

NARRATIVE PARADIGM IN THE MAGIC KINGDOM:
THE STORY OF ENTERING A WHOLE NEW WORLD

By

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Louise Nuar

12/30/2018

This research is dedicated to Clay—the Flynn to my Rapunzel, Anakin to my Padmé, Carl to my Ellie—whose astute insights and observations begat most of the decent ideas contained herein.

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ABSTRACT

Immersive entertainment is a relatively new storytelling medium that has been gaining academic interest over the last several decades. Theme parks represent the first widespread commercial foray into this burgeoning art form, presenting an implicit narrative in which guests temporarily escape the “real world” and enter a separate plane of reality. However, the theme park medium has historically received little scholarly attention from a narrative perspective. This research proposes Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, a classic communication research theory, as a baseline framework for the assessment and analysis of the storytelling techniques used in theme parks. Using Walt Disney World and its Magic Kingdom park as subjects for a pilot case study, this research applies the narrative paradigm framework to explore the storytelling techniques used in theme parks. This study is intended to shed some light on the popularity and success of the test subjects, focusing on their ability to present a cohesive narrative that immerses guests in the “story” of leaving their everyday realities behind.

Keywords: immersive entertainment, theme parks, narrative paradigm

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Overview

Immersive entertainment is a centuries-old art form that has been rapidly increasing in popularity since the latter half of the 20th century. Over the past decade, the discipline has experienced a surge in critical and academic interest as new technologies continue to foster innovative developments in this fast-evolving field. The term “immersive” has been used to describe a wide array of media ranging from traditional theme parks and interactive museums to emerging fields such as open-world video games, virtual reality, and augmented reality. Current literature reveals no consistently accepted definition of just what qualifies an entertainment medium as immersive; however, most researchers agree that theme parks represent the first widely-accepted commercial venture in this field (Lukas, 2013; Bishop, 2017).

Starting with small ventures like Santa Claus Land and Knott’s Berry Farm in the 1940s, the theme park medium has rapidly evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry that entertains hundreds of millions of guests each year (Rubin, 2018). Today, theme parks can be found in nearly every developed nation and encompass a wide array of themed motifs ranging from traditional fantasy settings to soviet-era prison camps, sex education, and even the bowels of hell (Harness, 2014). However, despite these differences in subject matter, all theme parks can be said to present a basic “story” of transportation to a different reality. As such, the theme park medium may be understood as a form of narrative text in its own right, with each individual theme park venture representing a unique rhetorical artifact worthy of scholarly examination.

Indeed, the field of immersive entertainment is rife with opportunities for academic research delving into its nature as a communication medium. Such studies have been slowly gaining steam in the new millennium, particularly with regard to video game analysis. However, the academic discipline of immersive entertainment studies is still in its infancy, and scholars have yet to settle upon a consistent framework for research and analysis of such ventures. Existing literature on the subject is limited and inconclusive, particularly when it comes to theme park analysis. This paper aims to contribute to the research by proposing Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, a classic communication research theory, as a starting point for such a framework.

The narrative paradigm offers an all-encompassing approach to the study of communication media, positing that all human communication ultimately tells a story and can thus be interpreted as part of an ongoing narrative that is subject to analysis based on its coherence and consistency. First proposed in the 1980s as a framework for analyzing the strength of socio-political rhetoric such as the debate over nuclear disarmament during the cold war, the narrative paradigm has since been applied to a variety of media ranging from oral and written debate to folklore and reality television (Fisher, 1984; Roberts, 2004; Eaves & Savoie, 2005). As such, Fisher's framework provides a solid foundation for the analysis of immersive entertainment, which—like all communication media—pursues the implicit goal of presenting a compelling narrative.

According to the narrative paradigm theory, all humans are natural storytellers who constantly process the world around them as a continuous narrative. People tend to gravitate toward narratives that “make sense” to them based on what they already know of the world. For this reason, one of the primary goals of any media creation must be to

tell a coherent “story” that is logical and avoids contradicting its audience’s predetermined beliefs. Fisher refers to this principle as *narrative rationality* and divides it into two subcomponents: *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity*. *Narrative probability* refers to a story’s internal logic and cohesiveness, while *narrative fidelity* refers to the story’s conformity to external truths and values (Fisher, 1984; 1985). In an immersive entertainment context, each of these measures may be applied toward two distinct levels of narrative: the general narrative of being immersed in a new reality and the specific narrative of the “world” to which audience members are transported.

Of course, as several scholars of video game studies have pointed out, the interactive and open-ended nature of immersive entertainment ventures ensures that such media can never be wholly processed or analyzed as linear narratives in the same manner as traditional storytelling media (Jenkins, 2004; Juul; 2001; Costikyan, 2000; Frasca, 2013). Ludic (i.e., play-related) considerations and related topics must also be incorporated into such studies in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the works in question. However, as Fisher would almost certainly agree, immersive entertainment media can and should be processed *primarily* as narratives, just as many scholars of communication philosophy recognize that all real-world interactions may be processed as stories and even as literature (Burke, 1957; Derrida, 1980; Nehamas, 1985). For this reason, this thesis proposes that the narrative paradigm serves as the most suitable baseline for an analytical framework focused on the study of immersive media. The open-ended structure of such a narratological analysis allows for the incorporation of a wide variety of disciplines (e.g., ludology, architecture, environmental psychology, etc.) in layers for a holistic understanding of this emerging art form.

This thesis proposes a case study to test the suitability of the narrative paradigm as a grounding for an overarching schema geared toward the study and analysis of immersive entertainment in general and theme parks in particular. As the world's largest and most-visited themed resort, the Walt Disney World (WDW) complex in Orlando, Florida, provides the richest and most layered subject for such an initial case study. In particular, the Magic Kingdom park (the “flagship” and most popular of WDW's four full-fledged theme parks) offers a wealth of three-dimensional theming and interactive design geared toward its overarching narrative of transportation to a realm of storybook fantasy. The question to be addressed here, then, may be framed as follows: *what makes the “story” of WDW and the Magic Kingdom so enduringly popular and how can Fisher's narrative paradigm help to deepen our understanding of this topic?*

1.2: Research Goals

As discussed above, the primary purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the applicability of the narrative paradigm as a suitable baseline for developing a consistent framework with which to analyze immersive entertainment media. Using WDW as a pilot subject, this research will conduct a detailed case study analyzing the resort's narrative strategies from a variety of perspectives—including proxemics, film studies, marketing, environmental psychology, and place branding—with a particular focus on the Magic Kingdom park and its fantasy motifs. Each narrative technique and immersion strategy will be examined through the lens of the narrative paradigm, evaluating the success with which the resort presents its “story” to guests in a manner that encourages them to suspend disbelief and embrace the narrative of entry into a new reality.

As such, the chief objectives of this research may be summarized as follows:

- (1) Define the multifaceted narrative(s) presented to guests of WDW in general and the Magic Kingdom in particular.
- (2) Thoroughly analyze the rhetorical strategies used to convey this narrative, including traditional storytelling and theming techniques as well as interactive elements and emerging technologies.
- (3) Apply Fisher's principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity to analyze the success with which these strategies persuade guests to embrace the WDW narrative of separation from reality.
- (4) Evaluate the extent to which this application of Fisher's principles can fully account for the enduring success and popularity of WDW and the Magic Kingdom.
- (5) Outline the implications of the findings of this case study in terms of opportunities for further academic research as well as practical applications for future immersive endeavors.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to promote the study of theme parks—and all immersive entertainment ventures—as a communications medium. The hope is that this research will serve as a springboard for further inquiry into the narratological implications of the rapidly-evolving art of immersive world design. Using Fisher's framework as a foundation, as demonstrated in this pilot study, future scholarship may build upon this baseline to shed further light on this new and relatively unexplored academic discipline.

1.3: Document Roadmap

This initial chapter serves as a brief introduction to the concepts and research questions to be explored in the remainder of this thesis, as outlined below.

Chapter two provides background information on immersive entertainment and theme parks, exploring the historical context and socio-cultural forces that have helped shape the evolution of such ventures over the past two centuries. Particular attention is given to the development of Disneyland and the ensuing Disney Parks enterprise, which has set the standard for theme park development since its debut in the mid-1950s.

Chapter three explores the concept of the theme park as a communications medium, outlining its basic narrative of transportation to another reality and exploring the unique storytelling considerations of this immersive art form. This chapter provides a particular focus on the research applications of the theme park as a rhetorical artifact, ending with a summary of the limited existing academic literature on the subject of theme parks as narrative texts.

Chapter four offers a detailed exploration and analysis of Fisher's narrative paradigm theory, outlining the concept of narrative rationality and its attendant principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Here the evolution and practical applications of the theory are explored, starting with Fisher's initial publications on the subject and ending with its applicability to a range of disciplines that share common DNA with the theme park medium. The chapter concludes with a detailed outline of the proposed case study, focusing on WDW and the Magic Kingdom as pilot subjects.

Chapter five explores the complex and multi-layered narrative presented to guests of WDW and the Magic Kingdom. As with all theme parks, the basic WDW narrative

may be summarized as the story of being transported to a new and compelling reality. However, the long history, deep-rooted culture, and large physical scope of the WDW resort afford a depth of storytelling nuance that bears further examination before the narratological applications of such storytelling can be fully appreciated. In particular, this chapter explores WDW's narratives of world-hopping fantasy, of interfacing with the cinematic "world of Disney," and of reverence for the history of Walter Elias Disney and his ideals.

Chapter six begins the narratological analysis of WDW and the Magic Kingdom, focusing on Fisher's narrative probability principle in the context of the journey to a separate reality. In order to promote a sense of logic and coherence within the overtly fantastical narrative of WDW, the resort must first foster a willing suspension of disbelief by conveying a convincing sense of separation from the "real world" outside the park's gates. This chapter explores the storytelling, marketing, and design strategies used to promote this sense of transportation to a special new world.

Chapter seven continues the analysis of narrative probability in the Magic Kingdom, now focusing on the techniques used to maintain the consistency of the narrative once guests have completed the transportive "journey" described in Chapter six. The chapter explores a variety of theming and storytelling techniques used to develop a sense of coherence and logical progression as guests navigate through the park's many themed lands, areas, and individual attractions.

Chapter eight focuses on WDW's application of Fisher's narrative fidelity principle (i.e., the extent to which the narrative under analysis upholds its audience's existing beliefs and values). The chapter begins with an analysis of the applicability of

the narrative fidelity principle within a fantasy-themed resort, followed by detailed explorations of the strategies employed by WDW to conform to guests' fantasy world expectations as well as their individual values and ideals.

Chapter nine delves deeper into the interplay between narrative probability and narrative fidelity in WDW and the Magic Kingdom. The chapter begins with an exploration of the instances when the fantasy-world illusion may be broken, followed by an examination of the inherent conflict between narrative probability and narrative fidelity. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the synergy between the two principles, wherein each serves to bolster the other and helps to downplay the inevitable deficits in WDW's fantasy narrative.

Chapter ten concludes this thesis with an in-depth discussion of the theoretical indications and practical applications of this case study within the context of a broader academic environment. This chapter analyzes the limitations of the current study, explores implications of the latest developments in immersive technology, and discusses potential future directions for academic research on the subject of theme parks and immersive entertainment as distinct communication media.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1: Immersive Entertainment

Most of the traditional entertainment media that have been developed over the centuries (e.g., literature and theatre) are fundamentally structured as narratives, designed to tell a linear story. Many 20th century media developments (e.g., movies, television, and interactive electronic media) are natural extensions of those older forms of media and are thus based around the same storytelling principles. However, over the past several decades, another form of “storytelling” has gradually been gaining steam: the burgeoning field of immersive entertainment.

Immersive entertainment has been defined as a medium “wherein experiential entertainment designers and scenario authors project the audience into an experienced reality, whether actual or imagined” (Trowbridge & Stapleton, 2009, p. 57) or, more succinctly, as the experience of “interactive, all-encompassing worlds that swallow up the participant” (Bishop, 2017, ¶ 2). This form of entertainment seeks, more than any other medium, to engage audience members as active participants in the “story” being told. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the storyteller(s) to build an immersive world, which leading scholar Scott Lukas (2013) has defined simply as “a place where guests can become fully absorbed or engaged” (p. 6). Such worlds can encompass a wide variety of real and virtual spaces, ranging from video game and virtual reality environments to themed restaurants shopping malls.

Immersive media and worldbuilding are relatively new concepts, particularly in academic circles; the phrases *immersive entertainment* and *immersive world* did not begin

appearing in academic literature until the mid-1990s¹. However, the concepts behind the genre can be traced back millennia, beginning with ancient cave art and expanding in recent centuries to include multisensory “built” environments such as pleasure gardens and fairs (Lukas, 2008; Jeffers, 2004). Indeed, some have posited that Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave² was an early imagining of modern immersive environments that suspend participants “between the varying poles of the artificial and the real” and “cast shadows on and affect the people who visit them” (Lukas, 2008, p. 21). However, the seeds of immersive recreation did not truly begin to take root until the 19th and 20th centuries, as technological advancements improved the standard of living and created more leisure time for a burgeoning middle class (Ramey et al., 2009).

The foundations of modern immersive entertainment have been tied back to German composer Richard Wagner’s (1849) concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a term loosely translated to mean a “total work of art” with a goal of “synthesizing multiple art forms in one piece, engaging all the senses” (Vankin, 2017, ¶ 12). The term was originally applied to operatic performances and, later, to architecture; however, its influence radiated to other fields and paved the way for late 19th-century developments such as amusement park rides and world’s fair expositions. In the early 1900s, these experiential forms of recreation were joined by haunted house attractions, wherein designers used special effects to simulate the real-life “hauntings” of urban legend, where hinges were heard to creak in doorless chambers and strange, frightening sounds would echo through the halls.

¹ A custom search on Google Scholar returns no relevant results for either phrase between the years of 1900 and 1991.

² Plato’s allegory of the cave, first published in the *Republic*, involves a group of individuals fettered in a cave who experience reality primarily via shadow puppetry projected onto the cave wall (Plato, 2004).

This marked an important step in the evolution of modern immersive entertainment, as it demonstrated the public's willingness to pay for the thrill of experiencing simulated "fear" in a safe environment.

