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Summary of exploring a three-dimensional narrative medium: The theme park as “de Sprookjessprokkelaar,” the gatherer and teller of stories

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Abstract

This paper presents a summary of the author’s doctoral dissertation, which examines the pervasiveness of storytelling in theme parks and establishes the theme park as a distinct narrative medium. It traces the characteristics of theme park storytelling, how it has changed over time, and what makes the medium unique. This was accomplished using a mixed methods approach drawing data from interviews with creative professionals, archival research, fieldwork, and an analysis of more than eight hundred narrative attractions. The survey of narrative attractions revealed the most common narrative expressions to be dark rides and stage shows. Source material tends to be cultural tales (legends, fairy tales) or intellectual properties (generally films). Throughout major periods and world regions, setting, scenes, and visual storytelling are the most ubiquitous narrative devices. Three dozen techniques and technologies are detailed in this project. Significant impetuses for narrative change over time are the advent of technologies, formalization of the industry, explicit discourse on storytelling, formation of design philosophies, and general convergence of media. There are at least a half dozen key distinctions in theme park narratives compared with other mediums: dimensionality, scale, communality, brevity, a combinatory aspect, and a reiterative nature. Also significant is that creative professionals view themselves as storytellers, purposefully design with narrative systems, embed them in spaces, and participate in public dialogue surrounding narrative and design principles.

Keywords: theme parks; narrative; storytelling; design; technology; education.

1. Introduction

When examining the fundamental scholarship in the approach of Texts and Technology (an area that combines humanities principles with technologies and interrogates human relationships with technologies and broadly defined texts), there is a perceived path of communication changes leading from oral to print and from print to electronic. Another possible manifestation of medium, one that adds the crucial component of space, is the theme park. The theme park, one of the world’s popular leisure concepts with hundreds of millions of annual visitors, was influenced by other forms: pleasure gardens, world’s fairs and expositions, trolley and amusement parks, cinema, and theatre. Browne & Browne defined a theme park as “A social artwork designed as a four-dimensional symbolic landscape, evoking impressions of places and times, real and imaginary” (qtd. in King 2002, p.3). This implies the multifaceted

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nature of theme parks and themed spaces in general. Gottdiener (1997) elaborated, noting that themed environments are “material forms,” “social processes,” and cultural processes that “use constructed spaces as symbols” (p. 5). This denotes the complex forms and functions of these parks. It is evident that theme parks are texts that can be studied and technologies for the purposes of leisure and more profound things like meaning and uplift. Theme parks offer “meaningful experiences” and allow people to “transcend their everyday experience” (Hench 2003, p. 38, p. 9). They are also art forms. As King (2002) stated, “Theme parks are a total-sensory-engaging environmental art form built to express a coherent but multi-layered message” (p. 3). One of the common ways that theme parks evoke messages is through storytelling.

Within theme parks, there is a storytelling presence in every phase of the relationship between the visitor and the park. This includes marketing or branding before one visits, attraction storytelling within the parks (in architecture, rides, shows, films, meet and greets, or atmosphere entertainment), and narrative items when one leaves (tangible merchandise or media like videos and music). The quantity and variety of techniques used to tell stories in parks have increased over the years. Though there were instances of storytelling in these venues from the beginning, the theme park model has evolved from the milder story installations of Disneyland, the park that sparked the contemporary industry, into today’s paradigm, one that frequently employs explicit storytelling and immersive worlds. This added emphasis on story “grew out of a natural maturation of the theme park as a medium” according to Younger (2016, p. 157). Likewise, the visitors’ role in theme park stories has changed over time from one of passive viewers of spectacles to role-playing participants in elaborate narratives. The theme park has become a more story-centric medium, and it continues to use specially designed or appropriated technologies to tell stories. The dissertation traces the evolution of theme park storytelling over time and expands the conversation about the unique qualities of the narrative medium.

This abridgment of the dissertation summarizes the project and its findings as well as specifies the implications of the project. Note that this is an overview of more than four hundred pages of content; the literature review, most data, example images, and the extensive reference pages are omitted.

