

CURIOSITY AND COLLABORATION

Values at Play in Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return

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Over the last decade, visibility of “in real life” (IRL), immersive play experiences has increased, blending built environments, transmedia storytelling, and digital assets. These experiences include selfie palaces, VR arcades, micro-theme parks, immersive theater, and immersive art installations. Such emerging experiences captured enough attention to warrant notable industry practitioners to prepare the inaugural *Immersive Design Industry Annual Report*, which valued the industry’s 2018 worth at \$4.5 billion (Brigante, 2019). Meow Wolf is referenced four times in this 29-page report. As an art and entertainment production company based in Santa Fe, NM, Meow Wolf creates immersive art installations. Their installations combine numerous elements of studio art, scenic design, architecture, sound, interactive technologies, and narrative storytelling. Meow Wolf artists and designers aim to create extremely collaborative and maximalist environments, drawing on science-fiction tropes while working from a process of collective group ideation.

Meow Wolf opened its first permanent exhibition, *House of Eternal Return (HOER)*, in March 2016. Thrillist.com described *HOER* as a “20,000-Square-Foot Psychedelic Funhouse” (Zwickel, 2017), and the *New York Times* pronounced it was “part commentary on what’s real and what’s not in an increasingly

‘virtual’ age” (Payne, 2016, para. 3). *HOER* experienced a meteoric rise in popularity, becoming a top tourist attraction in New Mexico with the millionth guest visiting in July of 2018. After opening *HOER*, the company began work on additional permanent installations for Las Vegas and Denver, which were originally slated to open in 2020 and 2021, respectively. The COVID-19 global pandemic delayed the opening of Meow Wolf’s Las Vegas site to February 2021. And, at the time of writing this paper, the company has not announced an opening date for their Denver location.

HOER shares a number of qualities with adventure and sandbox games. The production of the exhibition is akin to AAA game development, involving million-dollar budgets and hundreds of workers. Further, in terms of play experience, guests of *HOER* become collaborative investigators the moment they enter. There they find themselves wandering through a two-story, family home populated with portals that lead to various fantastical locations throughout the “multiverse.”

During June and July of 2018, I served as a researcher-in-residence at Meow Wolf Creative Studios. In this capacity I performed an ethnography of the once art-punk collective turned corporation. My study’s participants included artists and designers on the art, fabrication, narrative, and technology teams. Since June 2016, I have been a guest of *HOER* nine times—eight of those visits were during Summer 2018—and I have spent more than 40 hours in the house and multiverse playing, studying the exhibition, and observing the experiences of other guests. In this paper I analyze *HOER* and the values upheld by the project for both the guests who visit and for the company’s artists and designers who labor behind the scenes.

To conduct my study, I will highlight select game elements from Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum’s framework as described in their *Values at Play in Digital Games* (2014). They outline the

following premises: “(1) there are common (not necessarily universal) values; (2) artifacts may embody ethical and political values; and (3) steps taken in design and development have the power to affect the nature of these values” (p. 11). Thus, “There are many elements in a game, and each affects how games access, represent, and foster particular values” (p. 33). While the authors focus on digital games, the model they provide is very helpful in uncovering the expression of values that come to the fore in my analysis. Flanagan and Nissenbaum list 15 game elements that they use to analyze digital games, noting their list is not exhaustive (p. 33-34). From their list, narrative premise and goals, actions in game, player choice, and interface are most applicable for beginning to understand the multifaceted *HOER*. As I will demonstrate, analyzing these elements reveal the embedded values of curiosity and collaboration in the game play of *HOER*. Many artists and designers involved with the design and build of *HOER* and Meow Wolf’s forthcoming exhibitions described experiences that similarly value curiosity and collaboration.

