Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Analysis– Entertainment

Leveraging Dimensions of Specialized Knowledge in the Theme Park Industry: An Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

Carissa Baker, Ph.D.
University of Central Florida

Carissa Baker is an Assistant Professor of Theme Park and Attraction Management at the University of Central Florida (UCF). She attained her Ph.D. in Texts and Technology from UCF; her BA and MA degrees were in literature. Her interdisciplinary scholarship focuses on aspects of the themed entertainment industry, especially narrative, history, technology, and guest experience. Questions and comments can be directed to carissa.baker@ucf.edu.

Abstract

This analysis addresses the value of utilizing multiple knowledge domains when trying to grasp a subject. In this case, the discourses of academia, industry, and fandom can inform one another and prove beneficial to understanding a complex entity like a theme park. The analysis suggests breaking out of silos, embracing interdisciplinarity, and engaging in informal and formal relationships between stakeholders with different perspectives.

Keywords: Knowledge Domains; Theme Parks; Interdisciplinarity; Academic-Industry Partnerships; Fandom; Collaboration

Issue at Hand

When I began doing serious research on theme parks over a decade ago, I quickly realized the limited perspective in several areas of inquiry. A lot of stakeholders, whether academics, industry professionals, or fans, did not tend to share knowledge, with even academics of different fields reluctant to observe other disciplinary perspectives. Though each group has a kind of specialized knowledge, gained through combinations of study and experience, they are not as likely to collaborate and share these domains of knowledge.

This article will examine the problem and suggest that stakeholders in a particular area (the analysis reflects on theme parks, but the same issue is present with video games, film, or other entertainment genres) should explore various knowledge domains and draw on those for additional insight. It proposes ways in which several of the stakeholders could benefit each other and argues that the inherent interdisciplinarity of theme parks themselves should mean that their study is equally multifaceted.

Findings and Analysis

Theme parks are fascinating and complex texts, symbolic works or compositions (literary, musical, or otherwise) to be interpreted. They are forms of art, operate within businesses, utilize advanced engineering to construct rides, and impact cultures around the world. Multiple stakeholders commonly visit and scrutinize theme parks (see Figure 1); these include professionals, scholars, fans, guests, and external observers.

Professionals comprise those who work in the industry whether in creative, operational, corporate, or other roles. *Scholars* include those who have research as a primary role; they tend to teach for colleges or universities, but they may be independent or work in government or corporate settings. *Fans* consist of those who self-identify as enthusiasts of a particular element of the industry (theme parks, amusement parks, Disney, Universal, roller coasters, etc.) and may organize themselves in groups with similar interests. *Guests*, the intended market of a park, may consider their experiences and elements of the theme park in public forums, but they tend to have no specialized knowledge unless crossing over into fandom. However, guests may gather knowledge from sources such as travel books, blogs, forums,

social media, and the press. *External observers* who consider theme parks include the press, scholars who do not directly work in theme parks but may discuss them (e.g., economists), and business consultants.

Figure 1

Stakeholders in the interpretation of theme parks
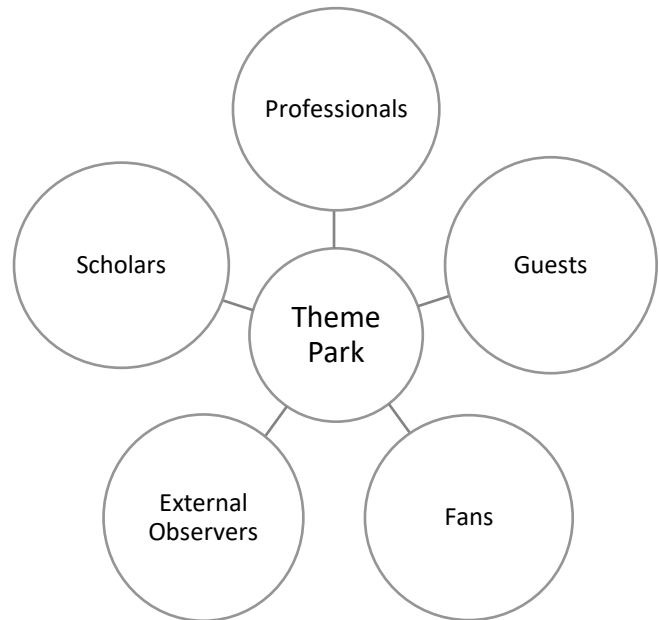
Professionals, scholars, and fans all possess specialized knowledge (see Figure 2), and all contribute to the discussion of the theme park through public or private discourse communities. Overlaps of these knowledge domains contribute to greater understanding of the object of interpretation. Unfortunately, it is rather standard for these communities not to overlap in meaningful ways and to be distrustful of each other.

