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CREATING THE IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING DESIGNER

FEST, the Federation for European Storytelling, is partner in INSIDE-ACT, an Erasmus+ project coordinated by the University of Florence (UNIFI). It brings together a consortium of 14 organisations across 6 European countries. The partnership unites higher education institutions, cultural organisations, digital enterprises, technology clusters and vocational education and training (VET) centres, all working toward a shared goal: developing an innovative training framework for the *Immersive Storytelling Designer* (ISD), a professional figure capable of critically and strategically using advanced immersive technologies to communicate European values and address contemporary social challenges.

Who is the Immersive Storytelling Designer?

Every time a medium is born, the technology comes first and the figure able to use it as a language arrives later, with a certain delay. Cinema existed as a device for years before the director existed in the sense we mean today. For a while it did nothing more than film theatre from a fixed seat, convinced that pointing the camera at something interesting was enough. Then someone understood that the camera was not there to record the world but to build one, and from that moment cinema stopped being an invention and became a language.

Immersive media are roughly at that point today. The technology exists, it works, it is within reach of many. What is missing, or what is emerging now, is the professional figure able to treat immersion as a language with its own rules, rather than as an effect to add to content conceived for other formats. INSIDE-ACT calls this figure the Immersive Storytelling Designer, and the aim of the project is to train it deliberately, instead of letting it emerge by chance, as happened with almost every craft of the earlier media.

The most common temptation is to define this figure by addition. Part director, part game designer, part developer, part experience designer. It is a reassuring way to describe it, and for that reason it is also the most misleading. It is worth starting from the opposite end, from what the Immersive Storytelling Designer is not.

It is not a film director. The director governs the viewer's gaze, decides what is seen and what stays off screen, and the frame is the instrument of that control. In immersive media the off screen does not exist in the same way: whoever wears the headset can turn and look elsewhere, and that gesture is not an error to correct but the basic condition of the medium. Those who come from cinema bring a precious competence in storytelling, but they have to unlearn the idea that the gaze belongs to them.

It is not a game designer, even though it shares with game design the problem of interaction and agency. The videogame is built around challenge, around the goal, around the mechanic that produces victory or defeat. Many immersive experiences have nothing to win and ask for no skill:

they ask for presence, attention, sometimes only the willingness to stay in a place. The grammar of the game is one tool in the ISD's kit, not its identity.

It is not a developer or a virtual reality technician. Knowing how to build a scene in a rendering engine is a competence, not a poetics. Confusing mastery of the tool with the ability to tell a story is the same mistake as thinking that knowing how to use a camera makes you a director. The tool has to be known thoroughly, precisely so that it can be bent to an intention.

And it is not a user experience designer in the classic sense of the term. UX aims to make a path fluid, predictable, free of friction. Narrative often lives on the opposite: on friction, on waiting, on controlled disorientation. An ISD sometimes has to make things deliberately less comfortable, because that is where the story happens.

Once these boundaries are removed, what remains is the space where the figure actually lives. The Immersive Storytelling Designer arrives after every other language, and this is its greatest advantage. It inherits a century of film editing, centuries of theatrical dramaturgy, decades of videogame interaction, architecture's experience in guiding bodies through space, the tradition of oral storytelling that is the oldest of them all. It does not start from zero. It starts with a toolkit richer than the one any author of the earlier media ever had at their disposal.

The delicate point is understanding what to do with this inheritance. Here the historical precedent helps more than a thousand definitions. When cinema was young, Lumière and Méliès marked out two paths. Lumière filmed the world as it was, Méliès turned it into illusion. Both, however, still worked inside categories inherited from theatre and photography. It took years before anyone understood that cinema had a language of its own, made of editing, of malleable time, of points of view impossible in reality. Those who limited themselves to filming theatre did good craftsmanship, but they were not yet making cinema.

The Immersive Storytelling Designer stands exactly at that crossing. It can use everything it knows about cinema, theatre and games, but if it stops there it produces immersive experiences that are simply old formats with a headset around them. The leap happens when it accepts that immersion has rules of its own, some already intuitable and many still to be written. The viewer does not watch from outside, but stands inside. It does not follow a frame, it inhabits a space. It does not receive a time decided by the author, it crosses a time lived in the first person. Presence takes the place of the gaze, and presence is a material that no earlier language ever had to reckon with all the way through.

Defined by difference, the figure then becomes clear in the positive as well. The Immersive Storytelling Designer is the author of an experience, not of content to be consumed. It thinks in terms of space, presence and lived time, rather than frame, page or level. It holds together four things that until yesterday belonged to separate crafts: the artistic sensibility of someone who builds a story, the technical competence of someone who knows the medium from the inside, the attention to the audience of someone who knows that here the viewer is an active subject and not a recipient, and the awareness of the social and cultural impact of experiences that act on people's bodies and memory with an intensity that screens do not reach.

It is a figure that inherits a great deal and that must have the courage not to settle for the inheritance. It knows it is working on a language whose rules are still partly to be invented, and it accepts this uncertainty as the most interesting part of the craft and not as a limitation. To train it, within a project like INSIDE-ACT, means precisely this: not to teach a piece of software, and not even a closed set of techniques, but to cultivate a way of thinking. To pass on the awareness that one is writing a grammar while teaching it, and that whoever learns it today will be among the people who help to write it.

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