Dark Ride: Disneyland.
Using educational games for critical media literacy education

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ABSTRACT

This article describes *Dark Ride: Disneyland* - a mobile game that encourages Disneyland guests to critically consider Disney's representations of history, culture, and technology. The game was the creation of a group of faculty, students and professionals associated with Brigham Young University. The article contextualizes the game and its development in relation to concepts including media as public pedagogy, critical inquiries of place, critical and creative media literacy, creative production as research, and educational videogames. It reviews the project's objective to foster critical reflection and creativity among those involved in developing the game and hopefully to extend media literacy education to the broader public. It summarizes the development of the game itself and describes the its narrative and mechanics. The article concludes with some initial findings from the experience based on responses from those involved in the project and a discussion about the potential for using educational games for critical media literacy education.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, media education, video games, Disney, theme park.*

Fun isn't a distraction or an escape from the world, but an ever deeper and more committed engagement with it.
(Ian Bogost, 2016, p.81)

INTRODUCTION

The idea came to me on a visit to southern California in the summer of 2013. I was in Los Angeles, participating in the National Association of Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) bi-annual conference, presenting on my efforts as a scholar and educator in the field of media literacy. The two-day conference was filled with conversations among different stakeholders in the field on how to most effectively encourage the public to engage more critically with media culture. As it is with these types of events, I left the conference feeling a renewed enthusiasm about my area of interest. With this new learning under my belt, I would be able to develop more effective pedagogies, produce research that would push the field forward, and ultimately make a difference in the world.

The next day, I went to Disneyland. My wife and I rode the rides, and ate the turkey legs, and purchased the souvenirs, and loved every minute of it. And it didn't take me long to recognize the contradictory nature of this trip. With a PhD in Media Studies, and a record of scholarly and educational efforts to promote media literacy, I was arguably the guest at Disneyland that day who was best prepared to be able to critically engage with the theme park. And yet, I was entranced by the magic of the park – I willingly suspended my disbelief and along with it, any type of critical thought.

In his analysis of Disneyland as "degenerate utopia," Marin (1977) describes the challenge facing park visitors in being reflective about their experience:

> But, in fact, this critical process is not possible in Disneyland in so far as the visitor to Disneyland is not a spectator estranged from the show, distanced from the myth, and liberated from its fascinating grasp. The visitor is on the stage; he performs the play […] (p. 54)

It was this realization – that the theme park was entirely effective in encouraging me to abandon my critical perspectives and play the part of giddy Disneyland guest – that sparked the idea for *Dark Ride: Disneyland*. What if we could take advantage of mobile game technologies to provide park visitors with the opportunity to see Disneyland through an active,

analytical lens – to facilitate their deconstruction of the magic of Disney?

This article describes *Dark Ride: Disneyland[1]*, a mobile game that uses augmented and virtual reality and geo-location technologies to provide guests of Disneyland with an experience that follows the story of Captain Jean Lafitte's takeover of the popular theme park and positions the player as the one who uncovers the villain's sinister designs for the park and must prevent his plans from being realized. The game was the creation of a group of faculty, students, and professionals associated with Brigham Young University.

The article begins by reviewing relevant concepts including media as public pedagogy, critical inquiries of space and place, critical and creative media literacy, creative production as research and videogames as educational experiences. The second section discusses the project's intentions, describing the objective to use *Dark Ride: Disneyland* as a means of fostering critical reflection and creativity among those involved in developing the project and hopefully to extend media literacy education to the broader public. Next, the article describes the development of the project itself, including the organization of the team, the historical, theoretical, and on-site research that informed the game's development, the design of the game's objectives, narrative, and mechanics, including descriptions of how in each of the three primary "lands" within the park (Tomorrowland, Frontierland and Adventureland), specific gameplay was designed to encourage the player to engage in analyses of the park's ideology, design, and history.

Following this in-depth explanation of the game and its development, the article provides some initial findings from the experience based on discussions and survey results from the students, faculty, and professionals involved in the project. The article concludes with an acknowledgment of some of the limitations of the project, and a discussion about the efforts that might be made to address these limitations and further the work that *Dark Ride: Disneyland* intends to do.

CORE CONCEPTS

In order to provide the proper context for the description of the mobile game – its objectives,

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[1] www.darkridegame.com

development, and evaluation – it is necessary to review the research that is relevant to the project.

Media as public pedagogy

The study of media as public pedagogy addresses the power that mass-mediated messages potentially have to frame, inform, and influence the audience's perceptions and understanding of the world. Luke (1994) was the first scholar to use the term *public pedagogy* to refer to the potential power of media culture. Describing "children's popular culture as public pedagogy," she argues:

> From infancy, most children are immersed in the texts of popular culture. The texts and artefacts of popular culture frame children's understanding of the world and of themselves, of narrative, heroes and heroines, gender and race relations, and social power. (p. 289)

Particularly relevant for the purpose of this article, Giroux and Pollock (1999) analyze the ways that Disney – the man and the corporation – have educated generations of media audiences. In particular, they acknowledge how between Walt Disney's work producing propaganda during World War II, and his efforts to bridge entertainment with education, Disney is perhaps the premiere, and still most powerful, example of popular culture as public pedagogy. They write:

> Refusing to separate entertainment from education, Disney challenged the assumption that entertainment has little educational value and is simply about leisure. Walt understood that education is not confined to schools but embedded in the broader realm of popular culture and its mechanisms for the production of knowledge and values…Walt's fusing of entertainment and education blurred the boundaries between public culture and commercial interests and found expression both in the various attractions that came to characterize theme parks, such as Disneyland and Disney World, and in the extended range of cultural and media outlets that shape everyday life. (p. 18)

Given the near-monopoly of the Walt Disney Corporation over the global media market, it is more important than ever that media audiences recognize what is being taught and learned from the nearly ubiquitous Disney culture. As noted by Giroux and Pollock above, this includes acknowledging the ways in which Disney's theme parks function as pedagogical

spaces. While Disneyland provides its visitors with glimpses of the past and future, cultures familiar and foreign, and even into a world of fantasy, it also presents the public with very particular representations of the world – including history, culture, and technology – and emphasizes specific practices – of recreation, interpretation, and consumption. Bey (2016) emphasizes the powerful pedagogical potential of the parks, writing:

> Walt Disney theme parks are, more than anything else, teaching tools. They provide a vast yet carefully integrated set of lessons and "new knowledge" designed to shape a particular set of norms and values […] (p. 179)

Given this often-overlooked understanding of the pedagogical power of Disneyland, there must be a means of providing park visitors with the ability to recognize and reflect upon the teaching and learning that takes place in this *most magical place on Earth*.

Critical inquiries of space and place

Since Baudelaire (1863/1964) celebrated the figure of the *flaneur* – describing this observant city stroller as a "passionate spectator," an active audience of the drama of the modern metropolis – the reflective navigation of space and place has been practiced in different variations by artists and scholars.[2] In recent decades, the study of space and place has developed as a field in itself, drawing upon traditions like semiotics, cultural anthropology, environmental studies, media studies, urban development, and so forth. Postmodern theorists[3] have been especially influential in the development of the field, examining the ways in which spaces and places contribute to "the practice of everyday life" (de Certeau, 1984).

Among the most significant contributions to the study of space and place is the analysis of Disneyland in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). Baudrillard identifies the theme park as the perfect example of the *hyperreality* that he argues characterizes contemporary American culture. He writes:

> The objective profile of America, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified. (p. 12)

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[2] See Benjamin (2002); de Beauvoir (1999); Debord (2006); Lefebvre (1991); Tonnies (1957); Whitman (1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

[3] See de Certeau (1984); Jameson (1992).

