



MARGARET CHANDRA KERRISON

ON STORYTELLING, NARRATIVE PLACEMAKING, AND PUSHING BOUNDARIES

In this issue, editor Jeanne Normand Goswami interviews Margaret Chandra Kerrison, former Walt Disney Imagineer and author of *Immersive Storytelling for Real and Imagined Worlds: A Writer's Guide* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2022), to learn more about the importance of story to placemaking, the potential of immersive spaces to build connection, and what she's working on next.¹



Born in Indonesia and raised in Singapore, **Margaret Chandra Kerrison's** career spans 15 years of creating narratives and writing for television, film, digital media, games, brand storytelling, location-based entertainment, narrative placemaking, and immersive experiences. She is an award-winning Story Lead and Writer for multiple projects around the world. She was a Disney Imagineer from 2014 to 2021. Her first book *Immersive Storytelling for Real and Imagined Worlds: A Writer's Guide* was released in August 2022. Margaret is the 2023 Paul Helmle Fellow for the Department of Architecture at California Polytechnic State University, Pomona. She is currently working on her second book.

Q Jeanne It's great to meet you, Margaret. Could you begin by telling our readers a bit about your career path?

A Margaret I've always been a writer, ever since I could hold a pencil. It has always been a very big part of me, but I never really considered it as a career. I moved to the United States when I was 18, and when I graduated from college, I happened to take a screenwriting course and absolutely fell in love with this whole format of writing and telling stories.

When my husband and I moved to L.A. 18 years ago, he went to USC for public policy, and I got my master's in screenwriting. But coming out of that program, it felt very limiting to just tell stories on the screen because that's not how I told stories in my mind. One of my thesis professors mentioned that all kinds of industries need writers – everything from film to TV to video games;

even rollercoasters need writers. That night I looked it up, and I found this whole world of themed entertainment. I immediately cold emailed a bunch of companies to say, I'm graduating from film school. I don't have any experience in this, but I'd love to learn.

And one of the companies that replied was BRC Imagination Arts. The founder of the company, Bob Rogers, was a writer and a storyteller himself; he had worked at Disney and directed his own films. So, he appreciated the art of storytelling. And when I went into that industry, it was mostly to do museum and brand design work. I worked with BRC on the Heineken Experience and the NASA Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. BRC opened my eyes to this other world of storytelling and world-building and immersion that you cannot get through just the screen – being able to feel a story with all your senses and to have a role to play in the experience, to have agency to influence your environment.

I love the idea of having agency in a story or experience. Can you say a bit more about the role it plays in your work?

A The idea that you could influence the story you're in was very intriguing and exciting for me. I grew up as a gamer. I played a lot of Nintendo, and that was something that felt very empowering as a child: to be able to have this very direct effect on your environment and to play an important role in this bigger story. Museums, theme parks, and other experiences that recognize this desire, that can tap into it, and grant that wish fulfillment, are the ones that are going to capture their visitors' hearts, minds, and imaginations.

The other thing that drives me as a storyteller is embracing the fact that every single person who walks into an experience is from a different background and comes from a different state of mind. How do you

build an experience that is inviting and welcoming to all, that feels like a place where people can not only belong, but have the invitation to play, and to engage, and to connect with each other in a very safe and inviting and compelling way? Because, ultimately, every single experience that I work on, I want everyone to walk in, experience something meaningful together, and walk out believing that they're stepping into a better world. I want their mindsets and perspectives to have changed for the better, so that they feel hopeful and optimistic and question why things are the way they are. Why are certain stories being told, and who is telling them? We need to question all that.

How do you define “immersive experience” for yourself and for the teams you work with?

A An immersive experience is many things, but the most successful ones all involve certain elements:

1. They're multisensory: you can use all your senses, not just your eyes or ears.
2. They're dynamic and adaptive: nothing is static in terms of content or presentation.
3. They're social: we have the chance to connect with one another and with ourselves to really understand the greater meaning of whatever topic is being presented.
4. They suspend my disbelief: I believe that I'm in this place, so that everything else falls away, and I can fully immerse myself in this new world.
5. They give me agency: the place itself acknowledges that I'm part of the story, and that, even if it's a minor role that I play, it's a role, nonetheless.



