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Disney: Castles, kingdoms and (no) common man

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Abstract

Disney: A company with media and experiences that are studied over and over again, almost exhaustively. However, there is good reason that this company, recognized by its emblematic castle, is studied so intensely. No other company has prolifically created such successful experiences across platforms and settled so comfortably in audiences' hearts, making so many of them feel special. This paper explores *why* and *how* Disney creates this impact through examining Disney's transmedia world building techniques through the lens of the psychological schema theory. The theory explains the way humans process information, empathize and learn from experiences which are not their own and make mental plans which lead to action. It also investigates the power of immersion and empathy in narratives psychologically, with the neurological processes, and explains the relationship between the lessons imbibed through the narrative that Disney creates and the real world beliefs and actions. The study argues that Disney is able to empower people through the creation of a coherent world with consistent moral values and recurring relatable themes such as overcoming obstacles, valuing relationships and achieving dreams. The 'fictional truth' of Disney narratives has real implications because these themes and values which are present in everyday life help the audience create predictable mental maps that they are even able to utilize in reality. Moreover, the theme parks act as an opportunity to visit a world which audiences are familiar with and have explored through a variety of media windows, giving the illusion that the outside world is profoundly connected with the internal Disney world. These experiences are united by the ubiquitous Disney castle, which acts as a trigger to contextualize themselves in a Disney narrative, even in the real world.

Keywords: Disney; transmedia; world-building; schema theory; education.

Disney has shaped many lives through its stories that range from movies to theme parks – which are all united by the recurring symbol of the castle. Despite all the critique Disney faces for racist messages, commercial focus and idealistic portrayal of reality that can lead to disillusionment, many fans take its positive teachings that 'Dreams Can Come True' to heart. Disney inspires people to pursue their own dreams and fans contextualize themselves as characters in a story – their story. This paper will analyze how Disney is able to create this impact and it will argue that it is by creating an intersection between the psychological schema theory and transmedia world building through the iconic Disney Castle – the door to Fantasyland.

The schema theory is our mental knowledge base which dictates our perception, planning, and behavior in all contexts. Schema are "foundational narratives upon which subsequent and dependent narratives are based," which shape worldviews built on interdependent narratives (personal communication, Rohde to Dalmia, 4/12/18). They are hierarchies of knowledge and characteristics that function as mental plans of action as they "allow us to know what to expect in different situations and how to react in each." They include fixed values which must always be present (such as food in restaurants), default values which are usually present (such as waitresses in restaurants) and

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optional values which differ according to people's personal experiences and schemas (such as chopsticks in restaurants) (Hannibal, 2012).

Disney helps construct the schemas of many people by popularizing certain versions of reality and furthermore, has constructed a prominent Disney schema. Fixed values of a Disney schema include the castle and themes such as love, friendship, overcoming adversity and realizing dreams. The story arc is also very predictable, as it outlines the typical Hero's Journey in which we follow a protagonist getting what they want, despite initially struggling to achieve it. Default values include elements such as the sidekick, the mentor and other specific roles that contribute to the Hero's success. And the variable factors are the worlds - who the protagonist is, what they want, where the story is set. Therefore, both Elsa from Frozen and Mike Wazowski from Monsters Inc. fit into the same schema.

The main uniting factor other than themes is the Disney castle. The castle is Disney's main 'transportation tool.' All Disney movies and media begin with the Disney Castle to establish continuity and make the story of a part of the Disney World - an idea substantiated by recurring themes and journey arcs. Disney's castle is literally everywhere creating the illusion of a consistent, coherent world. This illusion of unity allows emotional evocation in one Disney platform transfer to another. There are 52 variations of the same castle in movies ranging from 'The Pacifier' to 'Toy Story' to 'Tomorrowland.' Many variations were customized to thematically fit in with the world they were trying to create, giving the impression that the castle is a part of that world. For example, in Inspector Gadget the castle is metallic with a half gear instead of the usual pixie dust semi-circle. The logo for 'Country Bears' is on the wooden sign of a lodge and in 'Lilo and Stitch' the castle has a green light shined on it, levitating it up as if aliens are stealing the castle. (TheDeadlySquid, 2017). By theming the castle, it seems like each of the castles is in a separate city and is a separate castle of the same Disney-world which has uniform architecture. This even bleeds into the real world, as each castle in Disneyland reflects some native architecture - for example the Shanghai castle has a golden peony on the top of it which is the flower of China. Castles are universal structures, which may have variations across cultures, but are easily recognizable and stand for the same things.

This is only possible due to aesthetic consistency of the castle - they literally re-dress the same structure to give the impression of a different world. It is emblematic of the entire Disney franchise. They also reskin many timeless, universal but similar ideas to keep the lesson fresh but consistent. We extend this consistency to our daily life and as we see things and encounter challenges that remind us of Disney characters, we utilize the lessons they taught us - be nice, try to get what you want, work hard - to overcome them and finally feel like how we imagine they do. In Rohde's words, "The castle is a goal. To rise above, to transcend what appears to be limitation, as with Cinderella."