While his was not the first critical engagement with the theme park,[4] the popularity of Baudrillard's essay helped establish studies of Disneyland.

Since then, Disney studies has become a field of its own, with analyses of Disneyland common among the scholarship.[5] If, as Lefebvre (1991) argues, "each society offers up its own peculiar space, as it were, as an "object" for analysis and overall theoretical explication," (p. 31), then Disneyland is arguably the particular place which, through its critical analysis, might yield some insight into the state of contemporary American (and perhaps global) society.

Critical and creative media literacy

Developed out of cultural and communication studies, media literacy education has emerged in the last few decades as a field of study and practice that attempts to use education to promote the public's critical engagement with media culture. While different theories and practices of media literacy have emerged,[6] the approaches of both critical media literacy and creative media literacy are especially applicable to the development of *Dark Ride: Disneyland*.

In "Critical media literacy, democracy and the reconstruction of education," Kellner and Share (2007) define critical media literacy as constituted by:

> […] a critique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multiperspectival critical inquiry, of popular culture and the cultural industries, that addresses issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media. (p. 8-9)

As demonstrated by Kellner and Share, critical media literacy makes a special effort to combine critical analysis of media culture with creative production of "alternative media" as a means of preparing the public to become not simply sophisticated consumers of media, but also creators and citizens.

Connoly and Readman (2017) extend the field's emphasis on "creation" as a core component of media literacy with the introduction of the concept of *creative media literacy*, which they define as "a critically oriented set of attributes with which students practice a systematic interrogation of their own productive processes and the meanings attributed to them" (p. 245). Connoly and Readman describe this process as one of *synthesis*, in which students' creations and reflections allow them to more effectively integrate critical thinking and creative production. They write,

> The critical stage between one synthesis and the other is characterized by defamiliarization, where the student can step back and critically analyze what they have made in the light of the conceptual knowledge and cultural experiences that they have acquired, and then subsequently articulate how and why they did that. These kinds of ontological and epistemological questions – "What is the thing that I have made?" or "What does this thing show that I know?" support Buckingham's notion of production work as deductive process and the production work itself as a means of generating new ideas. (p. 253)

Dark Ride Disneyland draws upon both critical and creative media literacy approaches. While its objective is not explicitly political, the counter-narrative in the game encourages both the development team, and the playing public, to engage in an ideological critique of the theme park. And the development of the game draws upon the concept of *synthesis*, in which team members are engaged in a cyclical process of creation and reflection. As the team develops each of the game's elements, we evaluate how our work reflects our developing critical perspective on the park and whether it is consistent with our objectives for the game. Engaging in this process of "synthesis" allows the game to integrate theory and practice.

Creative production as research

Media literacy education has long valued integrating critical analysis and creative production in the classroom. And the field – not unlike most other academic disciplines – emphasizes the integration of theory and practice, ensuring that scholarly research informs pedagogical practice, and vice versa. Research in media literacy education sometimes includes action research approaches, in which scholar-educators create, implement and evaluate curricula as part of their research.[7] However, while among media literacy education's central premises is the expansion of "the concept of literacy (reading and writing) to include all forms of media," it is uncommon that scholars within the

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[4] See Marin (1977); Real (1977); Schickel (1968).
[5] See Bey (2016); Bryman (2004); Byrne & McQuillan (1999); Eco (1986); Fjellman (1992); Francaviglia (1981); Hauk (2016); Johnson (1981); King (1981, 1994); Mechling & Mechling (1981); Wallin (2016); Wasko (2001).

[6] See Hobbs (1998); Kellner & Share (2007).
[7] See Irizarry (2009); Penuel & Freeman (1997); Thevenin (2012).

field communicate their research in forms other than written publications, with the occasional figure or diagram (NAMLE, 2007).

The question asked by Bogost (2012) is particularly applicable here:

> An obvious question, then: must scholarly productivity take written form? Is writing the most efficient and appropriate material for judging academic work? If the answer is "yes," it is only so by convention (p. 87)

Bogost goes on to observe that written scholarship reveals itself to be inadequate in that it is typically inaccessible (and even irrelevant) to anyone but other scholars, and it privileges a single approach to the production (and communication) of knowledge. Bell (2007) observes that research assessment practices within academia commonly recognize the creative work of professional faculty as parallel to the more traditional research conducted by their professorial peers – a fact which seems to validate the scholarly significance of such creative practice. Nonetheless, academic research largely remains within the realm of the written word because, as Bell (2007) observes,

> [...].the notion that creative practice itself – with its enthusiasms and confusions, expressivity and sheer immanence – could be the crucible for a process of systematic research investigation, remains a harder sell within the wider academic community. (p. 85)

Among the goals of *Dark Ride: Disneyland* is to explore the possibility of conducting and presenting research as a creative work, and in particular, in the form of a mobile game. The team aspires to develop, in the words of Frayling (1993/1994):

> Research where the end product is an artifact – where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artifact, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication. (p. 5)

So, this article might provide a necessary bridge between our interest in creative production as research and the existing traditions of academic scholarship – objectives stated, methodologies articulated, data gathered, findings offered using the written word in a peer-reviewed publication. Though in order to fully understand the significance of this research, readers are encouraged to become players – to visit the park, play

the game and experience our efforts to help the public deconstruct Disneyland. After all, in the words of Bogost (2012): "When we spend all of our time reading and writing words – or plotting to do so – we miss opportunities to visit the great outdoors" (p. 88).

Videogames as educational experiences

As videogames have developed over the last few decades, scholars have looked to games for inspiration on how we might better understand, and thus improve, processes of teaching and learning.[8] While many educators and game designers attempt to realize this pedagogical potential by using games as vehicles to deliver educational content, this idea of "gamifying" education has clear limitations. Bogost (2016) stresses these limitations using a comparison to the Disney film *Mary Poppins*, arguing that the "gamification" approach positions play as analogous to the "spoonful of sugar [that] makes the medicine go down" – the bit of fun that makes doing chores (like cleaning or…learning, *blech!*) manageable (p. 79). He writes:

> […] the things we tend to find the most "fun" are not easy and sweet like the Bankses' cleanup routine. Manual transmissions and knitting are fun because they make driving and fashion hard rather than easy. They expose the materials of vehicles and fabrics, and they do not apologize for doing so. They make playgrounds in which gear ratios and yarn loops become materials…*Terror is at work in real fun, the terror of facing the world as it really is, rather than covering it up with sugar.* (p. 79, emphasis added)

Bogost suggests that the "fun" that games provide its players is not *devoid of* – but rather, in some way *defined by* – difficulty.

Some game scholars and creators have embraced this idea of difficulty as a crucial part of playing games and have contributed to the development of and discourse around new genres of "serious" games. For example, Flanagan (2009) argues that the serious games provide players with an opportunity to understand and engage with the complexities of reality – "They are not necessarily meant to be fun, though fun may be a side effect, and are rather meant to make people think" (p. 249).