Curiosity can alter one’s worldview, an undertaking that Flanagan and Nissenbaum encourage as one becomes a more conscientious practitioner (p. 11). When curious, one learns and questions, learns more and questions more, and continues in the process of growing beyond their own known experiences. Making the world bigger is a necessary and political undertaking at a time of strong partisanship and deadly ideological divides. One of the ways critics dismiss experiences like those of visiting *HOER* is to call such endeavors “mere entertainment” or escapism. A similar criticism has been lobbed at video games and all sorts of play. But play is productive (Bogost, 2011; Flanagan, 2013; Upton, 2015). Curiosity can change worldviews. We can take the tool sets and ideas from immersive, fictional spaces and weird the everyday world a little more so that we do not have as much need to escape from it. Similarly, having the value

of collaboration provides an important mode for working cooperatively during an age of political gridlock, ongoing culture wars, and a shrinking labor market that often exists at odds with soaring stock markets.

It is important to note that Meow Wolf's internal team structures and divisions continue to evolve. I participated in my 2018 residency when *HOER* was firmly established for two years, and the company had recently grown considerably to accommodate more workers for the design and build of the Las Vegas and Denver projects. This specific moment in Meow Wolf's history delineates a particular formation of their organization—a moment to examine the utopian optimism felt by many of the creative workers I spoke with that paralleled the excitement expressed by many of the guests roaming throughout *HOER*. Many artists I spoke with were willing to sacrifice personal control or aesthetic style to be part of the team as it undertook new projects that dwarfed the scope of *HOER*. However, evolving structural needs of Meow Wolf also resulted in frustrations as a more formalized hierarchy began to emerge, fomenting a more cultivated curation of ideas when compared with the earlier days of the artist collective. Finally, I will share some recent structural changes the collective-become-corporation has undergone—some of them unforeseeable in 2018. Doing so shows how, in practice, Meow Wolf has not always fulfilled its ideals.

DISCOVERING PORTALS TO THE MULTIVERSE WITHOUT LEAVING THE HOUSE

HOER's narrative premise is that the Selig-Pastore family home in Mendocino, CA, has become frozen in spacetime and quarantined in Santa Fe by “the Charter.” The Charter is a no-nonsense bureaucracy with a self-mandate to maintain order in the multiverse. The Charter chose to freeze the house because “the Anomaly”—an unwieldy chaos of creative forces—has

caused multiple spacetime rifts. The Selig-Pastore family and their home appear to be at the center of an ongoing cosmic skirmish between the Charter and the Anomaly.

While fans have leaked clues from the exhibition and fan theories on social media, Meow Wolf does not offer any definitive narrative summary in the lobby, within the exhibition space, or in their public-facing media. The only introduction Meow Wolf provides is a strongly backlit “man-in-black” styled character, Agent 35 of the Charter. He greets guests on a TV monitor above the lobby door that leads into the exhibition and recites a handful of IRL rules while setting a tongue-in-cheek tone for the in-world experience:

The zone you are about to enter is a classified zone and it has been quarantined not only for your safety but for the safety of the entire universe. Please be respectful of the contents within this zone. Please treat this zone with the utmost love and care. Please remember to watch your head. Remember to watch your step. But most importantly, remember to watch your mind. No running. No gossip. No food. No wrestling. Please just nothing radical. Charter agents are watching you.

Once guests watch the video and enter the single point of entry into *HOER*, they stand in the front yard of the Victorian house. The pastel siding, intricate wooden railings on the front porch, and bay windows feel familiar. Looking for the seams of what must be a façade, the strangeness of finding a two-story home inside a renovated bowling alley creeps to mind. A lulling soundscape plays above the yard as the scene’s oddity deepens. The windows frame glimpses of other guests poking through the home’s domestic spaces, including a living room, dining room, kitchen, and studio on the first floor and bedrooms and a bathroom on the second. The multiverse extends out from, and intertwines with, the house’s floor plan.



Image 1: When guests enter House of Eternal Return, they immediately confront a two-story Victorian house.

