The use of themed entertainment design in museums and heritage sites

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Seminole State College

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Abstract Despite being perceived as very different genres of visitor attractions, theme parks and museums have become less distant in their interpretation practices. More and more museums and heritage sites are utilizing the techniques of themed entertainment including in situ display, overt storytelling, and immersion. Even some of the same design companies work in both spaces. This article provides an overview of narrative and environmental techniques common to visitor attractions and investigates the ways in which these venues construct historical narratives for visitors. It then explores sites in the United States, England, and the Netherlands that employ these design techniques. The essay argues for more awareness of these principles as the incorporation of entertainment techniques seems inevitable in a time where visitor attractions compete with one another.

About the Author Carissa Baker received her Ph.D. in Texts and Technology from the University of Central Florida. Her primary research focuses on narratives in the theme park space. She presents at conferences and themed entertainment industry events on various aspects of theme park creativity. She guest lectures in this area, and has had two appointments as a Visiting Scholar at Breda University in the Netherlands. Dr. Baker has a literature background with a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and a Master of Arts in Literature from Chapman University and the University of Central Florida respectively. She is a Professor of English at Seminole State College, teaching literature, writing, and honors humanities classes related to Disney and Harry Potter.

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Decades ago, it would have made less sense to consider museums or heritage sites in the same breath as theme parks, though they may all be classified as “visitor attractions.” The contemporary museum, however, has other aspects in common with theme parks including their engagement techniques. Museums have been included right alongside theme parks in the TEA/AECOM Global Attractions Attendance Report since 2012. The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), a one hundred-year old amusement industry group, also includes museums and science centers within their programs. Museums, heritage sites, nonprofits, and even exhibitions hosted by municipalities are increasingly designed by themed entertainment industry professionals. Deborah Philips (1999) finds that museums and libraries have used the “marketing techniques and attractions for the theme park in order to compete for funding” (105). Industry researcher Harrison Price (2004) went as far as to say that nonprofits apply “Disney showmanship” (175). Creative director Charlie Otte (2017) reveals that museums not only “engage in storytelling” more now but use design principles to create exhibitions. Industry researcher Gene Jeffers finds other industries “turning to the techniques and approaches developed in theme parks of linking...
story/narrative with entertainment or educational experiences” (as quoted in Ford 2012). Since themed entertainment has become a paradigm, museums and heritage sites employ similar or the same techniques to have a chance at engaging the generally distracted visitor who has many options for leisure. Museums now have “thematic environments,” high technology, and a move from passive observation to interactivity to the point where “the gap between museums and entertainment venues seem[s] to be narrowing,” even in art and history museums, which had previously stayed more traditional in approach (Sasha 2013). In older museums that are adding these kinds of features, there may be jarring transitions between new and old exhibitions. Nonetheless, as writer and creative consultant Larry Tuch (2017) finds, “Story is important for museums because they’re interpretive environments.” Both museums and theme parks are a form of interpreting the world, and both utilize storytelling as a key way to do so. This article will describe the narrative practices common to multiple types of visitor attractions and argue that awareness of these practices is useful as the lines between forms continue to blur.

**Storytelling in spaces**

Storytelling has been an essential aspect of redefining the museum space and heritage sites. It is utilized by designers in these areas and is inherently used by visitors as they participate in the act of tourism. Athinodoros Chronis (2012b) mentions that within heritage sites, “People use stories in order to interpret and transmit their experience” (446). He asserts that tourism itself is “about storytelling” and that sites use storytelling to transform places into attractions (Chronis 2012a, 1799). There are two key entities in tourism, the staging agent and the visitor. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore’s (2011) notion of the experience economy is useful here, as organizations have had to take on the role of creators of theatre to stage experiences rather than just provide services. Museums are likewise associated with staged authenticity (MacCannell 2013); even if the artifact or space is not authentic, it should maintain the appearance of reality. The organization often uses “commercial techniques” to appeal to visitors (Chronis 2012a, 1799). Those who curate places use narrative positioning (stories in marketing), narrative image (the projection of the destination through storytelling), and importantly, narrative staging (where the space’s “core organizing principle is narrative structure”) to develop experiences (Chronis 2012b, 455). They may employ dramatic structure as well with “central plots, coherences, and acting protagonists” (Chronis 2012a, 1799). Chronis says that the real job in marketing a place is selling its “place narrative,” or, in other words, the constructed story of the place rather than the place itself (1799).