From these precursors, the immersive entertainment genre solidified in the form of modern theme parks (discussed in greater detail in the following section), which differ from traditional amusement parks by virtue of their immersive nature, usually developed around a central theme or a series of interconnected themed areas. Within a few decades, these three-dimensional "real-world" environments were followed by electronic and virtual environments such as open-world video games and virtual reality. Indeed, it has been noted that video game developers have taken numerous environmental storytelling techniques directly from the theme park genre, and some veteran theme park designers have crossed the "bridge" to create immersive video game worlds in virtual space (Carson, 2000).

Today, technological advances allow designers to blur the line between virtual and real-world environments via the use of emerging media such as augmented reality (e.g., the popular mobile game *Pokémon GO*), which incorporates real-world elements into virtual environments, and 4-D films, which incorporate physical effects such as tactile sensations or scent projection into traditional audiovisual films. In addition, traditional "real-world" immersive environments are increasing in popularity as demand for affordable immersive recreation continues to grow. As just one example, the escape room³ genre has exploded in the last decade, snowballing from a virtually nonexistent

³ Escape rooms are a form of recreation wherein participants are locked in a room and must role-play in a themed adventure that offers this chilling challenge: to find a way out via a series of puzzles and trials.

concept in 2010 to a flourishing business with thousands of iterations by mid-2015 (French & Shaw, 2015). It is likely that the field of immersive entertainment will expand even further in the coming years as designers and engineers continue to develop new applications for this flourishing genre.

2.2: Theme Parks

There is no clear consensus on the precise point in history when the seeds of immersive entertainment (described in the previous section) blossomed into the distinct genre recognized today, but many analysts have suggested that theme parks represent the first successful mainstream endeavor in this field (Bishop, 2017; Zika, 2017). As cultural scholar Scott Lukas (2013) explains,

Theme parks are enclosed spaces that include rides, games, and shows like amusement parks, but the key difference is that they have one or more central themes (and sometimes themelands) that orient the guest to the space. Theme parks are popular design spaces because they allow designers to develop complex stories that can span more than one attraction or ride. (p. 16)

Indeed, there can be little debate that the theme park, with its fantastical environment and cohesive theming, represents a watershed moment in the evolution of immersive entertainment. However, sources also differ on the question of which amusement venture qualifies as the first “official” theme park.

Knott’s Berry Farm in Buena Park, California, claims the title of “America’s First Theme Park” based on the wild-west-themed buildings and accompanying show that the company began offering in 1940 (Knott’s, 2018). Others maintain that Santa Claus Land (later rebranded as Holiday World) in Santa Claus, Indiana, became the first theme park when it opened in 1946 with a collection of small attractions such as a toy shop, model

train, and meet-and-greet opportunities with the jolly old elf himself (Levine, 2017). However, such ventures were generally low-budget, family-owned operations that grew organically by adding one attraction or themed element at a time. It was not until the 1955 opening of Disneyland (the original Disney theme park located in Anaheim, California) that the concept of full-scale, pre-planned themed retreats truly began to take root. With its multimillion-dollar budget, meticulously designed layout, and promotional tie-ins with the already-flourishing Disney brand, Disneyland helped propel the theme park medium into the public consciousness, spurring its development into the multi-billion-dollar industry it has become in the 21st century.

Disneyland also stands apart from its predecessors in the fact that it was planned and designed by seasoned storytellers, including Walt Disney⁴ and hand-picked members of his existing animation team, who had pioneered the genre of animated films over the previous three decades (Thomas, 1976; Hensch, 2003). In Disneyland, these trailblazers put their storytelling skills to work in an entirely new medium, crafting an implicit narrative of transportation in which guests had the opportunity to become characters in the fantasy worlds that the Disney film studio helped define. In doing so, Walt Disney and his design team pioneered a new genre of environmental storytelling, firmly establishing the theme park—along with its parent genre of immersive entertainment—as the narrative medium it is today.

In the decades since Disneyland's opening, the theme park industry has expanded exponentially—not just in terms of popularity and financial success, but also as

⁴ Walt Disney founded the Disney entertainment empire in the 1920s, starting with animated cartoons and gradually expanding his enterprise to incorporate other media, including feature films and theme parks.

a narrative art form. The Disney team drew from all the environmental storytelling lessons they learned in developing Disneyland and parlayed them into the design and planning of the WDW complex in Florida, which Walt Disney intended to be his magnum opus⁵ (Thomas, 1976). Meanwhile, engineers, architects, and designers around the world began—and still continue—to build on these lessons to develop and/or expand similar enterprises, continually finding new ways to enhance immersion and craft increasingly persuasive narratives to convince guests that they are indeed entering a new and improved reality.

⁵ Unfortunately, after meticulous planning and tenacity spanning decades, Walt Disney passed away before he could witness WDW's grand opening in 1971.

Chapter 3: The Theme Park as a Communications Medium

3.1: Theme Parks as Narrative Texts

Video games and related electronic media have received a fair amount of scholarly attention as narrative texts, particularly in recent decades (Juul, 2001; Atkins, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Garrelts, 2006; Journet, 2007; Baron, 2012). However, the theme park remains relatively neglected in this arena, despite the fact that several analysts have explicitly noted its nature as a persuasive, storytelling, and/or cultural text with an implicit narrative of transportation between worlds (Fisher, 2008; Brannen, 2004; Carson, 2000; Hensch, 2003; Aarseth, 2006).

In a theme park, the guest becomes the main character in a fictional story that involves entering and exploring a different realm of reality. The specific nature of that reality may vary from one theme park to the next, but the basic “plot” remains the same: the protagonists have temporarily escaped the “real world” and have entered a different realm of existence—usually a dazzling place they never knew to be compatible with their everyday realities—that offers a new and fantastical point of view when compared with the mundanities of the world outside the park’s gates.

In many ways, this journey to a separate realm mirrors the mythical “hero’s journey” outlined by screenwriter Christopher Vogler (1998) based on the works of mythology scholar Joseph Campbell (1949). Vogler theorizes that most stories, regardless of medium or genre, are composed of the same fundamental building blocks in terms of character archetypes and plot stages, all focused around a “hero” who is called to journey from the “ordinary world” to a “special world” full of adventures and wonder. Figure 1

below portrays an abridged version of the archetypical hero's journey as described by Vogler.

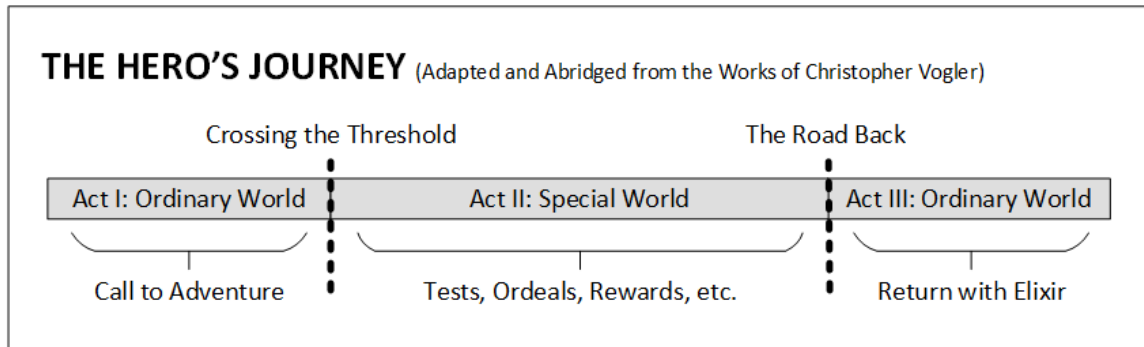


Figure 1: The Hero's Journey

In the theme park narrative, each guest assumes the role of the storybook “hero” who has been called to adventure within the “special world” inside the park’s gates. Here guests encounter a shining, shimmering, splendid new reality of exhilaration and excitement where, much like Vogler’s archetypical hero, they must successfully navigate the adventures and “trials” of their temporary new locale before returning to the “ordinary world” of their everyday lives armed with memories, souvenirs, and—hopefully—a rejuvenated spirit.

Unlike the “special worlds” portrayed in traditional media, however, theme parks are unable to fully separate their protagonists from the concerns of their “ordinary” lives beyond the park. As such, theme parks must negotiate a complex balance between a purely fictional fantasy world and the real-life needs of tourists who must inevitably return to their everyday lives. Every theme park approaches this challenge in a different way, creating a separate realm that tells a unique story based on its overarching theme. In this way, all theme parks may be understood as a complex type of communication medium that, as with any other genre, has the ultimate goal of telling a convincing

“story” that guests can embrace both narratively and thematically without deviating too far from the truths they recognize and value within their day-to-day realities.

3.2: Theme Parks as Rhetorical Artifacts

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods defines a rhetorical artifact as “a collection of symbols that is meaningful in a culture” and explains that “an artifact is rhetorical to the extent that the symbols it incorporates convey a persuasive message to some audience” (Allen, 2017, p. 1494). With its strong focus on symbolic design and interactive storytelling designed to engage guests in the suspension of disbelief, the theme park can almost certainly be understood not only as a legitimate communication medium, but as a rhetorical artifact in its own right.

As mentioned earlier, the basic narrative of the theme park is that guests have temporarily escaped their everyday realities and taken sanctuary in a new and—in some ways, at least—better world. However, the rhetorical impetus behind the narrative bears further examination: who is/are the storyteller(s), what is their motivation, and what ultimate message do they seek to convey? Kenneth Burke’s (1969) dramatism theory of rhetorical interpretation may shed some light on the subject by defining the dramatic pentad outlining the *Act*, *Scene*, *Agent*, *Agency*, and *Purpose* of motivational influences behind the crafting of a given theme park’s narrative.

The *Act* (theme park development) and *Scene* (a society seeking increased opportunities for experiential recreation) of the theme park pentad are explored in some detail in the preceding sections. The *Agent* or “storyteller” of the theme park narrative is usually a large group of stakeholders including owners/investors, designers, builders, management, etc., whose *Agencies* (i.e., storytelling tools and techniques) vary according

to their role. As such, their individual goals (*Purpose*) are varied and complex but may be generally summarized as a drive for some combination of financial, popular, and/or artistic success. In fact, the only constant among individual goals may be the drive to continue successful operations of the venue in question. Within a theme park setting, the best way to succeed at this goal is to persuade guests that this venue is a place worth visiting. To that end, the persuasive narrative presented to guests must produce the basic effect of convincing them that a visit to the park in question is an enjoyable experience that they wish to partake in—preferably as often as possible.

This, then, is where the narrative of transportation and escape comes in. After all, a visit to any theme park requires some expenditure of time and/or money that could easily be spent elsewhere. In order to be worth this effort, the theme park must somehow feel like a place apart—an oasis where the more vexing aspects of “real life” can be left behind and temporarily forgotten. However, most potential visitors (with the possible exception of young children) understand that the separation from reality is fictional and must thus make the decision to intentionally suspend disbelief in order to benefit from the immersive atmosphere. For this reason, a consistent and persuasive storytelling approach is central to the success of any themed venture.

3.3: Previous Research on Theme Parks as Communications Media

Since development of Disneyland began in the 1940s, most professional theme park designers have viewed their craft as a narrative storytelling medium, similar to cinema (Hench, 2003; Freitag, 2017). Unfortunately, academic scholarship on the subject of theme parks has traditionally shied away from this perspective, focusing instead on technical aspects (Dzeng & Lee, 2007; Trowbridge & Stapleton, 2009), managerial

concerns (Hickman & Mayer, 2003; Hoai Anh & Kleiner, 2005), consumer psychology (Bigne, 2005; Chim et al., 2011), or general cultural criticism (Baudrillard, 1983; Van Eeden, 2004). However, the concept of immersive entertainment as a narrative form has begun to take root over the past 10-15 years, as evidenced by a slowly-expanding body of literature that directly or indirectly addresses the theme park medium as a storytelling text worthy of scholarly examination.

In his exploratory analysis *Theme Park*, Lukas (2008) examines the conceptual and historical background of theme parks, analyzing the cultural impact of this emerging medium from multiple perspectives. Lukas explores the abstract notion of the theme park as an oasis, land, machine, show, brand, and, finally, as a cultural and narrative text which, “like all texts, can be variously read, interpreted, critiqued, and remade” (p. 212). Lukas notes that theming is a “materialized and mobilized” form of storytelling in which the park itself becomes the ultimate “author” of the narrative (p. 213). This initial exploration of the concept of the theme park as text paved the way for Lukas’ later publications and collaborations with other scholars that focus on the multifaceted storytelling strategies and perspectives used by modern theme park developers (Lukas 2013; 2016).

Lindgren et al. (2015) analyze the idea of the theme park as an enactment of “real” fiction, exploring the complex relationship between *material real* and *fictive real* and the ways in which the theme park medium serves as an “interconnecting world” between these two concepts. The authors explore the environmental storytelling strategies employed at Astrid Lindgrens Värld, a small Swedish theme park based on the works of

internationally renowned children's author Astrid Lindgren⁶. The authors argue that postmodernist critical concerns regarding the simulated nature of theme parks may be too narrowly constructed and that immersive venues such as Astrid Lindgrens Värld exhibit "complex interrelations and interconnectedness" with real culture, history, and contemporary values (p. 183).

Carlà and Freitag (2014; 2015) explore the translation of classic Greek myths into immersive themed environments and theme park rides. The authors examine popular European theme park areas and attractions geared toward Greek mythology, adopting a multidisciplinary research approach focused on the close reading methodology traditionally reserved for written literature. Carlà and Freitag recognize the inherently narrative nature of the theme park medium and outline four primary storytelling strategies employed in the parks: selection, abstraction, immersion, and transmediality. Importantly, this research emphasizes that theme parks allow guests to "immerse themselves into and become a part of" the story being told (2014, p. 16).

Freitag (2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2017) continues this research into the unique transmedial and intermedial strategies employed in theme parks, focusing on the interconnections between theme parks and movies as well as those observed in *autothemed* areas and attractions (i.e., theme park elements that are based on real or fictional theme parks). Freitag recognizes the unique storytelling potential of the theme park as a hybrid communications medium and provides several in-depth case studies of the myriad theming and immersion strategies used in popular theme parks throughout the

⁶ Astrid Lindgren has published 50+ children's books, including the beloved *Pippi Longstocking* stories.

United States and Europe. Freitag's analysis and insights have proven invaluable to the development of this thesis.

