



152. Creating Immersive Art Experiences that Spark Creativity with Allyson Lupovich

Allyson Lupovich: [00:00:00] I think as a brand and as a company, we're still, to this day, holding on to our core ethos of being a collaborative, like an extreme collaborative entity, and never forgetting that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:16] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, and your host.

We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. I am super excited as always because we are going to be able to have a conversation, actually, with an organization and group that I've been dying to get on the program for many, many, many months now. And so, I am very excited about the fact that we have Allyson Lupovich, who is the Director of Brand Content for Meow Wolf, which is in Santa Fe, an immersive experience company. And if you've not been there, it is one of the most sort of epic experiences, I think, that you can go and have. And so, we're super excited, Allyson, to have you talk with us about Meow Wolf today.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:01:29] I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:32] Absolutely. Okay. So, for our listeners who are not from the U.S. in particular and even for those who are but haven't had the opportunity to get to experience Meow Wolf. So, share with us what is this thing, because it's kind of a thing. It really is.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:01:51] It's the age old question, What is Meow Wolf? Well, Meow Wolf started as a small arts collective in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the southwest. Very small, only about five to six people who were all artists and kind of came together with the desire to make stuff and to make art. But not only just make art, create immersive experiences. And so, it started of as a small arts collective in Santa Fe, and then they started having parties, and they started expanding to the arts community in Santa Fe.

The arts community, and just the arts world in general, is kind of very limiting to a lot of artists. And I think there was just this need to have something else, something wild, something different in Santa Fe, and that's how Meow Wolf came to be originally. And over the years, they started expanding their practice and we started building larger and larger immersive experiences.

We got offered the opportunity, our first big opportunity was we built a gigantic immersive ship at the CCA, Center for Contemporary Arts, in Santa Fe which was up for a couple of months. And there was just this

insane, literally, giant ship that you might see kind of pirates and all of that stuff. And within the ship, people could explore. There's different compartments, different rooms, even interactive elements. There was the steer when you, like, spun it around, activated other elements in the room. And so, that was called The Due Return, and that was in 2012. And that was really our first big project.

And then, you know, we had to take it down and then started thinking like, "Damn. What if we created something that was permanent?" And fast forward to 2015, we got offered the opportunity to create House of Eternal Return, which was our first permanent exhibition in Santa Fe. With the help from George RR Martin, who you may know, who was the writer of Game of Thrones, he was kind of the catalyst to building House of Eternal Return, because he really helped fund the whole thing with our landlord.

And then, we created House of Eternal Return, which is still there. And, now, we have two other exhibitions. One in Vegas, which is Omega Mart, which I actually want to talk about the origins of Omega Mart a little bit too. And then, we have Convergence Station in Denver, and we're expanding to Texas now. We're building two brand new immersive experiences in both the Dallas-Forth Worth area and in Houston.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:52] That's really very exciting. And I think one of the reasons that I'd like what Meow Wolf is doing and the reason I wanted to bring it to Learning Unboxed is because it really honors the notion that humans like to play, and to explore, and to be immersed in an opportunity to learn. So, whether it's your learning about art, you're learning about yourself, you're learning about your community, you're learning about a specific topic, it doesn't make any difference. We have this innate desire, I think it is, to be completely absorbed in a thing that most folks, whether you're a visual learner or you're a tactile learner or an audio learner, it doesn't make any difference what your learning style is, we find that when we can be fully immersed in something, everybody can sort of find their space and place in that. And that's a unique way, I think, to think about this notion of how we absorb content.

And as schools are trying to figure out what should they be in a post-pandemic world is this great beautiful opportunity to say enough of what was, what if we can take the best lessons that are out there in the world and incorporate them into our day to day practice. And I would argue that the immersive experience in Meow Wolf is one of those best practices that everybody should think about as they're designing and developing.

So, I am curious and we will get into the new sites because I totally want to talk about that because I haven't seen those yet, so I'm super jazzed to have that experience. But as you're thinking about these new experiences that you're designing, what is sort of the core components, I guess, from a design standpoint that you're thinking about? What is the need that you're pulling in to each of these different experiences as you're expanding art work?

Allyson Lupovich: [00:06:43] Yeah. And I do want to say that over the years, we've definitely learned so much. Even when we first built House of Eternal Return, that was really the first time where we actually had to start thinking about this is not just an art experience. This has to be an accessible space for everybody of all ages. And it also has to be to code, fire code, and all of the things that go into it. So, there's just a plethora of things that go into building our experiences. But I do think that the number one thing that we're always keeping in mind is all age friendly. Our experiences are for everybody.