2. Summary

2.1 Research Questions

The dissertation set out to answer two primary research questions:

1. *How has storytelling in theme parks changed over time?*
2. *What makes the theme park a unique narrative medium?*

The project answered the first question by looking at the pervasiveness of theme park attractions that tell stories over time and region. Attractions from the key parks (see Appendix) in each region were broken into three periods: early (1950s-1970s), maturing (1980s-2000s), and current (2010s) and three regions: the United States, Europe, and Asia (with an additional case of the emerging Middle East market). Tables were composed that list theme park attractions, the attraction type, the source material, and storytelling elements from a list of ten selected terms: *allusion, character, conflict, narrator, plot, scenes, setting, symbolism, theme, visual storytelling*). Over eight hundred and fifty narrative attractions were analyzed for these factors.

The work also investigated the use of major narrative techniques and technologies in three chronological categories (traditional, maturing, and contemporary) to trace their use within the industry. The techniques and technologies examined were these:

- architectural and landscape stories;
- implicit storytelling, tableaux, and walkthroughs;
- cinema and dark rides;
- theatre, shows, and parades;
- auditory and musical storytelling;
- animatronics;
- graphic design;

- edutainment;
- explicit artificiality;
- simulators;
- interactive dark rides;
- fireworks and spectaculars;
- montage;
- environmental storytelling;
- explicit storytelling;
- transmedia storytelling and vast narratives;
- original narratives;
- interactive quests;
- live role-playing, interactive theatre, and improv storytelling;
- virtual and augmented reality;
- immersive worlds and total immersion.

Parts of both research questions were answered by seeking the perspectives of creative professionals in interviews (twenty personal interviews were conducted) as well as locating their voices in archival research. The second question was assisted by the process of comparing and contrasting theme park narratives to that of other mediums (oral, written, theatre, film, video games, and other new media).

2.2 Prevalence of Storytelling

The first thing evident in this project is that there is so much storytelling in the parks that it is not quantifiable. Themed spaces before theme parks (world's fairs, amusement parks, kiddie parks, etc.) had rudimentary storytelling. The advent of Disneyland signaled the institutionalization of storytelling in the themed space and the beginning of the contemporary industry. Since then, storytelling has flourished in each time period and in all world regions. Storytelling is accomplished through multiple forms, modes, and narratological schemes. *Dark rides* and *stage shows* are particularly likely to involve storytelling techniques, though both explicit and implicit means are applied. *Setting*, *scenes*, and *visual storytelling* are the most common narrative devices used in park storytelling. Story expressions continue to be drawn from cultural tales and popular intellectual properties (IPs). The summary of some primary findings is expressed in Table 1.

Table 1. Theme Park Narratives Overview.

Period/Region	Most Common Attraction Type	Most Common Narrative Device	Most Common Source Material
Early/United States (n = 74)	dark ride	setting	IPs
Early/Europe (n = 17)	walkthrough	scenes	culture
Maturing/United States (n = 273)	stage show	setting	IPs
Maturing/Europe (n = 143)	dark ride	setting	culture
Maturing/Asia (n = 109)	dark ride	scenes	IPs
Current/United States (n = 75)	dark ride	setting	IPs
Current/Europe (n = 58)	dark ride	scenes	IPs
Current/Asia (n = 91)	dark ride	scenes	IPs
Current/Middle East (n = 31)	dark ride	scenes	IPs

In the early period, the root of the contemporary industry, theme parks began to distinguish themselves from the amusement park and cement their identities through a set of narrative attractions, many of which still exist. The dark ride emerged as a chief facilitator of narrative though other genres were present (walkthroughs, stage shows, architectural stories, transport rides, and boat rides). Setting and scenes were common devices used, illustrating the importance of space and the influence of film. Visual storytelling expanded the capabilities of this particular medium, allowing for more to be done in small spaces and encouraging an appeal regardless of language spoken. The maturing period, characterized by international expansion and globalization, represented a maturation of the

design process and products. This period was marked by a diversification of storytelling genres, with special effects theatres, simulators, cinemas, and nighttime spectaculars becoming more prevalent. The market was simultaneously rife with emerging technologies and vendors formalizing their catalogs. The current period includes a further diversification of storytelling attraction genres including projection shows, interactive quests, and augmented or virtual reality in addition to more and more attractions being hybrid concepts. Though theme parks have a variety of source materials (i.e. culture like fairy tales or local legends, genre traditions like horror or Western, or science and technology), IPs such as films or novels predominate through most periods and regions.

Despite the debate about how much storytelling is appropriate to attractions and the multiple philosophies creative professionals have about the incorporation of story, storytelling is prevalent in the most successful theme parks around the world and is characteristic of the medium. Storytelling is a “differentiating factor for the theme park” (Younger 2016, p. 83) and its influence in the global industry only grows.