In 2016, a group of notable cultural scholars and analysts collaborated to publish *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*,⁷ the first collection of original academic research articles focused on the concept of themed spaces as communications media (Lukas, 2016). These essays address a wide variety of subjects related to this general topic, including discussions of culture, history, phenomenology, self-identity, rhetoric, politics, critical studies, and future research. While not all of the entries explicitly address theme parks from a narratological perspective, this collection undeniably represents a watershed moment in the academic approach to immersive entertainment as a medium. It is hoped that these studies will pave the way for additional qualitative and quantitative research in this burgeoning field.

Meanwhile, other scholars have taken a more roundabout, but no less important, approach to the narrative strategies employed in theme parks, addressing the techniques used to maintain immersive appeal from a variety of perspectives. Some studies approach this analysis from a consumer's viewpoint, analyzing guest responses to and interactions with the theme parks and attractions they visit (Pettigrew 2011; Durrant et al. 2012). Others take the opposite tack, analyzing the strategies employed by theme park designers and worldbuilders to maintain guests' engagement and enjoyment within the themed setting (Dholakia & Schroeder, 2001; Pikkemaat and Schuckert, 2007). Such studies may not explicitly acknowledge the theme park as a communications medium; however, they

⁷ This collection includes two of Freitag's (2016a, 2016b) explorations of autotheming and intermediality in theme parks, referenced in the preceding paragraph.

still provide valuable insight into the concept of environmental storytelling and have aided significantly in the development of the case study presented in this thesis.

This research has laid the foundations for more thorough and in-depth analysis of the theme park medium from a literary and narratological standpoint. It is clear from the disparate perspectives of these initial explorations that additional analysis is needed in order to fully understand the appeal of such immersive recreation and its effects upon those who experience it. Fisher's narrative paradigm may provide a new and unexplored framework for examining these issues, allowing scholars to analyze the rhetorical storytelling techniques employed by theme park designers and leadership as well as the role played by guests in the process of narrative formation. In the following chapters, this paper will endeavor to shed further light on these matters via an application of the narrative paradigm and its dual tenets, narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Chapter 4: The Narrative Paradigm as an Analytical Framework

4.1: Introduction to the Narrative Paradigm

In 1984, Walter Fisher introduced the narrative paradigm as an influential new model for understanding and classifying rhetorical communication. The narrative paradigm theory posits that all humans are natural storytellers who constantly process the world around them as a story or narrative. As Fisher (1984) puts it, the narrative paradigm proposes “a theory of human communication based on a conception of persons as *homo narrans*” (p. 1). In a subsequent essay, Fisher goes on to explain that the narrative paradigm is:

...a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of all human communication – assuming that all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character. (Fisher, 1989, p. 57)

In other words, all forms of human communication can essentially be assessed as “stories” that we tell one another. From the narrative paradigm perspective, “the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-formation” of the “stories” that they consume (Fisher, 1984, p. 13). As such, people from all cultures tend to gravitate toward communications that they consider logical from a narrative standpoint and that “ring true” to them based on what they already know of the world and its attendant logic.

Fisher refers to this drive for coherent, consistent logic as *narrative rationality* and breaks it down into two basic principles: *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity*. *Narrative probability* refers to a narrative’s cohesiveness and concerns the story’s

“formal features” such as characters, actions, and internal logic. *Narrative fidelity*, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which a story’s values and reasoning align with the other stories that already make up the audience member’s worldview. As Fisher explains in his introductory essay,

...rationality is determined by the nature of humans as narrative beings – their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives.
(Fisher, 1984, p. 8)

This statement can be seen as the crux of Fisher’s theory: humans determine the validity and persuasiveness of a “story” (i.e., any verbal or non-verbal communication to which they are exposed) based on their current knowledge of the world around them. Ultimately, the narrative paradigm “seeks, like any other theory of human action, to account for how persons come to believe and behave” (Fisher, 1985, p. 357).

4.2: Applications of the Narrative Paradigm

In each of his essays on the topic, Fisher repeatedly emphasizes the applicability of his theory to all media and genres, pointing out that “there is no genre, including technical communication, that is not an episode in the story of life” (Fisher, 1985, p. 347). Fisher stresses the point that even “technical discourse is imbued with myth and metaphor, and aesthetic discourse has cognitive capacity and import” (1985, p. 347). For any communicative text, regardless of its medium or genre, it remains true that “insofar as it invites an audience to believe it or act on it, the narrative paradigm and its attendant logic [...] are available for interpretation and assessment” (1989, p. 56).

Since its introduction in 1984, the narrative paradigm has been studied, debated, and applied to a wide range of media in various contexts. In his various essays on the topic, Fisher himself outlines the pertinence of the narrative paradigm to venues as wide-ranging as public debate, epic mythology, 20th century scriptwriting, and even casual conversation (Fisher, 1984; 1985; 1989). Other scholars have continued this line of questioning over the decades, examining the relevance of the narrative paradigm across an increasingly broad range of media.

For example, several scholars have examined the applications of the narrative paradigm in relation to marketing and advertising material, including both images and text (Bush & Bush, 1994; Stutts & Barker, 1999; Shankar et al, 2001). In these studies, the researchers focus on practical explorations of the narrative paradigm's utility in sales rhetoric, noting how Fisher's principles may be applied in various scenarios to enhance the industry's understanding of what drives consumers to embrace or reject a given instance of marketing literature.

Other researchers have focused on the role of Fisher's theory in abstract and fictive settings that share some common DNA with the theme park genre. For example, Stroud (2002) examined the ways in which ancient Indian philosophical texts—which fuse “didactic elements, contradictions, and mythic traits that often confound and inspire Western audiences” into one cohesive narrative—may offer new perspectives on the narrative paradigm “to allow for the introduction of new values and narratives to an audience” (p. 369). Roberts (2004) took a similar tack with traditional folklore studies, examining the common threads running through the narrative paradigm and classical folklore scholarship and exploring the ways in which each discipline may build upon the

other for an expanded perspective. Meanwhile, Eaves and Savoie (2005) analyzed practical applications of the narrative paradigm in the production of the reality television show *Big Brother*, noting the difficulty of balancing probability with fidelity as well as the importance of conformity to “previous accounts or other tellings of the story in various contexts” (p. 94).

The genres examined in the aforementioned studies may at first seem unrelated to the theme park medium, but a closer analysis reveals strong narrative similarities between each. For example, they all represent a delicate balance between fictive and non-fictive storytelling that presents a curated version of “real life.” Each example builds upon other, preexisting accounts of similar stories and/or worlds, and each overtly manipulates the audience’s perspective and invites suspension of disbelief in order to convey a compelling story. These and other related studies show the potential of the narrative paradigm to shed light on the nebulous question of successful storytelling within a theme park context; however, there is currently no academic literature available on the subject. Therefore, this thesis proposes a pilot case study to explore this potential and test the paradigm’s applicability throughout the field of immersive entertainment by focusing on one of the industry’s oldest and most established venues: the theme park.

4.3: Proposed Case Study

The current research will involve a detailed case study, focusing on Fisher’s joint principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, to demonstrate the ways in which the narrative paradigm may be applied for a practical analysis of the theme park as a storytelling medium. If successful, this study may provide a basic framework upon

which future research can be built. For the purposes of this pilot demonstration, it is necessary to select a subject with enough depth and breadth to showcase the full potential of the narrative paradigm to operate on multiple levels of analysis.

As mentioned above, there are currently thousands of different theme parks and related attractions operating on a wide range of themed premises throughout the world. However, there can be little debate that the industry leader in theme park development is still the company that put theme parks on the map with Disneyland back in 1955. In 2016, the Walt Disney Company's 12 theme parks in six themed resorts throughout the world had an operating budget of \$3.3 billion and attracted about 139 million visitors (Barnes, 2017). The Disney theme parks alone accounted for eight of the ten most-visited parks worldwide in 2017 (Rubin, 2018). It can be reasonably presumed, then, that the Walt Disney Company's Parks and Resorts division successfully meets its goal to combine "beloved Disney characters and storytelling" with "legendary" service and technology to craft extraordinary guest experiences (Walt Disney Parks & Resorts, 2017).

Each of the Disney theme parks and resorts approaches its "story" in a unique way, drawing upon the surrounding environment and culture in addition to its own overarching theme in order to ensure maximum guest appeal (Fung & Lee, 2009). However, as Disney's "flagship" destination and home to four of the world's top 10 theme parks, the WDW resort in Orlando, Florida, is the most suitable subject for this case study. Likewise, as the world's most popular theme park for several decades running, WDW's Magic Kingdom park warrants a particular focus within the context of the larger resort complex. Out of the dozens of theme parks, resort hotels, and other themed spaces that comprise the full WDW complex, the Magic Kingdom's story aligns

most closely with the overarching WDW narrative of a separate world. In fact, WDW and the Magic Kingdom are linked so closely that many casual visitors consider the two to be synonymous. With their cutting-edge immersive technology, vast physical scope, and rich storytelling history—supplemented by a wealth of interpretive and analytical literature in the form of fan sites, books, blogs, and travel brochures—WDW and the Magic Kingdom provide a veritable treasure trove of possibilities for narratological examination and exploration.

The following case study will analyze evidence gathered through a combination of empirical observations and archival research to document the diverse narrative strategies observed throughout WDW and the Magic Kingdom. These strategies will be explored through the lens of Fisher's narrative paradigm, noting the methods used to maintain narrative probability and narrative fidelity as well as the instances where the park's narrative fails to meet the criteria of one or both principles. Particular attention will be given to the interplay between the two principles, noting the ways in which each one serves to bolster the other as well as instances where they directly conflict with one another, forcing designers to make a choice in order to maintain the most compelling narrative possible. However, in order to analyze the storytelling strategies and techniques in use throughout WDW and the Magic Kingdom, it is first necessary to define the story that the resort seeks to tell visitors. The following chapter will endeavor to outline the complex and multifaceted narrative that pervades the WDW resort in general and the Magic Kingdom in particular.

Chapter 5: The Multifaceted Narratives of WDW and the Magic Kingdom

5.1: Overarching Narrative of Transportation and Transformation

As with all themed parks and resorts, the basic plot of WDW's story involves its audience leaving "reality" behind and entering a new, surreal realm of existence. As discussed in section 3.1, this journey to a separate realm mirrors the archetypical "hero's journey" to a "special world" that serves as the basic template for almost all adventure stories (Vogler, 1998; Campbell, 1949). For guests of WDW, the special world to which they are transported may best be defined as simply "the world of Disney⁸," i.e., the universe of classic characters, settings, and situations that the Disney company has created or acquired.

In addition to being transported to a new realm of storybook fantasy, guests may also experience a sense of personal transformation as they become "characters" within this overarching story, leaving their "everyday" selves behind along with some of their real-world stressors and concerns. However, they understand that their sojourn in this land is transitory and that they must eventually return to their "real" lives outside the boundaries of their chosen retreat. For this reason, WDW's designers must juggle the complex task of sustaining the immersive fantasy of the park's theme while also maintaining the guests' sense of connection to the real world to which they must inevitably return (Durrant et al., 2012).

⁸ In the context of this thesis, the phrase "world of Disney" refers to the entire universe of Disney-owned properties. This term should not be confused with the World of Disney souvenir store or the *Wonderful World of Disney* television anthology series (although both may be considered component parts thereof).

In a sense, the themed universe presented within WDW and the Magic Kingdom may be understood as an intermediate realm that combines the “best of both worlds” while suspending guests somewhere between fantasy and reality. In this way, the “story” of WDW must intricately weave these two frames together in a way that balances the fantasy-world narrative of adventure with the real-world need for comfort and security.

5.2: WDW’s Nested Narrative Structure

As established in the previous section, the basic plot of WDW’s story involves transporting guests to “the world of Disney.” However, the nuances of this world and its attendant story are somewhat more intricate and difficult to pinpoint. In addition to the necessary balancing act of reconciling a themed fantasy realm with the limitations of everyday reality, the WDW narrative is rendered even more complex by multiple layers of nested stories. The 27,000-acre resort does not seek to tell a single, straightforward tale, but instead draws guests deeper into a series of nested realities and sub-realities as they become more immersed in the overall narrative of their escape experience.

The WDW complex currently includes four full theme parks (not to mention dozens of other themed spaces such as hotels, water parks, and golf courses), each centered on a distinct concept: animals and nature in Disney’s Animal Kingdom, cinema and related media production in Disney’s Hollywood Studios, culture and innovation in Epcot, and, of course, classic Disney storytelling in the Magic Kingdom. Each theme park is further divided into several themed areas (referred to in the Magic Kingdom as “lands”) that vary widely in tone and treatment. Likewise, every area includes multiple individual attractions and related infrastructure (e.g., stores and restaurants), each with a

unique setting, tone, backstory, etc. Figure 2 below represents the multiple nested layers of narrative experienced by guests of WDW.

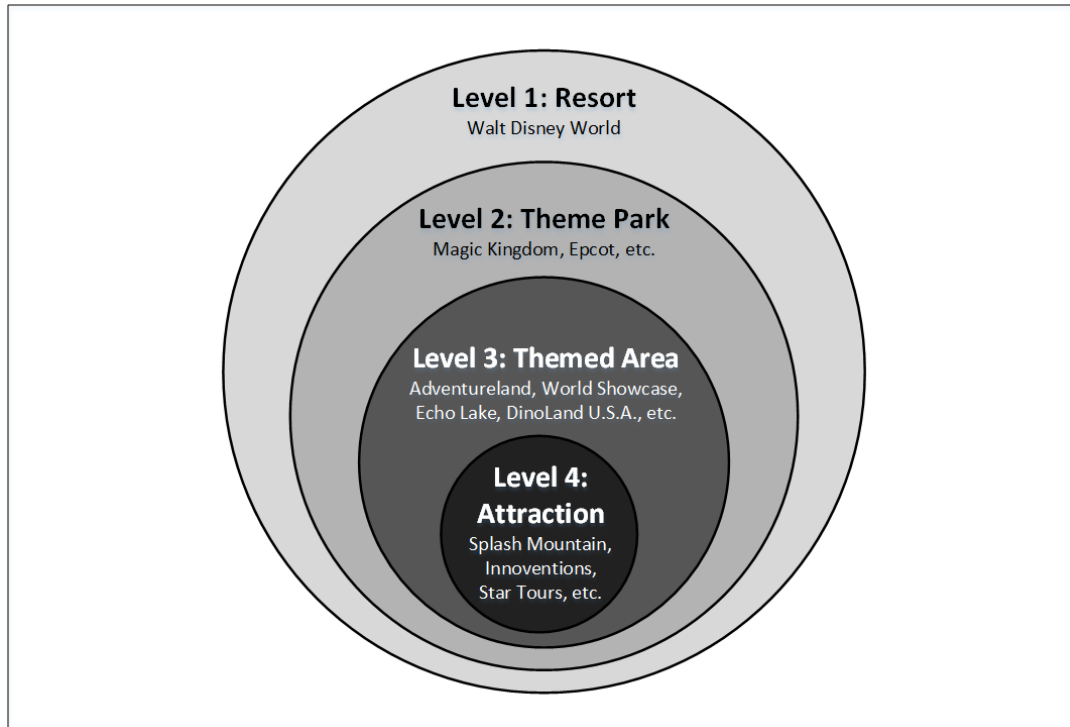


Figure 2: Nested Layers of Narrative within WDW

Each layer of narrative represents a different level of immersion that must convey a unique and convincing story while remaining true to the surrounding layers of narrative and theming. For example, the Space Mountain ride in the Tomorrowland section of the Magic Kingdom park tells a specific story of interstellar transportation that fits in with the stylized retro-futuristic theme of Tomorrowland, which in turn must align with the Magic Kingdom's motifs of whimsical fantasy and, finally, with the overarching story of the "world of Disney" that pervades all 43 square miles of the WDW resort.

