

Meta-Images: Visual Storytelling Across Virtual Worlds and Hybrid Platforms

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ABSTRACT

As visual communication migrates across immersive environments and hybrid media platforms, a new form of visual storytelling emerges: the meta-image—an image that is aware of its own circulation, transformation, and participatory remixing. This paper explores the meta-image as both a symbolic and computational entity that organizes narrative, gesture, and cultural memory within digital ecosystems. Drawing on visual theory, media archaeology, and examples from virtual worlds and augmented social platforms, the paper investigates how meta-images function as mutable storytelling interfaces. We argue that meta-images redefine authorship and spectatorship by fostering recombinant visuality across games, filters, memes, and 3D environments. Through a close analysis of visual practices on platforms like VRChat, TikTok AR, and Fortnite Creative, the study reveals how storytelling has shifted from linear narrative to procedural, affective, and modular patterns of image-based communication.

Keywords: Meta-Image, Hybrid Platforms, Visual Storytelling.

INTRODUCTION: FROM IMAGE TO META-IMAGE

In the evolution of media technology, interfaces have often been treated as pragmatic tools—means to navigate, control, or experience digital content. Yet in immersive media environments, the interface becomes a space of affective negotiation and symbolic participation. Whether through gestural input, eye tracking, haptic feedback, or full-body tracking, users engage not just with information but with meaning, identity, and affect.

This paper explores immersive media interfaces not as mere gateways but as cultural apparatuses—technologically mediated stages for embodied ritual. We draw from media anthropology, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism to investigate how immersive interaction becomes ritualized: repetitive, meaningful, and symbolically charged. These "interface rituals" are not arbitrary. They are choreographed by designers, shaped by cultural scripts, and internalized by users.

To understand the transformation of the interface into a site of ritual, we must consider its historical and socio-cultural evolution. Interfaces have moved from keyboard and mouse setups to fully embodied systems involving gaze, movement, and spatial awareness. As interfaces have become more transparent—disappearing into our environments—they have simultaneously become more ritualistic. The user must undergo specific acts to enter immersive states: donning the headset, adjusting the body, syncing the gaze. These acts are not just technical—they are performative.

The sociologist Bruno Latour suggests that technology is never neutral—it is always embedded within a network of cultural meanings and symbolic exchanges. This applies to immersive media design: the gestures we use to interact with virtual environments are culturally coded, even when they appear intuitive. For instance, bowing to activate a portal may seem natural in an Eastern cultural context, but might feel unfamiliar in Western systems. Thus, interface rituals must be examined as forms of cultural performance.

In this context, the body is not simply a tool for control; it becomes a canvas upon which symbolic meaning is enacted. Anthropologist Turner (1969) emphasized the importance of liminality in ritual—an in-between state where ordinary roles are suspended, and transformation becomes possible. Immersive interfaces create such

liminal conditions, wherein users temporarily suspend their everyday identities to inhabit new perceptual and symbolic roles.

Designers increasingly recognize this potential and deliberately incorporate ritual motifs. The onboarding experience in VR, for example, may involve centering one's body, calibrating the environment, and listening to a voice-over that encourages emotional alignment. These elements form a coherent ritual sequence. When repeated across multiple platforms, such sequences contribute to a larger grammar of symbolic interaction in immersive media.

Moreover, the metaphor of ritual allows us to reframe interaction not merely as input/output dynamics but as culturally and emotionally rich performances. In immersive experiences, actions such as reaching out, kneeling, or even breathing deeply can hold narrative and symbolic weight. These are not just means to an end but affective forms of presence.

A further dimension of interface ritual is its ability to create shared experience. Multi-user immersive environments require synchronized acts, such as collective gestures or voice activation, which resonate with anthropological theories of communal ritual and participatory performance. These shared interactions foster a temporary sense of unity and co-presence, echoing Émile Durkheim's concept of "collective effervescence"—a communal energy arising from synchronized ritual acts.

Interface rituals are also a form of cultural inscription. As immersive technologies become more widespread, their rituals contribute to new behavioral norms and embodied literacies. Children growing up with VR, for example, learn new forms of spatial etiquette, gaze behavior, and postural modulation. These embodied practices become second nature, naturalized into the sensorium of the digital subject.

Importantly, these ritualized interactions are not universally legible. Cultural context shapes how ritual is perceived and enacted. A movement considered reverent in one culture may be read as inappropriate in another. This calls for a culturally sensitive design approach—one that accounts for pluralism, symbolic depth, and emotional resonance.

