

Disney Theme Park Attractions as Second Person Storytelling

Today's children access stories in formats that the writers in the Golden Age of Children's Literature could never have imagined. The emerging platforms of interactive on-line narratives, video games, and virtual reality allow an unprecedented level of immersion and interactivity. Within these contexts, the "reader" takes part in what is essentially second person narration. This is especially evident in video games which cast the gamer as a character in the story, or allow the gamer to create their own character. Gamers experience the story first hand within a fictional world where they can move freely, observe at will, and interact with fictional characters. A similar experiential and immersive form of storytelling has evolved in Disney's Theme Parks.

Every Disney park uses "theming" (set dressing) to create totally immersive environments. The effect is intensified in Disney's "dark rides" (indoor attractions in which guided vehicles take the audience through a series of scenes that contain special effects) and other narrative-driven attractions that allow Disney to control everything its audience perceives. At their most immersive level, these environments create a narrative in which the audience plays the role of a fictional character. Disney utilizes theming, dark rides and other immersive techniques to create riveting second person narratives for 400,000 readers of all ages every day.

This paper will discuss the three types of characters that ride audiences may play: 1) real-life people in a fictional tour group observing the alternative reality, 2) people living within the fictional alternative reality, and 3) wholly fictional Disney characters navigating the Disney world. These rides provide an immersive second-person narrative experience that includes apparent free will, independent mobility, and improvisation, require a degree of interaction from the audience through the process of casting them as a character, and place them in a reality that seems to transcend the bounds of the theme park and moves into the realm of full-fledged fiction. By using classic storytelling elements in a physical space Disney transforms the audience's experience into one that is more active and participatory than has ever been possible using traditional storytelling platforms.