

# Playing Disney: Experience and Expression in the Land of Curation

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## INTRODUCTION

Before there were digital gaming worlds, there were amusement parks.<sup>1</sup> Curated spaces where visitors inhabit a thematized space have existed in their modern form since the 1800's and can be traced back to Dyrehavsbakken ("Bakken"), originally a Danish nature park founded in 1583. Theme parks – with their rides that tap into embodied thrills and joyful terror, arcades hosting luck or skill-based games, or encounters with special characters or storytelling – represent some of the earliest moments of produced environments for play. Unlike playgrounds, they have tended to be seen as not facilitating free-from play, but directed experience situated squarely with a commercial space. Indeed venues like Disneyland<sup>2</sup> represent one of the most archetypal endeavors in this regard with its heavily designed space where visitors are at every turn funneled into themed experiences. The very name of the technicians that design Disney properties, the famed "Imagineers," speaks to a vision of directed imagination in which user experience arises through designed experiential curation.

But what happens when you visit a theme park monthly or weekly? When you decide to just pop over for a few hours? When somehow what is otherwise an expensive destination vacation for most becomes a regular part of your leisure, even daily, life? Does the experience of a curated environment change when that same space is experienced repeatedly, even mundanely?

In this project I explore, through fieldwork at a range of Disney parks worldwide, via online forums and archives, and interviews with attendees, how a commercial theme park can become an everyday playground. I also wrestle with how much we should understand this unconventional set of experiences as expressing a meaningful form of playful agency, self-direction, and social experience beyond just than an example of play "captured" within the economic and commercial frameworks of a massive media entity.

## EVERYDAY PLAY IN A THEME PARK

While many people only visit a theme park once in a lifetime or every few years, there is a subset for whom regularly spending time in an otherwise fantastic world becomes normal, even mundane. For some, the proximity to a Disney property and a ticketing structure that allows for (relatively) unlimited visits transforms the experience.<sup>3</sup> Other patrons have the resources to go with enough regularity that the park becomes a familiar, well-trod space. What happens once you've ridden all the rides such that you aren't rushing through to do them? How do repeat visitors move through and

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experience a theme park? This project explores how regular attendees carve out new paths through the space, either self-directed or in concert with a community. As novelty recedes, alternative ways of engaging with the property emerge. Very often the spectacular edges out of frame and people find a wide range of experiential, playful, and embodied pleasures within a more familiar mode of attending.

Park designers certainly understand and anticipate this dynamic; they have built in auxiliary systems to keep people entertained beyond the attractions. Activities like pin collecting and trading, the *Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom* card game, finding “hidden Miceys,” or playing with the Disney game app (which also facilitates co-located gaming while waiting in line) are all forms of play happening outside of the ride structure. Some not only sit solidly in the commercial framework of the parks, but require it. Pin trading, for example, relies on an ongoing production of new designs, rarity, and the intermeshing of fandom and commerce. Others, like trying to spot the subtle placement of the iconic Mickey Mouse ears design throughout the architecture of the park don’t require any additional cost.

Amidst all the curation, however, other forms of play emerge from the ground up. Achievement systems like the “Parkeology Challenge” (riding all open rides in a single day) or set goals (riding particular sequences of rides) offer more instrumentalized modes of engagement. Activities like “drinking around the world” at Epcot offer a mix of embodied and, typically, social play. Expressive forms of play, sometimes rooted in fandom or communities (such as the “social clubs” or more informal friendship networks) where identity or affect are a significant part of the experience and pleasure of being at the park are also an important form of patron-directed activity. Focusing on sensory experiences (sights/smells/sounds/singing/dancing), re-living moments and nostalgia, also emerge as powerful experiential nodes for regular attendees who have often developed rich histories with the space. Finally, there are those whose time in the park is spent building their knowledge of it and the company. Taking tours, sleuthing out histories, hidden bits of knowledge, or strange park quirks (both online beforehand and in conversation with employees) sit at an intersection of achievement and socially focused play.

## **GAME STUDIES MEETS DISNEY STUDIES**

There is a rich tradition of scholarship on Disney theme parks this study hopes to contribute to (Baudrillard 1983, Choi 2012, Davis 1996, Eco 1986, Fjellman 1992, Hebdige 2003, Moore 1980, Van Maanen 1992). Recently work coming out of fan studies has offered a nuanced picture of how these properties sit within complicated schemes of commodity, fandom, and affect (Williams 2018, 2019). This project seeks to contribute by introducing a frame that explores play and games. While park designers themselves, as well as designers of interactive systems broadly, have been attuned to this mode (typically framed around “interaction”, see for example, Raffe et. al. 2015, Schell and Shochet 2001), here I look at how patrons with an everyday experience of the parks fashion heterogeneous forms of play and gaming for themselves. It extends a conversation begun by early pieces from Brenda Laurel (1999) and Celia Pearce (2007) who brought their expertise in games to a consideration of theme parks.

This project focuses on everyday play in Disney parks that at times dances with, and against, commercialization and designed experience. It explores how park visitors create new paths of experience, exploration, achievement, social connection, and expression through forms of play not fully captured by the Disney machine. It explores how patrons themselves think about this tension. This case addresses issues of emergent forms of engagement within a heavily commodified and curated structure, a topic relevant to both theme park and game studies.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 In this brief abstract I will use the terms "theme parks" and "amusement parks" interchangeably but there are differences explored in the longer work.
- 2 Though "Disneyland" generally refers to the first original park located in Southern California, for simplicity's sake I will use that term as shorthand a variety of the Disney properties. When needed I will specify particular ones, such as Disney World or Shanghai Disney.
- 3 Disneyland began offering annual passes in 1982 (at the cost of \$80-\$100 USD) which certainly opened up the possibility that it could be a place you go on a moment's notice. See <https://allears.net/walt-disney-world/wdw-planning/1980s-walt-disney-world-tickets/> for full historical information.