Chronis (2012b) observes tourist stories, which may be idealized, emotionalized visions of places. While he recognizes that the storyteller at the site constructs the story, a visitor “contributes to the making of the story” and his or her “imagination functions as a creative agent” (450). He details the process of this: visitors come to the place with narrative familiarity; they are exposed to artifacts, which leads to narrative enrichment; they elaborate on what they see with narrative imagining; and they organize and interpret what they have experienced with narrative closure. This process will likely yield different results for each person based on level of narrative familiarity and cultural background. Chronis (2012a) uses the heritage site of Gettysburg to denote that even competing ideologies (in this case, the Northern and Southern cultural regions within the United States) can be supported by the narratives of place. While the site may present a particular storytelling scheme, visitors bring cultural variants. Otte (2017) mentions a similar issue in the design process for the Abraham
Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library (Springfield, IL). While the creative organization (BRC Imagination Arts) attempted historical accuracy and the most contemporary understandings of the historical figure, reactions might still be mixed for those with preexisting narratives about the American Civil War. Like with theme parks and other spaces, visitors co-construct narratives. Places are defined by stories, whether from the designer or the visitor.

When looking at the museum segment in particular, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) distinguishes between two ways to display artifacts. The first technique of display is in context, which features particular objects that are arranged together based on some kind of taxonomy or relationship determined by curators. The second display scheme is in situ, which features set ups like “dioramas, period rooms, and other mimetic re-creations of settings” (3). These two differ because of their approaches to the “performativity of objects” (3). In context displays allow the “drama of the artifact” to be front and center; “objects are the actors” (3). This mode is more about knowledge dissemination and exposition, though a larger historical story can be discerned. Conversely, in situ displays are “immersive and environmental” and “thematize” instead of offering exposition (3). Some are fully realized virtual worlds in the ways that theme parks have been described. She considers in situ expressions to be metonymy, as the particular scene or display substitutes for the whole. This method “enhances the aura of its ‘realness’” as well as privileges the role of culture within environments (19). The “most mimetic” of in situ displays, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, are those that include live people representing the culture being showcased (20). What Keith Hollinshead (2012) deems “museum towns” or “townscapes” are emblematic of in situ design (270).

**Museum town immersion**

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) uses Plimoth Plantation (Plymouth, MA) as an example of an in situ approach. For this research, I visited two such in situ townscape, Colonial Williamsburg and Jamestown (both in Virginia). Colonial Williamsburg, a museum constructed of multiple edifices on a few streets is billed as the “world’s largest living history museum” and is, with the unfortunate exception of occasional resident cars driving through, quite immersive. Places like these “blur the difference between museum and theme park” (Hochbruck and Schlehe 2010, 13). Christina Kerz (2016) believes the use of the themed environment “influences the notion of authenticity” despite it being essentially a constructed narrative from the 20th century Colonial Revival period (196, 198). Many of the buildings include live people who are either acting in character, interpreting the scene in front of the visitor, or partaking in the actual trades of the time. Actors wear period clothing and use period phrases. It is a curious mix because there is evidently research that goes into each scene, but it is still a contemporary interpretation. Cher Krause Knight (2014) refers to criticism that Williamsburg is “history themed, edited, and marketed” (96). Kerz (2016) calls it an atmosphere of “performed pastness and secretly sanitized history” (199). Actors rather than historians populate the houses. While slavery is referred to quite a lot, slaves are not being openly abused. Animals are present but treated more humanely, and people are not as crude or malodorous as they really would have been. These are just small things perhaps, but it is a reminder that this is a theatre space and an imaginary reconstruction rather than the “real place.”