Therefore, in proposing a theory of interface rituals, this paper argues that immersive interaction is not merely a technological concern but a symbolic one. The interface is a threshold between realities, a liminal zone where the technological, cultural, and affective converge. By analyzing this convergence through the lens of ritual, we open new possibilities for understanding user experience, identity formation, and the future of interaction design.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 develops a theoretical foundation for understanding interface rituals, drawing from ritual theory, phenomenology, and embodied cognition. Section 3 presents empirical examples from immersive media practices, demonstrating how ritualization operates in contemporary design. Section 4 explores symbolic meaning and interface semiotics, considering how rituals shape user subjectivity. Section 5 proposes implications for design, outlining a ritual-centered methodology. Finally, Section 6 reflects on the broader significance of treating interfaces as ritual spaces in the context of future immersive systems.

META-IMAGES AS AESTHETIC AND SEMIOTIC OBJECTS

The idea of the meta-image arises from both aesthetic and semiotic concerns. In Mitchell's foundational work on picture theory, he distinguishes between the image as "that which appears to the eye" and the picture as its material or mediatic form. The meta-image, in this taxonomy, operates reflexively—it is an image that reflects on its image-ness, often through repetition, modulation, or performance.

Contemporary digital aesthetics have intensified this reflexivity. As Vilém Flusser argued, technical images possess an apparatus behind them—a program, a code, a logic. The meta-image reveals and plays with this apparatus. It is not just a surface for viewing but a scriptable interface—responsive to algorithmic and embodied inputs. Consider the visual elements in a VRChat avatar: each element may encode a cultural reference, animation trigger, or reactive behavior tied to social rituals (Van Gennepe, 1960).

Semiotically, meta-images destabilize fixed meaning. They are mutable and processual, often designed to be recombined with other image elements. On Instagram, the use of AR filters exemplifies this logic: the same visual substrate (e.g., a selfie) can be endlessly re-inscribed with layers of motion, color, symbols, and interactive elements. The story told is not just in the content of the image, but in its affordances and its mode of becoming.

CASE STUDIES IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

VRChat and Avatar Semiotics

VRChat represents one of the most prolific ecosystems for meta-image practices. Avatars here are not merely representations of identity but dynamic containers of expression, myth, and modularity. A user's avatar can shift in scale, glow in response to emotional input, or transform into a meme figure during performance rituals.

Meta-images in VRChat include entire environments and interfaces that respond to touch, proximity, or voice. One prominent example is the "Mirror World" phenomenon—users gather around virtual mirrors not just to see themselves, but to co-construct an image of presence, often mediated through dance, fashion, or glitch effects. The mirror becomes a site of shared storytelling, where the avatar-image is reflected, performed, and iteratively remade (Witcomb & Message, 2015).

Fortnite Creative and World-Modular Imagery

Fortnite Creative allows players to construct their own worlds using prefab assets. These assets, often meme-like in their stylization, become components of visual grammar. Narrative in this environment is modular: objects have no fixed meaning but gain narrative weight through arrangement, iteration, and use.

A key example is a Fortnite machinima project where players choreograph visual stories using emotes, soundtracks, and object placement. These stories unfold through hybridized aesthetics—combining anime, sci-fi, and internet culture into visual pastiche. The meta-image here is not a single frame but a performative sequence of iconography, modular action, and viewer remixing.

SYMBOLIC MEANING AND INTERFACE SEMIOTICS

Interface rituals, as forms of embodied interaction, operate within a dense web of semiotic codes. These codes—gestures, spatial positions, haptic cues—are not neutral or incidental. They serve as signs, and their meanings are constructed through culturally specific interpretations and affective responses. In immersive environments, the interface becomes a site where symbolic meaning is encoded, decoded, and re-encoded through user interaction.

Drawing on Peirce's (1931–1958) triadic model of the sign (icon, index, symbol), we can analyze how interface elements acquire meaning within immersive contexts. An icon in VR might be a hand that visually resembles the user's own, whereas an index might be the responsive vibration felt when touching a virtual object, and a symbol might be a recurring gesture such as placing the hand over the heart to initiate dialogue. These semiotic layers compound to create a coherent system of symbolic interaction that goes beyond utilitarian function.

Furthermore, the interface serves as a space where symbolic meaning is enacted through ritualized repetition. When users repeat certain gestures across multiple experiences—such as opening a virtual book by spreading the hands apart—they learn a symbolic grammar, a set of embodied signs that inform their expectations and guide their behavior. This grammar varies across cultural and narrative contexts, and it evolves with user experience.