While *Dark Ride: Disneyland* hopes to provide players with a "fun" experience, more importantly, it attempts to make people think more critically about the stories being told by Disney. Players are immersed in a

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[8] See Gee (2003, 2005), etc.

world and invited to interact with its systems and understand its logics. Playing the game requires the player to exercise their agency, make choices and experience consequences. And in so doing, the player learns not just how to beat the game itself, but how to identify and challenge the contradictions within media, culture, and society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE GAME

Critical thinking

Among the primary objectives of *Dark Ride: Disneyland* is to help our team, and ultimately the broader public, to engage with the hyper-mediated place that Disneyland provides from a more critical perspective. As my anecdote at the beginning of the article illustrates, this is not as simple as it sounds. Bey (2016) describes the power of Disneyland, writing:

> The ideology of magic taught within Walt Disney World, though simple on its surface, is one of the most powerful examples of pedagogy in the arsenal of this vast and amazingly complex organization and perhaps in all of contemporary American society. (p. 181)

It is this very constructedness that makes critical engagement with Disneyland such a necessity. The first of the National Association of Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) Core Principles of Media Literacy Education emphasizes the importance of recognizing that "All media messages are "constructed" [...]" (NAMLE, 2007). The type of critical thinking that the project attempts to encourage is inquiry-based learning that enables the visitor to Disneyland to go beyond "common-sense" understandings of and intended experiences with the park. Instead, *Dark Ride: Disneyland* models different methods of critical analysis for players, "[...] teach[ing] students to ask the specific types of questions that will allow them to gain a deeper or more sophisticated understanding of media messages," and enabling them to discover the park's underlying intentions, assumptions, representations, logical correlations and contradictions (NAMLE, 2007).

In order to encourage critical engagement with the park, we made an effort to position both the students developing the game, and the playing public themselves as active, observant, questioning and reflective.

- *Active*: In the development of the game, we emphasized the importance of each student's contributions and encouraged them to take risks, make use of their particular skill sets, and identify

and then subsequently solve problems in the production process. In the game itself, we made an effort to allow the player to make choices wherever possible. We were interested in experimenting with a non-linear structure for the game, as well as using, wherever possible, elements like dialogue trees to emphasize the games interactivity.

- *Observant*: In the development of the game, we wanted to help the students engage in "close readings" of both written materials about Disneyland and the elements within the park itself. In the game itself, we worked to develop a narrative and mechanics that would encourage players to examine often-overlooked elements of the park more closely.
- *Questioning*: In the development of the game, we prepared the students with analytical frameworks through which they could engage with the park, allowing them to deconstruct Disneyland. In the game itself, we wrote dialogue to help players adopt a questioning perspective as they navigated the park.
- *Reflective*: In the development of the game, we helped the students not only analyze elements within the park, but also then reflect on the implications of these analyses. In the game itself, we wanted to give the player opportunities to connect the observations they were making with larger ideas or issues, often including within characters' dialogue open-ended questions that could prompt reflection on the part of the player.

Creativity

The second objective of *Dark Ride: Disneyland* is to provide the development team, and in some ways the playing public, with an opportunity to practice their creativity. As Marin (1977) notes in the quote above, while themes of imagination, dreams and wishes are pervasive within the park, the "play" engaged in by visitors to Disneyland is much less like make-believe and more akin to fulfilling a particular role in a predetermined production. *Dark Ride: Disneyland* gives those involved the opportunity to take the materials within the park − the characters, stories, design elements, and so forth − and construct something new from it.

In order to encourage this type of creativity, we made an effort to help the students conceptualize the game, develop the necessary technical skills, collaborate with

other team members, make deliberate decisions, as well as reflect upon and refine their work. In the early stages of development, we encouraged the students to draw upon their research, observations and analyses of the park to develop ideas for the game's story, themes and mechanics. We provided students with instruction on the use of software[9] to realize their ideas and manage their workflow. We organized the students into groups and established processes in an effort to facilitate communication and collaboration across disciplines. Most importantly, we made a special effort to encourage students to create elements of the game with its primary concepts and objectives in mind, provided them with opportunities to evaluate their work and helped them refine their creations to be integrated with their learning (both analytical and technical).

In the game itself, we made an effort to include narrative elements and game mechanics that fostered creativity among those playing. We wanted to create a world within the game for the player to explore. We wanted to help the player see Disneyland through new perspectives and consider alternatives to the stories being told in the park. We wanted to ask open-ended questions that would prompt the player to be curious and reflective about their experience playing the game and visiting the park.

DEVELOPMENT

Organization of the team

Due to the nature of the project, the game required that we assemble a team drawing upon multiple disciplines, with a variety of skill sets. As a faculty member specializing in critical studies of media, I knew that while my work in media literacy education would serve the project, I would need to work with collaborators with specialties in media production and game design. It was also a priority for the project to provide opportunities for university students and faculty to collaborate with professionals in the field. In the end, our faculty and professional mentors included myself, a professor specializing in media production, a graphic design faculty member, a professional game designer and a professional transmedia developer.

Next was organizing a team of students with whom we would develop the project. We advertised the project

on campus and accepted applications for students in three designated disciplines: story, design, and engineering. From the students who applied, we organized a team of twenty-five undergraduate and graduate students, representing a variety of programs on campus including Media Arts, Animation, Illustration, Computer Science, Graphic Design, Mathematics, Advertising, and Business. Based on the students' interests and experience, the students were organized into one of the three disciplines (writing/research, art/design, and engineering). From these groups, student "discipline leads" were chosen to act as team leaders and liaisons with their corresponding mentors.

In the research and development phase, the students were also organized in four "lands" – Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland, and Fantasyland. These groups were comprised of students from a mix of disciplines. This organization allowed for cross-pollination of ideas across disciplines, encouraging all of the students to engage in research about the park and develop concepts for the game together, and in so doing, create channels of communication and good working relationships with students with other skill sets. The groups of students in each "land" were also led by selected students who were responsible for overseeing the research and development and communicating with the project mentors.

Research and development

The first stage in the project involved developing a core concept that would drive the game's narrative and mechanics. In order for this concept to be grounded in elements of the park itself, the team researched Disneyland's creators, history, and design. And while much of the information we collected did not eventually end up in the game, immersing ourselves in historical accounts, scholarly analyses and fan-discussions of the park provided us with the means of determining the best approaches for our analysis of the park. For example, a popular post on the Disney's Haunted Mansion-themed blog *Long-Forgotten* introduced the team to the pirate Captain Jean Lafitte and detailed the presence of this historical figure in the park since the park's opening in 1955 ("Jean Lafitte," 2010). Lafitte would ultimately become the game's antagonist, providing the team with

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[9] Including Adobe Illustrator, SourceTree, Trello, Unity, Vuforia, XCode, and so forth.

a narrative that would frame *Dark Ride: Disneyland's* approach to the park.

Among the most important aspects of the research engaged in by the development team was the theorization of media literacy applied to the theme park. As Disneyland functions as both a hyper-mediated and a pedagogical space, visitors to the park are encouraged to leave any skepticism at the door and succumb to the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory experiences that Disney offers. Bey (2016) writes of the effect of this experience on the visitor-student:

> In the face of this bombardment, the visitor or student has a limited chance of resisting the lesson and many visitors strive to learn the lesson and "have their eyes opened" so they can fully enjoy and understand their expensive experiences and patterns of consumption within "the world." (p. 190)

Bey articulates an interesting tension related to the public's interpretation of Disneyland: rather than exercise their agency to analyze and reflect on their visit, they do so to more effectively immerse themselves in the experience Disney provides for them. This acknowledges the power of the audience not just to willingly suspend their disbelief, but actively choose to believe in "Disney magic."

In addition to examining secondary sources, the team's research also involved a number of visits to the park. This primary research included carefully observing and documenting our experiences: taking notes and photographs on the design of the park, interpreting the stories being told and the themes explored in the various attractions, and reflecting on and discussing our experiences. In order to resist the tendency to passively (or enthusiastically) consume the messages communicated by the park, the team familiarized ourselves with some of the core concepts of media literacy. Carrying paper copies of NAMLE's "Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages," the team considered questions related to:

- The park's production:
  - Who made this?
  - When was this made?
  - Why was this made?
- The park as a text:
  - What does this want me to think (or think about)?
  - What techniques are used and why?
  - What ideas, values, information or points of view are overt? Implied?
- Interpretations of the park experience:
  - How does this make me feel and how do my emotions influence my interpretation of this?
  - What is my interpretation and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?
  - How might different people understand this message differently? (NAMLE, 2014)

Researching the park with these questions in mind, the team learned, for example, about the various creators responsible for the different attractions and the plaques at the entrance to each of the "lands" in which Walt articulates the themes he intended for the park to explore. As we rode rides and watched shows, we made an effort to be active audiences, critically interpreting our experiences and considering how others might experience the same attractions in different ways based on their own backgrounds and perspectives.

