited to uncover secrets, we don't just follow along with the story. We become integral to it.

WHY WE LOVE TO SOLVE MYSTERIES

There's something deeply satisfying about solving a puzzle or uncovering a hidden message, whether it's as simple as Wordle or Sudoku or as complex as a conspiracy-laden ARG. And what makes these discoveries so rewarding is the way we're wired.

When faced with a challenge, our brains kick into high gear, scanning for patterns and solutions. Scientists Andrew Westbrook and Todd Braver showed in a 2016 paper in the journal *Neuron* that the process releases dopamine, the feel-good chemical in our brain. It's nature's way of giving us a nudge, saying, "You're onto something—keep going!"

And it's not just about solving the puzzle. We get that same rush of dopamine even while anticipating a solution. We stay hooked, even when things get tough, because our brains are wired to chase that "aha!" moment. It's why we find ourselves drawn to treasure hunts, whodunnits, and mysteries. The satisfaction we feel from discovery isn't just in our heads. It's built into our biology.

This dopamine-fueled loop is also what keeps us coming back for more. We get a thrill from the anticipation, another boost from the achievement, and the cycle continues. It's this satisfying rhythm that makes each discovery feel like a personal win, and we can't help but chase that feeling again.

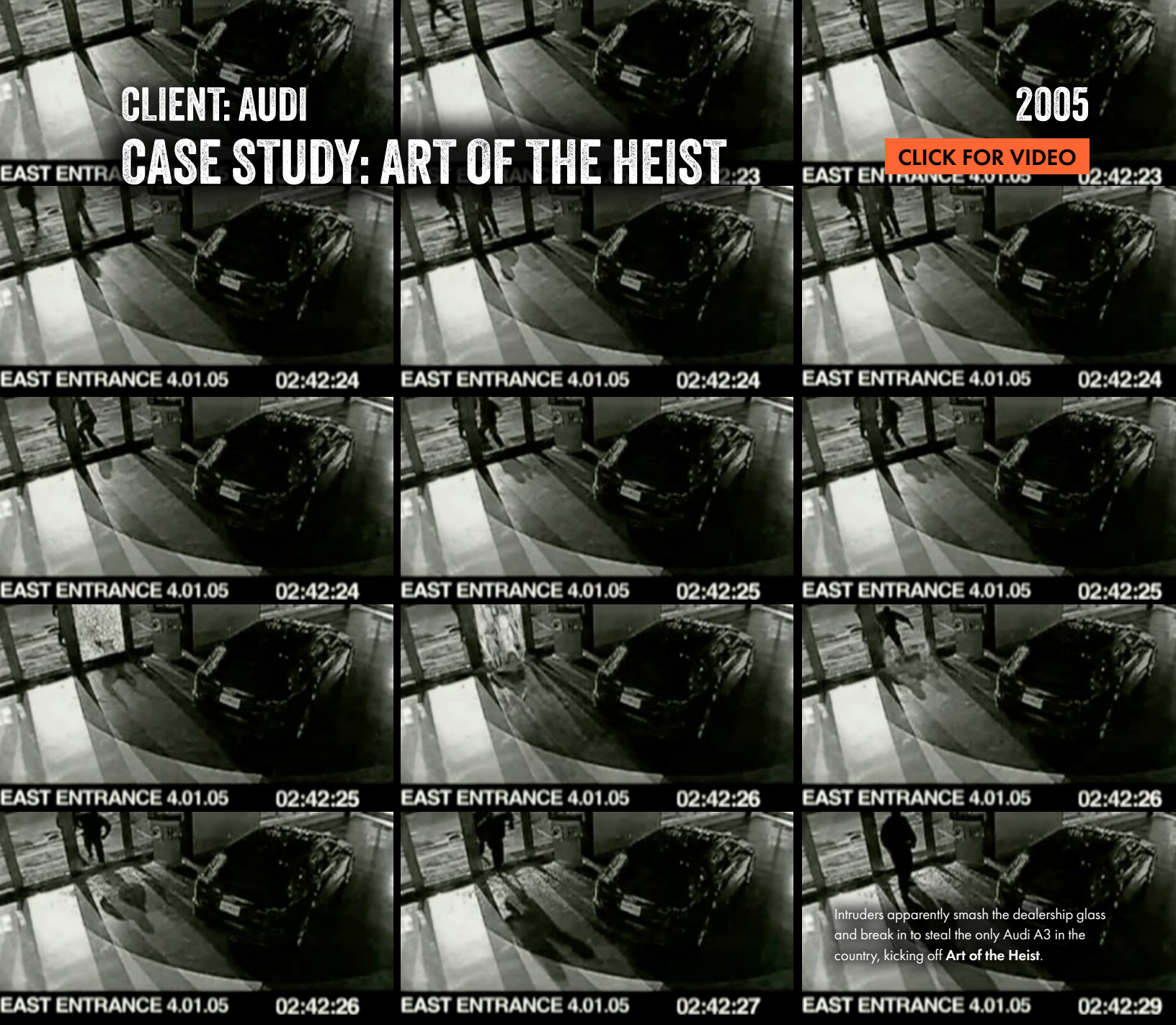
For those of us who design puzzle experiences, tapping into this natural craving for discovery is powerful. When we balance the right amount of challenge with moments of reward, the journeys we create keep people emotionally engaged and personally invested.

THE BREADCRUMB METHOD: A GUIDED ADVENTURE

One way to achieve this ongoing dopamine feedback loop is by creating a clear, carefully designed path for participants, where each clue naturally leads to the next. It's like leaving a trail of breadcrumbs through a forest: each small discovery reassures you that you're heading in the right direction, with the promise of something exciting or worthwhile just ahead. The pleasure comes from choosing to follow the trail, driven by curiosity and momentum rather than compulsion.

This method helps maintain a steady sense of excitement and forward motion, making it especially effective for people who may not wish to dive into complex layers but still want a fun, engaging experience. It's also ideal for large groups or events where we want to involve as many people as possible without overwhelming them. We used this approach in our experience for Audi's **Art of the Heist**, crafting an imaginary art theft around the newly launched Audi A3. Clues were scattered across real-world locations, websites, live events, and videos, each one pulling participants toward the next and inviting them to continue the journey at their own pace.

But the Breadcrumb Method is more than just moving people from one clue to the next. It's also about how each discovery lands emotionally. Every new moment should spark feelings, memories, or thoughts that deepen the audience's connection to the story. When designed responsibly, these breadcrumb trails remain playful and self-contained, ensuring that the emotional journey is just as compelling as the physical one, and that every step forward feels meaningful.



A BREADCRUMB TRAIL

In 2005, Audi® launched **Art of the Heist**, one of the most ambitious and innovative marketing efforts of its time to promote the new Audi A3. The experience hinged on immersive storytelling, blending fictional narrative with real-world interactivity in a way that had never been done before in the automotive industry.

Art of the Heist chronicled a purported high-stakes operation in which two agents were on a mission to retrieve a series of SD cards that had been covertly stashed within the first consignment of Audi A3 vehicles imported into the United States. These cards contained detailed plans for a meticulously orchestrated art heist targeting the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. Recognizing the scope of the threat and the complexity of the search, the agents turned to the public for assistance. The result was a modern-day treasure chase, blending automotive intrigue with the tension of an international crime thriller.



The daring "heist" of the first Audi A3 on American soil at the New York Auto Show was the beginning of a three-month thrill ride. The mystery invited curious minds to follow a trail of clues, starting with a cryptic phone number that transformed onlookers into players in a heist caper.

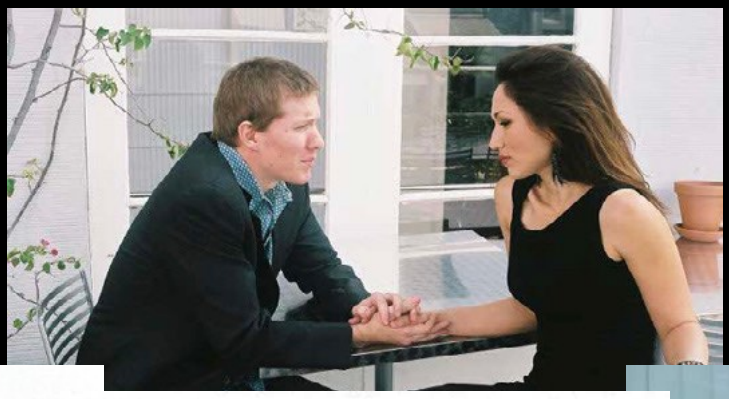
Art of the Heist used an elaborate mix of digital and physical elements to draw participants into its narrative. The story unfolded through a series of cryptic messages, websites, live events, video footage, and even real-world locations, all designed to make marketing indistinguishable from reality. Unlike traditional product placement, the A3 itself was a central character. The story took on a life of its own as real-life participants joined the search for the hidden SD cards in a series of high-energy "retrievals" staged across the United States. From the Coachella Music Festival in California to a branch of Waffle House in Georgia, these events became national spectacles, many livestreamed to audiences of up to half a million viewers. Reflecting on the impact, Audi's then director of marketing, Stephen Berkov, remarked, "It's marketing that pulls in, instead of turns off."



What made **Art of the Heist** different was its participatory design. The story encouraged collaboration among players, who used online forums and message boards to share information, solve puzzles, and theorize about the unfolding mystery. By positioning the participants as active investigators, we fostered a sense of agency and excitement as they collectively tracked down the missing vehicle. This approach embodied Campfire's principles of immersive storytelling and audience engagement, as players became central to the progression of the narrative.

The integration of online forums and real-world interactions was crucial in amplifying the reach and impact. Participants received phone calls, attended live events, and visited locations connected to the heist, creating a fully immersive experience that captured the attention of players and media outlets alike. News of the "heist" spread rapidly, with fans and industry insiders praising its innovative use of transmedia storytelling and interactive engagement. Ultimately, it garnered over two million unique visitors, tens of thousands of participants, 4,000 test-drives within two months, and 75% more dealer leads than any previous model launch for Audi.





Photos, passports, birth certificates, and even security camera footage were forged to blur the lines between fiction and reality. These artifacts drew participants deep into the story, challenging them to work together to unravel the mystery.




DIVISION OF HEALTH – STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
66 0018186
FILED MAY 9 1993
Los Angeles
California
Los Angeles
Brentwood
721 Third St.
5900 Wilsh Blvd.,
Naoko Wu
April 27, 1993
Female.
Asian,
3/21/1968
25
Pilot Knob, Missouri, U.S.A.
Edward F. Wu,
Yukiko Takahashi,
Virgil Tatum
491-61-
Grace Klunk, 5921 Wilsh Blvd. L.A., CA
Internal Bleeding
Car Accident
10:56 P.M.
4201 Watson St.
4/27/93
5/09/1995
Mt. Olivet Cemetary,
Lenay, Missouri,











Meet Virgil (**ABOVE** RIGHT), a video game designer and key player in **Art of the Heist**. His character came to life through vivid photos that captured his interactions with other characters and gaming legends like Kazunori Yamauchi (**RIGHT,** at left), the mastermind behind the *Gran Turismo* series.





Art of the Heist changed how brands could engage with consumers by crafting a narrative that lived beyond traditional advertising. It was widely recognized for its creativity and impact, solidifying Audi's reputation as a forward-thinking brand. It boosted awareness of the A3 and demonstrated how discovery could foster more meaningful connections with their audiences.

THE ONION METHOD: LAYERS OF EXPLORATION

An alternative to breadcrumb trails is to design experiences that encourage participants to work through the story at their own pace, like peeling an onion. There's no strict order or narrative pathway. People can explore freely, deciding how deeply they want to dive into the puzzles.

The guiding principle behind this method is that discovery is deeply personal. Every clue or object we uncover connects with our particular blend of emotions, memories, and perceptions. As we peel back each layer, what's revealed feels unique to each of us.

This suits people who love to explore, who lose themselves in a story. Each new layer pulls us further into the narrative, making the journey feel ever more rewarding. And because there's no set path, this method encourages collaboration, as different people discover different pathways, sharing insights and finding common ground.

Designing non-linear narratives leads to experiences like **Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More***, an immersive theatrical performance inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that was staged in New York (2011–2025). In *Sleep No More*, audience members roamed freely through a sprawling, elaborately designed set. There was no prescribed route. You followed your own curiosity, deciding which rooms to explore and which characters to follow. The magic lay in its unpredictability. Each person's experience was unique, shaped entirely by the path they chose.

This kind of open-ended exploration naturally sparks conversations after the experience is over. People want to share and compare the details of their personal journeys, revealing different angles of the same story. In the process, the experience lives on long after the event has ended.



Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in an intimate scene from *Sleep No More*, surrounded by the masked audience.

COLLECTIVE DISCOVERY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Before platforms like Reddit and Discord existed, most of us tackled puzzles alone or in small, isolated groups. Progress could feel slow and sometimes lonely. But with the rise of social media, everything changed. Suddenly, we had instant access to people all over the world who were working on the same challenges. What used to be an individual effort became a team sport. Now, we could tap into the creativity, insights, and problem-solving skills of a global community, solving puzzles faster and in ways we never could have imagined.

In 2009, the **Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency** (**DARPA**) launched **The Red Balloon Challenge**. The task? Find ten red weather balloons tethered high across the United States in return for a $40,000 prize. But no clues to their locations were provided. Players were tasked with almost literally finding ten needles in a haystack, a near impossibility without a different kind of collaborative effort. Indeed, the real challenge was to see how quickly people could mobilize using digital communication. Players soon realized they couldn't do it alone. They needed to build large, distributed teams to cover more ground.

The eventual winners from MIT came up with a clever solution. Rather than solving the problem of *where* to find the balloons, they focused on *how* to find

them. So, they built an incentive system that rewarded participants not only for finding balloons but for recruiting others to join the search, much like a multi-level marketing effort, built on the power of social connections. Thanks to this, they found all ten balloons tethered across the U.S. *within nine hours!* It showed how, when a challenge requires participants to work together across digital platforms, they can achieve things that would be nearly impossible alone.



The weather balloons from the **DARPA Red Balloon Challenge**.

THE SEARCH FOR SATOSHI: SOLVING MYSTERIES TOGETHER

Another story of collective discovery was the race to find the mysterious Satoshi, a quest that originated with the ARG *Perplex City*. Created by London-based Mind Candy in 2005, the game revolved around clues hidden in foil puzzle cards that were sold in retail outlets. The overall aim was to find the "Receda Cube," an artifact of spiritual significance to the inhabitants of a fictional metropolis known as "Perplex City" and said to have great scientific value. We learned in the game that the Cube had been stolen and buried somewhere on Earth (and was eventually discovered in a wooded area in Northamptonshire, UK, two years later).



ABOVE: The "Billion to One" Puzzle.

One particular puzzle card was entitled Billion to One and featured the face of a man it claimed was named Satoshi, alongside a caption that simply read Find Me in Japanese. If DARPA's red balloons had been ten needles in a haystack, this was one needle hidden among a thousand haystacks.

Early on, players began building hubs to gather clues. One of the most important was FindSatoshi.com, launched in 2006 by Laura E. Hall, which helped consolidate leads and keep the trail alive as the hunt sprawled across forums and fan-made sites. Even at its most fragmented, the search relied on people comparing notes, translating scraps of text, and checking one another's assumptions.

Years later, the hunt found a second life. A viral YouTube video reignited interest, drawing in new participants and reviving discussion spaces where newcomers could get up to speed and veterans could resurface overlooked discoveries. In 2020, Tom-Lucas Säger used AI facial-recognition image search to locate a newer photo of Satoshi online. With that lead, Hall and the community were able to contact him directly, and Mind Candy confirmed his identity, closing the loop after fourteen years.

It's tempting to credit the breakthrough to a tool, but the real lesson is communal. Social media didn't provide a silver bullet; it provided *continuity*: ways to share progress, preserve hard-won knowledge, and keep a mystery alive long enough for the right insight to land. The platforms changed, but the work remained human: people returning, revisiting, and carrying the search forward together.

Online platforms have made it far easier for people with shared interests to find each other and collaborate. Whether we're uncovering hidden messages in an immersive game or solving real-world puzzles like the DARPA challenge, these communities become hubs where collective intelligence helps us to thrive. There, we can pool our knowledge, skills, and perspectives, amplifying our ability to solve problems.

And for games like *Perplex City*, these communities are *essential*. For many of us, the joy of discovery comes from being part of a team working toward a common goal. The social aspect adds depth to the experience, making it more meaningful because it's shared. As we celebrate victories and support each other through challenges, camaraderie, connection, and a sense of belonging ensue.

EXPLORING PHYSICAL SPACES: FROM GUIDED PATHS TO OPEN-ENDED ADVENTURES

Just as the digital world has expanded how we discover and collaborate, physical spaces offer their own special magic. They let us dive into stories with all our senses, exploring environments that feel as real as the world around us. You can see this in the rise of escape rooms since they were first developed in Japan in 2007, spreading from big cities to smaller towns, colleges, and malls.

Escape rooms and other immersive puzzle chases work best using the Breadcrumb Method, when there's a clear path to follow. In these scenarios, participants move along a structured route, with clues placed strategically to unfold in a specific order. It's a guided journey that creates a satisfying sense of progress as each part of the narrative is unlocked.

In our activation for Hulu®'s *Only Murders in the Building* Season Three, fans were able to step into a recreated Goosebury Theater, a key location from the show, armed with UV flashlights to search for hidden messages. Each discovery logically led to the next, guiding fans through the space in a linear yet highly immersive fashion. It was designed to mirror the mystery-solving process from the show, keeping participants engaged as they moved from one clue to the next.

CLIENT: HULU

2023

CASE STUDY: ONLY MURDERS IN THE BUILDING: BACKSTAGE AT THE GOOSEBURY

CLICK FOR VIDEO

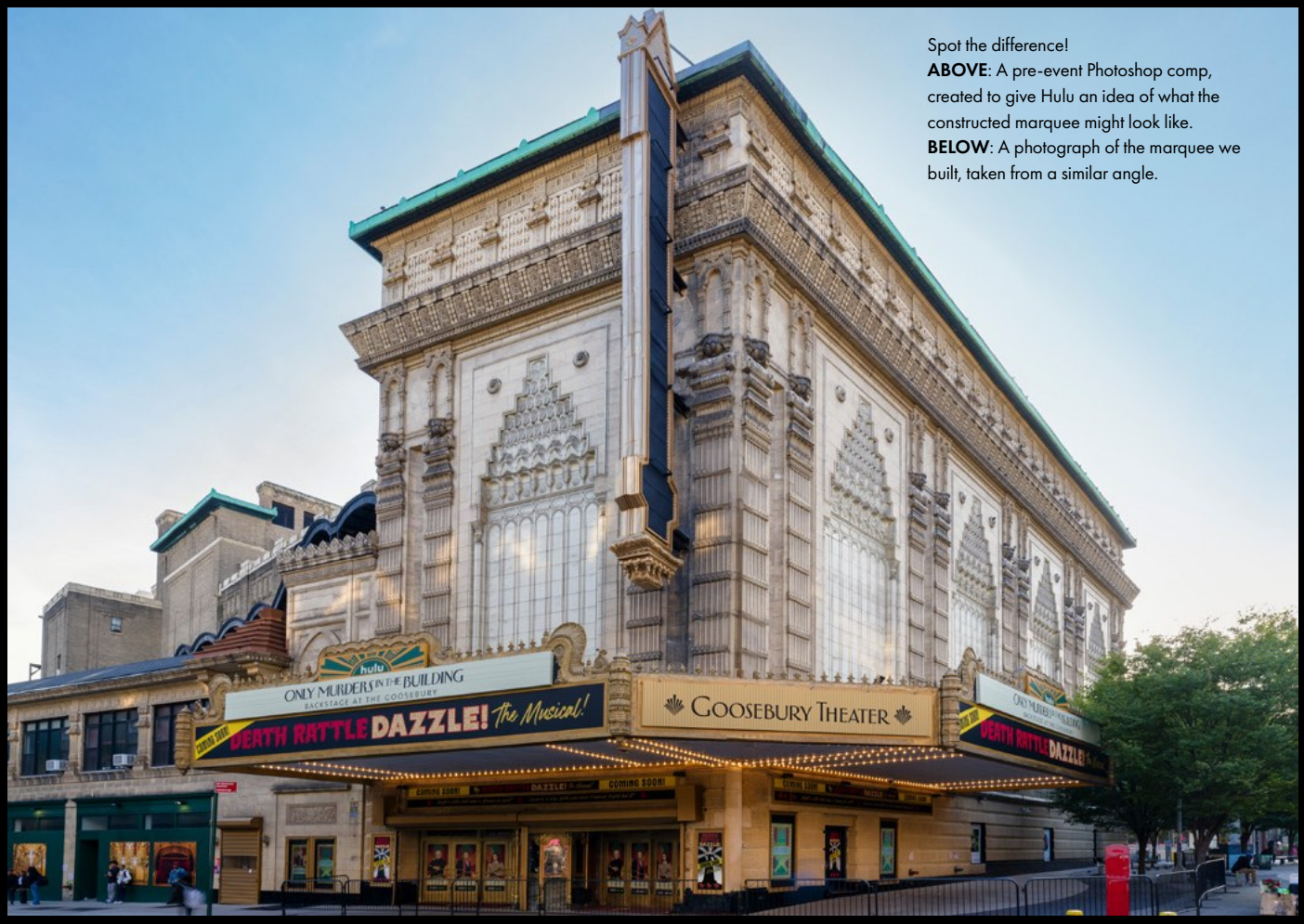


The original set from the musical *Death Rattle Dazzle* rebuilt on stage. Fans could climb the steps of the Pickwick Lighthouse for a one-of-a-kind photo opportunity.

WHEN FANS BECOME SLEUTHS

In the fall of 2023, Campfire designed an immersive experience for Hulu®'s *Only Murders in the Building*. This brought fans directly into the heart of the series in the form of an important location from the show's third season: the Goosebury Theater. The goal was for attendees to feel like they were part of the show's amateur detective team, unraveling secrets in real time.





Spot the difference!
ABOVE: A pre-event Photoshop comp, created to give Hulu an idea of what the constructed marquee might look like.
BELOW: A photograph of the marquee we built, taken from a similar angle.

Side-by-side comparisons of the pre-event renders and the actual installation.

















The experience began as fans entered the meticulously recreated Goosebury Theater, a space filled with clues, props, and rich environmental details pulled straight from the world of the show. Each participant was handed a UV flashlight, their key to the journey ahead. Using it, attendees uncovered invisible messages and symbols scattered throughout the theater, and these guided them onward. This structure mirrored the investigative process of the show, as each discovery naturally led to the next, creating a linear but immersive path through the activation.







RIGHT: A fan examines an evidence tag with a UV flashlight to reveal a clue written in invisible ink.

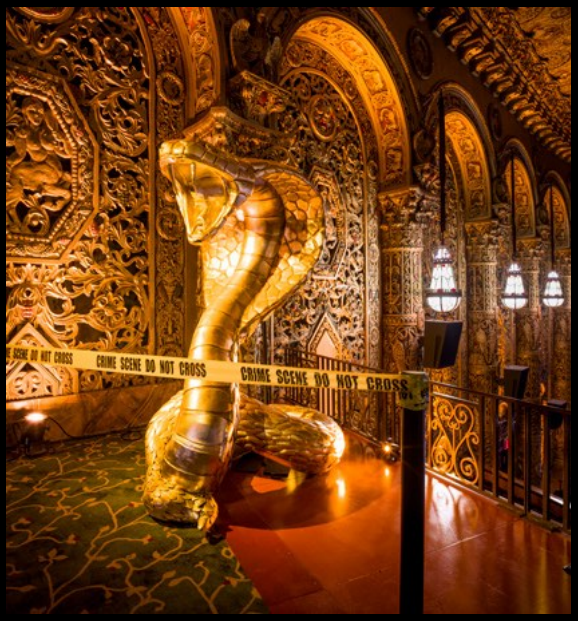
BELOW: Evidence tables featured actual props from the show, including bloodied costumes.





Our design fed the thrill of mystery-solving. Attendees actively pieced clues together, rather than simply observing the investigation. The careful placement of clues and strategic use of UV flashlights heightened the suspense and excitement, keeping participants engaged from start to finish.



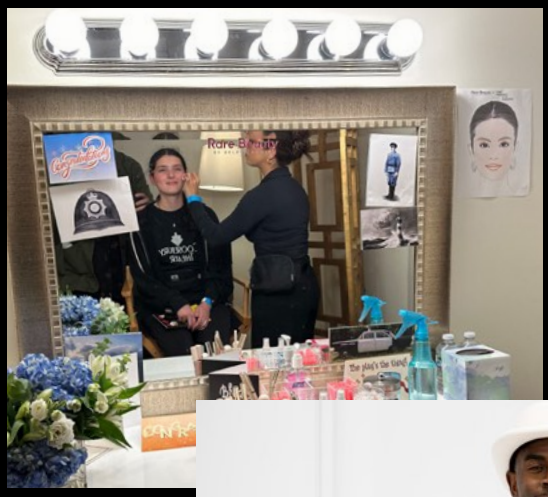


On an upper level, a shrine to a character murdered in the show invited fans to leave memorial messages, prompting more than 3,000 personalized notes over the course of a few days.





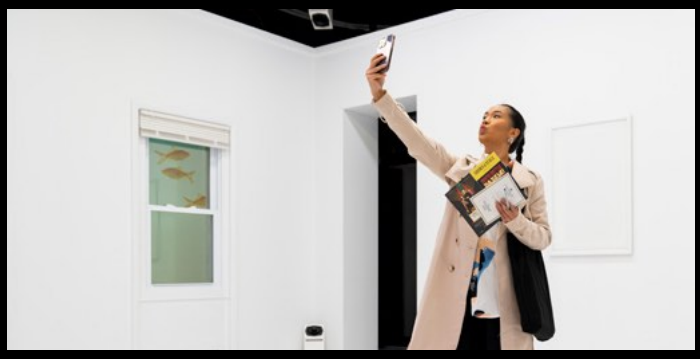




Backstage, fans could leave their signature on the wall and receive a free makeover in the dressing rooms, care of Only Murders star Selena Gomez's *Rare Beauty*® line.





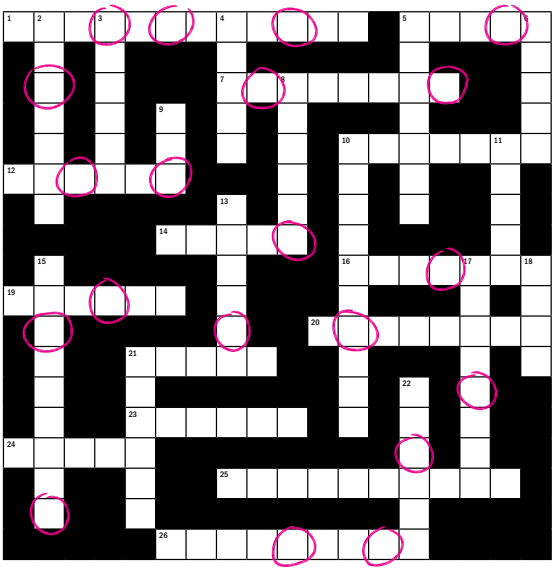






On the stage, fans recreated moments from the show within the show.

CROSSWORD



?

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

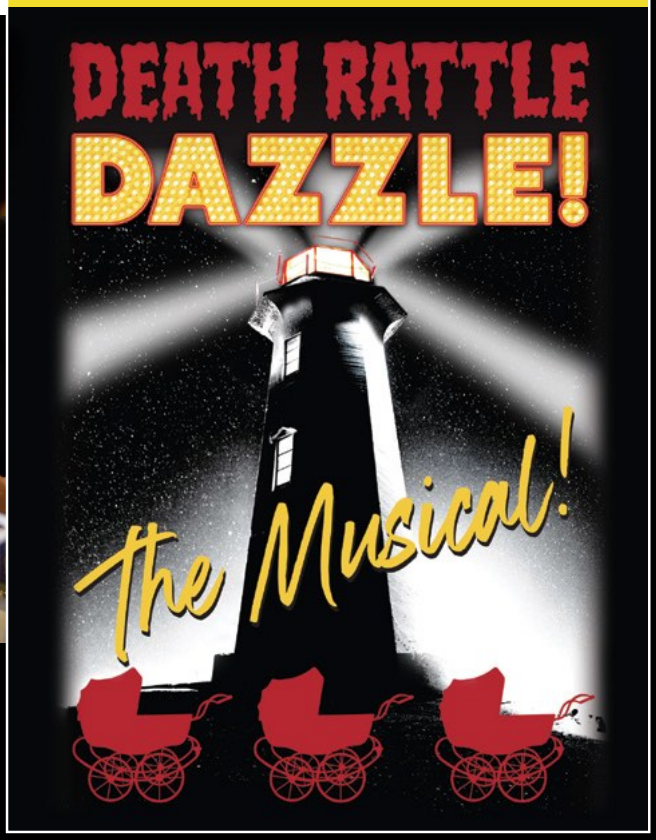
1 Opening night gift. (12)
5 Common to goldfish and fungi. (5)
7 A child's cradle. (8)
10 Cult classic TV show. (7)
12 He haunts his namesake theater. (6)
14 Reborn as a musical. *(also 13 down & 3 down)* (5, 6, 6)
16 *See 26 across*.
19 Dill, sweet, brine; also diner. (6)
20 Ice + candle, rhyme and combine for patter. (8)
21 *See 22 down*.
23 Often precedes *3 down*.
24 *See 21 down*.
25 Beacon for navigational aid. (25)
26 Named after *12 across*. *(also 16 across)* (9, 7)

DOWN

2 Art deco apartment home to the stars. (7)
3 *See 14 across*.
4 Zoologist who morphs into a reptile to save the day. (5)
5 *See 9 down*.
6 A superstitious stage cleaning. (5)
8 Aquatic movie and failed Broadway musical. (6)
9 Star of *10 across* and *4 down*. *(also 5 down)* (3, 7)
10 Shines in the darkness of *26 across*. (5, 5)
11 Nickname of the Director behind some of the most outrageous Broadway productions. (5)
13 *See 14 across*.
15 Seated rehearsal, actors plus orchestra. (9)
17 Three of a kind. (8)
18 From down to up on a stage; also a gardening tool. (4)
21 A tool for figuring out whodunnit. *(also 24 across)* (6, 5)
22 An upcoming podcast from a fan favorite. *(also 21 across)* (6, 5)

SHOWS & STAGE

GOOSEBURY THEATER





Each visitor received a special playbill containing an *Only Murders in the Building*-themed crossword (which could be solved by finding the hidden clues), leading them to uncover another mystery that would be revealed in the finale episode.

This approach also allowed each participant to decide just how far down the rabbit hole they wanted to go. As they followed the path, attendees self-selected the level of sleuthing that was right for them. Some took detailed notes and read every UV clue. Others took a few photos of key pieces of evidence and continued on.





ABOVE: A fan placing a pin in the "Murder Board" to mark their prime suspect.
BELOW: The Campfire team poses on the steps of the lighthouse where the *Death Rattle Dazzle* murder occurred.







The activation was a huge success, drawing thousands of fans over the course of the weekend and generating significant buzz across social media, with over 7.5 billion impressions. Attendees praised the experience for its interactivity and the seamless integration of story elements from the show. It was also covered by major entertainment outlets, receiving accolades for our innovative approach to immersive storytelling.

Applying the Breadcrumb Method to environmental design works especially well for large groups or events where managing the flow of people is critical. It helps maintain a steady pace and prevents participants from feeling overwhelmed by too many options. Keeping everyone on a linear path means they experience key moments and unlock the story in a way that feels intentional and exciting.

Conversely, some experiences shine when we're given the freedom to roam and discover at our own pace. When there's no set path, we can wander wherever our curiosity leads us, uncovering parts of the story in any order we choose. This creates a deeply personal experience, one where every journey feels unique and each person can follow whatever intrigues them most.

We employed the Onion Method for Hulu's **Animayhem Factory** at SDCC in 2024. Attendees entered a whimsical, puzzle-filled world in which multiple stations were each tied to a different animated series in Hulu's stable, including *The Simpsons*, *American Dad*, *Family Guy*, and many others. While participants were directed along a loosely prescribed route, they were free to dive as deep as they wanted into each installation. Some explored every detail, uncovering hidden layers of their favorite narratives, while others moved quickly from one station to the next, opting to skim the surface instead.



SDCC 2024 attendees line up to enter Hulu's **Animayhem Factory.**

CLIENT: HULU

2024

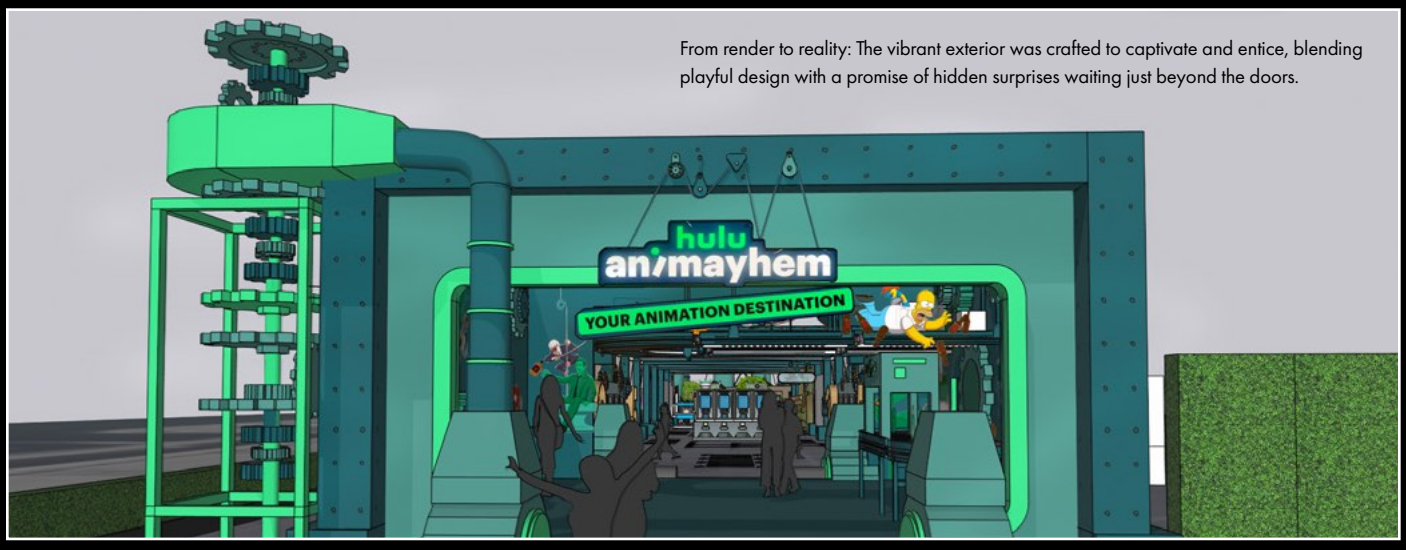
CASE STUDY: ANIMAYHEM FACTORY

CLICK FOR VIDEO

AN ANIMATED WORLD OF DISCOVERY AND MAYHEM

Campfire's **Animayhem Factory** for Hulu® showcased the potential of a **non-linear exploratory environment**, designed to immerse participants in a playful, interactive world. In this experience, attendees visited a whimsical factory filled with puzzles, games, hidden messages, and Easter eggs. They could follow a path through everything, or pick the shows and activities that interested them, at their own pace.

A selection of interactive stations centered on 10 different Hulu animated series. On arrival, attendees could decide for themselves how deep they wanted to go at each station.

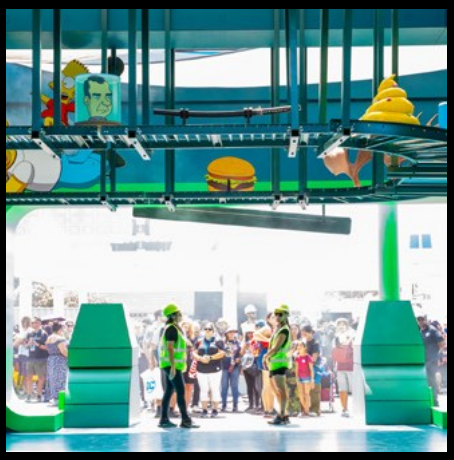


From render to reality: The vibrant exterior was crafted to captivate and entice, blending playful design with a promise of hidden surprises waiting just beyond the doors.













TOP TO BOTTOM: The Factory Entrance, The *Solar Opposites* Stress Test, *The Simpsons* Lard Lad Donut Factory, and the Slurm Factory from *Futurama.*













We celebrated *Family Guy*'s 25th anniversary with 25 props, each representing an iconic cutaway gag from the series. Fans could place these RFID-tagged props on pedestals that triggered the infamous clips, allowing them to relive some of the show's funniest moments. Superfans could explore each one to discover "deep cut" moments specifically selected to appeal to them. If you were not a big *Family Guy* fan, you could skip the experience and take a deeper dive with a series that you loved more.







RFID tags hidden in iconic "animated props" from 25 years of Family Guy cutaway gags let fans step into the humor. Placing a prop on a pedestal brought the corresponding gag to life. Technology powered the discovery, keeping the spotlight squarely on the comedy.







The *Solar Opposites* Stress Test offered fans, and curious newcomers, a hilarious glimpse into the show's quirky, sci-fi humor, complete with a personal encounter with the oddball, Goobler-spouting characters.





The *Bob's Burgers* Record-O-Matic made fans part of the show, letting them explore a library of end-credit songs, pick a favorite, and create a custom video starring themselves dancing alongside the Belchers.



Of course, all these different show-specific immersive moments added up to a larger story about Hulu's Animayhem. That's what made the **Animayhem Factory** a layered experience, where each element was part of a broader narrative waiting to be pieced together.







Fans teamed up to reassemble Roger's alien parts, forging connections through shared experiences and a mutual love for *American Dad*.





Fans embarked on a quest to find the Bonsai Master's sword, immersing themselves in the world of Marvel's *Hit-Monkey*. This interactive experience introduced newcomers to the show, sparking curiosity and building a personal connection to its unique story and characters.









The Animayhem Break Room offered fans three different ways to dive into discovery before the grand finale. They could peek into *The Great North*'s cozy cabin by opening the refrigerator, select quirky items from the *Krapopolis* vending machine to unlock related clips, or channel their inner detective by solving bizarre crimes from *Grimsburg*. These experiences brought new or lesser-known shows into the spotlight, sitting comfortably alongside long-time fan favorites.

The Simpsons Lard Lad Donut Factory treated fans to free "nuclear waste frosted donuts," turning a simple food giveaway into a memorable immersive experience steeped in the show's iconic humor and storytelling.









LEFT: Fans tasted Futurama's beloved "Slurm" fresh from the Slurm Queen's anus, reliving iconic moments and discovering hidden details. **BOTTOM**: Upon exiting, fans were gifted collectible pins from their favorite show and a tool belt/fanny pack designed to look like it came right out of our Animayhem Factory, a unique gift that cemented fans' memories of the experience.





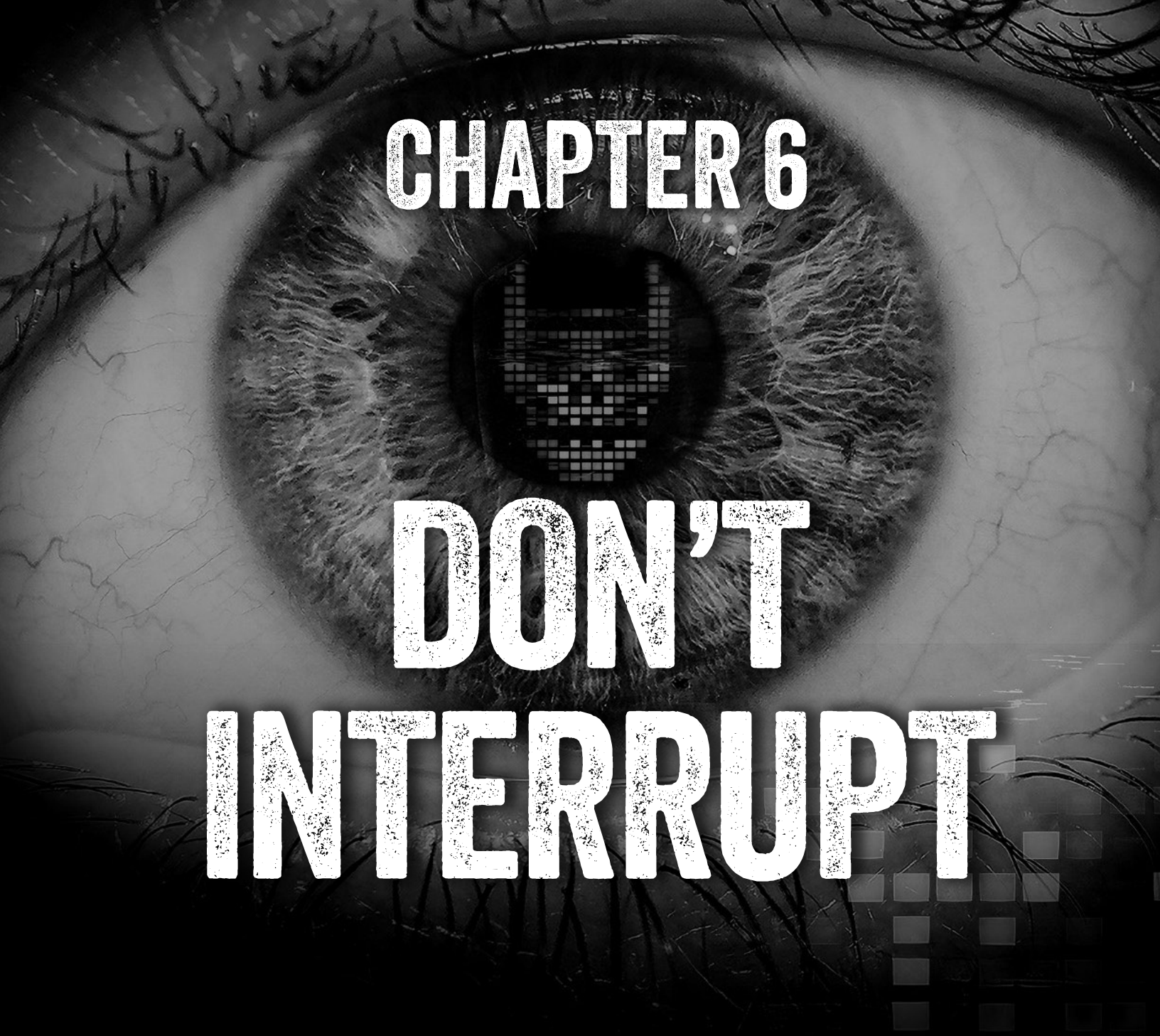


The Hulu Animayhem Factory brought together a diverse range of animated worlds under one roof: a bustling factory where the chaos of various beloved shows could thrive in harmony. This connective concept made it easy for fans to explore new stories alongside familiar favorites, creating an environment where discovery felt natural and seamless. By blending shared spaces with individual narratives, the factory encouraged personalized journeys and collective storytelling, giving each participant a sense of ownership over their adventure.

Non-linear design lets participants explore in a way that feels right for them. Whether they spend hours at one station or breeze through the entire space, they get to choose how deeply they want to engage. And we've often observed that it's these kinds of open-ended environments that spark the most collaboration, as participants share their discoveries with one another, piecing the broader story together through collective effort.

Whether we're designing a linear journey or an open-ended world, the key to creating powerful discovery experiences lies in understanding how people feel as they move through them.