Regaining their bearings, guests may next notice a post-mounted mailbox labeled “Pastore” to their right. Inside lie several sympathy cards that express condolences for the loss of Lex Pastore, the family’s ten-year-old son and grandson, and a cryptic missive from the Charter. Many guests then decide to enter the home’s front door. The welcome mat carries the message “Beyond Here There Be Dragons,” an idiom derived from the medieval cartographic practice of illustrating monsters on unexplored territories. Guests can be forgiven for not immediately realizing that pathways on either side of the yard could lead them elsewhere. For the moment, these paths remain unknown and unexplored passages

As a physical interface *HOER* unfolds as a labyrinthian structure that invites guests to follow their own curiosities. Guests use their perceptions as guides to uncover what their personal experience will be in the sandbox gameplay of the installation. They are not provided with a map. There are no docents leading tours or wayfinding aids. Narrative engagement in *HOER* is not

a required ludic goal. Some guests roam the immersive space, enjoying the interactive elements without narrative engagement. But many choose to learn what is happening in the story, at times influenced by the actions of other guests. They investigate the house and the family by exploring dozens of rooms, portals, secret passages, interactive light and musical objects, print periodicals, computer files, libraries, journals, videos, and photo albums.



Image 2: Guests examine the contents of the Selig-Pastore family home.

A number of portals connect with rooms in the house. One of the most iconic portals is the kitchen's refrigerator. When the refrigerator opens and guests walk through, it is like finding a doorway to Narnia. As the door opens, a blinding white light emanates from a void where the appliance's shelves should be. Guests step into the refrigerator and walk down a sterile, white hallway, disappearing from the view of other onlookers. The

hallway unfolds around rounded corners until it terminates at the interdimensional travel agency “Portals Bermuda.”



Image 3: Guests step into the refrigerator portal.

Futuristic LED light columns offer a glowing ambience in Portals Bermuda’s circular room. Venting in the ceiling tapers to a central holographic kiosk. A couple of touch-activated, pneumatic doors lead out of the travel agency. Alva, the holographic kiosk guide, takes a feminized form with gradient colored face and effervescent uniform. Below Alva’s translucent hologram—the product of a Pepper’s Ghost illusion—a touchpad lists possible travel options to “St. Malibados,” “Todos 7,” “Murok-Inoo,” and “Viridian Heights.” In the outside hallway, a robotic voice routinely reminds guests, “You are okay.” Perhaps a guest in Portals Bermuda has already spent time in the living room and read through Uncle Lucius’s day-planner, or watched some of his cultish videos about the Power of Positive Mechanics, and can draw a connection to Portals Bermuda. But perhaps not.



Image 4: Alva helps a guest make interdimensional travel plans.

If a guest chose another path and found themselves in the living room, they might see others crawling through the fireplace. Beyond the mantle and hearth, they confront an alien cave filled with speleothems. Glowing crystals embedded in these large rock formations resonate musically when touched. Hugging a few of the stalagmites generates an ambient soundscape. Colorful striped worms adorn the ceiling. Inside the largest rock formation, the skeleton of a mastodon glows light blue and purple. Mallets hang from the beast's fossilized ribs as a platform beneath the skeleton comfortably accommodates six adults. Striking a rib with a mallet sounds a tone reminiscent of a marimba. It is not uncommon for guests to create music together.

Guests who undertake the hours-long task of reading the journals, documents, or periodicals found throughout the house often move methodically from room to room. They see other guests dashing off through the portals, but hunger to know the story: Who are the members of this family? What happened to them? Why is the Charter quarantining the house? Is the

bedroom in the back of the house actually a part of the family home, or is it from elsewhere in the multiverse? This detecting style of play rewards such guests with access to the meaning of visual motifs spread across the exhibition, helping them solve puzzles found elsewhere in *HOER*.

As one example, Lex's bedroom upstairs houses his inventor journal, drawings, and a "missing" flyer for the family hamster, Nimsesku. A guest who spent time reading these materials may well feel rewarded for their efforts when they later find Nimsesku in a diorama in a back alley of the multiverse. Nimsesku appears gargantuan on an experimental platform surrounded by scientists and engineers. Cables run from a makeshift helmet strapped on the hamster's head to a control console. The family pet has become a power source for a pyramid with four eyes gazing toward the cardinal directions. Hundreds of other clues like this interconnect with puzzles, visual motifs, and spatial constructions throughout the exhibition.

