

# Transmedia Storytelling in Disney's Theme Parks

## Or How Colonialism Underpins Participatory Culture

**Sabrina Mittermeier**

### Introduction

As Henry Jenkins famously posited, “transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation or what industry observers call ‘synergy.’ . . . [This means that] a media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible.”<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is most often attributed to developments in the media industries of the 21st century, but in the case of the Walt Disney Company, such synergistic efforts reach back to the 1955 opening of Disneyland Park. Making use of the then-new medium of television, the theme park was promoted by a TV series of the same name<sup>2</sup> that quickly garnered its own fandom, as evidenced by the so-called “Crockett craze” surrounding the *Davy Crockett* episodes.<sup>3</sup> More-

1. Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101,” *HenryJenkins.org*, March 21, 2007, [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html).

2. Jay P. Telotte, *Disney TV* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Karal Ann Marling, “Disneyland, 1955,” *American Art* 5 (Winter/Spring 1991): 167-207, <https://doi.org/10.1086/424113>.

3. Sabrina Mittermeier, *A Cultural History of the Disneyland Theme Parks* (Bristol: Intellect, 2021), 33–35.

over, the park also served as a marketing tool for all of the company's media properties from the get-go; even its famous icon, Sleeping Beauty Castle, was a clever synergistic effort to promote the then-upcoming animated film (released in 1957).<sup>4</sup>

This has only expanded further in the following decades, particularly with character meets, shows, and parades being introduced into the parks before films were released (such as the Captain Marvel character in early 2019). For Disney, inclusion in the parks has also foreshadowed the eventual takeover of Lucasfilm in 2016, with the *Star Tours* simulator ride in Disneyland opening as early as 1987 and *Star Wars* Weekends becoming a feature of Walt Disney World's Hollywood Studios Park in the 2000s. In many ways, the theme park has become a core of transmedia strategies as corporate practice, one which extends beyond Disney to Comcast-Universal and other global operators.

Despite their integral position in these strategies, theme parks present a special case in the study of transmediality, as they are physical places that must be visited to be experienced. As such, they exist at the intersection of media and tourism<sup>5</sup> and have become destinations of what can be called "fan tourism"<sup>6</sup> or "transmedia tourism."<sup>7</sup> As Rebecca Williams argues, theme parks

. . . seek to challenge the dominant view of transmediality as something that flows across and between different media spaces, "since this assumption does not match up with embodied and spatialized realities of transmedia branding/storytelling." . . . the concept of "spatial transmedia" . . . [thus] accounts for these moments of narrative extension and world-building that take place within a specific rooted location.<sup>8</sup>

4. *Ibid.*, 45.

5. Sabrina Mittermeier, "Theme Parks—Where Media and Tourism Converge," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Tourism*, ed. Maria Mansson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 27–34.

6. Sabrina Mittermeier, "(Un)Conventional Voyages? *Star Trek: The Cruise* and the Themed Cruise Experience," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 6 (January 2020): 1373.

7. Ross Garner, "Transmedia Tourism Editorial," *JOMEC Journal* 14 (2019): 1–10.

8. Rebecca Williams, *Theme Park Fandom: Spatial Transmedia, Materiality, and Participatory Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 12.

This worldbuilding, in relation to the built environment I analyze here, draws upon recent efforts in transmedia storytelling for the first time interconnects all Disney theme parks globally with the Society of the Explorers and Adventurers (S.E.A.) and the Marvel Avengers Campus themed areas. I engage with concepts of “drillable immersion”<sup>9</sup> to unearth an underlying colonial ideology inherent in the “tourist gaze” that has continued to shape these virtual interiorities in the age of post-/mass-tourism and for which theme parks have become the epitome.<sup>10</sup>

## The Society of Explorers and Adventurers and Theme Parks' Colonial Imagery

With the opening of Tokyo Disneyland in 1983, the Disney theme parks have expanded beyond the United States for the first time. Because of the surprising and massive success of this first overseas park, Disney soon opened gates outside Paris (1992), Hong Kong (2005), and, most recently, Shanghai (2016). Originally, local and national visitors were in the focus of the theme parks' marketing (with the exception of Paris's broader Western European focus), but in more recent years, the Walt Disney Company's strategy has more clearly shifted towards a global approach. This is noticeable in the increasing promotion of the international parks via the company's own social media channels (such as their *Disney Parks Blog*), but also through the immersive, transmedia storytelling at work in the parks' attractions. This marks a clear shift in marketing strategy and further positions the parks as key cogs in the multimedia conglomerate's machine.