When we balance challenge, excitement, and reward, our designs stay with people. Whether they're following a breadcrumb trail or peeling back layers of a complex narrative, the thrill of discovery keeps people engaged and invested. When done well, these moments stay with us long after the experience ends, sparking conversations, memories, and connections that continue to unfold over time.



CHAPTER 6

DON'T INTERRUPT

TELLING NEW STORIES IN OLD MEDIUMS

PREVIOUS: Artwork to promote **Video Palace**, which was developed as an original narrative podcast and a published collection of short horror stories. The streaming service Shudder's brand values were built into the themes addressed by both the podcast and the book.

CHAPTER 6
DON'T INTERRUPT
TELLING NEW STORIES IN OLD MEDIUMS

Up to this point, we've been talking about physical spaces: pop-up stores, themed streets, immersive theater. But what happens when there is no venue, no activation, no physical space? What happens when the content *itself* is the world?

Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff told a class that storytellers should "tell new stories in old mediums, and old stories in new mediums." Elena Parker was in that room, and she brought the line back to us. It's deceptively simple advice that contains two distinct ideas. If you're working in a new or unfamiliar medium (for example, an AR experience or a spatial game), anchor it in a story structure your audience already knows: a treasure hunt, a detective mystery, a fairy tale. The familiar narrative helps people find their footing in an unfamiliar space.

But if you're working in a format the audience already trusts (a podcast, a morning show, a documentary, even a retail store), that's where you have permission to fill it with something they've never encountered before. That second idea is what this chapter is about. We call it **format subversion**: inhabiting a familiar format so completely that the audience accepts the story as native to it.

But first, a cautionary tale...

Once upon a time, in the snowy burg of Hohman, Indiana, there lived a boy named Ralphie Parker. Ralphie was an ordinary kid with an extraordinary dream: to decode a secret message from his favorite radio show, *Little Orphan Annie*. He dutifully sent away for the coveted secret decoder pin, having carefully collected Ovaltine labels to earn his place in the show's exclusive club.



Finally, the golden envelope appeared in the mail. Inside was the decoder pin, gleaming like a treasure. Ralphie was ecstatic. That evening, as the familiar voice of the announcer crackled over the family radio, he waited with bated breath. The moment came: the announcer read out the numbers, the code to unlock the secret message. Ralphie ran upstairs to his room, decoder pin in hand.

After much concentration, he pieced together the words. His heart raced with anticipation. The secret message was revealed!

"Be sure to drink your Ovaltine."

And so, young Ralphie learned a hard truth: even the most thrilling adventures can be hijacked by someone trying to sell you something. After all the waiting, the decoding, the breathless promise of hidden meaning, the great secret turned out to be a crummy ad. Yet somehow, despite the disappointment, Ralphie couldn't help but notice how close it all came to meaning something more.

This WTF moment is brought to you by the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, and yes, it's based on a true promotion that ran from 1935 to 1940. *Little Orphan Annie was* sponsored by Ovaltine and *did* issue decoder pins for the young listeners who mailed in enough proofs of purchase. Ralphie's decoder-pin disappointment offers a fictional glimpse into the early days of advertising, when entertainment and marketing first began to collide.

THE SKIP BUTTON AND THE OPPORTUNITY IT CREATED

Ralphie's disappointment captures a tension as old as commercial media. From the first newspaper ads of the 17th century to radio soap operas, TV commercials, and internet pop-ups, the pattern has repeated: advertisers find a way to reach audiences, audiences find a way to tune them out, and advertisers scramble for a new approach.

The internet accelerated this cycle to the breaking point. Ad-blocking software, the skip button on YouTube, and a generation raised on on-demand content made one thing inescapable: attention can no longer be interrupted into existence. It has to be earned.

But this also creates an opportunity. If audiences won't tolerate content that interrupts their experience, what if you create content that is the experience? What if the brand casts a spell instead of bre*aking* one?

This is the premise behind **format subversion**: build your own content inside a format the audience already trusts.

And it has a longer history than you might think.

THE PIONEERS OF FORMAT SUBVERSION

On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre company broadcast an adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* on CBS Radio. What made the broadcast extraordinary wasn't the story itself. It was the *format*. Welles presented an alien invasion as a series of increasingly urgent news bulletins interrupting a music program. He inhabited the conventions of live radio news so faithfully, from the breathless reporter and the crackling field dispatch to the somber authority of the anchor, that listeners who tuned in after the opening disclaimer believed they were hearing real coverage of an actual landing.

The resulting panic has been somewhat exaggerated over the decades, but the lesson was real: when you reproduce a trusted format faithfully, the audience's relationship with that format does your work for you. They don't need to be told to believe. They already do.

Forty years later, Eric Idle and Neil Innes applied the same principle to comedy with *All You Need Is Cash* (1978), better known as *The Rutles*. More than a parody of the Beatles, it was a fabricated cultural history inhabiting the form of a straight documentary, an early mockumentary years before *This Is Spinal Tap* made the style widely recognizable to American audiences.

To create the illusion, Innes composed original songs that inhabited the Beatles' sonic evolution so precisely (from early pop through psychedelia) that they functioned as music on their own terms. (It's a technique we'll encounter again in Chapter Eight with the mysterious case of Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings.)

Real cultural figures, including Mick Jagger and George Harrison, appeared in the Rutles documentary, lending the fiction an unsettling credibility. Fake archival

footage, album covers, and interviews created a complete alternate history that was simultaneously a tribute, a satire, and a demonstration of just how far format subversion could go.

The Rutles proved that original music, crafted with enough care, could inhabit a cultural moment so convincingly that it became indistinguishable from the real thing. Decades later, we applied a version of the same principle to our project for Amazon Prime Video, **Resistance Radio** (see Chapter Eight), not by fabricating songs, but by transforming real ones. Contemporary artists re-recorded 1960s hits as they might have sounded in a world where the Axis powers won the war and rock'n' roll never existed. The familiar became uncanny, and that uncanniness became the emotional engine.



In 1992, the BBC broadcast *Ghostwatch* on Halloween night, a live investigation of an alleged haunting in a London suburb, hosted by the famous BBC presenter Michael Parkinson. The production used every convention of live television: studio cross-cutting to a reporter in the field, phone-ins from viewers, and the slow escalation of unexplained events. It was, of course, entirely scripted and performed by actors, but the format subversion was so convincing that the BBC switchboard was overwhelmed with thousands of calls from terrified viewers.

What these examples reveal is that the audience's trust in a format functions like infrastructure. News bulletins, documentaries, live investigations. Each carries built-in expectations about truth and authenticity. **Format subversion** depends on that common language. When done well, the audience doesn't experience the content as fiction wearing the clothes of fact. They simply experience the

format, and the story arrives through it naturally.

BRANDS ENTER THE PICTURE

Twenty years later, Red Bull went further. Felix Baumgartner's Stratos skydive in 2012 was streamed live to over 9.5 million concurrent viewers on YouTube. On the surface, it looked like a stunt. But the format being subverted was something older: a historic live broadcast. The NASA moon landing. Evel Knievel's televised jumps. The kind of "will he survive?" TV special that viewers already had a visceral relationship with. Red Bull created a spectacle that felt like a global event. By stepping into the role of broadcaster, they allowed the audience to experience Stratos as history in the making.

That same year, the marketing team behind Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* created a short prequel featuring Guy Pearce as Peter Weyland, the fictional founder of the Weyland Corporation, delivering a TED Talk set in the near future. It was released through TED's own channels, inhabiting the format of the keynote address so convincingly that it expanded the film's universe without ever feeling like a trailer. The format, the inspirational tech talk, did the heavy lifting. Thanks



to the internet, the audience already knew how to receive a TED Talk, and the fiction arrived through that trust.

Both examples show format subversion operating in different environments: Stratos by inhabiting the language of a historic broadcast event, and Prometheus by slipping into a real-world platform where the fiction became indistinguishable from its surroundings.

At Campfire, we wanted to push this even further.

INHABITING THE FORMAT

Our approach was to inhabit a format so completely that the content felt native to it. A home makeover series where the technology being installed happened to be the client's product. A morning show that happened to be set the day after a dystopian national holiday. A pirate radio station broadcasting from inside an alternate history.

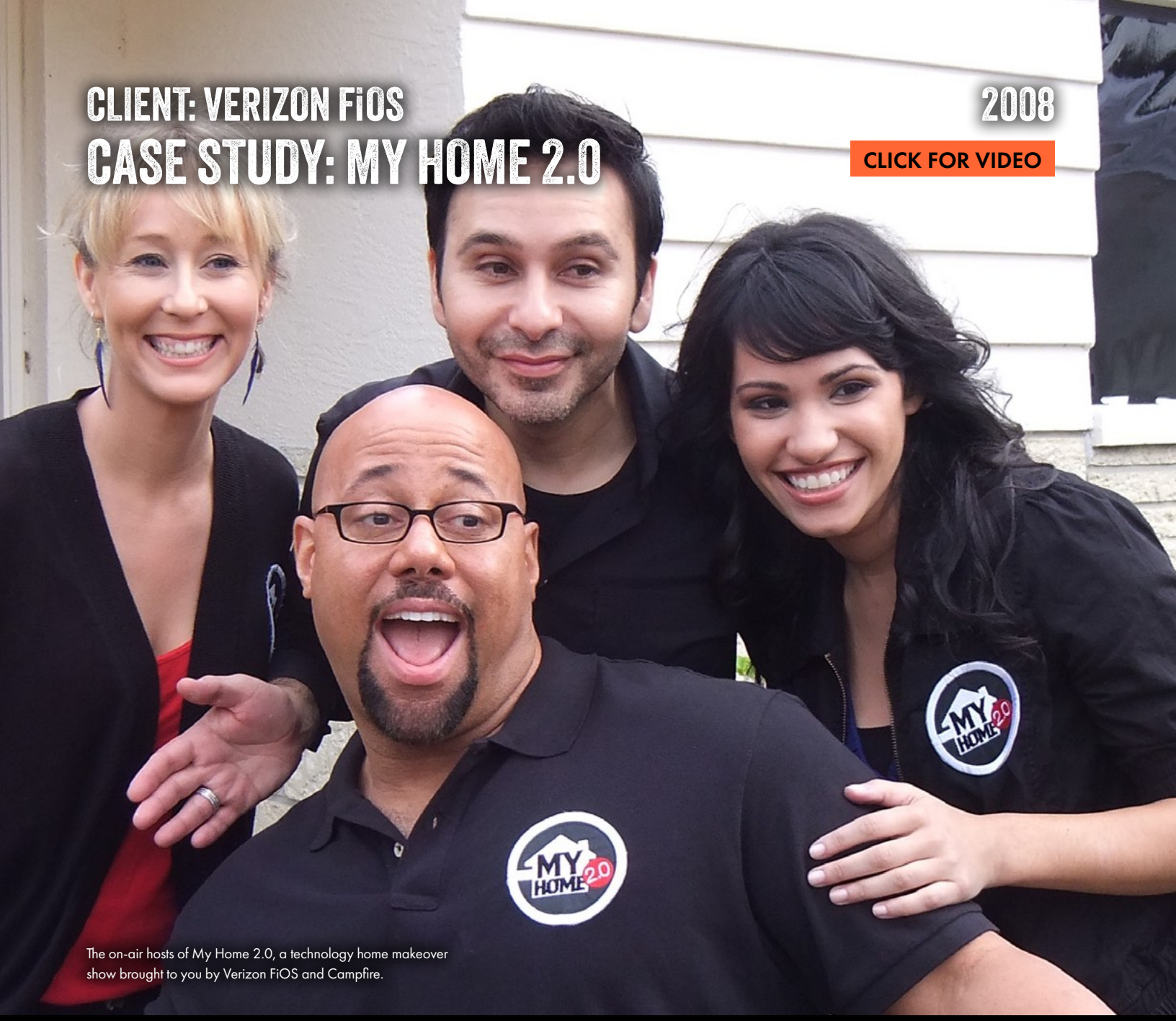
We found that respecting the conventions of a format, including its pacing, tone, and expectations, earns you the right to place your story inside it. The audience engages because the format feels familiar, and the story lands because it doesn't ask permission to be there.

CLIENT: VERIZON FiOS

CASE STUDY: MY HOME 2.0

2008

CLICK FOR VIDEO



The on-air hosts of My Home 2.0, a technology home makeover show brought to you by Verizon FiOS and Campfire.

TURNING FiOS INTO A STORY FAMILIES COULD FEEL

When Verizon FiOS® first approached Campfire, it had a challenge: breaking a 20% sign-up ceiling for FiOS in its service areas. The problem? Offering benefits like "faster internet" and "better picture quality" wasn't connecting with families who thought their current setup was "good enough." FiOS needed a story that would make its value emotional, not just technical. **My Home 2.0** was the answer, a home makeover series that transformed Verizon's approach to marketing.

We reimagined Verizon's existing efforts to create a cohesive narrative for families. Home and houseware shows became audition spaces where families could candidly share their frustrations with outdated technology, giving the show an authentic emotional core. Block parties were transformed into "My Home 2.0 Reveal Parties," vibrant block events where residents could celebrate alongside their neighbors, watch domestic transformations unfold live on jumbotrons, and experience FiOS in action through interactive games, activities, and a TV show that was being produced right in their neighborhood.











The show's format followed that of any home makeover show: interviews with a family in need, charismatic hosts overseeing a secret home tech revamp, followed by a dramatic, feel-good reveal.







Traditional ads like door hangers and radio spots invited families to audition for the show, creating a personal connection before introducing FiOS. Series episodes integrated FiOS commercials seamlessly, contextualizing the service within real stories of family upgrades and turning passive promotion into relatable moments of inspiration.

Over 13 episodes, from Pennsylvania to Florida, **My Home 2.0** showcased real families and their upgraded homes, creating genuine buzz in local communities. Viewers could clearly see how FiOS empowered creativity and enhanced family life, turning the humdrum promise of "faster internet" into a story about possibility.



From open auditions to celebrity appearances, our **My Home 2.0** street fairs provided spectacle and excitement for entire neighborhoods.













FiOS ads during the show delivered stellar new engagement compared with other placements. Dialogue shifted from generic features to emotional benefits, making FiOS relatable and real. Each episode amplified excitement in new markets, making **My Home 2.0** an event people wanted to be part of.

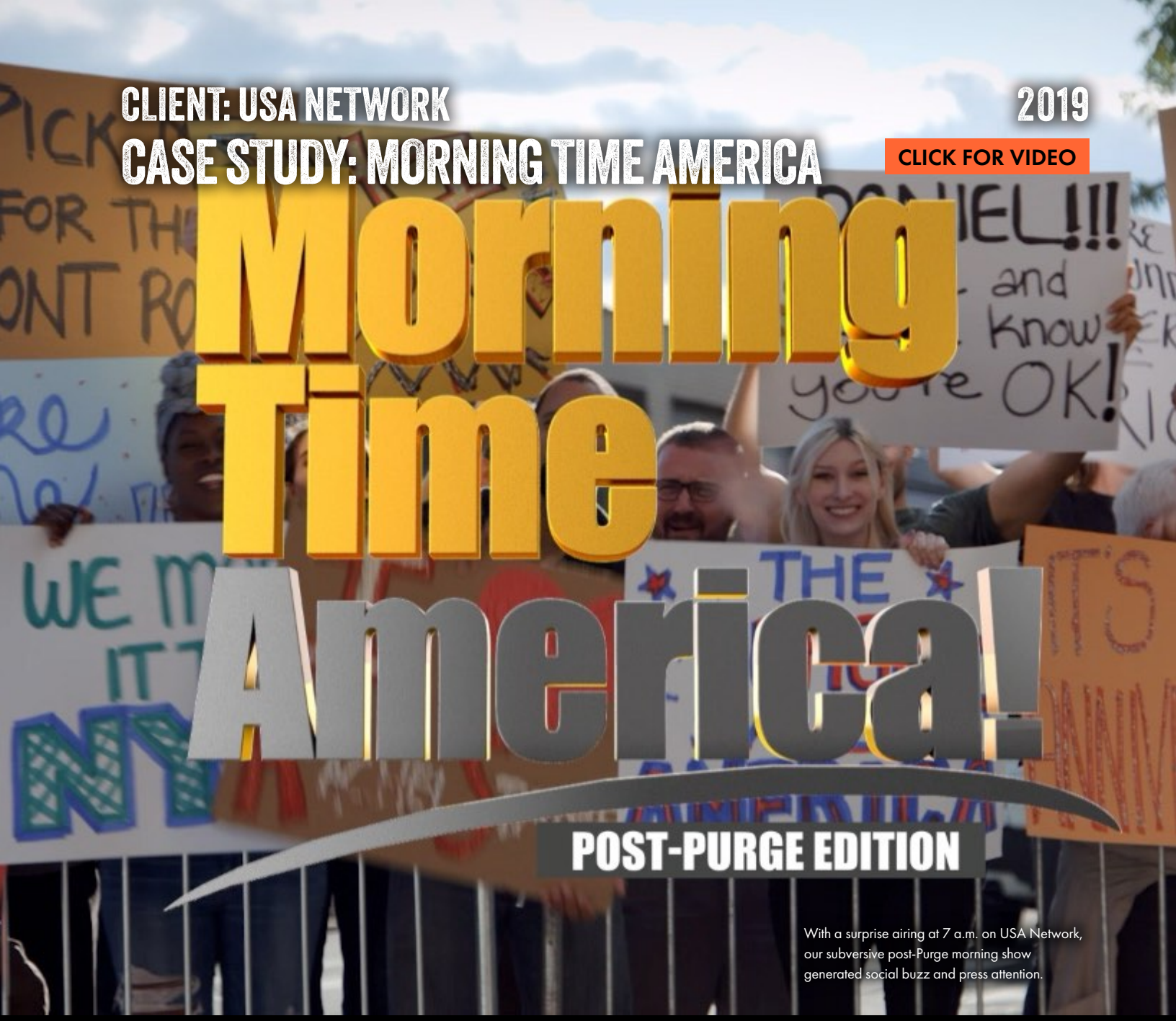
By turning FiOS into a story families could experience and connect with, Verizon turned a technology upgrade into a life upgrade.

My Home 2.0, created for Verizon FiOS, demonstrates that format subversion can work for brand marketing as well as entertainment. The home makeover show format carried its own credibility. Audiences already knew how to watch one, what to expect from it, and how to feel about the reveal. By inhabiting that format honestly and delivering genuine value to real families, we earned the right to embed Verizon's product into the narrative. The brand became the solution to the story's problem.

But **format subversion** becomes even more powerful when it serves a storyworld, when the format you're inhabiting is a window into a fictional universe that the audience can explore.

IMMERSIVE BRANDING FOR TELEVISION

In 2019, Campfire created **Morning Time America** for the second season of USA Network®'s *The Purge* TV show. Like the *Prometheus* TED Talk, **Morning Time America** took a recognizable format, in this case a breezy morning TV show, and infused it with the unsettling themes of *The Purge* (see also Chapter Three). Cheerful hosts chatted about their dystopian world, nonchalantly blending satire with eerie world-building. Broadcast on USA Network in the traditional morning show timeslot as well as being released online, this content extended *The Purge* universe, drawing fans deeper into the story while generating buzz among new viewers for the second season. It exemplified how branded content could captivate audiences by feeling like part of the world it promoted.



With a surprise airing at 7 a.m. on USA Network, our subversive post-Purge morning show generated social buzz and press attention.

THE MORNING AFTER PURGE NIGHT

Morning Time America was Campfire's follow-up to its previous year's highly successful **The Purge Shopping Channel**, which adeptly satirized the commercialization of violence in *The Purge* universe by parodying home shopping channels (see Chapter Three). For the sequel, we explored subverting another familiar format: a sunny, upbeat morning TV show. For continuity, we brought back one of the shopping channel's hosts, linking the experiences and expanding the shared in-world narrative.



Designed to promote the second season of *The Purge* TV series on USA Network®, **Morning Time America** presented an eerily cheerful post-Purge Night morning show. Hosts discussed banalities like fashion tips, traffic updates, and Purge-themed giveaways, all with unnervingly chipper smiles. Content was released online in bite-sized clips, with a full version edited together to air in a real 7 a.m. timeslot, adding a layer of plausibility to the fiction.





Modeled after the kind of segments regularly seen on morning shows, **Morning Time America** included features on traffic conditions after Purge Night, Purge fashions seen on the street, tips for surviving the Purge, and getting in shape for next year's Purge.



By leaning on satire and dark humor, **Morning Time America** made the dystopian horror of the franchise accessible and engaging for fans while drawing in new viewers. It also stood alone as a branded entertainment offering that fit squarely within the franchise without resorting to overt tune-in messaging.

FORMAT SUBVERSION BEYOND VIDEO

Format subversion isn't limited to film and television. Any format with established conventions can be inhabited: a podcast, a radio station, a shopping experience. The less obvious the format, the more subtle the subversion, because the audience has to recognize what they're experiencing before they can appreciate how it's been transformed.

Consider our project for USA Network, **Purge City** (see Chapter Three). On the surface, it was a pop-up store, an experiential activation at SDCC. But look closer and you can recognize it as format subversion applied to physical retail. When designing the experience, we studied how real supermarkets and big-box stores work: the guided path through departments, the endcap displays, the narrative progression from sales flyer to entrance to checkout that's engineered to shape your behavior. A trip to the supermarket is, whether you realize it or not, a guided narrative experience. The layout tells you where to go, the product placement persuades you to buy, and the checkout is the grand finale.

Purge City took that format, the cheerful, fluorescent-lit retail environment, and filled it with the dystopian storyworld of *The Purge*. Cleaning supplies became "Purge Away" stain remover for those stubborn bloodstains. Greeting cards celebrated the holiday of sanctioned violence. Endcap displays promoted seasonal Purge essentials. Every detail followed the conventions of a real store, right down to the perky staff and the department signage. The format was familiar. The content was horrifying. The gap between the two was where the experience lived.

And its follow-up, **Morning Time America**, took the relentlessly upbeat format of morning television and filled it with cheerful post-apocalyptic banality. In both cases, the comedy and the horror came from the gap between the format's expectations and the content filling it.

Perhaps one of the purest expressions of Campfire's format subversion is **Video Palace.**

Not all branded content ideas need to appear on the big screen or to have multi-million-dollar budgets. Our **Video Palace** podcast showcases how challenger brands can employ original content in unfamiliar mediums to target new audiences, even while staying true to their identities. Developed in collaboration with Shudder®, **Video Palace** was a bold step for the subscription-based streaming service, known for its curated library of horror films and series. With this original fiction podcast and its accompanying book of terrifying tales, Shudder was able to access new audiences in a completely different medium.

Video Palace was a departure from Shudder's core offering. This free, original podcast didn't require a Shudder subscription, nor did it serve as a direct ad for the studio's platform or roster of movies. Instead, it functioned as a sideways expansion of the brand, a vehicle to introduce Shudder to a wider audience by delivering a standalone horror story that felt like an essential listen for fans of the genre.

What made **Video Palace** so effective was how it aligned with Shudder's brand identity while also opening up new possibilities. The podcast and accompanying book reinforced Shudder's credibility as a leader in horror content, reaching audiences who might not have been ready to subscribe to a streaming service but were eager for compelling, well-crafted horror.

CLIENT: SHUDDER

2019

CASE STUDY: VIDEO PALACE

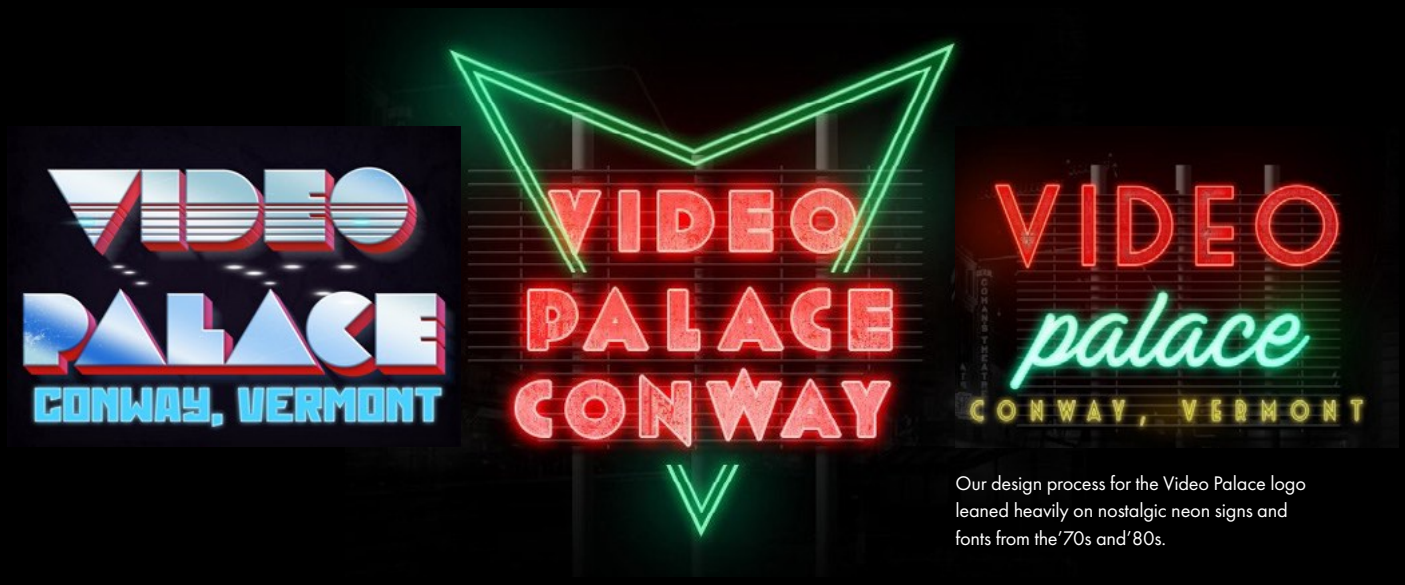
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CRAFTING A HAUNTED MEDIA PHENOMENON

Campfire's heritage in the horror genre and demonstrable love of scary stories found a perfect outlet when Shudder® called on us for original podcast ideas that would engage horror fans. We drew inspiration from Shudder's community, whose members often praise its streaming catalog as reminiscent of classic video rental stores, rich with overlooked gems from the golden age of VHS horror.

To capture that nostalgic allure, we created the urban legend of mysterious "white tapes." According to our new mythology, these haunted VHS recordings were rumored to drive viewers mad. The podcast follows fictional video collector Mark Cambria, who discovers a tape, becomes afflicted, and races to investigate its sinister origins. Styled like a true-crime series, the story blends imagined characters with interviews featuring real horror luminaries, enhancing its eerie realism.



Our design process for the Video Palace logo leaned heavily on nostalgic neon signs and fonts from the'70s and'80s.



RIGHT: *Blair Witch* production designer (and creator of the infamous Stickman) Ben Rock directs Leon Russom as Thurman Mueller.





ABOVE: Chase Williamson as Mark Cambria and Bonita Friedericy as Bets Mueller.

Breaking from traditional podcast formats, director Ben Rock instructed our cast to physically act scenes out, capturing more authentic performances. Layers of found audio, voicemails, and interviews lent the show a raw, compiled feel. With no ads or brand interruptions, **Video Palace** became pure storytelling, achieving a 4.8/5 listener rating and introducing Shudder to a whole new audience.





ABOVE: Devin Sidell as Tamra (top), Anina Denove as Cat (bottom), and Audrey Flegel as Becca (right) perform a hospital scene in the studio.
RIGHT: Chase Williamson as Mark Cambria (left) and Larry Cedar as Randy Wane (right).



ABOVE: Chase Williamson as Mark Cambria and Devin Sidell as his girlfriend Tamra act out a driving scene in the studio.

In Phase II, we expanded the story into publishing with *Video Palace: In Search of the Eyeless Man*. Presented as an academic's diary, the book, published in partnership with Simon & Schuster, included horror short stories from acclaimed authors, journal entries, and in-world commentary, deepening the mythology and entrancing fans across several mediums.



Our short-story contributors included novelists, filmmakers, performers, and multi-hyphenate creatives, so we developed unique assets that would allow each one to promote their specific stories to their fandoms.



Video Palace succeeded not only as a podcast but as a multi-platform experience that captivated new and existing horror fans, while reinforcing Shudder's identity as the ultimate horror destination.

FORMAT SUBVERSION AS WORLD-BUILDING

Format subversion is simply the same craft we've been describing throughout this book, but applied to media instead of space.

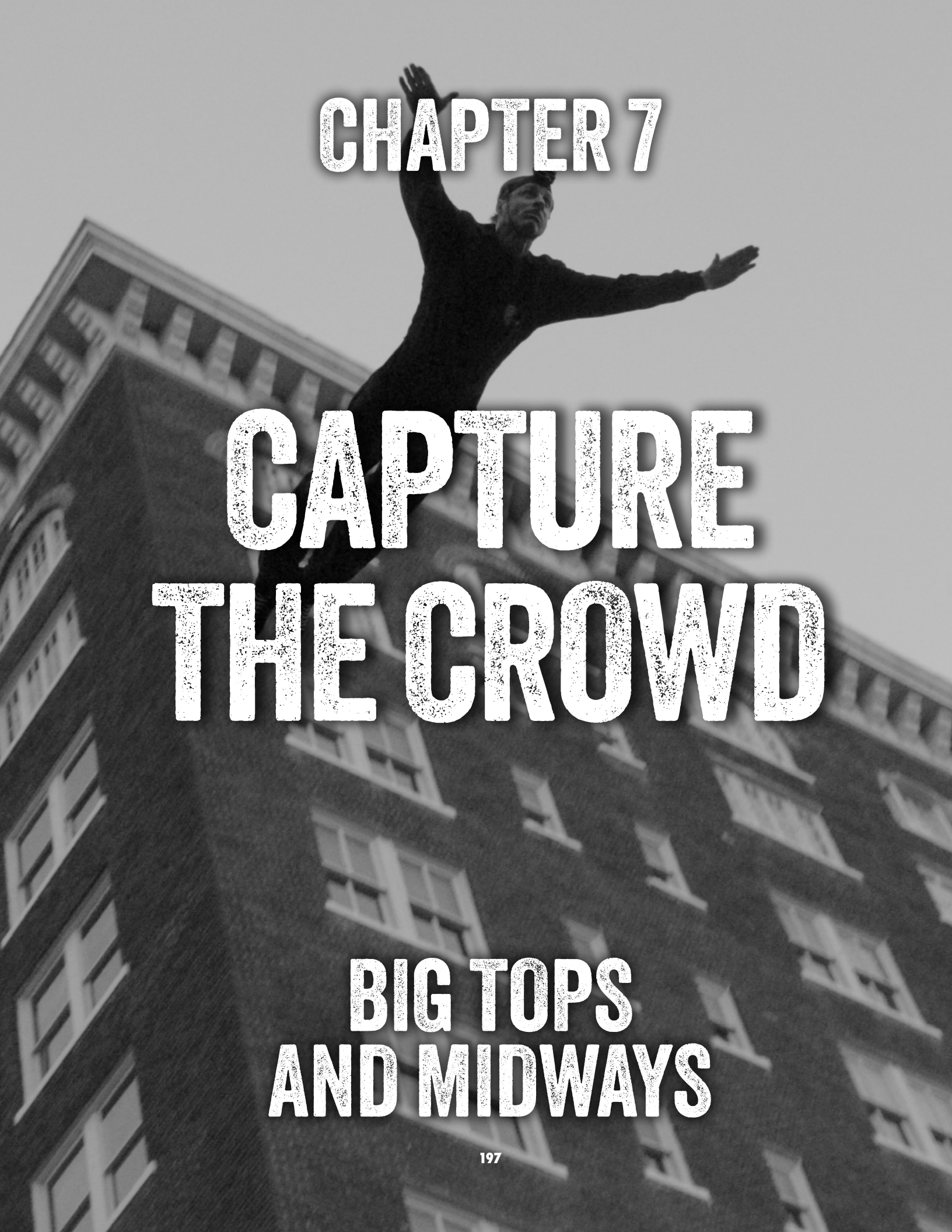
Video Palace is a storyworld, built with the same care as any physical activation. **Morning Time America** is world-building through content, applying the same "Think Like a Forger" craft we bring to our props and environments. The *Prometheus* TED Talk is a breadcrumb, designed to pull audiences deeper into a narrative. **Resistance Radio** (see Chapter Eight) is perhaps the most complete example of all: an entire pirate radio station, with original music, scripted drama, and in-world DJs, inhabiting the format so thoroughly that some listeners weren't sure if it was real or fake.

Every principle in this book (designing for Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers; creating moments of discovery; making technology invisible) applies whether your canvas is a city block or a podcast feed. The format is different. The philosophy is the same.

Orson Welles understood this in 1938, as did The Rutles in 1978. We've spent two decades applying it to brands and entertainment properties, going all the way back to our beginnings with *The Blair Witch Project*, which subverted the format of the student documentary and raw recovered footage. The technique keeps working because it taps into something basic about how people receive stories through the containers they already trust.

The difference between interruption and immersion isn't about the medium. It's about whether the audience feels respected.

And Ralphie's decoder pin reminds us what happens when that respect is broken. Audiences can accept a brand inside their story, but they won't accept realizing the story existed only to deliver it. The adventures that work, the ones we return to again and again, carry their promise all the way to the end. They don't ask the audience to laugh off a broken spell. They reward them for believing in it.



CHAPTER 7

CAPTURE THE CROWD

BIG TOPS AND MIDWAYS

PREVIOUS: Brian Miser, AKA the Human Fuse, one of the last remaining human cannonball acts in the world, flies over the crowd in Orlando, FL for the Captain Morgan Human Cannonball Bar Crawl.

CHAPTER 7
CAPTURE THE CROWD
BIG TOPS AND MIDWAYS

I remember the moment I became convinced I'd sent a man to his death.

I was standing on the balcony of a bar in Orlando, looking down at the street where we had positioned two custom-built cannons, each towering 30 feet over the throng below. A performer playing Captain Morgan was working the crowd, revving them up with exaggerated swashbuckler charm, while Brian Miser, one of the most experienced human cannonballs in the business, prepared to launch himself from one end of the street to the other.



View from the balcony looking down at the giant cannon as the crowd began its countdown.

This was to be the world's first human cannonball bar crawl, so we'd spent months pitching the project and refining every detail. The cannons had been fabricated and tested by experts from Disney and Universal Studios, designed to Brian's exact specifications. Every element had been rehearsed. We'd test-launched weighted sandbags all afternoon to make sure our calculations were correct and that a

man of the same weight would land squarely on our airbag. Brian had full confidence in the rig, and drafted his wife to fire the cannon for good measure.

Yet, as the crowd began to count down from ten, a chill came over me. Despite all the careful planning, all the safety checks, I was suddenly gripped by a single, unshakable fear: ***an idea I had pitched to sell a shot of booze was about to kill a man****.*

— Steve Coulson, Creative Director at Campfire

Of course, everything went according to plan (check out the look of relief on our faces). When the countdown hit zero, Brian soared 50 feet through the air and landed perfectly. He got to his feet, alive and well. The crowd erupted in cheers. Moments earlier, every person there had felt fear, which is exactly what human cannonball acts are designed to create.



That rush of adrenaline taps into something primal, the same psychology that has drawn people to the circus for centuries. Long before movies or digital media could transport audiences via screens to different worlds, the circus was the ultimate immersive entertainment. The moment you walked into the Big Top, the lines between the possible and the impossible began to fade.

The circus plays on the tension between perceived safety and danger, the emotional thrill of watching someone walk a razor-thin line between life and death. It's what drives immersive experiences too. Audiences are gripped by the sensation that something extraordinary might happen, balancing that

emotional knife-edge with the safety net of knowing that professionals are in control. Psychologists call this "sensation-seeking," the desire to experience new and intense forms of stimulation, especially those that flirt with risk. And it keeps audiences on the edge of their seats, caught between fear and exhilaration, as they momentarily suspend disbelief to experience something larger than life.

P.T. BARNUM: MASTER OF SPECTACLE AND CURIOSITY



P.T. Barnum alongside his protégé and sideshow performer "General Tom Thumb."

No one understood this dynamic better than **P.T. Barnum**, a pioneer of modern entertainment whose circus was billed as "The Greatest Show on Earth." It was Barnum who revolutionized the circus in the nineteenth century and captivated audiences worldwide.

What set Barnum and his company apart from other promoters was mastering both the Big Top spectacle *and* the Midway experience, realizing that each demanded a different kind of engagement. His Big Top shows followed a narrative arc, building suspense, delight, and emotion, culminating in performances that left the audience breathless. He understood that the crowd came for the grand spectacle, to see performers who would defy death and instill awe in anyone watching.

But he also knew that to keep people's attention, he had to create smaller moments of intrigue and curiosity along the way. The attractions that Barnum placed around the edges of the circus in the Midway were derived from his many years' experience operating museums and shows that had featured

"curiosities and oddities." His chaotic collection of sideshows, gambling games, and performers capitalized on plain human curiosity to lure people in for short bursts of bizarre or mysterious entertainment.

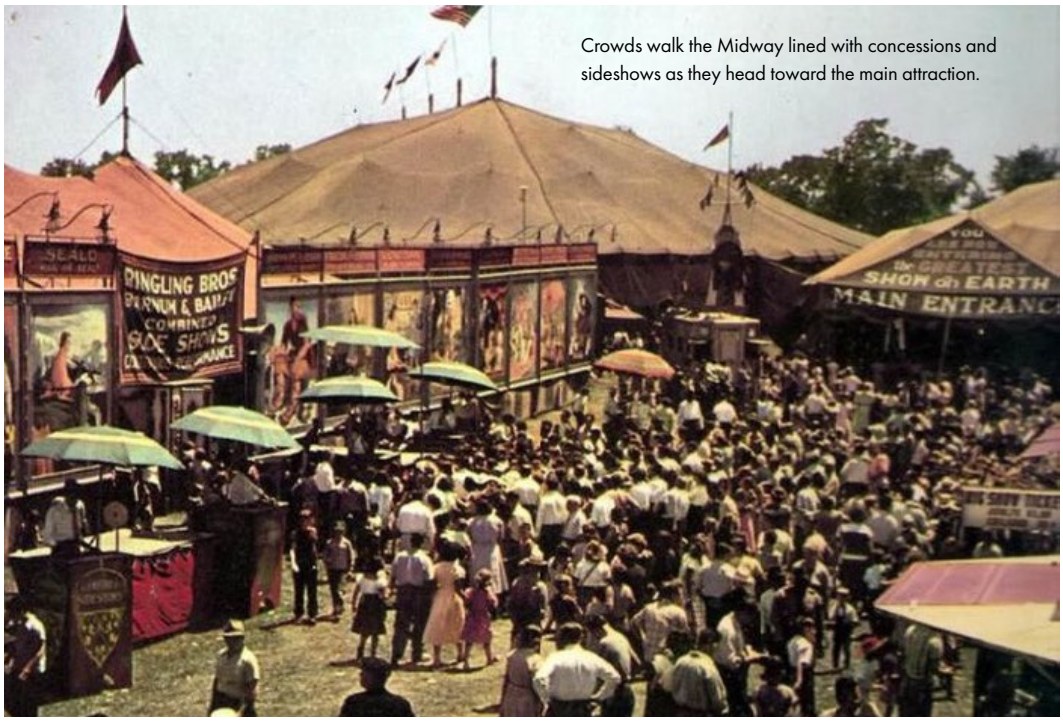
This dual approach laid the foundation for modern immersive experiences. Whether designing a grand, standalone activation or a smaller, sideshow-style affair, Barnum's principles still apply. Each requires different methods of engaging the audience, and Barnum's success came from knowing how to manage both. Almost every event that sets out to attract and seduce an audience bears his stamp, which makes him one of the most influential figures in the evolution of entertainment design.

BIG TOP VS. MIDWAY: TWO APPROACHES TO IMMERSIVE DESIGN

When designing an immersive experience, one of the first steps is to understand whether you're creating a **Big Top** event or a **Midway-style** activation. Each of these approaches to audience engagement requires a distinct set of design principles.

Big Top Thinking focuses on creating a grand, structured spectacle. In this case, *you* are the main event, and the audience expects an experience that unfolds over an arc and crescendos in a finale. They are looking for you to draw them in with narrative, pacing, and emotional depth.

Midway Thinking, by contrast, focuses on quick engagement and grabbing attention. As part of a larger set of attractions, you're competing for an audience that's constantly being pulled in different directions. These experiences need to be immediate and intriguing, designed to stop passersby and hold them just long enough to leave an impact. The emphasis is on discovery, novelty, and surprise.



Crowds walk the Midway lined with concessions and sideshows as they head toward the main attraction.

BIG TOP THINKING: GRAND SPECTACLE AND NARRATIVE MASTERY

Big Top Thinking draws on the tradition of the grand circus spectacle, where the goal is to take the audience on a narrative journey. In a Big Top event, ticketholders expect an orchestrated performance that captures their attention from the first moment and guides them through a structured series of emotional highs and lows. Every element, from lighting and sound to costumes and performance, must serve the story.

If you've been lucky enough to see a performance by **Cirque du Soleil**, the modern heir of Barnum's grand legacy, you'll have seen how it has elevated Big Top Thinking, weaving emotional narrative into the heart of every performance. Since its founding in 1984, Cirque du Soleil has reinvented the circus by removing traditional elements such as performing animals and replacing them with thematic

storytelling and human talent. Each show follows a carefully crafted narrative arc, designed to incrementally ramp up the audience's emotional investment while delivering jaw-dropping acrobatic feats.

What makes Cirque du Soleil a master of Big Top Thinking is the troupe's ability to create an immersive story in which every act is interconnected. The set design transports audiences to otherworldly landscapes, the music heightens emotional moments, and the acrobatic performances unfold as part of a larger narrative structure. It has mastered the art of building loops of tension and release. Shows like **O** and **Alegría** use visual spectacle not as a standalone feature but as a way to accompany the audience on an emotional journey, while **Love** reveals an immersive and interconnected universe in the music of The Beatles that we always suspected was lying just beneath the surface.

Campfire's aforementioned **Captain Morgan Cannon Blast** was built from the ground up as a Big Top event. Much like a two-ring circus, the experience featured **two massive cannons**, each poised to launch a human cannonball from one bar to another. **Captain Morgan himself** was the ringma**ster**, complete with a red coat and tricorn hat, rallying the crowd and building excitement for the main spectacle. This was a carefully orchestrated experience designed to build suspense and then release it at a climactic moment when the human cannonball took flight. Like any grand circus performance, it engaged the audience at every step, leading them through anticipation, excitement, and awe to the big bang finish.

CLIENT: DIAGEO

2015

CASE STUDY: CAPTAIN MORGAN CANNON BLAST

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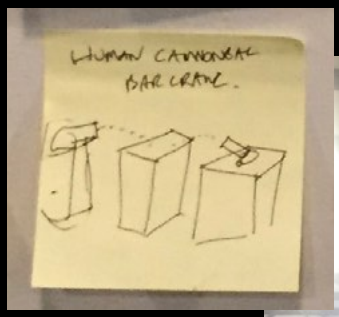
Captain Morgan stands atop one of two custom cannons fabricated especially for this event.

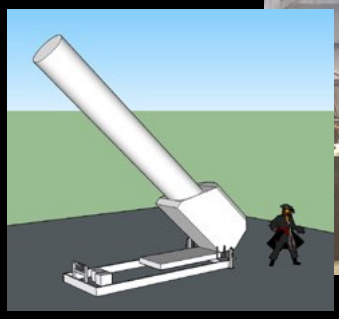
THE WORLD'S FIRST HUMAN CANNONBALL BAR CRAWL

In 2015, rum brand Captain Morgan® faced a challenge: how to launch its bold new **Cannon Blast** shot in a way that would capture its adventurous spirit while creating a memorable buzz. So we built a human cannonball bar crawl, naturally. It was an unforgettable activation that would ignite excitement, both on the ground and online.