2.3 Narrative Techniques and Technologies

Though narrative has remained prominent and even increased over the years, how stories are told has changed over time. Based on the in-depth study of dozens of narrative techniques and technologies, five primary factors for transformation were observed. These are indicated below:

1. *Technology* has been a major contributing factor, as theme parks have continually infused technologies into the repertoire of storytelling. Some were developed early in the industry or before it, such as dark rides, while others, such as virtual and augmented reality, are recent. In a number of cases, theme parks develop technologies that are widely used (e.g. animatronics, simulators), and in other cases, theme parks utilize or adapt outside technologies to fit theme park contexts (i.e. film, interactive quests). As new technologies arise, theme parks will try them to stay competitive.
2. The *formalization of the industry* has been a factor in evolution. This includes the fragmentation or specialization of industry trades, the teaching of techniques to the next generations through mentorship and other models, the professionalization of the industry by way of education and professional organizations, and the continuing philosophical discourse of design principles in the public and private spheres. The advent of the Internet has led to more popular media and fan sites contributing to public discourse on theme parks, with creative professionals involved in the conversation.
3. The *explicit discussion of story* in the industry, perhaps as a result of number two, has meant that storytelling has become more prevalent in parks as well as in discourse surrounding themed entertainment. In both professional and fan publications, the act of storytelling is being considered on a more regular basis. Whether arguing storytelling as an essential feature or disputing that, designers debate narrative and its place in design.
4. *Design philosophies* continue to determine the kind of storytelling used in parks. There are certainly “camps” of designers (in some cases coinciding with time period paradigms, company strategies, or favored design styles), with different designers preferring explicit storytelling, implicit or interpretive storytelling, storyworld creation, or experiential storytelling. Within these camps, the very definition of narrative may vary.
5. The *convergence* of media has lent to the infusion of more new media practices like transmedia storytelling and the bleeding in of the storytelling techniques from mediums like video games or theatre. As media becomes more a part of one whole, mediums become less distinguishable from one another (at least in their presentations of story), though essential differences remain. Theme parks are part of vast narratives that employ storytelling over diverse platforms, allowing opportunities for parks to expand content or invest in favorite franchises. This convergence led to an increase in desire to walk around within these beloved stories (immersion paradigm) and a need for more elaborate and connected stories.

These are some of the largest trends, but like all narrative mediums, theme parks will continue to evolve.

Theme parks remediate (a kind of refashioning of older media by newer media, a concept articulated by Bolter & Grusin 1999) techniques, technologies, and culture while still participating in invention based on their medium-specific affordances. Young (2006) claimed that recognizing story allusions in early parks depended on formal education whereas now they are geared toward a mass audience. However, the contemporary theme park has always been part of mass culture and depends on synergy with other mediums. There will continue to be a reciprocal

relationship between mediums, inspiring and drawing from others in turn. Theme parks have mass appeal, and one reason for this is their weaving of stories into physical space and the opportunities for the visitor to become an instant part of a *storyworld*.

2.4 Creative Professionals as Storytellers

Relating to the professionals who create theme park experiences, this research has further demonstrated that they theorize their work and contribute to a growing body of discourse. Many of them view themselves as *storytellers* rather than only job descriptions (“creative director,” “designer,” “show writer”) or job titles (“creative consultant,” “creative vice president,” “development officer”). They operate with story as a design principle, embed stories in various attraction genres, talk about story to one another and to guests (through articles, interviews, or social media), and occasionally teach storytelling in either professional or academic capacities. Designers may casually invoke narrative principles or may utilize formalized narrative systems including Rohde (2007), who advocates for a “rigorous application of narrative design principles to all aspects of a project.” An attempt was made in the dissertation to assemble discussions about storytelling from creative professionals, but this is only a beginning. A few have already published articles or books that mention storytelling, and others will follow. At some point, one can hope there will be a library of published works from both designers and academics on theme park narratives.

