

Entertainment Development:

Immersive Theatre and An Application to Theme Parks

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Introduction

As theme parks progress into the future, they are developing attractions and experiences that engage the guest more than ever before! It can be argued that theme parks are taking hints and inspiration from the world of theatre, specifically, immersive theatre. In an article titled, “You’re in the Parade! Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor,” it is said that “‘the multidimensional medium’ of immersive theatre ‘blur[s] spaces and roles,’” (Kokai & Robinson, 2019), allowing both audience members and actors to have a say in how a story unfolds. This same methodology can be applied to theme parks, especially the Walt Disney theme parks, as guests are expected just as much as Cast Members to play along in the themed environment around them, set to immerse them in whatever story they are located. In order to understand immersive theatre and theme parks, this paper will provide a clear definition of immersive theatre, an application of immersive theatre to theme parks, and examples of immersive theatre taking place in themed environments and theme parks.

Immersive Theatre

According to Josephine Machon, “‘immersive experiences in theatre...[are ones]...that combine the act of immersion—being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated—with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium” (Kokai & Robinson, 2019). In other words, immersive theatre involves an audience becoming incredibly involved in the actual story or show that is going on, having the chance to control or manipulate specific actions and scenarios. In Rose Biggins’s book *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk*, it is said that immersive theatre creates a setting and experience where both actor and audience member may inhabit and manipulate the space and story (Biggins, 2017). Immersive theatre has really been

around since the ancient days when people would sit around a fire and tell stories that involved calls and responses (Duquesne & White, 2020). However, this theatrical art form has experienced somewhat of a Renaissance beginning in the United States and the United Kingdom during the mid-20th century and continuing until today (Duquesne & White, 2020). Audience members seem to really enjoy when the barrier between actor and audience member is broken down, allowing the two to work together to progress a narrative and develop a story (Duquesne & White, 2020). Two factors are incredibly important to establishing immersive theatre, and while both of these factors do not necessarily have to be present in order to create this kind of theatre, at least one is required (Duquesne & White, 2020). These are the factors of site-specificity and level of audience participation and engagement (Duquesne & White, 2020). Theatre can be considered immersive if a show or performance is simply relocated to an area or site that falls in line with the theme or setting of the show (Duquesne & White, 2020). An example of this would be a production of *Little Shop of Horrors* literally taking place in a real-life flower shop. Another example of this would be a production of the show *Rent* in an actual run-down apartment building. Site-specific immersive theatre basically puts audience members in the real setting in which a play or show is set. The second factor that is incredibly important for immersive theatre is that of the level of audience participation (Duquesne & White, 2020). While immersive theatre can still be considered such if a show takes place in a specific site as explained prior, audience participation also plays a huge deal in making the audience feel like they are really part of the story as it requires them to engage and interact in order to move the story along (Duquesne & White, 2020). People must be able to get rid of all self-consciousness and break past the social norms and constructs put upon them in order to play along in the scene and really take advantage of immersive theatre (Duquesne & White, 2020). Once at least one of

these factors have been met, an immersive theatre experience is created! What type of immersive experience is created depends entirely on the role of an audience member involved (Warren, 2017).

Jason Warren claims that there are four types of immersive theatre experiences, including Exploration Theatre, Guided Experiences, Interactive Worlds, and Game Theatre (Warren, 2017). Exploration Theatre involves a multi-room experience that moves audience members into different rooms in order to experience different parts of a play or show (Warren, 2017). There is not much that an audience member can do to affect the overall course of the show, as the general script is still up to the actors and the performers, and audience participation is not encouraged (Warren, 2017). What makes this immersive, however, is the fact that different rooms themed to the show house different scenes rather than one stage that shows every single scene as with traditional theatre (Warren, 2017). Guided Experiences are similar to Exploration Theatre in the fact that audience members still navigate different rooms to experience a show, however, these experiences allow an audience member to specifically choose what happens in that scene, adding input and making decisions that possibly change the outcome of the script (Warren, 2017). Interactive Worlds take Exploration Theatre a bit further, allowing audience members to freely roam a themed environment without requiring them to follow any specific script (Warren, 2017). Instead, it is completely up to audience members to decide what their story is by interacting with other actors and actresses who understand the overall theme of an area but not necessarily a specific story (Warren, 2017). Finally, Game Theatre is the least like the previous three types of immersive theatre mentioned but involves audience members engaging in competitive spirit to move a story along, focusing on audiences playing in games that are themed around a story.

Regardless of the form of immersive theatre, it must be emotional, visceral, and multi-sensory (Biggins, 2017).

Application to Theme Parks

As theme parks are continuing to develop and grow, they are implementing techniques characteristic of immersive theatre, focusing on the importance of both actor and guest playing in the story of the park (Duquesne & White, 2020). In an article titled “Effects of Theatrical Elements on Experiential Quality and Loyalty Intentions for Theme Parks,” it is explained that the service personnel working in a theme park are the actors, the actual environment and physical setting of the park is the stage, the goods and services being provided are the performance, and the guests are the audience members (Huang, Kao & Wu 2008). Theme parks tend to be great at accomplishing the site-specificity requirement of creating immersive theatre by actually transporting guests to the setting in which their stories take place (Duquesne & White, 2020). People can usually digest this information, however, what is a bit more difficult for people to understand is the fact that guests just being in a theme park makes them participants in immersive theatre (Duquesne & White, 2020). Yet, the article written by Huang, Kao, and Wu really emphasizes the fact that guests are legitimately taking part in the show of the theme park (Huang, Kao & Wu 2008). In this same article it explains that “consumers become immersed when they are involved thoroughly in their activities, pay attention only to those activities, and filter out all unrelated perceptions” (Huang, Kao & Wu 2008). Therefore, given this definition of immersion as well as Huan, Kao, and Wu’s explanation of a theme park being a theatre, it can be understood that theme parks are forms of immersive theatre!