The fictional “Society of Explorers and Adventurers” (S.E.A.) that serves as the narrative glue for several attractions (meaning rides, entertainment, and dining venues) ever since the 2001 opening of the Tokyo DisneySea theme park is one key example for this new strategy. It originated with the popular Adventurers Club, part of the now-defunct Pleasure Island district at the former entertainment complex Downtown Disney at

9. Besides the Screen, “Down Into the Vaults: Drillable Immersion at Franchise Lands (Carter Moulton, Northwestern),” uploaded on June 4, 2021, YouTube video, 25:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNXiel-PjuQ>.

10. John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: SAGE, 2011).

Walt Disney World Resort, Florida. The immersive dining venue was created by a team led by Imagineer Joe Rohde and centered around a group of fictional characters played by an improv comedy troupe—a true foray into adult (rather than family) entertainment for the company. While the club had a more tongue-in-cheek take on colonial tropes, similar to the more recent incarnations of the Jungle Cruise ride at several of the so-called castle parks, the attractions found at Tokyo DisneySea elevate S.E.A. to a more sophisticated narrative. Introduced at the Fortress Explorations interactive walk-through and Magellan's restaurant, it connects back to an "Age of Explorers," AKA a time of European settler colonialism. DisneySea is also home to Lost River Delta—an area themed to the Indiana Jones franchise (which is possibly contemporary popular culture's most famous purveyor of colonial imagery), a good fit as they clearly share much common ideological ground.<sup>11</sup> thus adding yet another layer of hyperreality to this space—several levels of abstraction that arguably, blur the lines between fantasy and real-life colonial structures further. But it is the ride's storyline that reinforces the colonial narrative more clearly, centering on Lord Henry Mystic and his animal sidekick, the monkey Albert. Mystic is an aging British aristocrat (telling for this Hong Kong location, given its status as a former British colony) who collects artifacts from all over the globe. This is in line with S.E.A.'s official mission "to collect, conserve, and curate valuable cultural and artistic artifacts from around the world and make them available to the public in an artistically

11. Sabrina Mittermeier, "Indiana Jones and the Theme Park Adventure" in *Excavating Indiana Jones: Essays on the Film and Franchise*, ed. Randy Laist (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019), 200. [footnote Tokyo DisneySea introduces us to a member of S.E.A., Harrison Hightower III, the owner of this park's version of the popular Tower of Terror thrill ride. Hightower is portrayed as a wealthy white man who owns the hotel in a turn-of-the-century New York (part of the American Waterfront area). Hightower harkens back to Gilded Age millionaires like Rockefeller and Carnegie who shaped the city and the US at large. The attraction tells the story of a cursed artifact Hightower has acquired from his travels—the idol of Shiriki Utundu—which causes the hotel elevator to malfunction. The statue has also made Hightower—a painting of whom was modelled on the visage of one Joe Rohde—himself disappear. While this could be read as a critique of colonialism, in the same vein as film like *The Mummy* (1999) where a white man's hunger for exploration is punished, it also reinforces orientalist stereotypes of a mystical, magical, and foreign other (especially in contrast to modern, rational adventurers). The spatial elements of these S.E.A. attractions also contribute similarly to reinforcing these ideals, which are particularly visible at Hong Kong Disneyland's Mystic Manor. The ride is set in yet another colonial mansion, but one that is an amalgamation of several colonial architectural styles. It's reportedly been inspired by the Carson Mansion, a Victorian gingerbread house in Eureka, California, [footnote] "Mystic Manor," *The Disney Wiki*, [https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Mystic\\_Manor](https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Mystic_Manor).

pleasing and sensitive manner. . . . [And] to equip and mount socio-cultural expeditions to discover, explore, chronicle and protect the artistic achievements of human society, past and present, exalted and forgotten.”<sup>12</sup> This narrative of “forgotten” history is always one of whiteness, as history is framed as something to uncover and consequently make available to a Western audience, while erasing Indigenous knowledge and life worlds.

