MEOW WOLF

The Understory

A strategy for House of Eternal Return

Tye Tavaras / SCAD / Fall 2026



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From artist collective to immersive attraction

2008

Santa Fe artists formed a collective to make and share experimental art.

House of Eternal Return opened in 2016. Its combination of art and visitor participation became the foundation for expansion.



Building House of Eternal Return. Photograph courtesy of Meow Wolf.

Permanent exhibitions and expansion

2016

House of Eternal Return

Santa Fe, New Mexico

2021

Omega Mart

Las Vegas, Nevada

2021

Convergence Station

Denver, Colorado

2023

The Real Unreal

Grapevine, Texas

2024

Radio Tave

Houston, Texas

How the business earns revenue

Revenue source	What guests receive	Strategic role
Admission and upgrades	Timed entry, flexible entry and bundles	Converts interest into a visit
Retail and food	Collectibles, story artifacts and themed hospitality	Adds spending during the visit
Passes and programming	Portal Pass, music, community and private events	Creates opportunities to return
Story and digital content	Questing, comics, lore and online engagement	Extends the relationship beyond the building

The promise is permission to explore

Visitors enter a fictional world and decide what to follow.

The website sells the visit. Social content creates curiosity. Lore and fan communities keep the story going afterward.

That freedom shapes what the strategy needs to protect.



What I could observe remotely

Before booking

Access information and ticket choices shape whether someone can plan a visit with confidence.

During a visit

Guest reviews raise questions about story comprehension, route uncertainty and crowding.

After the visit

Portal Pass creates an offer to return. A changing experience needs to make that return worthwhile.

Part 2 Personal Observations

When does mystery become friction?

A guest can want to wander and still need help getting started.

The question is whether uncertainty leads to discovery or makes someone give up before finding what interests them.



Exhibition photograph from my interview walkthrough

What Scott Wolfson brought to the project

Co-founder and Chief Culture Officer / Centaurian AI

Innovation and design

Former Director of Design Thinking at KPMG Ignition. Helped build its Innovation Labs.

Strategy and storytelling

Former Senior Strategy Director at BCG BrightHouse. Emmy-winning storyteller.



Live interview / November 13, 2026

I built a detailed walkthrough of The Understory and used it to discuss the opportunity and each proposed pilot with him.

His visits changed what I would test

Experience or reaction	What it changed in my proposal
A guide made Omega Mart's story easier to follow	Test optional starting points before arrival
The timed scavenger hunt felt rushed	Keep orientation separate from time pressure
Solo exploration at Convergence Station felt immersive	Let guests choose how much guidance they use
Quieter windows and seasonal artist programs appealed	Test quieter sessions and a reason to return locally

Scott's examples came from Las Vegas and Denver. Santa Fe guests would test the local fit.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Interactive art generates attention and guest sharing	Story confusion and route uncertainty can interrupt discovery
Lore, retail, events and Portal Pass extend engagement	Crowds and sensory intensity compete with wandering
Sensory tools, staff training and local relationships already exist	Guests must assemble access and support information across touchpoints

Opportunities and threats

More ways to participate

Quiet, guided and open exploration can fit different visitor needs.

Price and perceived value

A more expensive visit raises expectations for what guests can do.

Local authorship and retail

Paid programs and story artifacts can make a second visit different.

Trust and operating costs

Growth, staffing and adaptations can strain both relationships and margins.

