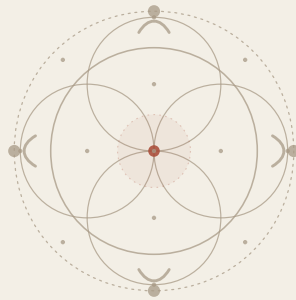


VNE / PUBLIC ESSAY

The Inbetween Story

Visceral Narrative Environments

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*How do human beings enter worlds that are not their own - and how does
meaning emerge before explanation?*

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ABSTRACT

In the Fall of 1999, I watched a degraded VHS copy of a Japanese animated film in a classroom at the California Institute of the Arts. I knew almost nothing about Japan, yet somehow the world unfolding on screen felt strangely familiar. The experience left me with a question that would follow me for the next twenty-five years: How do human beings understand worlds that are not their own? This essay traces that question across animation, intercultural life, immersive media, and artificial intelligence. Drawing upon experiences living between India, the United States, and Japan, together with the development of Visceral Narrative Environments (VNE), I explore how meaning emerges not only through information exchange but through participation in shared worlds. I propose that stories may be understood not merely as narratives that communicate meaning, but as environments that enable its emergence. As immersive media and intelligent systems increasingly participate in human experience, the challenge before us may be shifting from storytelling toward relational worldmaking: the creation of conditions through which strangers can inhabit uncertainty together and discover new realities between them.

SECTION 1

The Film Without Translation

The lights dimmed.

It was the Fall of 1999, my first semester in the Character Animation program at the California Institute of the Arts.

Around me, a classroom of freshman animation students settled into their seats.

One of our instructors wheeled a television and VHS player into the room.

The tape clicked into place.

Static flickered across the screen.

That was all the context I remember receiving.

The image that appeared was far from pristine.

It was a pirated VHS copy of a Japanese animated film.

The colors bled into one another.

The image wavered.

The audio crackled.

There were no subtitles.

Much of the information was missing.

Yet somehow the meaning remained.

At the time, I knew almost nothing about Japan.

Growing up in India, I had virtually no exposure to anime or manga. Japan occupied no meaningful place in my imagination. If someone had asked me to describe Japanese culture, I would have struggled to answer.

My understanding of animation had been shaped largely by Disney.

The Jungle Book.

Aladdin.

Beauty and the Beast.

Pocahontas.

The Lion King.

These films had inspired my decision to pursue animation in the first place.

The film unfolding before me belonged to none of those worlds.

The pacing felt different.

The silences felt different.

Even the relationship between the characters and their environment felt different.

Nothing seemed eager to entertain me.

Nothing seemed eager to explain itself.

The world simply existed.

The characters simply existed.

For a while, I watched from a distance.

Then something strange happened.

Without realizing it, I stopped observing the characters and began inhabiting their world.

I remember a shy young boy struggling to express himself around two sisters.

I remember an older sister carrying responsibilities larger than her age.

I remember a younger sister moving through the world with complete conviction.

I remember a father transforming uncertainty into adventure while quietly carrying concern for his hospitalized wife.

Most of all, I remember the feeling that the world itself was alive.

The trees.

The wind.

The silence.

The abandoned house.

The spaces between events.

The film did not persuade me that magic existed.

It simply behaved as though magic and everyday life already belonged to the same reality.

When the great forest spirit finally appeared, the moment did not feel surprising.

It felt inevitable.

As though the world had quietly prepared me to accept its existence long before it arrived.

Years later I would learn that the film was *My Neighbor Totoro*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli.

At the time, however, those names meant nothing to me.

The experience preceded the knowledge.

The emotional connection preceded the cultural understanding.

The world arrived before any explanation of how it had been constructed.

When the film ended, I remained seated.

A question had appeared.

How had I understood a world I knew nothing about?

How had meaning crossed such a vast cultural distance?

I would spend the next quarter century pursuing that question.

SECTION 2

Stories and Worlds

Looking back, I realize what affected me most was not the story.

It was the world.

Stories invite us to follow events.

Worlds invite us to inhabit relationships.

Years later, this question would become the foundation of what I now call Visceral Narrative Environments, or VNE: an exploration of how immersive worlds can support the emergence of meaning through participation rather than transmission.

For much of the twentieth century, narrative theory focused on stories.

Characters.

Plots.

Conflicts.

Resolutions.

The dominant question was often:

What happens next?

Yet the experience that remained with me after Totoro was not a sequence of events.