There is little denying that the in situ approach is effective. While Kerz (2016) argues that it means visitors get only some history with their entertainment, Williamsburg will be more likely to draw those visitors into an interest in history. This is also because Williamsburg encourages
“active participation from the guests” (199). This includes costume rental at the Visitor Center so that children and adults can engage in cosplay. Everyone is encouraged to interact with the people they meet at each site; in fact, a tutorial for this behavior is given in the “Welcome to Williamsburg” show, the first entertainment visitors are likely to view when arriving. Kerz finds that the process of “atmospheric immersion” is accomplished through five levels and techniques: *gripping*, or bringing the visitor into the setting to spark an interest; *immersing*, or creating a detailed world that does not seem staged (both a detailed setting and the presence of many *in media res* narratives where visitors enter in the middle of the action help with this); *unfolding*, where visitors are asked to become participants in “shaping the narrative of Colonial Williamsburg”; *connecting*, when, similar to the Chronis model, visitors connect the new experiences to their lives and “existing archives of emotions and knowledge”; and *fulfilling*, where the new frameworks they have been a part of “become embedded into the visitor’s everyday life” (202-3).

Kerz (2016) states that it is important to remember that “the designers of the setting and the stories play an important and powerful role in that process” (204). The designers of this space did take cues from themed entertainment not only in Williamsburg’s living history model but in certain interactive aspects. There is an escape game (a new form of themed entertainment) at Williamsburg entitled “Escape the King,” in one of the historic buildings, which presents the visitor with a task in a perceived historic location, adding to the authenticity despite its being a wholly contrived themed entertainment genre. An interesting aspect of this place is that, more than at a theme park, Williamsburg operates with improvisational theatre. When I spoke with Colonial Williamsburg storyteller Donna Wolf (2017), she agreed that interacting with visitors is about 80% improvisation and 20% scripted, though this varies based on role. Wolf argues that her purpose is to “bring the guest into [her] world,” and in general to “create a world,” not dissimilar from a theme park designer or other storytellers. Wolf has numerous roles including live (usually Gaelic) storytelling, acting as particular historical characters, and working as a “trade character,” or a person acting as part of a trade, in this case carpentry, instead of actually apprenticing to the trade. I witnessed Wolf playing the 18th century employee Anne Crosby as she worked in the carpenter yard and interacted with visitors (fig. 1).

Figure 1: Donna Wolf as Anne Crosby, Carpenter Yard of Colonial Williamsburg (Photo: Author)
While speaking with a child, she explained in the third person what people did historically, but with me, she spoke completely in the first person about her daily life; she later said that a facility with tenses is necessary for this work. She emphasizes the amount of research required for each role, from the interpreters who describe scenes, to the “Nation Builders” who play prominent historical figures (e.g. Thomas Jefferson or James Madison). While these performances are more scripted, they are equally about “story.”

With the exception of atmospheric immersion, no technique is perhaps more prominent in Colonial Williamsburg than narrative. The introductory show refers to the organization’s motto of “sharing America’s enduring story.” Their Making History blog creates fake stories about the inhabitants of the town, including one based on Wolf’s character, Sadie Gibbs, who puts on Punch and Judy puppet shows that involve “inflammatory rhetoric” (Sullivan 2015). Wolf (2017) feels that every Williamsburg role is about storytelling. Some of this is explicit, with shows that discuss American values of the period like “A Matter of Opinion,” where in the version I viewed, Jefferson and Madison argue with George Mason about supporting free exercise of religion. They also responded to guest questions, even regarding current events, in character. Others are implicit, peppering clues, for instance, in the printing shop where newspapers highlight a colony on the verge of revolution. Environmental storytelling, or storytelling enacted through physical space (often through architecture, props, lighting, etc.), is omnipresent, as are “tourists as story-builders,” in the words of Chronis (2012b). Kerz (2016) remarks that Williamsburg has been decried as Disneyesque in the negative context of commercialization, and staged rather than “authentic” experiences. Wolf admits that she has heard Williamsburg referred to as “Colonial Disney.” She agrees that it is a theatrical element to Williamsburg, for example slavery is not always touched upon with the force it could be. Notably, her degree is in acting. Nonetheless, she finds that even the more “fluffy stuff” she engages in (like the “Cry Witch” interactive show where visitors decide if the defendant is a witch) can still share historical information, or can spark interest in it. Wolf avows that Colonial Williamsburg “cannot survive without [storytelling]. We relate to the abstract in story form, so the place wouldn’t work without storytelling.” Like with Kerz’s thoughts on metonymy, Wolf argues that the “snapshot of life tells a big story,” and visitors understanding the entire period of history more deeply through these vignettes. Significantly, Wolf emphasizes the personal background of the storyteller, and notes that performances and relationships change as a result. Perhaps no storytelling is neutral. Regardless, Colonial Williamsburg, part museum and part theme park, thrives on using a variety of storytelling techniques to engage visitors.

