Interactive Characters in Narrative Places:
Implications and Applications for Awe, Education, and Advertising

A Thesis in
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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jacob Popčak entitled *Interactive Characters in Narrative Places: Implications and Applications for Awe, Education, and Advertising* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

For the modern designer, themed entertainment can serve as the bridge between the professional and categorical gaps separating traditional elements of design, storytelling, and lived experience. Although most closely associated with theme parks, the philosophy and practice of themed entertainment, what is sometimes termed "narrative placemaking," has disseminated throughout culture, influencing and informing everything from the way we learn (museums, science centers and memorials), to the way we eat (restaurants, bars and pubs), to the way we work and live (teams, businesses). Although the audience itself serves as the central protagonist in many of these narratives, the invented characters are often the most memorable and beloved element in a themed experience. These characters take many forms: animatronic, stationary statues, and costumed performers. But whatever form they take, these figures often seem to connect with audiences in a way no attraction, exhibit, eatery or organization likely could on its own. Such characters are therefore quite common in nearly every type of themed experience and they are often thought of within the collective consciousness as being part and parcel of narrative placemaking.

      The ubiquity of interactive characters within themed spaces of all sorts raises questions regarding the influences such figures have on a target audience. What about these characters makes them effective in reaching audiences, and how can these factors be accentuated or advanced? Conversely, what can be done to minimize the ineffective and negative elements sometimes historically associated with these characters, such as racism, colonialism, and manipulative capitalism? These questions are investigated within the body of this study.

About the Artist

Growing up, themed entertainment had a huge impact on me. My parents were prominent speakers, and their work often required that we travel as a family both nationally and internationally to their various engagements. Not ones to let work get in the way of family, my parents would always try to make time for some more child-friendly outing wherever we happened to be. Most often, this was some highly themed destination: a cultural center, a theme park, a museum of some sort.

Their busy travel schedule also necessitated my being homeschooled for much of my upbringing. Here, themed entertainment came to the rescue once again, as museums and educational centers became my classroom. Why study the digestive system when one could walk through a gigantic version of one at a science center? Why learn about colonial history in a classroom when one could visit a restored settlement complete with working shops and seasoned performers? As a traveling student and an aspiring artist at that, every day could be a field trip of a sort.

Beyond the entertaining and educational aspects, these early encounters of themed entertainment were valuable in another way. I learned firsthand the power of these experiences to strengthen my family's bonds, and to do likewise for all those whom I saw encounter them. Throughout my life, I repeatedly witnessed friendships formed over a shared visit to a cultural center or museum. I saw couples I knew choose to celebrate their honeymoons at a theme park destination. I saw parents learn something new about their children, or vice versa, through the shared experience of an exhibit exploring one or the other's point of passion. Themed

entertainment, in my eyes, is more than just another opportunity for education or entertainment: it represents environments where relationships can be formed, explored, and enriched.

Oftentimes, the characters we encountered as part of the experience became cognitive totems of the experience itself. More than the overall experience of Disneyland, I remember bonding with my father as we made a frenzied trek across multiple crowded lands in an effort to meet the elusive Donald Duck. At a cultural center dedicated to Canadian history, I remember taking my younger sister's hand as we excitedly ventured off to meet Anne Shirley of those titular Green Gables. I still recall how excited I was when an otherwise boring history lesson became an exciting event upon the arrival of an actual, genuine medieval knight to my local library's summer reading program.

In many cases, these memory totems became physical ones, as many of the destinations in which I found myself were clever enough to merchandise their characters. Though from the adult perspective such capitalizing on childhood experience might seem course and utilitarian, these toys and trinkets were (and remain) as much a part of the emotional experience as the characters and environments they represented. Somewhere among my belongings, I still have the plush penguin I gratefully received after meeting its living namesake at an aquatic park, as well as the tricorn hat I was given following a meeting with none other than George Washington himself while on a visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

Now grown, I am able to look back upon these memories and see how these many elements (story, space, character, and even commerce) were united to create experiences of awe which left a lasting impression. These experiences of awe outlived their comparatively momentary expressions of pure entertainment, leaving behind closer familial and social bonds,

sustained educational lessons, and successfully marketed messages made physical with personally meaningful merchandise.

As a maturing artist in my own right, I now hope to use my craft to create for others the same types of experiences which were so meaningful for me. By seeking a career in themed entertainment, I aim not to recreate but rather to improve upon what has already been accomplished within this field. I wonder: how can these experiences of awe be better understood, explained, and established? How can the sorts of lessons I learned be even better communicated, and in more diverse environments? How can the kinds of meaningful marketing I experienced through themed entertainment and interactive characters be made more effective?

At the same time, the social awareness I've developed since my childhood introduction to themed entertainment also demands of me less pleasant questions. I recognize that themed entertainment, like any art form, can also communicate the worst of our society, such as racism, ethnocentrism, and more. I am left to wonder how such things might be rooted out from my pursuit of the craft as I move forward. Artists of every discipline must seek constantly to reduce the negative and increase the positive in whatever their chosen field. Themed entertainment professionals must do the same.