It was the feeling of having briefly inhabited another reality.

Stories move.

Worlds endure.

Stories unfold through time.

Worlds provide the conditions through which meaning emerges.

A child entering a forest.

A father waiting for a bus.

A gust of wind through rice fields.

A pause between sisters.

None of these moments are inherently dramatic.

Yet together they create a reality that feels inhabited rather than observed.

The world does not merely contain the story.

The story emerges from the world.

This distinction would eventually shape my understanding of immersive media.

Many contemporary interactive experiences remain organized around objectives, progression, and completion.

They inherit assumptions from cinema even as technology evolves beyond it.

Yet some of the most meaningful experiences I have encountered—whether in art, culture, travel, or everyday life—operate differently.

They emerge through participation.

They emerge through relationships.

They emerge through inhabitation.

Perhaps the future of narrative lies not in creating better stories.

Perhaps it lies in creating more meaningful worlds.

Stories invite us to follow events.

Worlds invite us to inhabit relationships.

SECTION 3

Living Between Cultures

The question first posed by a Japanese animated film followed me far beyond animation.

Over the following decades I would live, study, and work across India, the United States, and Japan.

Each transition revealed a similar pattern.

What appears obvious within one culture often becomes uncertain within another.

Gestures change meaning.

Silences change meaning.

Time changes meaning.

Even the relationship between individuals and their environment changes meaning.

Again and again, I encountered situations where understanding could not be reduced to language alone.

A conversation continued despite incomplete translation.

A shared meal communicated more than words.

A bow repaired a misunderstanding.

A silence conveyed trust.

The less certainty available, the more carefully people attended to one another.

At first, this felt like limitation.

Later, it began to feel like possibility.

The absence of immediate understanding created space for observation.

Patience.

Adaptation.

The encounter demanded something more than information exchange.

It demanded participation.

One of the paradoxes of contemporary life is that humanity possesses unprecedented tools for communication while often struggling to create understanding.

Messages travel instantly.

Languages can be translated in seconds.

Information circulates continuously.

Yet understanding remains fragile.

Perhaps this is because information and understanding are not the same thing.

Information can be transmitted.

Understanding must be lived.

Prediction can anticipate behavior.

Understanding emerges through relationship.

Prediction remains one of humanity's most remarkable achievements.

It allows us to forecast weather, identify disease, optimize systems, and extend knowledge beyond previous limits.

Yet prediction alone does not explain what happened in that classroom in 1999.

Nor does it explain what occurs when strangers meet across cultures.

Prediction helps us anticipate what is likely.

It is less equipped to explain what emerges when people encounter one another under conditions of uncertainty.

The challenge is therefore not prediction itself.

The challenge emerges when prediction becomes the dominant lens through which all uncertainty is understood.

Some experiences resist prediction.

Some forms of meaning require participation.

SECTION 4

Negotiated Realities

The longer I lived between cultures, the less convinced I became that reality is something we simply discover.

Reality, as human beings experience it, is always mediated.

Through language.

Through culture.

Through memory.

Through relationship.

Two people may witness the same event and leave with entirely different understandings of what occurred.

Two communities may inhabit the same landscape while imagining it through different systems of meaning.

This does not imply that truth is arbitrary.

Nor does it suggest that reality is merely subjective.

Rather, it suggests that human beings do not encounter reality directly.

We encounter it through frameworks that help us interpret what is happening.

Most of the time these frameworks remain invisible.

We inherit them.

We inhabit them.

Only when we encounter difference do we begin to see them.

The Japanese film I encountered in 1999 did not eliminate cultural difference.

It revealed that difference could be crossed.

Not through agreement.

Not through assimilation.

Not through explanation.

But through relationship.

Meaning emerged not because I became Japanese.

Nor because the film became Indian.

Meaning emerged because a shared space appeared between us.

Neither side surrendered its identity.

Yet something common emerged.

I eventually began describing this process as negotiated reality.

A negotiated reality emerges whenever individuals carrying different histories, assumptions, and ways of knowing remain in relationship long enough to create meanings that none possessed beforehand.

Perhaps civilizations themselves are negotiated realities.

If so, the challenge facing the twenty-first century is not merely discovering shared truths.

It is learning how shared realities emerge.

SECTION 5

When the Audience Entered the Story

For most of human history, stories existed at a distance.

A storyteller told.

An audience listened.

A painter painted.

A viewer observed.

A filmmaker directed.