And I think that that's really important to the ethos of Meow Wolf, and not even just for building our actual experience, but for the content that we're showing on our brand pages, and within the experience as well. And so, when it comes to building our experiences, especially and like I said, we've learned so much over the years. I think House of Eternal Return, all of our exhibitions are ADA compliant. But I think as we've been building more and more experiences, they're becoming more and more accessible.

And so, when you look at the transgression of House of Eternal Return and Convergence Station, Convergence Station is our largest experience and it's also our most accessible as well. And it's, basically, almost 90 percent wheelchair accessible. And you can feel that when you're in the space.

And so, that is something that has become very, very important to us when we're making art is that it must be accessible to everybody. And that also includes, not only wheelchair accessibility, but also sight as well, and being accessible to low vision folks, and low hearing folks as well. So, there's many ways to access our exhibits, whether that's through sound, through touch, through physically moving and all of that. We like to really activate all of the senses in our immersive experiences, and that's really important.

And also thinking about with children, especially, like how can children engage with the work and the art. And a lot of that is through interactivity and how we're kind of creating our experiences. Like, when we're designing something, we always start with the very basic aspect of it. Some artist will create a creature, for example. And they're like, "Okay. This is the idea. We're creating this giant bear ferret that's going to live in the main part of the exhibit.

But then, what Meow Wolf really like to do is, "Okay. Well, we've designed this character and what's kind of the seventh side of the queue to this character? How can we just go beyond just having this creature in our exhibit and kind of turn it upside down and make it the wildest thing that it can? Is it when you touch its feathers, does its eyes light up?" Or does it activate a story element? Have you unlocked the story element that you never would have noticed would have happened? Or is there a sound element? Anyway, with Meow Wolf, we really like to start from the beginning of a very basic creative idea and continue to develop it until it can't be developed any further.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:46] And I'm super curious, too, so as you think about those elements then in your design and you put yourself or the team puts themselves in the place of that sort of end user, the guest is going through the experience, so how do you make decisions? Because you've got this incredibly creative group of people. And I can imagine the number of ideas being tossed, like darts at a dart board. There's got to be so many ideas that are coming forward. How do you, ultimately, wheedle that down?

Because I will say that, you know, that was one of the things in talking with teachers. Many of our listeners, obviously, are teachers. They're like, "There's all these great ideas, but figuring out just right ones and their combinations." And in your case, it's combinations of the best ideas that come together to create the experience. So, how do you ferret out the decision making piece as it relates to the experience of that end user that you have in mind? Because that's not an easy thing to do all the time.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:11:51] It's not. And I mean, we have creative directors, obviously, that oversee our exhibits. But I think the biggest part of being a creative director at Meow Wolf is you can't really play God where it's like, "This is my idea and this is how I want it to be." You really have to more so lead the creative process rather than tell other people what to do. And while the creative director might have a vision for something, it's everybody else's ideas that really feeds that vision.

So, like I mentioned, yes, we have creative directors and we kind of have a hierarchy of creative in how we're developing our exhibits. But the way that Meow Wolf works, it's insanely collaborative. And I think that is just so important where everybody has a voice in that process in building things. And the creative director is really the one kind of bringing everybody's ideas to life.

And that's why when you go to Meow Wolf's experiences, we're a maximal art collective and brand. We like to build on top of each other. And that's literally how our creative process is, is kind of starting with a vision and starting with an idea and having a team of people kind of bring it to life with other perspectives and other ideas.

It's kind of like the Exquisite Corpse, that's kind of like a very basic idea of kind of how Meow Wolf works. But it really is. You know, you start off with the beginning and then everybody else kind of builds off of it. And it kind of creates this beast that is filled with a multitude of facets and ideas.

And so, going back to my initial point of when you're a creative director, when you're leading a creative process, like I said, you don't want to play God and telling people what to do. Everybody else on your team have a voice in that creative process.

And I think, actually, my first experience with Meow Wolf was way before any of these permanent experiences were open. When I was at the College of Santa Fe and Meow Wolf had an interdisciplinary arts collective class that I took, it was like in my senior year - I went to lots of parties at Meow Wolf - this is how I was really introduced to the smaller collective. And, literally, the whole class got together and we threw all this different ideas. Like, "What do you want? What do you want to make?" "I want to make a playground. I want to make a music venue. I want to make a place where people can play music. I want to build a sand sculpture. I want to build a labyrinth made out of tires."

We, literally, were just throwing in all of these ideas. And I think it was Caity Kennedy, one of the senior creative directors and co-founders at Meow Wolf, she was like, "We can do all of that." And then, she was like, "Okay. We have all of these ideas. Now, how are we going to do it?" And they had a contractor on staff to help us, literally, bring all of these ideas to life. And it really just instilled this mentality of anything is possible. Literally, anything that you can dream of, you can bring to life. It's just a matter of finding the resources.