Deborah Philips has defined such exploration and adventure narratives as the “Empire Boys Genre”: “the adventure story . . . dealing with areas of history and geography that placed [the colonizer] at the top of the racial ladder and at the helm of all the world.”<sup>13</sup> The ride narrative of Mystic Manor centers on an enchanted music box’s magical powers, set loose by Albert, which wreak havoc on Lord Henry’s possessions. However, both Albert and the Lord, as well as the ride visitors, escape unharmed, as do the artifacts—in contrast to Hightower. Generally, then, these stories tie in with (Disney) theme park’s general depictions of the “exotic” as part of Adventureland and similar themed areas as locales “without mosquitos, monsoons, and misadventures”<sup>14</sup> but with the “cute colonial racism”<sup>15</sup> very much intact. Such “armchair colonialism,” as I have called it elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> “continue to give the West, and America in particular, the power to narrate.”<sup>17</sup>

This also extends to the park’s common paratext, the map,<sup>18</sup> as a powerful tool of colonial hegemony and narration, as it directly puts the visitor into the shoes of explorers. As John Urry has posited, tourism and its connected “tourist gaze” are direct outgrowths of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> The theme

12. “Society of Explorers and Adventurers,” *The Disney Wiki*, [https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Society\\_of\\_Explorers\\_and\\_Adventurers](https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Society_of_Explorers_and_Adventurers).

13. Deborah Philips, *Fairground Attractions: A Genealogy of the Pleasure Ground* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 146.

14. Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 226.

15. *Ibid.*, 225.

16. Mittermeier, *Cultural History*, 174.

17. Philips, *Fairground Attractions*, 163.

18. See Florian Freitag’s chapter in this book, “The Happiest Virtual Place on Earth: Theme Park Paratextuality.”

19. Urry and Larson, *Tourist Gaze*.

park, with its roots in World's Fairs and Expositions and racist history of "Völkerschauen" (human zoos) written back into such rides as the Jungle Cruise, is equally part of this. Arguably, none of this is new: such observations about theme parks, and particularly Disney theme parks, have long been the focus of scholarly works on the subject. I would also argue that this colonial ideology also underpins the larger project of transmediality.

## Transmedia Storytelling

One central component of transmedia storytelling is "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."<sup>20</sup>

S.E.A. clearly does this as it has been extended to include several global attractions—in addition to the aforementioned—including the Oceaneer club on the Disney cruise ships; the Trader Sam's Tiki bars in the resorts in California and Florida; the Miss Adventure Falls ride at Typhoon Lagoon water park at Walt Disney World; and Camp Discovery at Shanghai Disneyland while folding in existing staples such as the Jungle Cruise. The addition of the Skipper Canteen restaurant to Magic Kingdom Park built on some of the existing lore of this ride, such as the Schweitzer Falls waterfalls, named for Dr. Albert Falls, turning this fan-favorite pun into a fully-fledged character. The upcoming refurbishment of the ride will also further build on this by including his daughter, Sneh Falls<sup>21</sup> (herself a colonial subject), thus making the fictional family more clearly part of S.E.A. by tying into the additional worldbuilding done by the feature film *Jungle Cruise* (2021).

20. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101."

21. Michael Ramirez, "Jungle Cruise Adds New Characters, Mischievous Wildlife and Skipper Humor to Classic Attraction," *Disney Parks* (blog), March 19, 2021, <https://disneyarks.disney.go.com/blog/2021/03/jungle-cruise-adds-new-characters-mischievous-wildlife-and-skipper-humor-to-classic-attraction/>.

At Disney Springs, the shopping and dining district at Walt Disney World, the themed bar Jock Lindsey's Hangar Bar now cements the connection between the Indiana Jones story world as S.E.A.'s Jock Lindsey was Indy's pilot, seen during the opening sequence in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). It remains to be seen whether the forthcoming *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023) will include any nods to this; as Disney now owns the franchise outright after having acquired Lucasfilm, it would not be out of the question.

