

The VRDC logo is displayed in a large, white, sans-serif font against a solid blue background.

# VRDC

## **From Branded Content to Immersive Fiction: Directing Techniques for Better Storytelling in VR**

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# Hello!

## I'm Logan Dwight

- Storyteller, Designer, Ludologist
- Creative Lead at The Soap Collective
- I design interactive fiction for a living.



I'm Logan Dwight, Co-Founder and creative director at The Soap Collective. I have a background in experience design, game theory, and media storytelling. I've been a VR nerd pretty much my whole life. :-)

## Let's talk about...

- Storytelling in VR
- Directing User Attention  
(Using the Cone of Focus Technique)
- 360 Video vs "Real" VR



You may have heard some of these ideas before, as we're certainly not the first or only studio passionate about storytelling in VR. Still, the goal of this talk is to distill these concepts down to some core foundational guidelines - an introduction to what we feel has worked and what hasn't.

# THERE ARE NO RULES

VR is the new frontier. This medium is so new that the paradigms haven't even been set yet. Technology is changing and evolving at a staggering rate, and that's what makes this such an exciting time to create. No one has the right to tell you you're wrong, and every idea could result in something great.



## Here are some rules...

So anyway, now I'm going to go and tell you what to do right and wrong...

But in all seriousness, we've been creating interactive stories at Soap for just over 2 years now, and we wanted to share the foundations of what we've learned. Storytelling is a science, and this is what we've tested and found.

## Everything has a story



Seriously, everything. There's the obvious stuff: fantasy fiction, epic adventure stories, etc. But everything has a story. That beer you drink, where did it come from, how did it become something special? That place you love, what happened to you there that made you so attached to it?

This might seem obvious, but story is important. The human brain is sequential in nature, and emotionally driven. Stories tap into the deepest parts of our personal engagement. A video that tells the story of a place is infinitely more compelling than just a sequence of pretty images set to music. Whether we're creating content for ourselves, consumers, or brands, crafting a story leads to a better experience.

## Example: BROOKLYN BREWERY



This 360 experience we created for Brooklyn Brewery could have just been a “ride” through the brewery, or a series of poppy image sequences that make the beer look “cool” but don’t tell us anything about it. Instead, we focused on the story of the brewery, the origin of the beer. Connecting that to a 360 tour creates a compelling memorable experience. People remember the story, and more importantly - they feel an emotional connection to the brand. In the case of selling beer, this goes a long way.

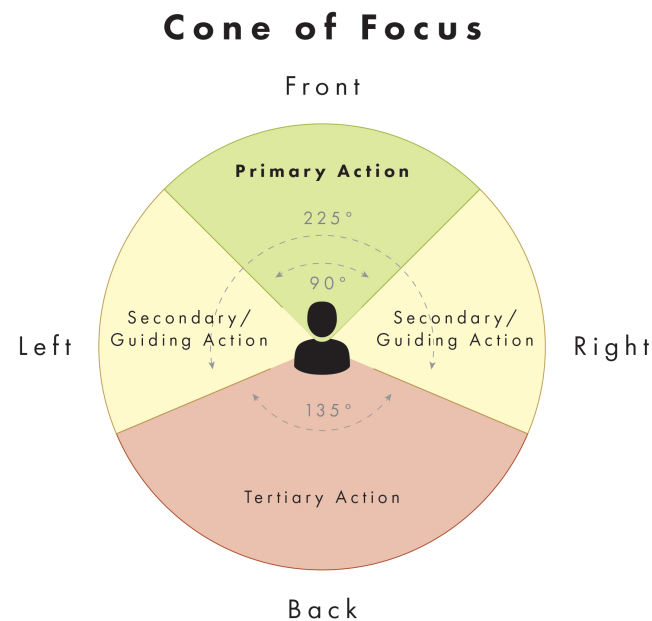
## Directing user attention is **CRITICAL**



DON'T OVERWHELM THE USER - VR & 360 video are cool, but we need to be careful not to fall blindly in love with the “I have more space, so I should fill it!” idea. It's most people's first gut reaction, and it's wrong. Surrounding the user with tons of content on all sides confuses them, distracts from their ability to focus, and ruins enjoyment and immersion.