5.3: The Story of the “World of Disney”

So, what exactly is the story of the “world of Disney” and how is that story conveyed to guests? The multiple diverging themes of WDW’s narrative can perhaps be best summarized via the resort’s two-sentence dedication speech (delivered by the late Walt Disney’s brother and business partner, Roy, and now commemorated in a plaque located near the entrance to the Magic Kingdom):

Walt Disney World is tribute to the philosophy and life of Walter Elias Disney ... and to the talents, the dedication, and the loyalty of the entire Disney organization that made Walt Disney’s dream come true. May Walt Disney World bring Joy and Inspiration and New Knowledge to all who come to this happy place ... a Magic Kingdom where the young at heart of all ages can laugh and play and learn – together. (Disney, 1971, ¶ 1).

In these two sentences, Roy Disney managed to communicate a complex message that continues to serve as a “preface” to WDW’s story. First and foremost, the park’s narrative is about the man and the ideals that founded the Disney company and set in motion the massive universe of Disney intellectual properties nearly a century ago. This is reflected in the very name of the resort, which was originally planned as “Disneyworld” before Roy Disney insisted on changing it to include his brother’s full name in an effort to ensure that guests would never forget Walt and his visionary role in the resort’s development (Thomas, 1976). Nearly half a century later, it would seem that Roy’s efforts to immortalize his brother’s memory were not in vain: the lights may have gone out on that old spartan of storytelling decades ago, but Walter Elias Disney’s presence can be strongly felt throughout the WDW narrative in statues, artwork, historical markers, and even entire attractions celebrating him, his history, and his ideals.

Meanwhile, a close reading of the second sentence of the dedication frames exactly what those ideals were and are: joy and happiness, inspiration, knowledge and learning, youthfulness of heart, play, laughter, togetherness, and—most important of all—magic and dreams coming true. Each of these concepts represents an aspect of Walt’s personality and passions that can be clearly observed throughout his range of creative outlets, perhaps most notably in the theme park template that he created with the opening of WDW’s predecessor, Disneyland, in 1955 (Thomas, 1976). Indeed, the very perseverance of Walt Disney’s dream project (i.e., WDW itself) across the decades serves as a message of hope and inspiration to those who enter, hinting at the possibility that they, too, may achieve untold success if they dare to follow their dreams.

If these ideals can be understood to be the major motifs of the story, then the specifics of the story’s “world” can be framed as an extension of the Walt Disney Company’s range of existing intellectual properties. Today, these properties cover a vast array of venues ranging from books and music to news media (Walt Disney Company, 2018). However, the WDW narrative focuses most heavily on the venues most closely associated with Walt and his original vision for the company: animation, cinema, and—in a prime illustration of autotheming—the theme park medium itself. In fact, the vast majority of the attractions and other themed spaces found throughout WDW can be clearly traced back to existing Disney properties in one of these three media venues. Transmedia narration across these different venues plays a major role in the WDW story and will be discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8 in the context of both narrative probability and narrative fidelity. However, it is important to note that even the completely original WDW attractions (i.e., those that were not based on preexisting

properties) can all be found to be consistent with the aesthetics and values evident within those properties, and with the classic Disney ideals outlined above.

Ultimately, the WDW story may be seen as a celebration of imagination and storytelling, presenting a meta-narrative that allows guests to hop from one story to another in the physical realm as easily as they do in the mental realm every time they consume entertainment media. Every park and themed venue in WDW aligns with this overarching narrative, offering multiple distinct but interconnected themed spaces that allow guests to travel between and among themed worlds like levels in a video game. However, no other area of the WDW resort complex exemplifies this narrative of “worlds within worlds” better than the Magic Kingdom park.

5.4: Themed Lands in the Magic Kingdom

WDW and the Magic Kingdom park are inextricably linked in the popular consciousness, and in fact the two concepts were almost synonymous for the first 11 years of WDW’s existence—up until its second theme park, EPCOT Center (later rebranded as Epcot), opened in 1982. All of the storytelling techniques that Walt Disney and his staff honed over 50+ years of animation, filmmaking, and theme park development culminated in the design of the Magic Kingdom. The Magic Kingdom is also the last venue that Walt had a personal hand in designing before he passed away in 1966 (Thomas, 1976). Perhaps for this reason, the Magic Kingdom is generally regarded as the most immersive of the WDW theme parks and a defining development in the history of themed and immersive storytelling.

As with all Disney parks, the Magic Kingdom consists of multiple themed lands that are each designed to convey a distinct tone and tell a unique story. Each land is further divided into separate themed areas designed to match the tone of the surrounding attractions. Table 1 below provides a non-comprehensive summary of the different narrative worlds and sub-worlds available for guests to explore in the Magic Kingdom.

Table 1

Worlds and Sub-Worlds in the Magic Kingdom

<u>Area</u>	<u>Theme(s)</u>	<u>Examples of Major Subsections & Attraction Areas</u>
Main Street, USA	Early 1900s Americana	Town Square, WDW Railroad, Castle Plaza
Adventureland	Exploration & Danger	Caribbean Plaza, Agrabah Bazaar, Jungle Cruise
Frontierland	Country & Wild West	Splash Mtn., Big Thunder Mtn., Tom Sawyer Island
Liberty Square	Colonial America	Hall of Presidents, Haunted Mansion, Riverboat
Fantasyland	Fairy Tales & Storybooks	Castle Courtyard, Storybook Circus, Enchanted Forest
Tomorrowland	Futurism & Retro Sci-Fi	Space Mtn., Astro Orbiter, Tomorrowland Speedway

Despite these disparate worlds and stories, the Magic Kingdom maintains a sense of consistency—both internally and within the wider framework of WDW—in the context of the overarching narrative of storybook whimsy, world-hopping, and magic that defines the Disney story. When considered through the lens of Fisher’s narrative paradigm theory, this consistency may go a long way toward explaining the park’s unparalleled success. In particular, Fisher’s dual principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity may be applied in equal measure to help explain the strength of the Magic Kingdom’s immersive appeal. The following chapters will examine the theming and storytelling techniques at play in the Magic Kingdom and the surrounding areas of WDW in the context of Fisher’s principles.

Chapter 6: Narrative Probability: Entering a New Reality

6.1: Creating a Sense of Transportation

As discussed previously, Fisher's concept of narrative probability can be summarized as the extent to which a story appears logical and free from internal contradictions. In the case of theme parks, this may be understood as the extent to which the space presents a cohesive sense of separation from the "real world." In WDW and the Magic Kingdom, the first step toward this goal is to persuade guests to accept the illusion that they have been transported to a fantasy realm. Only after this initial sense of transportation has been achieved are guests truly able to embrace the "other world" narrative.

The concept of transportation in narrative is not exclusive to theme parks or immersive entertainment. Psychology scholars use the term *transportation* to describe the phenomenon of becoming immersed in any narrative (e.g., books) and note that the experience of transportation is strongly correlated with the persuasiveness of a given text (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). In the context of immersive theming, where psychological separation from reality is both the means and the end of the story being told, successful transportation becomes even more critical.

Unsurprisingly, WDW can be seen to dedicate considerable effort to fostering this sense of transportation using various communication strategies. This chapter will explore the psychological and narratological techniques used to strengthen the narrative probability of the "journey" away from the real world. Next, Chapter 7 will outline the theming strategies used to sustain the narrative after the transition has been completed.

6.2: Setting the Stage via Place Branding

One of the primary methods WDW uses to create a sense of transportation is the technique of place branding (sometimes referred to as city branding). Place branding is a common practice among city planners and managers, defined as “the creation of a recognizable place identity and the subsequent use of that identity to further other desirable processes” (Porter, 2013, p. 232). Researchers have documented several marketing strategies central to the process of place branding, such as repeatedly exposing the audience to textual representations of the place’s brand identity as well as emphasizing uniqueness, ensuring internally consistent values and imagery, and fostering a feeling of being “a part of something” (Koller, 2008; Porter, 2013). Each of these strategies can be readily observed throughout WDW’s design, marketing, and staffing practices as part of the larger storytelling process.

The first step begins with the company’s marketing efforts long before the guest’s actual resort visit. A quick scan of the WDW website at <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/> reveals a wealth of symbolic language geared toward setting up the expectation of a separate world. Phrases such as “escape to a world full of beloved stories” and “your fantasy becomes a reality” are predominant throughout the website and related marketing materials. In addition, the word “magic” can be found in almost every instance of Disney marketing, further cementing the expectation that the world awaiting within the gates of the Magic Kingdom operates on a separate plane of existence that is not subject to the rules of our everyday realities. For guests planning a vacation on the WDW property, the company mails out physical “vacation planning” materials full of similar symbolic language.

After the vacation has been officially booked, each member of the travel party is given the opportunity to design a personalized MagicBand that will be mailed to their home before the trip begins. MagicBands are patented digital wristbands that contain radio frequency identification (RFID) information linked to the guests' reservation and account information. These devices serve multiple potential functions ranging from hotel room keys to park passes to currency, allowing guests to access restricted areas and complete financial transactions by touching the band to reader devices throughout the WDW resort. For vacationers on the WDW property, the MagicBand provides a powerful sense of separation from the outside world as it allows guests to eschew the physical manifestations of their "everyday" concerns (e.g., keys and cash) without breaking the inescapable connection to the underlying concepts of physical and financial security. Meanwhile, the arrival of these colorful accessories in the mail evokes the "call to adventure" segment of the hero's journey described in section 3.1.

6.3: Making the Journey

After the stage for the resort visit has been set in this manner, the next step is to create a sense of physical and psychological separation from the outside world via a "journey" to the new realm. One major strategy that WDW uses to convey this sense of separation is the use of proxemics, or the structuring of physical space to communicate certain feelings or ideas. Studies have indicated that the use of distance and physical barriers can convincingly convey symbolic detachment (Amad et al., 2007). As guests embark on their journey into the world of Disney, the use of proxemics can be observed in multiple unique and innovative ways.

The calculated application of the principles of proxemics begins as soon as guests pass through the main gate to the WDW resort. The property is spread out over 27,258 acres, compelling guests to drive through the resort, often for several miles, before reaching their parking destination (generally either a resort hotel or a theme park or related attraction). This reinforces the idea of leaving the “real world” far behind before embarking on the next stage of the journey.

From here, the journey diverges depending on the guests’ plans for their visit. Those staying on the property for a multi-day vacation first enter the WDW story via their hotel check-in, which generally occurs in a luxurious and heavily themed lobby that serves as the symbolic threshold affording entry into their temporary new reality. Those lodging off-site or visiting the resort for a day trip enter their stories in different ways and with different levels of immersion depending on their destination within the WDW property⁹. However, for the purposes of this research, the applied study of proxemics will focus most heavily on the journey of guests as they approach, enter, and explore the Magic Kingdom.

For guests lodging off-property, the drive in to the Magic Kingdom parking lot is just the first of several steps required to reach their storybook destination. Once they have secured a spot in the park’s massive parking lot, visitors walk to a nearby junction to await a tram that will carry them on the next leg of their journey away from the real world. The tram carries its riders to the gates of the Transportation and Ticket Center (TTC), a facility located on the shores of a large man-made lake directly across from the

⁹ For example, local guests browsing the Disney Springs shopping district for an afternoon do not expect the same level of escape as those visiting a theme park as part of a weeklong family vacation.

Magic Kingdom. At the TTC, guests can purchase park passes (if they have not already done so) before passing through a security checkpoint and then finally catching the transportation that will carry them to the gates of the park. For this final stretch of the journey, travelers have the choice to board either a monorail or ferry boat. This serves a threefold purpose in that it:

1. Further enforces the perception of separation from the outside world;
2. Fosters a sense of surreal adventure via the use of unorthodox transportation; and
3. Carefully controls the angle from which guests first glimpse their destination, allowing for maximum visual impact.

Each of these factors serves to conceptually and emotionally immerse daily visitors deeper in the narrative they are entering as they approach the gateway into their temporary new reality.

Meanwhile, for guests approaching the Magic Kingdom from one of WDW's 25+ resort hotels, the journey to the park's entrance simply marks another chapter in the story that began when they entered their hotel lobby and checked into their rooms. Perhaps for this reason, the voyage is a bit more straightforward as travelers take a bus, boat, monorail, or footpath (depending on their choice of lodging) directly from their hotel to a security checkpoint at the park's front gate.

After they have reached the park entrance, guests undertake the final symbolic step of passing through the touchpoints that afford official entry into the Magic Kingdom and walking through a tunnel into their fantastical new reality. The tunnel into the park makes use of the architectural principle of "compression and release," wherein a small,

enclosed space opens suddenly onto a large and visually impressive area, producing a psychological sense of transformation and awe (Laseau & Tice 1991; Ledford 2014). As guests emerge from the dark archway into the bright, colorful, and airy “town square” area at the front of the park, it underscores their transformative journey away from the mundanity of the “real world.”

However, the application of proxemics does not stop once guests have passed through the entryway. To reach any of the five themed areas containing the bulk of the park’s attractions, guests must first walk down Main Street, U.S.A., a midway designed to resemble an idealized version of Walt Disney’s hometown at the turn of the 20th century. This completes the symbolic journey away from modern “real” life, as guests travel back through a simpler time before arriving at what may be viewed as the “capitol building” of their fantastical destination: Cinderella Castle (see Figure 3 on page 46).

