

Rebuttal to Lundberg's response paper

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Abstract:

Lundberg (2018, this issue) provides a thoughtful rejoinder to the article, "Leisure is for Experience, Not Industry" (this issue), one that was surely intended to add clarity and support for the experience industry model of Pine and Gilmore (2011) as it relates to the broad field of leisure studies. However, Lundberg's response evidenced several issues that remain to be addressed, much as does the experience complex writ large.

Keywords: leisure | experience | experience industry

Article:

Lundberg (2018, this issue) provides a thoughtful rejoinder to the article, "Leisure is for Experience, Not Industry" (this issue), one that was surely intended to add clarity and support for the experience industry¹ model of Pine and Gilmore (2011) as it relates to the broad field of leisure studies. However, Lundberg's response evidenced several issues that remain to be addressed, much as does the experience complex writ large.

Lundberg stated that,

As experience-based terminology is on the rise in our field, and as it is clearly a recommendation of this article that we continue to orient our curricula in this direction, it is important to distinguish several related but different terms: the experience economy, experience industries, and experience design. (2018, this issue)

¹ Experience industry/economy/design, hereto throughout referred to as the experience complex.

However, Lundberg believes that the field of leisure studies is inherently a part of the experience industry, and it is common knowledge that every industry has its (experience) economy. While Lundberg attempts to extricate “experience design” from the broader experience complex, each part is really one and the same: They are no different, or separate, than Russian nesting dolls; they are a complete set that only functions properly when all their requisite pieces are in place—and that proper functioning is the usurpation of the agentic experience from leisure through the pursuit of the bottom line.

Further, the logic is tautological. Lundberg stated that, “experience design is an experience-based collection of tools, techniques, and principles ideally suited for educating individuals in the experience-based methodology” (2018, this issue), thus suggesting that those trained in the craft of experience design will ultimately work in the experience industry and be responsible for driving the experience economy. While he attempted to differentiate the tripartite experience complex from itself, it was unsuccessful because each girder supports the others. He goes on to say that, “The purpose of the experience economy is to establish a variety of experience-based techniques that can be *applied to business* in order to experiential-ize and thereby *heighten economic return*” (2018, this issue, emphasis added). One can safely assume that to “experiential-ize” is to design experiences, yet again reinforcing the symbiotic nature of each aspect of the experience complex, not to mention its underlying purpose to “heighten economic return.”

In an attempt to improve upon the clarity of Pine and Gilmore’s (2011) thesis, Lundberg offered up an updated interpretation to deemphasize the economic component of the experience complex:

When a person [engages in] a service, he [engages in] a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he [engages in] an experience, he [engages] to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that [an organization designs]—as in a theatrical play—to engage him in an inherently personal way. (p. # needed)

While Lundberg agreed that a thoughtful consideration of the experience complex in the field of leisure studies should not be an exercise in semantics, his rephrasing of Pine and Gilmore’s (2011) original framework failed to become more “palatable.” The words he chose to embolden his claims are no less precarious, suggesting that when one “engages” in an activity, they are simply the input variable for the control experiment that is the event. The replacement phrase “organization designs” is no less commandeering of an individual’s agency than the phrase a “company stages.” Either way you put it, outside intervention directs the leisureist to a controlled outcome that should be of concern to all who value the agentic component of leisure experiences. The predetermined outcomes heralded by the experience complex are simply controlled environments; the experience industry model seeks to turn the treatment group into the control group for greater efficiency, all the while hoping to persuade their guests into believing they partook in something unique to them on that day.

We cannot have pre-determined sporting event outcomes, pre-determined first dates, or perfect performances from a band at every concert because people do not operate in, or live in, controlled environments. If the purpose of the experience complex is to provide a consistent

“escape” (see Pine and Gilmore’s four “experiential types”), it is only to escape to a fictional time and place which encourages disassociation from making one’s own decisions, not to escape to a place of awe and wonder, or growth and possibility. It would indeed be “a small world after all” if everyone “engaged” in the same collection of premeditated, and tightly scripted, “experiences.”