But, also, not only you, but having a community of people around you to build those ideas with you. And so, we literally built an outdoor playground with this massive tall structure that became kind of a stage. We built a labyrinth made out of tires and everybody had a tire that we all painted. We built a sandpit that was shaped like an owl. And then, there was someone else who built a sand sculpture within that pit. And we built this environment just from all of us coming together and just spilling out all of our ideas. And Meow Wolf kind of leading that process, that creative process.

And then, we had to name it and we all threw names in a hat, which is actually how Meow Wolf, the name, came to be. They threw in a bunch of names in a hat and then they just, literally, picked two words, meow and wolf, and put them together. And the rest is history exactly the same way.

So, just this insane sense of extreme collaborative environments is really how Meow Wolf came to be. And to this day, we still are, and it's how we create our exhibits. And we've definitely learned to add more structure and to add more organization, because we kind of had to as we grown. But I think as a brand and as a company, we're still, to this day, holding on to our core ethos of being collaborative, like an extreme collaborative entity, and never forgetting that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:21] Yeah. I love that. And I love the notion that you are really kind of honoring the individual and recognizing that the ideas don't have to even seem like they go together. But because we're operating in sort of a collaborative ecosystem that we've created, then those disparate ideas will have cohesion because of the collaborative process itself. I really love that. And I think it's a really unique way to sort of think about the collaborative process that I don't know that we've really talked about it quite like that on this program, so I really appreciate that.

Let's dig in a little bit and talk about the new ecosystems as Meow Wolf itself is expanding. Let's talk about the experience in Las Vegas. So, help our listeners sort of understand. So, if you have the opportunity to go there, what are you going to see? But more importantly, I guess, what are you going to experience? What's the gist of it?

Allyson Lupovich: [00:18:26] So, something that I actually forgot to mention that is so huge to what Meow Wolf is, is the accessible unknown. And Omega Mart is really the perfect example of that because, you show up, you're in a grocery store, and, obviously, something is not right. It seems like a normal grocery store. But as you kind of go through the aisles and you look at the products, you're like, "What is this place?" You'll kind of go deeper and you'll notice this multicolored spiel on the ground that kind of looks like it could be a portal to something else. And you're like, "That doesn't seem right."

And then, you go further and there's a fridge cooler with a bunch of weird drinks in it that don't make any sense. And you open the door and you, all of a sudden, are transported into a completely different dimension that is filled with psychedelic mountains and caves and a lot of stuff, a lot of weird stuff. And so, that's kind of what Omega Mart is.

And that's, obviously, just kind of like the basis of what it is. But as you dig deeper, you'll find out that it's more than just a grocery store. It's a father and a daughter run business that has gone haywire. And within, basically, their products and the larger company that runs this grocery store, there's something beyond this grocery store.

So, Omega Mart is really like the testament to Meow Wolf really strutting the line of immersive art, story telling, and actual psychedelic immergence as well. Because beyond the grocery store, there's art by Alex and Allyson Grey, who are just like the pioneers of psychedelic art. And there is just an insane amount of maximalist collaboration that goes beyond the grocery store.

Omega Mart in Las Vegas is actually the third iteration of what Omega Mart is. And it started off as a smaller art show in Santa Fe in 2009. And then, in 2012, there was a second iteration of it, where Meow Wolf actually worked with children to develop products. You know, they formed this collective called Chimera, where they were working with Santa Fe public schools. You know, they helped the kids design their own products without any limitations. I think there was one product called fruit troll ups, where they took fruit roll ups and the kid love trolls, and so they combined the two. And so, when you went into this grocery store, there's all these amazing products that were actually designed by children, which was amazing.

And then, the third iteration is, obviously, the permanent experience in Las Vegas where we've added a whole other story line and narrative to it, so that when people are going through it, they're not just kind of looking at the products and kind of experiencing it as a normal grocery store. They're, like, going upstairs to the factory office and going on one of the computers and digging through the files of whoever's computer this is and seeing a mystery unlock and unfold through these tiny little details and clues.

So, yeah, Omega Mart is really just an insane experience. And there was just hundreds of people that worked on it in different areas. Obviously, the art and the food and the products was a whole separate thing. But then, there is the story team. It developed the story line from start to finish. And then, there was a production team that created the content around that story that you can, like I mentioned, find on the computers and all of this different hidden areas if you really look for it. And it really allows all different kinds of people to be able to experience the exhibit in different ways.