“If everything is loud, nothing is loud”

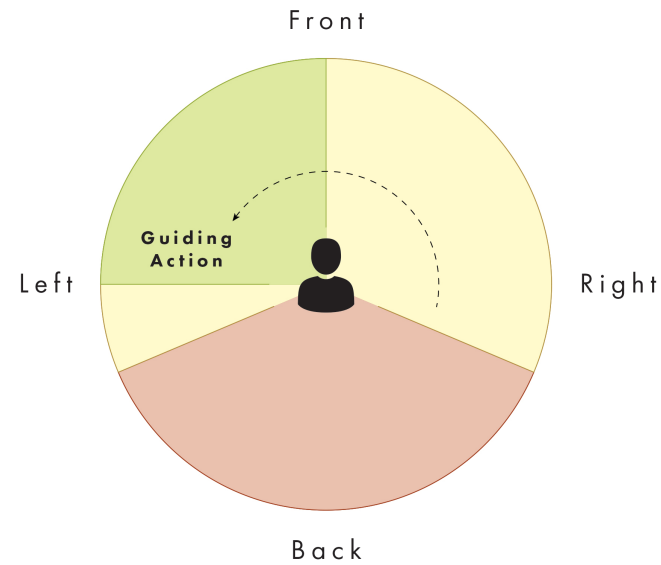
# The Cone of Focus



A person can really only focus on a ~90-degree cone in front of them at any time. We call this the Cone of Focus. This is how we map out attention, where our primary story action takes place, and how we guide the user.

When telling a story in VR, we must first account for the user's position and movement. Keeping someone comfortable is more important than the "novelty" of making them spin around. So we need to ask: are they sitting, standing, walking? For this example, let's talk about 360 video. Realistically, most 360 video content is consumed sitting. One easy rule we can establish right away for sitting: don't put stuff behind them. No one enjoys craning around and trying to contort behind their couch or chair. That's not fun, and it forces the person to be aware of their real-world setting again, which ruins immersion. You can put some action back there, but it should really only be background details. Don't put important stuff behind a seated user.