Jamestown and Yorktown (Virginia) provide similarly useful ways to observe in situ or in context approaches. Jamestown has two sites: Historic Jamestowne, where the actual historical colony formerly existed and now consists of ruins, and the Jamestown Settlement, which includes working outdoor areas, live actors, and indoor exhibitions with thematic elements. Similarly, Yorktown Battlefield is the authentic site of the Revolutionary War battle, whereas the American Revolution Museum in Yorktown is a living history museum that includes multi-sensory exhibitions, interactive narratives, and live actors. All of the sites are well presented, but it can be said that the actual historical locations (both run by the National Park Service) are more authentic than the living history museums, while the immersive attractions are more engaging (both run by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, whose website is perhaps tellingly titled “History Is Fun”). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) posits,
“Tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places,” a statement even more apt for heritage sites than theme parks (9). With the exception of an in-the-round cinema with a rather idealistic film about Jamestown history, Historic Jamestowne did not engage in much storytelling, though there some expository interpretative signs do exist. Jamestown Settlement’s outdoor portion, on the other hand, has live actors and people working at trades who tell individual stories. This act is eminently interpretive, as one tradesman at Jamestown casually noted to visitors that members of the remaining Powhatan people helped actors reconcile the inaccuracies in their portrayals, even down to appropriate dress. The museum portion uses storytelling techniques throughout, including an example where visitors walk inside a ship to view a film about the perils of sea voyages; an immersive English street where visitors view a handful of artifacts; multiple environmental storytelling spaces (buildings to walk inside of and experience); and a film vignette where an English colonist (Peter), an African (Masun), and a Native American (Ponnoiske) speak side-by-side about their experiences in 1620.

A similar juxtaposition exists at Yorktown. While the Yorktown Battlefield has few interpretive signs and a small museum that featured in context artifacts and hands-on exhibitions, the battlefield land itself is the actor, calling for active imaginations to construct historical experience. The American Revolution Museum, on the other hand, offers many more in situ experiences that define a vision for the visitor. While there are some in context artifacts, there are multiple displays within themed areas, dioramas, films behind windows to be more immersive, projection stories, and live actors in an outdoor atmosphere. Several films play, including Saratoga: The First Great Victory, which is staged in a tent; Liberty Fever, which tells the history of the American Revolution through the personal stories of a small group of everyday citizens; and Siege at Yorktown, which uses multi-sensory effects (lighting and fog, scents, noises, and vibrations) to recreate the Yorktown battle. The American Revolution Museum employs other storytelling technologies such as stations where one can listen to songs or narratives from soldiers on either the English or Colonial sides of the conflict; an interactive art piece known as the Liberty Tree, where visitors can write their own views on liberty, which then become part of the artwork through dynamically changing screens; an interactive graphic novel that connects ideas of the present with those of the past; and Personal Stories of the Revolution (fig. 2), a human-sized touch screen where visitors can listen to the motivations and stories of various Revolutionary era contemporaries (including every character in Liberty Fever), and

Figure 2: Personal Stories of the Revolution at the American Revolution Museum (Photo: Author)
then examine the artifacts associated with those specific individuals or that type of individual.