A spectator watched.

Interpretations varied.

The artifact remained largely unchanged.

Digital media began altering this relationship.

Video games introduced agency.

Interactive installations introduced participation.

Networked systems introduced emergence.

Immersive media introduced presence.

The audience was no longer merely interpreting a story.

The audience was increasingly participating in its construction.

Yet many immersive experiences remained deeply influenced by cinematic assumptions.

The participant was offered choices.

The world remained predetermined.

The objective remained progression.

The narrative remained authored.

At the same time, artificial intelligence introduced a new possibility.

Worlds could become responsive.

Characters could adapt.

Environments could learn.

Interactions could evolve.

For the first time, it became conceivable to design systems that do not merely deliver narratives but participate in their emergence.

The question changed.

If stories no longer need to be fixed in advance, what exactly are we designing?

A story?

A system?

A simulation?

Or the conditions through which meaning emerges?

The question returned me to the one first posed in that classroom.

How do people enter worlds that are not their own?

And how do those worlds become shared?

SECTION 6

Visceral Narrative Environments

Visceral Narrative Environments emerged from this question.

Not as a technology.

Not as a storytelling technique.

But as an observation.

Meaning often emerges before explanation.

Understanding often emerges before language.

Participation often precedes interpretation.

Many narrative systems assume that meaning is transmitted.

A creator produces a message.

A participant receives it.

Communication succeeds when the message arrives intact.

Yet many of the experiences that shaped my understanding of narrative seemed to function differently.

A Japanese animated film.

A conversation across incomplete language.

A shared meal.

A moment of silence.

An encounter between strangers.

Meaning did not arrive intact.

Meaning emerged through interaction.

Visceral Narrative Environments approach narrative as a relational process rather than a transmitted object.

The environment is not a stage upon which a story unfolds.

It is an ecology of interactions.

Participants do not merely observe events.

They participate in the creation of meaning.

Narrative emerges through engagement with people, places, objects, and increasingly intelligent systems.

The emphasis shifts from storytelling to worldmaking.

The objective is not to guide participants toward a predetermined conclusion.

The objective is to create conditions under which new understandings can emerge.

Friction, misunderstanding, and uncertainty are not always failures.

They may be the conditions through which adaptation begins.

The future of immersive media may therefore depend upon a shift in emphasis.

From narrative delivery to narrative emergence.

From optimization to participation.

From prediction to relationship.

From stories that are told to worlds that are shared.

SECTION 7

YATAI-01: A World Between Worlds

Ideas eventually demand embodiment.

For me, that embodiment took the form of an experimental immersive environment called YATAI-01.

The word yatai refers to the temporary food stalls commonly found at Japanese festivals.

These spaces are modest in scale.

A few stools.

A counter.

A conversation.

Yet they often function as places where strangers meet.

Transactions occur.

Relationships emerge.

YATAI-01 began with a simple question:

What happens when two people attempt to create shared meaning without relying on a common spoken language?

Between November 2025 and January 2026, participants entered an immersive environment inspired by a Japanese street-side yatai.

Inside the simulation, they encountered a Japanese vendor.

The interaction appeared straightforward.

A traveler approached a stall.

The vendor responded.

An exchange began.

Yet something unusual happened.

Many participants entered expecting the interaction patterns common to contemporary digital systems.

They expected immediate feedback.

Clear instructions.

Direct responses.

Efficient communication.

Instead, they encountered hesitation.

A pause.

A glance.

A gesture that seemed to mean something, but not enough to be certain.

Moments where the interaction appeared to stall.

Several participants initially interpreted these moments as failure.

The system seemed incomplete.

The communication seemed inefficient.

Nothing progressed as quickly as expected.

Yet as the interaction continued, something shifted.

Participants began slowing down.