Introduction

In the modern entertainment landscape, the impact of themed entertainment can be seen on every level, from vacation destinations to local restaurants (Brown & Patterson). Abstractly defined as "the creation of a dimensional story experience unified by a theme," examples of themed entertainment, or "narrative placemaking," as it is sometimes also called, can be found in almost any category (Younger 3). These dimensional stories, "open a dynamic territory between dualistic notions of place and space, myth and reality, work and play" and are therefore

extremely popular among adults and children alike (Jeffers 221). Examples of themed

entertainment can be found in a variety of venues and environments, including vacation

destinations like Disneyland in Anaheim, California; educational centers and museums like

COSI in Columbus, Ohio; casinos and hotels like the Venetian in Las Vegas, Nevada and even

one's local "Irish" pub. Themed entertainment and the "dimensional stories" it tells can elevate

experiences, entertain audiences, and communicate messages with great efficacy.
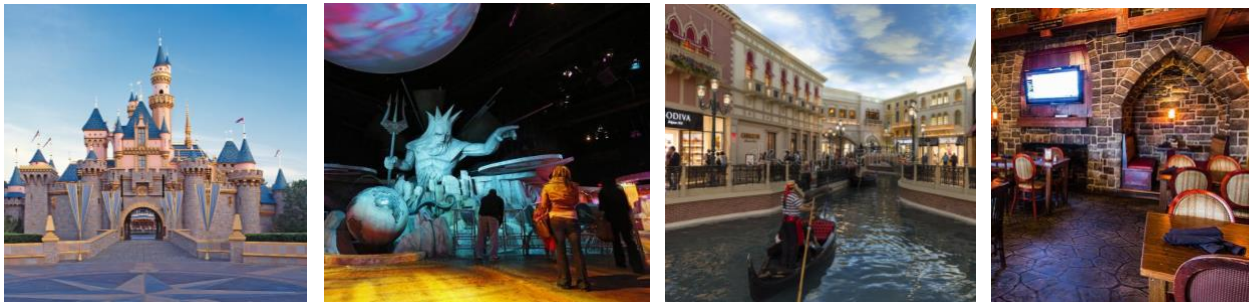

Figure 1 (from left to right): Disneyland gives guests the impression that they're in another world; COSI uses themed entertainment to educate about oceans; the Venetian recreates the canals of Venice within the interior of a hotel; Claddagh Irish Pub is less authentically Irish than it is "themed" to a hyper real version of Ireland according to the collective imagination.

Regardless of venue or subject, character is vital to any themed entertainment experience.

On one level, this has to do with the basic structure of narratives themselves; stories, after all,

must have characters. Granted, in the kinds of dimensional stories that themed experiences tell,

audiences themselves represent primary characters (Sklar); they can serve as accomplices to a

heist, as guests at a royal birthday party, or as any other role the story needs them to fill in order

to involve them in the real time action of an attraction or experience. As Professor Ian Kay

writes, "An Experiential Story is about us. That's right, us! You and me and all who've come to

this happy place are each, individually, its protagonists. It's the chronicle of our experiences as

we attend an attraction" (Kay, "Pure Imagineering").

But these audience-filled roles do not comprise a full-fledged story. After all, a themed experience is most often meant to represent, to one degree or another, a livable world and a hyper real place-within-a-place. As Creative Designer David Younger points out, "being a living world, it is expected by the guest that each land will be populated by its own citizens and not just the crowds of other guests. From two-dimensional representations of characters… through to static and animatronic sculptural characters, through to live performers, characters become a key part of the theme park experience" (362). Characters give a themed environment a greater sense of realism. Without them, an area would seem empty, uninhabited, and lacking.

Additionally, characters can also provide audiences with an emotional connection to the dimensional story itself. The impact of these characters, "is powerful and immediate because they tap into the emotional needs of their audiences" (Bennett & Thomson 227). The Carnegie Museum of Natural History, for instance, did its utmost to communicate the known science of the Cretaceous period, but this lesson reached the "next level" of effectiveness when a new dinosaur character was instituted to teach it better than could signs and placards. A ride like *Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout!* in which a fictionalized escape is the inciting event can be an excellent source of narrative drama, but add a character in need of rescue and audiences will connect with the higher emotional stakes. A tiki bar like *Trader Sam's Grog Grotto* and others represent one of the earliest examples of themed entertainment as we know it. Such an institution may attract guests, but the same establishment with the addition of a fictionalized history based on some faux founder garners fans as well as diners.

Figure 2 (from left to right): The Carnegie Museum of Natural History lets kids pet "Spiny," a "real" dinosaur; Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout! *invites guests to help save a beloved character;* Trader Sam's Grog Grotto *plusses the Tiki Bar with a fictional founder.*

Some researchers have even argued that the reason for this apparent trend lies in evolutionary biopsychology. According to this theory, mascot characters are able to illicit in audiences – especially young audiences – a sense of *kin recognition*, or a deeper level of empathetic connection (Veer 8). This connection extends not only to the character, but also to the experience, service, or product the character represents. "There's more to mascots' popularity than consumer nostalgia and managerial adoration," writes Brown. "There's a deeper driving force; humankind's anthropomorphic urge. We interpret the world in human terms and have done so since the dawn of time" (Brown & Ponsonby-McCabe 9). Humans see themselves in the characters they love, so the addition of these characters to a livable narrative can only serve to provide an audience with just one more means of personal, meaningful connection to the experience in question.

Walt Disney, one of the primary originators of themed entertainment as it is now understood, was no stranger to this reality. Designer Bill Justice relates: "Walt told me, 'Other places have thrill rides and bands and trains. Only we have our characters.' [The characters] were very important to Walt" (Stewart 6). The available data seems to indicate that Disney was more correct than he could have known. For instance, research has shown that the positive physiological responses of children to the greeting of mascot characters in a Disney park far

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exceeds the responses of those same children when encountering other stimuli (rides, shows, etc.) in the same environment (Pettigrew). The relationships audiences form with these fictional characters can actually encourage return visits as well: "Previous meetings with the mascots have left memories, and connect expectations of everyday life with the upcoming visits" (Cardell 106).