A personality quiz can be taken before the interaction, ensuring that visitors will recognize themselves in at least one of the people living during the time. The people and their associated artifacts for this exhibition are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Personal Stories of the Revolution at the American Revolution Museum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin Whitecuff</td>
<td>Loyalist Spy</td>
<td>Clinton painting, Gibraltar painting, map, saddle maker’s tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Flora</td>
<td>Battle Hero</td>
<td>Great Bridge map, Lord Dunmore Portrait, round hat, hunting shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Fanning</td>
<td>Loyalist Colonel</td>
<td>Haw River Valley map, memoir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther de Berdt Reed</td>
<td>Founder of Ladies of Philadelphia</td>
<td>portrait, Esther’s Call to Action, shirt, Sarah F. Bache portrait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco de Miranda</td>
<td>Venezuelan Revolutionary</td>
<td>Spanish coin, King Charles portrait, Siege of Pensacola event, Fort George map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Hewes</td>
<td>Boston Revolutionary</td>
<td>tea in bottle, The Bloody Massacre event, Hewes portrait, tricorn hat, shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Lafayette</td>
<td>Patriot Spy</td>
<td>portrait, Lafayette at Yorktown painting, petition, manumission, handbill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemima Condict</td>
<td>Young Diary Writer</td>
<td>toothkey, political cartoon, loom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Plum Martin</td>
<td>Patriot Soldier</td>
<td>ice creepers, sappers’ tool, diary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha Washington</td>
<td>First Lady</td>
<td>portrait, A View of Mount Vernon painting, letter, tea bowl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Perth</td>
<td>Freed Slave</td>
<td>Virginia map, prayer meeting, Book of Negroes, Birchtown Muster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly Brant</td>
<td>Mohawk Loyalist</td>
<td>Johnson portrait, Delft plates, table, glass bottle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myer Myers</td>
<td>Jewish Silversmith</td>
<td>bread basket, Torah ornaments, prayer book, minute book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This list illustrates the diversity of voices (genders, ethnicities, alliances) available in the exhibition, but also its constructed nature. Of all of stories, these stories were curated; of all of Revolutionary-era artifacts, these items were selected.

**In situ expressions in Europe**

The examples from Virginia’s Historic Triangle (Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown) demonstrate a correlation exists between in situ design and storytelling techniques that extend beyond basic engagement and immersion. It is not only that region, however, as the Beatrix Potter experiences in the Lake District of England has a similar contrast. Numerous visitors, including a large number of Japanese and Chinese tourists, visit the Beatrix Potter areas. There is a Beatrix Potter Gallery that showcases her art, and there is an exhibition of her botany paintings at the Armitt Museum and Library; these are in context displays. Hill Top is her actual house, which is run by the National Trust. Perhaps the most enjoyable part of this site is taking walks through the countryside that must have inspired The Tale of Peter Rabbit and other Potter stories. The most popular visitor attraction is the World of Beatrix Potter (1991), which is filled with life-size tableaux of many of her stories (fig. 3), a musical with puppets, a media exhibition about the author (Virtual World of Beatrix Potter), a tea shop, a gift shop, and a small garden.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter Harris</td>
<td>Catawba Patriot Soldier</td>
<td>Stono Ferry painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Randolph</td>
<td>Patriot Youth</td>
<td>miniature painting, letter, inkwell, dominoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Osborne</td>
<td>Patriot Woman</td>
<td>photograph, pension application, cannonball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadrack Furman</td>
<td>Loyalist Farmer</td>
<td>plantation hoes, cockle rake, violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trip</td>
<td>Patriot Dog</td>
<td>button, dog collar, Washington letter, painting of lady and dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Augustus Bowles</td>
<td>Loyalist and Indian Ally</td>
<td>portrait</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the least “authentic,” as it has few actual artifacts, the World of Beatrix Potter is the most whimsical, with many examples of the symbolic and implicit storytelling characteristic of theme parks. It is the only entity in that region that is commercial, perhaps illustrating why nonprofit organizations utilize comparable methods to compete for visitors.

Some organizations add more obvious theme park installations in their educational spaces. One particular museum, Jorvik Viking Centre in York, England, executes multiple methods to tell the history of Viking-era York: standard in context displays of artifacts, a glass floor over an actual excavation site, and a narrated “dark ride” (a genre of enclosed theme park ride, often with environmental story scenes) that recreates the 10th century city complete with animatronics, sound effects, and a nauseatingly rancid smell. Museum director Sarah Maltby specifically calls the place an “immersive experience,” “interactive,” and “informative” (as quoted in Whyman 2014, 57-8). She comments that the smell is “a very important part of what we represent” and that the sounds (particularly the animatronics speaking ancient Norse) are “as authentic as possible,” showcasing the value of immersion (57).