The concept was as explosive as the product itself. Campfire designed an event at which **Brian Miser**, a professional human cannonball, would be launched between bars in downtown Orlando, the first human cannonb**all bar crawl anywhere**. The stunt embodied Captain Morgan's image of high-energy, daring fun, while introducing its new Cannon Blast rum-based shot to a crowd primed for excitement.









From concept to execution and placement, the cannons were designed to Brian Miser's exacting specifications, including a highly confidential mechanism inside the barrel shaft.



Campfire worked with **Disney** and **Universal Studios** fabricators to create two custom-built 30-foot cannons, each designed for safe but visually stunning launches. The cannons were strategically placed along Orlando's Wall Street Plaza, where onlookers gathered to witness Brian Miser fly at 65 mph through the air.





LEFT: Brian Miser seen onsite with the second cannon, adjusting launch position to (hopefully) land on the inflated airbag. The black sandbag, weighing the same as Miser, was used as a test projectile during early test fires.



Campfire founder Mike Monello tests our consumer photo moment where everyone could snap a souvenir of themselves emerging from a cannon.





The event fully embraced the **bold**, **adventurous** essence of Captain Morgan's brand. The atmosphere was electric, with **Captain Morgan himself** building anticipation by leading the countdowns before each cannon shot.

In the street beneath the aerial cannonball stunt, a bar crawl featured **multiple tasting stations** where participants could sample the new **Cannon Blast** product, a blend of spiced rum with hints of citrus and heat. The entire event was engineered to engage every sense, from the sight and sound of the launch to the scent and taste of the product. Partygoers enjoyed cocktails crafted with the new rum, such as the "Morgan Mule," further embedding the product into the immersive environment.





The stunt reached far beyond the packed crowd in Orlando. The activation was **live-streamed** by Funny or Die, bringing the energy of the event to an even wider audience. Within 24 hours, a 60-second social media video recap had garnered over 1.2 million views on Facebook, with a total reach that ultimately earned more than **100 million PR impressions**.



The launch of **Cannon Blast** directly improved the brand's performance. Captain Morgan outpaced the declining rum market in 2015, with Diageo attributing much of this success to the launch of Cannon Blast.

APPLYING BIG TOP THINKING BEYOND THE CIRCUS

You don't need cannons or circus acts to apply Big Top Thinking to your experience. It's about creating an immersive narrative that takes the audience on a journey toward a predetermined destination. Unlike Midway-style activations, where the audience is already present and you're competing for their attention, a standalone pop-up event has to be the main attraction. The entire experience, from the initial draw to the payoff at the end, must feel like a full entertainment journey, worth both the trip and the wait.

For Big Top-style events, focus on designing an experience that feels *essential*. People are actively deciding to attend your activation, whether they are making a special trip or securing a ticket in advance, so the stakes are higher. The premise must be compelling enough to pull people out of their routines and make them want to stand in line for what's coming. To succeed, the event must deliver on multiple fronts: it must provide spectacle, it must entertain, and the emotional engagement must feel complete, from the moment the audience steps into your world to the moment they leave.

Our activation for *Only Murders in the Building* (which we discussed in Chapter Five) is a great example. There was no surrounding midway or festival to count on, so we needed to create an experience that would not only immerse participants in the show's world but also give them a reason to make the trip to the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Structurally, people had to feel like they were getting a full, exclusive experience, complete with interactive clues, carefully designed set pieces, and the promise of stepping into the show's mystery. The entire activation was designed to present the experience itself as a reward, offering enough intrigue and entertainment to justify the time and effort.

Big Top Thinking in a standalone activation means building an experience that markets itself through its concept. The result should be compelling enough that people start talking about it before they arrive.

THE MIDWAY: DESIGNING FOR ATTENTION AND CURIOSITY

Traditionally, a circus midway was a bustling strip where smaller attractions competed for attention. It would be lined with sideshows, games, and food stalls, each offering a quick-hit experience designed to capture curiosity. The midway's purpose was to lure people in, convince them they simply had to see what was behind the curtain. Often, there was a murmur of an illicit undercurrent, of a secret to be revealed.

The best sideshows thrived on their ability to generate curiosity and anticipation. A good sideshow never gave too much away. It always left something to the imagination. Whether it was a freak show, a strongman, or a magician, the goal was to make people feel like they were about to witness something unbelievable.



Snap Wyatt and Johnny Meah in particular excelled at painting banner art. With bold, exaggerated depictions of curiosities and oddities, such as two-headed women or a girl who transformed into a gorilla, these banners suggested that what lay behind the tent walls was something wild, strange, and unmissable. Accuracy mattered little. The key was to fire up the audience's imagination.

Inside the tent, sideshows were usually short, sharp, and designed to leave an impression, but they didn't have to fully deliver on the promise made outside. The tease, the sense that there might be something more extraordinary hidden out of sight, was often enough to keep people engaged. The genius of sideshow design was in balancing exaggeration with surprise, giving just enough to keep the audience guessing but always holding something back.



Best practices in sideshow design came down to a few key elements: create a strong visual and emotional hook, play on curiosity and anticipation, and deliver something that, even if it didn't fully meet the promise, left the audience feeling like they had seen something remarkable. The owners of the best sideshows understood that what drew people in was the chance to see something out of the ordinary, something that could challenge their expectations and surprise them.

When you think about applying this strategy to the modern world, you start to realize that many of the largest pop-culture gatherings fall into this category. For example, South by Southwest (SXSW) might be seen as a very big tent, where concerts, keynotes, and high-stakes parties vie for every second of attention. For performers and promoters, getting crowded into the background is a real

risk. This is where Midway Thinking comes in. Much like sideshows on a bustling carnival strip, you have to be right in the thick of things, eye-catching and just unexpected enough to stop people in their tracks.

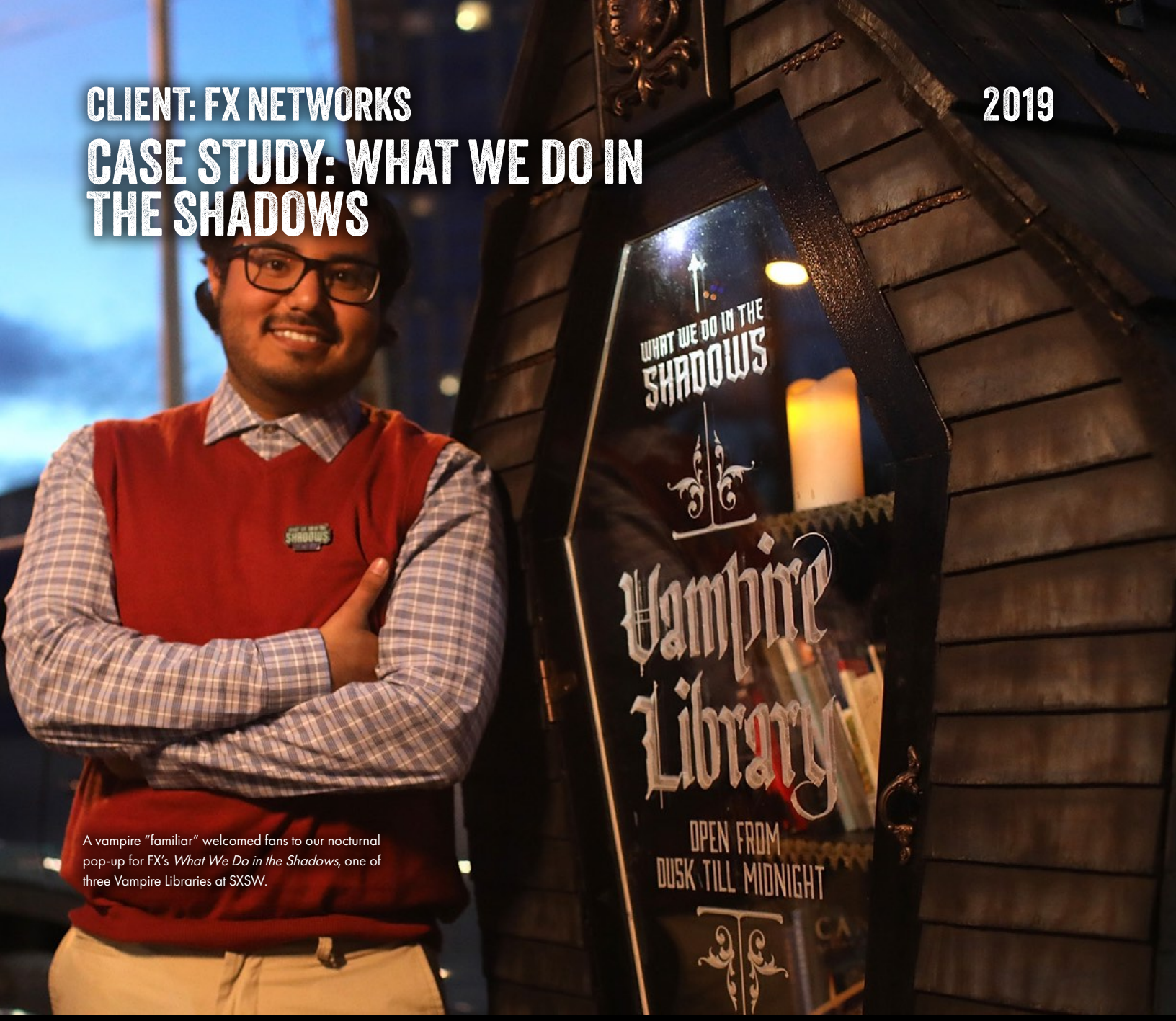
Instead of competing for attention against big-ticket events, at SXSW our approach was to take an activation to the festival's own "Midway," Austin's famous 6th Street, where every bar and music venue pulses with energy. Inspired by the civic-minded "Little Free Libraries" you might see in your own neighborhood, we built our own *with a What We Do in the* Shadows spin: "Free Vampire Libraries" styled in the FX Networks® show's outrageously gothic aesthetic, complete with spooky lighting, a fog machine, and shelves bearing an ominous assortment of vampire stories and scientific tomes on blood.

Locked and enigmatic by day, the libraries attracted curious glances, intrigue building around them as festival-goers speculated on their contents. Then, as dusk fell, a vampire "familiar" would arrive, unlocking the library for Austin's own vampires to peruse. Attendees eagerly lined up to claim their free vampire book, complete with a special *What We Do in the Shadows* bookmark, turning a simple giveaway into a surreal, humorous, and memorable experience. The **Vampire Libraries** were a prime example of Midway-style activation: small in scale, but a perfect bite-sized immersion in the show's world, and one that festival-goers could take home with them.

CLIENT: FX NETWORKS

2019

CASE STUDY: WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS



A vampire "familiar" welcomed fans to our nocturnal pop-up for FX's *What We Do in the Shadows*, one of three Vampire Libraries at SXSW.

IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING IN UNEXPECTED SPACES

To build buzz for FX Networks®' *What We Do in the Shadows*, a documentary-style comedy about four vampires who had lived together for centuries in Staten Island, Campfire brought a Midway-style strategy to SXSW 2019. Rather than attempt to compete with massive parties, we built quirky, quick-hit experiences, small moments that shone out amid the cacophony.



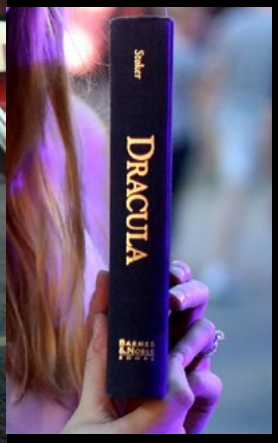
LEFT: Early concept sketch of the Vampire Library.
BELOW: A familiar awaits sundown to open the Vampire Library.



Our solution was an immersive multi-location pop-up experience at SXSW, one of the largest media and tech conferences in the world. The epicenter of pop culture, it regularly draws over 200,000 influential, media-savvy attendees to Austin, TX. With numerous brands competing for attention in this crowded space, the challenge was clear: how do you **break through the noise** and stand out?

We leaned into the national trend for neighborhood lending libraries, the "take a book, leave a book" installations found in communities across the country. Of course, our libraries had a unique twist: they contained nothi**ng but vampire-themed lit**erature, and they opened *only* after sunset.





The shelves held vampire literature and medical books on human blood, and a vampire "familiar" was on hand to help visitors choose a book.

Our three gothic **Vampire Libraries**, outfitted with special effects, were placed across downtown Austin. Each library was built to resemble a coffin, with the expertise of Hollywoo**d set designers.** One stood prominently on "Dirty 6th," a notoriously rowdy stretch of Austin's 6th Street known for its dive bars, food trucks, and music.

Like vampires, our libraries came to life from dusk until midnight. Operated by **immersive actors** playing the role of a vampire "familiar," these eerie hosts drew curious attendees into the experience. With the help of triggered fog and lighting effects, they created a spectacle that was impossible to miss.

Attendees were greeted with a creepy, in-character interaction, where the familiar selected a book for them, complete with a custom *What We Do in the Shadows* bookmark and a glow-in-the-dark tote. One of the Vampire Libraries even made an appearance at the show's **premiere screening** at the Paramount Theater, with key cast members in attendance.



These surprise encounters became a SXSW highlight for festival-goers who stumbled upon them across Austin.







Like classic sideshow banners, our gothic Vampire Libraries teased an experience that would be worth lining up for.



The creators of *What We Do in the Shadows* pose with our Vampire Library at SXSW.

The activation was a hit. Influential SXSW attendees raved about the concept on social media, calling it "marketing genius" and praising the immersive experience and attention to detail. Coverage from media outlets like *Deadline*, *Nerdist*, *SyFy Wire*, and *Bleeding Cool* amplified the buzz.



CONEY ISLAND: THE PERMANENT MIDWAY

While the traveling circus would set up its midway for a limited time before moving on, turn-of-the-century **Coney Island** operated like a permanent, standalone midway. There, visitors could indulge in endless attractions, games, and sideshows, all without the need for a main event. Coney Island became synonymous with chaotic, unstructured entertainment, offering an array of experiences that promised thrills, surprises, or a spectacle at every turn.

Coney Island thrived on the same principles that made circus sideshows successful: curiosity, exaggeration, and intrigue. Visitors walking the boardwalk were bombarded with bold banners proclaiming the human oddities and strange feats that waited inside. If that wasn't enough, barkers, much like in traveling sideshows, shouted exaggerated promises of the bizarre and the impossible, offering everything from freak shows to games of chance. The latter were rigged, of course. Whether or not these attractions delivered on their promises didn't matter all that much. The excitement was in the mystery, in the possibility of witnessing something shocking or implausible.







One of the most unusual and compelling attractions was **"Dr." Martin Couney's baby incubators**, where premature babies were displayed for public viewing. What had begun as a medical innovation in dire circumstances was transformed into one of Coney Island's signature exhibits, blending the spectacle of the midway with a surprisingly emotional and scientific core. Families would return year after year to see the babies who had once been on display as fragile infants, now thriving children.

However, this kind of chaotic, competitive entertainment was precisely what **Walt Disney** disliked about places like Coney Island. For Disney, the lack of structure and the noisy, clashing attractions represented a failure of immersion. He found Coney Island messy and distracting, the exact opposite of the carefully curated experience he envisioned for **Disneyland**. While Coney Island thrived on the thrill of discovery and surprise, Disney's vision was one of control, where every element served a larger narrative, and visitors were guided through a world that was at once cohesive and immersive.

Despite Disney's disdain, Coney Island remains an iconic symbol of the raw, untamed spirit of American entertainment. Its attractions competed to outdo one another, offering visitors a chance to glimpse the strange, the impossible, and the unexpected at every turn. In many ways, Coney Island exemplified Midway Thinking, a place where the experience itself was chaotic, unpredictable, and, above all, designed for curious minds.

MIDWAY THINKING IN EXPERIENTIAL DESIGN

The lessons of the midway, to build curiosity, spectacle, and the promise of something slightly forbidden, are as relevant today as they were in Coney Island's heyday. In modern festival environments like **SDCC** or **SXSW**, brands and entertainment franchises must employ these principles to draw attention in a crowded, competitive field. Much like sideshow operators at Coney Island, we're competing against the overall noise and spectacle of these massive events. Your event must feel unmissable, which means building an activation that snags attention through mystery, atmosphere, and surprise.

At large events, visitors tend to be overstimulated and competition for their interest is fierce. Designing for these environments mirrors the challenge faced by sideshow operators: How do you make people stop in their tracks? What draws

them in isn't always the act itself but the anticipation of what they might discover. This is why mystery is so powerful. Whether through sound, hidden elements, or the promise of something to be revealed, your activation needs to hold part of the experience back. Visitors need to feel like stepping inside will offer them something they haven't seen yet.

Just as Coney Island barkers used noise and visuals to build excitement, modern activations must engage multiple senses. A well-placed sound, a glimpse of activity behind a curtain, or the buzz of people participating in something thrilling can imply that there's something exciting happening inside. The midway was never silent. There was always an undercurrent of noise and activity that made visitors feel like they had to be part of the action. The same principle applies today: using sound and atmosphere can be a powerful way to draw people into an activation before they even know what's happening.

In crowded environments like SDCC, creating curiosity through concealment can be one of the most effective tactics. By hiding the main event behind a partition, you can build a sense of intrigue. Visitors can hear what's happening, but they can't see it until they've committed to stepping inside.

This is a strategy we employed in our activation for the launch of Peacock®'s *Those About to Die*, an epic tale of gladiators and charioteers set in Ancient Rome. Our activation, a boardwalk-inspired chariot race, was concealed behind canvas walls, mimicking the mystery of a sideshow. Visitors could hear the excitement but had to venture in to experience the thrill, just as with carnival games amid the competitive energy of a midway.



CLIENT: PEACOCK

2024

CASE STUDY: THOSE ABOUT TO DIE

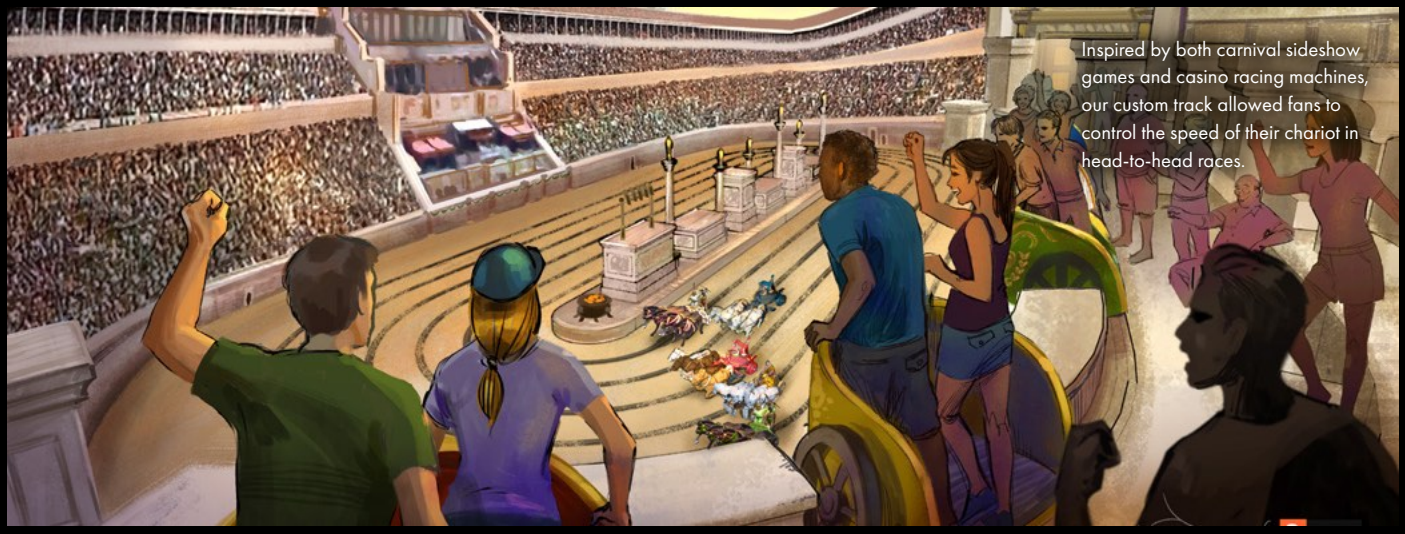
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Our Circus Maximus was built in the thick of SDCC 2024, with sounds of the chariot races ringing out from the mysterious arena.

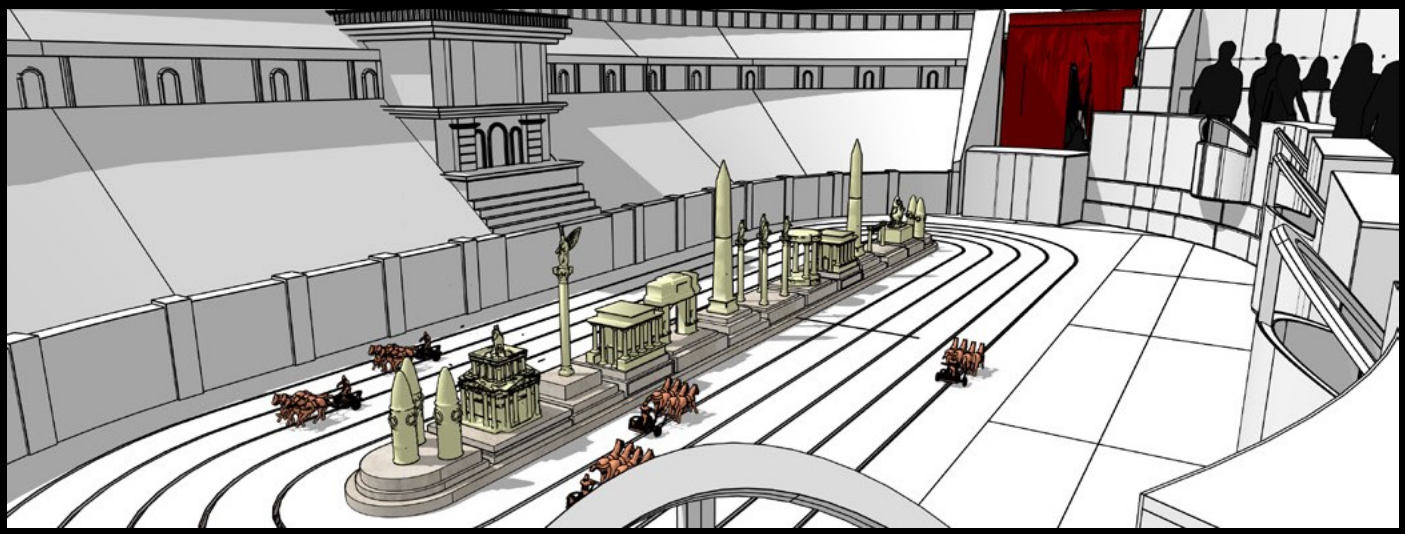
LET THE GAMES BEGIN!

At **San Diego Comic-Con 2024**, Campfire partnered with streaming service Peacock® to bring the world of *Those About to Die* to life. The show is an epic historical drama about Ancient Rome's chariot racing and gladiatorial combat, and our goal was to immerse attendees in that world, offering them an exciting hands-on experience that captured the intensity and spectacle of the **Circus Maximus**.

The activation centered on a massive char**iot race, bu**ilt as a giant slot racetrack. Visitors were divided into five teams and competed against each other on the track, with real-time commentary and sound effects to recreate the energy of an ancient Roman race. The atmosphere was enhanced by **4-D effects**, including vibrations and rumbling noises that mimicked the thundering hooves of racing horses.



Inspired by both carnival sideshow games and casino racing machines, our custom track allowed fans to control the speed of their chariot in head-to-head races.





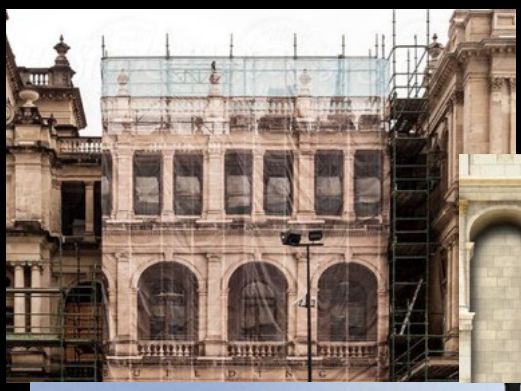


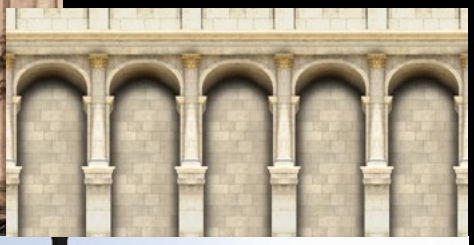




Costumed actors playing gamblers and team owners welcomed fans, giving them a pre-race demonstration of how to "drive" their chariots, as well as showing a scoreboard of previous team results to energize the competitive nature of the event.

True to the show's gladiatorial theme, the activation was designed to **build anticipation and excitement**. Visitors entered through a grand archway modeled after the historic **Circus Maximus**, and once inside they found themselves in a **Betting Tavern**, where costumed actors helped them strategize and place their bets. Participants then took turns racing on the slot track, with live commentary adding an extra layer of excitement.





Our arena's design was influenced by the trend for European architects to camouflage historical monuments while they undergo restoration.





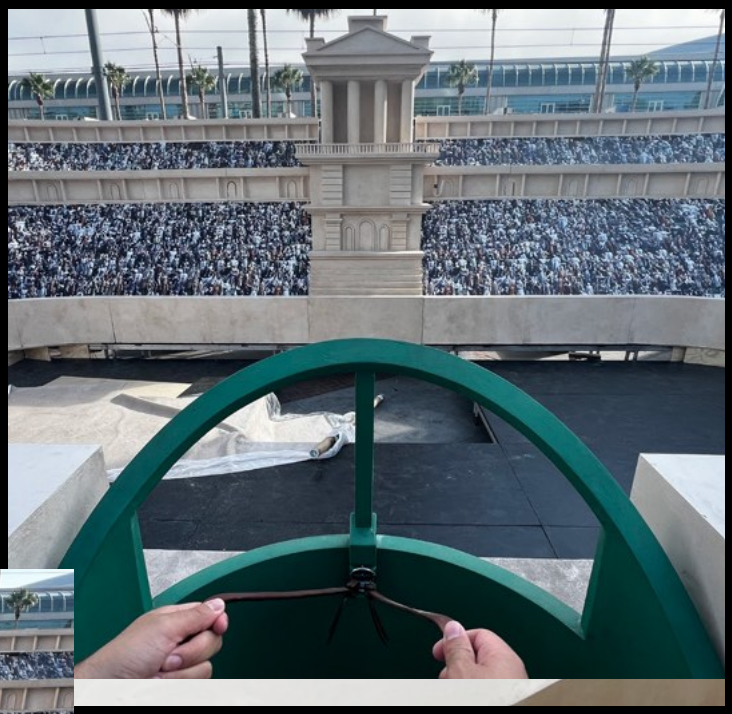
Each morning, a drummer called guests to the stadium, much like a traditional carnival barker.

Sensory engagement was central to the activation. For those waiting in line or passing by, the commentary, cheering, and sound effects created an immersive auditory experience, drawing them into the action even before they entered the race area. The races themselves were kept hidden behind canvas walls, further heightening the sense of curiosity and anticipation.

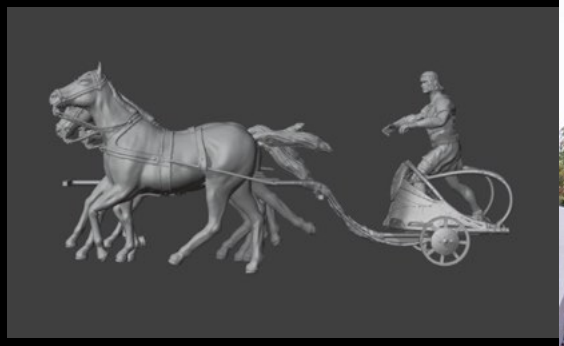


Coinciding with the opening of the modern Olympics, our legion of trumpeters heralded the start of the Games.











Much like a movie miniature, each component of the track was scaled and proportioned to create the optical illusion that the audience was witnessing the race from high in the stands of a massive arena.







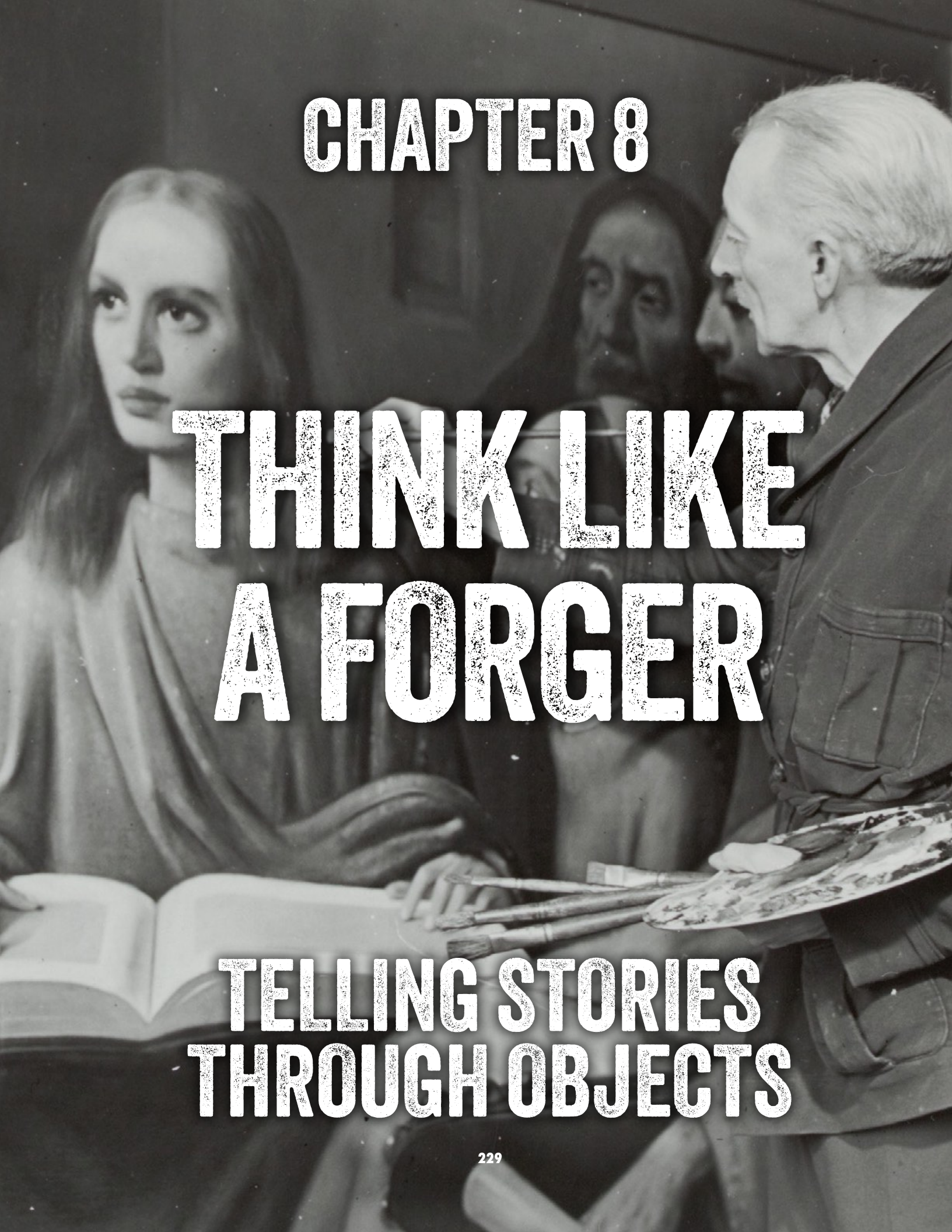
Each race ended with a **photo opportunity** and a commemorative **gold chariot pin** for participants, helping to extend the connection to the show beyond the activation. This combination of physical engagement, sensory effects, and team-based interaction made it one of the standout activations at SDCC that year, generating over 600 million PR i**mpressions and showing how** immersive, experiential design can build buzz and excitement for a new series.

THE ART OF CAPTURING THE CROWD

Whether you're designing for the Big Top or the Midway, a successful immersive experience hinges on creating mystery, excitement, and even a little danger (or perhaps more accurately, the suggestion of danger). From Barnum's grand spectacles to the chaotic charm of Coney Island, the most engaging experiences have always attracted audiences with the promise of something extraordinary.

At Campfire, we apply these lessons to modern activations, whether building a full, narrative-driven event or designing a quick-hit, curiosity-filled experience. At events like SDCC and SXSW, where competition is fierce, the key is to invite audiences in and make them feel like what's inside is worth the wait.

The art of the spectacle is about leaving people with a sense of wonder. It has thrilled audiences for centuries. By tapping into it, we can design experiences that connect, turning moments of engagement into lasting memories.



CHAPTER 8

THINK LIKE A FORGER

TELLING STORIES THROUGH OBJECTS

PREVIOUS:
Han van Meegeren (1889-1947) in his Amsterdam Studio in 1945, with his forgery *Jesus Among the Doctors*. This work was created as a demonstration of his forging ability, painted under police supervision to disprove accusations that he had sold looted Dutch masterpieces to the Nazis.

CHAPTER 8
THINK LIKE A FORGER
TELLING STORIES THROUGH OBJECTS

AVOIDING THE PENNY: THE FRAGILITY OF IMMERSION

There's a powerful scene in the 1980 film *Somewhere in Time*. Christopher Reeve plays Richard, a playwright who, becomes obsessed with a woman in a vintage photograph and determines to travel back in time to meet her. But where most sci-fi tales rely on a machine, Richard uses only sheer willpower and self-hypnosis to send himself back to 1912, immersing himself completely in the past. It's an object lesson in living fully in the moment without distraction. But then, everything is unwound by one small, seemingly insignificant detail.

As Richard moves through his carefully crafted reality, he accidentally pulls a 1979 penny from his pocket. The sight of this anachronistic coin breaks the illusion instantly, snapping him back to the present. This moment is a vivid reminder of how fragile immersion can be. With just one out-of-place detail, a rogue penny in this case, the entire experience unravels.

This applies to every storyworld we build, where a single inconsistency can break the magic. Whether it's a misplaced prop, a wrong note in the dialogue, or an interaction that feels off, any tiny crack can ruin the whole illusion.

At Campfire, we call this concept "**Avoiding the Penny**." It's a guiding principle for how we think about the experiences we create. Our goal is to make sure nothing pulls the audience out of the world we've built for them. Every detail should feel right, in place, and part of the story. We want fans to stay fully immersed and believe, even for a moment, that the world they've stepped into is completely real.

THE FORGER'S MINDSET

This idea of maintaining an unbroken illusion leads to another of our key immersive design principles: "**Think Like a Forger**." A forger's job isn't to create something that seems brand new. Instead, their challenge is to recreate something that already exists so perfectly that it looks and *feels* like the real thing.

It's a different mindset from a traditional designer's. The designer leans on *invention*, bringing new worlds to life by creating something entirely fresh. But a forger's goal is to mimic reality so convincingly that even an expert can't tell the difference between the genuine and the forged.

Approaching storytelling like a forger means more than just designing experiences; it means *recreating* them, making sure every detail feels like it has always belonged in the story's world. A master forger recreates every last brushstroke of a famous artist. We focus the same way, on every tiny aspect of the world we build, whether it's a physical object, a setting, or even a sensory experience. We want fans to willingly suspend their disbelief and imagine they are interacting with the real thing.



Han van Meegeren demonstrating his forging ability in his studio in 1945.

LESSONS FROM MASTER FORGERS

Shortly after World War II ended, Allied soldiers uncovered something extraordinary: a hidden trove of valuable artwork that had been looted or acquired under duress and concealed by Hermann Göring, Hitler's second-in-command. Among the recovered masterpieces was a painting that captured the investigators' attention: *Christ and the Adulteress*, signed by Dutch master Johannes Vermeer. A rare find, the Vermeer was thought to be a priceless example of the artist's work.

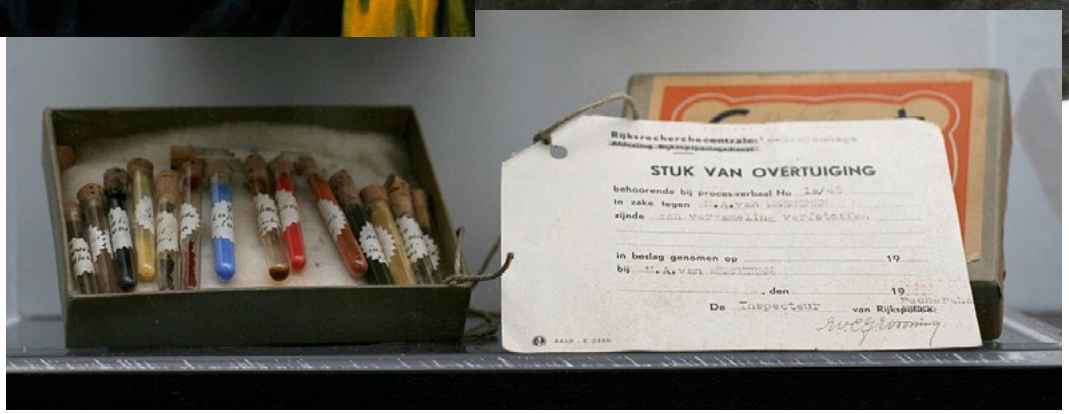
But as the case developed, the painting became the key to unraveling one of the greatest art forgeries in history. They discovered that Göring had purchased this piece via an intermediary from Han van Meegeren, a relatively unknown Dutch painter and art dealer. If the investigators could prove the sale, Van Meegeren would face serious consequences, possibly even the death penalty, for collaborating with the Nazis by selling such a potentially precious piece of cultural heritage.

To exonerate himself, Van Meegeren revealed the truth: *Christ and the Adulteress* was no Vermeer, but one of his many forgeries. He had fooled some of the most respected critics and collectors, including Göring, into paying millions for his fakes. To reinforce his position, Van Meegeren even provided a list of other works he'd passed off as Vermeers, duping museums and private collectors alike.



RIGHT: *Woman Drinking* by Van Meegeren after Frans Hals, displayed in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.
BELOW: *Christ and the Adulteress*, the supposed Vermeer painting Göring purchased from Van Meegeren.
BOTTOM: A selection of Van Meegeren's hand-mixed pigments, introduced into evidence during his trial.





The Dutch public hailed him as a folk hero, celebrating his cunning in swindling one of the most powerful Nazis. But the court was less convinced. It demanded proof. To settle the matter, Van Meegeren was asked to demonstrate his forgery techniques before a panel of experts. Under police supervision, Van Meegeren recreated a Vermeer from scratch, painting *Jesus Among the Doctors* before a panel of witnesses. Using a vintage canvas, mixing pigments by hand, and imitating the master's brushstrokes, he painstakingly demonstrated how he had fooled the art world.

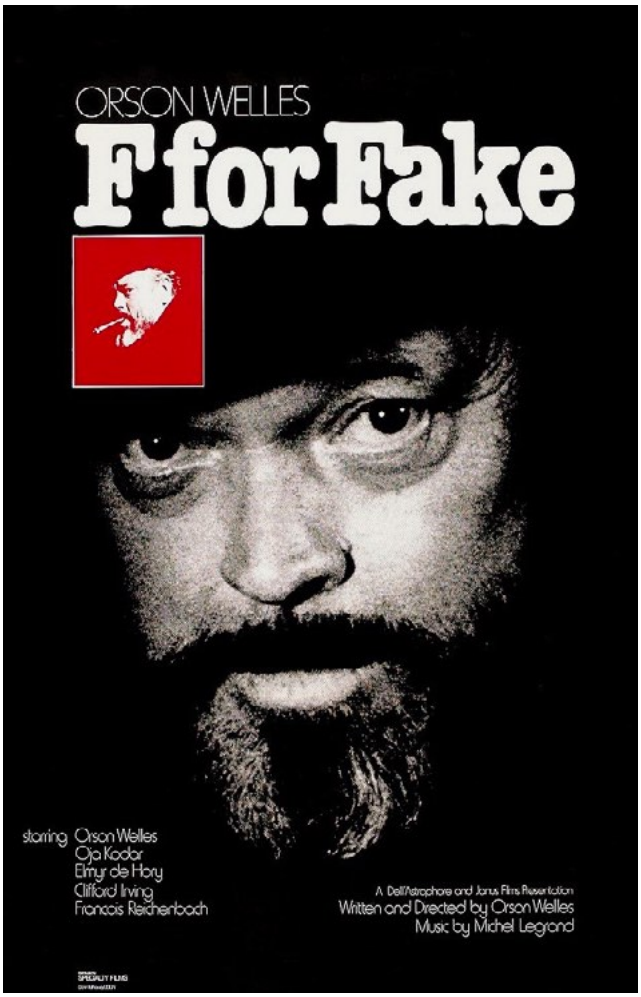
Spotting forgeries remains an enormous challenge for art historians and museums alike. Even in major institutions, works are sometimes reattributed or quietly removed from view as new evidence comes to light. The difficulty isn't negligence; it's craft. Skilled forgers study materials, methods, and historical context with extraordinary care, continually refining their techniques and even using modern tools (such as irradiation or chemical aging) to make new objects convincingly resemble old ones.

This ongoing battle between forgers and experts is a lot like the challenge we face in creating immersive experiences. Just as the tiniest inconsistency can expose a forgery, a single out-of-place detail can ruin the immersion in the worlds we create, much like the penny in *Somewhere in Time*.

POP CULTURE'S OBSESSION WITH FORGERS AND FAKES

The public has long been fascinated by forgers. Some even achieve a kind of rebellious fame. Take **Clifford Irving**, for example. In the 1970s, he concocted an elaborate scheme to forge an authorized biography of the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, a story later told in his highly entertaining book *The Hoax*. Irving's forgery was so detailed and convincing that it fooled not only publishers but the public at large, until Hughes himself stepped forward from the shadows to brand it a fake.

Orson Welles explored Irving's forgery in his 1973 documentary *F for Fake*. The film also considers Elmyr de Hory, another art forger, who fooled major galleries for years by producing fakes of modern masters. Welles' playful blending of fact and fiction in this, his last film, mirrors the same compelling deception that forgers represent.



Welles was also a proficient amateur magician, working in an art form built on convincing illusions of the real world. This can be seen in the work of magicians like **Eugene Burger**, author of many seminal works on magic and storytelling, including *Spirit Theater*, in which he examines the use of aged, mysterious objects to build a sense of wonder and immersion. From weathered tarot cards and flickering candles to strange fortune-teller's coins, the objects themselves helped build a multi-layered mystique that few could resist.

Burger understood that even though magic tricks are built on deception, the objects and props used in those tricks can fortify the sense of authenticity. The same idea applies to the worlds we create for immersive experiences: it's the small, carefully crafted details that make the story feel real.

By thinking like forgers, we are, in essence, following in the footsteps of Van Meegeren, Irving, and Burger, layering touches of authenticity on top of artifice. The aim is to create an object or environment so convincing that fans never stop to question its reality, while embedding clues that invite them to piece together a larger narrative for themselves.

Of course, the motivations behind forgery can vary. For Irving, the primary drivers were fame and financial gain, at least the first of which he achieved. On the other hand, forgers like Mark Hofmann, who forged historical documents including those related to the Mormon Church, set out to rewrite history itself. When exposure closed in, Hofmann *killed two peo*ple with pipe bombs. And in the case of the notorious Hitler Diaries hoax, the aim was a blend of the two: money, and the *ch*ance to reshape how history was understood.