Overall, the rooms and twisty passages of *HOER* defy expectations as the wonder of what will come next activates many guests' playfulness. One does not know where the next portal or passage will lead. A different kind of geometry is at play. A whimsy guides how one moves from room to room and arouses curiosity, often leading strangers into cooperative mindsets. Guests play music or dance together. Guests looking for certain rooms are often directed by other guests. Guests speculate with one another about the meaning of clues that they have found. Guests talk about their favorite space so far and marvel at how many artists it must have taken to make *HOER*. The large physical and conceptual scale of *HOER* activates the critical play that comes from allowing curiosity to lead the way and demonstrates the magic that collaboration can produce.



Image 5: Guests play with interactive light and musical objects.

CHANNELING THE MULTIVERSE INTO EXISTENCE

Meow Wolf began in 2008 as a collective of friends making art via pop-up exhibitions and parties, often in rented venues. Some of the early co-founders of Meow Wolf talk of their difficulties finding breaks into the fine art galleries of Santa Fe. As the telling in *Meow Wolf: Origin Story* goes, eager to make experimental work, and finding a pronounced apparatus of gatekeeping, the disenfranchised youth culture set out amongst themselves to find alternative ways to live, work, and make art in Santa Fe (Renzo, Capps, & Spitzmiller, 2018, 0:03:34). A few Meow Wolf artists shared stories from a time before their employment with the company when they worked multiple part-time jobs and spent all their money and leisure time making art, recalling it as a practice in “reverse capitalism” (Shakti Howeth, personal communication, June 22, 2018).

Just prior to my residency, former IT and Infrastructure Director Chris Clavio described the organizational structure at the time (personal communication, May 13, 2018). About 40 employees had been working together since the art collective period, which

culminated in the collective's breakthrough 2011 temporary exhibition, *The Due Return*. Several of the employees who were part of the collective before the company's incorporation as a LLC in 2015 expressed that the initial motivations to grow the scope of their installations were not founded on a capital agenda, but, rather, were due to a passion for creative undertakings and working with their friends. Most Meow Wolf creative workers did not earn wages for their labor on the organization's temporary exhibitions from their founding in 2008 until 2015, when the number of employees expanded to about 75 people who worked on the design and build of *HOER* at an estimated cost of about \$3 million (Monroe, 2019, para. 26).

In 2017, Meow Wolf LLC elected to assess and evaluate their business model impact to officially become a Certified B Corporation. B Lab (2020), which administers this legally binding certification, explains that this business model balances purpose and profits and is for mission-driven institutions. B Corps are legally bound to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment and to do so with accountability and transparency. For its employees, Meow Wolf provided living wages, healthcare, paid time off, sick time, college tuition, and paid parental leave. Nearly all of the artists and designers that I spoke with in 2018 shared with me that this was the first time in their adult lives that they had health insurance.

By the time I arrived at the Creative Studios in 2018, Meow Wolf employed a staff of over 300. More than half of those employees had been with the organization for less than a year and were working on projects associated with the upcoming installations in Las Vegas and Denver. Project managers had been instituted at the beginning of 2018. This shifting composition of the organization was both a source of excitement and minor frustration. It indicated the quick growth and potential for the projects' scales that the artists and designers were creating: while

I am unable to locate the estimated budget for Las Vegas, the 53,000 square-foot space is more than twice that of *HOER*. Denver's site is even larger with an estimated budget of \$60 million to build a 90,000 square-foot experience (Monroe, 2019, para. 6).

In the collective days, all the members knew one another. An ethos and shared language emerged to help guide the group through both worldbuilding and design conflicts. But in 2018, Meow Wolf personnel were becoming acquainted with strangers as production on multiple installations ramped up. Interviewees expressed that they did not know who they were working with and opined for a way to know more about new employees and what abilities they brought to their large-scale work. All workers that I talked with were genuinely curious about who their colleagues were, their backstories, and what they did for the company. Some of the former collective members thought critically about how a decade of ethos-building could be onboarded.