This exhibition opened in 1984, with a re-launch in 2017 following a major flood, which added new animatronics and projection effects. Museum designer John Sunderland (2014) wondered why museum attractions could not be more like movies, and thought museums should be immersive. He remembers that Jorvik did approach Disney to do a project of this nature, but settled on Sunderland’s group already located in Yorkshire.

Instead of more standard approaches to archaeology or museum exhibition design, Sunderland (2014) designed the Time Car idea, which was about “transporting people and telling them a story, creating a sense of adventure and anticipation” (161). As he explains, “This level of reconstructive display was new to the museum world, as was the idea of immersing people in it. What we were doing was so unlike a traditional museum that Jorvik’s staff was confused at first as to what was real and what was simulated reality” (227). Sunderland mentions that to do in situ work successfully, it is “essential to carry the illusion convincingly” (227). He believed that the ride was “unique and very special,” but he also worried that the experience would not be as compelling as the “other violent Viking reality” (228). Likewise, he admits that archaeologists did not know all the specifications for varied elements because history is still mysterious in many cases, but asserts that admitting what we do not know is an essential step in “Heritage Interpretation” (209).

The Jorvik dark ride received positive feedback, with high praise and visitation. Sunderland calls himself a storyteller first, and believes the attraction was important to interpretation in Britain because it “told a story to people, it de-institutionalized a subject that had very academically presented before, archaeology” (as quoted in Kennedy 2011). Gordon Rankmore of the British Museum concurs that the ride at Jorvik was significant because of its popularizing a “dry” subject. He refers to the techniques used in that installation: “Sunderland was one of the first to take artefacts and tableaux out of glass cases, to present them in a realistic setting. He recreated the story and then presented the artefacts later” (as quoted in Kennedy 2011). Nonetheless, similar to Williamsburg, the space has had criticism such as the accusations of being a “pop-up-book view of history,” “a new form of theater,” or a “popularization of the past” (Jensen 1988). Scott Lukas (2008) calls Jorvik both unique and “perhaps controversial,” though it can further “self-education” (15, 167). Gregory Jensen (1988) seems to agree with the British Broadcasting Corporation that Jorvik and its
successors (The Oxford Story and Canterbury Pilgrims Way) are “a new art form.” It might have inspired the recent Viking Ride in Sweden: Ragnfrid’s Saga at Vikingaliv. This is a dark ride at a Viking museum where a woman narrates her and her husband’s lives. Like at Jorvik, both designers and curators worked to develop the experience. According to museum executive Elin Karlsson, they are focusing on creating a museum where “facts and stories come together in an exciting way” (as quoted in Gilling 2017). It is interesting that the implication of this quote is that these two are not inherently paired. As Yiannis Gabriel (2000) reminds, one must be constantly aware of story’s “juxtaposition to fact” (5).

It would be interesting to determine the line between these Viking rides and a Disney dark ride, as Epcot’s Spaceship Earth (1982 with multiple updates since) has similar elements including a narrated recounting of history, lighting, animatronics, and even fire smells, though Jorvik sits atop an actual archaeological site and Disney has a clearer profit motive. The key distinction, according to storyteller and storytelling center director Kiran Sirah (2017) might be the “purpose” of the exhibit. As entertainment design writer Sasha (2013) notes, a museum’s “underlying mission [is] to educate and inform the public.” Sirah (2017) asserts that museums are not about entertainment but about “understanding the human experience,” though I would contend storytelling in any space is just that, at its essence. Theme parks have historical and educational shows as well, but museums “have a duty to educate and rally behind messages with deeper social, scientific or historical meaning” (Sasha 2013). Theme parks like Puy du Fou, Futuroscope, and Disney’s Animal Kingdom blur this line even further, with their large-scale edutainment offerings. Thus, the same techniques can be used to create engaging exhibits with various purposes, indicating the power and versatility of themed entertainment.