The multimedia conglomerate's strategies that make such transmedial narration roots in colonial ideology possible are food for another discussion, but let us turn here to the clear connections to the practices of participatory culture. As Williams has argued, "theme parks and the transmedia opportunities they present are often 'pieced together over time.' . . . transmediality in the theme park . . . is also frequently a more organic and fan-led process than more typical dominant models [of transmedia]." <sup>22</sup> At this point, only the most die-hard fans of Disney parks are likely aware of S.E.A., as clues to it are mostly hidden in waiting queues and absent from paratexts such as maps and park apps and puzzled together on fan-led online resources such as the *Disney Wiki* or Facebook groups. To know about S.E.A. and connect the dots, you need to put in active fan labor. As it is, S.E.A. as a story world mostly exists in virtual fan spaces. Megan Condis and Bobby Schweizer have studied this fan engagement and concluded that part of the draw of puzzling together these easter eggs is the feeling of being in a "secret society"—much like S.E.A. itself—and that this story world is seemingly only available to the interested fan, even if hidden in plain sight. <sup>23</sup>

Yet, it seems clear that Disney is willing to change this and elevate S.E.A. from a hardcore fan experience to a more broadly accessible story world. The official Disney fan club, D23, still caters to their most avid fans, but it is worth noting that their Destination D fan event in 2016 acknowledged the S.E.A. story world in panels with Imagineers and merchandise sold.

22. Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*, 12.

23. Megan Condis and Bobby Schweizer. "Enlisting Fans in the Society of Explorers and Adventurers." *Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2022*. Chicago, IL, 2022.

The blockbuster film *Jungle Cruise* (2021) also reaches out beyond this audience, as does a forthcoming book series, and most importantly, the forthcoming television series *Society of Explorers and Adventurers*. Created by Ronald D. Moore and set to premiere over the coming years on Disney+, it definitely has the potential to further expand S.E.A. into a viable franchise of its own. The show is also reportedly connected back to a larger Magic Kingdom framework that points to Disney's desire to keep building on their theme parks as source material for such a franchise (or even several franchises).

S.E.A., however, is not the only Disney Park story world that engages in these practices. One other key example for transmedia storytelling under the Walt Disney Company's roof is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), now also a source for an ever-expanding presence at the theme parks. The MCU is one of Disney's most elaborate transmedia franchises and it has expanded with the active intent of such fan engagement that Disney also wants to foster with S.E.A. (*Star Wars*, of course, has long grown into something similar). Due to an agreement born out of a long-standing court case over licensing rights with Comcast/Universal, Disney is only allowed to build theme park attractions themed to a select few of the Marvel properties they own east of the Mississippi, AKA at Walt Disney World.<sup>24</sup> This, however, has not hampered their ability to build these elsewhere, and Marvel-based attractions at Disney's other parks are on the march. Since 2018, an *Iron Man* simulator ride similar to Star Tours can be found at Hong Kong Disneyland, and in 2019 an *Ant Man and the Wasp* attraction replaced Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters there. In June of 2021, the first Avengers Campus opened at Disney's California Adventure, and the Hong Kong park is planning a similar expansion. That same June, Disneyland Paris Resort opened its rethemed Hotel New York—Art of Marvel and yet another Avengers Campus opened at the Walt Disney Studios Park there in July of 2022. The *Disney Magic* cruise ship has been hosting Marvel Days at Sea since 2018, and at Walt Disney World's Epcot, a *Guardians of the Galaxy*-themed indoor roller coaster opened in May of 2022.

24. Sharon Kennedy Wynne, "Here's Why Walt Disney World Will Likely Never Get a Marvel Theme Park," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.tampabay.com/fun/heres-why-walt-disney-world-will-likely-never-get-a-marvel-theme-park-20190614/>.