Characters with whom guests can interact are therefore inseparable from the kinds of dimensional stories that themed entertainment seeks to tell. Of course, this is in part practical: stories need characters and places need indigenous inhabitants. Moreover, it is emotional. Interactive, physical characters provide audiences with the means by which they can empathetically connect to the experience as a whole, and furthermore ensure that they return to those experiences and to those characters again and again.

With this information in mind, the designer would do well to question how the effects of encountering a character within a themed setting could be improved upon. How can the emotional and bonding components of these experiences be heightened? In those instances in which the character in question is meant to communicate a lesson or message of some kind, what can be done to improve upon the communication method and indeed upon the character's ability to communicate it? And in the aforementioned cases in which commerce plays a role in the audience-character experience, what could be done to advance the character's capacity to market, advertise, or drive more corporate elements?

Conversely, it is also worth questioning how the occasionally negative elements of characters and character interactions within themed environments could be minimized or eliminated entirely. For instance, certain themed environments have sometimes been accused of cultural appropriation and even outright racism, while others have occasionally been accused of

promoting problematic values and ideals. This phenomenon includes examples in which cultures are stereotypically depicted, problematic perspectives are subversively promoted, and certain cultural, ethnic and religious groups are denied representation (Foley). The designer should certainly question any instance in which these accusations have been legitimate, and furthermore give ample research to how such situations can be rectified or otherwise avoided.

The remainder of this thesis devotes itself to exploring the answers to the above questions. Focusing specifically on the microcosmic example of interactive characters as they appear within narrative placemaking, as has already been established, this thesis gains insights on three different levels: first, awe, as a psychosocial personal and bonding experience within the context of narrative placemaking. Second, education, and how it can be more effectively communicated through characters in themed environments. Third and finally, commerce, with a particular focus on how themed entertainment and interactive characters can be utilized towards greater ethical effectiveness. This thesis also focuses on the ideology and circulation of stereotypes within themed entertainment. The contemporary designer has an ethical responsibility to be critical, first of himself in his reaction to familiar use of clichéd images. Finally, we will apply the findings of our analysis to an original project.

Exploring Awe

Awe is not a phenomenon discussed often within the realm of entertainment. To most minds, awe belongs primarily in the category of religious experience (Wolfe 336). However, when understood properly, experiences of awe can have profound implications for themed entertainment and especially for the characters which so often accompany it.

I myself remember experiencing awe on several themed entertainment-related occasions. Catching a first glimpse of the recreated Mayan pyramid which takes center stage at Mexico's

Xcaret park was one; meeting Mickey Mouse for the first time at Disneyland represents another. Although hard to describe, I remember experiencing in both these instances and others an emotional phenomenon which can only be described as "awe."

When pressed for a definition of "awe" as an experience, one might be tempted to assign to it some synonymous relationship with transcendence. This is in fact not a bad guess, and is partially true, but this analysis deserves a more precise definition. Author Neil Wolfe defines awe as, "an experience of amazement in the face of an overwhelming stimulus" (337). Already, even this vague definition brings with it both clarity and a certain degree of sense for the designer of a character or themed entertainment experience. After all, narrative placemaking is filled with overwhelming stimuli intentionally designed to amaze audiences of all ages. Even a minimally-themed attraction like the ubiquitous roller coaster is constructed with the express intention of overwhelming and amazing its riders.

The question, however, remains: in what ways and by what means do the feeling of being amazed and the feeling of being overwhelmed combine to create awe? Evidently, not every amazing or overwhelming experience lends itself to awe. It is hard to imagine, for instance, a person experiencing awe over a particularly large to-do list, although such is certainly overwhelming. One might have similar difficulty imagining a person giving themselves over to awe after witnessing a particularly unique pet trick, although the situation may very well be "amazing," at least in a common sense.

To more precisely understand awe, researchers Keltner and Haidt propose a two-fold prototypical perspective. Experiences of awe, they suggest, can be dissected into two separate but interdependent categories: *vastness* and *accommodation* (303). Vastness, for its part, holds the most in common with Wolfe's definition regarding amazement in the face of an

overwhelming stimulus. "Vastness," they concluded, "refers to anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference" (303).

The vastness they describe is not merely literal. The researchers elaborate that "vastness" pertains to emotional size as well as to physical (Keltner & Haidt). A favorite celebrity in the eyes of a fan, for instance, could be seen as vast. The experience of a jarring weather pattern like thunder and lightning or a striking spiritual encounter with a ghost or phantasm could similarly be described as vast. Such stimuli to some extent defy the assignment of precise size yet are certainly vast to those who experience them.

The second component of the researchers' prototypical perspective was defined as "accommodation" (Keltner & Haidt 304). This latter category describes those instances in which the vastness of a stimuli is so great that it necessitates an update to one's mental schemas, or the preconceived categories one has for the structure and order of reality (Rudd, Vhos & Aaker 1130). For example, a child whose preconceived category or *schema* of a bird as a very small winged creature with a beak may be overwhelmed and amazed to the point of awe when forced to *accommodate* an encounter with an ostrich. An ostrich, after all, is a bird, but nevertheless defies any notion said child could hold in regards to the definition of a bird.

Together, vastness and accommodation create the groundwork for the emotional experience of awe, but there are other components too. Wolfe, for instance, holds that awe necessarily prompts a decreased sense of individuation, replaced with a sense that one is a comparatively small part of something greater (337). Even Keltner and Haidt cede that threat, the vague sense that a stimulus could pose a personal danger, and beauty, which includes aesthetic,

biophilic, and even procreative components, may play a significant role in constituting awe (304).