2.5 Theme Park as Unique Narrative Medium

Based on comparisons with other narrative mediums and interviews with creative professionals, theme parks have discrete qualities that make them a distinct narrative medium and unique art form. The defining attributes gathered from the research are *dimensionality*, *scale*, *communality*, *brevity*, a *combinatory* aspect, and a *reiterative* nature:

1. *Dimensionality*: The most obvious difference between theme parks and other mediums is dimensionality and the presence of storytelling in space. It is a living storyworld and setting, with guest motion (whether traversing the park on foot or moving through a ride in a vehicle) as a vital component of experience. Also, more so than other mediums, theme parks rely on sensory methods to tell stories.
2. *Scale*: Theme parks are created on a larger scale than other art forms, with expensive, often permanent installations that may have taken years and hundreds of people to design and build. Some attractions are colossal pieces of machinery that took enormous capital outlay to produce. Architectural features may include massive structures like mountains or castles that add to the impression of scale.
3. *Communality*: The theme park is a collective article, as it is developed with collaborative processes and presented to thousands of visitors at once. There is collective authorship and sometimes hundreds of people that design and build attractions, but there are also teams of operators, with dozens needed to manage, operate, and maintain them. Attractions are meant for a mass, often multi-generational, audience.
4. *Brevity*: Theme park narratives are generally briefer than all but some film shorts; because of this limitation, they rely on symbolic presentation, shorthand techniques, and familiar stories. Most attractions are less than ten minutes long, so timing and pacing are factors. Stories in parks have a condensed character, making it essential to utilize all elements of space to convey messages.
5. *Combinatory*: While media in general has come closer to becoming one whole, theme parks have long relied on combining media forms (oral, written, architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre, film, video game, et al.) to present stories. Attractions are the result of a fusion of disciplines and their presentation is a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that synthesizes many art forms in one.
6. *Reiterative*: Unlike other art forms, which tend to reach a kind of permanence, theme parks add and subtract attractions or reinvent themselves and are still considered the same narrative container. They are living canvases, where attractions can be built, altered, repurposed, or removed, with the whole-park narrative intact. As the large companies have shown, attractions or even entire parks can be reproduced.

Theme parks are a “constantly evolving” art form and likely one of the “most known art genres” (King, 2002, p. 8-9). Clavè (2007) asserted that the theme park is not just a tourist attraction; it is “a unique place for entertainment, a source of meaning and a suitable framework for the study of culture, place and technology” (p. xx). King (2002) found them to be “prominent, even central, American cultural icons,” though Europe has a mature theme park model and Asia has a developing one (p. 6). Stories will continue to be utilized within the parks, visitors will keep going to experience these tales, and storytelling as a vehicle for meaning will be the subject of discussion amongst designers, fans, and scholars.

The theme park will continue to act as the Sprookjessprokkelaar, an Efteling theme park character who is the gatherer and teller of stories (particularly fairy tales in the original context). In the dissertation, this character is a metaphor for the creative process, the collecting and disseminating of tales, the community connection, the reception of tales within parks, and the innate human desire for storytelling. Like that character, theme park stories are collaboratively produced and collectively received. They find age-old or original stories to engage an audience and encourage an emotional response. Like the mood the walk-around Sprookjessprokkelaar character elicits in the theme park, with children sitting around rapt with attention, there is a wonder to storytelling, a human desire to listen and connect. Theme parks are a communal space, one where visitors will keep experiencing tales from humanity's library.

3. Implications of the Project

This project posits the theme park as a distinct narrative medium and an emerging medium. It should be considered as such in literature and scholarship surrounding visual, material, and narrative arts. While storytelling is frequently covered in areas of scholarship, the theme park as a distinct medium with interesting ways to tell stories has not been touched upon by many of the areas that deal with storytelling. Though art and design schools are beginning to embrace themed entertainment as an art form, it is rarely if ever addressed in discourse around narrative theory, literature, or folklore.

In the literature surrounding Texts and Technology, there is a perceived evolution from oral to literary to digital to new media texts. Scholars like Murray (1998), Jenkins (2004), and Rose (2012) recognized theme parks as fascinating examples, but scholarship in the area does not focus on the theme park as a new medium or as an evolution of or remediation of previous mediums. Theme parks should be recognized as a separate medium or at very least a medium that is an amalgam of others. Since theme parks predate what is usually considered “new media,” but they are not “old” media, scholarship can determine where the medium fits. The theme park has enough distinct affordances to qualify as a medium worthy of separate consideration.