While many of these concepts of media analysis translated to the team's experience critically engaging with Disneyland, some effort was required to extend the analytical frameworks to account for the aspects of park culture. Especially helpful in this regard were critical analyses of the park itself in which scholars (and fans) examine the logic of the park, its attractions and the experience. A concept that emerged again and again in the team's research was the idea that, despite Walt and his Imagineers' efforts to present an idealized world in the park, Disneyland is characterized by contradiction.[10] Giroux and Pollock (1999) write:

> Like all cultural formations, Disney is riddled with contradictions; rather than being a static and monolithic entity, Disney culture offers potentially subversive moments and pleasures within a range of contradictory and complex experiences. (p. 7)

Giroux and Pollock argue that these contradictions, instead of demonstrating some sort of flaw within Disney's design of the park, provide audiences the opportunity to slip within the cracks, resist the dominant narratives told within the park and actively interpret and experience Disneyland in different ways.

In the team's research, we learned that by identifying the contradictions within the park, Disneyland's constructedness becomes apparent. And by identifying

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[10] See Baudrillard (1994); Marin (1977); Wasko (2001).

the contradictions between the stories Disney tells and actual cultural practices or historical events, the version of reality constructed by Disneyland becomes apparent. With this in mind, the development team sought out the tensions within the Disneyland experience. We navigated the park's "architecture of reassurance" in an effort to find the cracks where the *Dark Ride: Disneyland* player could slip through, play with the meanings being created and circulated, and see Disneyland with a new perspective.[11]

STORY, THEMES, AND GAMEPLAY

Introduction

Upon opening the app, the player receives a message scrawled on a piece of parchment by a curious character called Baudrillard.

Figures 1-2. *Baudrillard's note and pirate map*

Upon entering Disneyland, the game reveals a black and crimson-colored pirate's treasure map. At the center of the tattered map of Disneyland, a red X marks the spot where the player will find the Walt and Mickey statue. Upon reaching the statue, the player taps on the red X and hears the squawk of a parrot. Baudrillard appears on the phone's screen and greets the player, commending them for making it this far and handing them a spyglass.

"With this spyglass, you can see the secret plans of Captain Jean Lafitte," remarks the parrot.

The player uses the phone's camera to look through their spyglass at the park and finds that the sky is black with smoke. Ash falls on the dreary landscape. This is the park under the reign of Captain Lafitte.

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[11] While this article does not address the issue specifically, the most commonly asked questions about *Dark Ride: Disneyland* concern the game's treatment of Disney's intellectual property. In order to avoid legal action from The Walt Disney Corporation, the development team met with Brigham Young University's copyright office and the office of general counsel througho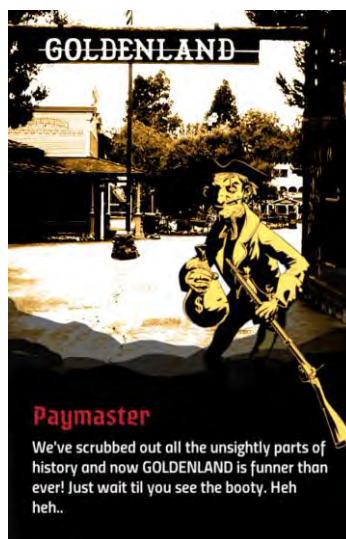ut t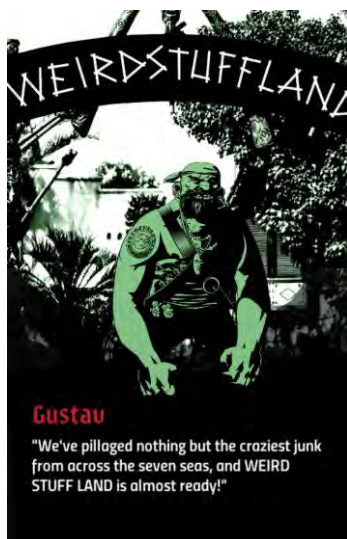he course of the project to ensure that the project worked within legal precedents in both fair and transformative use. The development team often referred to the "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education" (2008) and "The Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for the Visual Arts" (2015).

Figures 3-4. *Baudrillard and Captain Jean Lafitte*

Suddenly, Baudrillard squawks, "Uh oh! There's his ship now! Brace yourself!" From the smoke-filled sky emerges a massive pirate ship which pauses in the sky above the player. Captain Lafitte can be seen at the bow of the ship. "Loyal friends!" he calls to his pirate crew. "We've out-Disneyed Disney himself! Is Disneyerland ready for tonight's unveiling?" One by one Lafitte's fellow buccaneers report from each of the park's lands.

Gustav

"We've pillaged nothing but the craziest junk from across the seven seas, and WEIRD STUFF LAND is almost ready!"

Paymaster

We've scrubbed out all the unsightly parts of history and now GOLDENLAND is funner than ever! Just wait til you see the booty. Heh heh..

DeadRed

I've slashed all creativity and innovation so guests won't get distracted from the real thrill of TODAYLAND: the rides and franchises!

Figures 5-7. *Gustav, Paymaster and DeadRed introducing Weirdstuffland, Goldenland, and Todayland, respectively*

"Beautiful!" replies the Captain. "All naysayers will disappear tonight when me plans become a reality, in a magical-er Disney-er moment!"

After the player's confrontation with Lafitte, the captain abruptly takes off in his flying ship.

Baudrillard reveals to the player that Lafitte has trapped something important in the wishing well by the castle, but they will need the help from the characters throughout the park to free it.

Figure 8. *Lafitte's Arrival*
https://youtu.be/rAC8R-410ZQ

As the story continues, Baudrillard guides the player throughout the park, using their spyglass to locate characters and help them overcome the pirates. In each of the three lands – Tomorrowland, Frontierland, and Adventureland – the player has dialogue interactions, goes on fetch-quests and plays mini-games. Eventually, the player is able to return to Lafitte's stronghold in Fantasyland, free the wishes from the well- releasing Lafitte's control over the park- and confront the captain himself in a final battle.

Tomorrowland

Entering Tomorrowland, the player encounters the villainous Dead Red who has led the captain's efforts to transform the land into Todayland. "Lafitte saw Tomorrowland becoming less about sailing to an attainable future. I agree!" Dead Red calls to the player. "Hang today, never worry 'bout tomorrow! Spend now! Where you're moored now couldn't possibly be better!"
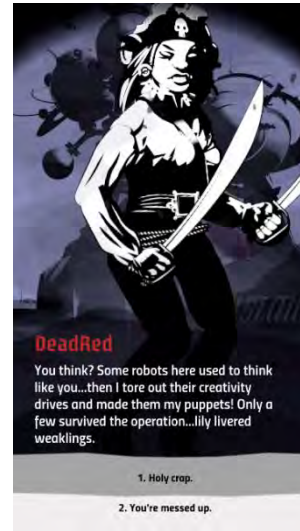