Whatever the precise recipe, a consensus regarding awe seems to conclude this: that to experience awe is to encounter stimuli of at least some aesthetic merit, which overwhelms and amazes one right up until the point of fear, but not quite. Within a religious context, this final element of the transcendent experience might be referred to as the "Be Not Afraid" factor. In every supernatural experience of awe, a reassurance from the angel, fairy, or deity in question that there is nothing to fear is both welcome and necessary. Experiences of awe within the context of narrative placemaking are no different; amidst the wonder and the growing sense of dread, there must be some assurance that everything will come out alright in the end. This anticlimactic cessation of wonder before terror can be introduced is of fundamental importance, as it marks the difference between pleasure and trauma. This premise takes into account all the aforementioned components, including vastness, accommodation, threat, and beauty. The remaining component, reduced individuation, deserves greater inquiry and will therefore be addressed by this study in short order.

Before this is addressed, however, we are compelled to examine more deeply how the established information regarding awe applies and pertains to themed entertainment. Themed experiences, especially character encounters within themed experiences, have a particular capacity to inspire awe according to the documented perspective. Such environments and figures mirror nature insofar as will give aesthetic comfort to the audience, but they ultimately use this hyper real pantomime of nature as a jumping-off point for vastness and accommodation. For instance, a mountain-themed attraction like Walt Disney World's *Expedition Everest* or the focal point of Universal Studios Florida's *Volcano Bay* present a hyper real version of a familiar-

enough mountain range. This appearance of nature comforts an audience and provides a sense of

place. These attractions are also vast both in physical size – the structures dwarf the audience –

and in emotional weight. A mountain, after all, can be very imposing. These attractions further

demand an adjustment to the schemas of the audience, as the experiences offered by the

attractions are unlikely to match anyone's preconceived notions of either a mountain or a

traditional roller coaster. Finally, they provide a sense of aesthetic beauty with ancient boulders

and rushing waterfalls, and even a sense of threat: if we go up the mountain, how do we get back

down? Does something sinister reside in the mountain, and if so, how do we escape it?

Altogether, these attractions are designed to include all the elements needed for awe to arise.

Figure 3 (left to right): Disney's Expedition Everest *and Universal Studio's* Volcano Bay *create the perfect themed environments for inducing a sense of genuine awe among their visiting guests.*

Character encounters within a themed experience are no different. Meeting Winnie-the-

Pooh at Disneyland or Scooby Doo at Universal Studios inspires first a sense of both literal and

emotional vastness ("my, what a very large and also very personally meaningful bear/dog!").

Second, they necessitate accommodation, as both characters certainly bear little resemblance to

the real-life animals upon which they are based. Third, they have about them a sense of aesthetic

beauty, with bold colors and safely rounded forms, but nevertheless give off a vague sense of

threat. After all, they really *are* terribly large creatures.

Figure 4 (left to right): Guests meet Winnie-the-Pooh at the Disneyland Resort; Hanna Barbera Characters Daphne and Scooby Doo await guests at Universal Studios Florida.

In the cases of both the attractions and the characters, therefore, the ingredients for overwhelming and amazing a guest are realized: an appearance of vastness, a demand for accommodation, a sense of threat, and aesthetic attraction. But in order to induce awe by ceasing wonder before the line into terror and trauma is crossed, designers often implement a particular specialized tactic: "toyness." Toyness is a themed entertainment design term which refers to the principle that an object, "benefits from being in some sense akin to a toy… Toyness keeps the [object] as something that can be played with, and encourages guests to take a childlike perspective" (Younger 166). By exaggerating the look and feel of an attraction or character into a sense of hyper reality, the designer allows the audience to experience an unspoken sense of safety. Of course, other tactics are also utilized to reassure guests and introduce the anticlimax. Jump scares, for instance, are a particularly popular way to make an audience feel as though they have organically escaped threat, when no true threat was ever present (Schmitz). But toyness remains a most popular technique, as it applies to everything from rides to characters and to a whole manner of emotional environments and stakes (Younger).

With all the components for awe in place, it is easy to see why encountering a character within a themed environment could be an impactful experience. Transcending the experiential wonder of the interactive character, however, is the essence of the encounter itself. It is in the

encounter that the lasting power of awe truly rests, and it is through this element that the aforementioned component of reduced individuation comes into play (Wolfe).

Character encounters are inherently relational (Younger). This is true in two ways: in an encounter with an interactive character, there is the primary relationship between the audience member and the character itself, but there is also the shared relationship between audience members experiencing the character at the same time. This latter form of relationship includes families or clusters of friends who consciously intend to encounter a certain character together, but it is not limited to such outwardly intimate groups. All those who wait in line together, or dine together, or merely share an environment do so on the grounds of an unspoken relationship built upon shared experience. These experiences are bonding, not just between guest and character, but between guest and guest. They establish an invisible connection, a kind of Masonic handshake, between individuals who remain strangers even after the experience has concluded. Whatever their differences, they have both met a character, existed however momentarily within a place, and made a memory together. It is this shared experience which ultimately creates the grounds for the reduced individuation necessary for an experience of awe. The feeling of being part of something larger than oneself can be truly humbling, even if that something is merely the crowd in which one gathers to see Tinkerbell during a nighttime fireworks show.

These shared experiences of awe should not be seen superficially. Research has shown that, "awe promotes group coordination and cohesiveness… by generating feelings of interconnectedness and common humanity" (Stellar 4). Nor can the prosocial benefits of these shared awe experiences be portrayed as strictly ephemeral. "People induced to feel awe… [are] more willing to volunteer their time, prefer experiential goods over material ones, and experience

a boost in life satisfaction (Rudd et al. 1130). We see, therefore, that the personal and social impact of awe is lasting and significant.