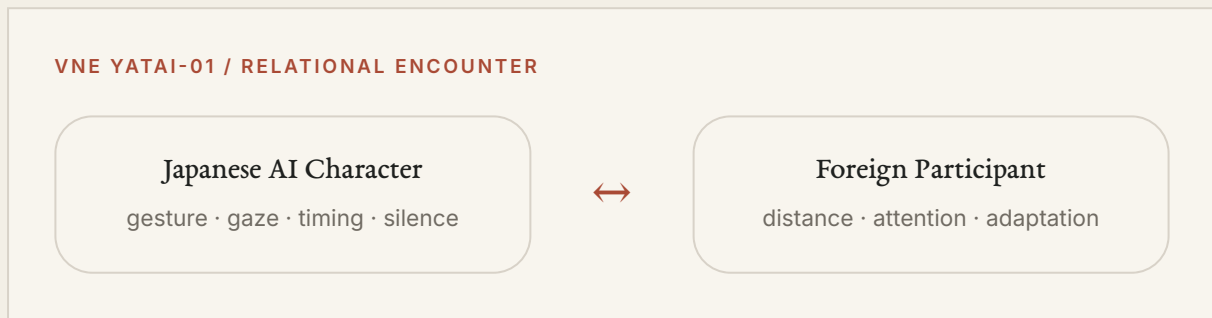
They paid closer attention.

A slight movement of the hand.

The direction of a gaze.

The timing of a response.

The distance maintained between bodies.



Signals that normally disappear beneath language suddenly became important.

One participant later described the experience as feeling less like using a system and more like meeting a person.

Another remarked that they stopped trying to complete a task and began trying to understand the world.

What interested me most was not whether communication succeeded.

It was how participants changed.

The environment did not adapt itself entirely to the participant.

The participant began adapting to the environment.

A mutual adjustment emerged.

What initially appeared as misunderstanding often became an opportunity for repair.

What initially appeared as uncertainty often became the beginning of relationship.

The interaction became less about information exchange and more about negotiation.

Neither side fully imposed its world upon the other.

A third space emerged between them.

The story did not arise from dialogue.

The story arose from adaptation.

Looking back, I realized that YATAI-01 was attempting to recreate the same mystery I had encountered decades earlier while watching *My Neighbor Totoro*.

How does understanding emerge before explanation?

How do people enter worlds that are not their own?

How do strangers create a reality they can briefly inhabit together?

These questions proved surprisingly relevant not only to intercultural encounters, but also to the future design of intelligent systems.

Perhaps the most important observation from YATAI-01 was not that participants communicated.

It was that they learned.

Not facts.

Not instructions.

Not information.

They learned how to be with difference.

And that may be a very different form of intelligence.

Although this essay emphasizes lived experience and design reflection, YATAI-01 also formed part of a broader doctoral investigation into intercultural interaction within immersive environments.

Preliminary observations suggested that participants increasingly relied upon gesture, timing, gaze, and spatial negotiation when familiar linguistic strategies became unavailable. These observations continue to inform the development of Visceral Narrative Environments as a framework for relational worldmaking and social simulation.

SECTION 8

Relational Intelligence

Contemporary artificial intelligence is largely organized around prediction.

Given sufficient data, systems learn to anticipate what users are likely to want, say, purchase, watch, believe, or do.

The more accurately a system predicts behavior, the more successful it is often considered to be.

This paradigm has produced extraordinary capabilities.

Search engines anticipate questions before they are fully formed.

Navigation systems predict traffic patterns.

Language models generate plausible responses from vast statistical landscapes.

Prediction is one of humanity's most powerful inventions.

Yet prediction is not the entirety of intelligence.

A weather forecast may predict rain.

It does not experience the conversation that occurs beneath an umbrella.

A recommendation system may predict what we are likely to watch.

It cannot determine what meaning that experience will hold within a particular life.

Prediction excels at anticipating known possibilities.

Human life, however, is often transformed by encounters with the unknown.

A friendship.

A work of art.

A journey.

A conversation between strangers.

A child encountering a world they do not yet understand.

These experiences derive their significance not from certainty but from uncertainty.

They change us precisely because we do not know in advance what will emerge.

The participants in YATAI-01 were not attempting to solve a puzzle.

They were not optimizing toward a predefined outcome.

They were attempting to inhabit a situation together.

Understanding emerged through adjustment.

Through attention.

Through participation.

This suggests a complementary form of intelligence.

An intelligence concerned not only with prediction, but with relationship.

I have come to think of this as relational intelligence.

Relational intelligence is the capacity to remain present within difference long enough for new meanings to emerge.

It is the ability to navigate situations in which participants do not share the same assumptions, histories, languages, or ways of understanding the world.

It does not eliminate uncertainty.

It works with uncertainty.

It does not seek immediate resolution.

It remains open to emergence.

In this sense, Visceral Narrative Environments can be understood as a form of social simulation.

Most simulations attempt to model behavior.

VNE explores something slightly different.

It explores the conditions through which meaning emerges between participants.

The objective is not agreement.

The objective is not persuasion.