But not all forgeries are about deception. For Burger and Welles, forgery was a way to enhance the magic of storytelling, where a convincing illusion is more about entertainment than deception. Whether it's recreating an object, an image, or even an entire world, the goal is not originality but authenticity. Forgers meticulously study their source material, ensuring every detail is so accurate, so true to the original, that no one can tell the difference. While that misplaced penny in *Somewhere in Time* shattered the illusion, a well-crafted forgery can do the opposite, creating an experience so convincing that no one questions its veracity.

CLIENT: CINEMAX

2014

CASE STUDY: THE KNICK SURGEON'S BOX



The Knick Surgeon's Box, created by Campfire for HBO/Cinemax in 2014.

TRAVELING BACK IN TIME

For Cinemax®'s series *The Knick*, set in a gritty New York hospital in the early 1900s, Campfire took the idea of thinking like a forger to heart. To promote the show's premiere, Campfire created **The Knick Surgeon's Box**, a meticulously built influencer package that mirrored the unsettling world of early twentieth-century medicine.



Top-down view of The Knick Surgeon's Box, with all items held in place by a hand-routed wooden insert and leather straps.

Each box replicated a tangible artifact from the past, featuring antique medical tools, glass slides that showed microscopic surgical scenes from the show, and a letter addressed to the recipient, typed on a period machine. A fold-out poster, illustrated by Canadian artist Gerhard, provided a cutaway of The Knickerbocker Hospital, and a glass bottle containing "Nervous Pills for Female Hysteria," a deliberately ironic nod to the era's pseudoscientific diagnoses, reinforced the period's unsettling medical assumptions. An engraved syringe doubled as a USB drive, containing exclusive digital content like trailers and behind-the-scenes material, while a bar of carbolic soap, gimmicked to "bleed" red when wet, released a pungent waft of antiseptic odor the moment the box was opened.

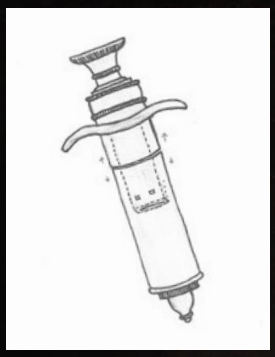
The Surgeon's Box was sent to 200 influencers and VIPs, to transport them into the world of The Knick before the premiere. It generated considerable buzz ahead of the show's launch, with one reviewer calling it "the coolest promotional item I've ever seen (let alone received)." It also won a Gold Clio Award for Best Television Packaging, proof that physical, immersive storytelling can invite people into the world of a TV series.

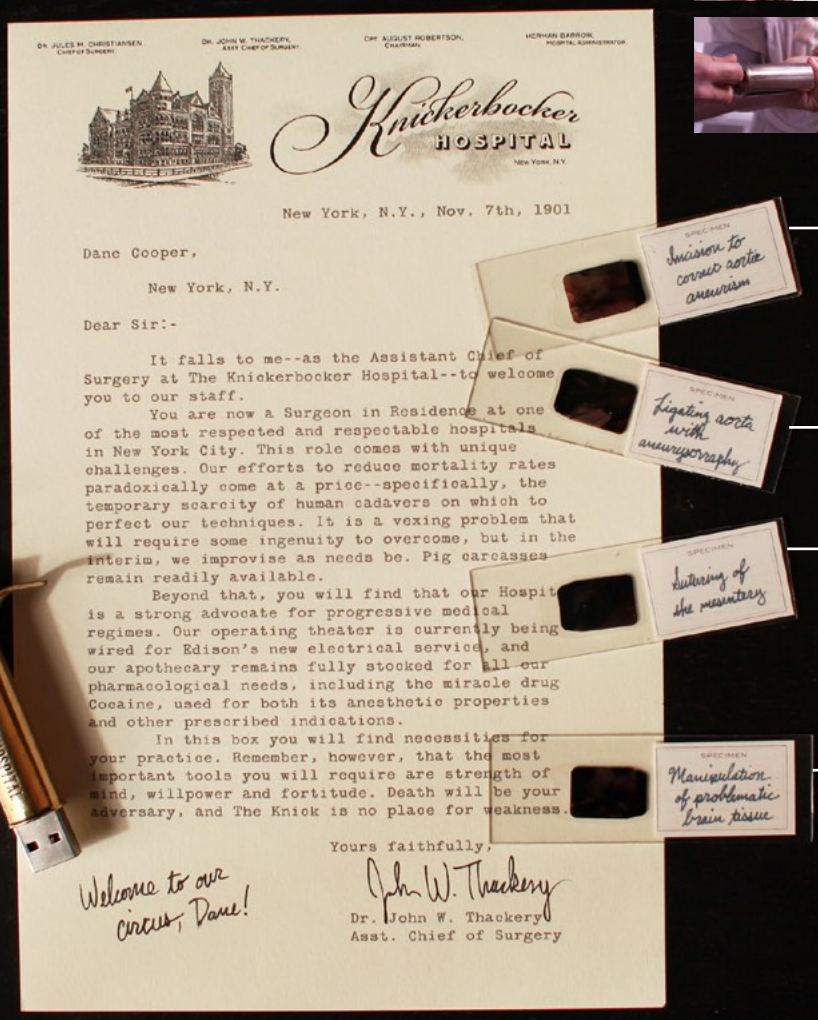


Each edition of the box was personalized with embossed gold lettering featuring the recipient's initials. Inside, each letter, typed on a vintage machine onto period paper stock, carried a handwritten note, including a handwritten note.



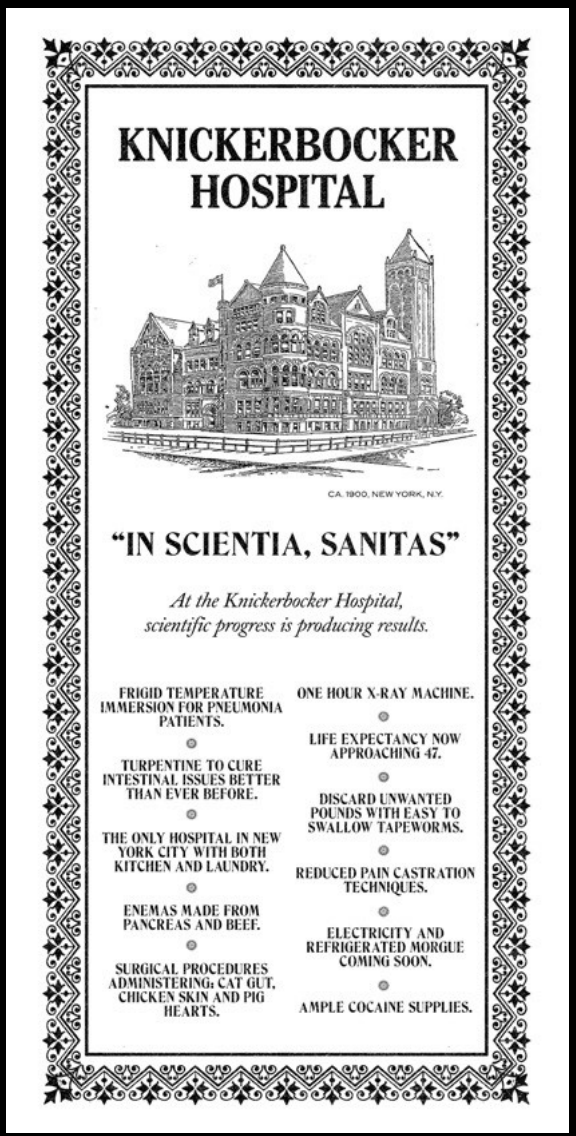








Microscope slides displayed tiny images of a selection of surgical procedures from The Knick, while recipients could "inject" further photographs into their computers using a custom brass "USB syringe."

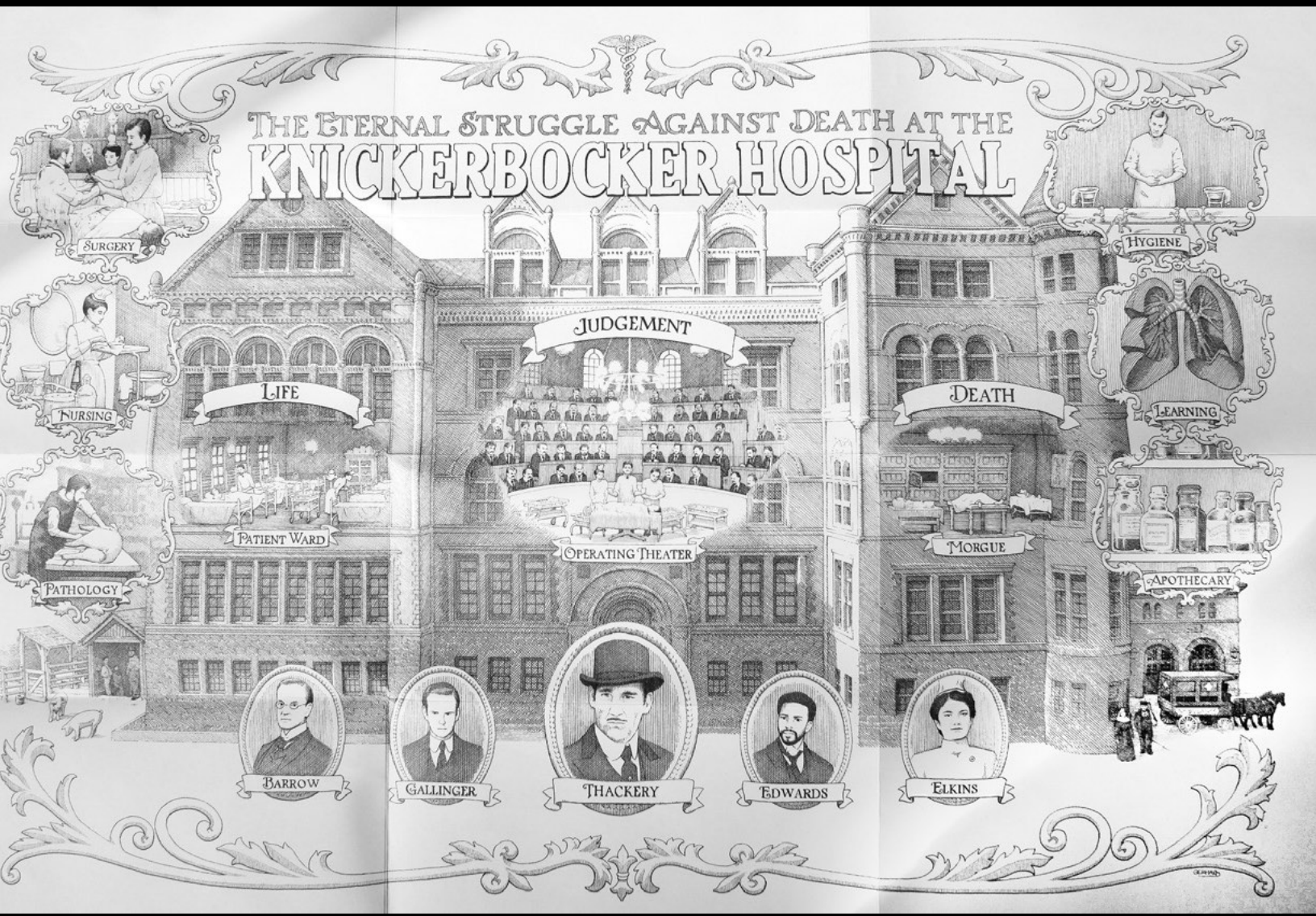








ABOVE: A snapshot of the work-in-progress design process for the letterhead of the show's Knickerbocker Hospital, inspired by our research into promotional materials and fonts from the time.
RIGHT: Every element is a canvas for world-building and narrative fun, as seen in the cover of the fold-out poster that we included in each box.



Working with famed illustrator Gerhard (known for his intricate architectural backgrounds in the independent comic series *Cerebus the Aardvark*), we developed this cutaway engraving of the Knickerbocker Hospital, including several "Easter eggs" for fans of the show to discover.

A forgery production line. The Campfire team labeling and filling glass bottles with mints that stood in for our "nervous pills."





Each pair of forceps held a trapped piece of bloody medical gauze.



Carbolic soap wrapped in custom-printed sleeves provided a waft of antiseptic smell as each box was opened. And those dedicated fans who actually used it to wash up discovered it "bled" red, providing an authentic surgeon's post-operation scrub experience. Each soap was hand-gimmicked by our team, using the same powder and principle as the trick soap seen in magic shops.





Product labels are always an opportune place for world-building informative text, providing both the type of text you'd expect a product like this to have *and* "Easter eggs" for dedicated fans to enjoy.





The key is to make sure that any written material is entertaining enough that it's worth finding, while also staying true to the voice, tone, and design of the forged item. If in doubt, copy from an example of the real thing. *Think like a forger.*



AUTHENTIC



FORGERY



FORGING MEMORIES

But there is a further step. Beyond forging objects and artifacts, we can forge memories. These moments should feel so authentic that they evoke powerful emotional responses: **nostalgia** and **déjà vu**.

To do this, we need to go beyond simple materials and visual cues. We need to tap into the senses of smell, taste, and touch. These senses are powerful memory triggers and when we use them, participants feel like they've been to a place at least once *before*, even when stepping into a fictional world.

THE POWER OF SENSORY CUES

Our senses are gateways to memory and emotion. Smell in particular reaches the limbic system directly, which is why a scent can trigger a vivid memory before you have placed it. Perhaps the most famous example of this is in Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

In C.K. Scott Moncrieff's translation of *Swann's Way*, the narrator dips a madeleine cake into tea, and the taste transports him back to his childhood.

"No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me... And suddenly the memory revealed itself."

Pixar's Ratatouille draws on Proust directly: the food critic Anton Ego tastes a dish and is thro*wn back to h*is mother's kitchen. This powerful involuntary memory triggered by taste and smell is often referred to as the "Proustian moment." Sensory stimuli unlock memories that thought alone cannot reach.

Smell, taste, and touch help to forge powerful memories, and we even use them

to assess authenticity. "Does it pass the *sniff test*?" The test is well-named because forgers assail both the intellectual and the emotional faculties. Each reinforces the other in a feedback loop: what your head tells you confirms what your heart tells you, and vice versa. This is because "authenticity" is also an emotional process, mediated by memory. Does it smell, taste, look, or sound like the thing you've encountered before? Does that make it *true*? The senses are an emotional anchor to previous experience and can invoke powerful memories that help to corroborate events in the present moment.

In **The Maester's Path** for HBO's *Game of Thrones*, our influencer scent boxes were designed to trigger emotional memories. By replicating the earthy scents of dry grass, woodsmoke, and wild horses, we immersed participants in the fictional Dothraki plains, giving them the sensation of having *been* there through scent memory.

When we use sensory elements like smell, taste, and touch in our experiences, we're tapping into the brain's emotional and memory centers, making the experience more personal and lasting.



CLIENT: HBO

2011

CASE STUDY: THE MAESTER'S PATH

CLICK FOR VIDEO

Game of Thrones scent box, created by Campfire for HBO, the first of five steps on **The Maester's Path**, 2011.

FORGING MEMORIES OF WESTEROS

When preparing audiences for the premiere of HBO®'s *Game of Thrones*, we knew the show's vast political intrigues and complex narrative might overwhelm first-time viewers. That's why we designed **The Maester's Path** as a prequel experience to ease them in, setting the stage with **tangible experiences** that made Westeros feel real. Our approach was that of a **forger**: artifacts that felt like they came from a medieval world, and, through sensory techniques, memories of a place that doesn't exist.

SMELL: CONJURING THE SCENT OF THE DOTHRAKI PLAINS

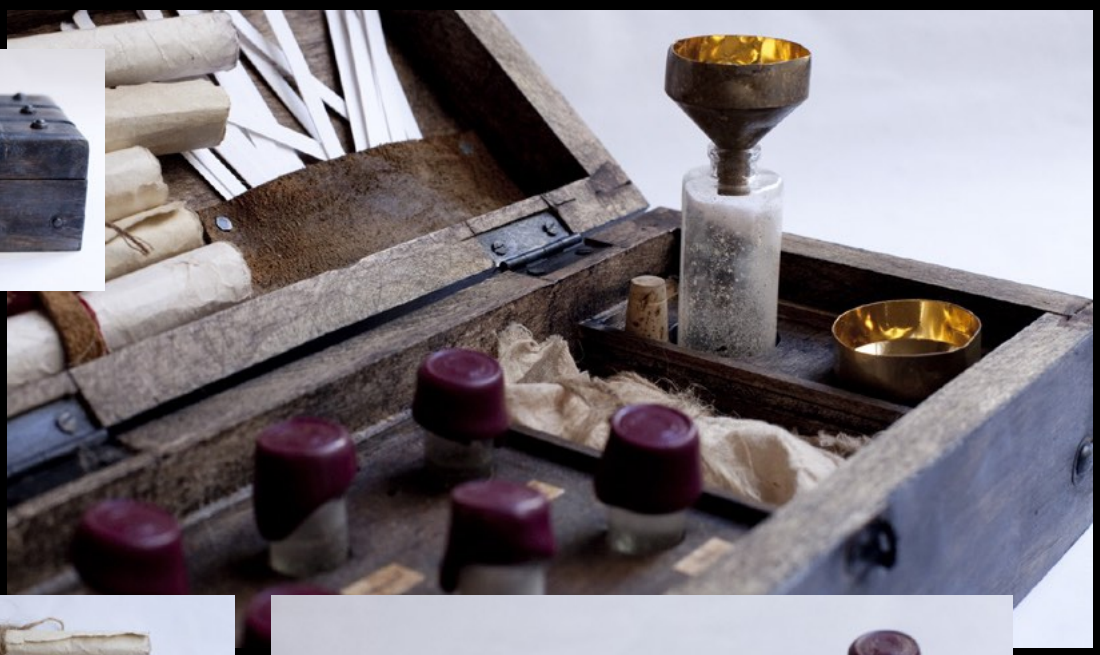
One of the most powerful components of **The Maester's Path** was **smell**. Recognizing scent's potential to evoke emotional and sensory memories, we lovingly designed the scent boxes to feel like relics from Westeros. The materials, the vials, and even the scrolls reflected the medieval craftsmanship of the world.

We partnered with a custom perfumer to bring a series of pivotal locations from *Game of Thrones* to life. For the **Dothraki Plains**, we used George R. R. Martin's own descriptions to imagine the smells of the Dothraki camp:

— The tough **grasses** of the plains.
— The **smoke** from the campfires.
— The earthy scent of **horses**, integral to Dothraki life.

A curated group of journalists, influencers, and superfans each received a box containing three distinct scent vials, with scrolls instructing them to combine the smells, an **experiment** that felt as if it had been sent directly from Westeros. Holding these vials, participants could imagine themselves handling a relic from the Dothraki camp, forging a physical and emotional connection to the storyworld.



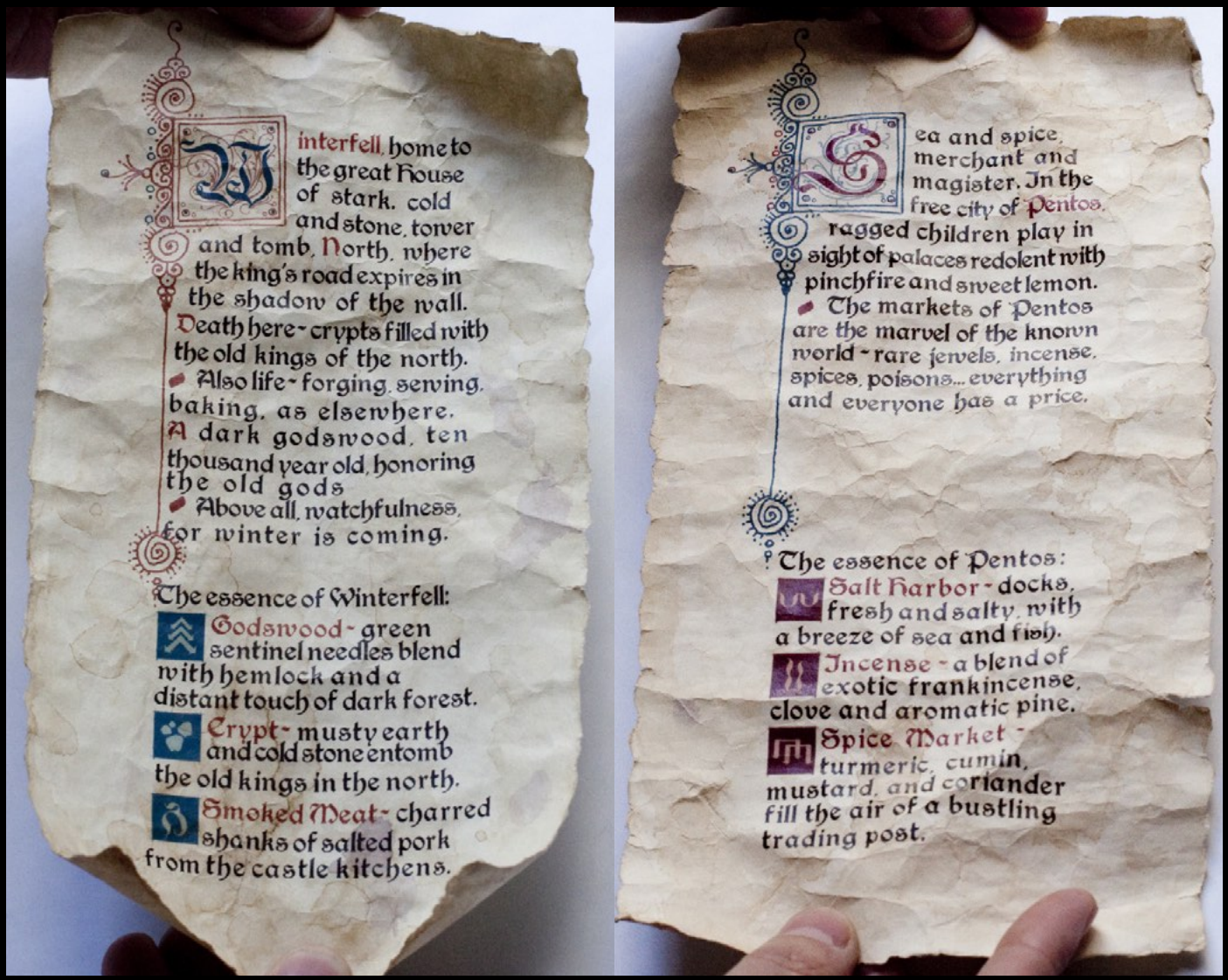


Each scent box not only contained custom-crafted individual scents but also mixing bottles and funnels.

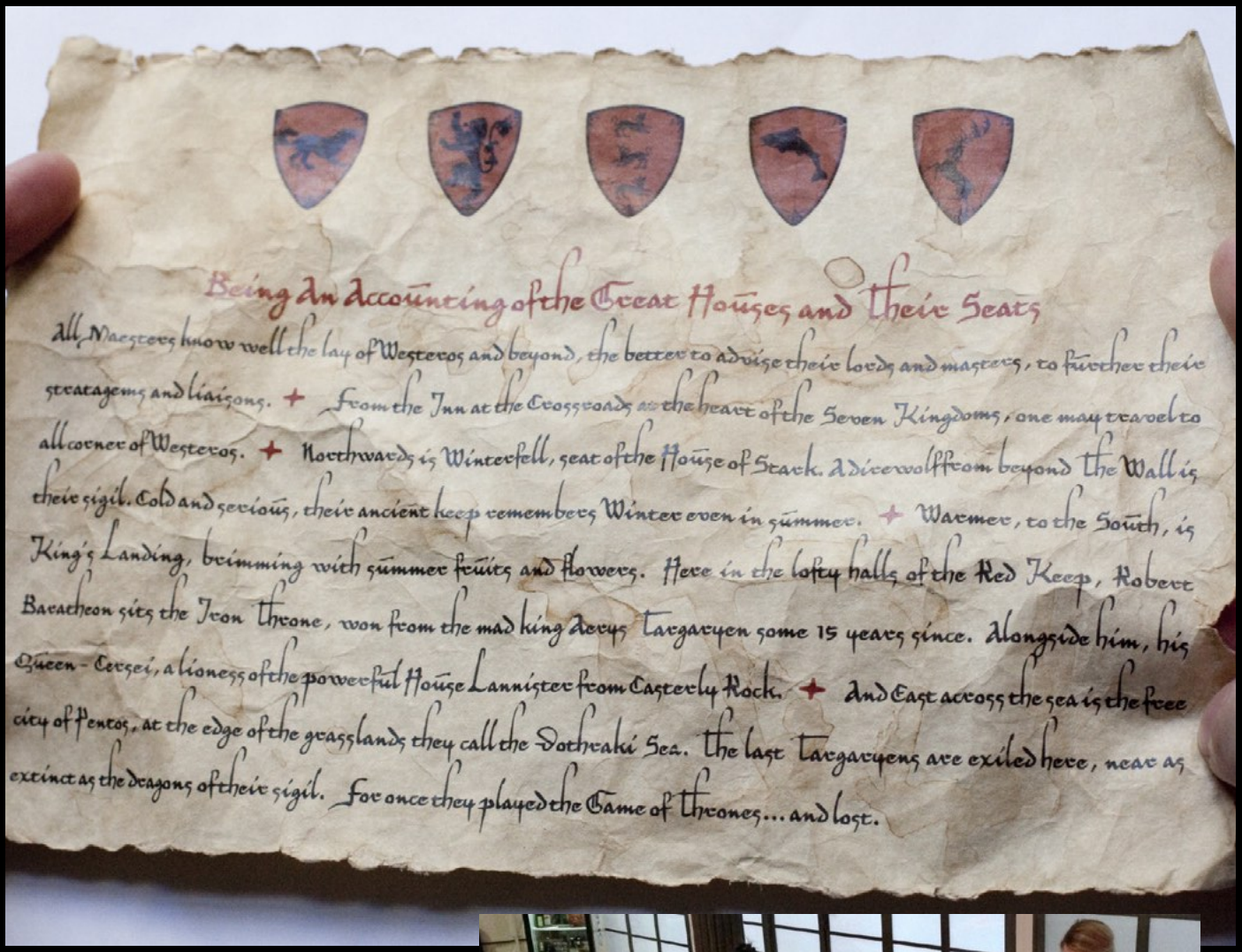




By providing individual scent building blocks that had to be combined to create the smell of a place, the box offered an interactive experiment that allowed recipients to tell their **own** story about the experience as they mixed.



Each location was accompanied by a recipe scroll, explaining the location itself to the uninitiated, and allowing them to smell each scent in turn before experiencing the alchemy of the combination.





ABOVE: Instructions were forged to look and feel like the scrolls seen in the show, which would be rolled up, bound by cord, and attached to a Raven by a Maester for dispatch across the Seven Kingdoms.
RIGHT: The Campfire team forging scrolls en masse.



Binaural audio is a stereo recording technique that creates a 3-D sound effect that mimics the experience of listening live. The word "binaural" means "having two ears." The effect is achieved by "dummy head recording," using a mannequin head fitted with microphones in each ear.



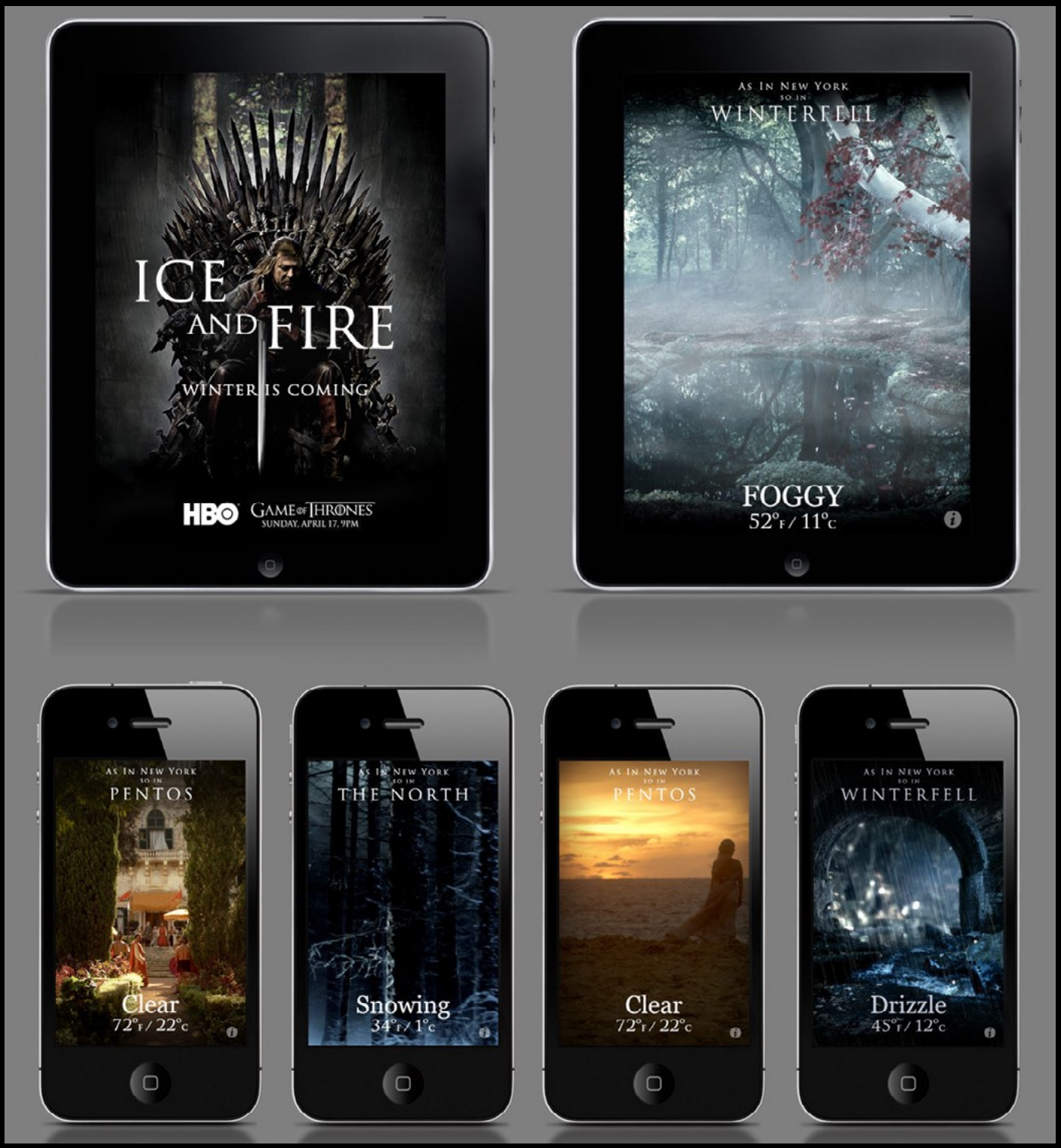
SOUND: UNCOVERING THE SECRETS AND LIES OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

The second component visited a key location in the show, The Inn at the Crossroads, and allowed fans to eavesdrop on conversations in the tavern to hear the gossip of Westeros.

Working with the showrunners and voice coaches from production, we recorded unique conversations using a binaural recording technique that adds a dimensional "live" element to sound recording when heard using headphones. Fans could "walk" around the tavern with their cursor and, as they did, hear the low murmurings at the tables move in and out of their hearing range.

TOUCH: FROM THE COLD OF THE NORTH TO THE SULTRY SOUTH

The iPad was less than a year old when we began working on the *Ice and Fire* weather app, using the expanded real estate of its touchscreen to display prominent locations from *Game of Thrones*. The app read the weather at the user's location and then opened the region of Westeros where the skies matched. Mixing form with function, the app gave many fans their first glimpse of Winterfell and the Godswood before the show had even aired.



SIGHT: THE VIEW FROM THE TOP OF THE WALL

With the fourth sensory element, we wanted to give fans something spectacular: the view from the top of The Wall, the 700-foot-high structure from which the men of the Night's Watch guard Westeros from the terrors of the North.

To do so, we recreated structures based on production design models (pictured below) in the best technology then available for online 3-D environments: Adobe Flash. Fans visiting in their browsers could ride the ancient elevator up The Wall and then stand watch. If and when they saw wildlings emerging from the forest below, they needed to run to one of the horns and give two blasts to warn of an imminent attack.





Production design models of the structures at the top of The Wall, as seen on location in Belfast, in the buildings once used to construct the Titanic.





A member of the Night's Watch stands vigil atop The Wall.



The team from Tom Colicchio's restaurant crafted dishes based on the Seven Kingdoms.

TASTE: AUTHENTIC MEDIEVAL FLAVORS IN WESTEROS

Food, too, plays a crucial role in both authenticity and memory. Martin's use of food throughout the books as a narrative device reveals the socio-political dynamics of Westeros. For our fifth and final sensory experience, we partnered with chef **Tom Colicchio** to bring the foods of Westeros to life through medieval dishes, with no modern shortcuts.

Colicchio's food trucks distributed plates inspired by five regions of Westeros, using ingredients and techniques that would have been familiar to medieval cooks. For example:

— **The North** offered hearty stews of game meat, evoking the harsh climate and reliance on hunting.
— **King's Landing** featured decadent, more highly spiced dishes, reflecting the wealth and status of the capital's elite.

These meals were designed to evoke memories through taste, culinary a**rtifacts that told** a story on a plate and grounded the world in something real.

This project epitomized the forger's mindset. Each element was built to feel as if it had always existed in Westeros, ensuring that fans could fully lose themselves in the world.

A long line of fans waiting for dishes to be served on the chilly streets outside Lincoln Center in New York City.





Game of Thrones author George R. R. Martin addressing news crews beside the food trucks.



Squab from the Riverlands. See full menu on the following page.

Each of the five sensory experiences contained deeper clues to a parallel scavenger hunt called **The Maester's Path**, designed for hardcore fans of the book series: our Divers.

Fans who figured out how to fold the menu in a certain way revealed a hidden phrase, "Tears of Lys," that unlocked exclusive online content.







Lemon Cakes

Serves 6

1/2 cup sugar plus additional for dusting ramekins

2 eggs, separated

3 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon all-purpose flour

Pinch kosher salt

2/3 cup buttermilk

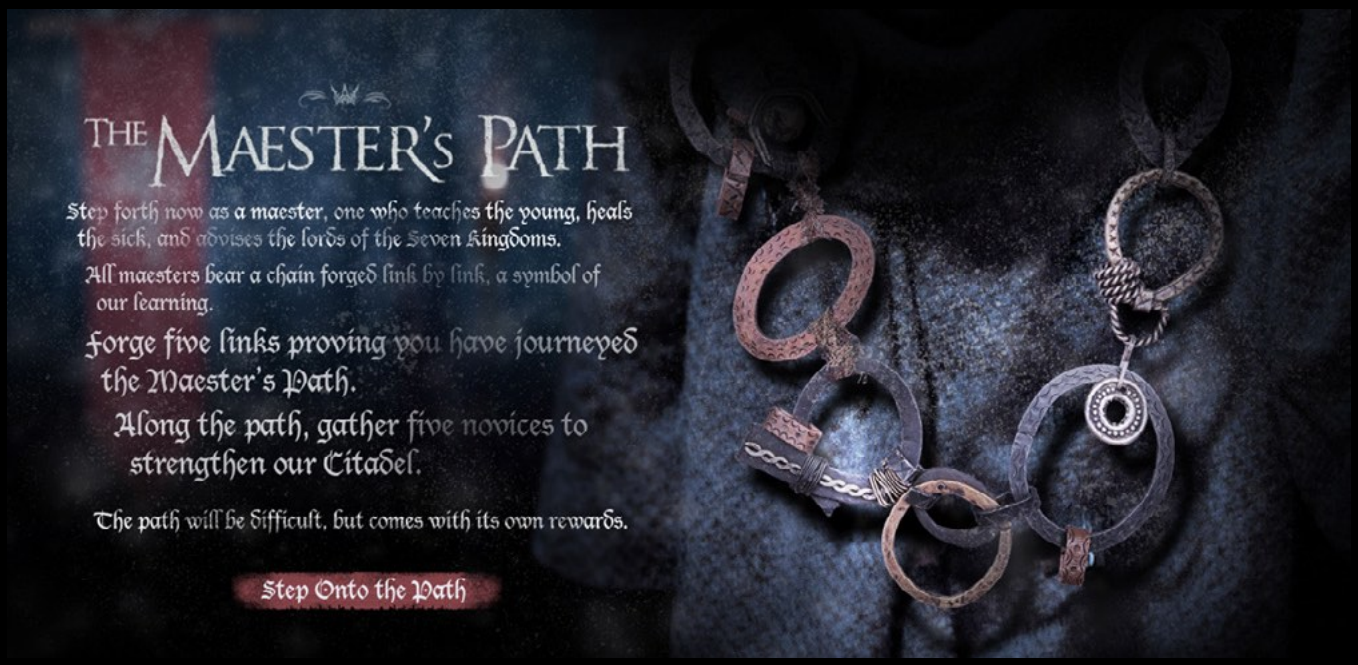
2 1/2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Finely chopped zest of 1 1/2 lemons

- Heat the oven to 300. Butter and lightly sugar 6 4-ounce ramekins. Beat the egg whites until they hold soft peaks then set them aside. Sift the sugar with the flour and salt. In a mixer, using the whisk attachment, combine the buttermilk, lemon juice, egg yolks and lemon zest.
- Gradually add the flour mixture then fold in the egg whites. Divide the batter between the prepared ramekins. Place the ramekins in a water bath (set the ramekins in a larger pan; fill the pan with enough hot water to come half way up the ramekins) cover with aluminum foil.
- Bake until the cakes rise and are almost firm, about 25 minutes then uncover and continue baking until the tops are lightly golden and the cakes spring back when touched, about 15 minutes more. Unmold and serve.



Tom Colicchio's official recipe that HBO distributed digitally.





This puzzle wheel could only be solved by "collecting" the unique insignia displayed on the bottles of scents seen on the influencer scent kits.

The success of **The Maester's Path** lay in the way it combined **emotional memories** with **authentic artifacts**. Much like master forgers, we crafted **experiences** and **objects** that felt lived-in. The sensory elements of **smell** and **taste**, paired with the authenticity of the physical artifacts, fully immersed participants in *Game of Thrones*.

Our well-intentioned forgeries ensured that every detail felt **authentic** and **lasting**. The result was an introduction to the world of Westeros that made fans feel as though they had **been there**, holding relics from a fantasy world and forging their emotional connections to the story.

AUDITORY FORGERY: CRAFTING IMMERSIVE SOUNDSCAPES

Just as smell and taste can forge powerful connections to a story, so too can sound. One example that fascinates us is the story of **Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings**, a musical forgery that has intrigued listeners for over a decade (and counting).

Purported to be a lost masterpiece from a forgotten early-1970s soul group, an album by Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings gained attention when several tracks attributed to the group surfaced on YouTube in 2012. These songs, including soulful renditions of David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* tracks like "Moonage Daydream" and "Starman," were recorded in classic Motown style. Featuring smooth vocals and arrangements characteristic of the era, the recordings convinced many that they were real soul versions by an obscure band. The supposed album, titled *Starman*, featured reinterpretations of all the tracks from Bowie's original work. David Bowie himself even tweeted the video to his fans, and collectors went looking for copies in the used record bins.





But Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings never existed. The recordings were (almost certainly) a modern-day hoax. And so far, it has never been revealed who was behind it.

What made this auditory forgery particularly effective was the meticulous attention to detail. The tracks seem to have been produced using era-appropriate techniques and instrumentation, and the crafted backstory included plausible elements, such as record label disputes and mysterious disappearances. The hoax feels so authentic that it continues to fool even the most seasoned music fans.

Starman was one of many inspirations for Campfire's **Resistance Radio**. Working with **Danger Mouse** and **Sam Cohen**, we set about reimagining what pop music might sound like in a world where the Allies had lost World War II, a world where cultural revolutions like Rock'n' Roll and The Beatles never happened.

The team used period-specific instruments and recording techniques to make the music sound as though it had come straight out of the 1960s. Songs were infused with a sense of darkness and oppression that reflected the alternate history of *The Man in the High Castle*, the Amazon Prime Video show the music was promoting.

The resulting soundtrack became integral to the show's world. Classic songs like "The House of the Rising Sun" and "Get Happy" were darkly reinterpreted through subtle shifts in tone, mood, and production style.

Auditory forgeries work by taking familiar reference points and rearranging them just enough to unsettle.

CLIENT: AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

2017

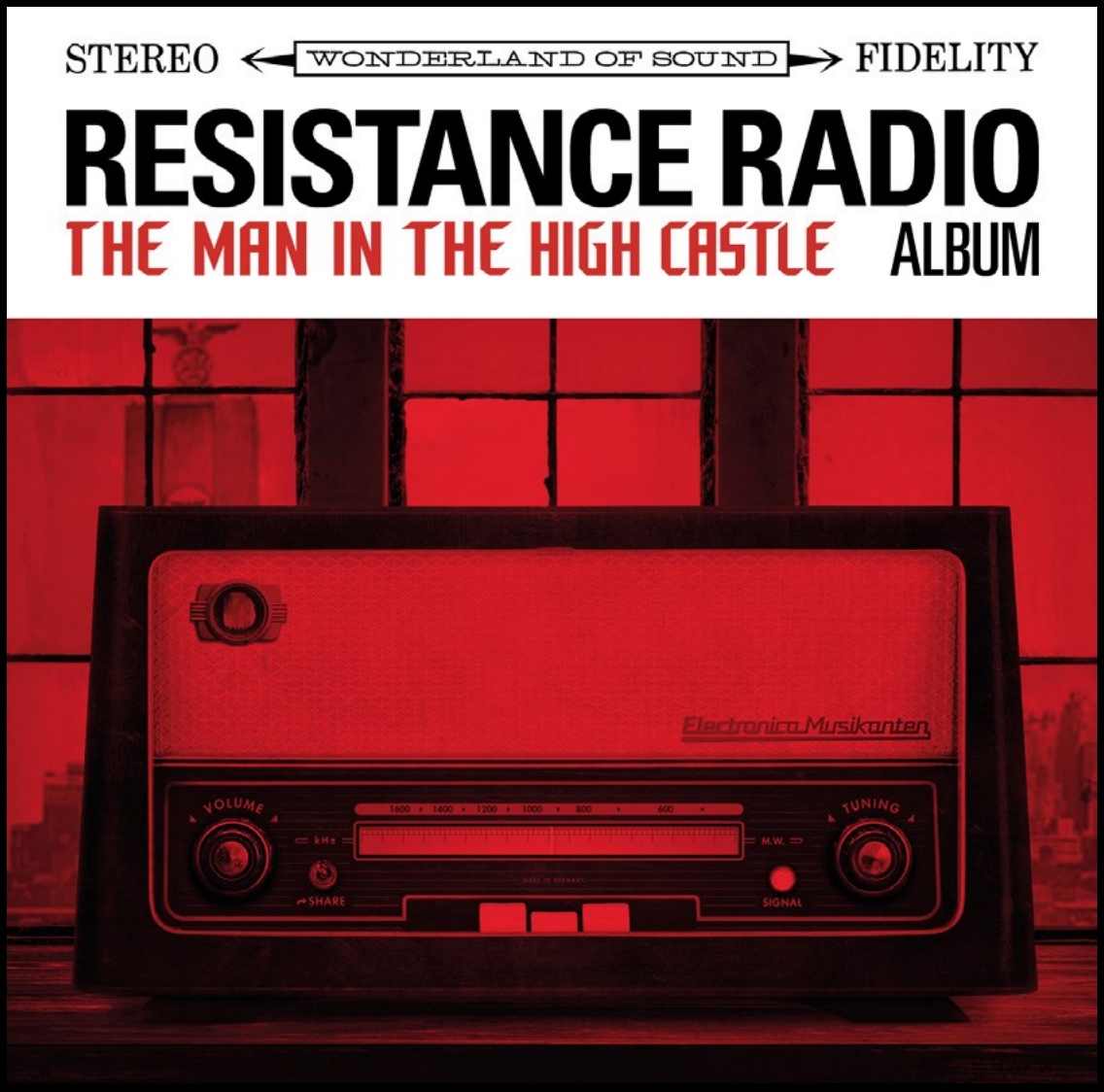
CASE STUDY: RESISTANCE RADIO

CLICK FOR VIDEO



REIMAGINING PIRATE RADIO AND FORGING A DYSTOPIAN SOUNDSCAPE

For our client Amazon Prime Video®, Campfire launched **Resistance Radio** as a multi-layered promotional experience for *The Man in the High Castle*. This project exemplifies Campfire's approach to immersive storytelling, creating a world where music and pirate radio stations were used to convey messages of rebellion from a dystopian imagined version of 1960s America. The execution was divided into three core components: authentic radio programming, influencer packages, and the overall narrative experience.