Figure 9. *Meet Dead Red*
https://youtu.be/s1ec0jRGdzs

As the player navigates the land, they encounter various robots, led by Herbert, who reveal that in order to restore the spirit of creativity to Tomorrowland, they will have to accomplish something that will inspire the robots to again dream of a better tomorrow. Herbert and the player hatch a plan to explore the land in search of missing rocket parts that could launch the TWA Moonliner rocket that stands outside of the Carousel of Progress.
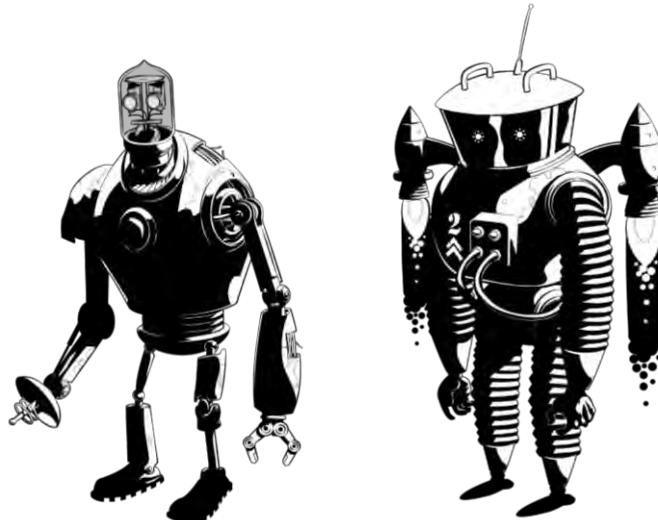
Figures 10-11. *Herbert and Astrobot*

Each robot sends the player on quests to learn about the innovative attractions that once were the focus of Tomorrowland and rewards them with missing pieces of a rocket. Finally, the player encounters Astrobot at the base of the TWA Moonliner, who uses the parts collected by the player to repair the rocket.
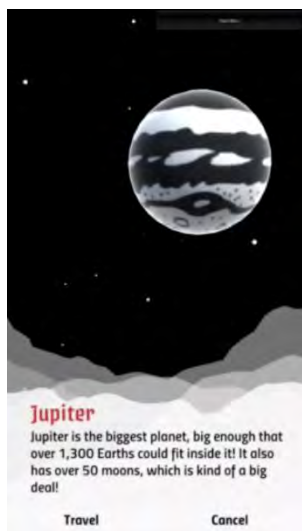
Figure 12. *Star Map Mini-Game*
https://youtu.be/onc-nK0lC1M

"I used to dream of the cosmos, but my dreams have gotten hazy. Now, everyone in Tomorrowland thinks less about real space and more about space fiction. Could you help me ride out this flight?" Astrobot asks the player.

The player is suddenly transported to space, where they navigate a course around the solar system, learning about the various planets along the way. Eventually, the journey takes them to other systems, and finally, galaxies. "You're amazing!" exclaims Astrobot as they return from their journey. "Look at all of these things we discovered! Isn't exploration a kick? Can you think of other places that mankind has yet to explore?"

With the spirit of creativity restored to Tomorrowland, the robots have the confidence to resist Dead Red's vicious rule and regain control of the land.

Tomorrowland themes

In the research phase, the primary observation of Tomorrowland made by the students was the contradiction between the intentions behind the land and the current realization of those intentions in the park. Displayed below the sign for Tomorrowland is an excerpt from a speech given at the park's opening on July 17, 1955.

> A vista into a world of wondrous ideas, signifying man's achievements…a step into the future, with predictions of constructive things to come. Tomorrow offers new frontiers in science, adventure and ideals: the Atomic Age, the challenge of outer space, and the hope for a peaceful and unified world. ("Tomorrowland," 2019)

This quote creates a vision of Tomorrowland filled with attractions that make use of emerging technologies, represent human innovations in science, and envision a future in which society uses these achievements to create a better world. And yet, as the students observed, while the land once featured attractions like the People Mover – a prototype for the public transportation of the future – and the Carousel of Progress – a stage show using audio-animatronic figures to illustrate various technological inventions throughout the twentieth century – it now fails to represent the same creative innovation described in Walt's dedication speech. Broken-down attractions have gone into disuse, and the theme of the land has shifted from space exploration and scientific discovery to science fiction and fantasy franchises like Buzz Lightyear and Star Wars.

Observing the disconnect between the intentions behind the land and the realization of those intentions in today's park, the development team set out to help the player identify and question this contradiction. Recognizing that the land was becoming less about "sailing to an attainable future" and more about the escapism and consumerism represented by the sci-fi properties that currently populate the land, Lafitte and his pirates decide to call the place Todayland, ridding the robots of their impulse to create and innovate and halting any progress within the park. Lafitte's Todayland echoes a critique of Disneyland's version of the future voiced by Wasko (2001):

> Most of the theme park analysts suggest that the future seems mainly to reflect the past, or Disney's version of the past, and thus celebrates a reification of existing social relations and the status quo, *or, in other words, the present.* (p. 175, emphasis added)

Lafitte's takeover and makeover of Disneyland uses the exaggeration of characteristics within the actual park in order to heighten the player's awareness of the potentially problematic elements within the stories told by Disney. This strategy is consistent with the approach to critical inquiry discussed by Wallin (2016). Remarking how impervious Disney is to traditional methods of critical analysis, Wallin suggests an alternative approach that "entail[s] a spiraling up of

Disney's logic rather than an adherence to conventional forms of deep reading and interpretation" (p. 146). Wallin theorizes, and *Dark Ride: Disneyland* attempts to practically realize, that through extending and exaggerating the logic employed in the park, we might be able to most effectively deconstruct Disneyland.

Frontierland

In Frontierland, the player learns that Lafitte's henchman, Paymaster, has captured the old mine and enslaved the characters within the land as laborers. Greeting the player, Paymaster says "Welcome to Goldenland, buccaneer! Here ye can leave yer past behind and have a wild west time. Enjoy yerself."

Responding to the miners' plea for help, the player finds an aged Davy Crockett on the banks of the Rivers of America. The legendary figure enlists the player to help him seek out some of the lost references to history in Frontierland and find some historical figures that may be willing to join them in one last siege against the pirates.

Figure 13. *Welcome to Goldenland*
https://youtu.be/cvKWuy22L5g

With map and spyglass, the player ventures across Frontierland, encountering characters like folk hero John Henry, who helps the player discover the presence tall tales once had in the park, and former park manager Joe Fowler, who directs the player's attention to the park's history itself.

Figures 14-15. *Davy Crockett and Sacagawea*

Finally, the player encounters an elusive figure, disguised in pirate garb. From the shadows, someone cautiously calls to the player.

"I am Sacagawea of the Shoshone tribe. I am hiding because Paymaster took out all of the Native American things here in Goldenland."

Sacagawea agrees to join Davy's effort, if the player can help her recover some of the last Native American artifacts in the land. Following clues from Sacagawea, the player locates each of the items and correctly matches them using a puzzle game. When the player has discovered each of the artifacts, and learned a bit about Native American culture in the process, Sacagawea joins Davy to run Paymaster and the pirates out of Frontierland.

Frontierland themes

During the research stage of the project, the team observed that while Frontierland effectively realizes the intention voiced by Walt: "Frontierland is a tribute to the faith, courage and ingenuity of the pioneers who blazed the trails across America" – the story it tells is a limited interpretation of frontier history ("Frontierland", 2019). Notably absent is the presence that people of color – specifically Native Americans and African Americans – had in the Old West and American South portrayed in the land. Frontierland invokes a romanticized feeling of the frontier, while avoiding references to specific historical events or figures. Where characters from history do appear – in Davy Crockett's Explorer Canoes, and the Mark Twain steamship – they are most often

white men. This whitewashing[12] of history is problematic because it represents a very narrow and romanticized interpretation of frontier America. The factual and folkloric heroism of these frontiersmen eclipses any mention of their mistakes and mistreatment of people of Native American and African descent.