The objective is not even successful communication in the conventional sense.

The objective is the creation of a shared space in which understanding becomes possible.

This distinction may become increasingly important as artificial intelligence begins inhabiting the same social, cultural, and narrative spaces as human beings.

The future may require more than intelligent systems.

It may require intelligent encounters.

Systems capable not merely of predicting behavior, but of participating in the emergence of meaning.

Not replacing human relationships.

Not simulating them.

But helping create conditions in which new relationships can form.

Perhaps intelligence is not only the capacity to know.

Perhaps it is also the capacity to remain in relationship with what is not yet known.

And perhaps that capacity has always been at the heart of storytelling.

Not because stories provide answers.

But because they create a space in which strangers can explore uncertainty together.

The future of immersive media may therefore depend less on building worlds that respond to us perfectly and more on building worlds that invite us into relationship.

Worlds that challenge us.

Worlds that surprise us.

Worlds that ask something of us in return.

Worlds that help us become participants rather than spectators.

For centuries, stories have served as humanity's most enduring social simulations.

They have allowed individuals to encounter unfamiliar lives, cultures, and possibilities without leaving their seats.

Immersive media and artificial intelligence extend this tradition into new forms.

The question is not whether these technologies will become more intelligent.

The question is what kind of encounters they will make possible.

And whether those encounters will help us learn how to inhabit a world together.

SECTION 9

The Inbetween Story

When I first watched that Japanese film in a CalArts classroom in the Fall of 1999, I believed I was encountering a foreign world.

Years later, I realized something stranger had happened.

The film was not inviting me into Japan.

It was inviting me into a relationship.

At the time, I thought understanding meant learning about another culture.

Its language.

Its history.

Its customs.

These things matter.

Yet none of them fully explain what happened that afternoon.

The emotional connection arrived before the knowledge.

The world arrived before the explanation.

Meaning appeared before understanding.

The longer I have lived between cultures, the more I have come to suspect that this is not an exception.

It is the rule.

Human beings rarely begin from shared realities.

We begin from different histories.

Different assumptions.

Different fears.

Different hopes.

Different ways of seeing.

The miracle is not that these differences disappear.

The miracle is that, despite them, we repeatedly create worlds together.

A family creates a home.

Strangers create a community.

Artists create a culture.

Civilizations create a society.

Again and again, realities emerge that did not previously exist.

Not because people agree.

Not because they become the same.

But because they remain in relationship long enough for something new to appear between them.

Perhaps this is the deeper significance of narrative.

Narrative is not merely a sequence of events.

It is a process through which relationships become worlds.

For centuries, stories have served as humanity's most powerful technology for negotiating reality.

Today, immersive media and artificial intelligence place that responsibility into new forms.

The question is no longer simply how we tell stories.

The question is how we design worlds.

Worlds capable of holding difference without collapsing into fragmentation.

Worlds capable of supporting uncertainty without demanding immediate resolution.

Worlds capable of transforming strangers into participants.

This, ultimately, is what Visceral Narrative Environments seek to explore.

Not how stories can be delivered more efficiently.

Not how intelligence can become more predictive.

But how worlds can become more inhabitable.

The question that first appeared in a darkened classroom eventually became a research program, a prototype, and a framework.

Yet the question itself remains unchanged.

"Every story begins with difference."

Otherwise there would be no story to tell.

Every shared world begins with strangers.

Otherwise there would be no world to share.

Meaning does not emerge from sameness.

It emerges when difference remains present long enough to become relationship.”

Perhaps this is what the best stories have always understood.

And perhaps it is what the most meaningful technologies must learn as well.

Not how to eliminate uncertainty.

Not how to predict every outcome.

Not how to make every interaction frictionless.

But how to create conditions in which new realities can emerge.

The future may depend less on building systems that know us perfectly than on cultivating environments in which we can continue discovering one another.

After all, the first question that led to this work was not a technical question.

It was a human one.

How had I understood a world I knew nothing about?

Twenty-five years later, I no longer believe the answer lies in information, translation, or explanation alone.

I believe it lies in relationship.

A story, at its best, is not a message sent from one person to another.

It is a place where strangers meet.

And leave having created a world together.

A Note on References

The ideas presented in this essay emerged primarily through lived experience, intercultural practice, creative production, and doctoral research conducted over more than two decades. The references below are offered not as sources from which *Visceral Narrative Environments* was derived, but as neighboring works whose questions occasionally intersect with those explored here.

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