Are there any immersive experiences that you've visited recently which you've found particularly successful?

A teamLab Planets in Tokyo just took my breath away. Not only was the art itself extremely beautiful and engaging, but there was a lot of surprise and delight, and discovery and exploration, and using your entire body to experience a place. When you line up, they do a little preshow of what to expect; some of the rules. And immediately, it tells you that you can bring your cell phone if you want to take pictures, but you'll have to take off your socks and shoes. And I remember, I was with my family, and they were like, No, no, no. I'm backing out. Nope, not taking off my socks and shoes. And I'm like, Just accept it, and let it go. Just go on this journey, because how often do we get to do that? So, we went into this locker room, and we put our socks and shoes away. And one of the first things we did was climb a waterfall.

Immediately, you're taken into a different place. One moment you're in bustling Tokyo, and then you go into this experience, and suddenly, the mood and the tone and the emotion of the place is just so beautiful and relaxing. Yet you're also being very social and connected. And it is very dynamic and adaptive: you have art that interacts with you that you can push and pull and touch and feel and grab, and water is dripping from your fingers. I didn't think about anything else, except being in that experience, in that moment, with the people that I love. It was a magical way for us to discover a new place together. The fact that everyone in our group from my nine-year-old son to my 48-year-old old brother loved it so much speaks to how wonderful that experience was.

Another really shining example for me is the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC.

I don't even see it as a museum; I see it as an experience. The architecture of the building is astounding. And then you start your experience in this dim basement, in the bowels of a slave ship – immediately, bang, emotionally, you know that this is not going to be an easy experience. And yet, the museum takes you on that journey and makes you feel like you're really getting a sense of walking in someone else's shoes, in a different place and time. You are immersed in that history in a way that feels very important and very emotionally compelling. And then you literally, physically, move up through the floors of the museum to the light, to the very top, where all this natural light is coming in, and experience that journey from slavery to celebration, and you feel it in your body as you move.

And the thing about that experience, too, is that it made me feel connected. I was having conversations with other visitors in a way that I've never experienced before in a museum. People I didn't know were chatting with me and sharing their thoughts. I wasn't asking questions; we were just looking at the same thing and would strike up a conversation about really challenging things. And that's extremely moving because it's not something that we can easily do in our daily lives. And that's why, for me, one of the most important elements of any immersive experience is that it has to be social. It needs to connect you to a larger whole.

What strikes me in these examples is the way teamLab and NMAAHC have built spaces that feel distinct from the world that surrounds them. They've created these sanctuaries that give people the freedom to think, react, and interact differently, and this allows the experience to resonate in deep and lasting ways. How in your work as a storyteller do you help to shape these types of spaces?

A What's most important as a team is to really think about why you're building this place. All of you are coming from different backgrounds, and you're also carrying your own unconscious biases and assumptions and opinions on what this topic is about. So, to come together as a team and be aligned with *why* this is important, why you're telling this story, why you're building this place, and who it's for is absolutely essential *before* you start talking about how it's going to look and what people are going to do there.

As a team, you must align your creative intent. And, frequently, by asking these questions, you realize you don't agree. The fact that there are contradictory opinions on your small team is very telling about how the topic will be received by the public. So, you really need to allow time for exploration, research, and dialogue – not only within your teams, but also with those outside. You need to ask: Who do we need to bring in to expand this conversation? Who will challenge us to see past our own biases and thinking? How can we expand upon this topic to be as thorough and authentic as possible?

Once you've had those conversations, you can begin to collectively identify the value system that will guide your group throughout the design process. And because you have that shared value system, then you can move forward in a way that's not, we want to do it because it looks cool. Or, we want to do it because kids will like it. Instead, you're asking: Does it fit into our guiding principles and values? Because if it doesn't, it doesn't belong there.

