

NARRATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

From Disneyland to World of Warcraft

In 1955, Walt Disney opened what many regard as the first-ever theme park in Anaheim, California, 28 miles southeast of Los Angeles. In the United States, various types of attractions had enjoyed varying degrees of success over the preceding 100 years. From the edgy and sometimes scary fun of the seedy seaside boardwalk to the exuberant industrial futurism of the World's Fair to the "high" culture of the museum, middle class Americans had plenty of amusements. More than the mere celebrations of novelty, technology, entertainment and culture that preceded it, Disneyland was a synthesis of architecture and story (Marling 1997). It was a revival of narrative architecture, which had previously been reserved for secular functions, from the royal tombs of Mesopotamia and Egypt to the temples of the Aztecs to the great cathedrals of Europe.

Over the centuries, the creation of narrative space has primarily been the purview of those in power; buildings whose purpose is to convey a story are expensive to build and require a high degree of skill and artistry. Ancient "imagineers" shared some of the same skills as Disney's army of creative technologists: they understood light, space flow, materials and the techniques of illusion; they could make two dimensions appear as three and three dimensions appear as two; they understood the power of scale, and they developed a highly refined vocabulary of expressive techniques in the service of awe and illusion (Klein 2004). Like the creators of Disneyland, they built synthetic worlds, intricately planned citadels often set aside from the day-to-day bustle of emergent, chaotic cities or serving as a centerpiece of escape within them. Narrative space is not new, nor is it an aberration of 20th-century capitalism and commercialism. In fact, architecture has functioned as a narrative medium for millennia.

Cities themselves also have a rich, emergent folk narrative of their own – a messy, unplanned story of ad-hoc expansion, a stark contrast to the highly controlled schema of narrative spaces (Mumford 1961, Brand 1994). Different stylistic motifs were layered upon each other. Against a scenography of a rich historical cityscape and a lineage of narrative spaces, European modernism must have seemed refreshing in its vision to shed the shackles of hegemonic ideologies and aesthetic eclecticism to create a new, purer form of space. Yet for places with little of their own historical backdrop, such as the newer, postautomotive settlements of the US, modernism ultimately became more blight than revolution.

Los Angeles is one such settlement. Barely 100 years old as a municipality when Disneyland was built, by 1955, the systematic erasure of its already meager history was well underway. Adobe missions and Victorian mansions were being razed to

make way for steel girders and curtain walls. As cultural critic Norman Klein brilliantly and poetically explains, through the combined machinations of Hollywood and efficiency real estate, Los Angeles' short and less glamorous *real-life* history of immigration, agriculture and boosterism was supplanted by a *mise en scène* of movie backdrops, a “social imaginary” of the fictional histories of Los Angeles (Klein 1997).

It was in this sociocultural milieu, at the crest of the 20th century, against the backdrop of a systematically dehistoricized, increasingly sprawling, automobile-enraptured Southern California, that Disneyland was born. It is generally assumed that Disneyland was conceived as a mecca for Disney animation, the vehicle for the first modern entertainment mega-brand and the prototype for transmedia. Quite to the contrary, in its initial conception, the theme park contained no references to Disney animation at all. Disneyland was envisioned as a kind of “locus populi” of narrative space, a pedestrian haven for families, traversable only by foot or by train (Hench et al. 2005). It was a return to a more innocent past and perhaps a reaction *against* the suburban, freeway-interlaced sprawl that Southern California had become.

In places like Paris, London, Athens or even New York or Boston – urban centers rich in history and interwoven with centuries of narrative – there was no need to create synthetic stories in the architecture. Cathedrals and castles are the narrative structures of Europe. New York's emergent stories are inscribed in the wrinkles of its weatherworn edifices. Disneyland was created to fill a vacuum that did not exist in cities with a history, a vacuum that was uniquely regional and historical or, more accurately, ahistorical. In some sense, Disney was trying to rehistoricize Southern California. While Disneyland's value as high design or low design is certainly arguable, what cannot be argued is that it fulfills a deep need in contemporary mass culture – particularly in the United States – for a human-scale, pedestrian experience of immersion in a three-dimensional narrative. In Europe and even in the northeastern United States, such immersion is commonplace; in Southern California, it's not.