And, actually, Omega Mart was the first experience where we tested our Boop Cards, which is a new way of accessing stories and our exhibits. And there's different stations where you're given a Boop Card and there's a symbol for the Boop Card and you flag your card in front of it and different things happen. And you're unlocking different parts of the story world. And it's been a huge success and it's really allowed a lot more accessibility to how people are finding out about the story and learning about it.

And teaching people how to dive deeper into the story, too. Because I feel like when you just go and you have all this hidden things, a lot of the time, not everybody is able to experience it because they don't see it or not the capacity to see these entry points to the story. So, yeah, Omega Mart is wild. And if you haven't been, I highly recommend going because it's really one of our most unique exhibits because Meow Wolf is inherently super maximal and appear that way.

But Omega Mart is very, very specific and has just a very unique story that I think a lot of people grasp on to pretty easily because, again, it's the accessible unknown. You know what a grocery store is and what lies beneath that grocery store. You know.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:47] Right. Yeah. And I love all of that. And I am super looking forward to the opportunity to actually get to see it and play with it myself.

I always like to wrap up the conversations by recognizing that we've got listeners having this shared experience with us, imagining to themselves, "Oh, this is super cool but, obviously, I can't take my kids to Santa Fe. I can't take my kids to Las Vegas, or Denver, or Dallas, or whatnot." But there have been elements of what I've heard Allyson talking about that I'm really jazzed or excited about. And so, I want to be able to take some of what I'm hearing today and apply it into my own day to day practice with my own kiddos and my own classroom.

Because you've lived so many different experiences with the Meow Wolf organization. I think that you're uniquely qualified, quite frankly, to sort of reflect back on that and say, "Look, if you've got two weeks and you want to do a project with your kiddos." What might that look like? Or what would your recommendation to an educator really be around how can I take some of the tenants of what, ultimately, becomes a successful Meow Wolf exhibit and turn into inward into my own classroom, my own experience with my students.

What would you tell somebody who's looking to explore in addition to, "Hey, go to the Meow Wolf YouTube channel because there's tons of ideas there." But how do you internalize that for somebody who's thinking about grabbing some of the concepts. And, quite frankly, the fun and excitement and the joy of being in an immersive experience.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:26:26] That's a tough one. I think, within the creative process, Meow Wolf really allows room and space for anybody to even think about the creative process and what that could be. And I think, even looking at the forest in House of Eternal Return, the forest was the most collaborative project in the early years of Meow Wolf. And I'll quote Catie Kennedy, she mentioned just a long time ago, "Digging deep, where is that place that your child self wanted to be?" And where is that place that they dreamt of being. And how can you just take that and make it come to life?

And I think it's just a matter of providing that space for the creative process and for the mind to wander. And just kind of ask your kids, ask whoever you're working with, "Where is that place that you want to be? And where do you want to go?" "I want to go to space. I want to go to a magical forest." And then, how do you make that come to life? I think it's just a matter of providing room for that creative thinking and really digging.

And then, also taking that and kind of, again, finding the seventh side of the cube to that magical forest is like, "How can we just make this but make it the craziest thing that we've ever done? Do you want to turn your classroom into a giant sparkly jungle because that's what somebody's dream was?" Like, why not? Why not spend the next two weeks with your class stapling things to the wall to create the classroom that they want to be in? And just providing that space and room to go wild and do the unimaginable.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:44] Yeah. Yeah. No. I really love that. And I think that we forget, sometimes along the way, we're so focused in the things that we think that we're supposed to be doing that we forget about the imaginative side of getting us there. And we can still do an awful lot of learning and experiencing along the way but it doesn't have to be that traditional path all the time. And I do think that some of the value of stepping back and allowing for the collaborative process within sort of this notion that I'm going to immerse my whole self in the act of learning.

And I think that's the other thing, in my mind when I think about experience, what happens at Meow Wolf, it's like you bring yourself to this experience. Including the parts of yourself, either you didn't recognize or maybe you had hidden or don't tap into everyday because there's just not enough room, or, to your point, space to allow me to do that. It's freeing.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:29:40] It is. Yeah. I mean, the creative process, it is very freeing. And, again, it can be hard to make room and space to be creative. But it's so important. And I think providing that space, especially our educational system, we built this very strict tight structures within our systems and at schools. Like, how can we just break those down?

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:13] Yeah. I love that. Absolutely. How can we? Let's do that collectively. Well, Allyson, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to sort of share what's happening with Meow Wolf and the excitement that you clearly have for the endeavor. So, we really appreciate it.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:30:30] Yeah. Anytime. It was really wonderful talking with you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:35] Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Allyson Lupovich: [00:30:35] All right. Take care.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:38] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:41] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.