Standing on the desert surface of Tatooine, you instinctively duck as the Millennium Falcon swoops in for a thunderous and dramatic landing beside you. Through the lenses of your virtual-reality headset, it looks real. That’s because it is, in the sense that it’s the same 3D computer model that appeared in “Star Wars: The Force Awakens.” After you help Han and Chewie complete an urgent repair, R2D2 presents you with a light saber. A squad of Stormtroopers appears on the distant ridge. Not to worry, The Force is strong with you.

The Force is also strong with Industrial Light & Magic’s Experience Lab (ILMxLAB), the supergroup of artists, engineers, sound designers, and storytellers prototyping the future of interactive, immersive cinema. This is their latest demonstration, titled “Trials on Tatooine.” The ILMxLAB is Lucasfilm’s R&D arm, leveraging graphics technology invented for traditional filmmaking and applying it to virtual reality, augmented reality—via a new partnership with Magic Leap—and theme-park attractions. (The latter is no surprise given that the Walt Disney Company acquired Lucasfilm in 2012.)

The ILMxLAB leverages the tools of traditional filmmaking and the principles of game design, but are wedded to neither, or perhaps both. John Gaeta, the group’s executive creative director who is best known for his dazzling special effects work on the “Matrix” trilogy, frames their efforts as first-person immersive storytelling, in which the story itself, not the game mechanics, sucks you in. The goal is to place compelling characters within a strong narrative that generates a natural pull to participate.

Indeed, this is the digital dream of all of the interdisciplinary auteurs who are experimenting with today’s virtual-reality systems.

“We want to make it plausible for storytellers to imagine allowing the audience inside these worlds as if they exist for real, not limited to fantasy,” Gaeta says.

And doing that requires rethinking a century of film grammar.

Here are four of the tensions, techniques, and strange behaviors emerging as pioneering artists, designers, and engineers write the future of VR storytelling.
No Disbelief to Suspend  In 1817, philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase “suspension of disbelief” to describe sacrificing our sense of what’s possible in order to fully appreciate a fictional story. Virtual reality, at its best, can flip that to the point that you are so immersed in the experience that belief in the simulation becomes your default state.

Nearly 20 years ago, media theorist Matthew Lombard explored the physical and psychological effects of this state, sometimes known as “presence.”

“A number of emerging technologies including virtual reality, simulation rides, video conferencing, home theater, and high-definition television are designed to provide media users with an illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated,” Lombard wrote in a technical paper.

Two decades later, we are finally at a point where virtual reality can make us digitally delusional. Presence is ready for prime time, says VR pioneer Chris Milk, creator of the critically acclaimed experiences “Walking New York” and “The Displaced.”

“Our brain is no longer translating an approximation of the story...” Milk says. “Instead of suspending your disbelief, you actually have to remind yourself not to believe.”

Beyond that, to quote The Beatles, nothing is real.

—David Pescovitz