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Figure 2

Knowledge domains of frequent contributors of theme park knowledge
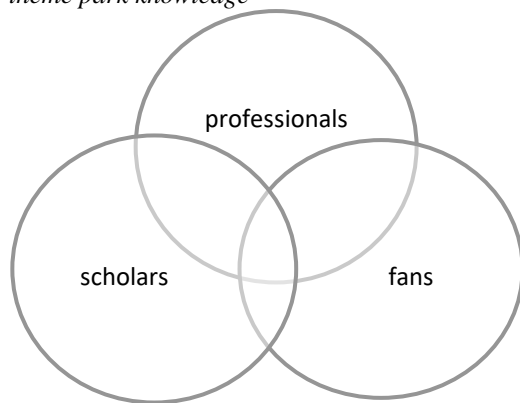
The group in professional roles (designers, engineers, managers, etc.) tends to come from an apprenticeship or formal education background and have specialty knowledge in addition to a community of practice. Frontline employees will usually have training but less education in the area yet still have some specialized knowledge such as operational procedures and how to meet performance metrics. Professionals have the longest standing and began serious discussions of theme parks from a variety of angles beginning in the 1950s. Earlier pieces include Platt (1955) discussing the advent of theme park economics and the design theories of Hench as found in Haas (1978). Informal discourses happen with professionals around water coolers or on social media, with formal conversations occurring in myriad workshops and industry conventions (the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions [IAAPA] annual Expo, the Themed Entertainment Association's [TEA] SATE conference, etc.). Formal written discourses from professionals are available for popular audiences (e.g., Hench, 2009; Sklar, 2015), industry audiences (e.g., Usle, 2020; Younger, 2016), or for those with a more academic bent (e.g., Marling, 1998; Rohde, 2007).

Scholars have formal education, routinized methodologies (using the scientific method, textual analysis, etc.), and disciplinary communities of practice. Generally, art forms and business genres become more enshrined and accepted when academics study them and apply formalized theories to them. The academic study of parks was done in earnest by the 1970s and 80s and continues now. There is literature surrounding theme parks developed in anthropology (Moore, 1980; Lukas, 2008, 2012), sociology (Baudrillard, 1995; Bryman,

1995), cultural studies (Fjellman, 1992; King, 2002), arts (Kokai & Robson, 2019; Young & Riley, 2006), humanities (Jackson & West, 2010; Knight, 2014), tourism and management (Clavé, 2007; Milman, 2008, 2013), and science (dozens of publications out of Disney Research). There are formal curricula now at several colleges and universities in design, engineering, or management. While some of the earlier work in cultural or Disney studies areas tended towards the negative (with Marcus [1998] commenting that the "real literature remains to be written"), there has been a wave of more balanced scholarship focused on multiple facets of theme parks (p. 207). What remains rare is meaningful interdisciplinary work, with many scholars choosing to stay within their own disciplinary communities.

Fans utilize knowledge developed from informal educational sources and develop communities of practice. Theme park fandom has existed for decades, and the Internet crystalized fan movements by uniting people with similar interests around the world and allowing for production and sharing (fan art, attire, videos, trip reports, reviews, interpretation and critique, ride tributes, etc.). Fan spaces are less rigorous than professional disciplines and academic pursuits and have a lower barrier to entry. Nonetheless, some scholars (Gee, 2018; Jenkins, 2004) have found that informal educational environments and affinity spaces like fan communities provide significant ways to learn things about a subject of scrutiny like a theme park. Those who partake become more literate viewers of media and learn to be perceptive and engaged visitors. Fans may become "forensic fans" (Mittell, 2013), fans who "dig deeper" into stories presented in media worlds, and either take advantage of more layers of the space than average guests or even help to co-create these spaces. Books from publishers such as Theme Park Press or Disney Editions often cater to fans. While earlier works tended to pathologize frequent park visitors (e.g. Eco, 1986; Wasko, 2001), scholars, especially in the fan studies area, are now looking at the multi-faceted nature of these communities (Williams, 2020; works in *Transformative Works and Culture* like Baker, 2016, and Godwin, 2017).

The main idea of this analysis is that each of these groups can offer the others insight, but there remains conflict. While all groups might share a desire of understanding the theme park, interests might be at odds, as they interpret offerings differently or even seek to control the narrative of a park or attraction. There are distinct pursuits in understanding for the purposes of research, creating and managing spaces

for guests, or enjoyment and emotional connection. There has been a traditional tension between professionals and academics because of contrasting perceptions of the park and disparate sources of knowledge. As Walt Disney said, "we just make a picture and then you professors come along and tell us what we do" ("Art," 1942). Another quote explained his films were for entertainment but professors explained "what they mean," something that continues today (as cited in Apgar, 2015). Academics are more likely to want to interrogate the negative aspects of a theme park (its ties to societal consumption tendencies, for instance). A professional is more likely to have hands-on experience in park development that makes a scholar's theoretical approaches seem out of touch but may have a less global view of the industry if ensconced in a particular company's values and projects.