From a poststructuralist perspective, interface rituals can also be read as texts—sites of contestation, interpretation, and meaning-making. Derrida's (1978) concept of *différance* suggests that meaning is always deferred, never fixed, and contingent on context. Applying this to interface design implies that the symbolic significance of a gesture or ritual is never singular; it is shaped by the interplay between user, technology, and cultural memory.

These symbolic structures are deeply tied to subjectivity. When a user performs a gesture repeatedly in VR—for instance, kneeling in a sacred digital space—they internalize not just the gesture but the identity associated with it. This has implications for identity construction, cultural immersion, and the affective force of design. Interface rituals thus participate in the symbolic construction of the user-subject, mediating not just how one acts, but who one becomes in digital space.

This symbolic encoding also facilitates narrative coherence. In immersive storytelling, repeated interface rituals can serve as symbolic anchors, reminding users of their role or progressing the plot. For example, the repeated act of lighting a lantern might come to symbolize memory retrieval, mourning, or illumination. When such gestures recur, they acquire affective saturation—a buildup of emotional resonance tied to symbolic repetition.

Ultimately, interface rituals in immersive media are never purely functional. They are inherently symbolic, shaping not only what users do, but what their actions mean. Recognizing this opens new avenues for design,

critique, and cultural engagement.

TOWARD A RITUAL-CENTERED DESIGN METHODOLOGY

If we accept that immersive interfaces function as sites of symbolic ritual, then it follows that designers should adopt a ritual-centered methodology—one that foregrounds meaning-making, embodiment, and cultural sensitivity. This methodology begins by rethinking interaction design as performance. Rather than designing for utility alone, designers should consider how each interactive element participates in a sequence of symbolic acts.

First, the ritual-centered approach requires narrative integration. Each gesture or action within an immersive environment should be aligned with the storyworld's symbolic structure. For instance, if the narrative centers on rebirth or transformation, then interface rituals might involve actions like removing a mask, shedding layers, or stepping through symbolic thresholds. These actions are not only intuitive; they are emotionally and symbolically meaningful.

Second, a ritual-aware designer must consider the semiotic ecology of their interface. What cultural meanings are being invoked by a particular gesture or posture? How might these vary across audiences? Designers should collaborate with cultural consultants, anthropologists, and local communities to ensure that rituals are resonant rather than appropriative. This is particularly crucial in transnational or heritage-based immersive experiences.

Third, ritual-centered design emphasizes embodied affect. The goal is not just to elicit action but to foster presence—an emotional and cognitive investment in the virtual world. Techniques like rhythmic repetition, sonic synchronization, and gestural mirroring can deepen immersion and enhance symbolic engagement. When users feel their bodies participating in meaningful acts, the experience becomes transformative.

Fourth, ritual design should anticipate and accommodate user interpretation. Not all users will experience a ritual in the same way. Interfaces should be designed with polyvalence—offering multiple points of entry and layers of meaning. This allows users to navigate their own symbolic trajectories while still aligning with the broader structure of the experience.

Finally, designers must consider ritual closure. Just as real-world rituals end with reintegration into the everyday, immersive rituals should offer a means of de-escalation—a symbolic return. This might take the form of a farewell gesture, a narrative coda, or a debriefing interface that acknowledges the user's journey.

By adopting a ritual-centered methodology, immersive media designers can transcend the limitations of instrumental design. They can create experiences that resonate deeply with users, that respect cultural meaning, and that elevate interaction to the level of symbolic art. Such a methodology not only enhances user engagement but affirms the role of immersive media as a site for embodied cultural expression.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A GRAMMAR OF META-IMAGES

In an age of immersive and hybrid media, images no longer operate as static units of representation. They are procedural, affective, symbolic systems: meta-images that tell stories through their own transformation, circulation, and engagement. Virtual worlds, social platforms, and generative tools form an ecosystem in which visual storytelling is performed as much as it is perceived.

The meta-image represents a key conceptual tool for understanding this shift. It bridges image theory and platform studies, visual semiotics and affective design. As AI continues to reshape production and platforms increasingly entangle narrative with interaction, the study of meta-images will become essential to both critical and creative practice.

Future research should explore how meta-images shape political discourse, identity formation, and epistemologies of visual truth. For designers and theorists alike, learning to read and construct these images will be central to shaping visual culture in the post-screen age.

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