Perhaps equally important, and egregious, is how this particular version of history plays out for park visitors who do not – or do not choose to – identify with the cowboys and riverboat captains. While the land celebrates values often associated with frontier America – individuality, freedom and exploration – Frontierland's options are quite limited. Marin (1977) writes of this contradiction:

> The visitor has learned the codes of the language of Disneyland and has thus been given the possibilities to tell his individual story. Yet, this freedom, the freedom of his parole (his tour) is constrained not only by these codes but also by the representation of an imaginary history. This imaginary history is contained in a stereotyped system of representations. In order to utter his own story, the visitor is forced to borrow these representations. He is manipulated by the system, even when he seems to freely choose his tour. (p. 59)

If park visitors choose to explore the Old West represented in Frontierland, they are obligated not only to navigate a very limited representation of the land's history, but also to inhabit a very particular role in their journey.
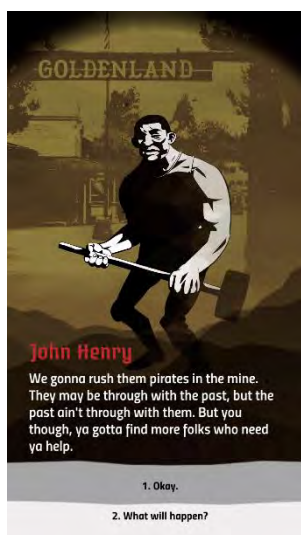

Figure 16. *Goldenland Finale*
https://youtu.be/urHc0YNDS3M

In developing the game, the team chose to represent this tension in Frontierland by making Lafitte the most ruthless colonist and conqueror. In order to collect more booty, the pirates have enslaved the characters that populate the land and covered up pieces of "distracting history" – mirroring the oppression of Native and African American peoples and the marginalization of their perspectives within accounts of history.

The gameplay in Frontierland encourages the player to reclaim the pieces of history that have been left behind and reassemble the multicultural community that existed in the American frontier. With the Native American artifacts recovered, and a band of heroes and heroines, of all colors, the player is able to challenge the oppressive forces within the land.

Adventureland

Upon entering Adventureland, the player encounters Gustav, who introduces them to Weird Stuff Land – "It's a place to gawk at weird stuff from who cares where.
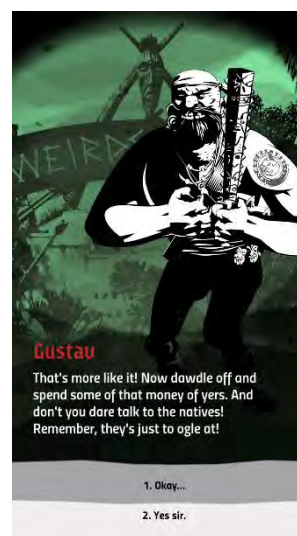

Figure 17. *Weird Stuff Land*
https://youtu.be/PLRqwC8yWzE

Laffite liked that so much, he plundered things from all over the world!" With the help of Baudrillard, the player explores the land meeting characters and encountering artifacts from different lands and cultures.

Among these characters is Hakim the genie. Hakim fills the player in on Lafitte's efforts to profit off of foreign cultures, mixing artifacts from different places and times into a hodge-podge collection of "weird

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[12] Tom Sawyer pun!

stuff." "Now no one can tell what's real, what's fake, and what's just thrown in. It's a cultural nightmare," Hakim laments. "Without a foundational knowledge of our culture, we have no voice, no identity. Our cultures have become a costume that we wear for visitor.

Led by Hakim and Jade the elephant, the player follows clues to locate artifacts and images from various cultures and correctly matches them using a puzzle game.

Figures 18-19. *Hakim and Jade*

After learning about some of the actual cultures represented in the land, the player encounters Louisa, another double-crossing pirate who assists the player in learning some of the facts and fiction behind Captain Lafitte himself.

With the help of the player, the characters in Adventureland recover their cultural identities and free themselves from Gustav's control. The player is finally able to confront Lafitte at his stronghold in Fantasyland.

Adventureland themes

During the research phase of the project, the team was especially puzzled by the stated objective of Adventureland. Walt's dedication speech reads:

Here is adventure. Here is romance. Here is mystery. Tropical rivers – silently flowing into the unknown. The unbelievable splendor of exotic flowers…the eerie sound of the jungle…with eyes that are always watching. This is Adventureland. ("Adventureland,", 2019)

While in the other lands, there is some acknowledgment of the role of the attractions in teaching park visitors about the technologies of the future or the historical events of the past, the Adventureland seems nothing more than a collection of exoticized and exaggerated representations of non-Western cultures from around the world. The Jungle Cruise follows a tour of rivers from Southeast Asia to Northern Africa to South America. The bazaar on the

Figure 20. *Jade Matching Game*
https://youtu.be/Kq0Tx5wApCk

central thoroughfare of the land features items from the South Pacific and the Middle East. And mixed among the mess of references to actual cultures, are representations of fictional cultures and languages – the best example being the Temple of Mara featured in the Indiana Jones Adventure.

In developing the game, the team observed that – especially given the fact that Disneyland has become a vacation destination for visitors from all over the globe – there was a tension between Walt's intentions behind the land and how park visitors (some from the very cultures represented) might interpret his "romantic" and "mysterious" vision. Thus, the team developed the story and gameplay in the land to acknowledge this contradiction and allow the player some opportunities to verify and re-contextualize the "weird stuff" scattered throughout the land.

The gameplay in Adventureland – and throughout the game – acknowledges that while many visitors may enjoy the creativity demonstrated in the park's design and the escapism that their Disneyland experience provides them, they are not wholly unaware of the contradictory nature of the reality presented to them and they often critically and creatively interpret the stories told by Disney. Giroux and Pollock (1999) write:

Of course, there are no passive dupes in this script. Disney's texts are neither static nor universal, and some even present opportunities for oppositional readings. For some cultural theorists, the strength of Disney's texts lies in their potential to tap into viewers' desires and in the multiple readings they provide for diverse audiences, although most researchers find it necessary, as we do, to carefully balance the discussion of the affirmative elements in Disney culture with acknowledgment of its problems. (p. 10)

As Giroux and Pollock indicate, those contradictions within Disney's magic kingdom provide the cracks through which critical readers are able to run and radically reinterpret the park.

Fantasyland finale

Having helped the characters in each of the three other lands rise up against their pirate oppressors, the player ventures to Fantasyland. With the help of characters like Harold the yeti, Terra the fairy godmother and Sir Bedivere the knight, the player finally confronts Captain Lafitte, shooting his flying ship down from the sky and engaging him in a duel with Excalibur itself.

Figures 21-22. *Harold and Terra*

Having defeated the Captain in the duel, the player frees the park from Lafitte's control. Lafitte cries out in anguish, "But me dream, the way the park should be... the way Walt would have wanted it! There is so much potential, so much to be done..."

"I know, but that's not up to you alone," responds Baudrillard. "You have your place in Disneyland, as does this young rascal. Even I was wrong sometimes!

They might've taught me a thing or two about Disneyland along the way."

At that, Lafitte is transported back to his home inside the historic anchor that bears his name outside New Orleans Square, and the player and the characters bid each other farewell.

Figure 23. *Lafitte's Defeat*
https://youtu.be/Sey3VGaqofw

Game mechanics

In order to position the player as the hero who will save Disneyland from Lafitte's control, restore the spirit of learning, exploration, and imagination to the park, and ultimately see Disneyland with a new perspective, the development team carefully constructed game mechanics including dialogue interactions, fetch-quests and mini-games.