The cover for the Resistance Radio album, which was released by 30th Century Records, based on the accompanying website design. The album featured 18 cover versions of period songs, re-recorded by top contemporary artists, and was released on all major streaming services, as well as on CD and vinyl. The tracks were first heard in our original audio drama, Resistance Radio.

AUTHENTICITY OF THE RADIO PROGRAM

Resistance Radio, a fictional pirate radio station, was set within the alternate history of *The Man in the High Castle*, where the Axis powers had won World War II. This underground radio station broadcast anti-fascist messages and featured a collection of reimagined 1960s songs that aligned with the show's timeline and atmosphere.

Resistance Radio was a fully functional, four-hour broadcast available on platforms like **iHeartRadio**, **Amazon Alexa**, and dedicated websites. Three fictional DJs, Miss Evangeline, Bob Montez, and Jake Rumiel, were said to host their shows from hidden locations, risking their lives to keep the hope of freedom alive. The programs mixed music and storytelling, including subtle references to conspiracy theories and rebellion. Jake Rumiel's darkly comedic program, Firing Squad, played on the very real threats of execution that freedom fighters faced under a fascist regime.

The radio segments were punctuated with static, secret codes, and Morse code transmissions, further immersing listeners in the nerve-racking world of underground resistance. The combination of DJs' personal stories and melancholic music transformed the broadcasts into a narrative experience that struck a nerve with the audience.

REIMAGINING 1960s POP MUSIC FOR A WORLD WITHOUT ROCK'N' ROLL

Sam Cohen and Danger Mouse worked closely together to produce **18 tracks**, performed by modern artists like Beck, Sharon Van Etten, Norah Jones, and The Shins, all to complement this dystopian narrative.

These recreations of nostalgic 1960s hits had a darker, more melancholic tone to reflect the oppression of the fictional world. Using period-specific equipment and techniques, the team reworked the music to sound as if it had evolved under totalitarian rule, where subversive genres like jazz, gospel, and R&B were outlawed. This challenge, imagining what pop music might have become without the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, was key to making the radio station feel authentic to both new listeners and fans of the series.











The **Resistance Radio** audio drama was available on a custom web and mobile experience, allowing listeners to tune into four hours of in-world programming, with select segments also available on social networks. The interface design was based on vintage radios.

BELOW: The experience was so convincing that some listeners weren't sure whether it was real, which is the hallmark of a good forgery.







11 SEGMENT ELEVEN 11

COMING OUT OF RECORD "SPOONFUL":

EVANGELINE
All right, Miss Evangeline is *back*, broadcasting on **nine-twelve** kilohertz from the Neutral Zone, home to Resistance Radio.

I spend a lotta time on this show talking about America today, what we've really were - and are - versus what we always believed we were. And I don't think it's a controversial notion at this point to find vast discrepancies between the two.

Some folks may act like that's a surprise, but most of 'em are first of all *white*, and second, maybe not *quite* so shocked as they let on. I mean, we did have Jim Crow all the way up to when the Axis won the war; no big state secret.

On the flip side, y'all white folks in the Japanese Pacific States have spent the last few years getting to know what it's like to be black in America. Those Pons may be *cool* with the Negro! But if you're a *white* man there? You're a *second class citizen*. You *have no* civil rights. Military can *kill* you in the street just for looking at them funny. You are a suspect on sight, because you bear the *"shame of surrender."* How's that feel, West Coast?

And here's the really crazy part: Pretty soon? *You're gonna forget it was ever any other way.*

That's the thing I worry about most. Because as long as we can remember who and what we were before the war -- as incredibly flawed as that was -- we at least got a *chance* to find our way back
(MORE)

3/3/17

EVANGELINE (CONT'D)
to it.

Not the reality of what we were -- nothing to be gained in that -- but what we aspired to be.

Because let me be clear: You cannot create a society based on democracy and liberty, and at the same time enshrine in your founding documents the notion that the people you stole, and beat, and raped, and bought -- that *those* human beings are an *exception*.

There's a word for that. And that word? Is *evil*. Ain't no dressing it up. Americans have shown themselves to be capable of *breathtaking* evil.

And the only thing to mitigate our guilt, is that we may not be any better than any of the other deluded fools in the world, but we sure as hell ain't any worse. And moreover, We *wanted* to be *better*.

Now, good intentions are no excuse. But they are an essential part of the way we Americans see ourselves. They *matter*. Because we were the first nation in the *history of the goddamn world* to *create ourselves*, to organize around common *ideals*.

And our founding fathers, the men who articulated and agreed on those ideals? They knew we were flawed -- but they bet that we could rise above our natures. Even as they themselves could not! You ask Mister Jefferson, I *guarantee* he'd tell you he wasn't writing how it *is* -- he was writing how it *ought to be*.

You know me, I am the *last* person to defend all the wrong this country did. And when push comes to shove, the reality is we handed our country to a nazi madman, and threw practically everything good we ever stood for out the window. *That* is the reality of America today.
(MORE)

EVANGELINE (CONT'D)

But the *idea* of America?

As long as any of us can still see that light through the fog, there's still a chance for us to grope our way back to that higher road. To be our best selves, instead of our worst.

But it's getting late. That fog is settling in. That light is getting harder and harder to see.

Not gonna lie to you, America: we're running out of time.

You're listening to Miss Evangeline, on Resistance Radio. Back after this.

GO TO RECORD "NATURE BOY."



The Resistance Radio booth at SXSW.

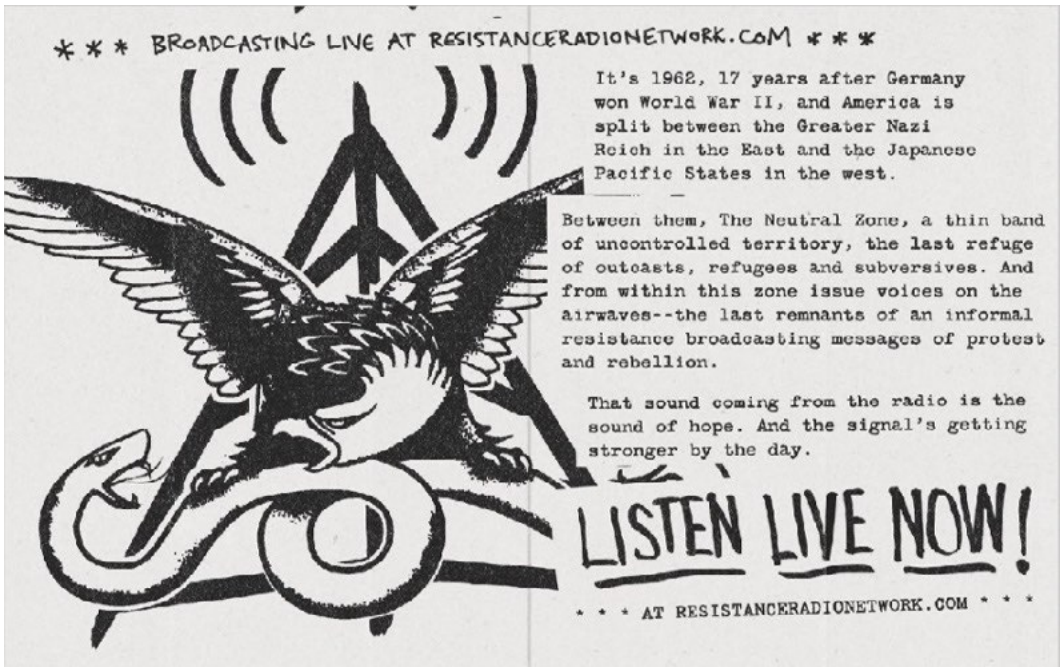
RRN Symbols & Iconography Reference



ABOVE: "Thinking like a forger" almost always begins with research. In this case, an extensive mood board of patriotic logos, focusing on wartime propaganda.

RIGHT: Our final design not only embraces the iconography, printing techniques, and color palettes of the visual inspiration, but also tells a fuller story of our storyworld: The Eagle, a pervasive icon of America, sitting astride a two-headed snake, symbolizing the Nazi control of the East Coast and the Japanese control of the West. In between, in the Neutral buffer zone, the transmission tower of Resistance Radio.





FORGING INFLUENCER PACKAGES TO IMMERSE THE AUDIENCE

To deepen audience engagement, Campfire distributed detailed influencer packages designed as pieces of subversive resistance memorabilia. Each package contained a **vinyl record** disguised as a piece of Nazi propaganda called the *Kinderliederbuch zur Charakterbildung* (Children's Songbook for Character Building). However, inside the album sleeve was the real record, featuring subversive protest songs, including Sharon Van Etten's *"The End of the World"* and Sam Cohen's *"The House of the Rising* Sun."

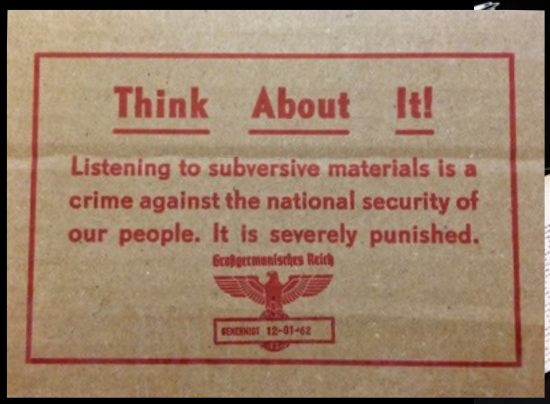
The package also included a **DIY record player kit**, allowing recipients to create a manual player using just the provided needle and a coin.

This tactile invitation to join the Resistance allowed influencers and superfans to engage physically with the world of the show and forge a deep emotional bond.





Even before influencers opened the box, the world-building began on the outside, where a faux story purported to justify the distribution of illicit music. In this case, being smuggled out of the Neutral Zone in an otherwise official-looking package.





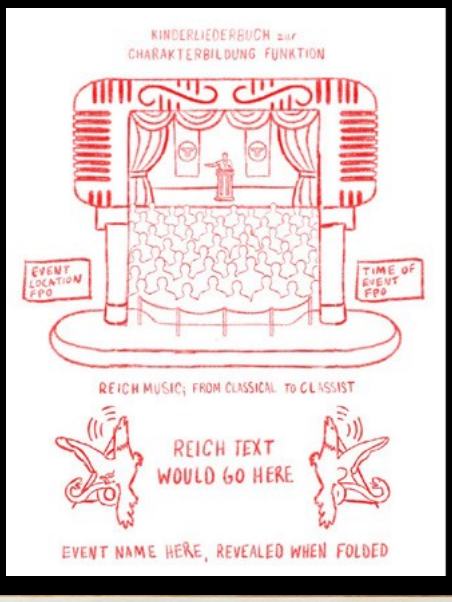


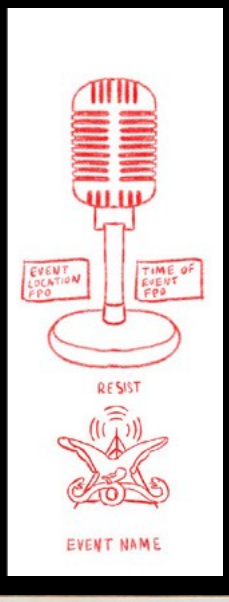


An enclosed "mimeographed" leaflet included instructions on how to fold the cardboard, so that by using a needle and turning the vinyl record, you could listen to the music subversively and without electricity.



Early design concepts.



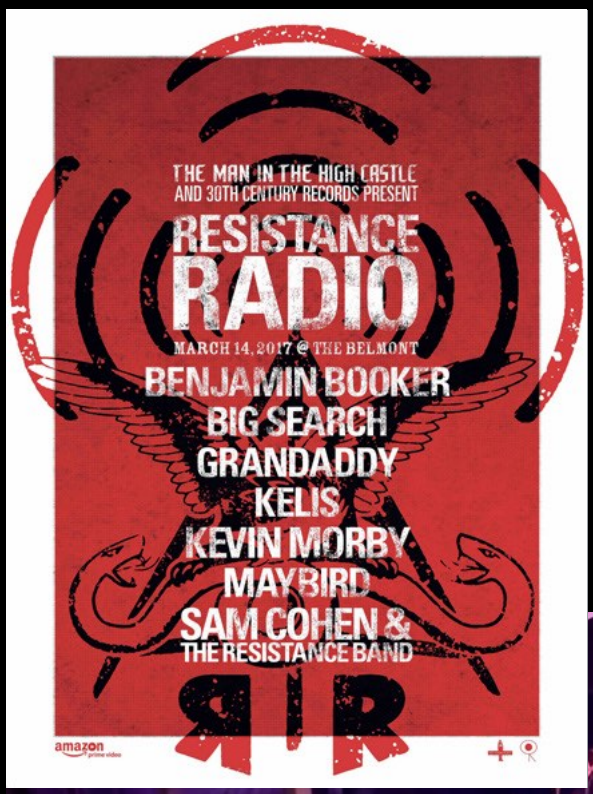








Anyone who grew up loving Al Jaffee's fold-ins in Mad Magazine will recognize our inspiration in hiding the details of the Resistance Radio pop-up activation and concert at SXSW.









TOP: Emmy award certificate for the Resistance Radio program, which also won top awards at the Clios and at Cannes.
CENTER: Benjamin Booker performing "Spoonful" onstage at the Resistance Radio concert in Austin, TX.
BOTTOM: Conan O'Brien introducing a live performance by Danger Mouse and Sam Cohen on his late-night show.

Resistance Radio was a living piece of The Man *in the High Castle*, bridging the gap between seasons while extending the show's storyworld into real life. The combination of immersive audio storytelling, period-accurate music, and physical engagement through influencer packages made the program a stand-out example of transmedia storytelling. It won Grand Clios and Cannes Lions, and earned an Emmy nomination. And the showrunners loved it so much that they wrote **Resistance Radio** into the show in subsequent seasons.

FORGING NOSTALGIA AND DÉJÀ VU

As Proust knew, nostalgia plays a key role in forging memories. By using raw sensory experiences, the strongest triggers of memory, we can encourage participants in our activations to feel as though they are revisiting something from their past. What the audience brings with them matters as much as what we create. We can carry them further into a fictional world by tapping their own sensory nostalgia. That scent from Westeros pulls at a memory of walking through fields on a summer's day. The taste of a rustic stew triggers moments of nourishing meals from your own life. Blending sensory memories with the imaginary storyworld is what makes people feel like they've *been* there before.

For an experience to stick, you need a perfectly executed mix of what you provide and what fans already carry with them: the déjà vu of a false memory.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND PRACTICALITY

However hard you chase authenticity, it has to be balanced against practicality. Remember that not every tiny detail needs to be meticulously recreated if it doesn't enhance the narrative or the fan experience. When we're crafting something, we always ask ourselves: "**Does this deepen the story?**" If the answer is no, we might decide it's not worth the effort or the expense.

Authenticity isn't *always* about perfecting every detail. It's more about making sure the details that matter come together in a way that brings the story to life. Immersion happens when fans feel an emotional response to the world we've built, and sometimes, it's the small, subtle moments that matter most.

But ahh, the magic when it works. In Chapter Three, we discussed our activation titled **Purge City**, an exercise in world-building that required us to forge many of the pieces "on sale" in our store.

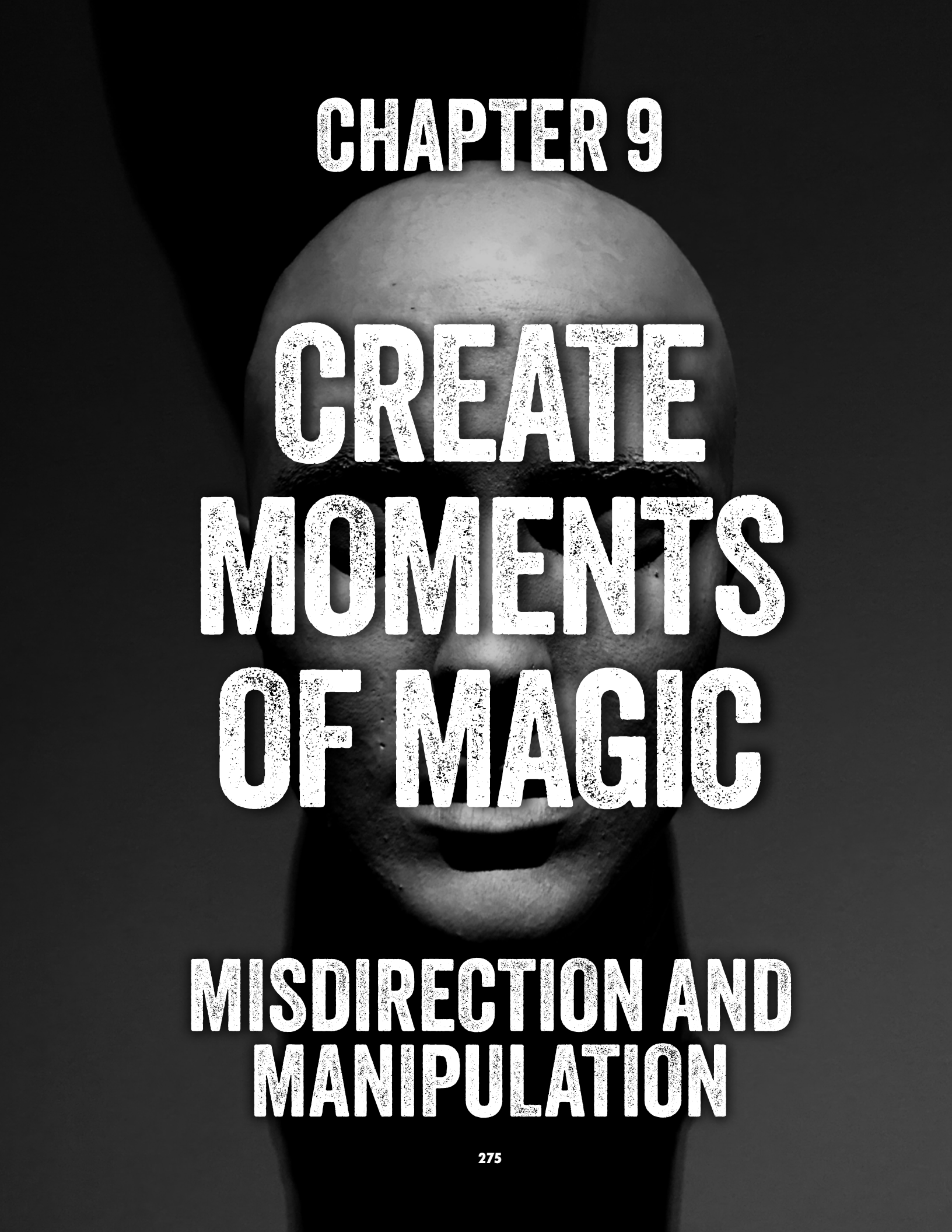
One of the artifacts we created was a packet of blue Baptisia seeds, an element taken directly from the flora of the storyworld of *The Purge*. They came with detailed planting instructions designed to make the flowers bloom on Purge Night, and varied according to the U.S. region where seeds might be planted.



Designs for the Blue Baptisia seed packets that were exclusively available in the Purge City experience for "Five Purge dollars" at SDCC in 2018.

That level of attention is the philosophy of "Thinking Like a Forger." The seeds were part of the larger narrative of *The Purge*, something that would give fans the sense that they had taken a piece of that world home with them. The subtlety of this creation was essential. Just as forgers strive to ensure no one ever suspects their work is a forgery, we wanted the recipients of these seeds to feel as though they had been transported into the world of *The Purge*. In our work, we aim for this level of authenticity across every aspect, creating artifacts that feel like they belong in the worlds we build.

This balance is key to immersive storytelling. Never chase authenticity for its own sake. Focus on what will enhance the story and create a more complete world. That's what guides us in deciding where to spend time and resources, making sure our efforts have the greatest impact on the fan experience.



CHAPTER 9

CREATE MOMENTS OF MAGIC

MISDIRECTION AND MANIPULATION

PREVIOUS: Detail from the wall of heads, as seen in Robert Ford's office in *Westworld,* and featured in our activation **The Westworld Experience** at both SDCC and NYCC. Each head was a full-size life cast of an actor who played a character in the show, including Evan Rachel Wood (Dolores) and Ed Harris (The Man in Black).

CHAPTER 9
CREATE MOMENTS OF MAGIC
MISDIRECTION AND MANIPULATION

THE LIGHTBULB THAT DEFIED REALITY

Each February, in the windswept British seaside resort of Blackpool, around 3,000 magicians gather for the world's largest magic convention. Since its founding in 1953, the annual Blackpool Magic Convention has been a vibrant mix of magic dealer showcases, lectures, amateur competitions, and, for one night only, a grand theatrical performance featuring some of the world's best magicians.

In 1987*, during one of these special nights, an American magician stepped onto the stage and the expectant chatter faded into silence. The audience, magicians and fans alike, instantly knew they were about to witness something extraordinary, an illusion still considered by many to be one of the greatest ever performed.

"What you are about to see," he began, his eyes scanning the crowd, "is something you will remember the longest day you live."

Then he produced what looked like an ordinary lightbulb. As he gently cradled it, the bulb started to glow softly, with no visible source of power. The crowd gasped. With a graceful motion, the magician released it, and the bulb floated effortlessly between his hands, as though gravity no longer applied.

* *I know, because I was there.* —Steve

But that was just the beginning. The magician then produced a solid ring and passed it around the lightbulb, showing there were no wires or hidden supports. The lightbulb spun and danced in mid-air. Then he stepped down from the stage into the audience, and the bulb followed, floating inches away from the astonished faces in the front row.



After walking the width of the stage, the magician returned to the center as the orchestra reached a musical crescendo. Just when it seemed the performance had reached its peak, he called for silence. Looking toward a man seated dozens of rows back, he asked, "What's that? You'd like to see it up close? All right, look, but do not touch. Then, *you may see it.*"

With a simple gesture, the lightbulb left the magician's hands and glided over the audience, floating 50 feet across the auditorium until it hovered right in front of the audience member's eyes, lighting up his stunned expression.

At that moment, everyone in the theater forgot about the mechanics of illusion. They were no longer analyzing the trick. They were experiencing pure wonder. For a fleeting second, they all believed that Harry Blackstone Jr. was demonstrating real magical powers.

CHASING "THE MOMENT"

There's a feeling we all know and instantly recognize. It starts as a tingling sensation on the back of your neck as the hairs stand up. Everything else fades away, and for a brief electric moment, you're consumed by wonder. The trigger might be a photo, a piece of music, or a movie scene.

With a great magic trick, it goes even further. It's when logic evaporates. For just a second, the ground beneath you feels unsteady and you begin to question everything you thought you knew. For a heartbeat, maybe, just maybe, magic is real after all.

Of course, this feeling is fleeting. Logic inevitably returns. You remind yourself that the trick is clever craftsmanship, skill, and illusion, and wonder turns into "I wonder how it's done." (There are now whole TikTok feeds devoted to answering that question, for better or worse.) But for those few seconds, the experience is almost transcendent. It touches something older than logic.

At Campfire, we call this "**The Moment**." It's that sublime point in an experience where you're fully immersed in what's unfolding before you, even if it flies in the face of everything you've been led to believe. It isn't easy to achieve, but when it happens, an ordinary experience becomes something people don't forget.

As with master magicians, creating The Moment requires an alchemical blend of surprise, emotional connection, and impeccable timing. It's about guiding the audience's attention, toying with their expectations, and delivering something that not only amazes but connects with them on an emotional level.

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS OF ILLUSION



Publicity photo of Steve Coulson aka "Scaramouch," circa 1988

Our commitment to creating Moments draws inspiration from legendary magicians like **Harry Blackstone Jr.**, **Eugene Burger**, **Ricky Jay**, and **Derren Brown**, performers past and present who don't just do tricks, but build experiences that leave lasting impressions.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Campfire Creative Director Steve Coulson has a background in magic. Long before joining Campfire, he supported himself through college working as a restaurant magician in London.

I loved magic as a kid, and being in London gave me access to some of the best magic shops and societies in the country. So, when it came time to supplement my college fund with some extra income, I turned to close-up magic, "table-hopping" in restaurants across the West End, performing to diners when they had finished their meal. That's a tough gig, moving from table to table, trying to capture the attention of reluctant strangers. But I quickly learned that the best way to win over an audience is by inviting them into a story, not just performing tricks for applause.

— Steve Coulson

Nearly forty years later, he's still making magic. And while magicians are notoriously tight-lipped about their secrets, we're going to risk the wrath of the Gods of Magic and share a few key concepts that help us craft those Moments: **Misdirection**, **Cold Reading**, and **Manipulation**.

MISDIRECTION: THE ART OF GUIDING ATTENTION

At its core, misdirection is the art of controlling where people look, and when. A skilled magician weaves a story that draws the audience in, making the final reveal land all the harder.

In our immersive experiences, we've found that misdirection isn't limited to sleight of hand. When telling a story or designing an activation, misdirection allows us to craft moments in which the audience thinks they know what's happening, only to have their assumptions turned upside down. In such instances, the emotional impact can be intense. By carefully controlling the flow of information, we build layers into our stories that not only invite the audience to participate but also intentionally guide their perception. When we plan the narrative journey fans will take, we always build in a moment of unexpected diversion, the moment the rug is pulled and the ground shifts.

That doesn't mean building something as dramatic as a trap door or hidden switch. You can achieve a similar result by much more subtle means. In a lot of our work, we employ something psychologists call *The Forer Effect*, named after Bertram Forer (also known as *The Barnum Effect* after our old friend from Chapter Seven).

The Forer Effect is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when people believe general statements about personality types are specifically tailored to them. Forer first demonstrated the phenomenon in a 1948 experiment in which he gave students personality profiles he had created by combining various statements from an astrology book. The students consistently rated the accuracy of thei*r o*wn profiles as high, **even though they were all identical**.

The Forer Effect can help to explain why people often accept paranormal beliefs and practices, such as astrology and fortune-telling. As humans, we are all susceptible to it because we instinctively seek to connect with others and the world around us.

The Forer Effect came **in handy when w**e built The Byzantium Tests, a viral experience for Cinemax's *TV series Hunted.* In this project, we used it in combination with misdirection to craft personalized psychological experiences that gave participants a sense of disquiet. Each person took a series of strange online tests that seemed designed to probe their personality and decision-making, at the end receiving a final "reading" that felt eerily accurate, like this one:

> *"You are a troubled individual, with unique abilities. Unlike most people, you have a strong—at times destructive—independent streak. Routine tasks are frustrating and often impossible to complete, unless you've created them for yourself. At the moment, you are under substantial stress and anxiety. This is caused by the unshakable feeling that you're not fully in control of your own life... However, when you are in control, you're capable and even excited to make difficult decisions. This occasionally leaves you feeling isolated or alone. You are willing to make this trade-off, if it means being in charge of your own life..."*

Many participants reported being blown away by how well the tests "understood" them (even though they knew from the outset that they were enjoying an entertainment experience), convinced by the apparent complexity of our system. But of course, it was simply *The Forer Effect* at play. The reading was filled with vague but personal-sounding insights, as in the example above, tricking participants into thinking it was uniquely about them. The illusion of insight, and the shock when they realized the truth, left a psychological impact that lingered long after the test was over.

CLIENT: CINEMAX

CASE STUDY: THE BYZANTIUM TESTS

2012

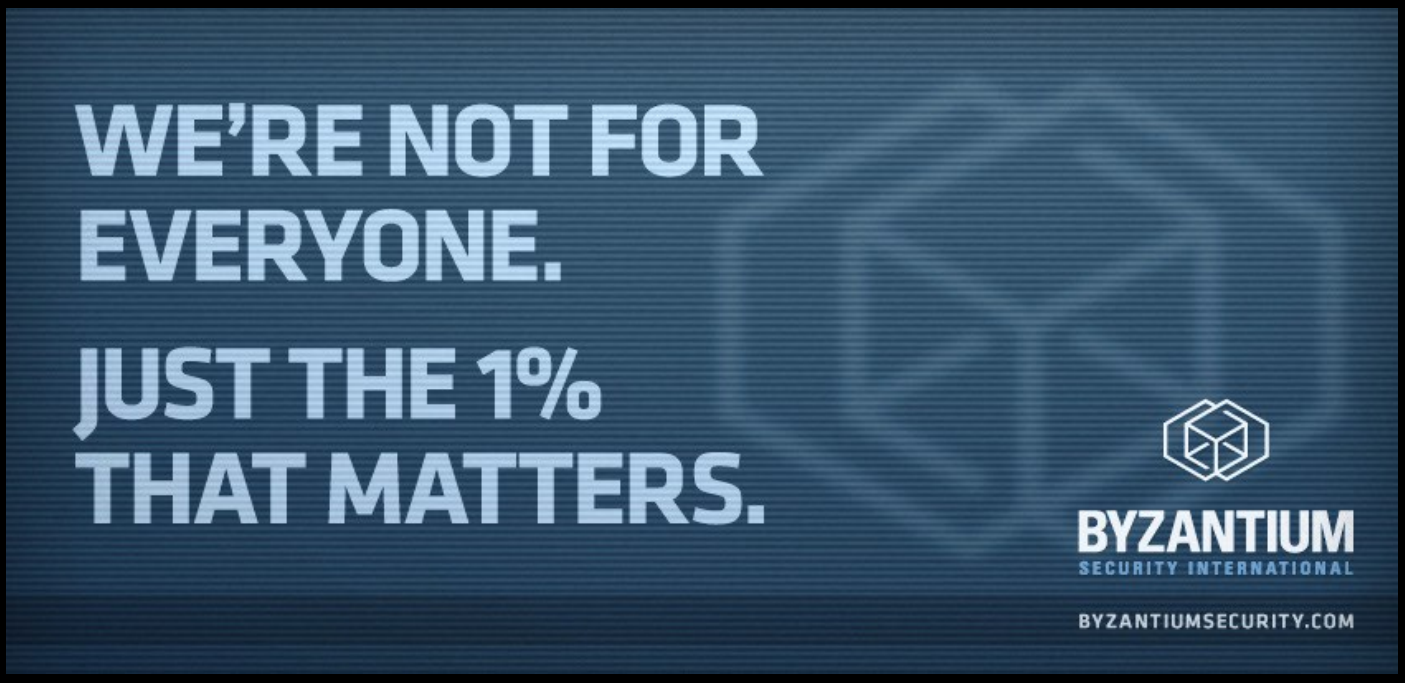
CLICK FOR VIDEO



Melissa George starred in **The Byzantium Tests**, an online experience created to promote HBO and Cinemax's *Hunted*.

ARE YOU NORMAL?

Campfire's love of magic and magicians led us to the question "What would it be like to unveil the equivalent of an online magic performance?" So when we were tasked by Cinemax® to help launch its psychological spy thriller *Hunted,* we knew we had our opportunity. **The Byzantium Tests** put participants through a fictional recruitment process for Byzantium Security International, the shadowy organization from the show.



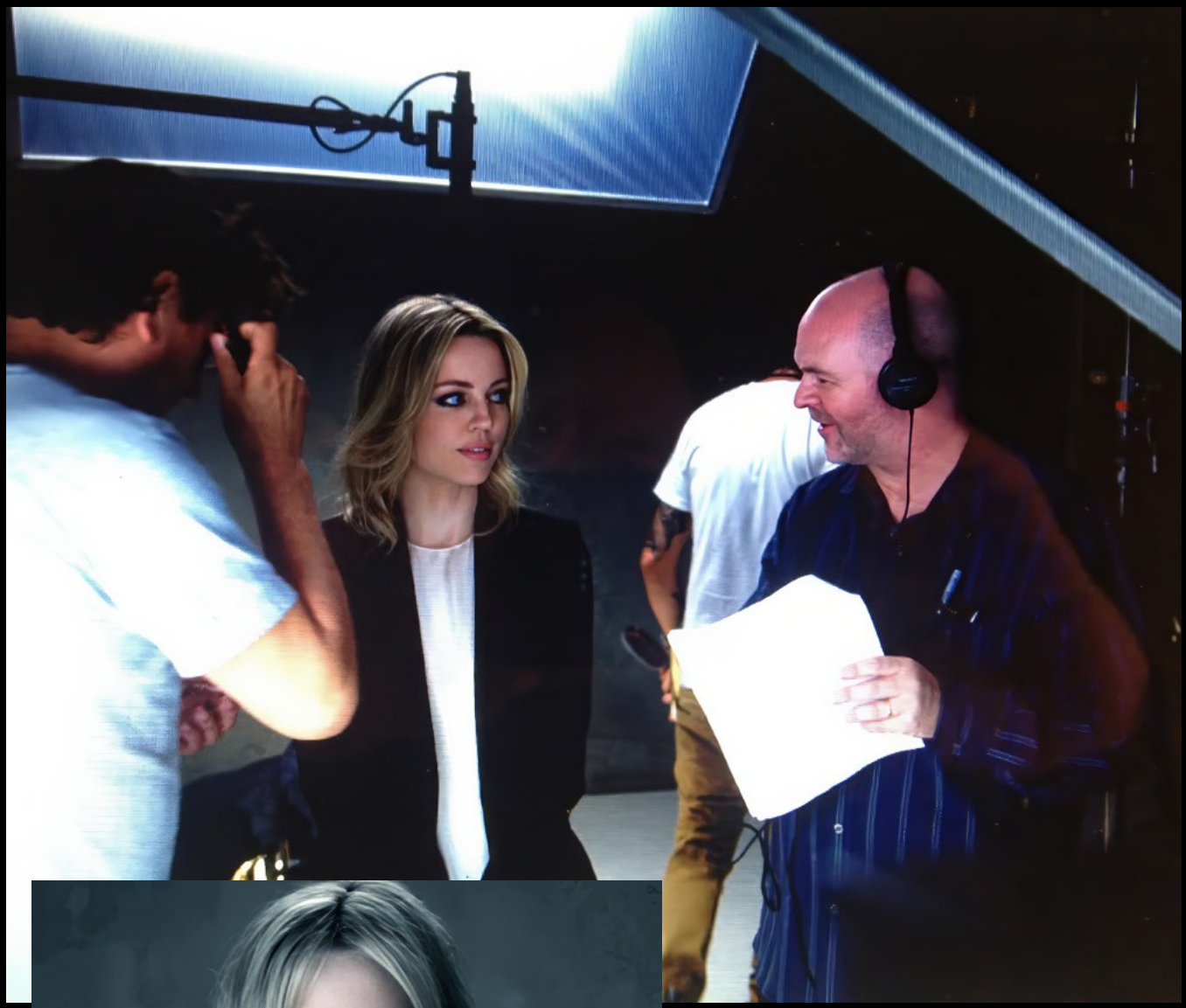
Our would-be audience initially encountered online advertising on *The New York Times* website, as well as mysterious posters around downtown Manhattan, especially near Wall Street, with messages like "Are You One of the 1% that Matters?" These cryptic ads led to an online portal where people were invited into an entertainment masquerading as a series of faux psychological tests. The timing was deliberate, landing in the wake of Occupy Wall Street and its "We are the 99%" slogan, which gave the tests a real-world edge.





LEFT: This photograph, captured during the Occupy Wall Street demonstration by a freelance press photographer, was an unstaged moment of synchronicity. The combination of the bank, the police officers, and our posters created a striking image perfect for newspapers and mainstream press.

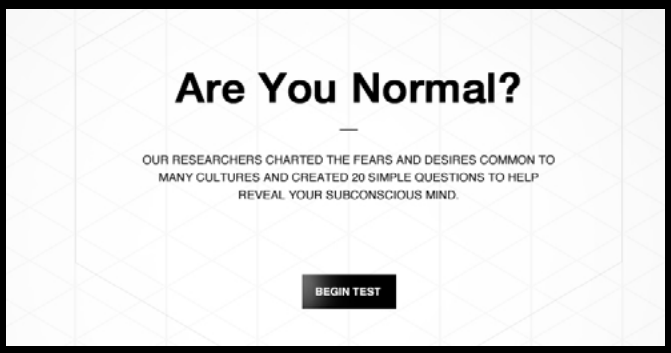
The experience comprised a series of five dark psychological and cognitive tests purportedly designed to assess whether participants belonged to the "One Percent that matters." It was a provocative play on the socio-economic discourse of the time. These tests were designed to be weird and unsettling, including ambiguous questions and tasks that seemed to probe deep into the participants' psyches. It all took place in an opt-in performative setting that evoked the trappings of a stage show given by a mentalist or psychic entertainer like Derren Brown or Uri Geller.

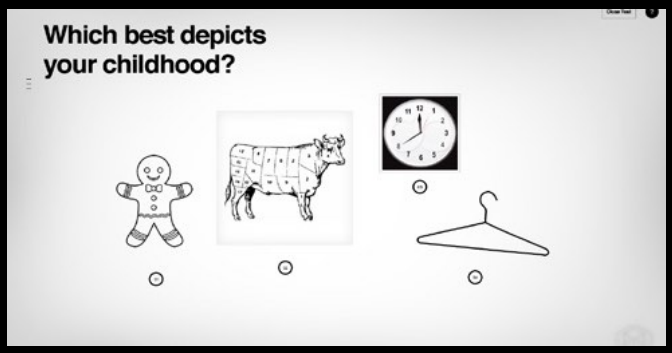




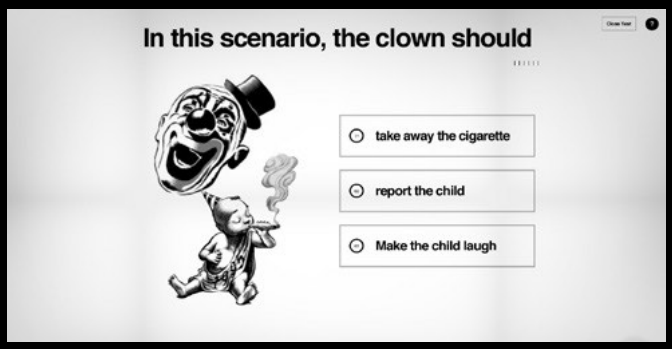
ABOVE: Campfire's Steve Coulson directs Melissa George on the set for **The Byzantium Tests**. It's not always possible to use show talent in immersive marketing due to scheduling and budgetary restrictions, but when the planets align, magic happens.
RIGHT: *Hunted*'s showrunner Frank Spotnitz loved **The Byzantium Tests** concept, leading to the show's star Melissa George shooting extensive original sequences for the online experience.

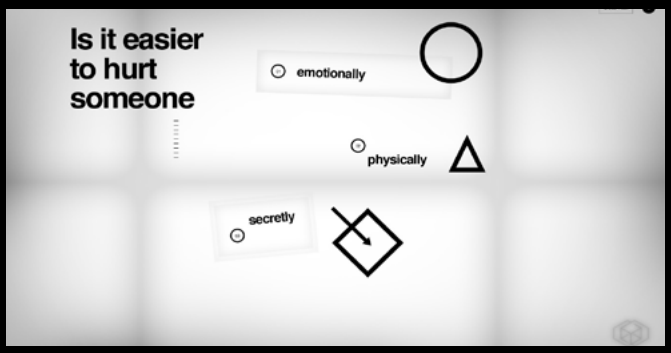
Strange ads on The New York Times website recruited an audience for this weird personality test at byzantiumtests.com (now dark).