## Directing Focus

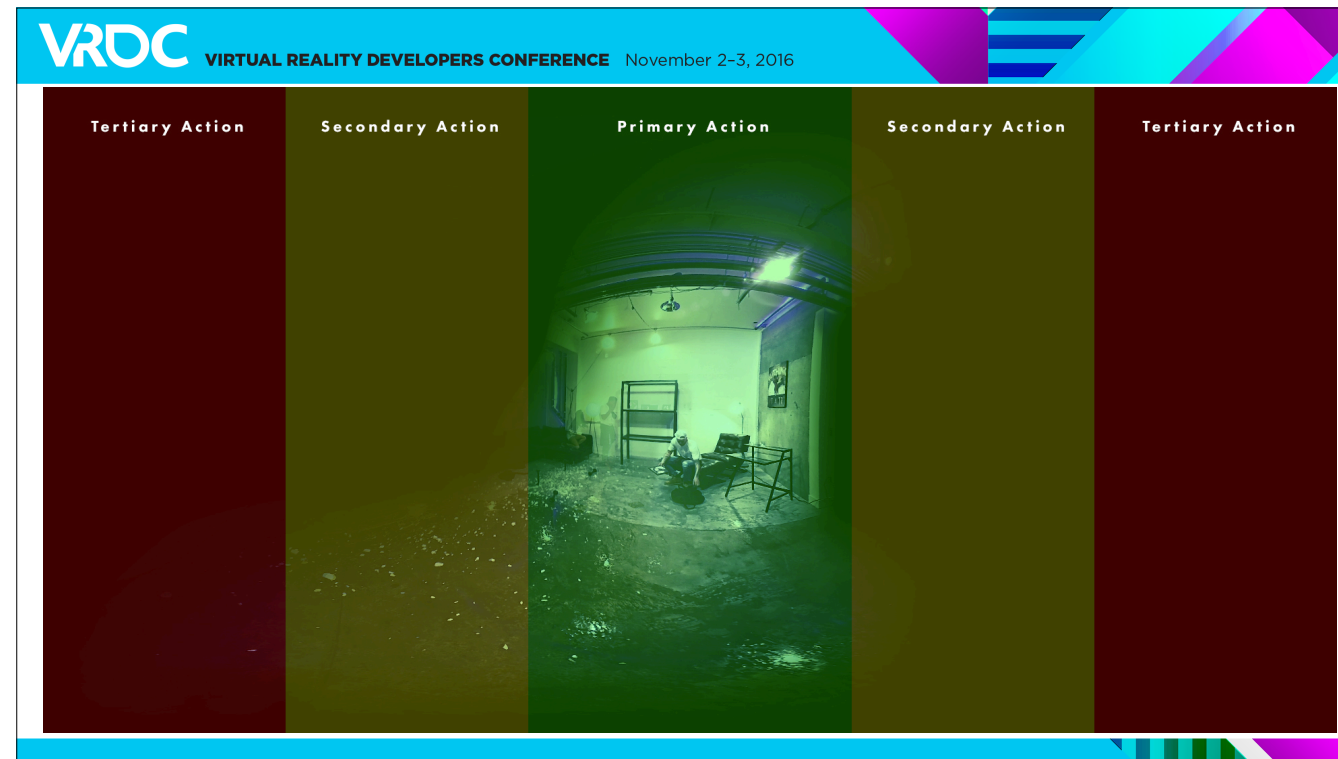


We can use a person's peripheral vision to guide the cone of focus. By using techniques such as lighting, exaggerated motion, and directional sound, we can beckon a person left or right. These are concepts already well-established in two other mediums: theater and video game design. When telling our story, we are best served by mapping action in a "path" that guides the user's attention.