Dialogue Interactions. The characters' dialogue makes a particular effort to both inform the player and invite them to reflect on their own experiences and interpretations of the park. For example, in the player's conversation with the robot Goodyear, the player learns that John Hench, the Imagineer responsible for much of the land's original design, envisioned Tomorrowland to be a place where guests would marvel at and be inspired by the energy of the many moving attractions. Goodyear shares that the People Mover attraction once ran on the now-abandoned tracks that stand above Tomorrowland's walkways and goes on to explain that when the attraction was updated to become the Rocket Rods, the system had difficulty managing the quick stops and starts of the thrill ride and was shut down. This little history lesson helps the player recognize the contradictions within the land, and sets the stage for the gameplay that follows. Perhaps even more significant than the information that the characters provide are the invitations they extend to the player. For example, after the player helps Goodyear locate the lost People Mover car, he is inspired to get to work. "Can you think of other things in the park that could be updated?" he asks the player. And later, when the player returns from their

space voyage, Astrobot asks for suggestions on his next adventure: "Can you think of other places that mankind has yet to explore?" In each of these cases, these open-ended questions invite the player to reflect on their experience and – in the spirit of Tomorrowland – use their own intelligence and imagination. This concept is effectively summarized by Astrobot who, when asked by the player where the rocket will take them, responds, "Sometimes it's not about where you're headed, just that you're going! If your mission inspires someone else to make progress, well, then that's just as good! Let's make something happen!" This bit of dialogue emphasizes that it is through effort, experimentation and exploration that any progress is made. It is not so important that the player has the correct answer, just that they are always questioning.

Fetch-Quests. The fetch-quests in the game further emphasize these themes of exploration and observation. For example, in Frontierland, the player is led by Joe Fowler on a scavenger hunt to find various historical items along the banks of the Rivers of America. While the player is provided with some clues as to where they might locate these artifacts – from Lafitte's anchor to the Mark Twain paddle boat – they are invited to explore and carefully observe the land, maybe even ask questions of the park employees or other visitors to find the objects of their quest. Most importantly, the fetch-quests are designed to provide the player with opportunities to see Disneyland through a new perspective, reflecting on the significance of the stories – and the implications of the representations – told in the park. For example, on the shore where the Mark Twain paddle boat docks, Joe Fowler invites the player to consider the way creators like Walt Disney and Mark Twain represent reality in the stories they tell. "Walt and Twain were men of the same mind. Shaping history and culture through a combination of fact and fun, science and story," observes Joe. "Is Lafitte up to anything different?" The quests and conversation are designed to prompt the player to consider how creative works – from novels to animated films to theme parks – construct particular visions that influence the public's perception of reality.

Mini-Games. Lastly, the development team deliberately designed mini-games in each of the lands in order to help the player identify and critically engage with the themes in each land. For example, in both Adventureland and Frontierland, the game uses an image-matching game to encourage the player to seek out artifacts from Native American and other cultures

within the park, correctly match them using a puzzle mechanic, and learn something about these items and the cultures they come from. In these games, the player is not only provided information about the cultures represented (or misrepresented) in the park, but encouraged to consider the use of these items in the design of Disneyland and implications of their representation. The mini-game allows the player to re-contextualize these artifacts, understanding their significance in the stories Disney is telling. And in Tomorrowland, the player journeys through a virtual universe, charting a course between the planets, star systems and galaxies. The freedom provided the player here – not simply to tag along with C3PO and R2D2 on their tours through the stars, but to go on their own voyage – is consistent with the vision of Tomorrowland as a place where discovery is celebrated and encouraged.

Returning to Wallin (2016), the mini-games provide a practical realization to his theory of deconstructing Disney. He writes that as we "accelerate those tendencies already at work within Disney's synthetic universe…we might be flung from its orbit and into the void beyond, where we might once look ahead divested of remedies for the trouble of living" (p. 146). Through the exaggeration of certain characteristics within the park – the de-contextualization of historical or cultural artifacts, or in this case, the lack of innovation represented in Tomorrowland's world of tomorrow – the game encourages the player to recognize the limitations of the land's representations of scientific discovery and human progress and, hopefully, to use their own "creativity drives" to envision a more "peaceful and unified world."

Findings and discussion

Near the conclusion of the development process, the team completed a survey in which we each shared the challenges we faced and the things we learned from our experience working on *Dark Ride: Disneyland*. The following findings are the result of those responses as well as the discussions that followed, organized around the game's two objectives as identified earlier: critical analysis and creative production.

Critical thinking

"I thought I knew Disney park history before - but man, I've researched the hell out of this project." – student team member

"I also learned how to critically look at theme parks and other forms of art as well as creating art based on a thematic idea -- lots of Aha! moments in this class." – student team member

Among the successes of the project was the opportunity it provided the development team to critically engage with Disneyland. One example of this success is the use of Baudrillard and the spyglass as plot device and game mechanic. Early in the development process, the team determined that in order for the player to be successful in their own critical navigation of the park, they would need a guide. And that guide came in the form of a battle-scarred parrot whom the team dubbed Baudrillard, after the famous French philosopher. Baudrillard's character played the role of educator, equipping the player with a critical lens and directing the player's attention to certain elements within the park. In the context of the game's narrative, this "lens" is quite literal – Baudrillard provides the player with a spyglass through which they are able to see the changes being made by Lafitte to the park. This spyglass mechanic – and its use of augmented reality and geo-location technologies – functions as a metaphor for the critical perspective through which the player is encouraged to see Disneyland. And this view of the park gives the player a glimpse into the game's depiction of the potentially problematic aspects of Disneyland.

A challenge we faced during the development of the game was the pedagogy we wanted to employ in the game. When we visited Disneyland to research and conceptualize the game, our conversations included both expressions of appreciation of the careful design in the park and discomfort with some of the park's problematic elements. And during the development of the game, we had frequent discussions about the balance of entertainment and education in the game. One student writes of this challenge, "I struggled with what was the end goal of the game a lot, guessing if it was supposed to be more fun, more exploratory, more educational, or more open." The challenge the development team faced achieving a balance of providing the player with an enjoyable experience that still challenged them to critically examine the park without being too heavy-handed is common to "serious games." Flanagan (2009) writes:

> Whatever their message, serious games are among the most challenging games to design. These play spaces must retain all the elements that make a game enjoyable while effectively communicating their message. Either component can be lost in the attempt to manifest the other, resulting in a game that is dull

and didactic, or entertaining but hollow. In the worst case, the results are both dull and hollow. (p. 249)

Ultimately, the team attempted to integrate these critical and celebratory perspectives and provide both educational and entertaining experiences for the player. Flanagan's model for "designing for critical play" was influential to our process, as was the work of self-identified "aca-fans" like Jenkins (2006, 2013), who argue that such engagement with popular culture benefit from "the acknowledgment of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study" (Jenkins, 2013, p. xiii). With this perspective in mind, the team conceived the story, wrote dialogue, crafted characters, designed fetch-quests and mini-games that would acknowledge the elements of the park that we felt merit some attention, that deserve further scrutiny, and then invited the player to play with these elements, make their own meanings, and reflect on their experience with, and interpretation of, those elements.

However, as scholars and practitioners of this type of critical pedagogy can attest to, there is a delicate balance between advocating for a particular ideological interpretation and equipping students with analytical frameworks and encouraging them to critically engage with a text.[13] Ultimately, the game requires the player to confront Lafitte – who is representative of the elements of the park that the team (and the game) identifies as potentially problematic. So, even if the player comes to different conclusions about, for example, Disney's representations of history or culture, than those suggested in the gameplay, in order to "win" the game, they are still obligated to defeat Lafitte and contest the messages being communicated in the park. Thus, the structure of the game potentially inhibits the player from possible readings of the park. There is, then, the possibility that the experience that *Dark Ride: Disneyland* provides the player is subject to the same critique that Marin makes of the park itself: "…the possible tours in Disneyland are absolutely constrained by the codes which the visitors are given" (p. 59).