Building attractions on such a massive franchise is of course not new—what’s new, however, is the clear intent for transmedial world-building and participatory engagement underlying these lands. Since the opening of the land in Anaheim, it has become clear that the parks are cleverly used to promote the MCU televisual and cinematic properties as they are released: while the first season of television series *Loki* (2021–) aired on Disney+, the Loki theme park character changed appearance in accordance with the newest episode. This is not only a nice gimmick for existing fans, but it also sparks fan engagement with those already invested in such character meets<sup>25</sup> and garners interest in following along with the show weekly (and in subscribing to Disney to do so!). This is a form of “drillable immersion”<sup>26</sup> where layers of immersion only become available at an upcharge. This is even more clearly the case with the “webslinger” devices guests can buy at a particular Avengers Campus retail location to unlock different features on WEB SLINGERS: A Spider-Man Adventure. The system borrows from MMOPGs and online gaming by generating extra revenue through upselling, further cementing connections to other “virtual interiorities” in a consumer-capitalist landscape.

What is more, the stated goal of the Avengers campuses, as presented at D23 Expo in 2019, is to interconnect them internationally. While it is not quite clear how exactly the lands will do so, the connection fosters a mentality to motivate fans to travel to all the international parks. Naturally, it is still possible to enjoy the Avengers campuses separately or the WEB Slingers ride without surcharge, but the way these transmedial story worlds function is to invest fans to a degree that makes them want to complete all the experiences possible. On a narrative level, that also means uncovering all parts of the story—if you are an avid fan of the MCU, you watch every film, TV series, and so on, and it might now also mean visiting all Avengers campuses in the world.

25. Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*, 133–52.

26. Besides the Screen, “Down Into the Vaults.”

I argue then that when this participatory culture is actively encouraging such global media tourism, it is rooted in an ideology not unlike what Urry has described for tourism more broadly: a quasi-colonialist agenda. Thus, even while the MCU itself does not perpetuate colonial imagery and stereotypes, the fan engagement with it, at least in the spatial medium of the theme park, follows an ideology of consumption that in and of itself is colonial.

When the drive to explore and uncover the unknown—also found in fan engagements with the films and TV series of the MCU—is paired actively with travel to different places, it takes on new connotations. And when it comes to the multi-location story world of S.E.A. (which also expresses colonial narratives at the textual level), it even more clearly showcases the colonial roots of these practices and spaces, or virtual interiorities. Thus, while Disney has begun to retheme and remove some of the more obviously problematic depictions of racialized bodies in attractions such as the Jungle Cruise in a strive for inclusion and diversity, colonial ideology continues to underpin their theme parks on a much more integral level. Michelle Anjirbag has also noted these practices for Disney's film industry:

Such diversity, though addressing (in very small ways) postcolonial identity politics that are both salient and fraught in the current geopolitical climate, nevertheless serves Disney's corporate interests: (re)producing coloniality and a colonizing progression decentralized from the nation-state but rooted in the projection of a particular "global" culture, or Disney's overarching, central and dominating view of the world as it should be, through its traditionally White, heteronormative, conservative, Christian, middle-class lens.<sup>27</sup>

27. Michelle Anjirbag, "Reforming Borders of the Imagination: Diversity, Adaptation, Transmediation, and Incorporation in the Global Disney Film Landscape" *Jeunesse* 11, no.2 (2019), 151.

This also directly aligns with Disney's impetus for their theme parks as spaces that cater to a white middle class, or as I have referred to them elsewhere, "middle-class kingdoms."<sup>28</sup> Their more recent forays only cement this further, but thus also highlight how transmedia practices themselves are largely rooted in such US- and Eurocentric ideologies. As Disney expands these further, they are continuing to build on their (cultural) imperialist legacy.

## Conclusion

As Disney further expands their theme parks, their goal is to increase immersion through both virtually and physically embodied spaces of fandom and participatory culture. By interconnecting these sites with the narrative connective tissue of story worlds such as S.E.A. or the MCU, they encourage visitors to travel to all their international resorts and thus actively foster transmedia tourism. These practices, however, are rooted in colonial ideologies of exploration, and consequently make them hard to align with Disney's recent efforts in increasing diversity. Furthermore, they also expose transmedial practices at large as being intrinsically connected to colonial thought and practice. What these practices then also showcase for the entertainment and, more specifically, theme park industries is a turn towards a more overt catering to fandom, as well as a clear interest in increasing immersivity through such affective and participatory practices. Thus, studying these practices closely will further expand our understanding of virtual interiorities and their significance, as well as what the future holds for multi-media conglomerates like Disney's ever-growing global reach.

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