Towering at the end of Main Street, Cinderella Castle serves as the Magic Kingdom’s hub as well as a visual centerpiece to connect all the different themed areas within the park. From Main Street up through the “courtyard” area at the front of the castle, skillfully arranged building structures and foliage ensure that none of the other themed areas are visible to guests. It is only after they have reached the plaza area at the foot of the castle that guests are free to take one of several diverging paths leading to the Magic Kingdom’s five themed “lands” and the beloved attractions they have to offer.

Chapter 7: Narrative Probability: Maintaining the Illusion

7.1: Consistent Theming

Once guests have reached the castle and have, presumably, suspended their disbelief enough to accept that they have indeed left reality behind, the park's task becomes one of maintaining the consistency of the illusion for as long as the guests remain within the park's gates. As discussed above, this mission is rendered all the more difficult by the "worlds within worlds" motif that defines the Magic Kingdom's story. Table 1 on page 35 outlines the different worlds and sub-worlds that comprise the Magic Kingdom's narrative.

In order to maintain a consistent sense of place as guests travel from one sub-reality to another, The Magic Kingdom must meet two core goals. First, it needs to ensure that all the scenery and infrastructure in a given locale matches the tone of the "land" and nearby attractions. Next, it must also maintain believable transitions from one theme to the next in order to prevent disorienting guests in a way that would break the illusion of immersion. Fortunately for those tasked with handling this risky chore, the process of switching between marginally-related realities is part of the Magic Kingdom's story.

As explained in Chapter 5, the overarching narrative of all of WDW—and especially the Magic Kingdom—is about hopping from one fantasy world to another like levels in a video game. In this context, the task of maintaining a sense of narrative probability becomes one of simply ensuring that all the different worlds, and the transitions between them, are consistent and believable while maintaining a sense of connection to the "real" world. The Magic Kingdom's designers (referred to in the

Disney lexicon as Imagineers), managers, and front-line staff members use a myriad of artistic, technical, and psychological techniques to sustain guests' suspension of disbelief and keep them engaged as protagonists in their fairy tale narrative.

7.2: Transmedia Storytelling

Arguably one of the most important techniques in the park's arsenal of narrative strategies is the use of transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling (sometimes referred to as cross-media storytelling or cross-media narration) is a relatively new concept that continues to evolve as it gains steam in the academic community. Henry Jenkins, the scholar who popularized the concept in the early 2000s, has described transmedia storytelling as follows:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95).

The study of transmedia storytelling has been gaining steam in the past decade, with multiple researchers exploring its applicability to the theme park medium (Schweizer & Pearce, 2006; Aarseth, 2006). However, the roots of the concept are not new and may actually be traced back to the original Disneyland park (and perhaps even further), as Walt Disney and his designers worked to incorporate known Disney characters and properties into the narrative as a way to expand those existing stories and underscore guests' entry into a fantasy world (Thomas, 1965).

Even before the opening of the first Disney theme park in 1955, the Disney brand was well-known and loved by children and adults alike (Telotte, 2010). Today, the company's animated features have become a fundamental fixture in the childhood memories of almost all individuals raised in the western world. In addition to the Disney studios' direct output, the company also continues to acquire beloved third-party properties such as Marvel Comics and the *Star Wars* franchise. Thus, most westerners are familiar with the world of Disney long before their first visit to one of the brand's theme parks and/or resorts. Disney capitalizes on this familiarity by working cross-media narratives into rides, attractions, and scenery throughout the property. For example, several Fantasyland rides (e.g., Journey of the Little Mermaid and Peter Pan's Flight) allow guests to relive movie events from the characters' perspective. Other attractions, like the Monsters, Inc. Laugh Floor and Enchanted Tales with Belle, take guests into the characters' world but present a new narrative that builds on the original story or stories. Disney has begun creating cross-media narratives in the other direction as well, producing several movies based on WDW attractions (e.g., *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Haunted Mansion*) and even entire areas of the park (e.g., *Tomorrowland*).

Meanwhile, the creation and use of cross-media narratives extends beyond individual rides and attractions to permeate the entire atmosphere of the park. For example, many of the Magic Kingdom restaurants (e.g., Gaston's Tavern and Tony's Town Square Restaurant) are modeled after specific locales from Disney movies. In addition, guests can meet and interact with myriad fictional characters from the world of Disney, ranging from princesses and villains to Mickey Mouse himself. Costumed employees receive lengthy training—on everything from mannerisms to forging

characters' signatures—in order to ensure that they portray the character accurately and maintain the narrative of the world they are representing (Chamlee, 2018). Children are even invited to become characters themselves, dressing up as their favorite hero or heroine and/or receiving a makeover from “Fairy Godmother” at a salon inside Cinderella Castle¹⁰. With such an immersive atmosphere linked to known and cherished properties, it is little wonder that the Magic Kingdom has been successful in conveying a sense of narrative probability to guests.

7.3: Visual and Multisensory Design

Another related immersion technique used in the Magic Kingdom to create a consistent sense of fantasy and escape is the use of three-dimensional, multisensory theming. WDW is widely acclaimed for the detailed and immersive theming found throughout all levels of the property, from the bear-shaped architecture hidden in the northeast face of Disney's Wilderness Lodge hotel to the stylized bathroom signs tailored to each area of the resort complex. However, in no section of WDW is the use of immersive theming more detailed or prevalent than within the Magic Kingdom, the company's flagship theme park. Countless books, blogs, podcasts, and related media are dedicated to chronicling the impressive level of attention to detail found throughout the park and its themed lands¹¹.

¹⁰ All children, regardless of attire, are regarded as royalty by Magic Kingdom cast members, who generally address them as “Princess” or “Sir.”

¹¹ Just a few examples include *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture* (Dunlop, 2011); the Passport to Dreams Old and New blog (<http://passport2dreams.blogspot.com/>); and the Imagineering Disney fan site (<http://www.imagineeringdisney.com/>).

Perhaps the most striking example of three-dimensional theming in the Magic Kingdom is Cinderella Castle, the park's iconic centerpiece.



Figure 3: Cinderella Castle in the Magic Kingdom

More than just a scenic structure, Cinderella Castle is considered the official symbol of the Magic Kingdom and the heart of WDW's place identity (WDW, 2018). This fairy tale-inspired building is perhaps the best example of the multiple factors that are taken under consideration when using visual imagery to reinforce the park's storybook narrative. The following quote from the official WDW website summarizes the way the castle seamlessly blends a sense of old-world history with the fairy-tale setting

one would expect in the home of one of Disney's most beloved heroines, all while catering to real-life tourist concerns such as photo opportunities:

Boasting soaring spires, ornate turrets and regal royal-blue rooftops, the 189-foot castle invokes both the magic and mystery of real-world castles—such as Fontainebleau and Versailles—and fictional palaces like the one seen in Disney's animated classic *Cinderella*.

Adding to the enchanted environment, the castle is surrounded by a tranquil moat, lush green grass, rose bushes and a wishing well, providing perfect picture-taking opportunities from nearly every angle. (WDW, 2018, ¶ 2-3)

The castle combines classic European architecture with bright colors, fanciful accents, and modern details to convey a very “Disney” feeling of storybook whimsy. The structure also employs a common optical illusion called *forced perspective* to enhance its apparent height by decreasing the scale of the building's upper levels in order to make them appear further from guests looking up at ground level (Hench, 2003). Not only does this increase the structure's perceived grandeur in the eyes of the viewer, but it also provides a subtle hint that guests are in a new and unfamiliar reality where things are not always what they seem. This sense of exoticism is further cultivated by high-wattage lights embedded in the walls of the castle that twinkle intermittently, mimicking the sparkles that have come to signify the presence of “magic” in so many of the Disney company's feature films and related visual media. Guests are likely to recognize this visual cue from the movies and make the intuitive association that this building, too, must be imbued with magical qualities of its own.

Meanwhile, the importance of the castle's theming and its place in WDW's mythos extend beyond the physical space occupied by the structure and out into the surrounding lands. As the “capitol building” of the Magic Kingdom's storybook realm,

Cinderella Castle is the only structure in the park meant to be visible from all six of the different themed areas. From this position, the castle serves both a symbolic and practical purpose as the focal point of the park. Not only does the sight of the castle's turrets serve as a psychological reminder of the Magic Kingdom's narrative, it also allows guests to physically orient themselves as they explore the winding pathways connecting each area to the next, knowing that the castle represents the park's central hub.

This combined application of psychological and practical benefits is just one example of the ways in which WDW uses visual communication techniques to support a consistent and immersive experience for guests as they travel throughout the Magic Kingdom and other areas of WDW. Similar levels of theming and strategic use of design principles can be found in all sections of the park. Each of the six themed areas has a consistent look and feel that can be observed in myriad ways, from the color schemes and staff uniforms to paving materials and even strategically chosen typefaces. Imagineer John Hench (2003) describes the meticulous planning that goes into the design of each land, including a set of "rules of the land" that determine the background, geography, and time period of each area in order to maintain consistency and avoid internal contradiction.

Another example of Disney's use of imagery to create a consistent sense of place is the strategic use of the "Mickey" logo (consisting of three circles representing the character's head and ears). This easily-recognizable icon is ubiquitous across all areas of the Disney property, appearing in park and hotel decor, landscaping, engineering fixtures, etc. Some designers have even turned this into a game for guests by concealing "Hidden Mickeys" in unexpected places throughout the resort. Figure 4 shows examples of the Mickey logo worked into food, linens, flooring tile, building trim, and even fireworks.

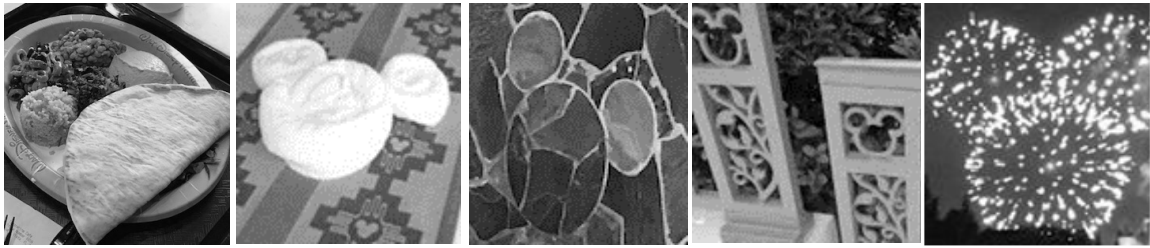


Figure 4: Examples of Mickey Logo in WDW

It is rare for guests to find themselves in a location without at least one immediately noticeable Mickey logo; there are usually several visible at all times. The logo appears so frequently and in so many different contexts that it begins to feel almost organic to guests, as though the shape simply grows out of the surrounding environment as just another of the magical laws of nature in this unique and fantastical habitat. Meanwhile, the MagicBands worn by guests (see section 6.2) feature a Mickey logo that serves to enact “magical” RFID technology when touched to certain other Mickeys, thus branding guests as a part of the WDW story and imbuing them with some of its magic.

Additional examples of visual place branding in the Magic Kingdom and WDW can be found in practical fixtures such as telephone poles, manhole covers, etc. Throughout the WDW property, such mundane objects can often be observed to display bright and/or fanciful touches in keeping with the whimsical, colorful tone of the resort and parks. For example, directional road signs inside the gates of WDW are branded with bright Disney colors (purple, yellow, and red) instead of the traditional green. While this might not immediately seem like a particularly fantasy-inspired detail, it subtly reinforces the message that guests are in a new “land” with its own governance and regulations.

To supplement the meticulous visual theming found throughout the resort, audio theming plays an equally important role in the immersive WDW experience. Every area

of the Magic Kingdom features unique, setting-appropriate music piped in along the park's walkways and attraction queues. From the 1900s-era ragtime melodies on Main Street, U.S.A., to the eerie organ music on the pathway leading to the Haunted Mansion, each tune is carefully selected to align with the overarching theme of the location. These disembodied leitmotifs serve to augment the sense of being a character in a fantasy movie or play, complete with a soundtrack to frame the mood and tone of each scene.

Meanwhile, this curated audio is supplemented by dynamic sounds coming from the attractions themselves. In his book *Designing Disney*, veteran Imagineer John Hench (2003) describes the careful planning and consideration that goes into every aspect of ambient sound in a given location, from the rushing water features in Tomorrowland to the cheerful whistle of the riverboat in Liberty Square. According to Hench, the Imagineers even account for the anticipated screams of excitement coming from moving thrill rides, ensuring that these noises are prominently audible in areas where such sounds will serve to augment the tone of the surrounding setting.

Of course, the Magic Kingdom's use of immersive theming does not stop with sights and sounds. Disney is well-known for its development of strategies designed to engage as many of the human senses as possible, and the company's Imagineers are constantly developing new technologies designed to enhance the immersive nature of the resort's attractions and themed areas (Trowbridge & Stapleton, 2009). While the majority of these technologies focus on visual immersion and technological conveniences, there is no shortage of examples in which the Magic Kingdom incorporates immersive, multidimensional theming designed to appeal to each of the five senses.

For example, tactile sensation plays a major role in the immersive atmosphere, especially for children. Guests are often encouraged to touch and interact with scenery

throughout the park, particularly in ride queues and open-play areas such as Tom Sawyer Island. If an object is within reach of guests, it is generally designed not just to look but also to feel completely authentic. Even such “mundane” details as guard rails and paving stones convey a feeling of authenticity that anchors guests to the specific land or area, from the smooth metallic railings of Tomorrowland to the rough “wood” and “dried mud” that surround guests in line for Splash Mountain.

Even for older guests who are less inclined to interact with the scenery, Disney finds methods to use tactile sensation to heighten immersion in several ways. One obvious example is the use of haptic effects in attractions, such as the vibrating seats and puffs of air directed at guests in Stitch’s Great Escape and Mickey’s PhilharMagic. Even temperature comes into play in rides like Pirates of the Caribbean, where guests can physically feel the heat emanating from the embers in the pillaging scene. Another, more subtle illustration of this phenomenon is the way guests can “feel” the transitions from one land to the next via small changes in the surrounding climate. For example, guests may move from an open, airy land to a shady, humid area full of trees or exotic plants. Many such transitions involve travel through a shaded archway or pavilion equipped with fans and/or water misters that enhance the sense of atmospheric transformation. Particularly perceptive guests may even notice changes in the feel of the paving materials beneath their feet (e.g., smooth pavement vs. artificial “cut stone”), heightening the narrative probability of the “story” that they have just stepped from one world to another.