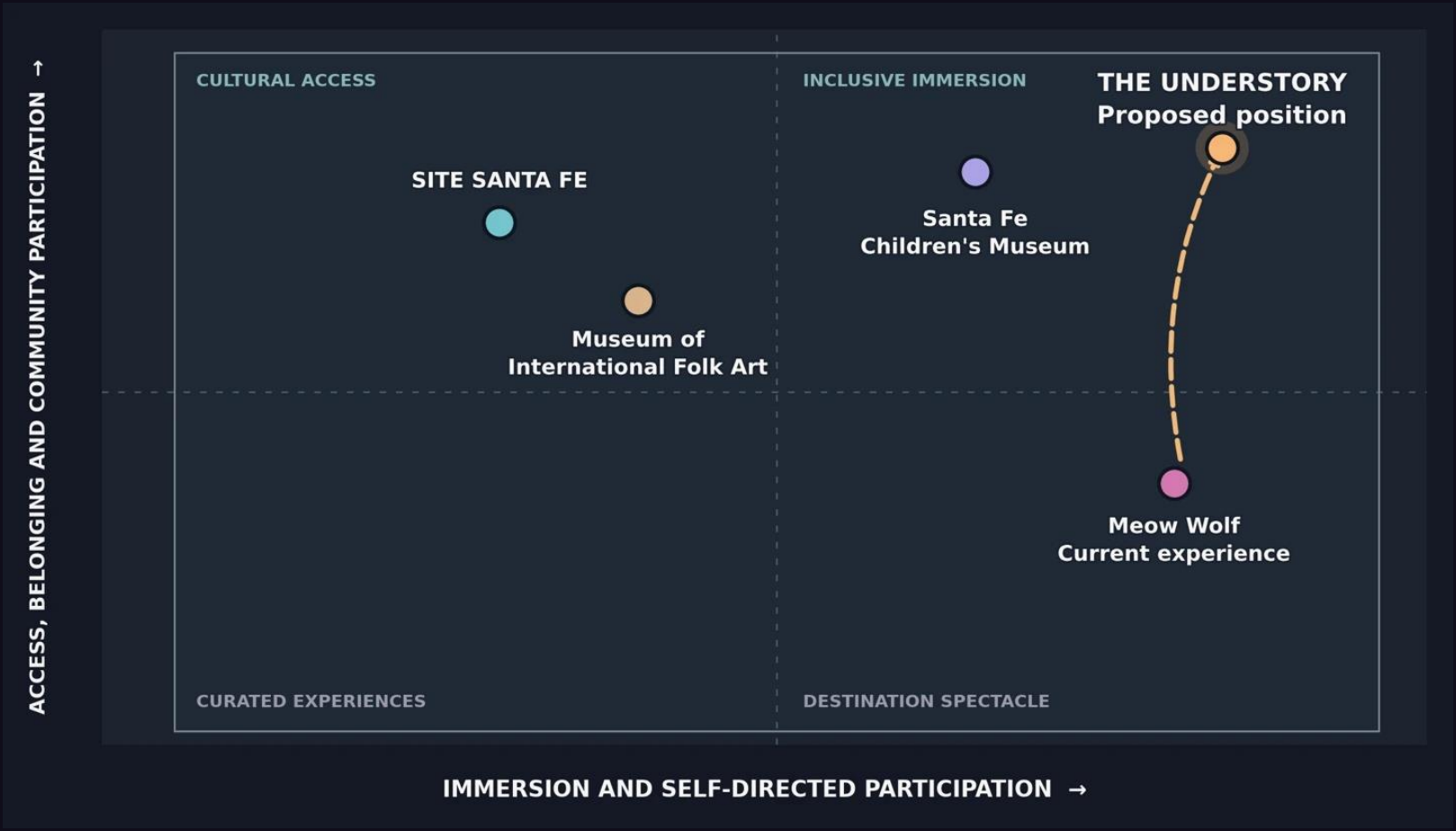
The current strategy has a clear tension

Area	What appears to work	What needs testing
Differentiation	Guests participate in a fictional world	How easily newcomers enter the story
Commercial model	Tiered admission and several ways to spend	Guest value relative to crowding and guidance
Access and community	Tools, discounts and artist relationships	A coherent journey and a reason for locals to return
Operations and culture	An established exhibition and frontline team	Staff capacity, artist terms and sustainable pilot costs

Santa Fe competes for the same visitor time

Competitor	What it does well	What I would learn
SITE SANTA FE	Free admission and approachable contemporary art	Lower the effort required to participate
Museum of International Folk Art	Cultural interpretation, demonstrations and artisan retail	Connect products to makers and meaning
Santa Fe Children's Museum	Hands-on learning and family access programs	Make participation part of everyday operations

Competitive positioning



Interpretive research assessment. The Understory marks a proposed future position.

Trust depends on operating choices

Local artists and frontline staff need a role in the pilot’s decisions.

Agree on pay, credit and retail terms. Include paid accessibility testers. Confirm who maintains routes and support information.



Rainbow Rainbow gives Santa Fe an existing community foundation.

The Understory

More control over how guests plan, explore and return

Before booking

One place to understand access and choose a starting point.

Inside and after the house

Optional orientation, quieter sessions and a changing local artist program.



Priority 1 Access planning

Guests should know what they can explore before paying.

Routes and barriers

Verify with Facilities and paid testers with disabilities

Sensory conditions and support

Consolidate existing guides and borrowing instructions

Ways to begin

Offer optional suggestions based on interest and motivation

Proposed lead / Guest Experience with Facilities and accessibility testers

Priority 2 Guest navigation

Optional orientation

A short introduction helps guests get started, find support and find their way out.

Quieter session test

Compare selected lower-capacity slots with similar standard sessions.

The test asks whether more room to wander improves the experience enough to justify the operating tradeoff.

Proposed lead / Site Operations with Creative and Finance

Santa Fe as coauthor

A changing artist program can give residents something different on their next visit.

Pay artists to shape two seasonal installments. Pair each with an optional story artifact or fieldbook and invite residents back.



Existing Meow Wolf artist collaboration, Virgil Ortiz

The first year has three goals

Month 6

Planning confidence
A verified access guide and guest test

Month 8

Navigation confidence
Orientation and a comparison of quieter sessions

Month 12

Resident participation
Two paid seasonal artist installments

Access comes first because it shapes who can participate. Navigation shapes the visit. Programming creates a reason to return.