Other examples of visitor attractions with immersive narrative elements exist in York. Barley Hall, also run by Jorvik Viking Centre, is a medieval house that uses costumes and role-playing to tell the story of the time, an act that straddles the line between theatre and theme park. The medieval guildhall of the Merchant Adventurer’s Hall is a place-based experience but includes the gamification strategy of a video game that allows role-playing as a merchant. Other place-based attractions include the Undercroft section of York Minster, where visitors can walk on top of or next to, and read stories about the Roman era of York. York Minster also hosts the York Mystery Plays, large productions of the medieval theatre genre.

The most environmental storytelling in York might be Kirkgate: The Victorian Street at the York Castle Museum. It is possible to walk within the sets of this exhibition, the original version of which from 1938 predates all modern theme parks. The updated version (2012) of the street resembles theme design, as the street goes from day to night with lighting and sound effects, as well as costumed characters (fig. 4). There is a Magic Lantern show that introduces seven characters from Victorian York, and children can walk around with their information cards to role-play. The York Castle Prison exhibition utilizes the original 18th century prison cells that visitors can walk inside of, and in each cell a projected character is telling his or her story (fig. 4). Another Castle Museum environmental exhibition is 1914: When the World Changed Forever (2014), which recreates scenes and sounds from WWI, including the trenches. As with the Victorian Street, there are five characters (who were real people) that the visitor can follow and discover clues about their lives.
Themed entertainment design methods are also utilized in Dutch nonprofit spaces. Walt Disney visited Madurodam in 1952. It is a nonprofit attraction comprised of miniature buildings for the purpose of “experiencing the great Dutch stories” (Caroline Riemslag as quoted in Blooloop 2015a). Miniature buildings and cities are symbolic architecture, representing not only particular locations, but also the Dutch way of life. In 2015, they installed a show called Hof van Nederland (Court of the Netherlands) (fig. 5). The unique, small space asks visitors to sit around a table and watch story about Dutch independence projected around them, which features lighting, sound, and tactile effects. Multi-sensory attractions are, as Madurodam’s Caroline Riemslag states, “a different way of storytelling,” a way that will engage families for “fun education” (as quoted in Blooloop 2015a).
This attraction was a partnership between the nonprofit and the design company Jora Vision. Project development director Robin van der Want emphasizes that the attraction required a balance between information and entertainment, but van der Want mentions, too, that storytelling will become an important way of operating for Madurodam in the future (as quoted in Blooloop 2015a). He comments on Hof van Nederland’s story and technology: “In our opinion a visitor experience is always about the story. Theming creates the right atmosphere, and technology supports as a medium to communicate the story. You should hardly ‘see’ or ‘understand’ the technology being used. That is why we made sure that none of the technology is directly visible” (as quoted in Blooloop 2015a). The 2017 installation Nieuw Amsterdam (New Amsterdam) includes storytelling (learning about, sailing to, and defending 17th-century New York, with a brief look at the end of what the city has become) and technologies (immersive space with props, projections, film, lighting effects, an animatronic, and interactive cannons that allow children to shoot at the English ships on the screen). These experiences are completely immersive and are very different from most of the rest of Madurodam, in which visitors tower over clearly constructed cities.

Also in the Netherlands, Het Spoorwegmuseum, the national railway museum (themed attractions 2005), utilizes elements derived from themed entertainment to engage visitors. This contains an atmospheric luggage room with boxes of miniatures and projected stories, an audio-enhanced walking tour where rail pioneer John Middlemiss speaks to the visitor through headphones as visitors traverse an immersive streetscape (De Grote Ontdekking, The Great Discovery), an interactive and elaborately themed train simulator ride (De Vuurproef, The Fire Test), and a dark ride through scenes of giant trains (Stalen Monsters, Steel Monsters). The museum has standard rail museum fare including train stock, one of which is a train car from Auschwitz. However, the themed design exhibitions are effective in interesting visitors in what may be considered a “dry” subject to those who are not train aficionados or children. In fact, Elizabeth Alton (2014) uses the example of Het Spoorwegmuseum, the Mind Museum in the Philippines, and the Titanic Belfast exhibition as part of the “new wave” of museums that use “storytelling, immersion, cohesive theming, and technology to elevate the museum visitor experience.”