From Theme Parks to Games

Thanks in part to the advent of 3D and eventually real-time 3D in the 1990s, video games have come increasingly to resemble theme parks in terms of both design and culture. Both can be classified as “spatial media” (Pearce 1997). Digital games, with their conventions of real-time 3D and highly spatialized storytelling techniques, can be viewed as one step in the development of narrative environments with their own unique poetic structures (Klastrup 2005). In addition to making use of the major facets of theme park creation – spatial narrative, experience design, “illusion of authenticity” and immersion – digital games and networks also introduce three new key dimensions to spatial media: Agency, Identity and Persistent Community.

Glimmerings of theme-park-style craftwork can be seen in seminal single-player titles of the early 1990s. While spatial gaming has its precursors in text-based adventures, i.e. MUDs and MOOs, it began to emerge in visual form in games like the *Monkey Island* series (1990-2000), the landmark *Myst* (1995) and creative masterpieces like *Blade Runner* (1997) and *Grim Fandango* (1998). In these, the illusion of authenticity and the integration of space and story are at their highest level of

artistry. In addition to richly articulated themes and narratives, these games also introduce the added dimension of player agency, although they tend to constrain it to physical navigation and limited interaction with the world and its inhabitants. Unlike visitors to Disneyland, which is a highly controlled environment, the players of these games can begin to engage with the gameworld, enacting their own agency in a more dynamic way. Yet this has its shortcomings: in *World of Warcraft* (2004), for example, unlike in Disneyland, aberrant behavior such as public disrobement is commonplace due to the lack of social controls. But in spite of such drawbacks, Disney has also attempted to add increased agency to the experience of its kingdom through experiments such as the *DisneyQuest* Virtual Reality attraction and the recent *Kim Possible* Alternate Reality Game based on the popular children's television show.



The greatest parallels between theme parks and games can be drawn from the advent of graphically based Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). First and foremost, they are public places that thousands of people enter simultaneously to share an entertainment experience. Most MMOGs are themed, and it is interesting to consider the history and significance of that theming. Starting with the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1979) and some of its offspring (such as *Warhammer* (1985), for example), the vast majority of online role-playing games have been and continue to be based on or inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1957) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-55). Peopled with elves, dwarves, orcs and all manner of fantastical monsters, these virtual worlds rival Disneyland in both scale and audience. According to the independent website *MMOG Chart*, 95.5% of the major MMOGs revolve around *Dungeons & Dragons*-style themes (<http://www.mmogchart.com/>). The medieval fantasy theme is nostalgic in a sense, but it also imbues games with features like alternative races, monsters and magic. The growing appeal of these themes on a mass level cannot be denied; in 2004, the Korean game *Ragnarok Online* (2002) surpassed 17 million subscribers, and as of this writing, the number of *World of Warcraft* participants has passed the eight million mark. By way of comparison, the average attendance in Disney Parks is about 15 million annually (Niles 2005); Disneyland's admission price is about three times the monthly subscription to *World of Warcraft*.

Like Disneyland, the bulk of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) – starting with *Meridian 59* (1996) and *Ultima Online* (1997), which are among the earliest, all the way up to *World of Warcraft* and *Ragnarok* – play host to primarily pedestrian cultures. *World of Warcraft* allows travel by mount (high-level players can purchase a horse or other suitable creature), rental of a griffin to fly from one place to another (via a network of fixed “flight paths” throughout the world) or subway transport between the major “Alliance” cities. Also like Disneyland, *World of Warcraft* contains different “lands” with unique themes: on the “Alliance” side (the good guys), there are human areas, elven areas, dwarf areas and gnome areas, while areas such as “The Barrens,” “Desolace” and “Mulgore” are dominated by the “Horde” (bad guys).