Meanwhile, olfactory input plays an equally significant role in the multisensory immersiveness of the park’s story. The Disney company owns a patented device called a *smellitizer* that is designed to project scents across hundreds of feet (Ford et al., 2012).

Synthetic and/or artificially distributed scents are used in multiple different contexts and areas of the park, from the aroma of fresh cookies projected via smellitzer from the Main Street bakery to the distinctive smells used in specific attractions, such as the scent of burning embers in the Pirates of the Caribbean pillaging scene or the smell of pastries piped into the theater in Mickey's PhilharMagic. These "artificial" olfactory experiences are, of course, supplemented by the "real" scents of the resort's botanical arrangements, not to mention the signature culinary creations sold at kiosks throughout the park, such as popcorn and churros.

The signature tastes of WDW and the Magic Kingdom play such a significant role in many guests' enjoyment of the experience that it would be difficult to overstate the importance of such offerings in the park's overall narrative of a world that is not just new and different, but also objectively pleasurable. WDW is world-renowned for its high-quality fare—from the haute cuisine at Victoria and Albert's restaurant to the classic quick-service snacks like churros and Dole Whip—as evidenced by numerous awards and accolades as well as countless blogs, forums, and fan sites dedicated exclusively to the topic of Disney dining (AAA, 2018; Forbes, 2018; Mason, n.d.; Kramer, 2018).

One notable difference between the flavors of WDW and the other sensory experiences mentioned above is that taste is the only one of the five senses whose inputs remain (as yet) entirely non-simulated. Unlike some of the visual illusions and haptic effects of the Magic Kingdom's scenery and attractions, the comestibles are made of 100% real food and thus anchor guests to the "real world" outside the park's gates. However, such offerings are often exclusive to Disney and/or customized in extravagant ways that make them feel like part of the unique WDW fantasy narrative. This fare is

also often enjoyed in highly immersive “fantasy” settings or interactive shows as the staff members prepare and serve—with the usual Disney flair—a culinary cabaret that serves to tie guests back into the “other world” narrative and sustain the consistent sense of place that defines the WDW story.

7.4: Storybook/Cinematic Structure

One final approach that must be considered when analyzing WDW’s narrative probability is the use of classic storytelling techniques such as story structure, pacing, and transitions. These timeless narrative strategies are generally associated with traditional linear storytelling media and may initially seem out of place when discussing a narrative as freeform and self-directed as a theme park visit. However, a close analysis of WDW’s infrastructure and scheduling reveal a carefully engineered experience designed to encourage guests along an itinerary that emulates a traditional storybook, movie, or stage performance, complete with an exposition and setup, deliberate pacing, carefully crafted transitions from one “scene” to the next, and, at the end of the day, a grand finale. Such strategies are particularly important within the Magic Kingdom because they further reinforce the “storybook” feeling that defines the park’s narrative.

As described in section 6.3, the Magic Kingdom’s story “setup” is achieved via the multi-legged journey into the park’s gates and through the nostalgia of Main Street. For guests who arrive before the park’s opening, this exposition is enhanced by an “opening scene” in the form of an introductory ceremony near the front of the park. In the current ceremony (as of September 2018), the *Let the Magic Begin* show features a Royal Herald who unrolls a “scroll of proclamation” declaring that “the magic can begin”

before introducing guests to Mickey Mouse and several other classic Disney characters (WDW, 2018, ¶ 4). As with a traditional storybook or movie, this short vignette serves to introduce the audience to the tone, setting, and major characters of the story's narrative.

Once the park is officially open, guests are technically free to roam the lands and attractions in an open-ended manner. However, psychological and consumer-focused studies have found that most Westerners are significantly more likely to process three-dimensional layouts from left to right and in a clockwise direction, likely due to processing biases from reading text and analog clocks in this manner (Kholod et al., 2011, Flath et al., 2018, Rezaul Karim et al., 2016). In the Magic Kingdom, this intuitive pattern serves to guide guests west to Adventureland and then clockwise through Frontierland, Liberty Square, Fantasyland, and Tomorrowland, respectively, before exiting back down Main Street and through the park's gates. Figure 5 below shows a Magic Kingdom map with this likely progression delineated.

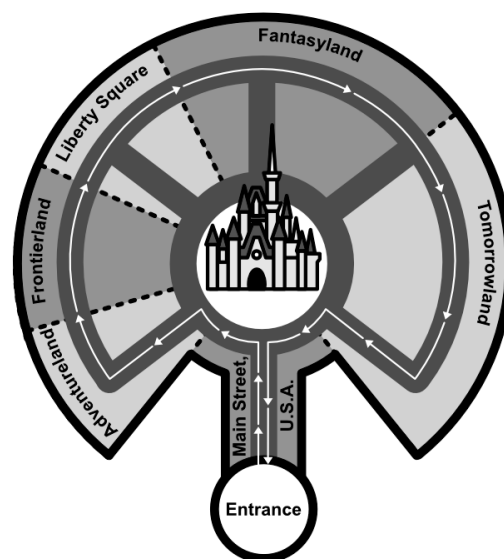


Figure 5: Magic Kingdom Progression¹²

¹² Design created for this publication by Clay S. Johnson. Property of the author.

Some observers have noted that this particular arrangement may be interpreted as a structured narrative outlining the tale of the fabled American journey. This narrative may best be captured in Brannen's (1992) description of Disneyland Park in California (the prototype on which the Magic Kingdom's layout is based):

The original Disneyland layout features a distinctly modern progression in which guests may relive the American romantic journey by heading "out West" from Main Street. They first fight their way through the turbulent waters of Adventureland, encountering savages and beasts along the way. They relax for a while in the civilized settlement of New Orleans Square before they push forward on their quest for the American dream through the rough terrain of Frontierland. Finally, they reach Fantasyland, where their dreams come true. Tomorrowland is a fantasized extension of this limitless dream—the new frontier. (p. 219)

The primary difference between the Magic Kingdom's layout and the California design described above is that Disneyland's New Orleans Square has been replaced by Liberty Square in the Magic Kingdom and moved between Frontierland and Fantasyland. It may be argued that this change makes the "American journey" narrative even more explicit, as guests experience the founding of a new and transformative society before moving forward to see "dreams come true" in Fantasyland.

If this progression through the Magic Kingdom's lands can be understood to represent the major "acts" of the story, then each act can be further broken down into individual "scenes" in the form of attractions and other themed spaces. It should also be noted that the Magic Kingdom's designers have taken great care to ensure a precisely delineated structure with seamless transitions from one such "act" or "scene" to the next. Artfully arranged structures and foliage are deployed to ensure that the different areas of the park remain as self-contained as possible, with no land visible from another except at

the junctures where each one segues into the next. Such junctures often take the form of bridges or tunnels to underscore the transition from one leg of the narrative journey to the next, and yet at the same time they are also crafted to maintain an impression of organic seamlessness. Design elements such as building styles, landscaping, signage, and even paving materials slowly transition from one theme to the next rather than abruptly shifting in a manner that would be jarring to guests. Some areas of the park even employ special transitional theme music at such junctures to bridge the gap between the diverse musical styles played along different sections of the park's walkways.

Another parallel between the Magic Kingdom's narrative and that of a traditional movie or storybook is the deliberate pacing of action and excitement interspersed with quieter periods of rest. DeJa (2016) describes how legendary Disney animator Wolfgang "Woolie" Reitherman managed the pacing of the classic animated short *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*:

Woolie strongly believed in pacing an action sequence a certain way. He stated that during fast-paced action scenes there need to be pauses where things slow down. This would give viewers the chance to catch their breath before tension rises again and speed is accelerated again. (p. 44)

A similar principle can be seen at play throughout WDW and the Magic Kingdom. The fast-paced thrill rides are generally scattered near the perimeter of the park, with multiple slower-paced attractions—not to mention stationary shows, retail stores, and restaurants—separating one from the next.¹³ Disney's FastPass+ system,

¹³ The one major exception to this rule may be Splash Mountain, which was built directly adjacent to the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad roller coaster in Frontierland in 1992. However, despite the proximity of these rides, the entry/exit queues and connecting walkways are structured in such a way that guests are compelled to walk through the themed surroundings for several minutes in order to get from one to the other.

which enables guests to save a spot in line for popular attractions, further enforces this sense of pacing by allowing no more than one reservation per hour. Meanwhile, pre-scheduled parades and live events in front of Cinderella Castle serve to intermittently draw guests back toward the park's hub, away from the "action" of the big-ticket rides and into periods of passive spectatorship.

Of course, it bears repeating that the Magic Kingdom narrative, as with that of any theme park, is open-ended in nature and allows guests the freedom to deviate from the guided path outlined above. Indeed, many savvy guests make a point of plotting their trajectory against the expected flow of traffic in order to avoid the worst of the crowds (e.g., taking advantage of shorter attraction lines during parades). However, for those who stay until near closing time, the story's climactic "grand finale" is hard to miss: the iconic fireworks show can be seen and heard from nearly every spot in the park and many of the surrounding resort hotels. In its current iteration, the aptly titled *Happily Ever After* fireworks show encourages guests to carry the inspiration of their Magic Kingdom experience with them beyond the park's gates and to pursue their dreams with all the passion of a storybook hero or heroine.

After this climactic scene, the story's denouement occurs in much the same manner as the setup and exposition at the start of the day: guests slowly make their way back to the "real world" via a walk down Main Street, through the tunnel and turnstiles, and onto the transportation (monorail, ferry boat, or hotel bus) that will take them back to the spot where the day's journey began. For those who have remained in the park until closing time, the Magic Kingdom even offers a "prologue" generally known among fans

as the “Kiss Goodnight.” During this final scene, the castle lights twinkle and a disembodied voice-over addresses guests:

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, on behalf of everyone here at the Magic Kingdom, we thank you for joining us today for a magic gathering of family, friends, fun, and fantasy. We hope your magical journey with us has created wonderful memories that will last a lifetime.

Walt Disney said that the Magic Kingdom is a world of imagination, hopes, and dreams. In this timeless land of enchantment, magic and make believe are reborn, and fairy tales come true. The Magic Kingdom is a place for the young and the young at heart. A special place where when you wish upon a star, your dreams can come true. Until we see you again, have a safe trip home. Thank you, and goodnight. (WDW, as quoted in Dreyer, 2017, p. 221).

This closing speech serves to explicitly reiterate the WDW story’s major themes—i.e., fun, fantasy, togetherness, the Disney cinematic canon, and the legacy of Walt Disney himself—as outlined in section 5.3. The final sentences even manage to plant the seeds for a “sequel” in the form of a return trip. All of this carefully crafted closure serves to support the Magic Kingdom’s narrative probability by augmenting the feeling of “walking into a movie”—and back out again—that defines the WDW story.

Chapter 8: Narrative Fidelity in a Fantasy Realm

8.1: Applicability of Narrative Fidelity in a Theme Park Setting

The previous chapters discuss the ways in which the Magic Kingdom persuades guests to suspend their disbelief and accept the “logic” of WDW’s narrative of a separate reality. However, this can only partially account for the park’s popularity among consumers. Once guests have accepted the “story” that the Magic Kingdom does indeed transport them to a whole new world, they must also decide that a visit to this alternate reality is worth the considerable financial investment required for a Disney vacation. In other words, they must deem the Magic Kingdom to be a land worth inhabiting. This is where the second facet of Fisher’s narrative rationality principle—narrative fidelity—comes into play. In the narrative paradigm, narrative fidelity refers to the alignment of a story’s reasoning and values with the audience’s preconceived understanding of the world. As Fisher (1984) explains, narrative fidelity is a question of how well the narrative in question conforms to “the truths we know to be true from our own lives” (p. 17).

In its most basic form, narrative fidelity is about testing the extent to which a story conforms to the audience’s understanding of how the world works. Such a subjective concept is nebulous and difficult to pin down in any form of communication media, and it becomes even more so in a genre focused on fantasy realms that, by definition, do not operate according to the same rules as our known world. In fact, some researchers have argued that Fisher’s standards are “inapplicable to works of fantasy and science fiction” for just this reason (Rowland, 2009, p. 39).

However, as this chapter intends to demonstrate, such a position may be based on too narrow and literal an interpretation of Fisher's paradigm. While fantasy worlds like the one presented in the Magic Kingdom may operate according to a different set of principles than those of the known "real world," they can still conform to an audience's sensibilities about what "feels" right in a given situation. After all, as Fisher (1984) points out, "The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation" (p. 9). In this context, there are at least two perspectives from which the concept of narrative fidelity remains relevant within a theme park setting:

1. the question of whether the park's "story" remains consistent with the audience's intuitive understanding of how the fantasy world in question should operate, and
2. the extent to which the park upholds the truths and values most salient to each guest.

The following sections will explore the Magic Kingdom's alignment with Fisher's narrative fidelity principle along each of these parameters.

8.2: Fidelity to Fantasy World Expectations

In order for a theme park to fulfill Fisher's criteria for narrative fidelity, it must align with its guests' conceptions of the world as they know it and with "the stories they know to be true in their lives" (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). In its most literal interpretation, this definition must necessarily reject all fantastical aspects of a story, as most observers would recognize such elements to be "untrue" from a factual standpoint. However, most modern psychologists agree that an intuitive understanding of certain archetypal fantasy tropes—what Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious"—is hard-wired into the

human psyche (Jung, 1969; Corbin, 1989; Hillman, 1997). Indeed, certain common fantasy themes can be found throughout the earliest examples of art and literature from numerous cultures across the globe, including themes of death/rebirth, divine descent, magical animal friends, and even culture-specific versions of classic folk tales like Cinderella (Campbell, 1949; Jung, 1969; De la Rochère et al., 2016). These universal themes have been further cemented in the western consciousness by centuries of fantasy storytelling, beginning with the faerie tales and folk tales passed across generations via oral tradition, then recorded in early written collections (e.g., *Grimms' Fairy Tales*), adapted into original works of literature, and eventually remade using 20th century media developments such as television, cinema, and video games. Thus any fantasy narrative, including a theme park, can be understood to have a certain intuitive measure of narrative fidelity as long as it conforms to these deep-seeded expectations of how a fantasy world should function.

