

Chapter 11

From Overlay to Interplay: Subverting the Message and Creating the Surreal With Augmented Reality

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the unique characteristics of AR as a visual communication medium while also considering the diverse and potentially powerful meanings that can be created by using it in conjunction with established visual communication devices such as posters. The chapter evaluates a number of current projects that have utilised this type of digital narrative. It also explores the theories of visual communication to understand how posters communicate in order to leverage the same techniques for AR. Using three case studies, the authors examine how AR, when used in conjunction with a printed poster, can subvert the original meaning of the poster to create a new meaning for the viewer and ultimately create the surreal.

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics and other visual communication theories are used daily by creatives during the execution of their design briefs. The practice has become so intuitive that many creatives do not realize they are using them. Augmented Reality is an experience that supplements the real world with a virtual layer of information (Lowry, 2015). While still finding its feet somewhat, this technology has the potential to be a powerful communicative tool of the future. The virtual layer has the untapped potential of a visual communication medium in its own right. But when it is used in conjunction with print, it can have a number of different effects, from expanding the meaning of the printed text, to bringing animation to static images. The possibilities are only limited by what we can imagine or want to communicate.

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From Overlay to Interplay

This chapter looks at the unique characteristics of AR as a visual communication medium while also considering the diverse and potentially powerful meanings that can be created using the medium in conjunction with printed media. The chapter will evaluate a number of current projects that have leveraged this type of digital narrative while also exploring three case studies where we have created examples of minimalist posters and examined how AR can subvert the original meaning to create a new meaning for the viewer.

BACKGROUND: DESIGN IS STORYTELLING

We live in an increasingly visual, image-based culture. The digital age has brought with it a growing expectation of pictorial instruction, signs and symbols (Salisbury & Styles, 2012). The design of information is nothing new. From the earliest cave paintings to modern-day data visualization, humans have always utilized graphic depictions as a means of representing information (Lankow, Crooks, & Ritchie, 2012). Visual storytelling is a pervasive and powerful way to share ideas, educate and communicate (Cherry, 2019). As with all types of storytelling, in order for visual storytelling to be effective, it must communicate and resonate with the intended audience. Visual storytellers must convey emotions and ideas, feelings and personality and bring characters and settings to life to tell their story. In fact, visual communication is a long established discipline in which visual communication has been used to stir emotions, illustrate facts and sway opinions. Designers as storytellers use a myriad of mediums and tools to create meaning and tell stories that resonate with their audience.

Meaning Making

Let's consider the matter of creating meaning. "Visual communication in its widest sense has a long history. When early man hunted for food, spotted the imprint of an animal in the mud, he was looking at a graphic sign. His mind's eye saw the animal itself" (Hollis, 1994, p. 7). Visual communication is the process of interpreting different signs to have meaning. Some we have learned from being taught at a young age or from experience and we now intuitively understand without consciously thinking about them, since they have become like muscle memory. One example is the letters of the alphabet and how words are constructed; another is simplistic visuals such as dark clouds in the sky meaning rain.

The study of signs has developed a great deal in the 100 years since the terms semiotics and semiology were first coined to describe this area of study, with many people taking up the mantle from those early semiologists. These include Barthes who expanded on the original theories of Saussure & Pierce (Chandler, 2007) on how different signs interact with each other to create new meaning. Barthes' analysis and evaluation of cultural signs and symbols and how they interact expanded the subject from linguistics to include visuals and people, society and body language. Further work by van Leeuwen and Kress looked at the visual combination of signs and symbols to such an extent that they have departed from the original landscape of linguistics and now focus solely on visual elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Kress and van Leeuwen evaluate how a sign or symbol is structured and the elements that make a sign or symbol communicate. They have identified different elements in the construction of meaning, which are: text, image, illustration, and color, and which are referred to as "modes of communication" (1996). They recognize these graphical elements individually and together, how they can be used to create and communicate meaning, as well as how each mode can affect the overall meaning of a composition.

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