Each time the castle appears, it is not a reference to a particular story but a reference to the consistent message Disney gives: the characters are special and if you learn from them, you can be too. All Disney media begins with the image of the castle in some form, establishing that now people are entering the Disney-world. And that sets people's expectations to perceive certain sets of values, morals and lessons. These expectations are set and met over and over again in all mediums. Furthermore, fans are invited to interact with the worlds they have created in multiple immersive platforms. Despite leading the industry in innovation, they stick to universally resonant themes to touch the hearts of their audience.

The characters are all designed to make the audience empathize with them and the success of these characters inspires the audience to learn behavior patterns. Hunte and Golembiewski (2014) used 'The Theory of Mind' to explore the storytelling process which allows people to be "both observer and participant" and therefore "to be immersed in a story without being entirely threatened by it." It explains a person's ability to understand and relate to another person's experiences is a result of simultaneous work of the right brain that gives a sense of overarching context, keeping people rooted in the separation of experience and the left brain that allows one to be "transferred to the experiences of the other." This ability allows us to empathize with each other, helping us experience "fictional truth." This concept is described as "the way the human brain uses 'fictional worlds' to expand understanding about the 'real world' or phenomenal reality." It is essential to our survival that "we don't need to actually live through an event to gain the perspective of someone else's experience. We can identify potentially disastrous or beneficial events as we recognize them through story, mythology, recount and other narrative structures describing comparable situations." (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014).

This ties into world building, specifically Disney world building, as we are transported into alternative worlds through the 'fictional truth.' Through this concept, it is possible to view Disney for its entirety across not just

different mediums but also as a part of our world. Disney as a brand can be considered a “large entity experienced through various media windows - often trans media” (Wolf, 2014). This transmedia information diffusion builds the schemas of people engaging with that content, and the castle often acts as the ‘door’ or the central figure people encounter on their journeys across media format.

The narratives people immerse themselves into, builds their schemas which guide their actions. Studies show stories have an impact on a person even after the story the person has been exposed to has ended. There is a hormonal reaction associated with strong narrative and people affected are more likely to take action such as offer money to a stranger in need. This is correlated with an increase in cortisol, oxytocin and peoples’ reported feelings of empathy for the characters (Zak, 2015). Oxytocin is known as the “love hormone” associated with bonding and feeling good while cortisol is associated with memory, so it can be inferred that the emotional memory inspired people to take action after experiencing the narrative and “these findings suggest that emotionally engaging narratives inspire post-narrative actions” (Zak, 2015). This proves schemas translate into action, as emotions activated by the narrative prompts one to mimic behavior or respond to stimulus from the story even in daily life which is distinct from it. This is a result of narrative transportation which is the single most important factor in emotional attachment, recall and action of the end of the narrative. The transportation occurs for every sort of narrative format, ranging from immersive theme parks to plain old books and movies.

For theme parks specifically, the physical transportation just allows you to visit a world which you have encountered over and over again through story books, movies, games and even memory. This gives the illusion that the world outside of Disneyland is connected with it and by being in the physical Disney World, visitors start feeling like a part of it. This is emphasized by the role of the castle which is a unifying figure across the Disney world and therefore an important schematic trigger. There are three more factors that contribute to the castle’s positioning. First, it leads to Fantasyland. Second, it can be any and every story’s castle. Third, it is the center of the park.

Starting with the lead into Fantasyland, the bridge between Main Street and Fantasyland through the castle has important metaphorical significance. Main Street invokes a very strong sense of nostalgia about the ‘better times in America’ but it is also designed to resonate with and represent all Americans. Main-street was present in most American towns. Disney’s Main Street is a heightened representation of the cherished ordinary. It is also “a land that separates and links Frontierland and Adventureland, on the one hand, and Tomorrowland on the other. For the narrator-visitor Main Street USA is an axis that allows him or her to begin to tell a story” (Marin, n.d.). But it leads directly to the Disney castle which represents the exact opposite idea that Main Street evokes, it represents the extraordinary. As each person reaches the castle, they too become extraordinary. As we walk across the drawbridge, we are literally transported into the metaphorical Fantasyland, with all its possibilities.

Using the Castle, Disney gives the impression across content of a coherent united world which includes our own. By having similarly themed stories in these worlds which emphasize the power of the imagination and the ability of a person to overcome all limits, people can imbibe these lessons through learned mental plans of action, which actually empowers them to do so. While this cannot be generalized, this study gives psychological insight on how people mentally process narrative and how Disney constructs social schemas that guide consumer behavior through activation of the expectation that we, as people in the story, are able to “reach the castle” or transcend all limitations to feel special and be special.

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