Have you ever been part of a team where you haven't been able to find that common ground?

A All the time. The process that I outline in my book is one in which everything falls in order. First, we do this, then this, then this. But it almost never happens

that way. I've been pulled into projects where they've already started designing, and then they bring me in and say, We've got story problems; help us fix them. Those are the most challenging projects to be in because I wasn't part of that journey from the beginning. And, as a team, you need to have that shared context and history to understand why decisions were made. I find that projects are most successful when a writer or a storyteller is in it from day one, so they're able to help guide conversations and be the wrangler of what's important and what's not.

How would you approach professionals who are used to storytelling in one setting or medium to encourage them to think in broader terms about how we tell stories for humans, wherever they may be, in ways that make them feel like a particular experience is speaking directly to them?

A People today don't differentiate, or compartmentalize, how or where they experience story. I just look at my son and the way he easily toggles between his physical and digital worlds, without thinking this is a story that I'm experiencing in real life, versus at a theme park, versus on my Nintendo Switch or phone or iPad. He's just there, enjoying the experience and immersed in the story, without regard for the vessel or container of it.

We are spoiled for choice. We can experience stories in every medium, all around us. Whether we want to sit on our couch and binge a Netflix series or get up and go into a museum or to a concert, we have so many choices and a lot more leisure time. So, ultimately, no matter what industry you're in – theme park, museum, video, gaming, film, TV – you need to have a growth mindset. You need to ask, What other ways can we be innovative?

We're always looking for something unique, compelling, and emotionally resonant. The more that an industry



resists change or feels like its stories or experiences shouldn't change, then it and its audiences lose out, because people are not static. Life is not static. We're always changing. We're always moving. We're always growing. So, we need our institutions to believe in that, too, and to be able to adapt and grow with the community and with the culture.

When I join projects, my favorite question to ask is, Why should I care? Why is this important? Why am I doing this rather than something else? The more museums and cultural institutions can authentically answer that question, the more they'll be moving in the right direction.

What drives you in your creative practice? How do you keep pushing the boundaries of storytelling?

A I've learned something from each of my projects. And for each one of them, there's something different that I'm proud of. It's interesting because I came from museum design and brand visitor design, not having any experience in it, and I went to theme park design at Imagineering with zero theme park experience. And so, for me, I'm always chasing my curiosity. I'm always trying to fulfill this need to learn and grow and ask questions: Why can't we do it that way? What if we did it this way? Why not? That outsider's mindset has allowed me to see other ways of approaching things.

I always believe that my best project is yet to come. This optimistic mindset is a constant in my work. As is my relentless pursuit of trying to find new ways to tell stories, of improving upon projects that I've worked on before. I never want to do the same thing twice; it kills me as a creative. I always want to push the boundaries and see what I can get away with. It's kind of my MO. And I'm inspired by companies and people that do that, too.

What's next on the horizon for you?

A I'm working on a second book that I describe as a designer's manifesto to build a more people-centric, narrative-driven world. It's an exploration of how some built environments and experiences have completely changed the way we think about things by asking those what-if and why-not questions. Cirque du Soleil, for example. They asked, Can you build a circus without animals? And look at what they've done. Absolutely mind-blowing, amazing work.

What's a theme park without rides? That's what Meow Wolf has done. What's an art museum where you can touch everything? That's what teamLab has done and Meow Wolf, too. So, when you ask these questions, and when you break that mold of what you think you are, or who you think you should be, that's when you find this gold that's been sitting there all along. Because it's never too late for anyone to reinvent and to reimagine themselves.

As people, we want to be pushed and challenged in new and creative ways. So, how can you, the creator and storyteller, make that space for us? How can you give us those opportunities to be creative, to be compassionate, and to socialize and have that sense of community and connection with people? How can you blow up the idea of what something should or shouldn't be by not being afraid to ask what if and why not? ■

¹ This interview was conducted over video chat. The transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and length.