The 12-month pilot timeline

	Months 1–3	Months 4–6	Months 7–9	Months 10–12
Access planning	Audit routes and gather needs	Publish, train and test	Maintain and resolve gaps	Review ongoing use
Navigation	Baseline and prototype	Orientation and matched tests	Decide which slots to keep	Monitor retained changes
Local program	Budget, pay and artist brief	Commission and prototype	First installment	Second installment and return review

Each phase ends with a decision to continue, revise or pause based on guest feedback and operating cost.

The first 30 days

Week 1

Name a Santa Fe sponsor and gather existing guest information.

Week 2

Hold the cross-functional working session and agree on the first test.

Week 3

Audit a sample journey with staff and paid accessibility testers.

Week 4

Present a pilot brief with an owner, costs and success measures.

Resources and decision ownership

Responsibility	Proposed owner	Resource to confirm
Route accuracy and guide updates	Guest Experience and Facilities	Staff time, tester pay and accessible formats
Orientation and capacity test	Operations, Creative and Finance	Training, staffing and foregone ticket revenue
Seasonal program and keepsake	Programming, Retail and artists	Artist fees, production and retail terms
Pilot approval and continuation	Site sponsor with Finance	Budget cap, evidence review and decision dates

Funding and staff commitments require a scoped pilot brief.

Three primary KPIs

+10 pp

Access planning confidence
Share finding needed information before booking
10 percentage points above baseline by month 6
Monthly

+10 pp

Navigation confidence
Share feeling confident navigating
10 percentage points above matched standard sessions
Each test, reviewed monthly

≥20%

Resident repeat participation
First-installment residents attending the second
At least 20% of trackable first attendees
After the second installment

Proposed pilot targets. Establish baselines and survey definitions before launch.

Balanced scorecard Guests and finances

Perspective	Objective and measure	Proposed target and owner
Customer	Planning confidence, navigation confidence and resident repeat participation	Primary KPI targets Guest Experience and Programming
Financial	Incremental pilot contribution after artist pay, staffing, production and displaced ticket contribution	Nonnegative contribution by second installment, or an approved subsidy Finance and site sponsor

A guest improvement and its operating cost need to appear in the same review.

Balanced scorecard Processes and learning

Perspective	Objective and measure	Proposed target and owner
Internal process	Reliable access information Verified segments divided by published pilot route segments	100% verified before launch Facilities and Guest Experience
Learning and growth	Staff can support the pilot Briefed staff divided by staff assigned to pilot sessions	100% briefed before launch Operations and training lead

Review route changes and staff feedback monthly so the information stays usable.

How I would evaluate the pilot

A consistent comparison

Use the same questions and orientation. Match time slots and report response counts.

A clear denominator

Count repeat participation among residents who opted into tracking.

Costs alongside experience

Review staffing, artist pay and ticket revenue with guest feedback.

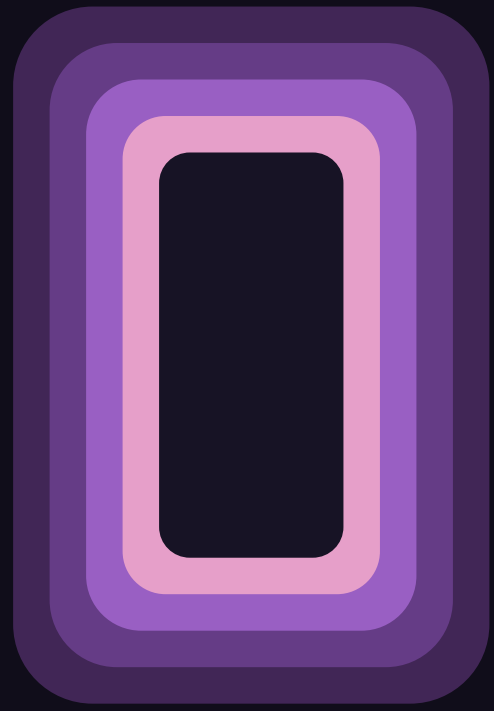
A decision after each phase

Continue what guests can use and staff can sustain. Revise or pause when the evidence falls short.

What changed in my thinking

I started by looking at what Meow Wolf could add.

I ended up asking what was already strong about the house and where people had trouble getting to it.



Next time, I would interview recent Santa Fe visitors early enough to change what I look for.

What I can carry into my work

Transferable skills

Competitive positioning, guest journey analysis and turning an idea into owned tasks.

Most enlightening

Nearby museums showed how access and local makers can shape an experience.

Least enlightening

Company history provided context. Guest decisions gave me more direction for the recommendation.

A course improvement

Add a midpoint observation or remote interview and show which assumption it changed.

Part 8 Project Reflection

The next decision is a Santa Fe pilot

The strongest opportunity is already inside the house.

Start with the access guide. Use the first year to learn what guests use, what brings residents back and what the team can sustain.

One to three years

Expand the changes that show guest value and viable costs.



Existing artist practice, Jacob Fisher

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