With these findings in mind, the reasons for and means by which a designer should seek to illicit awe within narrative placemaking and through character interactions becomes clear. Themed entertainment professionals should intentionally seek to design characters and attractions which impart a perception of vastness, necessitate accommodation, and maintain both aesthetic attraction and a sense of threat. By inducing awe via these means, the designer ensures that guests not only connect with the attraction or character in question, but with one another as well. These connections help to ensure return visits to the themed experience, but also create happier, healthier, and more fulfilled audiences within the experience and within the broader scope of our shared society.

Exploring Education

Building on what we have come to understand regarding the interpersonal connection possible between audience and character, it is not difficult to imagine how this connection might be utilized for educational purposes. To the educator, themed environments, "can be explored as a cultural vortex whose swirling forces contribute to the construction of knowledge, even as they open a dynamic territory between dualistic notions of place and space, myth and reality, work and play" (Jeffers 221). This multidimensional "territory" is rife with opportunities for learning, and interactive characters only advance this potential: "Likeable mascots offer a new channel to reach unengaged students, open conversations, [and] deliver criticism in a well-received manner" (Bennett 235). For the purposes of this analyses, the types of learning opportunities offered by characters within a themed space can be divided into two categories: *explicit* and *experiential*.

Explicit education is likely what most would imagine when thinking of ways in which an interactive character could educate an audience. In this type, the message is presented didactically with a clear end goal in mind. However, just because the lesson is more traditionally communicated does not mean that the interactive character has to play the role of teacher. In fact, the most educationally effective character acts as a kind of, "perpetual, idealized student; similar but better informed than most and available as a friend, mentor, and leader who can bridge the gap between the professional service and clients too anxious to approach it" (Bennett 229).

A good example of this can be found in the case of the Museum of the Rockies' *T. Rex on Trial* traveling exhibit, which I experienced as a boy (Petruzzini). In the attraction, guests were led linearly through a *CSI*-style crime scene and court room drama, guided by dinosaur-lawyers who argued over whether the tyrannosaurus rex was a carnivore or a scavenger. We the audience, for our part, played jury, and it was up to us to decide the t-rex's verdict: was he guilty of murdering a triceratops, or was he merely caught searching for leftovers? In this context, the lawyers and even the t-rex himself acted as the interactive characters and, by extension, the primary educators. They presented the information clearly and with no pretense that they had any other goal than to inform the audience. Nevertheless, their lesson was an immersive one in which character, place, and audience all served the overarching narrative and in which all parties learned *together*.

Experiential education, on the other hand, is far subtler. Lessons communicated via this modality do so on the basis of *experiential stories*, defined by Younger as, "those which essentially lack any story behind the high concept" (99). This type of narrative lacks the structure of a traditional beginning-middle-end format, and instead relies upon a series of "forensic stories" to give an audience the feeling that they have just arrived in a separate space with the

action in full swing (Kay). In such stories, environmental details indicate the big picture: a large

boot print in the ground suggests that a giant has recently come by; a robot typing coordinates

frantically on a computer suggests that a big adventure is about to begin. The characters in these

stories serve similarly forensic roles. Their lives and personalities are depicted as already being

in motion when the guests arrive, and their coexistence reveals a broader narrative than any one

character could on its own.

When an educational component is added to an experiential story, the lesson and the

narrative become one and the same. All of the elements including characters and forensic details

serve the lesson, and guests and observers absorb that lesson simply by abiding within the

environment. Renaissance festivals and pioneer villages represent excellent examples of

experiential stories *and* experiential education.

Figure 5 (from left to right): Museum of the Rockies' T. Rex on Trial *exhibit teaches an explicit lesson through creative means; Idlewild's Storybook Forest retells 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' as a forensic story with partially-eaten porridge; the presence of a blacksmith at a Renaissance festival teaches an environmental lesson about how people lived in the past.*

A blacksmith in such an environment is not waiting around to teach students the eccentricities of

metal-working. Instead, he is supposedly working in his shop as always. When passersby *do*

arrive, he will gladly educate them regarding a few key details of his trade, but only as a

momentary diversion from his primary goal of blacksmithing. Admittedly, one might point out

that there is an element of explicit education to the blacksmith's lesson; after all, he is directly

showing and telling how his work is done. When the blacksmith's narrative is joined with the

narratives of others in his world, however, a clear picture of their day-and-age is portrayed and

the broader lesson is successfully communicated. In this example, then, the blacksmith's lesson

regarding his craft may be *explicit*, but the lesson taught by his presence and that of his medieval

neighbors is *experiential*.

In both types of education, the benefits of narrative placemaking and interactive

characters is clear. Themed environments, for their part, hold, "educational value for students

and teachers when these cultural sites… are understood as sites of experiential learning" (Jeffers

221). The interactive characters who call these environments home add another level of meaning,

personal connection, and emotional impact. As indicated in this study's section on awe,

audiences are able to connect with interactive characters on several levels, meaning that any

lesson communicated by one of these characters is done so more effectively than without one

(Veer; Brown). Students are more likely to connect with the message if they care about the

character teaching it or, in many cases, learning it along with them (Bennett).

Designers of themed experiences and characters should take into account the educational

potential of their creations at the outset. On one level, doing so will allow the designer to

streamline how lessons and messages are being communicated. On another level, though, doing

so will allow the designer to recognize if an *unintended* lesson is being communicated, and to

correct accordingly. After all, in the case of experiential stories, a great deal of interpretation is

left up to the audience. Designers must therefore be careful when considering what lessons are

being conveyed by a given experience or character, as well as what lessons *are not* (Nooshin). In

the aforementioned case of the Renaissance festival blacksmith, for instance, what conclusions

are audiences going to draw regarding that historical period after witnessing the presence of

certain types of professions, races, and cultures? What conclusions will be drawn by the apparent lack of others? Since experiential and forensic stories are set up as separate worlds and events within separate worlds respectively, specific lessons, messages and takeaways are left entirely up to the audience to decipher. While it is therefore savvy for an educator to take into account the incredible potential of narrative placemaking and interactive characters, it is of profound importance that designers take into account all of the limits, gaps, and unintended messages made available by their medium.