Addressing the types of immersive theatre outlined by Jason Warren of Exploration Theatre, Guided Experiences, Interactive Worlds, and Game Theatre, theme parks definitely are

able to accomplish Interactive Worlds and Game Theatre. Simply allowing a guest to walk into an extremely themed environment and walk around accomplishes the goal of an Interactive World (Warren, 2017). This free roaming allows guests to fully decide what story they want to endeavor upon in the theme park. Theme parks also utilize Game Theatre in many of their attractions, bringing guests into rides that make them compete against each other in order to find out the outcome of their story in the ride! Guided Experiences and Exploration Theatre are a bit less common in theme parks, but nonetheless, they are still employed! There certainly are attractions that work like a Guided Experience, bringing guests from room to room to tell a chronological or preplanned story that do not allow input from guests (Warren, 2017). In terms of Exploration Theatre, there are also many character meet and greet locations in theme parks that move guests from different rooms allowing them to actually interact with characters through either a pre-planned route or a route that guests get to choose themselves!

Examples of Immersive Theatre in Theme Parks

To further make the point that theme parks are in fact manifestations of immersive theatre, four theme park attractions or experiences will be described and evaluated as to whether or not they satisfy one of the two criteria of immersive theatre, site-specificity or audience participation, and then they will be categorized as either Interactive Worlds, Exploration Theatre, Game Theatre, or Guided Experiences.

First up is the brand-new themed experience coming to the Walt Disney World Resort, the Star Wars Galactic Starcruiser Adventure! This is a two-night experience that will bring guests on site to a real *Star Wars* ship, marking off the site characteristic of immersive theatre, and allow them to interact and actually play a part of the *Star Wars* universe, thus making it participatory in nature. Guests will actually wear clothing of the *Star Wars* universe, face light

saber battles against the First Order, be able to identify as either Resistance or First Order, meet many characters, and so much more (“Star Wars Galactic Starcruiser,” 2022). Due to the ability of guests to freely roam and create their story almost on their own, this theme park attraction would be considered an Interactive World!

Next up, it is important to take a look at character meet and greets within theme parks, specifically ones that occurred during Character Palooza at Disney’s Hollywood Studios as well as Enchanted Tales with Belle at Disney’s Magic Kingdom. Character Palooza occurred when random Disney characters would meet on the Streets of America for guests to choose at their own discretion to meet. While the Streets of America may not be the most fitting site for these characters, the participation that these characters encouraged was definitely warranting of considering it immersive theatre. This particular character experience could check both the boxes of Interactive Worlds, since guests could technically free-roam in order to meet these characters, and Exploration Theatre, since there were specific spots where they would go within the free-roaming area! Enchanted Tales with Belle, on the other hand, is completely Exploration Theatre, as it includes the site of Beast’s castle, audience participation to tell the story of Beauty and the Beast, and the ability to progress the story that is dependent on the audience participating. While Guided Experiences really do not encourage audience participation besides moving through a space, Exploration Theatre does!

On the topic of Guided Experiences, Poseidon’s Fury at Universal’s Islands of Adventure theme park is a perfect example of this type of immersive theatre. The site of Poseidon’s Fury in the Lost Continent land makes perfect sense for immersive theatre, and the audience participation that is required to move them from room to room in the attraction also fits immersive theater. What categorizes this as a Guided Experience is the fact that audience

members do nothing to actually affect the script of the story. Guided Experiences prescribe that guests walk from a specific order of rooms to understand a story but not that they actually participate in the story itself!

Finally, there are many rides within theme parks that follow the immersive theatre category of Game Theatre. Rides like Toy Story Midway Mania at Disney's Hollywood Studios and Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin at Disney's Magic Kingdom are clear representations of Game Theatre. Both of these rides throw a guest into the world of Toy Story, thus putting you in a specific themed site. Both of these rides also require audience participation with an emphasis on game competition, thus categorizing them as Game Theatre!

These examples of types of immersive theatre in theme parks is not at all exhaustive, as there are plenty of more examples of this blend of theatre and theme parks. Other examples include Galaxy's Edge and the ability of guests to build light sabers and droids at Disney's Hollywood Studios, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Orlando Resort where guests can buy robes and play wands to affect the scenery around them, and even Knott's Berry Farm's Ghost Town which allows guests to travel back to the Old West. The examples are truly limitless and constantly growing!

Conclusion

To summarize, theme parks are increasing in popularity by day, and thus, theme park companies are doing everything they can to create experiences that serve the highest level of storytelling. Therefore, they are focused on curating extremely immersive environments that literally transport guests into the stories they know and love. Without a doubt, theme parks are employing immersive theatre techniques in order to accomplish this, setting attractions in the sites of the beloved stories, and encouraging audience participation heavily. While theme parks

are not themselves immersive theatres, it can be said that they definitely employ immersive theatre elements that bring storytelling and guest experiences to a whole new level!

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