

T.L. Taylor

T.L. Taylor is Professor of Comparative Media Studies at MIT and Director of the MIT GameLab. She is a qualitative sociologist and author of a number of books focused on gaming and online culture. Her current project explores play in theme parks.

Did Disney Really Go LARPing?

In this talk I explore the ways Disney's Star Wars-themed Galactic Starcruiser (GS) – an inclusive two-day on-property experience that ran 2022-2023 – presents an exemplar case of ambivalent play in corporate environments. Drawing on my fieldwork “onboard the ship,” in interviews, at a subsequent fan convention, and online communities, I investigate the ways this innovative “attraction” offers important insight into immersive commercialized spaces. Though gesturing toward games and play broadly, the GS ultimately represented a truncated experiment into a more expansive model of social playful interaction and gaming. While the GS held many qualities resonant with things like Live Action Role-Play (LARP) and location-based gaming (facilitated through an extensive socio-technical network), in practice it functioned more akin to interactive theater.

Though this designation is perhaps formally notable, my concern is more toward toward a larger tension at work as play is embedded into curated commercialized environments. Disney continues to wrangle with balancing the promotion of their spaces as a site of play with concerns around control, safety, and governance. While the GS is not unique in this regard (see, for example, my prior presentation about Galaxies Edge at the DisNet conference in 2023), as an environment authored explicitly with an eye toward play and interaction, it provides a unique look at some of hopes and tensions that arise when this form of engagement sits within commercialized frameworks. I explore practices of guests and cast members in play moments, ambivalent sites of guest-to-guest engagement, and forms of structuring and control during the experience. For comparison I also briefly discuss the emergence of user-driven (and slightly stealth) LARP events that fans have created in Galaxies Edge at Disneyworld in response to the “loss” of the Galactic Starcruiser experience.



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