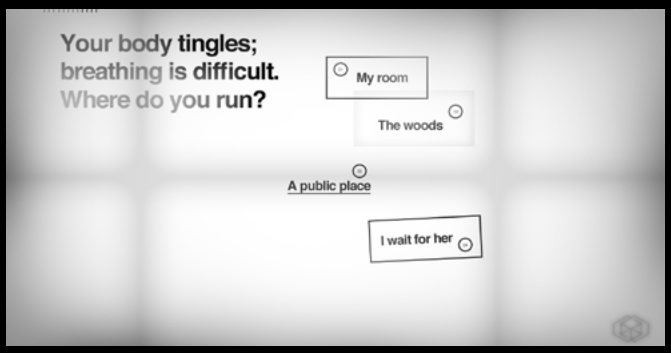


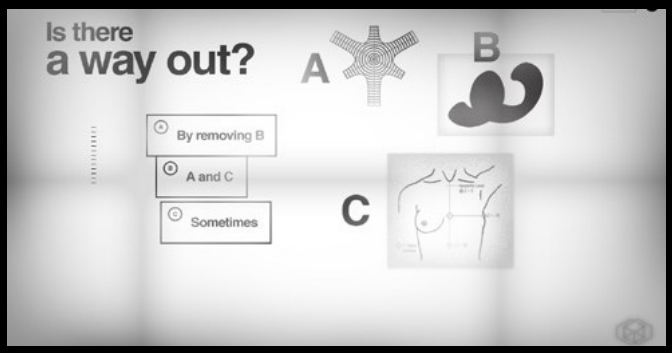


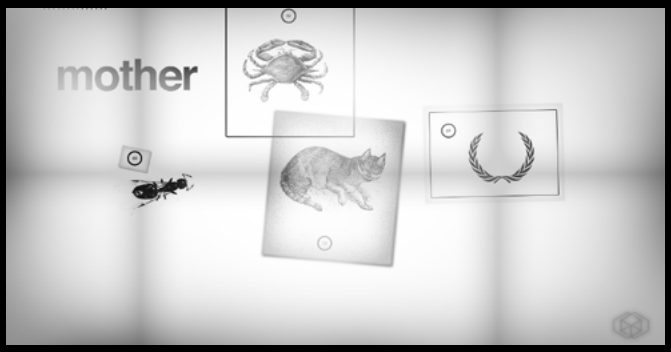


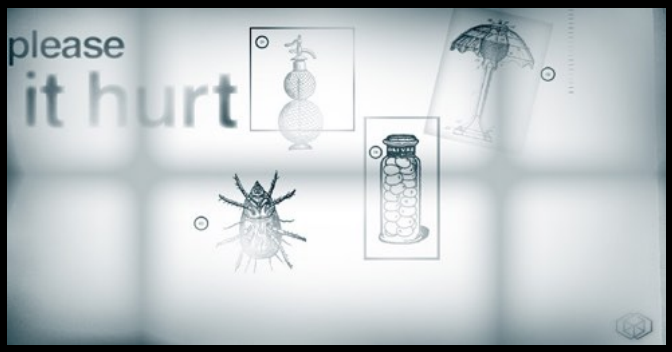


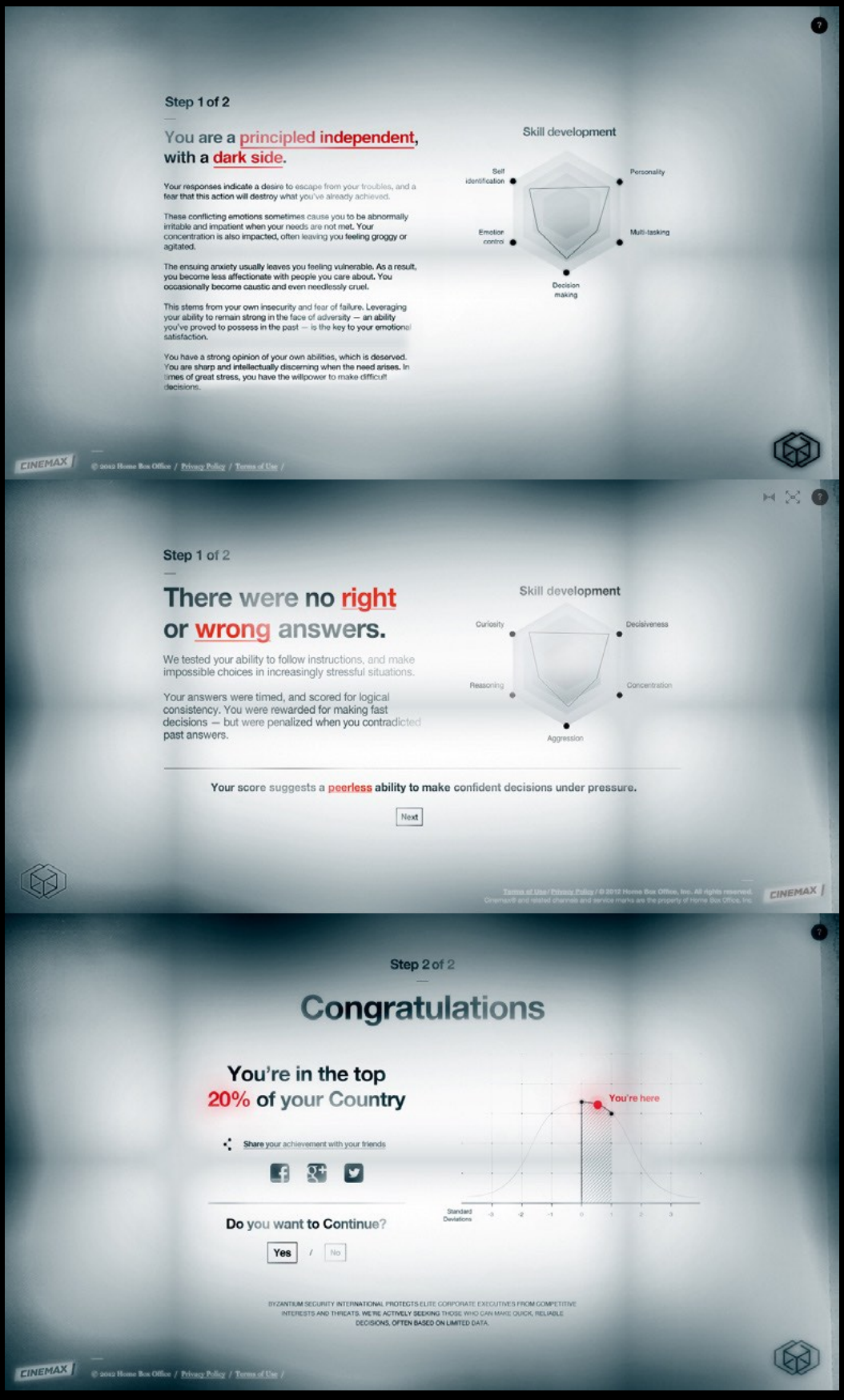










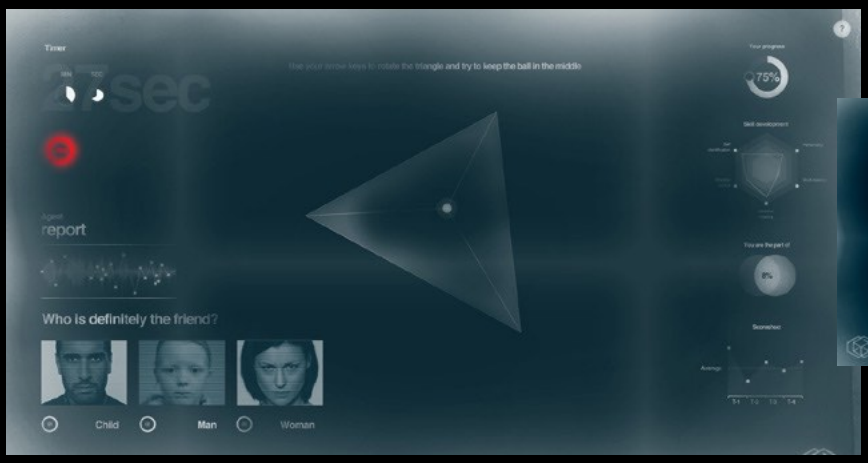


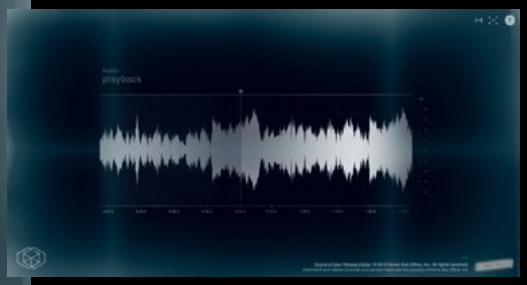
Upon completion, users received personalized assessments built on the mentalist's favorite tool, The F*orer Effect, in* which vague statements seem uniquely tailored to each person.





TOP: As we ratcheted up the tension, we unveiled a series of increasingly impossible choices under a time constraint.
RIGHT: The third test used facial recognition technology combined with emotional analysis to convince the user the system could recognize their true feelings. They were then shown a series of bizarre and sometimes evocative imagery, before the system tried to convince them of their own psychopathy, rewarding them for hiding what they felt.

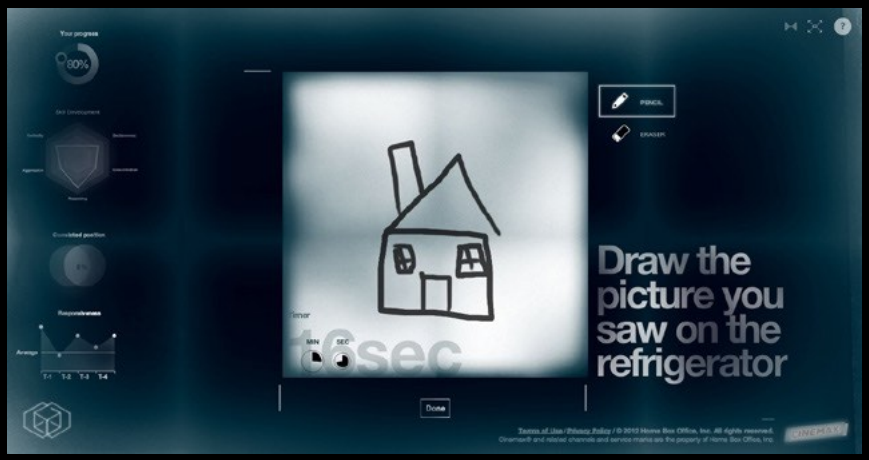


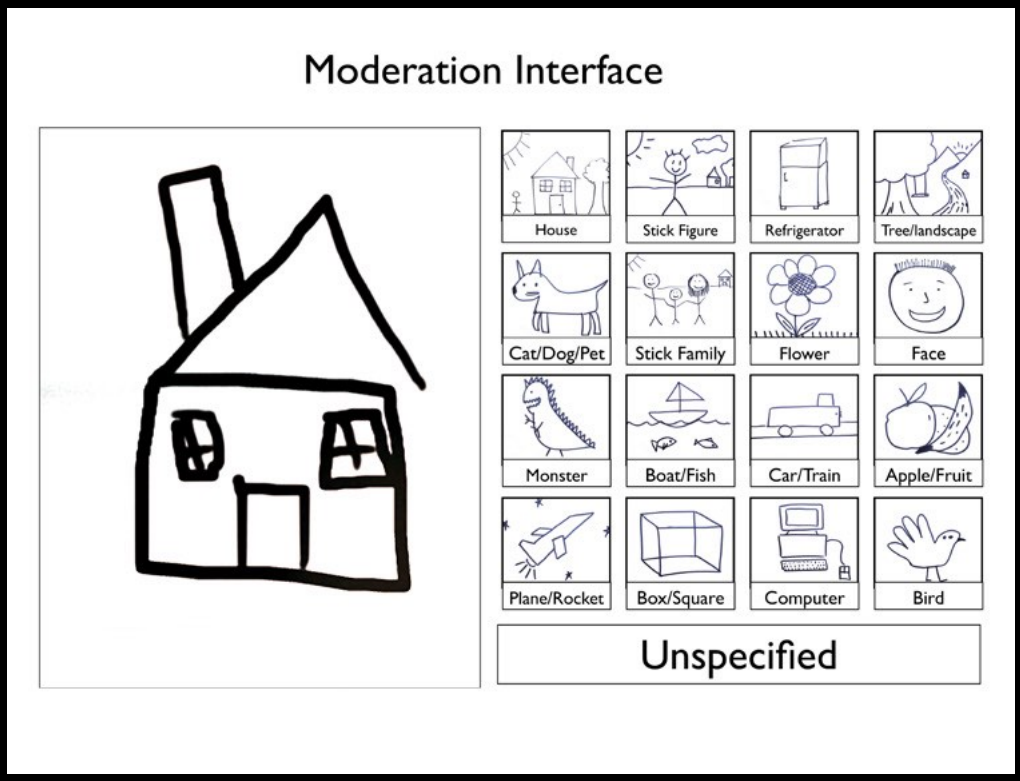


The fourth test posed a complex logic puzzle while asking users to perform a dexterous feat of hand-eye coordination.

For the final test, subjects were asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves standing in their childhood home in front of a refrigerator with a child's drawing pinned to it. Then, they were told to open their eyes and draw the picture they had seen.

But all was not what it seemed...

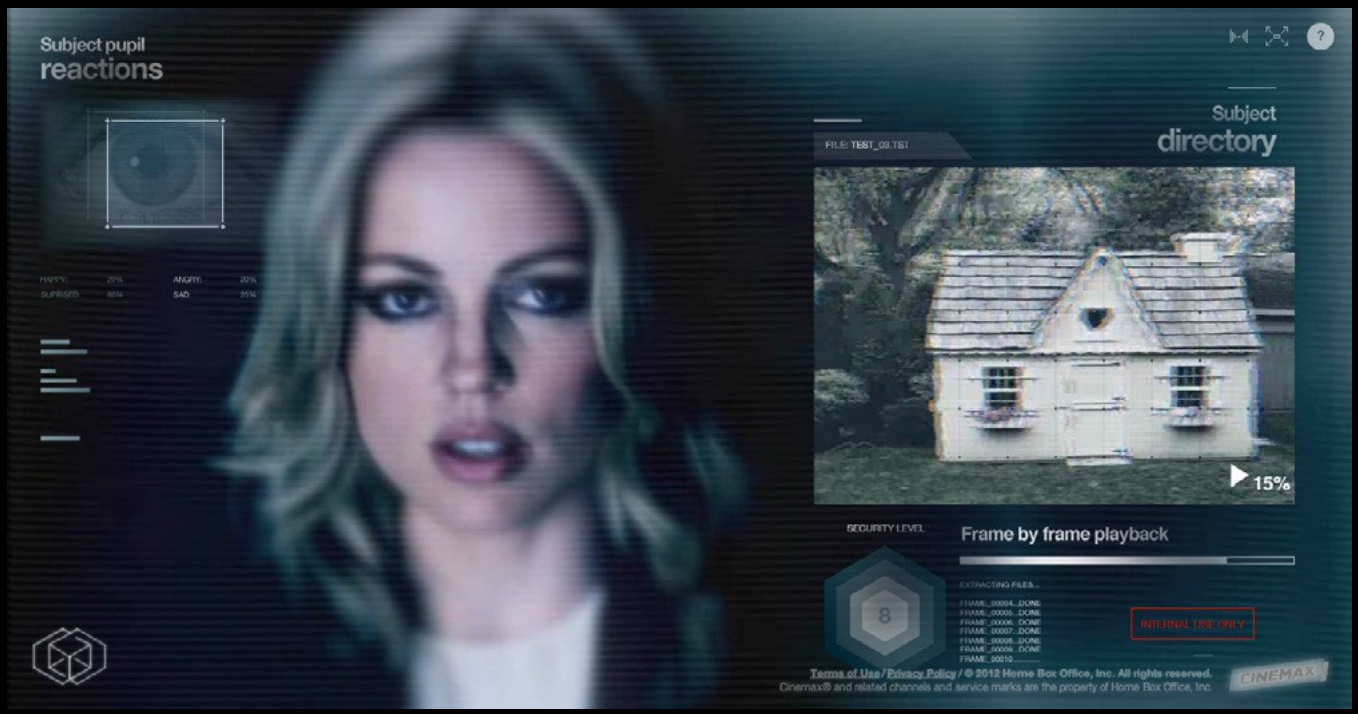




Test Five showed that the most sophisticated magic doesn't necessarily depend on advanced technology. After participants imagined and drew an image they saw on a refrigerator, they were immediately shown a replay of earlier tests that appeared to prove subliminal imagery had guided their choice.

In reality, it was a deliberate double bluff. There was no subliminal influence, only a set of carefully prepared "outs," each designed to convincingly explain one of several archetypal drawings that our research had shown most participants would supply.

Because this was 2012, the challenge wasn't prediction but recognition. Our solution was entirely human-powered: a global, always-on team of moderators trained to classify drawings in seconds and trigger the appropriate response. The mechanism was elaborate, but the experience felt effortless, and the illusion held.

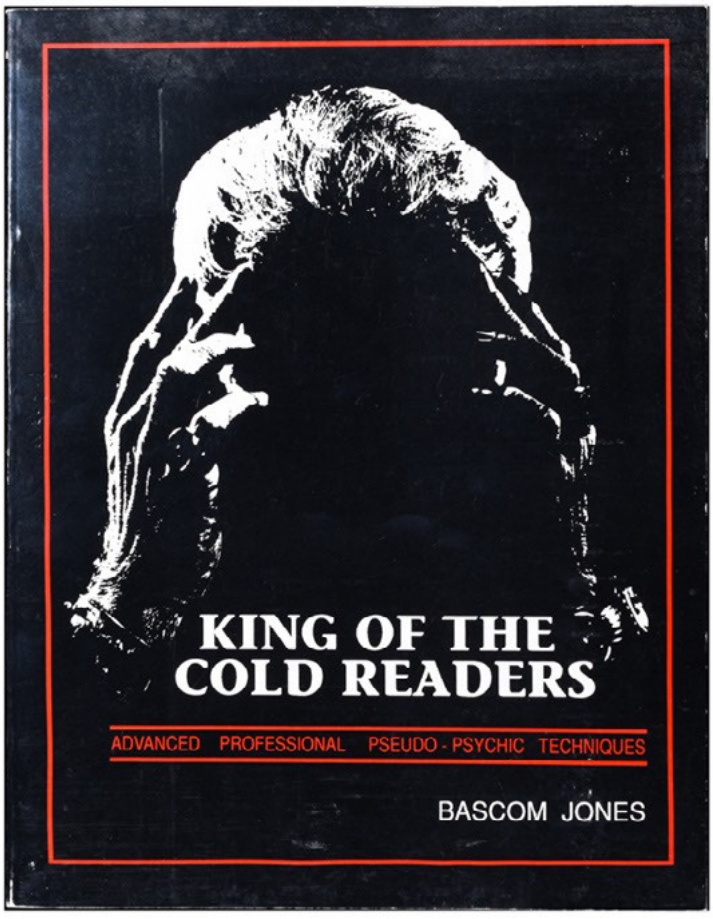


The Byzantium Tests became a viral sensation, attracting more than 1.3 million unique visitors over the course of the experience, and was featured on the home page of Reddit three times, along with coverage in mainstream publications. By combining magic techniques with immersive storytelling, we created an experience that left a lasting impression and a great buzz around the show.

THE DARK ART OF COLD READING

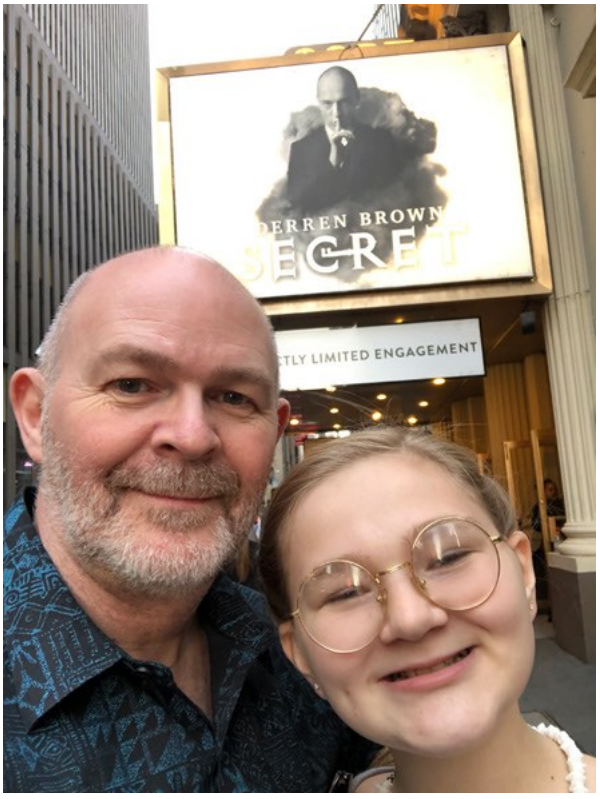
Cold reading is a skill often associated with magicians, psychics, and mentalists, people who seem uncannily able to read the minds of complete strangers. But far from a supernatural power, it is a learnable craft that involves careful observation and analysis of involuntary verbal and physical cues. By paying attention to body language, tone of voice, and even micro-expressions, a skilled cold reader can customize general Forer statements to feel even more personal.

Cold reading is a powerful tool for building immersive experiences, and for creating Moments where participants feel seen and understood. We aim to make them believe an experience is tailored just for them, nurturing their emotional investment.



The secrets of cold reading are closely guarded, requiring students to hunt for long out-of-print and privately published tomes such as Bascom Jones' *King of the Cold Readers*.

We've all seen "psychic entertainers" like **Uri Geller** and **Derren Brown**. Geller has wowed audiences for years with spoon bending and predictions, but much of his success came from being a keen observer of human behavior and using cold reading techniques to convince audiences of his psychic powers. Derren Brown takes the mind games one step further, openly explaining that he uses only suggestion and misdirection, and astonishing crowds anyway. Both performers tap into the human desire to be seen and understood, using cold reading to forge a personal connection.



Creative Director Steve Coulson and his daughter Lily attend a Derren Brown performance in NYC.

Cold reading thrives on physical co-presence: reading someone's breath, posture, and micro-expressions in real time and adapting on the fly. That exchange is rooted in the body, not the screen, and that's why it works so well face to face. It feeds on the authenticity of a real connection.

We've applied these principles in our own work. During **The Westworld Experience** at San Diego Comic-Con in 2017, participants underwent apparent psychological assessments conducted by actors we had trained in cold reading techniques. They would look into subjects' eyes, hold their hands, nod sagely, and pronounce, "I can see that you often feel misunderstood because you see the world so differently from others around you." Proclamations like this helped guests to project their own feelings onto the rest of the experience. If the subject nodded and smiled, the actor would lean into this analysis, whereas if the subject seemed hesitant, they would divert down alternative prewritten tracks. The result was a personalized encounter that felt eerily accurate, even though it was based on broad, general statements and guided by involuntary responses.

All cold readers come to understand one thing. In non-combative situations, especially one-on-one entertainment settings, subjects **want** their readings to be accurate, whether it's with a faux analyst or a tarot card reader. This means that they do much of the hard work themselves, first with visual or verbal encouragement and then by self-selecting which of the statements seem most accurate for later recall. This in turn dramatically increases positive word of mouth after the encounter.

By the time participants were assigned a black or white hat to indicate their moral alignment within the *Westworld* narrative, they were convinced the decision was based on their unique psychological profile. In reality, the decision had been made before they walked in.

CLIENT: HBO

2017

CASE STUDY: THE WESTWORLD EXPERIENCE

CLICK FOR VIDEO



The Westworld Experience for HBO was staged at both SDCC and NYCC in 2017.

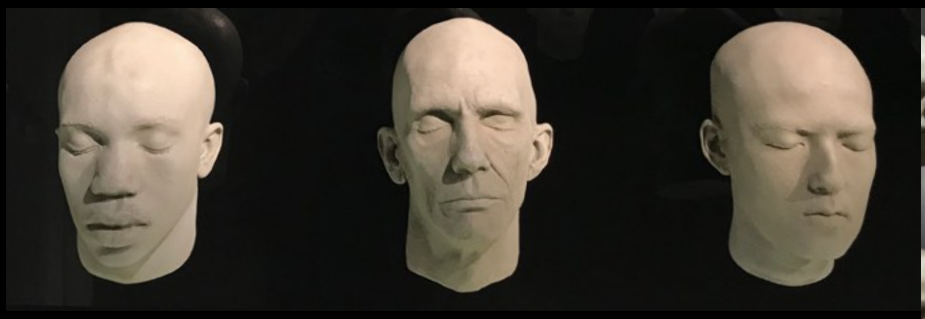
HAVE YOU EVER QUESTIONED THE NATURE OF YOUR REALITY?

To bring HBO®'s *Westworld* to life, we crafted **The Westworld Experience** at San Diego Comic-Con and New York Comic-Con. Both were fully immersive events where guests could step into the show's universe. From the moment they entered, participants were treated as guests of Delos, the fictional corporation behind the show's lifelike theme parks.

Much like the show itself, **The Westworld Experience** explored themes of free will, manipulation, and the blurring of reality and fiction. It was hailed as one of the most innovative and immersive activations ever created for SDCC, and according to Polygon.com, it "redefined what a live activation can be."

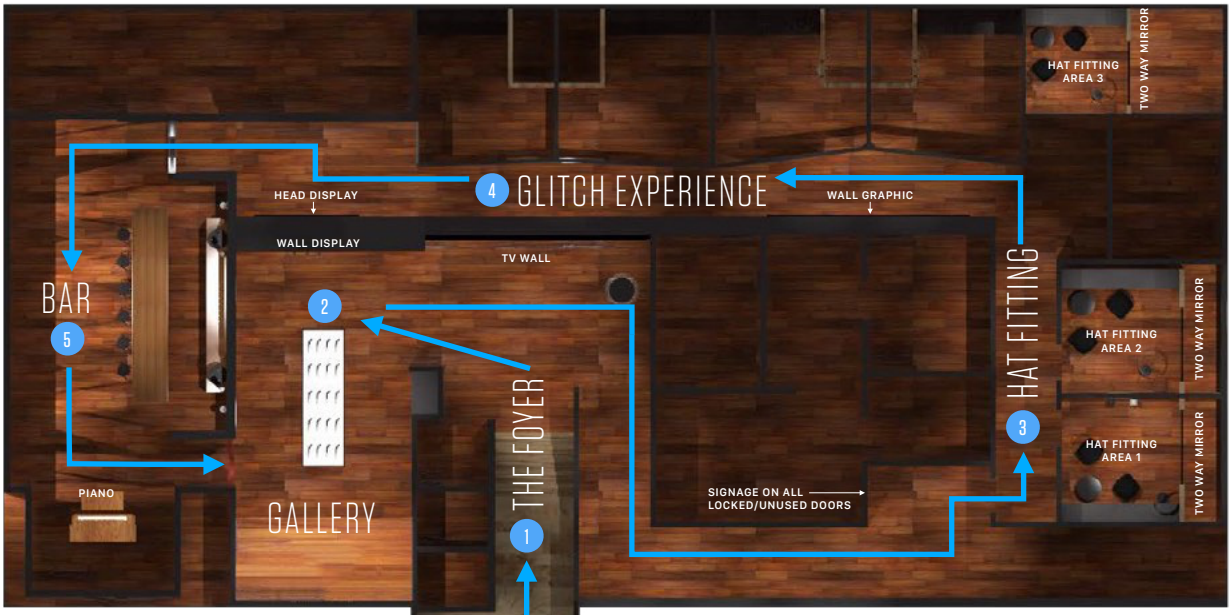


Upon arrival, participants were greeted by hosts dressed all in white, immediately setting the tone for an otherworldly experience. Guests were guided through the pristine Delos offices, where they were shown costumes and weapons from the show, subtly reinforcing the idea that they had actually entered *Westworld*.

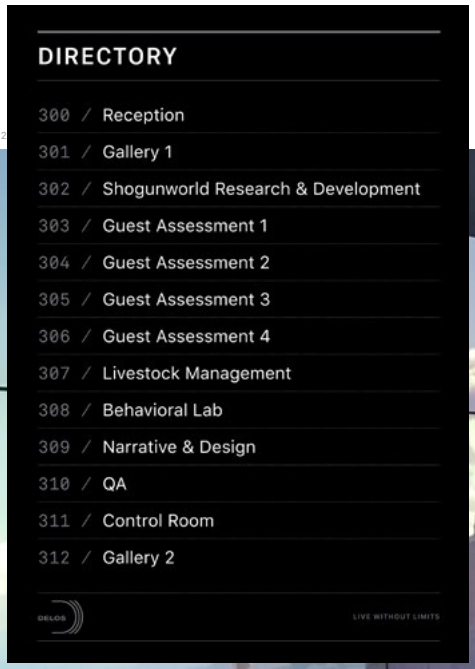




Some props seen in **The Westworld Experience** were provided by HBO. These heads can be seen in the show in the office of Dr. Robert Ford, as portrayed by Sir Anthony Hopkins.



USER FLOW

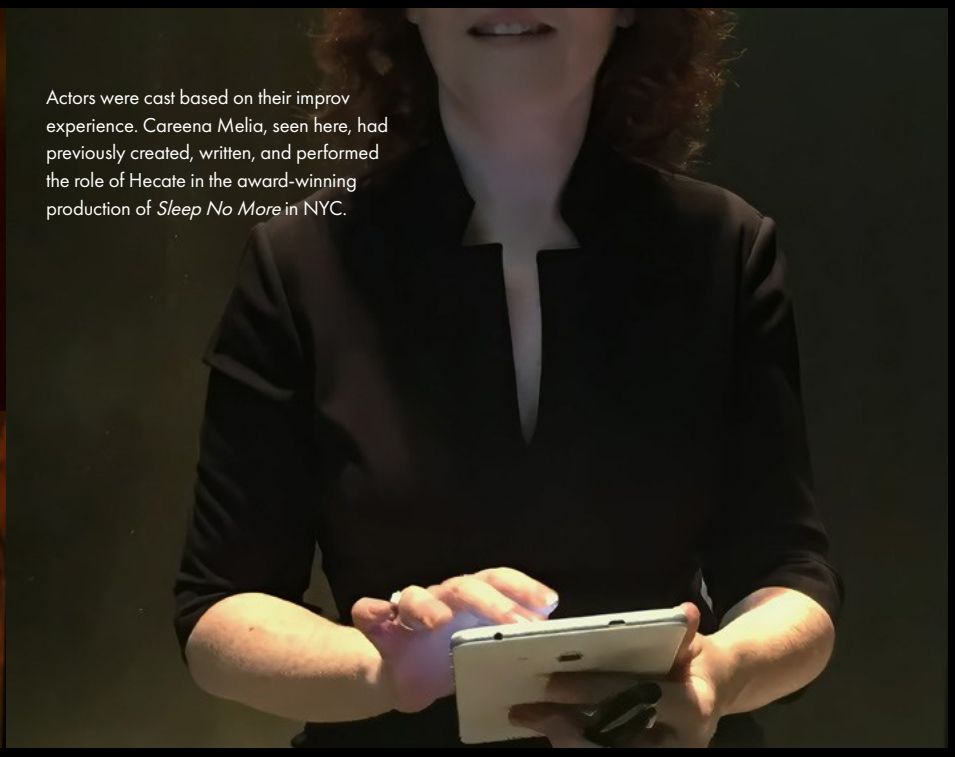




CLOCKWISE: User flow diagram for the SDCC staging; character costumes for mannequins supplied by HBO; Delos lobby at NYCC; Delos directory at SDCC.







Actors were cast based on their improv experience. Careena Melia, seen here, had previously created, written, and performed the role of Hecate in the award-winning production of *Sleep No More* in NYC.

Once inside, participants were led one by one into a private room for a personalized psychological evaluation. Here, trained analysts used cold reading techniques combined with Forer statements to create the illusion of a deeply personal assessment. Statements like, *"You often feel misunderstood because you see the world in ways others can't"* allowed participants to project their own experiences onto the analysis, making it feel uncomfortably accurate.

The culmination of the psychological evaluation came when participants were assigned either a black or a white hat to symbolize their moral alignment within the *Westworld* narrative. By the time participants received their hats, they were convinced that the choice was based on their personalized analysis, when in reality the entire experience had been carefully orchestrated through a blend of misdirection, cold reading, and manipulation.



Hats were made for us by Serratelli, which has been building fine cowboy hats since 1878.

The final part of **The Westworld Experience** took place in a re-creation of the Mariposa Saloon, a key setting in the show. After receiving their hats, participants were ushered into the saloon where the line between reality and fiction was completely dissolved. The saloon was staffed by hosts (actors portraying synthetic humans) who interacted with participants in character, offering drinks and engaging in seemingly spontaneous conversations.



Our cocktail experience was created and performed by Paul McGee and Shelby Allison, owners of Lost Lake in Chicago, named Best American Cocktail Bar at the Spirited Awards the following year.







The Mariposa Piano, developed by Digital Kitchen, played contemporary tunes from Westworld's soundtrack playlist. Attendees could trigger a song with a tweet.





Due to the extremely limited capacity, appointments for the experience were released the morning of the event and were strictly first come, first served. Anyone who scored a slot received a personalized metal appointment card.



As word-of-mouth spread across San Diego, people started lining up for appointments ever earlier. The line to get a Saturday spot began on Friday at 2 p.m., with fans sleeping in line overnight.

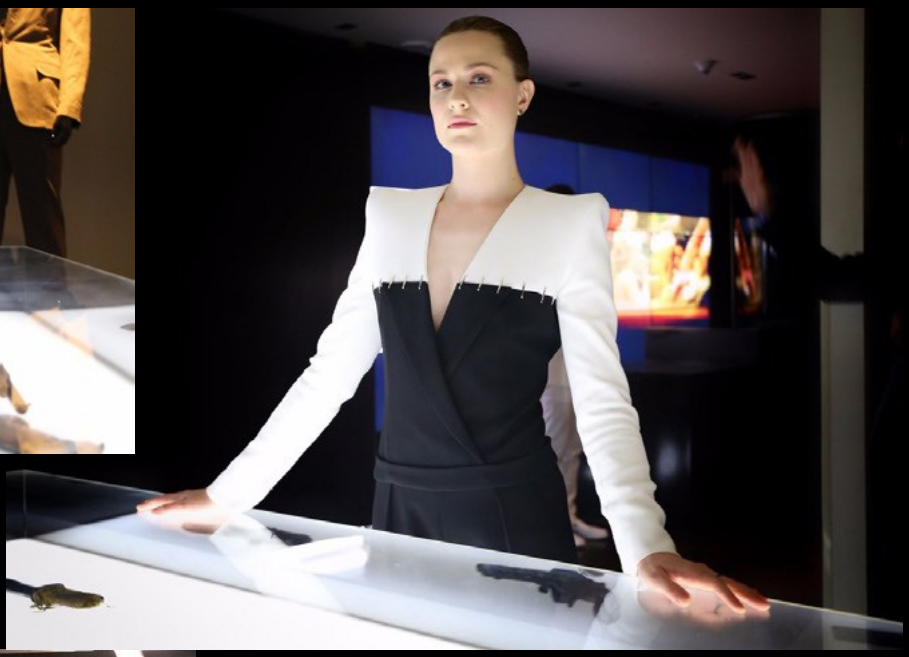


GUEST FLOW SCHEDULE - MONDAY LOAD OUT

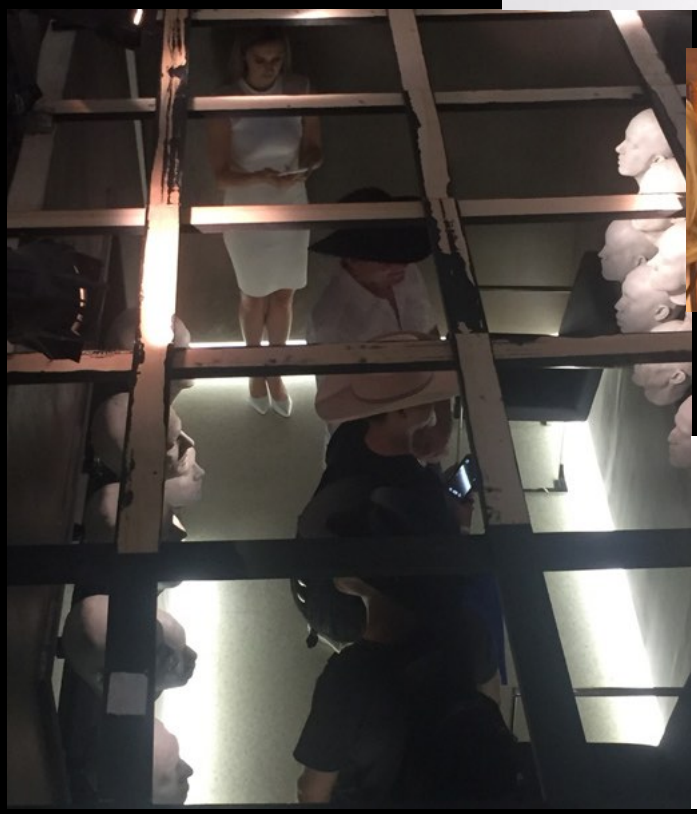
468 GUESTS

	MON 7/17	TUE 7/18	WED 7/19	THU 7/20	FRI 7/21	SAT 7/22	SUN 7/23	MON 7/24
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8:30 AM							8:30 AM - **CALL TIME**	
9:00 AM								
9:30 AM				9:30 AM - **SIGN-UP STARTS**	9:30 AM - **SIGN-UP STARTS**	9:30 AM - **SIGN-UP STARTS**		
10:00 AM								
10:30 AM			9:00 AM - 1:00 PM BUILD OUT			10:30 - 12 PM PR PHOTOSHOOT	10:30 AM - **VIP** [6]	
11:00 AM				11 AM - **RESERVATION** [6]			11 AM - **RESERVATION** [6]	
11:30 AM				11:30 AM - **RESERVATION** [6]			11:30 AM - **RESERVATION** [6]	
12:00 PM				12 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]		12 PM - **VIP** [6]	12 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	
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1:00 PM			1 PM - **CALL TIME**	1 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	1 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	1 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	1 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	
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8:00 PM			8 PM - **PRESS PREVIEW** [6]	8 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	8 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]	8 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]		
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9:30 PM					9:30 PM - **CAST** [6]	9:30 PM - **RESERVATION** [6]		
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			[30] PEOPLE TOTAL	[120] PEOPLE TOTAL	[114] PEOPLE TOTAL	[120] PEOPLE TOTAL	[84] PEOPLE TOTAL	



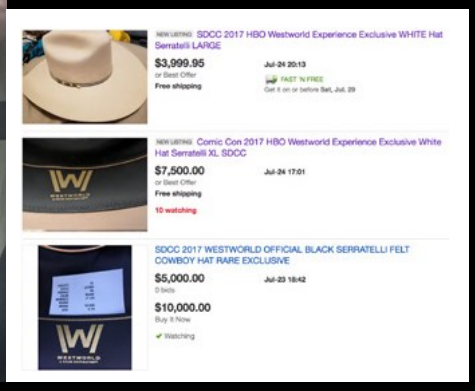


TOP AND RIGHT: Westworld cast members Ben Barnes and Evan Rachel Wood visit **The Westworld Experience** at SDCC.





Spotted at San Diego airport the morning after the convention, guests still wearing their hats.



As with all swag, a handful of the limited-edition Westworld hats appeared on eBay, for astronomical prices.

The Westworld Experience became one of the highlights of both SDCC and NYCC. As we had hoped, the activation generated significant buzz, with fans waiting hours for the chance to interact with *Westworld*. Coverage from outlets like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Entertainment Weekly* praised the immersive design, noting how it felt both intimate and unsettling, much like the show itself.

By blending live performance, set design, and interactive storytelling, we created an environment where the line between the show and reality temporarily disappeared. Guests became part of the *Westworld* story, experiencing firsthand the challenges to morality and identity the show puts on screen.

MANIPULATION AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE

Manipulation might sound like a negative word, but in magic and immersive storytelling there is no ill intent. Instead, the focus is on guiding people toward a meaningful experience without them realizing. It's the art of letting the audience feel like they're steering the ship, even when you've already mapped out the destination.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of *The Classic Force*, one of the most celebrated techniques in card magic.

At first glance, *The Classic Force* seems simple enough: a magician spreads a deck of cards and asks a spectator to reach in and pick any one of their choosing. It's a scenario we've all seen countless times, along with the exhortation to "Pick a card, any card." It's probably no surprise that this is not really an open choice. The card that's picked is always the one the magician intended all along. The elegance of *The Classic Force* lies in its subtlety; there is no obvious sleight of hand, no suspicious movement that alerts the audience to the manipulation happening right in front of them. The person feels as though they've made a completely free choice.

But the technique by which the Force is achieved is one of the most difficult to master in a magician's repertoire. It relies on perfect timing, pacing, and psychological awareness. The magician must spread the cards at just the right speed, with the force card positioned perfectly so that it seems like the most natural choice. Yet, if the spectator chooses too slowly, chooses too quickly, or grows suspicious, the illusion is broken. Unlike other forces that use trick decks to control the outcome, *The Classic Force* depends entirely on the magician's ability to manipulate perception and control the spectator's experience in real time.



In essence, *The Classic Force* embodies the idea of giving an audience member the illusion of free will, letting them believe all their decisions are their own, while in reality, their choices have been predetermined. That mastery of human psychology and misdirection is where the magic lives.

We use a similar approach in our immersive experiences, creating environments where participants feel like they're making their own choices, but we've carefully designed the narrative to lead them toward key moments. We call this "**freedom on rails**." Yes, participants can explore, but for the story to cohere it must still hit all the essential beats we've crafted. The designated card will always appear under their fingers when they reach out to grab it.

Narratives that simulate freedom of choice while maintaining authorial control have been around since at least the first half of the twentieth century. One of our favorite examples is *Treasure Hunt* by Alan George, published in 1940, which let readers navigate a branching story by making choices that determined the path forward. This and other works such as *Consider the Consequences!* (1930) by Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins, widely considered the first interactive novel for adults, laid the groundwork for modern interactive storytelling and offer a useful parallel when designing immersive experiences.



Treasure Hunt by "Alan George," from Steve Coulson's personal collection.

Applying this technique to other mediums allows us to craft engaging storyworlds where participants feel empowered, even though we control the available outcomes. By offering multiple paths that all lead to specific narrative beats, we create an illusion of agency while ensuring that the story unfolds in a meaningful way. It's a subtle manipulation of expectation and perception, where fans ultimately follow a story arc we've designed for them.

In **Deja View** for Nissan®, we used nascent voice recognition technology to allow participants to interact with and direct characters in a short film using the most transparent of interfaces: a telephone call. During the film, each viewer received a call from the onscreen character, who would respond to conversation in real time, creating the illusion of open-ended narrative. Behind the scenes, however, the possible responses were scripted to guide participants along specific narrative arcs. Much like *The Classic Force*, the participants in **Deja View** were gently guided, even though they believed they were fully in control.

The phone call interface appeared to be an open-ended command tool, which is what we would naturally *always* expect from a phone. Using a telephone rather than a cursor, a button press, or a multichoice dropdown gave our film a veneer of freedom inside a tightly built structure.

What made the approach work was how completely it concealed its limits. Much like a magician performing *The Classic Force*, we disguised the reality that choices were being subtly controlled. Instead, participants left the experience feeling as though they had played a key role in shaping the narrative. This sense of agency, even if illusory, created a real emotional connection between the participants and the story.



CLIENT: NISSAN

2013

CASE STUDY: DEJA VIEW

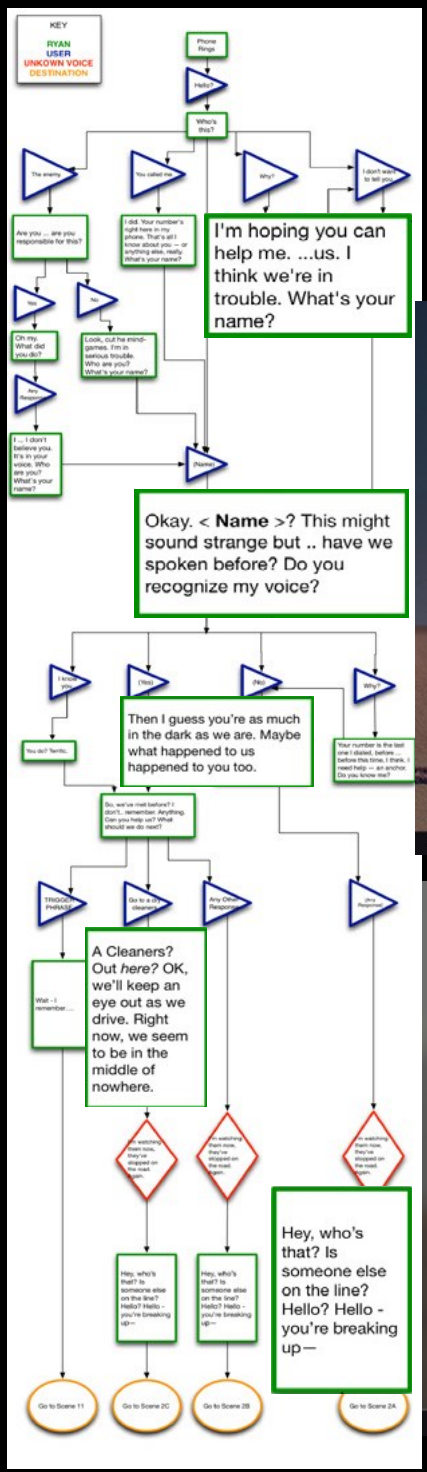
CLICK FOR VIDEO

INVITING DRIVERS TO ANSWER THE CALL

Deja View was an innovative, interactive film experience Campfire created for Nissan®, designed to showcase the Infiniti Q50 luxury sedan's advanced technology. Participants were invited to shape the narrative in real time by interacting with the film's characters through voice recognition technology. As participants guided the characters, the story adapted dynamically to their spoken input, creating a unique experience for each viewer.