Other areas of scholarship could benefit from more frequent analysis of theme parks as well. Cultural critics can add in-depth analysis of theme parks related to storytelling and culture. Though a few works in anthropology (especially with Lukas 2008 & 2013) and sociology exist, the connection between storytelling and this popular leisure concept has hardly been touched on. Tourism and hospitality scholars could incorporate the findings about the storytelling potential of the theme park to contribute to richer scholarship about staging spaces and the guest experience. The work of Pine & Gilmore (1999) is frequently mentioned, but they acknowledged theme parks as exemplars of the experience economy model. It is evident that storytelling is a key reason for the success of the industry, but it is only occasionally referred to in the surrounding literature and seldom applied to analysis.

The design philosophies or the artistic community surrounding themed entertainment is another area that the project highlighted. This discourse ought to be explored further, as it was shown to be complex. The self-perception of creative professionals as storytellers is a discovery that could apply to multiple scholarly fields. Also, industry professionals can contribute to the emerging discourse surrounding themed entertainment and continue to theorize their own work. Even though not all trade secrets can be revealed, it is important to continue the conversation around a medium that has emerged as a compelling narrative platform and cultural touchstone. Awareness of the theme park as an art form is only growing, and work like this expands the conversation and offers additional areas to examine.

Appendix

The following table is the list of parks used for the narrative analysis referenced in 2.2. Parks are listed in order of opening year.

Name of Park	Region	Year Opened
Tivoli Gardens	Europe	1843
Cedar Point	USA	1870
Gronalund	Europe	1883
Hershey Park	USA	1906
Liseberg	Europe	1923
Knott's Berry Farm	USA	1940
Efteling	Europe	1952
Disneyland	USA	1955
LEGOLAND Billund	Europe	1958
Busch Gardens Tampa Bay	USA	1959
Universal Studios Hollywood	USA	1964
SeaWorld San Diego	USA	1964
Nagashima Spa Land	Asia	1966
Phantasialand	Europe	1967
Magic Kingdom	USA	1971
Six Flags Magic Mountain	USA	1971
Kings Island	USA	1972
SeaWorld Florida	USA	1973
Six Flags Great Adventure	USA	1974
Europa-Park	Europe	1975
Gardaland	Europe	1975
Busch Gardens Williamsburg	USA	1975
Everland	Asia	1976
Six Flags Great America	USA	1976
Ocean Park	Asia	1977
Dollywood	USA	1977
Heide Park	Europe	1978
Thorpe Park	Europe	1979
Alton Towers	Europe	1980
Canada's Wonderland	N. America	1981
Epcot	USA	1982
Tokyo Disneyland	Asia	1983
Futuroscope	Europe	1987
Chessington World of Adventures	Europe	1987
SeaWorld San Antonio	USA	1988
Disney's Hollywood Studios	USA	1989
Lotte World	Asia	1989

Name of Park	Region	Year Opened
Puy du Fou	Europe	1989
Parc Asterix	Europe	1989
Universal Studios Orlando	USA	1990
Disneyland Paris	Europe	1992
OCT Window of the World	Asia	1993
Port Aventura	Europe	1995
Hangzhou Songcheng Park	Asia	1996
LEGOLAND Windsor	Europe	1996
Disney's Animal Kingdom	USA	1998
OCT Happy Valley (Shenzhen)	Asia	1998
Islands of Adventure	USA	1999
Changzhou Dinosaur Park	Asia	2000
Universal Studios Japan	Asia	2001
Tokyo DisneySea	Asia	2001
Disney California Adventure	USA	2001
Walt Disney Studios	Europe	2002
Parque Warner Madrid	Europe	2002
Hong Kong Disneyland	Asia	2005
OCT Happy Valley (Beijing)	Asia	2006
OCT East	Asia	2007
Chimelong Paradise	Asia	2007
OCT Happy Valley (Chengdu)	Asia	2009
OCT Happy Valley (Shanghai)	Asia	2009
Ferrari World	Middle East	2010
Universal Studios Singapore	Asia	2011
Fantawild Adventure (Zhengzhou)	Asia	2012
Chimelong Ocean Kingdom	Asia	2014
Songcheng Lijiang Romance Park	Asia	2014
Fantawild Oriental Heritage (Ningbo)	Asia	2015
Shanghai Disneyland	Asia	2016
IMG Worlds of Adventure	Middle East	2016
LEGOLAND Dubai	Middle East	2016
Bollywood Parks Dubai	Middle East	2016
Motiongate Dubai	Middle East	2016

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