Meow Wolf uses design and transmedia production strategies to cultivate the discovery of intra-company relationships. But they also make their approach known in public documents, showing that highlighting their behind-the-scenes processes serves to further promote and market their productions to their audiences. The company uses the practice of design sprints that invite personnel to ideate and prototype in stochastic, small-group pairings. Part of their public-facing corporate language touts, "Meow Wolf champions otherness, weirdness, challenging norms, radical inclusion, and the power of creativity to change the world" (Meow Wolf, n.d., About). The way that I have come to understand the claim of "radical inclusion" translates roughly to the acceptance of all ideas having a place in their maximalist constructions, not necessarily having a fully inclusive workforce in terms of racial and gendered equity. They use techniques from synectics, architectural charrettes, improv, and design thinking

to collect and synthesize all of the group's ideas, even with hundreds of people.

In fact, the organization has a name for gatherings when all members of the company come together: All Shrimps Meeting. Many of the artists and designers shared lore from All Shrimps Meetings when the group began their initial designs for Las Vegas' and Denver's installations. They recalled the week-long company ideation sessions around specific anchor areas for the new exhibits and the month of design sprints that followed. Project meetings offer another opportunity for Meow Wolf personnel to demonstrate the emphasis of the company's value of collaboration. Due to the maximalist nature and the interconnection of liminal spaces in their installations, the exhibition spaces are managed internally as discrete projects. Each project has a project lead and any number of support personnel from various teams as dictated by the concept (Meow Wolf, n.d., *House of Eternal Return Credits*).



Image 6: Part of the Meow Wolf art team meeting in the Creative Studios in June 2018.

Finally, employees from various eras of the company's history are interviewed in Meow Wolf's podcast, *Too Sick* (Bradley,

Langford, & Schafer, n.d.). Their YouTube channel hosts the series *Meet Meow Wolf* and *Meow Wolf Artist Docs* as artist show-and-tells of sorts. And, as both promotional media and historical record, the company released the 2018 feature-length documentary *Meow Wolf: Origin Story* (Renzo, Capps, & Spitzmiller).

In 2018 the day-to-day operations of the Creative Studios were as much an immersive environment to me as Meow Wolf's exhibitions were. Nearly all employees I spoke with commented positively about the workplace and the projects that they were contributing to the new exhibitions. I also observed moments that hinted at the challenges of this kind of stake-holding and collaboration. Employees had the benefits of health care and paid time off, but long days working towards deadlines were exacerbated by implementation changes. I heard stories of amazing synergies coming to life and collective action galvanizing shared visions. I also heard about some groups losing control of an idea to another team and teams at odds with competing directions.

In one case, a long-time artist's project had to be shelved midstream for budgetary reasons. I was to interview artist Mat Crimmins the day he discovered his project was being removed from an upcoming installation. He asked to reschedule our interview and was not at work the following day. But a day later, I found him sculpting at his work area with a pleasant gleam in his eye. During our rescheduled interview, his disappointment was clear, but he shared that when he joined Meow Wolf in 2011, he realized:

the kind of art that I could be a part of with Meow Wolf was much bigger than what I could do by myself. And the kind of obstacles that we ran into would never be solved by me. Working toward one experience was amazing. No longer did I think in terms of what I could do or what I could accomplish. I started thinking on a bigger scale. It was motivating, and,

in the end I felt an obligation. I think everyone here feels it; we have an obligation to one another. (personal communication, June 25, 2018)

Such an insight into company workings suggests that, at least for some, collaboration brings the power of perspectives and skillsets, a motivating drive of obligation, as well as the necessity of ego-wrestling during periods of compromise.

Reflecting on my time at Meow Wolf, I cannot help but draw some allusions between the massive undertaking of the company and the narrative surrounding the Selig-Pastore house. Creative chaos drives the artists and designers to dream big new worlds of incredible nuance into being. The tensions between the Anomaly, as creativity, and the Charter, as order-keeper, parallel those I witnessed beneath the surface of the studio. With so many people working on different projects, a bureaucratic order seemed increasingly important for directing creative exploration into managed timelines, presenting a challenge to art-punk ideals.