Exploring Advertising and Commerce

Although it arrives last in our analysis, commerce is perhaps the most familiar arena in which audiences expect to find interactive characters. Marketing events nearly always have some interactive representation of their company's brand, sports teams send forth mascots to inspire merchandise sales, and nearly every product on the shelf has a character to go with it (Brown & Ponsonby-McCabe). Even within the context of narrative placemaking, consumers are familiar to the point of humor with the "exit through the gift shop" phenomenon associated with many themed rides and attractions. Interactive characters are no strangers to such environments. In the modern themed entertainment landscape, a gift shop is never a gift shop; it's the treasure room of a famous pirate, the headquarters of a space explorer, or the home of some adorable animal. "Shop design walks the line between continuing the story and being economically viable, though at its best the former can spur on the latter" (Younger 349). The presence of these shops is narrative as well as commercial, and must appear so consistently to guests and employees alike. Also called, "attraction stores," the capitalistic elements of these retail locations are supposedly incidental to their primary importance as being a place of significance for a significant character (Younger). Research has shown that this tactic is extremely effective and that characters

associated with commerce, "provide a higher degree of appeal, attention, and customer recall ability compared with when this technique is not used" (Malik & Guptha 128). The characters in these contexts are therefore carnival barkers in as much as they are citizens of a themed environment. A guest comes for the character, but stays for the merchandise.

That said, one would do well not to become too cynical about the relationship between advertising and characters, commerce and narrative placemaking. The funds derived from retail are of course necessary for the upkeep of most themed experiences. Beyond any financial importance, though, the relationship between characters and commerce has prosocial and emotional significance worthy of exploration.

This analysis has already made mention of how a souvenir, especially when associated with a beloved interactive character, can serve as a memory totem for an emotionally significant experience. To illustrate this, I recalled the plush penguin I gratefully received after meeting its living namesake at an aquatic park, as well as the tricorn hat I was given while on a visit to Colonial Williamsburg. The shops which retail such souvenirs therefore, "proclaim themselves to be in the business of creating memories, of setting the stage for an ephemeral event that can be encoded in a souvenir, and recovered mnemonically, in contemplation, through play" (Sherry 200). The memories and emotions of a consumer is no small thing, and insofar as merchandise serves as a vessel for memory and emotionally significant experience, it too is significant. This, by extension, makes the character significant, as the souvenir represents the character and the character represents the souvenir. Both represent the themed environment in which the character resides, the souvenir was purchased, and the emotional experience was first felt. As such, character, place, and purchase become a kind of commercial holy trinity, each one inseparable from the others.

Like the experiences of awe discussed earlier in this analysis, the happiness induced by these character-inspired purchases can, in certain cases, be lasting. In a recent study of over 1,500 undergraduate students on summer break, researchers found that, "both experiential purchases and prosocial spending during summer break were associated with greater post-break happiness, but only when these purchases had a positive influence on the purchasers' social relationships" (Yamaguchi et al. 2) In other words, purchases which were other-focused or which pertained to experiences ultimately generated long-term satisfaction, so long as the purchases represented or followed social bonding. This explains, at least in part, the prevailing popularity of post-ride photo frames featuring an attraction's characters, as well as other products which more literally represent an experience. Such purchases are bonding, as they give a group a memory totem signifying a shared experience, thereby ensconcing the shared experience for posterity. The more totemic of a memory a product is, therefore, the more satisfying it remains over the long term.

The prosocial implications for character-associated commerce exist behind the counter as well as in front. Beyond serving as a memory totem for consumers, characters can actually serve as organizational totems around which employees can unite. Like the banners that brought together medieval houses under a single heraldic symbol, "brand mascots are treasured organizational assets that organizational members put 'on a pedestal'… this attachment partly comes from the fact that brand mascots often operate as symbolic proxies for a company's values and even its competitive strategy" (Cayla 2) These characters, when utilized properly, become more than just a logo or a mascot. In fact, these characters can serve as surrogates for the hopes, goals, and attributes which fuel the professional collective. "When they become the basis for the collective rallying of organizational members who converge around a tangible manifestation of

their firm's unique character, brand mascots operate as organizational totems, helping concretize and reproduce and organization's identity" (Cayla 1). For guests and employees alike, therefore, a character can serve as the means by which bonds are forged, professional identities are solidified, and memories are made.

Perhaps obviously, the relationship between character and commerce within a themed entertainment setting is not without fault. The products sold at attraction stores are often cheaply made, broadly designed, and manipulatively placed. Even the positioning of the stores, so often at the very exit of an attraction, can be frustratingly manipulative to audiences and critics alike. "Despite the cliché, however, attraction stores need not force guests through, and can instead be placed to the side or across the walkway from an exit route to entice guests inside without requiring it" (Younger 348). In this case, good design can actually correct manipulative capitalism. The better designed a location and the more incorporated a character is within a location, the more attractive a location will become and the less manipulative a location will have to be.

Exploring Ethics

Although this analysis has remained thus far largely positive in its position towards themed environments and the interactive characters which reside in them, such places and figures are not above reproach. Themed entertainment itself has a complex history filled both with social successes and failures. Beyond this history and as has already been mentioned, the educational and commercial potential of themed entertainment retains many opportunities for problematic actions, messages, and content.