For a theme park owned by a company as prolific and well-known as Disney, this requirement is readily met through the use of transmedia storytelling, as described in section 7.2. Walt Disney's animation company has played such a major role in the portrayal of fairy tales and other classic children's stories, starting with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, that it would be difficult to overstate the impact such media have had on most living westerners' understanding of the fairy tale genre. From the sparkles of blue-white light that signify magic to the lime-green glow that indicates the presence of evil, Disney has played a pivotal role in defining our society's collective understanding of how to perceive even those fantasy tropes that long predate the advent of cinema and animation.

In addition, Disney's specific interpretations of classic fairy tale and storybook characters have largely become synonymous with the characters themselves. As just one example of this phenomenon, most Americans can instantly recognize a visual representation of Disney's Peter Pan from the 1953 film, but far fewer would be able to identify the same character from the illustrations in the original J.M. Barrie (1911) novel.



Figure 6: Disney's Peter Pan vs. Original Illustration¹⁴

The same may be said of dozens more public domain characters that have been featured in the Disney canon. From fairy tale princesses and storybook heroes to mythological characters and even a few historical figures, the Disney company holds a massive portion of the public mindshare in terms of how such characters should look and behave. This association provides a powerful sense of narrative fidelity among guests as

¹⁴ (Left) Still frame from Disney et al.'s (1953) movie *Peter Pan*. Art by Walt Disney Productions.
(Right) Illustration from J.M. Barrie's (1911) novel *Peter Pan and Wendy*. Art by Francis Donkin Bedford.

they interact with staff who have received lengthy training and undergone meticulous styling to ensure that they meet these unconscious expectations (Chamlee, 2018).

As described previously in section 7.2, this same phenomenon applies across the numerous proprietary characters and settings from intellectual properties that the Disney company has either created or purchased. Particularly among popular older properties that many current guests have known since childhood (e.g., Marvel Comics and Star Wars), fidelity to these known universes is often more important than fidelity to the “real” world outside the park. As long as the narrative of the Magic Kingdom remains consistent with the logic and values of the ever-broadening collection of Disney intellectual properties, this criterion of narrative fidelity will be satisfied.

8.3: Fidelity to Personal and Cultural Beliefs, Values, and Ideals

The second facet of narrative fidelity in a theme park setting concerns the extent to which a park upholds the values most salient to each guest. This is often seen as the crux of the narrative paradigm in the traditional rhetorical context: an audience will not be open to a persuasive argument if it denies their worldview or conflicts with their existing beliefs and values (Fisher, 1989; Stutts & Barker 1999). In a theme park setting, similar principles apply. Despite the openly “built” and fictional nature of the setting, guests must be able to positively link it to their personal understanding of “reality”—including their ideals and values—or they will reject the basic narrative of transportation to a more pleasant realm. Indeed, the major academic critics of the Disney parks almost invariably place a heavy negative focus on the “simulated” nature of the theme park, voicing concerns that the narratives offered within serve to subvert or distract from what

they perceive as the “reality” or “authenticity” of the outside world (Marin, 1977; Baudrillard, 1983; Van Wert, 1995; Bryman, 1999). However, in recent decades many scholars have taken a more positive approach to theme parks, focusing on the value of the medium as a meaningful art form that bridges fantasy and reality in a manner that supports—and often elevates—its visitors’ psychological and philosophical understanding of the universe as well as their cultural and aesthetic values (Lukas, 2008; Jeffers, 2004; Lindgren et al., 2015).

In this context, it becomes clear that one of the primary tasks of the theme park designer is to create a narrative that meets and upholds universal values while seeking to minimize elements that might cause offense, particularly to those of the prevailing culture among potential visitors. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that a theme park must be compatible with the culture of its visitors in order to achieve success. For example, Säävälä (2006) observed that the “fragile identity” (p. 390) of India’s emerging middle class made it difficult for them to meaningfully engage with the opulent fantasy setting of a local theme park. Lukas (2008) provides several examples of prospective themed spaces that were scrapped before completion due to cultural conflicts, such as Dracula World¹⁵ in Romania or a themed National Rifle Association (NRA) arcade in New York City called NRA Sports Blast.

Even global Disney parks are not immune to this phenomenon. Several researchers have demonstrated that the initial performance and popularity of Disney’s international resorts—from the monumental success of Tokyo Disneyland to the “cultural

¹⁵ Dracula World would have been themed after Vlad III of Wallachia, the historical “Dracula” who earned the nickname *Vlad the Impaler* based on his acts of cruelty, brutality, and genocide.

Chernobyl” of Euro Disney¹⁶—can be traced back to the success with which each enterprise tapped into the social mores and values of the surrounding culture (Brannen, 2004; Packman, 1999; Trigg & Trigg, 1995). Fung and Lee (2009) describe how the Disney company has drawn upon these lessons in the design of its latest international resort, Shanghai Disney, which successfully links the global Disney culture to the shared values of the surrounding local culture.

This need for a recognition of shared values, perhaps more than any other factor, may help explain WDW’s enduring appeal. As Disney’s flagship resort and park, WDW and the Magic Kingdom are arguably the most important representatives of the Disney Parks brand. As such, they must simultaneously support universal values while also successfully representing the specifics of the “American” culture that they draw upon as part of their narrative (Brannen, 1992; Fung & Lee, 2009). This is true not only for domestic tourists who wish to see their own cultural values upheld, but also for international guests who seek the exoticism of an authentically “American” experience. In this context, the task of maintaining narrative fidelity in WDW becomes a complex balancing act of telling a uniquely American story while striving to avoid the possibility of cultural offense or controversy.

The first part of this task is easily met via the strong themes of Americana running through the Magic Kingdom—evident throughout the park but most visibly in Frontierland, Liberty Square, and Main Street, U.S.A.—as well as the American consumerist culture that pervades the resort. Meanwhile, WDW’s management can be

¹⁶ Euro Disney was later rebranded as Disneyland Paris and underwent a major overhaul to address the initial cultural discord; it is now the most popular theme park in Europe (Rubin, 2018).

seen to place a strong focus on minimizing the risk of cultural offense by avoiding potentially controversial imagery and providing a strong training focus on diversity and cultural sensitivity (Walt Disney Company, 2014). As just one example of this, all WDW staff members are trained to point using two fingers or their full palm, as some cultures consider pointing with one finger to be offensive (Garber, 2017).

Even more important than this avoidance of potential offense, though, is the park's focus on upholding universal ideals that all guests may be reasonably assumed to share. It may be true that the oceans are wide, and that mountains divide cultures, but humanity still shares many global values such as safety, comfort, cleanliness, and pleasant interpersonal interactions. Unsurprisingly, WDW's management can be seen to devote considerable energy to maintaining such a universally appealing atmosphere by prioritizing guest safety as well as security, convenience, and a generally inoffensive experience.

WDW's staffing and training policies are full of examples of how the company prioritizes such universal values in practice. For example, employees at all levels of the organization are trained to recognize the three "magic imperatives," in order of importance: to keep the park clean, to "create happiness," and to do one's job (Hoai Anh & Kleiner, 2005, p. 103). All WDW staff are referred to as "cast members" and are trained to view themselves as performers in the "show" that is the overarching WDW narrative. Recognizing that a smile means friendship to everyone regardless of culture, employees are also trained to "project a positive image and energy" at all times (Daley, 2018, p. 21). Staff also receive "Disney Courtesy" training that teaches them to recognize

the environmental factors that might affect a guest's mood and empowers them to mitigate potential negative experiences (Hoai Anh & Kleiner, 2005; Daley, 2018).

This focus on ensuring an inoffensive, values-aligned guest experience extends beyond staffing practices and into all aspects of WDW's management and design. For example, WDW has been recognized as an industry leader in allergy-friendly food service, working to ensure that no guest must face the cognitive dissonance of realizing that the "most magical place on earth" is unable to meet their basic dietary needs (Smith, 2017). Such emphasis on adapting to guests' needs and values can be traced back to Walt Disney himself, who encouraged his employees to seek out the underlying needs that drive guest conduct. Imagineer John Hench (2003) recounts how Walt Disney would tweak his park's layout based on observed guest behavior, as in the following example:

Just after the park opened for business, we discovered that some guests had made a pathway through a flower bed. We were walking through the park one morning before opening when the gardeners came up to Walt and said, "We need a fence to keep guests out of the flower bed."

Walt told them, "No, we must pave this pathway. When guests make their own path, they probably have a damn good reason for doing it." (p. 30)

This anecdote provides a perfect example of Walt's philosophy of conforming his park to guests' realities rather than expecting guests to adapt to the park.

Walt Disney's deep respect for his audience's values and perceptions is also evidenced in his insistence that any "backstage" activity be kept out of the view of guests, ensuring that the park never showed them its larboard side. Hench describes multiple examples from the early days of Disneyland when Walt would admonish employees for breaking the illusion of the park's narrative by presenting inconsistent theming (e.g., a Frontierland "cowboy" walking through Tomorrowland) or exposing guests to unpleasant

infrastructure activities such as scraping plates in view of restaurant patrons. This philosophy has been perpetuated in the design and management practices of all the global Disney parks and resorts, perhaps most notably in WDW itself. For example, when construction on the Magic Kingdom began in the 1960s, the park was built with a complex network of underground tunnels, or *utilidors*, that served to further preserve narrative fidelity by providing a separate staging area for cast members (Pike, 2005).

Of course, for an enterprise as extravagant as WDW, simply conforming to basic expectations and values is not enough. Every aspect of the park's design has been engineered to present an idealized version of reality that delights guests to the point of temporarily forgetting their "real world" concerns. This is evidenced not only in the design and layout of the different lands, where every turn offers a new and exciting surprise, but also in the management's goal to make every moment red-letter, with no opportunity for ennui or dwelling on the problems of life outside the park's borders. Dholakia and Schroeder (2001) outline a number of key strategies employed by WDW management to maintain maximum guest engagement and enjoyment, including adventures, spectacles, and acceleration (i.e., fostering of a state of excitement and anticipation). Within the narrative of the Magic Kingdom, guests are viewed not just as ordinary tourists from another world, but as visiting royalty, with staff members encouraged and empowered to provide special treatment and "magical moments" for their royal guests whenever feasible (Hoai Anh & Kleiner, 2005).

Another more subtle example of WDW's drive to improve upon ordinary "reality" can be seen in the visual design of the park's architecture, where the Imagineers manipulate lines and color to maintain a higher level of perceived consistency than that

afforded naturally. For example, Imagineer John Hench describes his careful selection of trim colors for a colonial-style building in WDW:

I selected three different shades of white to adjust the color of the lavish trim for exposure to natural light: the brightest white for the first floor trim, to correct for shadows, a slightly darker off-white shade for the second floor, and the darkest shade for the clock tower and bell towers, to equalize the effect of unfiltered sunlight. Manipulating the shades of white in this way gave the illusion of a consistent trim accent color (Hench, 2003, p. 110).

Similar manipulations for simulating the appearance of “consistency” can be seen in paint and décor selections throughout the WDW parks and resorts. Indeed, some analysts have described the Disney parks’ idealized presentation of the world as “hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1983; Dholakia & Schroeder, 2001).

This goal of presenting an intensified version of reality is confirmed by Hench (2003), who describes the Imagineers’ goal of creating “an enhanced reality, the ‘realer than real’ thrill that is the signature of the Disney parks” (p. 56). These and related factors all combine to present a narrative that does not merely achieve a baseline level of fidelity to the value “stories” that make up our world, but that actually surpasses them.

For many guests, Disney’s narrative has become the “preferred” version of reality. Dholakia and Schroeder (2001) aptly summarize the Magic Kingdom’s particular brand of narrative fidelity in their statement that “What began as a fantastic escape from ‘reality’ has become more real than real” (p. 60). In the context of Fisher’s narrative paradigm, it may be said that WDW and the Magic Kingdom present an augmented variety of narrative fidelity that conforms not only to the truths guests recognize in their “real” lives, but also those they know in dreams.

Chapter 9: Interplay Between Fidelity and Probability

9.1: Breaking the Illusion

As explored in the preceding sections, WDW's Imagineers go to great lengths to ensure that the park's narrative remains cohesive and consistent with guests' expectations. For the most part, as evidenced by the park's enduringly superlative popularity, these efforts result in successful maintenance of the narrative probability and narrative fidelity of the story presented to guests. However, given the real-world constraints that the park's staff and creators have to work with, it is inevitable that the "fantasy world" illusion will occasionally be broken. In these instances, the resort and its "world of Disney" narrative fall short of meeting the criteria for narrative rationality.

Some of these shortfalls are due simply to the limitations of the real world and its decided lack of actual magic. Unlike the movies, where characters regularly defy the laws of physics by flying, undergoing biological transfigurations, etc., these same characters in WDW must necessarily remain rooted to the ground (or suspended from wires) and maintain the same physical form while in view of the guests. Other shortfalls—like long lines, inclement weather, and mechanical malfunctions—present a more practical deficit of narrative fidelity that can cause real distress among disappointed guests; however, they still stem from the same basic inability of the real world to live up to the magical perfection of the fantasy worlds that WDW seeks to approximate.

A third, and particularly interesting, category of WDW's narrative shortfalls stems from the conscious design decisions of Imagineers who opted to promote one aspect of the narrative at the expense of another. For example, veteran Imagineer John

Hench (2003) describes the designers' decision to include a costumed Pluto¹⁷ at WDW who walks on two legs, despite the animated character's conventional four-legged gait. Hench explains that the Imagineers only focused on "essential characteristics" (p. 89), such as Pluto's head and nose, when designing the character. A related issue can be observed in the inclusion of FastPass+ kiosks¹⁸ in historically themed settings (e.g., amid the medieval architecture of Fantasyland or the rustic wooden setting of Frontierland), where these glowing electronic touchscreens provide a convenience for guests but detract from the consistency of the surrounding environment.

Other transgressions from the consistency of the "world of Disney" narrative can be seen in the introduction of classic characters and properties in contexts that do not fully align with the source materials, such as the inclusion of the Incredibles (a family of superheroes) in the future-themed Tomorrowland area of the park even though their story takes place in the early 1960s, a decade before WDW even opened. An even more egregious example of this phenomenon can be observed in the menu of Sebastian's Bistro (a restaurant at WDW's Caribbean Beach Resort), which features crab cakes and other seafood dishes despite the fact that its "owner" happens to be a crab who has explicitly expressed horror at the thought of himself or his underwater friends being beaten, fried, and eaten in fricassee (Musker et al., 1989).

Still, despite these obvious departures from WDW's narrative of storybook enchantment, guests are generally prepared to overlook these shortfalls and remain

¹⁷ Pluto is Mickey Mouse's pet dog, first introduced in the animated Disney short films of the early 1930s.