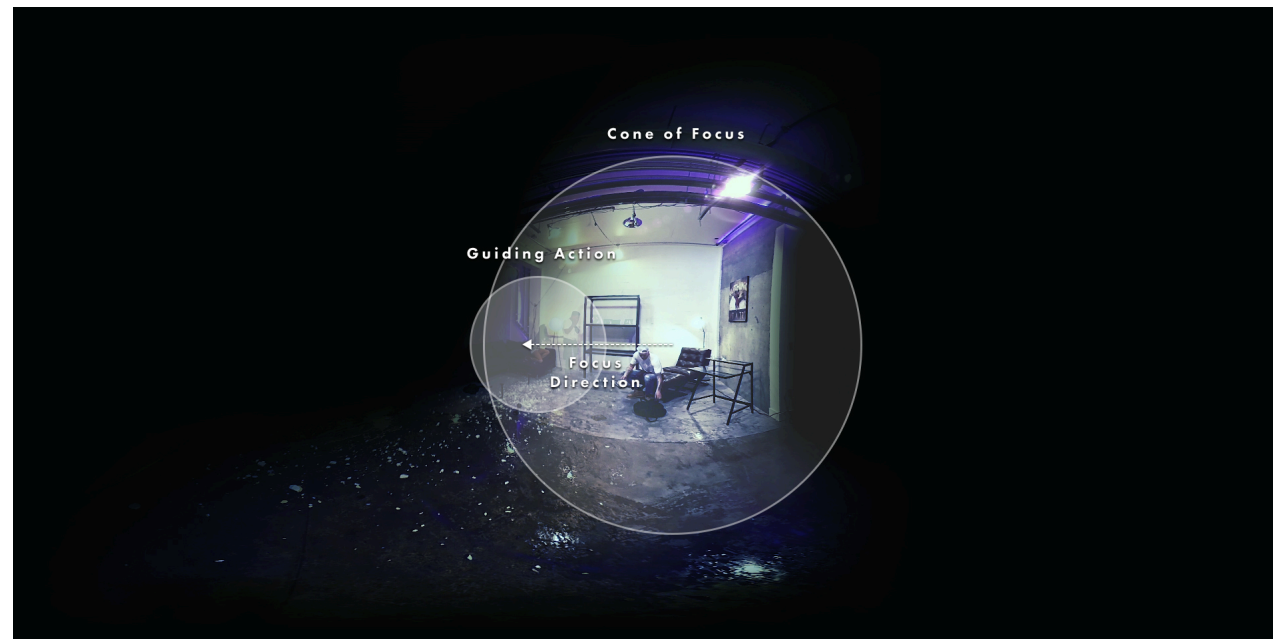
## Example: NEVER BOUT US







This is an unwrapped version of the Never Bout Us video. You can see here how, in this scene, we've laid action out based on the Cone of Focus. This video is a great example because it's extremely overt. We use dramatic lighting to tell the user where to look, and we map Cameron's path through the story to follow the lights.



We want the user's focus to shift to the left. To do this, we keep Cameron in the center of the frame and then display the secondary version of him, his "ghost", slightly to the left, just at the start of the user's peripheral vision.



As cameron moves to the left, following his ghost, we turn on more lights in that area, further drawing the user's focus. We call this the "guiding action".



Guiding actions are also extremely useful in scene changes. To avoid disorienting the user, we want to ensure that the important action in the next scene lines up with where their focus ended in the previous scene.



Here we end the scene far to the left with Cameron exiting through the door. We can safely bet that the user has been looking in this direction because all of the major action was happening over here.





When we cut to the next scene, we want the user looking at Cameron in the car. So, we position the shot so that Cameron exactly lines up with where the door was in the previous shot. As we transition scenes, the user never loses track of the main character. This helps them better stay within the flow of the narrative.

## What about room-scale VR?

“What about standing users?” “What about room scale?” “What’s the point of even creating in VR if we can’t use the full 360-degree area??” - All valid questions.

The answer so far is once again: think about what the user is doing and what you want them to focus on. In room-scale VR, action can happen literally ANYWHERE, because the user can change position without much discomfort. Even so, abruptly throwing important action behind the user can still be jarring. If a user is standing facing one direction, use lights and sound to guide them left or right leading up to the reveal behind them. If a user needs to interact with something in the environment, use visual cues to draw their attention to it. Don’t overwhelm them with too many things to do and see at once. Think of your VR story like theater or a theme park ride - pacing the experience in an intentional way is critical.

## Things to remember:

- **Consider how a user is positioned**

- Are they sitting, standing, walking?

- **Use audio/visual cues to tell your story**

- Don't tell a person where to look, show them. It's more engaging.

- **DON'T OVERWHELM YOUR SCENE**

- If everything is busy, nothing feels special.



**Now that you know these rules, *break them!***  
**(There are no rules, remember?)**

If there's a real point to this talk, it's this: As I said at the beginning, there really are no hard rules to VR storytelling. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, including me. What we really have here is a hypothesis, a foundation based on a relatively short timeline of production experiences. It doesn't matter how long a person has been working, how much money they have, how famous their projects are. No one is right all the time. Storytelling is a science, and like all science the hypotheses are only true until they are proven wrong. What I really hope you gain from this talk is something to test against, a set of techniques to try, a challenge to overcome.

Nothing would make me happier than to have all of these ideas proven wrong through great work. So let's all go out and make something! Inspire each other, teach each other something new. This is just where we've started, and there's a long way to go.

# Thank you

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Please share you thoughts, questions, and work with me!