In addition to extending the player agency of the earlier spatial games through features such as added navigation, interaction with nonplayer characters, quest-based gameplay and dynamically interactive battle scenes, the integration of a network into MMOGs creates two additional dimensions of gameplay: Identity and Community.

Unlike at Disneyland where every visitor is a “guest,” in MMOGs, every guest is a “resident,” a citizen of the online world, if you will. Following a model more akin to Renaissance fairs and live action role-playing, players are not simply spectators, but rather take the *roles* of elves and orcs fully engaged with the narrative and conflicts of the game. Unlike at a costume party or on Halloween, however, these identities are “persistent,” meaning the player maintains the same role over time. One game that has tried to walk the line between players having a “role” and playing “themselves” is the recently relaunched *Myst Online: Uru Live* (2005/2007). In this game, players take the role of explorers who, presumably playing themselves, have come together to uncover the mystery of the abandoned underground city of *D’ni Ae’gura*. This kind of persistent identity is a prerequisite for the last and final game dimension created by digital networks: Community.

Although Disneyland has generated a fan community, it fails to fully realize Walt’s aspiration to recapture the small town of his youth. The lack of a persistent identity amongst visitors is one key reason for this. Community can only occur in a context that blends agency with persistent and recurrent attendance and an ongoing sense of participation, neither of which is afforded by the infrequent visitation scheme of theme parks. By moving players beyond the role of spectator and towards the role of a full participant in the narrative, MMORPGs allow players to “live” in their magical worlds as citizens, rather than simply visit them as guests once or twice a year.

From Games to Virtual Themed Cities: The Fourth Dimension

Finally, we see a fourth dimension emerging in new virtual worlds such as *There* (2005) and *Second Life* (2005). In these worlds, players are not merely citizens of someone else’s fantasy world, but actually have a hand in constructing the fantasy themselves. I term this “productive play,” in which play merges with creative production (Pearce 2006a/2006b). In *There*, players can design their own houses, vehicles and fashions, which then become part of the world and can be acquired by other players. In

Second Life, virtually everything in the world is created by players. Many players even buy their own islands on which to build, in a sense, their own theme parks. These “co-constructed” worlds merge MMOGs with user-created content such as that seen on websites like MySpace and YouTube, yet they go beyond the scope of these sites by combining all player creations in a single, contiguous virtual world.

An interesting confluence of the former and latter type of world is the emergence of an *Uru* fan culture within the player-created worlds of *There* and *Second Life*. When *Uru* closed in early 2004, not wishing to see their communities destroyed, players from the game immigrated en masse into other virtual worlds where they began to re-create numerous cultural artifacts of their former “home.” Members of the “*Uru* diaspora” in *Second Life* created a near-exact replica of *Uru*, while another group of *Myst* fans created a totally original *Myst*-style game. In *There*, players continue to create *Uru* and *Myst*-inspired artifacts and environments, such as a recreation of the “Channelwood Age” (a game level) from the original *Myst* game.

Are MMOGs the new theme parks or are they the new cities? Perhaps, in some respect, they are both. On the one hand, they provide the human-scale pedestrian fantasy of Disneyland, a respite from the modern, homogenous, cookie-cutter reality of suburban sprawl. On the other hand, they provide the level of ongoing participation and contribution afforded by cities. And when players can contribute to the world itself, they become more like themed cities in which players bring their own fantasies to bear on the environments. Whether highly synthetic and predesigned like *World of Warcraft* or player-created and emergent like *Second Life* and *There*, these virtual themed cities clearly fill a longing that parallels Walt Disney’s initial inspiration over half a century ago: the desire to be part of a “small town,” a community to which one can belong and, in the case of digital virtual worlds, potentially contribute.

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