¹⁸ FastPass+ kiosks are touchscreens where guests can access the FastPass+ system to make or change reservations to bypass the lines for certain rides.

immersed in a willing suspension of disbelief. As the following sections will argue, this is likely due to the interplay between narrative probability and narrative fidelity, where each serves to bolster the other even at times when the two principles are in apparent conflict.

9.2: Conflict Between Narrative Probability and Narrative Fidelity

Conflict between narrative probability and narrative fidelity is certainly nothing new; Fisher himself hints at the potential tension between the two principles by contrasting “the most engaging stories” with those that are “the most helpful and uplifting” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). Eaves and Savoie (2005) present another example of this conflict in their narratological analysis of the reality show *Big Brother*, observing that the show’s producers chose to “suspend narrative disbelief” (p. 93) by deviating from the show’s internal logic in order to eliminate a potentially violent participant.

In the context of immersive worldbuilding, this tension between narrative probability and narrative fidelity often comes down to the conflict between realistic immersion and consumers’ need for security, comfort, or convenience. While not explicitly linking this phenomenon to Fisher or the narrative paradigm, many video game scholars have observed this inherent conflict and the resulting decisions that must be made. For example, Calleja (2007) discusses the contrast between first-person and third-person¹⁹ video game perspectives, noting that first-person gameplay is generally accepted as more “immersive,” but players often prefer the third-person perspective because it enhances theatrical appeal and affords a heightened awareness of the surrounding

¹⁹ In a video game context, a first-person perspective allows players to see through the “eyes” of their avatar while third-person shows the avatar onscreen (generally from the perspective of a “camera” following the character).

environment. In virtual reality games, this conflict becomes even more serious: Monteiro et al. (2018) found that a first-person perspective in virtual reality environments enhances immersion but is also significantly more likely to cause motion sickness.

Meanwhile, theme parks and resorts like WDW have no shortage of similar conflicts between the narrative probability of realistic immersion and the safety, comfort, and convenience that preserve the park's narrative fidelity for guests. For example, Epcot's (now defunct) motion simulator attraction Body Wars originally conveyed a highly immersive feeling of roller-coaster-type action that was so realistic it gave many guests motion sickness. The ride and its motion simulator successors (e.g., Star Tours in Disney's Hollywood Studios) were eventually tweaked to provide a less extreme experience that decreased overall narrative probability while increasing fidelity to the value of guest wellness. The presence of indoor plumbing in Frontierland (as opposed to historically accurate chamber pots and outhouses) presents another conflict with narrative probability, but guests are generally more than happy to overlook such a transgression as it enhances narrative fidelity to their core values of health and cleanliness.

When forced to choose between narrative probability and fidelity, Disney's Imagineers clearly place a higher weight on fidelity, as supported by research indicating that guests prioritize such values as safety and convenience over a rigidly authentic portrayal of the themed narrative (Pikkemaat & Schukert, 2007; Durrant et al., 2012). Indeed, many of the illusion-breaking examples listed in the previous section can perhaps be ascribed to the prioritization of narrative fidelity. For example, the jarringly modern FastPass+ touchscreens in Fantasyland and Frontierland increase fidelity by providing a convenience that ultimately allows guests more time to enjoy the WDW experience.

Even the inclusion of characters in inappropriate contexts (like the Incredibles in Tomorrowland or Sebastian serving cannibalistic crab cakes) may arguably be written off as a concession to guests' desires to see their favorite characters in any context, regardless of continuity. The success of such design choices may be debatable; however, they have not yet made any significant impact on the park's attendance figures. Ultimately, it is up to each guest to determine what level of transgression is worth rejecting the narrative as a whole. Fortunately for the Disney management, the synergy between narrative probability and narrative fidelity often goes a long way toward lessening the negative impact of such lapses in the overall story.

9.3: Conflict Resolution via Narrative Synergy

Narrative probability and narrative fidelity may often present surface-level conflicts in any medium, particularly in theme parks (as described above). However, it is important to note that in well-crafted stories, the two principles work together in a sort of synergy that serves to bolster the audience's overall perception of narrative rationality and subsequent buy-in to the story being told. Fisher provides the example of the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where readers are persuaded to accept the story's universal truths via the interplay between probability and fidelity:

We learn these truths by dwelling in the characters in the story, by observing the outcomes of the several conflicts that arise throughout it, by seeing the unity of characters and their actions, and by comparing the truths to the truths we know to be true from our own lives. (Fisher, 1984, p. 17)

In WDW, a similar principle applies. It is no coincidence that several of the resort's narrative strategies (e.g., transmedia storytelling, visual consistency, and

character training) have been explored in multiple previous chapters of this thesis in the context of both narrative probability and narrative fidelity. More often than not, these two principles work in tandem to promote the overall coherence of the story and its world.

In addition to this harmonious interplay, the successful application of each principle helps to “gloss over” the shortcomings of the other. For example, guests regularly overlook the illusion-breaking lap bars and safety rails on attractions because they take for granted the fact that WDW provides a high level of fidelity to their value for personal safety. This can also work in the other direction, such as when a tediously long line is rendered more palatable, and perhaps even enjoyable, by the high level of narrative probability visible in the immersive theming throughout the queue. The narrative probability of WDW’s “other world” storyline may also provide an additional impetus to overlook minor deviations from the story’s fidelity to guest values, as visitors may experience an unconscious urge to dismiss some of their own cultural mores in favor of the “local customs” of their exotic new locale.

Even the frustrations of ride shutdowns and other mishaps may be borne more patiently based on the values promoted by WDW and the “world of Disney.” From their earliest experiences with Snow White and Cinderella, guests have been taught the importance of remaining patient and cheerful in the face of adversity. With Cinderella Castle’s turrets never far from sight, guests are perpetually reminded of the struggles that their royal “host” managed to endure with grace... not to mention the resulting rewards that she ultimately reaped for maintaining such a model attitude. Such interplay between the principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity likely goes a long way toward promoting a positive narrative for guests, families, and staff members alike.

Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

10.1: Summary of Findings and Practical Applications

Unsurprisingly, the results of this case study indicate that the Magic Kingdom is successful in meeting the narrative goal of presenting a coherent story that feels logical and consistent with guests' expectations. Informal discussions with the researcher's colleagues and acquaintances verify that this conclusion is generally supported in the perception of those who are familiar with WDW; everyone interviewed agreed that the park's immersiveness and attention to theming detail are unparalleled among similar themed destinations. In the context of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, this makes it easy to understand the park's enduring popularity over the past 46 years.

WDW's successful presentation of the "other world" narrative is likely due to a large number of factors, not the least of which include the Disney company's enormous operating budget, access to cutting-edge technologies, and sizeable portion of the existing mindshare among potential consumers. However, the company's rich storytelling roots and decades of honing the craft of environmental narration cannot be discounted. While it is likely that WDW's Imagineers and management have not explicitly referenced Fisher's standards in their design of attractions and other areas, their understanding of the underlying storytelling principles is evident in the detailed theming and other presentational aspects seen throughout the design of the WDW parks and resorts.

As demonstrated by this case study, Fisher's narrative paradigm provides a viable framework for analyzing the success with which an immersive entertainment venture presents its "other world" narrative. This same framework may be applied to a wide

range of similar media, including other themed resorts and attractions, virtual environments (e.g., video games, virtual reality, and augmented reality), and commercial themed spaces such as shopping malls and planned communities. Future studies may also build upon this basic framework by incorporating additional disciplines as appropriate for the specific themed venture under examination. Just a few examples of the academic fields that may be studied within the framework of the narrative paradigm include engineering, behavioral psychology, game studies, interior design, and hospitality management. As long as the discipline in question serves to enhance the narrative probability and/or narrative fidelity of the themed environment, it remains relevant and applicable within the framework presented here.

This framework may also prove useful for practical applications in theme park design and related industries, as immersive worldbuilders can analyze any potential themed attractions or ventures along these same parameters. Exploring such ventures through the lens of the narrative paradigm could reveal potential narrative shortfalls that might otherwise have been overlooked. Particularly among smaller companies that lack Disney's level of resources, Fisher's joint principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity may provide valuable guidance for designers seeking to maximize the narrative potential of their creations.

10.2: Limitations of the Current Study

The case study presented here has successfully demonstrated the applications of Fisher's narrative paradigm in the context of a theme park setting and can hopefully be extended to other forms of immersive entertainment media. This research is intended to

shed some light on the relatively unexplored topic of narrative techniques used within the theme park medium. However, this analysis is merely a preliminary case study that barely scrapes the surface of a very complex and nuanced topic.

In particular, the current study was relatively small in scale and only focused on specific aspects of WDW's environmental storytelling techniques. Entire works could be written on details of the resort's narrative strategies that were barely mentioned in this study, such as the use of cutting-edge optical technologies to enhance immersion or the application of scientific crowd-control methodologies to optimize the experience of navigating the parks—not to mention the unique and complex narratives presented within individual attractions. Furthermore, in focusing on the largest, wealthiest, and most popular resort in the industry, this research passed over the opportunity to explore the creative ways in which smaller ventures might leverage their limited resources to meet the criteria for narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Additionally, this research merely affirms an already well-known fact (i.e., that WDW and the Magic Kingdom are popular and well-loved). It would be interesting to see future research that analyzes how a theme park's narrative affects guests' perceptions and mental state. Relatedly, it must be noted that the current research focuses largely on the positive aspects of the WDW narrative and its psychological impact on guests. There are legitimate critical concerns concerning the resort's potential promotion of overconsumption, particularly among children, that should not be fully discounted. However, those concerns have been well documented in other publications and need not be regurgitated here. For a detailed literature review on this subject, see Dholakia and Schroeder's (2001) discussion of WDW cautions and critiques.

Perhaps most importantly, it must be emphasized that the conclusions reached here are relatively subjective and are based primarily on the perceptions of the author. Further multidisciplinary research is warranted in order to confirm and expand upon the findings of this preliminary case study, especially with regard to its applicability toward other types of immersive media and related ventures. In particular, it would be interesting to see a more scientific approach that expands upon these findings via a statistical analysis of collected data. To the best of this researcher's knowledge, only one such study has been conducted that relates specifically to WDW: Pettigrew (2011) measured a range of psychological, behavioral, and physiological responses (e.g., heart rate and self-reported mood) in two children visiting WDW for the first time. However, the results were inconclusive and indicated a need for further research in order to better understand the immersive appeal of WDW and the Magic Kingdom. Clearly, the potential for additional research in this field has only begun to be tapped.

10.3: Future Directions

Looking back over the recent history of interactive and immersive recreation, there can be little debate that we have come a long way since the turn of the century nearly twenty-some odd years ago. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the field of immersive entertainment has exploded in the past decade, both in terms of commercial advances and academic interest. It can be reasonably expected that this trend will continue in the coming years as technological developments and increased popularity continue to push the boundaries of this emerging art form.

For scholars seeking further research opportunities into this burgeoning subject, the possibilities are extensive. The initial studies and research collaborations discussed in section 3.3 have laid the groundwork for a wide range of multidisciplinary approaches that examine the concept of the theme park narrative from a variety of professional and academic perspectives. The framework presented in this case study may support additional research that helps to bridge the gap between these different perspectives for a more holistic understanding of the immersive entertainment genre as a whole. In particular, it would be interesting to see such an analysis performed on a specific attraction within a larger themed venture such as WDW. By focusing on one of the many discrete “worlds” found within the larger WDW universe, researchers could uncover a wealth of narratological nuance beyond that explored in this overarching case study.

Additionally, as mentioned above, it would be gratifying to see more scientific research conducted on the subject of guest responses to theme park narratives. The vast majority of existing research on the subject of themed spaces has been theoretical and ethnographic in nature, with very few hard numbers or data to back it up. Future research could expand upon this theoretical foundation by analyzing quantitative data collected from survey responses, interview transcripts, or observed guest behaviors with an eye toward gaining a deeper understanding of how the “other world” narrative of a given venture affects guests and their perceptions.

Ultimately, the future of research into the immersive entertainment industry will be guided by the developments within the industry itself. A new age of electronic civilization is certainly upon us, as evidenced by the unrelenting tide of immersive technologies and related innovations that continue to make headlines on a regular basis.

In particular, the fields of virtual reality, augmented/mixed reality, and haptic feedback have progressed exponentially in recent years, hinting at the possibilities that may soon become commonplace forms of recreation. Just a few examples of these technological developments include omnidirectional treadmills, which allow users to walk freely in a virtual environment, and mixed-reality smartglasses (e.g., Microsoft HoloLens), which allow users to interact with holographic images within their real-world environment. As electronic advancements continue to blur the line between fantasy and reality, the future of immersive entertainment appears near-limitless.

In a theme park setting, such advances in technology translate directly to enhanced opportunities for increased narrative probability and narrative fidelity, as new innovations allow the park to draw guests deeper into its fantasy-world narrative while maintaining the necessary connection to their real-world needs. With immersive gadgets and gizmos aplenty, the Disney company can be reasonably expected to keep pushing the boundaries of modern themed entertainment for the foreseeable future. Indeed, over the course of the 1.5 years that this thesis was under development, WDW announced a plethora of new developments designed to expand the horizons of the immersive entertainment industry in unprecedented ways. In particular, the Play Disney Parks app, which provides themed experiences and activities that adapt to guests' locations within WDW, is expected to significantly enhance immersion by keeping guests more engaged in the fantasy narrative as they navigate the park's environment. The WDW Star Wars hotel, slated to open in 2019, represents another groundbreaking development in the field of immersive recreation, allowing guests to participate in a multi-day "living adventure" themed around the popular Star Wars franchise (Fickley-Baker, 2017, ¶ 3). It may be

reasonably hoped that these announcements are harbingers of additional innovations to be unveiled in the coming years of this developing industry.

Much like a theme park itself, the field of immersive storytelling is still a whole new and relatively unexplored world with limitless new horizons to pursue in terms of technological advances and immersion techniques designed to further enhance the perception of a seamless and cohesive narrative. With any luck, the storytellers of our society will keep expanding those horizons and continue to chase them anywhere they may lead us. In a wide-open future, full of expanded research opportunities, there is plenty of time to spare for deeper exploration and analysis of these concepts as long as we let these media artists, designers, and Imagineers continue to share their visions for this whole new world of interactive recreation with “the young at heart of all ages” for generations to come.

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