Since my residency, newsworthy moments at odds with Meow Wolf's stated values dot the landscape of the company's timeline. Multiple lawsuits allege gender discrimination, unfair labor practices, and copyright infringement, each in conflict with the company's idyllic language, such as that of radical inclusivity (Bear, 2019; Cascone, 2020; Smalls, 2019). In 2019, while Meow Wolf employed nearly 500 people, the company paid back its micro-investors to the surprise of those investors (Kohler, 2019). These micro-investors had made small and moderate investments toward a few million dollar budget for *HOER*, providing a lifeline to help keep the company afloat during its startup phase of incorporation. In a sense, these micro-investors collaborated to provide much-needed capital for Meow Wolf, only to be suddenly forced out of further returns on their investments. When Meow Wolf filled its SEC Form D, which allows for the sale of stocks without the company going public,

it disclosed that it raised more than \$150 million from private investors (Krabbe, 2019). In the same year, CEO Vince Kadlubek stepped down, remaining on the organization's board. He was replaced by a three-person CEO leadership team: Ali Rubinstein, formerly of Walt Disney, Jim Ward, formerly of LucasArts, and Carl Christensen, formerly of Goldman Sachs, further formalizing a corporate entertainment management structure for the once art collective (De Vore, 2019).

The Spring 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused Meow Wolf to shutter *HOER* temporarily for public health concerns, closing their primary source of revenue. At this time, the company laid off 201 employees, furloughing another 56 (Duke, 2020, para. 1). Even before the pandemic, speculations that cuts to the workforce were inevitable began to circulate (De Vore, 2020). This twofold inevitability is because by June of 2020 the company would have exhausted its capital, and much of the design and build of Meow Wolf's new permanent installations were nearing completion, but the new sites had not opened yet. In order to maintain a company, Meow Wolf had to balance their bottom line while caretaking for their employees' wellbeing, particularly as a B-Corp. Yet the company's decision to implement these cuts under the shadow of the pandemic becomes a possible act of "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007). The most recent changes to the company's structure have not altered the immersive experience of *HOER* for guests. But, as the pandemic's restrictions ease, and as Meow Wolf opens its new installations, we will have to see how the company chooses to honor their varied and ongoing corporate social responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I focused primarily on the *HOER* and Meow Wolf Creative Studios during the slice of time I undertook my ethnographic research in 2018. What emerged was the excitement and promise that Meow Wolf offered as it rapidly

geared up production on multiple exhibitions. Even though the overall sense I recorded from artists and designers was one of utopian optimism, the transition-in-progress from collective to corporation was apparent in the subtle confrontations between varying constituencies from the organization's history.

Additionally, the creative workers at Meow Wolf have continued to uphold the value of collaboration while trying to care for their collective well-being. In October 2020, they voted to unionize so they can collectively bargain with management (Vitu, 2020). In a public statement, the newly formed workers' union stated:

Meow Wolf taught us art should always be a radical endeavor. It will require time, effort, listening, and creativity. In short, it's a collaboration. Meow Wolf, which believes radical art can change the world, taught us to rethink the way we work together. Now we ask Meow Wolf to rethink the way it works with us. When we work together, we build worlds. (Meow Wolf Workers Collective, n.d.)

Meow Wolf engages a variety of communities. I limited my discussion to the guests of *HOER* and the artists and designers who create the company's exhibitions. Further analysis needs to focus on Meow Wolf's relationship to the larger populations who live and work near its sites and who participate in its programming and philanthropic endeavors. For example, Meow Wolf promised to support their neighbors by offering an "inclusive economy" (Anderson, 2018). Yet their popularity as a travel destination, along with their capacity to purchase and lease real estate, intertwine with gentrification, which most often benefits wealthy white communities while harming communities that are lower income and/or of color. The successful implementation of socially-conscious corporate responsibilities, such as those espoused by Meow Wolf and facilitated, in part, through curiosity and collaboration, would go a long way toward creating new and necessary worlds.

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