In the case of themed entertainment on the whole, even the most innocent of attractions and experiences can hide problematic factors. This fact stems particularly from the educational

aspects of experiential stories as explored in a previous section. Because of the experiential

nature of narrative placemaking and interactive characters, much is left up to guests to discern,

and the lessons they discover are not always positive. Disneyland's *It's a Small World* attraction,

for instance, famously sings a hopeful song praising the dream of world peace. However, that

very song has been criticized as masking and even advancing the "realities of exploitation and

domination" which so often arise in moves towards that sort of global homogeneity (Nooshin

236). In another example straight from the "squeaky-clean" streets of Disneyland, some have

criticized the sunnily optimistic tone of the popular Mainstreet USA as promoting a white

washed, simplistic version of America where capitalistic enterprise outweighs the struggles of

small business (Kay). Furthermore, these criticisms are to say nothing of the colonialism

glorified by Disney's Adventureland, the ethnocentrism of Universal Studio's Wizarding World

of Harry Potter, or the stereotypes subtly manifested in themed spaces the world over, from parks

and resorts to local dining establishments. These criticisms are simultaneously both valid and

invalid, precisely because they are subjective. Because of the increased subjectivity implicit

within the experiential art form, any designer working in said art form has a greater

responsibility to predict, guide, and answer to this subjectivity. They furthermore have a duty to

use the awe-inducing, social bond forming, and memory-making elements of their craft ethically,

doing everything possible to give audiences not only an entertaining experience, but an ethical

one. As former Imagineer Marty Sklar encourages in his book, *One Little Spark*, "When we

consider a new project we really study it – not just the surface idea but everything about it! And

when we go into that new project, we believe in it all the way. We have confidence in our ability

to do it right. And we work hard to do the best possible job" (3)

The preceding information in mind, the ethically-minded designer will consider several factors when approaching a narrative placemaking and/or interactive character-driven project. Where educational pursuits are concerned, a designer will evaluate to the best of his ability all potential lessons which might be derived from the experience in question. What could an audience infer from what is present? What could they infer from what is *not* present? The designer should take into account the social and historical factors informing the project, neither shying away from nor reveling in ugly truths. As a general goal, the designer should lean into the prosocial potential of his or her craft, aiming always to leave audiences more edified, more fulfilled, and more other-conscious as a result of encountering a given character or attraction.

Where commercial pursuits are concerned, a designer should further self-assign several goals. First, one must work to ensure the patrons of the location are attracted to it because of good design and meaningful character incorporation, not manipulatively forced to "exit through the gift shop". Second, designers should seek to create and stock products which incite shared bonding experiences or encourage other-motivated action. Board games, which demand social play, are an excellent example of the former, while sharing-based products like toy swords sold in a pair represent creative examples of the latter.

Of course, there are no clear and fast rules that will ensure the infallibility of a design. This is why, in most cases, the first and last duty of an artist is to humility, as well as to openness towards correction (Sklar). As illustrated by the examples which opened this section, characters and attractions which only a few decades ago brimmed with prosocial and optimistic sentiment now smack of unsavory implications. This is why an artist must always be growing, forming, and improving in ideals inasmuch as in technical proficiency. Only by doing so will a themed

entertainment experience make the most of the commercial, educational, and awe-inspiring opportunities afforded by the craft.

Project Implementation

Building on the lessons and findings drawn from the preceding analysis, I moved to apply what I had learned to an original project. I wished to incorporate all the elements required for an effective and ethical themed experience to the project, as well as for the project to include an original character. Out of this desire came an idea to create a hypothetical example of narrative placemaking that was equal parts interactive character *and* themed space, all the while utilizing the major components of my graduate degree in interdisciplinary design: branding, exhibit design, illustration, and print design. Thus, Café Fiona was born.

Inspired by the young hippo which first drew thousands of fans to the Cincinnati Zoo in 2017, Café Fiona is a themed outdoor restaurant designed to resemble a supersized version of the beloved animal (Domonoske). Appearing in every sense as a hyper real and friendly hippo and designed with placement at the Cincinnati Zoo in mind, Café Fiona therefore exists both as an example of narrative placemaking and as an interactive character simultaneously. Guests of the eatery are encouraged to approach the "animal" and eat around her lower jaw as if it were a bar, all the while sitting on stools designed to give the appearance of oxpecker birds. Oxpeckers share a symbiotic relationship with hippopotamuses and so the design of the Café Fiona experience invites guests to enter into this relationship. This is in keeping with the Cincinnati Zoo's goals to encourage an intimate understanding of the animal kingdom ("History, Mission, and Vision").

Figure 6 (from left to right): Original concept art for the Café Fiona restaurant features guests eating around the "animal's" mouth while playing the role of oxpecker birds; the concept art for Café Fiona is applied to a construction wall bearing the tag line, "Something Big is Hippo'ning," just as it might be during the development of the concept into a real restaurant on the grounds of the Cincinnati Zoo.

For the project, I created original concept art representing the structure of the restaurant itself, of the employee uniforms, of the menu, and of certain food offerings. These designs represented both the illustrative dimension of my work and the dimension of exhibit design, as the latter was needed on this project to inform the former. The structure itself was designed with a simple metal skeleton and fiberglass exterior in mind, hypothetically affording the Cincinnati Zoo a relatively cost-effective build and providing the staff with the working space of a large food truck. The restaurant was designed to resemble Fiona, with her lower jaw serving as the bar space, her interior mouth serving as the staff space, and the inner recesses of her throat (hidden interiorly by a curtain and exteriorly by the lake in which she is "swimming") as the kitchen. These artworks were designed using the iPad Procreate application, a program with which I was entirely unfamiliar before approaching this project but which nevertheless represented a challenge I wanted to take on. This final decision was in keeping with my ongoing professional and academic goal to push myself beyond the limits of my creative comfort zone, a major motivator behind my decision to pursue a graduate degree in interdisciplinary design originally.