Science and history in situ
In the United States, there are other expressions of storytelling technologies that borrow from themed entertainment including a film Otte (2017) references, The Star of Destiny at the Bullock Texas State History Museum (opened 2002). This production is filled with multisensory effects, even the touch effect common to 3D theme park movies, in this case to simulate rattlesnakes. It also uses projections, layers of screens, and three-dimensional sets. Lynn Denton, former museum director, explains that this installation (from BRC Imagination Arts, a themed entertainment company) was done “to be responsive to not only the changing needs of the museum but the changing needs of the audience” (as quoted in BRC 2013). Another show is Beyond All Boundaries (2009) at the World War II Museum in New Orleans, which features large-format film, effects, and moving set pieces (Young 2017). This space uses these technologies, in the words of creative executive Phil Hettema, “all in the service of telling this massive story in a compelling way” (as quoted in Blooloop 2015b). Even art museums are adding more interactive stories, effects, and augmented reality experiences, illustrating that the museum space is evolving alongside the theme park paradigm.
It is worth noting that perhaps because of its proximity to the Orlando attractions, Kennedy Space Center also added a ride, the Shuttle Launch Experience (2005), a simulator that helps visitors imagine what it was like in the shuttle. Daniel LeBlanc, an executive with site operator Delaware North, mentions that the installation of this ride was part of a “thematic development plan” meant to help “tell the NASA story” (as quoted in Pearlman 2005). The center already had IMAX movies and exhibitions like the Apollo 11 moon landing which include dramatic narration, lighting, and music, but this multi-sensory installation made the Kennedy Space Center closer to the theme park model, as does its use of the interactive game Cosmic Quest (fig. 6). In this game, primarily young visitors are given multiple quests and games to play while gaining knowledge of astronomy and space travel. This kind of interactive quest has been used in other science centers but is primarily a feature of theme parks, water parks, resort hotels like Great Wolf Lodges, and other location-based entertainment.

![Figure 6: Cosmic Quest station at Kennedy Space Center (Photo: Author)](image)

Cosmic Quest was installed, according to executive Therrin Protze, to be an “absolute immersion experience” and “transformational” for their space (as quoted in Dean 2015). The recent Heroes and Legends exhibition, paired with the Astronaut Hall of Fame, is likewise created by a themed entertainment design company (Falcon’s Creative) and features clear narrative and immersive 3D theatre.

Dozens of exhibitions are installations that use the principles and techniques of themed design. Not all agree with this methodology, however. Sirah (2017) worries about the movement of museums and other nonprofit organizations away from in context display. He does not want to see a “conveyor belt” where visitors simply learn the designer’s perspective.
He desires visitors to have their “own relationship with the object.” This is similar to theme park designers who strongly prefer implicit storytelling to explicit, as they want to inspire the visitor’s imagination during the experience. With curation though, it seems impossible to remove interpretation about which artifacts matter and how they should be linked or even labeled. Rachel Marie Gilbert (2015) finds that in context displays “rely on critical distance and analysis of the object to connect the thing to the culture”; the “object is separated from the viewer” (27). Some visitors, especially in this age of continuous technology and distraction as well due to the sway of storytelling in daily lives, will not respond to distance like this. Designer Bob Rogers, who worked on the aforementioned Lincoln and Texas projects, declares the limitation of the in context approach: “Artifacts have great power, but only if you know their story before you see them. If you know the story of an artifact, its presence can move you deeply. If you don’t know its story, it’s just stuff. At BRC, we are telling stories and creating experiences that release the power of the artifact in a way that will change behavior” (as quoted in Lukas 2012, 216). Nonetheless, the lessening of the imagination in the museum space is a relevant concern that will likely continue to be raised.

Whether a positive or negative trend, museums, science centers, heritage sites, and other nonprofit visitor attractions continue to be influenced by the theme park paradigm whether in techniques, technologies, or even in specific design firms. Theme parks occasionally install museum spaces (multiple parks with history museums) or use museum-type techniques (curated galleries of artifacts in Epcot, for instance), so it can be said that the worlds inform one another. The relationship between the two seemingly distinct visitor attraction sectors only grows, so it is worthwhile to stay apprised of trends in both areas to observe and interrogate the impact.

References