A final limitation of the project was the team's relative lack of experience and limited perspectives. As discussed above, *Dark Ride: Disneyland* is interested in prompting the player to consider how the stories told in the park might be understood from different perspectives. While the team made great efforts to "read

against the grain" and consider how, for example, people from the cultures represented in Adventureland might experience the stories told about their own cultures, our perspectives were necessarily limited. A limited amount of diversity on our development team created an obstacle for us to be able to achieve this objective – all five faculty and professionals on the project were White men; the students consisted of roughly 12% females and 88% males, 12% Latinx and 88% White. During the development process, we were very aware of this limitation and worked to compensate as best we could for the lack of diversity on our team.

However, some experiences highlighted how the lack of representation on the project created some blind-spots during the development of the game. For example, when presenting an early version of the game at NAMLE's 2017 conference, we demonstrated the scene in which Hakim the genie asks for the player's help to locate the missing cultural artifacts in Adventureland. At the time, however, Hakim's character was called Jinn – a name the team chose because of its use to describe genies and other magical beings within Middle Eastern mythology. Among those present at the conference was a student of Middle Eastern descent who approached us afterwards and shared that while Jinn might be a culturally accurate name for the genie, it had a particularly negative connotation within her specific religious and cultural tradition, to the extent that players that shared her background would likely be offended by the use of the name in the game. It was a valuable learning experience for the student-presenter – who was the lead writer in Adventureland and responsible for researching and selecting Jinn as the character's name – to have this conversation and experience firsthand a contradiction between the intention behind, and audience interpretation of her work. And the experience illustrated the importance of reflection as part of the development of "critical games" advocated by Flanagan (2009):

Globalization and its effects may produce or reinscribe problematic ideologies into technological artifacts such as computer games. Given these conditions, along with the fact that any creative act is complex and usually generates unintended consequences, the game creation process must mature to allow constant review and much more "reflection." (p. 254)

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[13] See Campbell (2005); Freire (1970); Giroux (2001, 2003); Giroux & Simon (1988); Hobbs (1998); Kellner & Share (2005); Sholle (1994).

Experiences like these, in which students were encouraged to reflect on their work and evaluate how their research and analytical skills were being employed in their development of the game, were valuable learning experiences for the development team.

Creative production

"I also learned that there is a lot of communication and planning between different disciplines to make a really cool app/game. I also learned that by working with different "types" of people (different disciplines), new/fun/creative ideas are developed in ways that you wouldn't have originally considered." – student team member

> "It's been a unique experience to work together with so many different fields, plus being mentored by people who are at the top of their field educationally to help us create something better than the sum of its parts. It's made me want to work in video games – which was something I hadn't considered before." – student team member

When asked to share the most valuable parts of developing the game, the team most commonly commented on the opportunity that the project provided us to collaborate on a creative project across disciplinary boundaries. As mentioned earlier, the project brought together students, faculty and professionals from a variety of fields. And while team members worked in their disciplines – as writers, designers and engineers – much of our work required us to cross these boundaries and communicate with team members with different skill sets and backgrounds. This is not to say that this interdisciplinary collaboration was seamless; team members also commonly commented on the difficulty of effectively communicating across disciplines. However, many students acknowledged that this experience prepared them to participate in the production processes within the media industries that require this type of collaboration. And perhaps most importantly, this type of cross-disciplinary communication required team members to be more deliberate in, and reflective of, the creative decisions we made.

Next, reflecting on the development process, the entire team agreed on the tremendous difficulties that they encountered making the game. Bogost (2012) remarks (and the team agrees), "Making things is hard.

Whether it's a cabinet, a software program, or a motorcycle, simply getting something to work at the most basic level is nearly impossible" (p. 90). In their reflections on the experience, students commonly commented on the challenge of learning new skill sets and software, working with a team of mostly-amateurs with varying work styles and ethics, and developing ideas for the game only to have them fail or get cut due to time and budget constraints. But in the same breath, many team members commented that these challenges provided valuable learning experiences. One student team member shared, "Through this project I was able to see the benefits and frustrations of the iterative process of creation and the pressures of a tight production schedule." And another offered:

> I also learned that there is a lot of communication and planning between different disciplines to make a really cool app/game. I also learned that by working with different "types" of people (different disciplines), new/fun/creative ideas are developed in ways that you wouldn't have originally considered. I also learned that there was a lot more to management than I thought. Lots of communication is necessary in order for deadlines to be met. I also learned that in order to meet deadlines, some of the original cool ideas need to be let go. And even though it was hard and extremely disappointing, it was necessary.

In each of these responses, the students identify the challenges and constraints we faced in developing the project while also acknowledging the learning experiences that came as we confronted those challenges and worked within those constraints.

Another common response to the project was the opportunity that it provided students to integrate theory and practice. They remarked that – consistent with critiques of media arts education[14] – much of their educational experiences working on creative projects focused on developing a familiarity with the conventions of a particular form and the technical skills required to effectively execute their ideas, but did not often emphasize the application of historical or theoretical concepts. Starting the development of the game with an educational objective, instead of a narrative premise or a visual aesthetic, for example, encouraged students to make creative decisions with this end in mind.

Though, again this is not to say that this unity of theory and practice was achieved seamlessly or consistently throughout the game. For example, while the story and gameplay in each of the "lands" are

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[14] See Kellner & Share (2005).

oriented around a clearly communicated contradiction, the final stage of the game consists, in large part, of shooting Lafitte's pirate ship out of the sky and defeating him in a duel. While the gameplay are clearly less in line with the game's educational objectives, the team justified their inclusion because they are a fun way to end the game. Their inclusion might provide the balance between education and entertainment in the game in its entirety, and the learning experiences the player has in each of the "lands" are ultimately what empowers her to defeat Lafitte in battle. Even given these arguments, it is unclear whether the team was ultimately effective at creating an experience that is both enjoyable and educative, providing players with a new Disneyland experience by prompting them to look at the park in new ways.

Conclusion

While this article demonstrates how *Dark Ride: Disneyland* attempts to provide a unique experience for both the development team and the park-going public to practice critical thinking and creativity, it is only the beginning of the conversation. First, while the article details how the game's development functioned as an educational experience for the students, faculty, and professionals involved, further research needs to be conducted on the public's experience playing the game. The feedback on their experience playing the game and analyzing the park will not only determine whether the game is effective in achieving its educational objectives but also in contributing to an understanding of the strengths and limitations of using games to promote media literacy.

Next, while the project's use of a mobile game to promote more critical engagement with Disneyland attempts to address some of the limitations of common approaches to media literacy education, *Dark Ride: Disneyland* clearly has limitations of its own. The most obvious limitation is that while it may extend the reach of media literacy initiatives beyond the classroom, the game is only accessible to visitors to Disneyland who own an iPhone. In this way, the game caters to those who can afford such luxuries as a Disney vacation and a smartphone, a bias that contradicts the media literacy movement's ethic of democratic education. If, in the future, games are to be used to further media literacy education's sphere of influence, their development should be informed by these issues of accessibility.

Lastly, while this article has hoped to emphasize the benefits of deconstructing Disneyland, in order for the game to have an impact on broader efforts to educate the public to more critically engage with media culture, we must be able to derive from this experience concepts, methods, and conclusions that are applicable in other contexts. Hopefully, *Dark Ride: Disneyland* might somehow help us find new ways to critically engage with media culture in general. And to return to the Bogost (2016) quote at the beginning of the article, hopefully the game is a step towards our understanding of "fun and games" not just as the spoonful of sugar that provides an escape from our world, but as a means of developing "an ever deeper and more committed engagement with it" (p. 81).

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