Figure 7 (from left to right): Café Fiona's mood board features images of South African arts and crafts as well as kitsch elements associated with classic tiki bar aesthetics; logo sketches for Café Fiona included (clockwise) an early version of the final design, a mark which played with the "hippo mouth" theme, and a more traditionally tiki-inspired logo.

        I further designed the brand for Café Fiona, including a logo, font choices, color palettes, patterns and sub-branding elements, thereby representing the branding dimension of my graduate education. Designed to look both exotic and rustic, elegant and child-friendly, the brand's elements utilize simple forms based on a hippo's natural environment of water and aquatic plants. The color palette for these forms was inspired by South African arts and crafts design trends, and includes orange (0, 67, 79, 0), turquoise (95, 0, 34, 0), and royal blue (100, 85, 34, 20). The brand also included paper lanterns, fishing nets, colorfully stained wood, and other traditional tiki bar aesthetics due to the similarity of the structure's purpose to these types of themed locations. Together, these separate but complementary artistic legacies and

environmental elements endowed the design with a sense of both cultural legitimacy and pop familiarity.

Next, I laid out the menu using the custom designed branding elements, representing as I did so the print design dimension of my studies. Created to resemble a rustic block print in keeping with the restaurant's overall aesthetic, the design is cheerful, colorful, and simplistic. Menu choices were selected according to four main criteria: first, due to the confined preparation space and presumably high demand, all meals had to batch producible. Second and inspired by the river-based habitat in which hippos are found, meals were to be similarly inspired by river cultures, with a particular bias towards authentic and respectfully represented South African

Figure 8: The menu is based off of traditional block prints and includes orange (0, 67, 79, 0), turquoise (95, 0, 34, 0), and royal blue (100, 85, 34, 20).

cuisines like bunny chow (a popular curry sandwich) and koeksisters (small braided donuts). Third and in contrast with the second criterion, meal options had to be at least moderately child friendly. While regionally and exotically authentic recipes were paramount, the final products had to be at least reminiscent of foods with which young guests would be familiar. This meant that foods like ramen ("noodles") and po'boys ("sandwiches") were acceptable, but less common fare like calamari or alligator were not. Fourth, meals had to accommodate guests with dietary restrictions and healthy eating habits, contrasting with the fast food-style fare common at zoos. Ultimately, all these resources were compiled into a mockup representing how the whole design could be used as an onsite (in-zoo) advertising campaign for the restaurant itself.

The restaurant's design took into account all three major effects of themed entertainment discussed in this analysis: awe, education, and commerce. In regards to the first, Café Fiona meets all recommended emotional components for inspiring awe. First, the character is vast both physically and emotionally. Fiona possesses a certain degree of celebrity status, thereby allowing a sense of emotional and personal vastness in those who encounter her. Second, she demands accommodation in size, purpose, and approachability, appearing as both a large-scale animal *and* a restaurant while simultaneously inviting guests to draw closer and to interact. Third and fourth, the character is inherently albeit vaguely threatening, hippos being considered a dangerous creature even at their natural size, but also aesthetically beautiful: bulbous, colorful, and exotic, she stands out among the jungle foliage which surrounds her. Fifth and finally, Café Fiona avoids true fear and institutes the anticlimax both by incorporating a sense of "toyness" into her overall design, but also by rewarding guest interaction with delicious food and drink.

Regarding the second effect, Café Fiona presents a number of educational opportunities. As previously mentioned, the entire restaurant is designed around the premise of communicating a lesson about symbiotic relationships via experiential learning. Guests sitting in avian-inspired stools play the role of oxpecker birds dining around Fiona's smiling face. This experience communicates not only a lesson about the symbiotic relationships which occur throughout nature, but also the sort of symbiotic relationship that humanity at its best can share with the natural world. Furthermore, the tiki-inspired odds and ends which decorate the interior of the space (Fiona has a few nets, paper lanterns and the like caught in her teeth) provide a festive energy but they also infer a darker truth: that waste and littering the environment around us has messy, real-world consequences. Finally, guests are invited to try authentic recipes from other cultures within the context of a zoo, giving them a global perspective not only of cuisine but of

their natural world and of the real communities which share an environment with the zoo's animal inhabitants. Although all three of these messages are reinforced through signage and menus, they are nevertheless communicated first and foremost in a non-didactic, experiential manner within the context of the themed space. Careful attention was paid to these environmental lessons and to ensuring authenticity of presentation, maintaining the high ethical standards to which themed entertainment professionals are called.

Concerning the last effect, Café Fiona, being a restaurant, is fundamentally built for commerce. However, in keeping with the aspirational ethics described in an earlier section, the products offered are educational, good quality, experiential and other-centered. At Café Fiona, guests are not merely grabbing a poorly prepared and dramatically overpriced fast food meal before carrying on with their day at the zoo. Instead, they are encouraged to sit and spend time with one another (experience), sharing a meal (other centered) which is healthy, delicious, and on some level, educational. By fostering bonding and memory making alongside nourishment, Café Fiona represents an example of ethical dining commerce uncommon in zoo experiences.

Taken together, these many elements amount to an original and comprehensively designed experience that is equal parts an example of narrative placemaking and interactive character. Conceptually, it represents an ethically driven experience with the potential to educate, drive commerce, and inspire awe among audiences who engage with it. Beyond this success, it represents the culmination of an education, the foundation of a creative perspective, and the beginning of a career for a rising themed entertainment professional. I am proud of the accomplishments that this project represents and humbled by the design responsibility that it signifies. Most of all, I am hopeful that the Café Fiona project is only a preview of what is to come in a journey that started with a boy visiting a theme park.

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