Looking to likeminded colleagues for support, Lundberg cited a forthcoming book by Rossman and Duerden (Forthcoming) but again was tripped up by what was perceived to be an argument in support of “experience design” when it was actually just the opposite: “*Design is generally conceived as an intentional intervention to create or change something in order to produce targeted outcomes; a purposeful intervention with a planned intention.* To affect the outcome of an experience, the designer must intervene in its production. Therefore, we define experience design as the process of intentionally organizing elements of an experience to facilitate ongoing interactions *resulting in intended outcomes* for both the participant and the provider” (p. # needed, emphasis added). Need more be said? The social engineering of freedom in leisure is front and center in this treatise.

Fun managers

In order to avoid rehashing the same argument, it might be more effective to draw from David Foster Wallace’s (1997) essay, *A supposedly fun thing I’ll never do again*. The gist of his essay was to recant his “experiences” on a weeklong cruise in 1995 aboard a cruise ship in the Caribbean. There are eerie parallels between Wallace’s expeditions and the aims of the experience complex.

We shall start with the place where all manufactured experiences begin, the advertisement. Wallace stated that the “real seduction” of the cruise brochure was “not an invitation to fantasize but rather a construction of the fantasy itself” (p. 266). As with any commodity, its proprietors must be able to establish its use-value to prospective consumers. It is never enough to have only partial interest: Wants must become needs; that is the only way people can justify expenses on unnecessary items and activities—if they somehow *believe* them to be imperative to their quality of life. In reference to the cruise’s ads, Wallace goes on to say that,

The promise is not that you can experience great pleasure, but that you *will*. That they’ll make certain of it. That they’ll micromanage every iota of every pleasure-option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation. The ads promise that you will be able—finally, for once—truly to relax and have a good time, because you will *have no choice* but to have a good time. (p. 267; emphasis original)

The experience complex, like the cruise ship industry (or theme parks, or casinos, etc.), is *designed* to take error and risk (of the provider), and its resultant growth (for the consumer), out of the equation. Businesses are only successful when they grow, gaining market share, and to do that they must calibrate their products on an aggregate level, emphasizing the quantity of consumers through the gates over the quality of experience for the individual or the family

involved. In the experience complex, the consumer pays “for the privilege of handing over to trained professionals [their] responsibility,” not simply for one’s experience, but for one’s “*interpretation* of that experience”—one’s “pleasure” (p. 268, emphasis original).

Wallace pointed to the heart of the advertising gimmicks associated with the cruise industry, which is evidential of the experience complex as well: The “dark heart” of experience manufacturers is the fantasy being sold, the one that promises “to sate the part of [us] that always and only wants” (p. 316). The essence of the mass-market “experience,” as evidenced by Wallace’s voyage by sea, is one that “manages [our] experiences and [our] interpretations of those experiences and takes care of them in advance for [us]. It seems to care about [us]. But it doesn’t, not really, because first and foremost it wants something from [us].” The experience complex (industry, economy, and design) is, simply put, “solicitous fun-managers” (p. 290).

Conclusion

In Lundberg’s conclusion, he asked, “Do we want to be a relevant and influential voice in the conversation?” This is a great question and the answer is a resounding “yes.” He goes on, “If so, actively engaging in the development of experience design curricula and the reconceptualization of leisure studies, parks, recreation, and tourism within the experience industries is needed” (p. # needed). But, again, his preferred outcome and mine are different: Our influential voice should side with the individual and the community, not the agency and its control practices of maximizing productivity and efficiency in the face of growth. Leisure, as a state of being, is the conduit to building meaningful relationships through the cultivation of authentic experiences (Sylvester, 2008). For if leisure truly has the potential to provide a path to a life well-lived, then leisure must be *enabled* for the individual and the community, not *disabled* by the agency, experiential design, and the pursuit of profit.

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