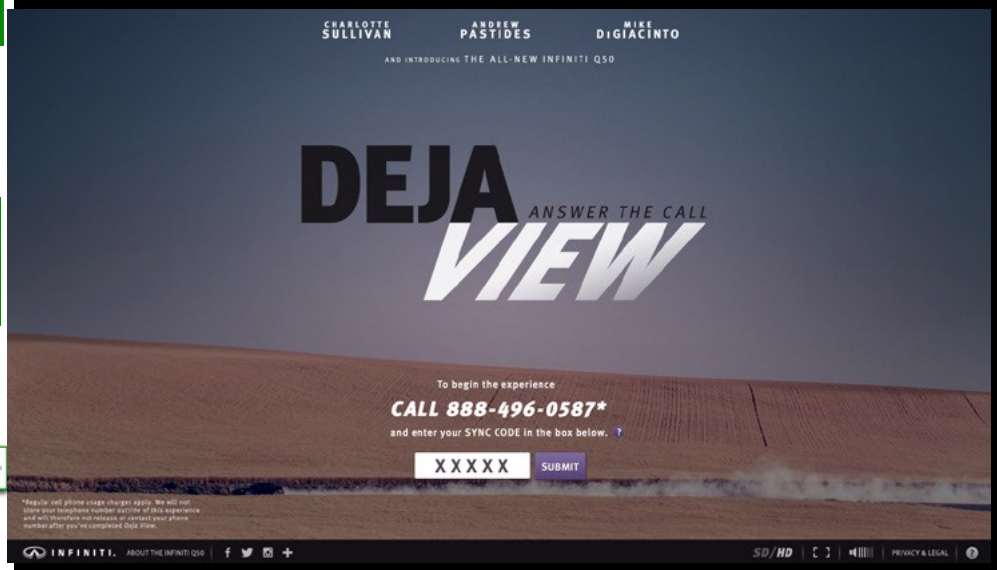
Deja View allowed Nissan to demonstrate the Infiniti Q50's cutting-edge technology in a way that surpassed traditional advertising. By blending cinematic storytelling with real-time interactivity, the project created a deeply immersive and emotional experience that mirrored Infiniti's brand values of personalization and innovation.

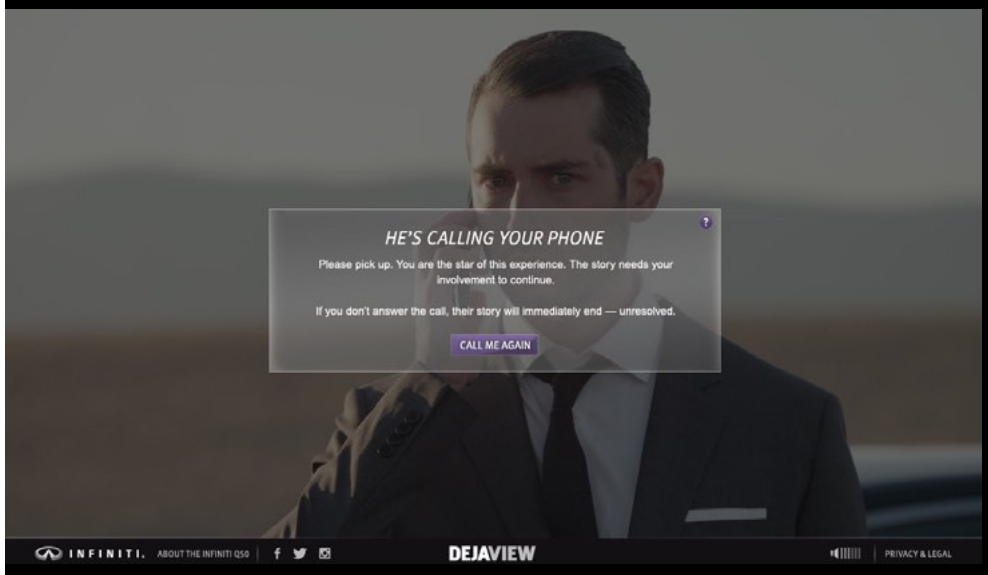
Deja View was a Hitchcock-style psychological thriller in which two characters, a man and a woman, were stuck on an empty road, unsure of who they were or how they got there. As the story unfolded, participants were asked to help the characters retrace their steps by responding to phone calls they received in real time on their own devices. The choices they made influenced the characters' actions, guiding them toward different story outcomes.



LEFT: A schematic of dialog options for one of the phone conversations.
RIGHT & BELOW: From concept to execution, the conceit behind Deja View was that the characters would be seen dialing your number to start a real-time conversation, during which you gave them advice and tried to win their confidence.







Multi-path movies require strict conformity to storyboarding to achieve continuity.







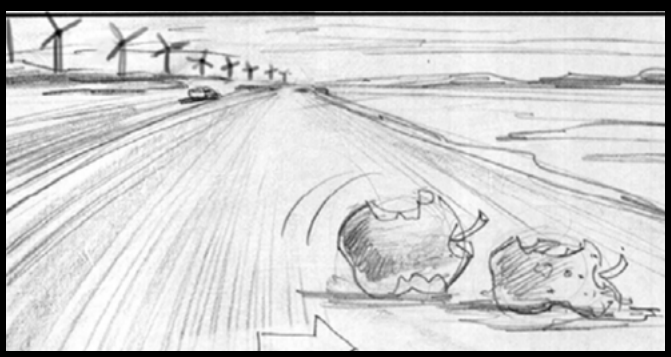

























What made **Deja View** innovative was its use of natural language processing technology. Participants were not limited to predefined options or multiple-choice prompts. Instead, they could speak directly with the characters, and the technology would interpret their responses and steer the story down one of several predefined paths. This created the illusion of a completely unscripted conversation, immersing participants fully in the story.







Deja View was shot on location in Oregon over seven days with two photography units, starring Charlotte Sullivan (*Rookie Blue, Chicago Fire, Law & Order)* and Andrew Pastides (*Boardwalk Empire, Sleep No More*).









Deja View was hailed as a breakthrough in interactive storytelling, and it attracted significant media coverage from major publications, such as *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Wired*, and *Google's Creative Sandbox*. With over 100 million PR impressions, the experience captured the attention of both the automotive and advertising industries, proving that interactive content could lead to meaningful engagement.

The Infiniti Q50 car was built into the experience, not as a product placement, but as a key part of the narrative. This subtle approach to branding made **Deja View** feel like an authentic story rather than overt advertising, which aligned perfectly with Infiniti's goal of engaging an affluent, tech-savvy audience.

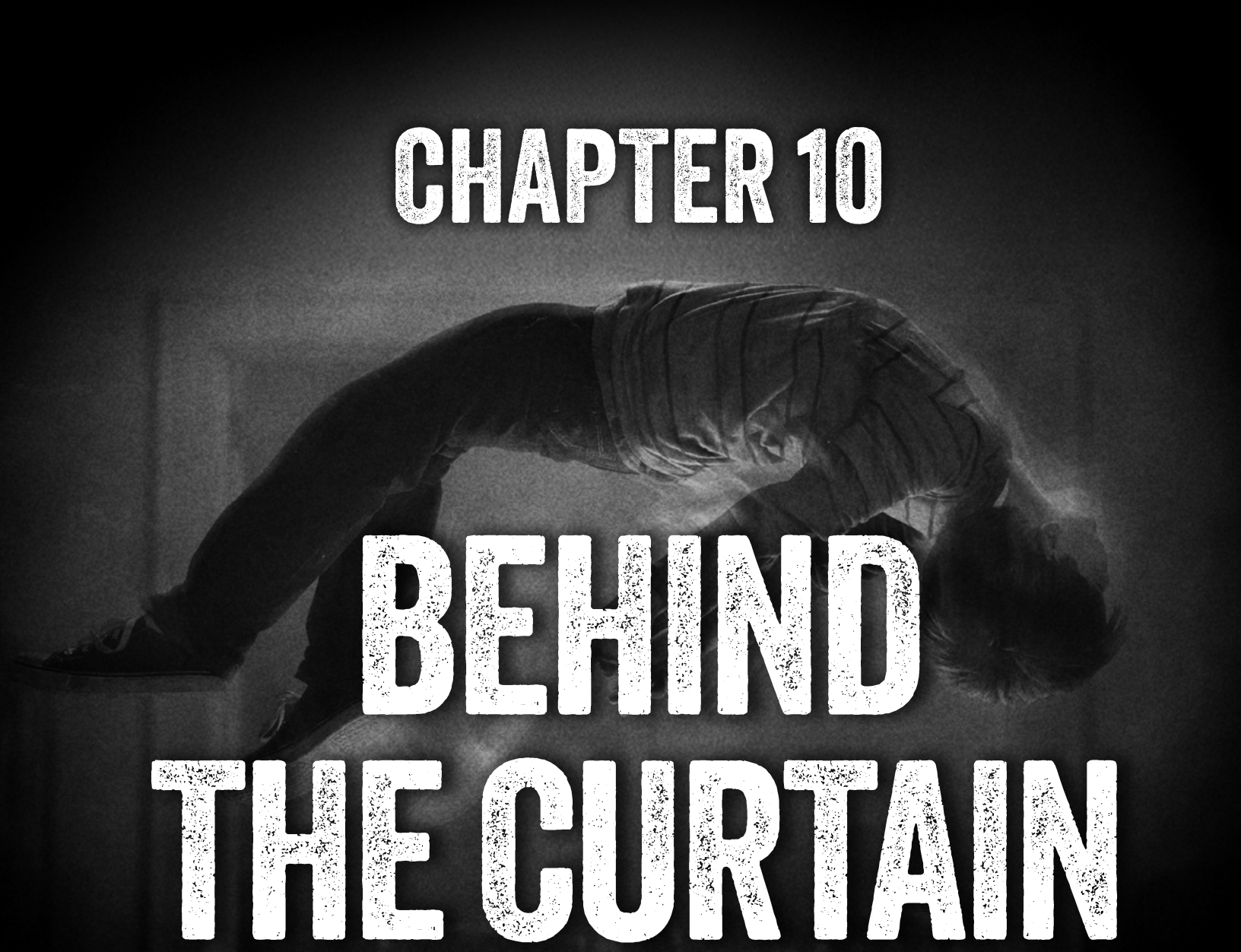
TECHNOLOGY AND THE MOMENT: CONCEALING THE MECHANICS

We're big believers in Arthur C. Clarke's idea that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Technology continues to open the door to experiences that once seemed impossible, but we believe the key is to keep the methodology invisible, so the magic is what stands out. That's what the next chapter is about: invisible technology.

We love using new tech to push the boundaries of storytelling, but it should never steal the spotlight. The audience should be swept up in the experience itself, not distracted by the mechanics behind it.

By keeping the tech behind the curtain, we let participants fully immerse themselves in the moment. They can let go and believe, if only for a little while, that the impossible is real.

Much like that lightbulb, floating across the stage.



CHAPTER 10

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

USING TECHNOLOGY TO DEEPEN THE IMMERSION

PREVIOUS: A possession scene from Cinemax original horror series *Outcast*, based on the comics written by Robert Kirkman, creator of *The Walking Dead*. How do you make someone sitting in front of a monitor feel what being possessed is like?

CHAPTER 10
BEHIND THE CURTAIN
USING TECHNOLOGY TO DEEPEN THE IMMERSION

In 1993, CERN released the World Wide Web into the public domain. At the time, I was the Marketing Director for Enzian, a storied arthouse cinema in Orlando, FL, and the producer of the Florida Film Festival. I wanted to bring both the theater and the festival online.

Asking around, I found Orlando had just one web development company then: Global Media Design, founded by Brian Clark. Brian understood the web's potential, and together we built a website for Enzian and the Florida Film Festival. We were kindred spirits and became lifelong collaborators in the process.



Brian Clark was a popular speaker at film festivals and industry events, where he inspired countless filmmakers and producers to see technology through the lens of experience design.

We wanted the festival to feel "live," which was a bold idea at the time. Our plan was to post updates during the event, which meant taking photos, developing and scanning them, and then coding the web pages manually to share them online. It was no small task, but the vision was clear: create a real-time digital presence for a film festival in an era when the web was just beginning to take shape.



On opening night, July 1994, Brian pulled me aside, practically buzzing with excitement, holding a weird gray box: an Apple QuickTake 100 digital camera. The specifications were laughable by today's standards. It stored eight photos, each at a grainy 640x480 resolution, no zoom, no preview screen, all for a whopping $749. As he talked it up, I couldn't help but focus on what it lacked. "All this money for that?" I said, raising an eyebrow. But Brian just grinned. "Mike, this is the worst it'll ever be. This tech will only get better, faster, and cheaper, and it will change everything."

At that moment it hit me. I'd been staring at the limitations while Brian looked straight into the future. It was a perspective shift I'll never forget. Ever since, I've looked at every piece of technology as a gateway to what comes next.

— Mike Monello, Creative Director at Campfire

TECHNOLOGY AS A STORYTELLING TOOL

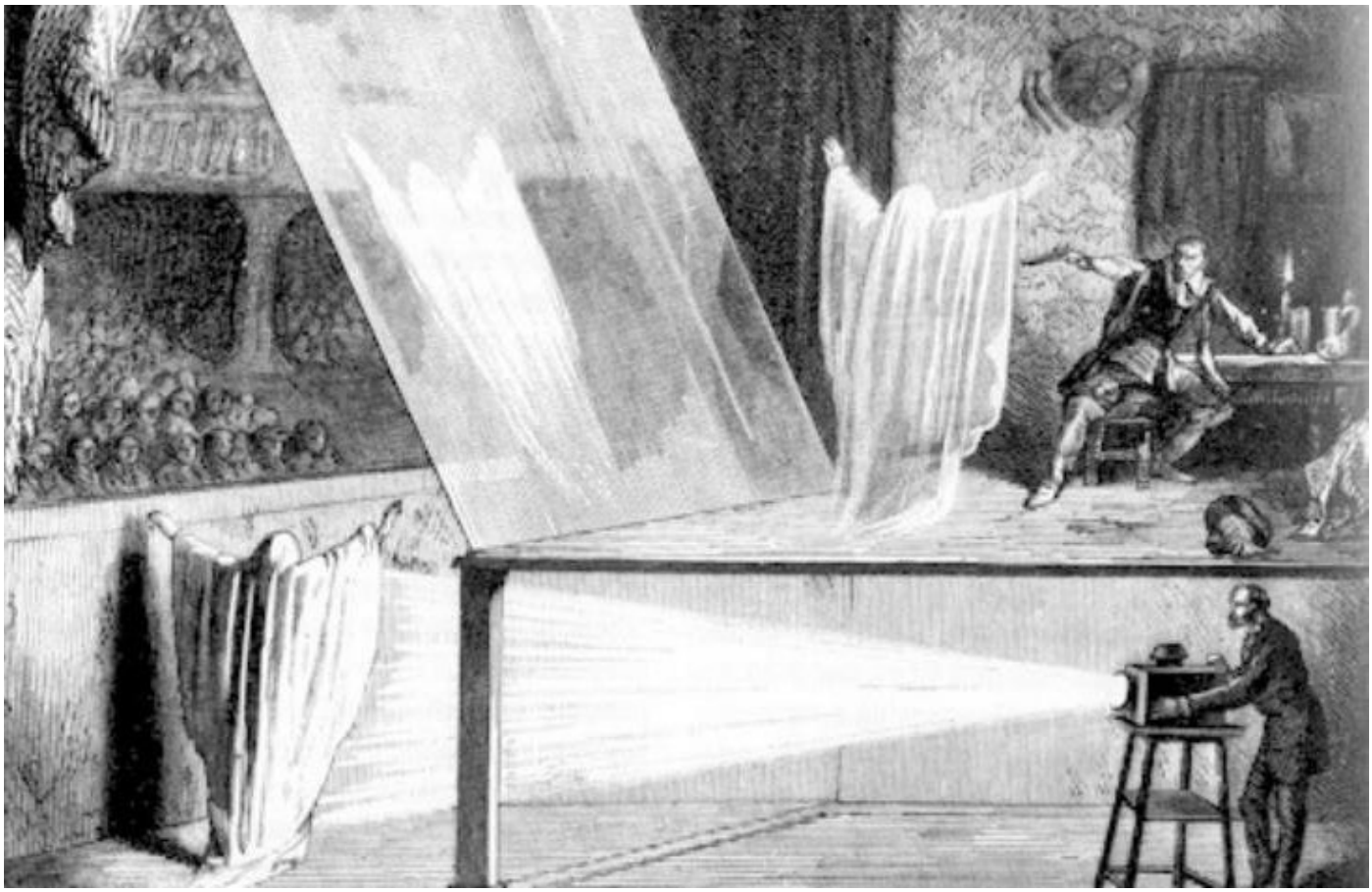
Technology is a method for mechanically amplifying human capability. In immersive storytelling, this means more than cutting-edge tools like artificial intelligence or virtual reality (VR). It's about humanity's long history of using whatever tools are available, simple or complex, to assist us in creating powerful emotional experiences. It follows, then, that there is also a long tradition of using mechanical and physical methods that amplify in-person performances.

One technological breakthrough that revolutionized immersive storytelling was the invention of moving pictures in the late nineteenth century. Suddenly, audiences weren't just reading or hearing stories; they were seeing them unfold before their eyes. Film transported people into different times and places, immersing them in worlds that felt real and vibrant. This technology would become the foundation of modern immersive experiences.

PEPPER'S GHOST AND THE EVOLUTION OF PROJECTION TECHNOLOGY

An enduring example of immersive technology is Pepper's Ghost, an optical illusion perfected by John Henry Pepper in the 1860s. Using angled glass and strategic lighting, this technique causes ghostly images to appear and vanish within a three-dimensional space. Unlike simply projecting onto a wall or installing LED screens, Pepper's Ghost creates the illusion that digital or projected elements share the same space as the physical environment. It's simple, yet remarkably effective.

The technique has been used for decades in classic sideshow attractions like "Girl to Gorilla," where a woman appears to transform into a beast before your eyes. This staple of carnivals and county fairs was celebrated in the 2018 documentary *Ape Girl* by Cris Siqueira. (You can also catch a fictional version





of "Girl to Gorilla" in the James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever*.)

Pepper's Ghost is also a key feature of Disney's Haunted Mansion attraction, allowing spectral figures to waltz across a ballroom and hitchhiking ghosts to materialize beside you in your car. The illusion even continues to evolve in modern productions like *ABBA Voyage*, where the band's 1979 avatars perform live using Pepper's Ghost-style "holograms" on huge mesh screens, synced to original audio recordings.

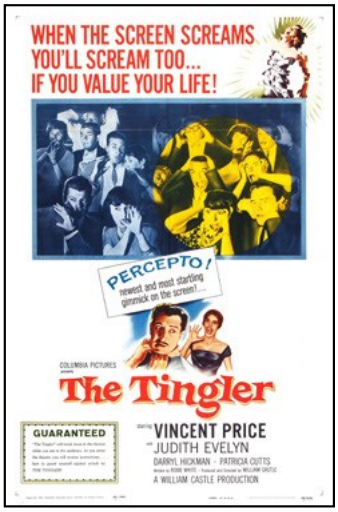
WILLIAM CASTLE: THE SHOWMAN OF IMMERSIVE CINEMA



Another pioneer of blending technology and storytelling for live audiences was **William Castle**, a filmmaker who merged psychology, spectacle, and mechanical trickery to create cinematic experiences that today are considered both cult classics and remarkably prescient.

You could say that Castle was the spiritual heir to P.T. Barnum, as he understood that the thrill of the experience could sometimes be more important than the story itself. In the same way that Barnum's traveling circus and midway attractions tantalized people with curiosity and spectacle, Castle used both **Big Top and Midway** Thinking in his films (as discussed in Chapter Seven) to keep audiences engaged.

Castle believed that movies could be *felt*, so he used technological innovations to make that happen. In his 1959 film *The Tingler*, he installed buzzers under select theater seats. At key moments, these buzzers would vibrate, creating the sensation of a "tingling" fear creeping through the audience, a gimmick he called "Percepto!" By physically engaging the audience, Castle gave them the experience of fear firsthand, not leaving it on the screen.



In *House on Haunted Hill*, Castle introduced "Emergo," where a skeleton would appear to emerge from the screen and fly through the auditorium via hidden wires. These forerunners of the 4-D immersive cinema experience blurred the line between the movie's world and the real one, involving viewers in the spectacle. Castle had grasped that immersion required provoking an emotional reaction.

Castle's movie *Mr. Sardonicus* is perhaps his most infamous use of trickery. Audiences were given "Punishment Poll" cards to vote on how the film should end: mercifully or cruelly. What they didn't know was that Castle had only

filmed one ending, gambling (correctly) that audiences would always clamor for the "no mercy" ending. The illusion of choice mirrored the magician's technique "The Classic Force," which we discussed in the last chapter, where a spectator believes they've freely chosen a card, but the magician has in fact guided them to a predetermined choice. Castle used this psychological trick to give the audience a sense of control when, in reality, the ending was a foregone conclusion. Sometimes the illusion of interactive technology lands just as hard as the technology itself.

ODORAMA AND THE RETURN OF SENSORY IMMERSION

Filmmaker John Waters, an heir to Castle's legacy, introduced "Odorama" in 1981 with his film *Polyester*. With their tickets, audiences received scratch-and-sniff cards with numbered scents corresponding to onscreen moments, engaging their sense of smell in concert with sight and sound. The scents ranged from roses to skunks, adding a subversive layer of humor and immersion. Like Castle, Waters understood that reaching multiple senses could transform the movie-going experience into something more participatory and memorable.

CLUE AND BANDERSNATCH:

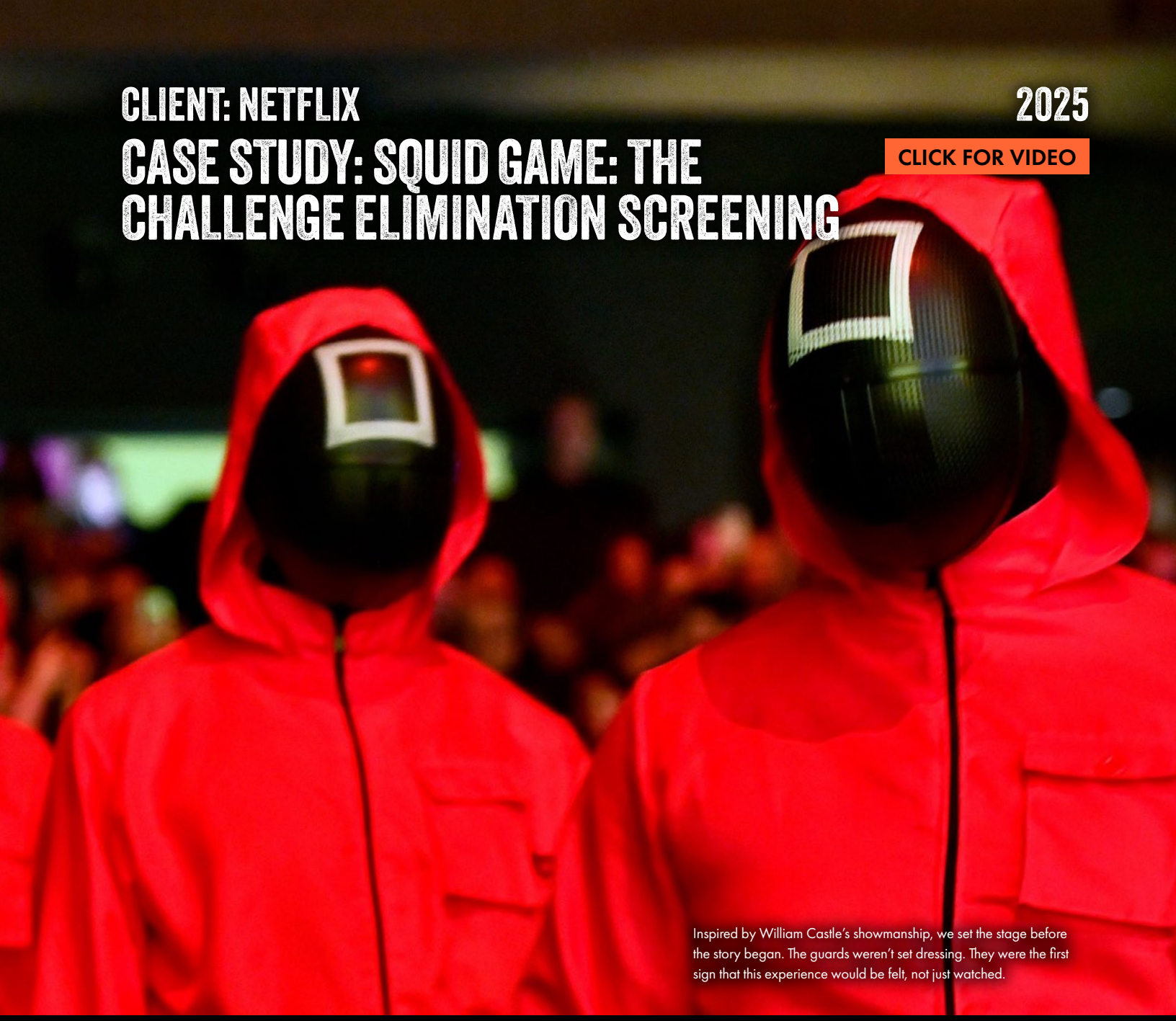


CLIENT: NETFLIX

2025

CASE STUDY: SQUID GAME: THE CHALLENGE ELIMINATION SCREENING

CLICK FOR VIDEO



Inspired by William Castle's showmanship, we set the stage before the story began. The guards weren't set dressing. They were the first sign that this experience would be felt, not just watched.

THEY CAME TO WATCH. THEY ENDED UP PLAYING.

For the season two finale of Netflix®'s *Squid Game: The Challenge*, inspired by the Korean drama in which 456 players face life-or-death stakes, we took a page from William Castle's playbook and turned a screening into something far more visceral. Using hidden technology, we gave the audience a way to feel the outcome and transformed spectators into participants.

At the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, 456 fans chose one of the five remaining finalists to represent them. Each guest was given a lanyard with their player's number and told to wear it during the screening. What we did not explain was that the lanyards held small LED lights and a vibration unit, positioned to sit against the back of the neck. There were no instructions, no apps to download, nothing to scan. The only requirement was to put it on.



ABOVE: 456 fans. Five finalists. One game. Before the first frame rolled, the audience was already playing.



ABOVE: Each lanyard had hidden lights and a vibration motor inside.



TOP RIGHT: Fans entered the party wearing lanyards with their player selection visible, providing opportunities for fans to meet and chat with each other over their chosen players.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Season Two players pose for photos at the pre-screening party.





Season Two finalist Dajah Graham (Player 302) and fans react to her elimination.

As the episode played, we controlled each lanyard remotely. When a finalist was eliminated onscreen, every fan wearing that number felt it instantly. Their lanyards lit up and vibrated, and the effect was immediate. Fans screamed, laughed, and clutched their chests as if they had been personally eliminated. They jumped up and down and cheered.



Season Two finalist Steven Jones (Player 183) and fans react to his elimination.



The reactions when Perla Figuereo (Player 72) won *Squid Game: The Challenge* were immediate and visceral. With no app, no instructions, and no interface, the technology faded into the background, and emotion took center stage.



When technology gets out of the way, emotion takes over. By removing friction, we created a moment that felt less like watching a show in a theater and more like being inside *Squid Game: The Challenge* itself. The story happened to them.

VOTE FOR YOUR ENDING

The seemingly multi-choice ending device employed by *Mr. Sardonicus* continues to be revisited. The 1985 cult classic *Clue* offered theaters three different endings. Audiences could choose among A, B, or C showings, but were not told which plot corresponded to which letter, in an attempt to drive them to catch all three! Although the movie only reached acclaim long after its initial release, its approach was groundbreaking, reflecting Castle's spirit of playful audience manipulation.

Netflix's interactive experiment, *Bandersnatch*, took the concept of multiple endings into the digital age. Released in 2018 as part of the *Black Mirror* series, *Bandersnatch* allowed viewers to make choices that altered the storyline in real time, leading to multiple possible endings. Unlike Castle's *Mr. Sardonicus*, *Bandersnatch* provided genuinely divergent narrative paths, using modern technology to give viewers a distinct sense of control, as did we with our own interactive short film, **Deja View** (see Chapter Nine).

Castle and showmen like Barnum taught us the same thing: technology, whether simple or advanced, works best when it strengthens the emotional connection between the audience and the story. It should enhance, not overshadow, the narrative, often casting its spells from behind the scenes.

VIEW-MASTER, 3-D MOVIES AND THE EVOLUTION TOWARD MODERN VR

Our pursuit of lifelike, immersive visuals goes back a long way. The earliest device for replicating a 3-D view of the world, the stereoscope, was invented in 1832 and over the next century the technology became more refined as photography progressed, leading to the introduction of the View-Master® in 1939. By displaying two slightly different images to each eye to create the illusion of depth, the



View-Master paved the way for 3-D movies of the mid-twentieth century, when films like *House of Wax* (1953) thrilled audiences with objects that seemingly leapt off the screen.



As technology has advanced, these principles have evolved into virtual reality. Devices like the **Meta Quest 3** and **Apple Vision Pro** mark an exciting new stage of this evolution. They optimize 3-D viewing experiences by using high-resolution displays and advanced optics to create a sense of depth that feels natural. By tracking eye movements, head position, and surroundings, these devices also adapt dynamically to the user's perspective, offering a smooth, lifelike experience.



What's fascinating is how these advancements are rooted in the same essential desire: to create depth and realism in visual storytelling. From the View-Master to VR headsets, the goal has always been to immerse audiences further in the story, revealing detail that doesn't appear in 2-D and shaping how narratives are told in modern interactive experiences.

However, one ongoing challenge in experience design is making new technologies feel seamless. While modern VR still reminds us we're wearing a headset, continued advances in comfort, responsiveness, and realism are steadily narrowing that gap. Each step forward brings us closer to invisible interfaces and more natural forms of narrative immersion.

CASE STUDY

BROKEN SPECTRE

2023

CLICK FOR VIDEO



The promotional art for **Broken Spectre**, often paired with the tagline "25 years ago your father climbed the mountain and never came back. Now he's calling for you."

BREAKING THE BARRIERS TO IMMERSION

When Evan Jones, Founder and Creative Director at Games by Stitch, approached Campfire to collaborate on a VR game, we knew it was a project worth diving into. **Broken Spectre** applies the philosophy of Invisible Technology to a single participant in a VR environment. Designed as a personal experience, the project strips away conventional interfaces in favor of natural movement and instinctive response.

Our aim wasn't to impress participants with technology, but to remove it entirely, allowing fear, curiosity, and unease to emerge without mediation. Game controllers work well for flat 2-D experiences, but in VR, controllers are barriers to immersion. In a 360-degree 3-D world, reaching out to grab an object with your hands is natural behavior. Pressing a button to make your hand grab it is not.

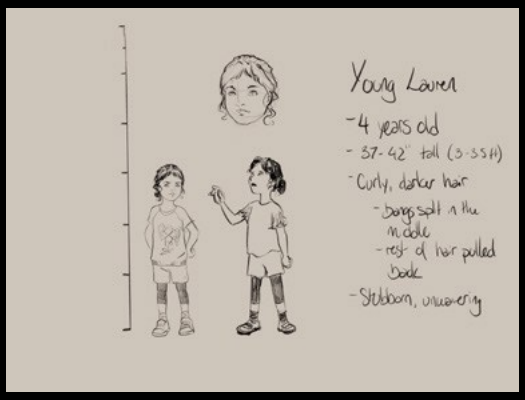
Broken Spectre uses advanced hand-tracking technology, allowing players to interact with the 360-degree environment without the need for controllers. Inspired by Lovecraftian horror, the game follows Casey, a woman searching for her father, who disappeared 25 years ago on Coldblood Mountain. When Casey receives a chilling phone call, seemingly from her missing father, she is drawn into a journey up the mountain, where reality twists into something far darker.

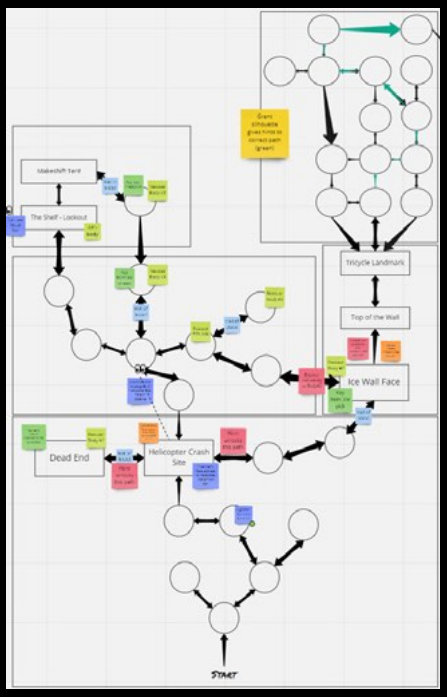


ABOVE: By removing controllers from the experience entirely, we were able to create moments of body horror unlike any other game or movie.
RIGHT: Wielding a lopper with your hands like you would a real one is more natural and immersive than pushing a button.
BELOW: Organic motions, such as opening and closing your compass with your hands, were prioritized.

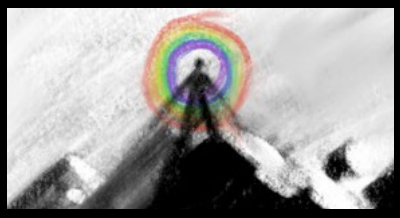








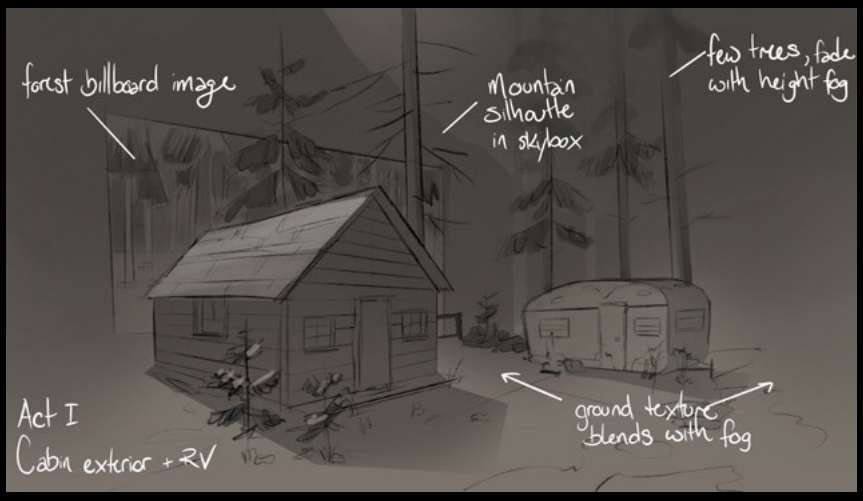
LEFT: Mapping the physical locations to the story was an ongoing task.
BELOW: Early sketches of the "broken spectre" drawn by "Young Casey" in the story.













ABOVE: Concept sketches of key characters.
LEFT: Early visualizations of key scenes and how they would appear in each act of the story.



The cabin as it appears in **Broken Spectre**.



The altar scene as it appears in **Broken Spectre**.



"Dad, is that you?" Casey sees the broken spectre.

In this game, hand-tracking is integral to the terror. Players grab objects; they use their hands to engage in disturbing, otherworldly moments that could only work in VR. This tactile design makes the game's cosmic horror even more visceral and personal.











Broken Spectre became one of the highest-rated VR experiences on the Meta Quest, setting a new standard for horror storytelling in virtual reality.

MAKING TECHNOLOGY INVISIBLE

In marketing, there's a tendency to spotlight technology. Think headlines like "This brand launched a mixed reality app." At Campfire, we take a different path. We believe the most successful immersive experiences are those where the audience can focus squarely on the narrative. We call this approach "**Invisible Technology**."

The aim is to make the interface as transparent as possible, ensuring that the story, not the technology, is front and center. Remember the principle we discussed in Chapter Eight about "**Avoiding the Penny**"? Just as an out-of-place object can break the illusion in a historical setting, intrusive technology can disrupt the emotional flow of an experience.

BUILDING FOR INVISIBLE TECHNOLOGY FROM THE START

Creating invisible technology begins in the earliest stages of ideation and pitching. The question we always ask ourselves is: **Can we describe and sell this idea without revealing the method behind the experience?**

If a concept relies heavily on explaining the underlying method, we're likely putting the tech before the story, a pitfall we strive to avoid. The focus should always be on the audience's emotional journey and the narrative we're inviting them into. Advanced or innovative technology is great, but we try to use it to enhance the story rather than to star in it.

As we explored in the last chapter, magicians captivate their audiences by immersing them in mystery, not by revealing how the tricks are done. The wonder and amazement come from keeping the method hidden. So, when pitching an immersive storytelling idea, we emphasize the emotional experience, the world we're building, and how participants will engage, without drawing back the curtain to reveal the technology.

The less we need to explain the mechanics, the more we can preserve the magic of the experience.

DESIGNING TO MAKE TECHNOLOGY INVISIBLE

The principle of "**Designing for Invisibility**" centers on ensuring that the technology used in immersive experiences supports the narrative without becoming a distraction. To achieve this, every element must be carefully evaluated and implemented in a way that serves the emotional journey of the audience.

Our guiding principle is that **people matter more than technology**. The choice of technology should be dictated by its ability to deepen the audience's immersion, not by its novelty or wow factor. Therefore, we always tread carefully. We live to create magic, and if a new piece of tech can deliver on Arthur C. Clarke's adage, it opens up exciting p*ossi*bilities. But in essence, we remain "cautious technologists."

Even before design begins, we consider what transparency means during the creative development process. As we move from concept to execution, we rigorously evaluate each piece of technology. We collaborate with trusted vendors to test viability, always asking: Will this enhance the audience's emotional engagement? Will anyone have to be told how it works? This ensures we choose solutions that are both effective and seamless.

Checks do not end there. Before fully implementing any technology, we prototype and pilot. This allows us to test how the technology integrates with the story, refine the user experience, and gauge how audiences respond in real time. Through iteration, we adapt the technology to enhance the story rather than disrupt it.

A common pitfall is to create a system that requires a complicated onboarding, where participants must spend valuable time learning how to use the technology before they can engage with the story. Our goal is to minimize this friction by creating intuitive interfaces that let participants dive right in.

The technology should feel natural, a convenient bridge between the participant and the narrative. As with good design in everyday products and infrastructure, users shouldn't have to think about how it works. When the interface fades away, nothing stands between participants and the experience.

CHOOSING AND MAPPING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY FOR YOUR STORY

Selecting the right technology means finding the tool that best serves your story and enhances the audience's emotional connection. The decision should be driven by the experience you want to create and how you want your audience to interact with it.

First, consider the level of audience engagement your story requires:

— **Casual Interactivity**: For a broad audience engaging at a surface level, simpler, accessible technologies work best. The goal is to invite them into the story without overwhelming them.

— **Deep Immersion**: Technology can offer more complex interactions for participants looking to dive deeper, allowing them to feel like they're shaping the narrative. This might involve tools like AI or augmented reality (AR), but the technology should support the story, not overshadow it.

Voice recognition is a great example of technology that feels organic. In **Deja View**, this method enabled viewers to have real-time conversations with characters. Participants could shape the dialogue without noticing the underlying tech, making their interactions feel personal and dynamic.

This approach works particularly well when the story calls for direct, personalized engagement. Audiences aren't thinking about the complexity behind the scenes. They're simply immersed in the conversation, because the interface is invisible. Many months of careful planning may have led to this brief activation, and the audience will never know.

There's a strong case for AR and VR letting participants step inside a storyworld, helping us to blur the lines between the physical and digital realms. These are powerful tools for creating fully immersive experiences where the audience feels present within the narrative.

Experiences like our **Watchmen Dr. Manhattan Booths** and **Westworld VR,** both created for HBO, gave participants access to environments where they could interact directly with the story. The technology disappeared into the background. Users weren't overwhelmed by the mechanics; they were absorbed in the world.

Technological advances will soon usher in a new wave of hybrid experiences, where the line between the virtual and physical worlds finally disappears. It's also why we avoid AR delivered through a phone: it forces people to stare at a tiny screen rather than becoming entranced by the storyworld around them. But the promise of lightweight AR glasses will certainly open up exciting opportunities for world builders.



Inside our **Watchmen Dr. Manhattan Booths** participants underwent a full-body AR experience in which their image was projected onto a screen for them to watch as their body appeared to dissolve into molecules and transform into Dr. Manhattan, mimicking the famous scene from the original comic series.

AI-DRIVEN EXPERIENCES: EXPANDING CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers burgeoning new avenues for dynamic, adaptive experiences. When we launched our original comic series *The Bestiary Chronicles* in 2022, we used AI to generate all the artwork. The AI tool Midjourney created visuals that served the story's themes and opened up directions we hadn't planned. The project also continually evolved. Each issue was made with a newer version of the engine than the one before it, as the technology steadily improved. The resulting aesthetic was worked into the storyline as an emblem of constant change.



In some ways, this is the bane AND the opportunity of technology in storytelling. Limitations can lead to innovative techniques and explorations. It's as true with AI and *The Bestiary Chronicles* as it was with the limitations and opportunities provided by video cameras and editing in the'90s that birthed the found footage phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project*.



Excerpt from The Bestiary Chronicles #5, an original comic series created using AI-generated imagery.

INTERACTIVE ONLINE EXPERIENCES: PERSONALIZING AUDIENCE INTERACTION

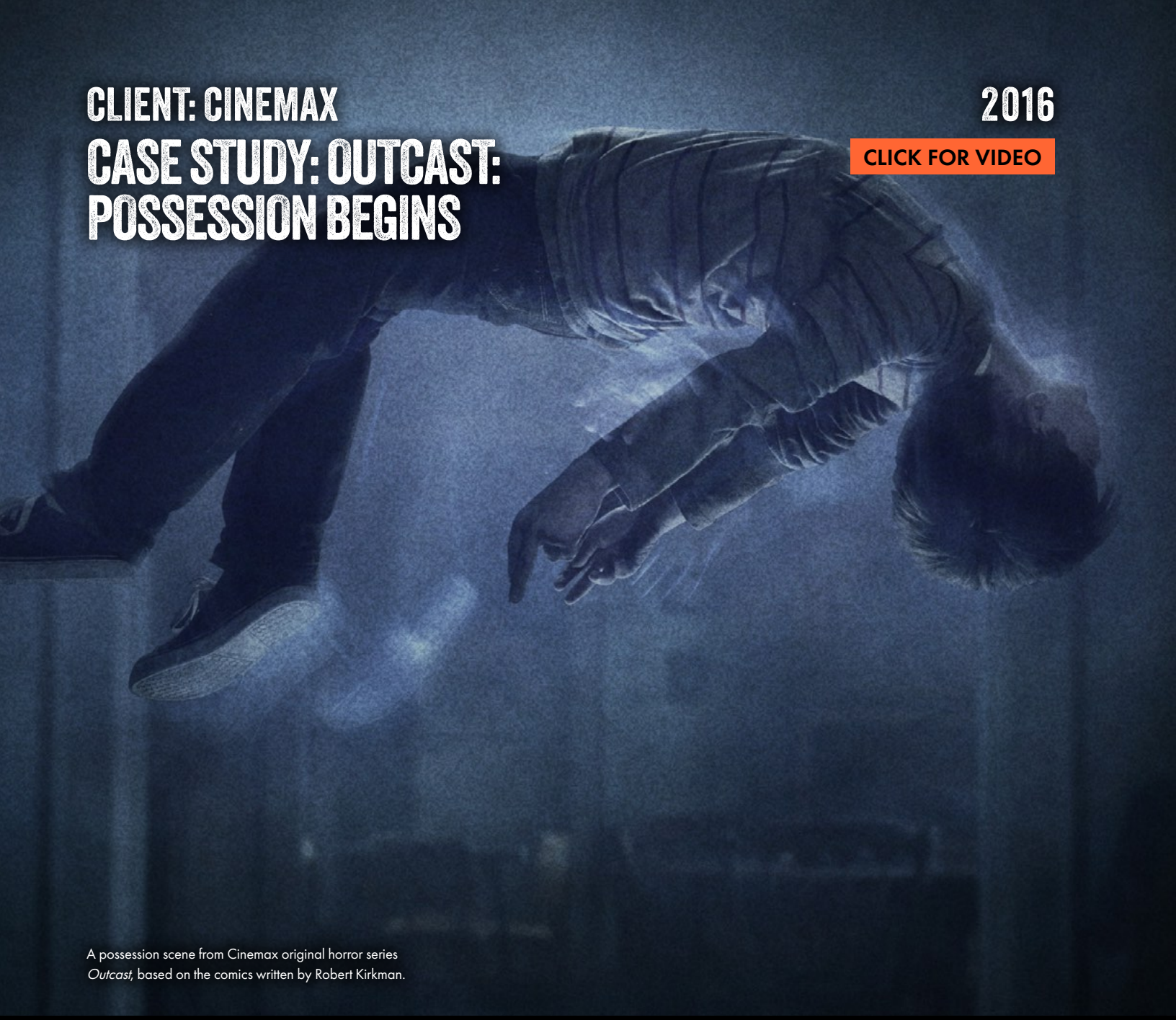
As technology recedes further, the most powerful interactions are no longer about what audiences choose to do, but how they instinctively respond. At this point, participation stops being a matter of interface or instruction and becomes a matter of behavior. Designing at this level requires an even lighter touch, one that accounts for reflex, avoidance, and the body's natural response to fear. **Outcast: Possession Begin**s, created to promote Cinemax's possession-themed horror show *Outcast*, was designed around a simple but radical idea: that the most immersive experiences don't wait for the audience to opt in. They respond to what people do instinctively.

CLIENT: CINEMAX

CASE STUDY: OUTCAST: POSSESSION BEGINS

2016

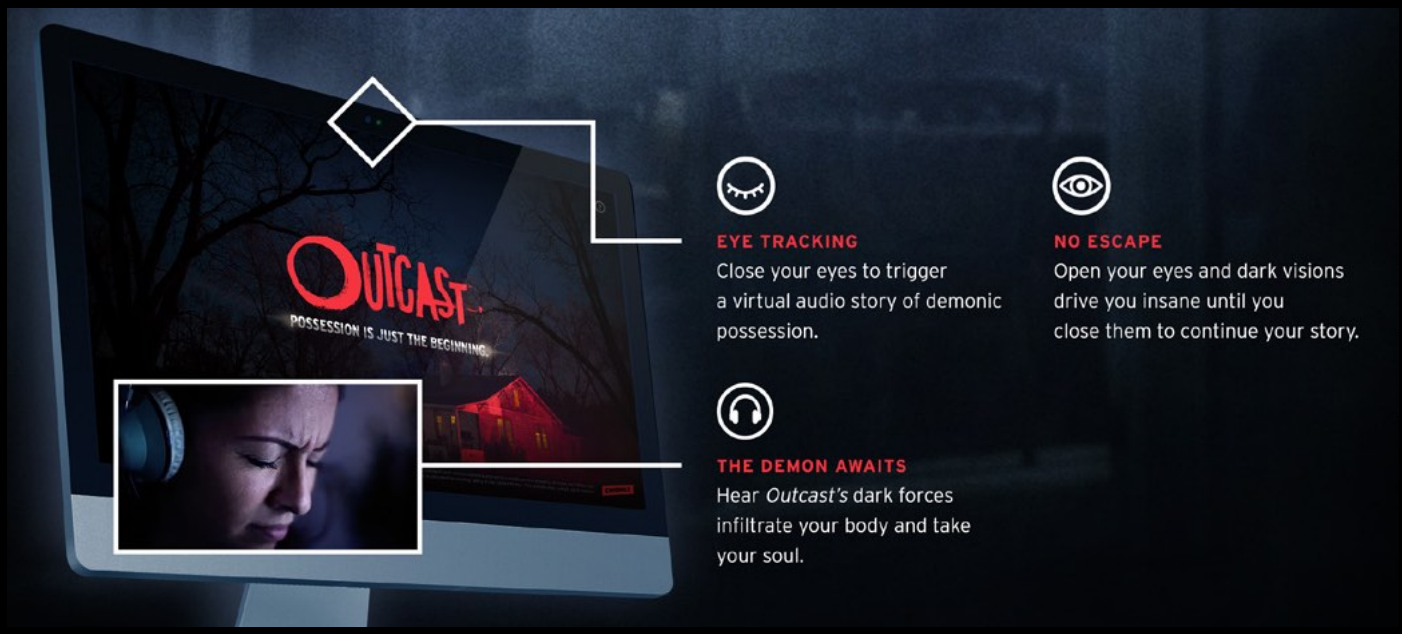
CLICK FOR VIDEO



A possession scene from Cinemax original horror series *Outcast*, based on the comics written by Robert Kirkman.

TOO SCARED TO OPEN YOUR EYES, TOO SCARED TO CLOSE THEM

Outcast: Possession Begins was an innovative and terrifying interactive trailer we developed to promote Cinemax®'s possession-themed horror show *Outcast*, created by Robert Kirkman (*The Walking Dead*). The goal was to immerse audiences in the show's dark narrative by deploying cutting-edge technology, bringing the horror of demonic possession to life.



This interactive trailer relied on a unique combination of **eye-tracking technology** and **3-D binaural audio** to create a wraparound psychological and sensory experience. We set out to envelop viewers in a story so terrifying that participants would be afraid to open their eyes, but just as afraid to close them.

When viewers closed their eyes, they were plunged into an immersive audio narrative, where a demon whispered in their ears. The encounter was terrifying and intimate. Opening their eyes in an attempt to escape the horror stopped the audio but revealed disturbing visuals tied directly to whatever they were fleeing, driving home a possession from which there is no escape. By working on sight and sound at once, the experience made participants feel they were guiding the story and trapped inside it. This blend of technology allowed the trailer to evoke the unsettling sensation of never being fully in control.





Campfire's use of binaural sound made the demon's voice seem substantial, a direct invasion of the participants' space, while the eye-tracking technology created a feedback loop, responding dynamically to their physical reactions. This was designed to make the audience feel like active agents in the experience, heightening the emotional stakes and making the horror more personal.



Outcast: Possession Begins was praised for reimagining how horror trailers could engage audiences, generating over 68 million impressions and giving O*utcast* the highest premiere viewership of any Cinemax series.

LEANING INTO BEHAVIOR: FAMILIAR INTERACTIONS IN IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING

As technology evolves, it's tempting to design around the capabilities of the tech itself rather than the experience it enables. For example, mobile AR can be exciting, but imagine Disney's Haunted Mansion if guests had to use their phones to see the ghosts. The effect would lose its magic. Holding up a phone to view something in a real space isn't natural, and it interrupts immersion. For technology to serve the story faithfully, it must align with the narrative, the environment, and the instincts of the audience.

Douglas Rushkoff's advice to "**tell new stories in old mediums, and old stories in new mediums**" is a guiding principle for immersive storytelling. It suggests that if the experience is innovative, then the story should feel familiar, anchoring the audience amid unfamiliar surroundings. When audiences can recognize elements of the story, they're more open to engaging with the immersive aspects, free to explore the experience's interactive or sensory elements without feeling lost.

This familiarity also provides context, helping audiences understand their role within immersive or interactive experiences. A widely known story like *Alice in Wonderland* is frequently adapted across different formats, from theater to virtual reality. Because it's culturally ingrained, creators can introduce fresh, immersive elements while allowing audiences to retain a sense of the familiar.

Considering what your audience is already comfortable with can make engagement smoother. The more intuitive the technology, the less it distracts from the story.

CONCLUSION: LET THE STORY LEAD

This chapter isn't about new tools or emerging platforms. It's about what happens when technology stops calling attention to itself and starts serving the story.

From the early days at Campfire, we've aimed to push the boundaries of immersive storytelling while keeping technology in the background. We've moved from low-tech approaches like early transmedia storytelling to embedding AI, AR, and voice recognition. And we're still learning. Yet, our core philosophy remains: If technology is the thing you're most excited about, you're probably solving the wrong problem.

Our approach to invisible technology has matured by embracing methods that prioritize audience interaction while staying true to our principles of immersion. Whether manipulating expectations with simple alternate reality games or designing complex multi-sensory experiences, we always seek to keep the mechanics hidden.

As technology advances, we'll continue to adapt these tools to serve the story without letting them steal the spotlight. Whether through AI-driven visuals, immersive VR environments, or interactive voice experiences, our success hinges on one factor: our audience's emotional connection to the story. When that connection is strong, the technology recedes, and participants become fully absorbed in the world we've created.



CONCLUSION

IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

PREVIOUS: Immersive actors from our partner #MetaForYou adorn the hood of a vintage NYC taxi at our block-takeover for Amazon Prime's *Hunters*.

CONCLUSION

IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

This book has covered a lot of ground. Twenty years of work, ten principles, and dozens of case studies. But the ideas behind them are simple enough to fit on an index card: build worlds people can inhabit, design for participation, and never let the machinery show.

The most powerful stories are lived, not watched. That conviction has guided every project in this book, and it's the lens through which we'd encourage you to evaluate your own work.

What follows is a chapter-by-chapter field guide, a set of diagnostic questions drawn from our experience. Whether you're planning your first activation, pitching a client, or teaching the next generation of immersive storytellers, these are the questions we ask ourselves at the start of every project. We hope they're useful to you.

CHAPTER 1: LIGHTING THE FIRE

Culture is the engine. Everything in this book grew out of a team that shared obsessions, argued about details, and held each other to a standard. If you're building your own team, start here.

- ☐ Which core principles make your work unmistakably yours? You need to define what great work means for your team or company. This is tied directly to your core values, and these principles must be evident in how you act, in the daily decisions you make, and in everything you create.
- ☐ How will you turn those principles into a manifesto that your team can get behind? This should not be a generic statement, but a rallying cry that your team can internalize and genuinely believe in. These principles must be so ingrained that they become the measure by which you continually judge whether you are on the right track.
- ☐ How do you reinforce those principles day-to-day? For Campfire, *Thirsty Thursdays* are more than an excuse for after-hours booze: each employee crafts their version of the Thirsty Thursday experience by selecting and mixing the cocktail, choosing the snacks, and explaining to everyone why each component was selected. Our culture is rooted in thinking about **the people for whom we are crafting the experience**. Find ways to engage your teams through activities like these, so the principles get reinforced organically.
- ☐ Culture begins with the people you hire. Which questions should you ask to work out whether they would be a good fit, beyond the quality of their work? At Campfire, every interview includes the question "What are you a fan of? Tell us about something you geek out over, your personal rabbit hole." We don't care about the specific answer, only that they have one.

CHAPTER 2:
TELL STORIES THAT SPREAD

People share stories for three reasons: to strengthen bonds with others, to express who they are, and to gain status within their communities. Design for at least one of these motivations. The best work hits all three.

- ☐ What experiences could naturally inspire people to come together, perhaps around shared challenges, intriguing mysteries, or meaningful causes?
- ☐ How might you design memorable, shareable moments that encourage participants to proudly "win their feed"?
- ☐ What does sharing an experience say about the person who shared it? How can you support their journey?
- ☐ Is there room to introduce friendly competition or collaborative challenges to strengthen participant engagement?

CHAPTER 3:
CREATE WORLDS, NOT CAMPAIGNS

A campaign ends. A world persists. The difference is coherence: every detail, from the scent in the room to the costume on the performer, reinforcing a single reality. The case studies in this chapter showed what happens when that standard is met: guests stop thinking about the brand and start living inside the story.

- ☐ Who are the characters that will bring your world to life, and how can you ensure their interactions with guests feel authentic and immersive?
- ☐ What sensory elements (sounds, tastes, or scents) can you incorporate to transport your guests fully into the story?
- ☐ Which tangible keepsakes or memorabilia might participants take home to extend their connection to your experience? Does the takeaway feel like it belongs in the storyworld, or does it feel like swag? There's a difference between a branded tote bag and a prop that extends the narrative into someone's life.
- ☐ How are participants' actions in the experience reflected back at them? Is their participation meaningful to the experience? Are they genuinely co-creators?

CHAPTER 4:
MEET FANS WHERE THEY ARE

Every audience contains **Skimmers**, **Dippers**, and **Divers**, people engaging at different depths, for different reasons, often at the same event. Designing for only one tier means losing the other two. The goal is an experience with multiple entry points and no ceiling: accessible enough for a first-time visitor, deep enough to reward an obsessive.

In the context of your own projects:

- ☐ Who are the different types of fans who might engage with your experience? Skimmers seek quick, engaging moments, Dippers look for social interactions, and Divers crave narrative complexity and exploration. How might their distinct behaviors and desires shape your design approach?

- ☐ How can you structure your experience so that each fan segment finds fulfillment without feeling overwhelmed or overlooked? Consider how clearly defined, yet interconnected layers can allow each group to move naturally through the experience at their preferred depth.

- ☐ How can you empower Divers, who typically have extensive knowledge and enthusiasm, to effectively share their passion with Skimmers and Dippers? Think about what specific tools, resources, or experiences might assist them, such as accessible summaries, intriguing anecdotes, or interactive activities, turning them from solitary explorers into approachable evangelists who enrich the experience for everyone.

- ☐ When people with the same obsessions connect, that passion grows. How are you naturally enabling this connection within your experience without forcing it?

CHAPTER 5:
DESIGN FOR DISCOVERY

Discovery runs on dopamine. The anticipation of a reveal, the satisfaction of solving it, and the drive to find the next one: that's the cycle you're designing for. The two structural options are the Breadcrumb Method (linear, guided, each clue leading to the next) and the Onion Method (layered, non-linear, explored at the participant's own pace). Choose based on your venue, your audience, and how much control you need over flow.

- ☐ Would the Breadcrumb or the Onion Method better suit your goals?
- ☐ How frequently should meaningful discoveries occur to maintain participant excitement and momentum, and what kinds of tangible or symbolic rewards could reinforce their satisfaction at key moments?
- ☐ What levers for participation have you created? For example, leaving an unattended piano in your experience subtly invites guests to sit behind it and play.
- ☐ How obvious are your invitations for participation? Consider including a wide range so everyone feels comfortable and understands how they can participate.
- ☐ How will you test and refine your experience's difficulty, clarity, and collaborative potential based on initial participant feedback, ensuring a balance between challenge and accessibility?

CHAPTER 6: DON'T INTERRUPT

Format subversion works when a story inhabits a familiar container so completely that the audience accepts it as native to the form. All formats carry their own pacing, tone, and conventions. Respect those, and your story can ride the carrier wave of a well-loved genre. Break them too early, and the spell is gone.

- ☐ What does the format promise in terms of tone, pace, structure, and authenticity? What are the best-in-class examples to study for cues?
- ☐ Where does your brand or message enter the experience, and does that moment serve the story or break the spell? Are you rewarding belief, or handing the audience a decoder-pin reveal?
- ☐ Does your story really belong inside your chosen format, or are you only borrowing its surface cues? Does it still feel coherent once the format is subverted?
- ☐ Which conventions do you need to honor so the audience accepts the story as native to the form? What details will make it feel authentic rather than merely imitated?
- ☐ Would people pay for this experience? If it delivers enough value that they would, you're probably on the right track.

CHAPTER 7: CAPTURE THE CROWD

Before you design anything, answer one question: are you the Big Top or a Midway attraction? The Big Top is the reason people showed up. It earns a narrative arc, a build, a payoff. A Midway attraction lives alongside bigger spectacles and has to earn attention in seconds. Both can be extraordinary, but they require completely different design instincts.

- ☐ Are you the headline spectacle or a sideshow on someone else's midway?
- ☐ If you are the Big Top, is the description of your event enough to make people line up, come rain or shine?
- ☐ If you are a Midway attraction, what are the interests and passions of the people coming to the Big Top, and how can you incorporate them into the experience? Knowing why people are attending the main event is essential to creating a successful Midway attraction.
- ☐ What is the thing people will see, hear, or smell when they encounter your experience that makes them want to stop?
- ☐ What takeaway can you give guests that will make other people want to check out your experience?

CHAPTER 8: THINK LIKE A FORGER

Audiences can smell a fake. They may not be able to articulate what's wrong, but they feel it, and the spell breaks. The forger's discipline is useful here: every prop, every surface, every piece of printed ephemera has to survive close inspection. If it doesn't, either raise it to standard or remove it entirely.

- ☐ If you have crafted an object, does it pass the sniff test? Sit for a moment with something and look, listen, smell, and taste. Use your senses. Is it real? Does it *convince* you, or merely entertain? If not, where is the weakest link, the too-clean surface, the giveaway seam? Identify it early. Find "**The Penny**" and figure out how to avoid it.

- ☐ How can you use ambient cues such as scent, temperature, and texture, the musty whiff of old paper, the clammy chill of a cellar, the gentle warmth of a projector fan, to place guests firmly in the era and setting you're evoking?

- ☐ What are your anchor objects, a ticket stub, a weather-worn Polaroid, a stamped passport, that immediately signal authenticity, and how will visitors discover them (or even take them away as souvenirs)?

- ☐ Can you embed layers of provenance in your artifacts, hidden maker's marks, custom watermarks, secret compartments, so the curious can unearth a story archaeology that rewards close inspection and fuels post-show discussion?

CHAPTER 9: CREATE MOMENTS OF MAGIC

Every experience should have what we call T**he Moment:** a precisely engineered beat when the impossible feels real and disbelief vanishes completely. Designing for it means borrowing from stage magic: misdirection to control attention, cold reading to create intimacy, and manipulation to give participants the illusion of free choice. Think like a magician first, a marketer second.

- ☐ A magician's act, whether a single effect or a complete stage show, builds tension in specific ways, often leading to a rug-pull moment at the end. You discover that everything you thought was true isn't. Watch one of Derren Brown's stage shows and you'll see how he often uses the grand finale to recontextualize everything you have experienced to that point. How can you apply that to your own work? Can you pinpoint the instant when the ground should figuratively shift, turning "that's clever" into "WTF?!"

- ☐ If you're using technology or mechanisms to create an immersive moment, how can you direct attention, through lighting, sound cues, performer blocking, or physical layout, so guests watch the "rabbit" while the real work happens elsewhere?

- ☐ People will want to share what they experience, but ideally without spoiling any surprises for other fans. What tool or artifact, a souvenir, a whispered password, an unlocked secret scene, will let guests relive the magic without demystifying it for others?

- ☐ What emotions are you evoking from your guests and participants throughout the experience, and is that emotional journey satisfying? Emotional connection is essential, and it's the one thing that stories and experiences do better than anything else.

CHAPTER 10: BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The best technology in an immersive experience is the technology nobody notices. When hardware, software, and show flow disappear, guests feel the magic rather than inspect the machinery. If you can't describe the experience without mentioning the technology, reconsider the concept.

- ☐ Are you designing the experience to accommodate the technology or is the technology helping you realize your vision?
- ☐ If you can only explain the idea by explaining the method, what would you have to change?
- ☐ How can you integrate technology so invisibly that participants will focus on the story, not the mechanics?
- ☐ In what ways can you balance technological precision with human warmth and real connection?
- ☐ Are there any aspects of the experience that take people out of a state of flow? If so, eliminate or change them.

Tools will keep changing. Twenty years ago, we were burning CDs and scanning photos we had developed at the local pharmacy. Today, the toolkit includes AI, spatial computing, and biometric feedback. Twenty years from now, it will be something we can't yet imagine. But the essentials won't move: evoke emotion, invite participation, make it real, leave a mark.

Immersion is a mindset, a commitment to making people feel something they'll carry with them long after they leave.

Now it's your turn. What will you build?

Remember: build worlds, not campaigns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When Campfire was founded, there was nothing else like it. We began as a group of independent filmmakers who believed in the internet as a living performance medium. From the start, we treated fans as active participants who were central to every story. We believed that if we honored that relationship, meaningful experiences would follow.

We're sincerely grateful to the clients and partners who have trusted us with their worlds over the years. Inviting others into a story takes courage, and the best work has always grown out of that trust. We've been fortunate to collaborate on some extraordinary projects, made possible by people who passionately believe in storytelling and are willing to explore new ways of telling it.

Finally, this book, and the ideas within it, would not exist without the many people who have contributed to Campfire across its history. Employees, collaborators, freelancers, partners, and friends: each of you has helped shape the culture, philosophy, and craft that define this work. Your intelligence, creativity, generosity, and care have strengthened the work itself and the people making it.

Thank you all.

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Further Reading

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Immersive Storytelling and Experience Design

Kerrison, Margaret. *Immersive Storytelling for Real and Imagined Worlds: A Writer's Guide*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2022.

A practical guide to writing for immersive experiences, from a former Disney Imagineer who led the narrative design for Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge. The closest thing to a textbook for this emerging discipline.

Kerrison, Margaret. *Reimagined Worlds: Narrative Placemaking for People, Play, and Purpose*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2024.

Kerrison's follow-up explores how narrative placemaking applies beyond theme parks, to urban design, public spaces, and community experiences.

Melcher, Charles. *The Future of Storytelling: How Immersive Experiences Are Transforming Our World*. New York: Artisan, 2024.

An overview of how immersive technologies and participatory design are reshaping entertainment, education, and marketing.

Rose, Frank. *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.

An early and influential account of how digital media was dissolving the boundary between storytelling and audience participation. Rose's reporting on projects like Why So Serious? and the Lost ARG provides useful context for much of Campfire's work.

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

McGonigal's argument that game design principles, particularly reward cycles, voluntary participation, and collaborative problem-solving, can be applied far beyond games, directly informs our thinking about discovery design and engagement. Her work on dopamine-driven motivation loops is useful background for Chapter Five.

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Hall is a puzzle designer, escape room architect, and the creator of FindSatoshi.com, the community hub that helped coordinate one of the most sprawling collaborative puzzle hunts on the internet (referenced in Chapter Five). Her book applies the same instincts to the practical craft of escape room design: puzzle pacing, difficulty calibration, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which parallel our discussion of breadcrumb design and the dopamine cycle of discovery.

Transmedia and Participatory Culture

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

The book where Jenkins coined the phrase "transmedia storytelling." If Spreadable Media (cited in our text) is about how stories travel, Convergence Culture is about why the media environment made that travel possible. Essential background reading.

Phillips, Andrea. *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

Published in 2012 and still the most practical guide to designing transmedia projects, from budgeting and team assembly to narrative architecture and audience management. Phillips worked on several notable transmedia works, including ***The Maester's Path*** *for Game of Thrones.*

Szulborski, Dave. This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming. New Fiction Publishing, 2005.

One of the earliest practical guides to ARG design, written by a pioneer who learned by doing, not by theorizing. Covers game mechanics, community management, and narrative architecture for alternate reality experiences.

The Craft of Magic and Illusion

Brown, Derren. *Notes from a Fellow Traveller*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2023.

A personal and philosophical reflection on the art of magic, perception, and performance from one of the world's foremost mentalists. Less a how-to than a meditation on why illusion matters, and what it reveals about how we construct reality. Directly relevant to our chapters on misdirection, cold reading, and creating moments of magic.

Burger, Eugene. *The Experience of Magic*. Chicago: Kaufman and Greenberg, 1989.

Burger, Eugene, and Robert E. Neale. *Magic and Meaning*. Seattle: Hermetic Press, 1995.

The Experience of Magic focuses on the craft of performance: how a magician constructs an experience for the audience, not just an effect. Magic and Meaning goes further, exploring the psychological and philosophical dimensions of creating wonder. Burger's thinking profoundly influenced our approach to designing moments that feel impossible.

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Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Updated 20th anniversary edition, 2012.

The foundational academic text on fan culture. Jenkins' argument that fans are active interpreters and creators, not passive consumers, underpins much of our philosophy around designing for Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers.

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A novel rather than a textbook, but perhaps the single best illustration of what it feels like to be inside an immersive experience designed by someone else. Fowles drops his protagonist into an elaborate, psychologically manipulative game on a Greek island, where nothing is what it seems and every revelation reframes what came before. If you want to understand why we design the way we do, read this book. And then read it again.

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A cult novel built from fragmented documents, footnotes, and competing narrators. Readers must piece together the story themselves, making the act of reading feel closer to immersive exploration than consumption.

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A novel presented as a library book filled with inserted artifacts and handwritten annotations from two readers uncovering a hidden story. A striking example of narrative delivered through objects and layered discovery. This is one you need physically on your shelf.

Spectacle and Cultural Interventions

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The definitive history of Ernest Gantt, the man who invented tiki culture and, as we argue in Chapter Three, pioneered immersive environment design decades before the term existed. Essential reading for anyone interested in the origins of experiential world-building.

Vale, V., ed. *RE/Search #11: Pranks!* San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1987.

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A fascinating look at the creator of Coney Island's Luna Park and one of the earliest architects of the modern amusement industry. Thompson demonstrated how architecture, lighting, and spectacle could transport audiences into fully realized fantasy environments decades before the modern theme park. Walt Disney hated Coney Island, which might be why we love it so much.

Castle, William. *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976.

Castle's autobiography is the story of a filmmaker who understood that the audience's experience mattered more than the film itself. His theater gimmicks, vibrating seats, skeleton rigs flying over the audience, insurance policies against death by fright, were experience design before the term existed. Essential context for Chapter Nine and Chapter Ten.

Notes

On Brian Clark:

Brian Clark (1969–2015) was a transmedia pioneer, experience designer, and one of Campfire's closest intellectual collaborators. His thinking about experience design, rooted in phenomenology and the idea that designers create "triggers for experiences" rather than experiences themselves, profoundly shaped how we approach our work. At the time of his death, he was writing *Foundations of Experience Design*, an attempt to formalize experience design practice for working practitioners. The work remains unpublished, but its influence runs through these pages in ways we're still discovering. Portions were shared publicly on his blog during his lifetime.

On Elena Parker:

Elena Parker (1985–2015) was Campfire's first Creative Technologist and one of the earliest practitioners to think rigorously about what it means to put technology in the service of story rather than the other way around. As the architect of the narrative systems that powered experiences like Deja View for Nissan/Infiniti in 2013, she demonstrated that the most sophisticated technology is the kind audiences never notice: they only feel what it makes possible. Her thinking feels more relevant with every passing year. We're still catching up to it.

On Dave Szulborski:

Dave Szulborski (1957–2009), to whom this book is partly dedicated and who was one of the creative minds behind Audi's *Art of the Heist*, was both a friend and a formative influence on Campfire's early thinking about participatory storytelling. His work and his generosity as a collaborator are missed.

INDEX

A

A&E
— see Dark Score Stories

agency (participant), 10, 16, 23–24, 86, 149, 152, 302–303, 322
— in Art of the Heist, 149
— in The Westworld Experience, 292–296
— and illusion of choice, 302–303

alternate reality games (ARGs)
— early internet examples, 17–22, 45, 53, 143–144

Amateur Press Associations, 47
— fan community origins, 47–48

Amazon Prime Video
— see Hunters Grindhouse Experience, Resistance Radio

AMC
— see Street of Immortality; Walking Dead Fan Celebration

Animayhem Factory (Hulu, SDCC 2024), 164–171
— non-linear exploration, 165, 170
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Apple TV+
— see Ted Lasso "Believe" Fan Experience

Art of the Heist (Audi, 2005), 23, 146–150
— as Breadcrumb Method example, 146–149
— collaborative investigation, 149
— Dave Szulborski and, 361
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

artifacts and props
— as narrative tools, 89, 95, 233–244
— Avoiding the Penny, 231–232
— carbolic soap (The Knick), 239, 243
— Easter eggs, 135, 165, 242, 244
— forging memories through, 245–248
— influencer packages, 25–28, 238–244, 268
— Purge City products, 89–91
— scent boxes (Game of Thrones), 247–249

attention Faraday cage
— immersive venue design principle, 85

Audi
— see Art of the Heist

audience segmentation
— Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers framework, 128–132, 347
— designing layered experiences, 140
— participation levels and engagement, 128–131
— see also Skimmers; Dippers; Divers

audio forgeries
— Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings, 178, 258–259
— Resistance Radio alternate-history broadcasts, 260–271
— The Rutles fabricated Beatles discography, 178–179

authenticity, 75, 79, 236–237
— as designed effect, 239, 243–244
— in artifacts and props, 233–244
— in themed environments, 79, 80–84, 87–95, 98–106, 113–117, 121–127, 156–163, 165–171, 222–227, 293–299, 319–322

Avoiding the Penny, 231–232, 330
— defined, 232
— Somewhere in Time as origin, 231

B

Bag of Bones
— see Dark Score Stories

Backstage at the Goosebury (Only Murders in the Building / Hulu, 2023), 156–163
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Barnum, P.T., 201–203, 228, 281, 317, 360
— and midway design, 202–203
— and spectacle, 201–202

Baumgartner, Felix
— see Red Bull Stratos

Beach, Donn (Ernest Gantt), 74–78, 107, 359
— Don the Beachcomber, 74–77
— as immersive environment pioneer, 75–78
— tiki culture and world-building, 76–78

Beta-7 (Sega, 2003), 17–22
— handcrafted artifacts, 18–19, 22
— viral storytelling, 19–21
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Bestiary Chronicles, 334–335
— AI-generated artwork, 334–335

Big Top Thinking, 201–204, 210, 228
— applied beyond circus, 210, 212
— Cirque du Soleil, 203–204
— vs. Midway Thinking, 201–203, 350

binaural audio, 251, 337–338

Blackstone, Harry Jr., 278, 280

BloodCopy.com
— see True Blood: Revelations

Blair Witch Project, 10, 15–17, 45–56, 198, 334
— fan participation, 10, 16, 46–48
— marketing campaign, 10, 15–17, 50–56
— BlairWitch.com website and message boards, 45–46, 50–54
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Breadcrumb Method, 146–151, 164, 172, 348
— Art of the Heist as example, 146–150
— vs. Onion Method, 151, 348
— pacing and reveal, 146, 348

Broken Spectre (Games by Stitch, 2023), 325–329
— hand-tracking, 326, 329
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Brown, Derren, 12, 280, 285, 291, 352

Burger, Eugene, 12, 236, 280

Byzantium Tests (Cinemax, 2012), 282–289
— cold reading in, 282, 286
— Forer Effect, 282, 287
— online magic performance, 283
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

C

Campfire Entertainment — project case studies
— Animayhem Factory (Hulu, SDCC 2024), 165–171
— Art of the Heist (Audi, 2005), 147–150
— Backstage at the Goosebury (Only Murders in the Building / Hulu, 2023), 156–163
— Beta-7 (Sega, 2003), 18–22
— Blair Witch Project (1999), 51–56
— Broken Spectre (Games by Stitch, 2023), 325–329
— Byzantium Tests (Hunted / Cinemax, 2012), 283–289
— Captain Morgan Cannon Blast (2015), 205–209
— Dark Score Stories (Bag of Bones / A&E, 2011), 133–139
— Deja View (Nissan/Infiniti, 2013), 304–309
— Expedition Granted (National Geographic, 2014), 66–68
— Frenzied Waters (Discovery Channel, 2009), 32–35
— Hunters Grindhouse Experience (Amazon Prime Video, 2020), 80–84
— Knick Surgeon's Box (Cinemax, 2014), 238–244
— Maester's Path, The (HBO / Game of Thrones, 2011), 247–257
— Morning Time America (The Purge / USA Network, 2019), 187–189
— My Home 2.0 (Verizon FiOS, 2008), 182–185
— Outcast: Possession Begins (Cinemax, 2016), 336–338
— Purge City (The Purge / USA Network, 2018), 87–95
— Resistance Radio (The Man in the High Castle / Amazon, 2017), 260–271
— Squid Game: The Challenge Elimination Screening (Netflix, 2025), 319–322
— Street of Immortality (Interview with the Vampire / AMC, 2023), 98–106
— Ted Lasso "Believe" Fan Experience (Apple TV+, 2021), 113–117
— Those About to Die (Peacock, 2024), 222–227
— True Blood: Revelations (HBO, 2008), 25–30
— Video Palace (Shudder, 2019), 191–195
— Walking Dead Fan Celebration, The (AMC, 2022), 121–127
— Westworld Experience (HBO, 2017), 293–299
— What We Do in the Shadows (FX Networks, 2019), 214–217
— WOW! Reply (Chasing UFOs / National Geographic Channel, 2012), 59–63

Captain Morgan Cannon Blast (2015), 205–209
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Castle, William, 317–319, 323, 360
— Mr. Sardonicus, 318, 323
— Punishment Poll, 318
— The Tingler, 317

Cinemax
— see Byzantium Tests; Knick Surgeon's Box, The; Outcast: Possession Begins

Cirque du Soleil, 12, 203–204

Clark, Brian, 2, 4, 313, 361
— epigraph, 4
— Foundations of Experience Design, 361
— "triggers for experiences," 361

cold reading, 290–292, 296, 352
— in Byzantium Tests, 282, 286
— in Westworld Experience, 292, 296

Colicchio, Tom, 254, 256

collective intelligence
— puzzle solving communities, 153–155

Coney Island, 218–221, 228
— Dr. Couney's incubators, 219
— as permanent midway, 218–219
— Walt Disney's critique of, 220

Couney, Dr. Martin, 219

Curse of the Blair Witch (Syfy documentary), 53–54

D

Danger Mouse, 259, 262, 271

Dark Score Stories (A&E, 2011), 133–139
— Easter eggs, 135
— Joachim Ladefoged photography, 134
— layered engagement, 133–139
— Stephen King universe, 133–139
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Deja View (Nissan/Infiniti, 2013), 303–309
— Classic Force and, 303
— natural language processing, 308
— phone interaction, 303–305
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Dippers, 128–131, 347
— defined, 129
— designing for, 130–31
— social sharing behavior, 130–131

Discovery Channel
— see Frenzied Waters

discovery design
— breadcrumb trails and clue structures, 146–151
— Easter eggs and hidden details, 135, 165, 242, 244
— dopamine feedback loop in discovery, 144–145

Disney, Walt, 73, 78, 96, 107, 220, 360
— critique of Coney Island, 220
— Disneyland and immersion, 73, 78
— Enchanted Tiki Room, 78

Divers, 128–129, 131–132, 256
— cosplay and, 132
— defined, 129, 131
— designing for, 132
— as evangelists, 347

dopamine, 144–145, 348
— anticipation and reward cycle, 144–145
— and discovery design, 144, 348

E

Easter eggs, 135, 165, 242, 244

Edwards, Milky, fabricated 1960s soul recordings, 178, 258–259

emotional connection, 78, 85–86, 303, 323, 340, 352

engagement spectrum
— Skimmers, Dippers, Divers framework, 128–132

environmental storytelling
— narrative embedded in spaces and objects, 73–79
— themed environments and world-building, 73–79
— artifacts as narrative clues, 233–244

Expedition Granted (National Geographic, 2014), 65–69
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

F

F for Fake (Orson Welles, 1973), 236

fan collaboration
— puzzle solving, 53, 138–139, 143–145, 149, 152–155, 357

fan culture, 11, 43–48, 65, 111–122
— activism and, 113–114
— Amateur Press Associations, 47
— conventions and, 48
— history of, 47–48, 118–120
— Jericho and, 111–112
— sharing motivations, 49, 57–60, 64
— Star Trek and, 111–112
fan psychology
— motivations for sharing, 49, 57–58, 64–65
— community participation, 45–50
— collaboration and puzzle-solving, 151–155
— fandom as narrative extension, 118–120
— see also fan culture; participation

Forer Effect, 281–282, 287

format subversion, 175–181, 186, 190, 196, 349
— Campfire's approach, 181, 186, 190
— defined, 175, 177
— Ghostwatch, 179
— history of, 178–180
— and physical retail, 190
— Red Bull Stratos, 180–181
— Rutles, The, 178–179, 196
— War of the Worlds, 178

freedom on rails
— guided audience agency, 86, 301

Frenzied Waters (Discovery Channel, 2009), 32–35
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

FX Networks

— see What We Do in the Shadows

G

Games by Stitch
— see Broken Spectre

Geller, Uri, 285, 291

Gerhard (illustrator), 239, 242

Ghostwatch (BBC, 1992), 179

H

HBO
— see Westworld Experience; True Blood: Revelations; Maester's Path

Heist, Art of the
— see Art of the Heist

Hulu
— see Animayhem Factory; Backstage at the Goosebury

Hunters Grindhouse Experience (Amazon Prime Video, 2020), 80–84
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

I

Idle, Eric, 178
— see also Rutles

illusion of reality
— immersive storytelling technique, 9–11

immersion
— and the Avoiding the Penny principle, 231–232, 330
— fragility of, 231–232, 351
— in physical environments, 73–84, 98–106
— and sensory design, 258–259
— technology and, 313–340

immersive experiences
— definition and philosophy, 9–12
— physical vs digital environments, 11–12
— multisensory engagement, 76–79
— audience participation, 16–17

immersive storytelling
— participatory narrative, 16–17
— transmedia storytelling, 17–22
— fan culture and, 45–48

Infiniti
— see Deja View

Innes, Neil, 178

invisible technology, 310, 325, 330–332, 340, 353
— Arthur C. Clarke and, 310, 331
— designing, 331–332, 353
— Squid Game lanyards, 319–322

Irving, Clifford, 235

J

Jay, Ricky, 12, 280

Jenkins, Henry, 12, 46

K

King, Stephen, 133–138

Kirkman, Robert, 336

Knick Surgeon's Box (Cinemax, 2014), 238–244
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

L

Ladefoged, Joachim, 110, 134

layered participation
— designing for multiple engagement levels, 128–132
— Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers framework, 128–131
— social sharing and deep fandom, 130–132

line management, 96–97

M

Maester's Path (HBO / Game of Thrones, 2011), 247–257
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Martin, George R. R., 40, 248, 254

Masquerade (Kit Williams), 143–144

Midway Thinking, 201–203, 210–221, 317, 350
— Coney Island, 218–221
— vs. Big Top Thinking, 201–203, 350

Milky Edwards and the Chamberlings, 178, 258–259

misdirection, 277, 280–282, 291–292, 296, 352
— Classic Force, 301–302
— in experience design, 281
— in Westworld Experience, 292, 296

Miser, Brian, 198–200, 206–207

Moment, The, 279, 310, 352
— defined, 279, 352
— designing for, 352

moments (memorable experiences)
— designing for emotional impact, 78, 85–86, 248
— spectacle and shared memory, 201–204
— surprise and discovery in design, 143–145
— lasting impressions and word of mouth, 340–343
— see also emotional connection; spectacle

Morning Time America (USA Network, 2019), 187–189, 196

— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies
multisensory design, 12, 76, 245–258, 340

My Home 2.0 (Verizon FiOS, 2008), 182–185
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

N

narrative artifacts
— storytelling through objects, 233–244

National Geographic
— see Expedition Granted

Netflix
— see Squid Game: The Challenge Elimination Screening

Nissan
— see Deja View

nostalgia, 245, 272

O

Onion Method, 151, 348
— vs. Breadcrumb Method, 151, 348
— Sleep No More as example, 151–152

Outcast: Possession Begins (Cinemax, 2016), 336–338
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

P

Parkinson, Michael, 179

participation, 10, 16, 42, 46–47, 86, 120, 149, 346, 354
— and co-creation, 16, 64, 70, 86
— fan activism, 113–114
— levers for, 348
— spectrum of engagement, 10, 128–132

Peacock
— see Those About to Die

Pepper's Ghost, 315–316

Prometheus TED Talk (2012), 180–181, 186, 196

Proust, Marcel, 245, 272

Purge City (USA Network, SDCC 2018), 86–95, 190, 273
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Purge Shopping Channel (USA Network, 2018) 94, 187

puzzles, 138–139, 143–155
— collaborative solving, 153–155
— DARPA Red Balloon Challenge, 152 - 155
— difficulty calibration, 138–139, 140
— dopamine and, 144–145
— FindSatoshi.com, 154
— in Dark Score Stories, 138–139

R

Red Bull Stratos (2012), 180–181

Resistance Radio (Amazon/Man in the High Castle, 2017), 40, 179, 196, 259–271
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

reveals (narrative)
— timing and audience payoff, 143–145, 210, 350
— avoiding the "decoder pin" disappointment, 176–177, 349
— magic and misdirection techniques, 277–292
— pacing discoveries and clues, 146–151

Rock, Ben, 194

Rushkoff, Douglas, 175, 339

Rutles, The (1978), 178–179, 196

S

Sánchez, Ed, 16–17

San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), 9, 86–95, 97–106, 164–171, 190, 220–228, 273, 293–299

scent and smell, 34, 78, 245–249, 272, 350–351
— in Maester's Path scent boxes, 247–249
— as memory trigger, 245, 272
— in themed environments, 243, 350

Sega
— see Beta-7

sensation seeking, 201

sensory design
— multisensory immersion in environments, 245–257
— scent and smell in storytelling, 245–249
— tactile artifacts and props, 233–244
— binaural audio and spatial sound, 251, 337–338

Shark Week
— see Frenzied Waters

Shudder
— see Video Palace

Skimmers, 128–132, 347
— defined, 128, 130
— designing for, 130
Sleep No More (Punchdrunk), 12, 151–152, 296, 308

Somewhere in Time (1980), 231

— Avoiding the Penny origin, 231
spectacle, 180, 201–204, 209, 228, 350
— Big Top vs. Midway, 201–204
— Captain Morgan Cannon Blast, 199–200, 205–209
— Red Bull Stratos, 180–181

Spotnitz, Frank, 285

Spreadable Media (Jenkins, Ford, Green), 12, 46, 49
— sharing motivations, 49, 57–60

Squid Game: The Challenge Elimination Screening (Netflix, 2025), 319–322
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

storygiving
— participatory narrative approach, 77

storyworld, 10, 24, 64, 75, 85, 107, 186, 196, 231, 273
— branded content as, 186, 196
— physical environments as, 75, 85

Street of Immortality (AMC, SDCC 2023), 97–106
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Szulborski, Dave, 2, 358, 361

T

Ted Lasso "Believe" Fan Experience (Apple TV+, 2021), 113–117
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Think Like a Forger, 196, 229–274, 351
— Avoiding the Penny, 231–232
— forging memories, 245–250
— forging nostalgia, 272–274
— lessons from master forgers, 233–237
— Milky Edwards, 258–259
— sensory experience and, 245–258
— Van Meegeren, Han, 233–235, 237

Thirsty Thursdays, 37, 344

Those About to Die (Peacock, 2024), 222–227
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

Tiki culture and world-building
— see Beach, Donn

transmedia storytelling, 12, 17, 25–28, 42, 133, 149, 271, 340
— Henry Jenkins and, 12, 46

True Blood: Revelations (HBO, 2008), 25–30
— influencer packages, 25
— Tru Blood beverage, 27–28
— street teams, 29
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

U

USA Network
— see Morning Time America; Purge City; Purge Shopping Channel

V

Van Meegeren, Han, 230, 233–235, 237

Verizon FiOS
— see My Home 2.0

Video Palace (Shudder, 2019), 191–196, 356
— as format subversion of true-crime podcast, 191, 196
— "white tapes" mythology, 193
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

viral storytelling
— early internet narrative design, 18–22

W

Walking Dead Fan Celebration (AMC, 2022), 121–127
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

War of the Worlds (Orson Welles, 1938), 178
— as format subversion origin, 178

Welles, Orson, 178, 196, 236–237
— F for Fake, 236
— War of the Worlds, 178

Westworld Experience (HBO, SDCC/NYCC 2017), 9, 40–42, 97, 292–299
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

What We Do in the Shadows (FX Networks, 2019), 214–217
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

white space (narrative)
— audience interpretation and participation, 64

Williams, Kit, 143

world-building, 73–107, 186, 196, 241–244
— branded content as, 186, 196
— craftsmanship and fabrication, 79, 81
— Disney and, 73, 78
— Don the Beachcomber and, 74–78
— tiki bars and, 74–78

WOW! Reply (National Geographic Channel, 2012), 58–63
— see also Campfire Entertainment — project case studies

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