Fans, who have the most experience visiting parks, tend to be disparaged by both professionals and academics, something Duffet (2013) calls the "pathological tradition." Fandom remains a "pathologized and stereotyped identity" (Booth & Bennett, 2016) with their practices being seen as "excessive or trivial" (Jenkins, 2012). There is no doubt that certain types of specialized knowledge are privileged. In this case, academics and professionals maintain status through formal gatherings or publications. While fans maintain status to each other with social media engagement, their work may be discounted amongst other stakeholders. Formal education and even particular academic disciplines also continue to be preferenced as affording authority and status.

Despite these challenges, there are reasons to share more. There are valuable assets that each form of specialized knowledge can provide. Academic theories can be foundations for design or management, and practitioner knowledge can help refine those theories. Through their tributes and critiques, fans offer insight into what makes particular attractions meaningful, and they represent a community of practice that operates within and about theme parks. They represent another form of creation and labor, one that is often unpaid.

Another reason for sharing is that the lines are already blurred. There are many who overlap in their identities. There is now a recognized identity called an "aca-fan" or "scholar-fan," who may engage in both worlds. Professionals and scholars might have started as fans, professionals can become academics,

and other combinations. There has been an advent of fans in the ranks of both professional and scholar roles, fan-specific offerings at parks, and the academic genre of fan studies, but there is still a large group that does not choose to engage with various facets of knowledge. Through engaging on multiple levels, the subject can be grasped from varied perspectives. My own holistic view of parks is informed by roles of scholar, employee, and fan. West (2013), a professional who is a fan, mentioned his surprise at those working in the industry not being regular attendees at parks and not knowing theme park history or the current global theme park landscape. Learning more about the industry and immersing it in, he argued, can enrich one's work.

Discussion

An Investigative Call to Action

A three-step process is suggested to begin addressing this issue: leaving silos, embracing interdisciplinarity, and engaging with diverse stakeholders informally or formally. These strategies will allow for individuals to deepen their knowledge and have fruitful collaborations.

1. Leaving Silos

One thing that hinders any of these groups is a tendency to inhabit silos. Academia is well known for entrenched disciplinary silos. Professionals and fans have less written on their encampments perhaps, but they exist nonetheless. Silos can be lonely and alienating places. They can create echo chambers, mental stagnation, and a lack of innovation. Specialization allows for more in-depth inquiry but also can lead one to function as a "king or queen of the castle," and this might make someone hesitant to engage with those outside one's own sphere of influence. However, a wealth of knowledge awaits those who venture out of the silo.

2. Embracing Interdisciplinarity

It is hard to leave engrained positions, especially once one has achieved mastery. I had this experience when I moved from years of education and experience in one field to a highly interdisciplinary doctoral program. I had to learn to adapt and be open to new schema, but it permanently changed my perspective and allows me to integrate multiple approaches to solve problems. There are inherent

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challenges to interdisciplinarity. In an academic silo, one will find the comfort of people with similar values, research purposes, epistemologies, and methodologies. Fiore (2012) described attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive issues present in interdisciplinary research. These problems are: disciplinary disdain (lack of respect for another discipline), arrogance (excessive pride in one's own discipline), apprehension (fear of treading unfamiliar ground), ignorance (lack of knowledge of another discipline), myopia (inability to see farther away disciplines), and multilingualism (similar language with different meanings based on discipline). This sounds like a lot to overcome, but interdisciplinary endeavors are often enlightening and inspiring.

A few suggestions for this area include cross-disciplinary conferences with diverse research shared, informative sessions or workshops where others can learn about particular disciplinary practices or values, engaging in research projects where contributions can be made that highlight the strengths of each discipline, and engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Co-teaching a class with faculty from other disciplines is very rewarding and gives great benefit to students. The students were given a richer experience, for instance, when I co-taught a class with a history faculty member and a music faculty member, as the same topic (in this case, *Hamilton: An American Musical*) was broached from multiple angles.

3. Engaging with Diverse Stakeholders

In the theme park industry, some groups may already collaborate. There are academic-industry partnerships that include workshops, internships, and research projects. Fan sites might highlight the work of professionals, professionals may engage with fan forums, academics have professionals visit their classes or present at industry conventions, or professionals might consult with academics on a project. Perhaps the most common way to engage is through the interview. Fan sites have interviewed professionals or academics working on theme park studies, and academics have interviewed fans or professionals for research.

There are several suggestions in this area. For informal collaboration, attend conferences, visit parks together, exchange ideas through writing, or just have good old conversations. For formal engagements, think about guest speaking opportunities, partner on panels at conferences, coordinate formal curriculum, or direct research partnerships. Academics and industry professionals can publish research together

(see Hinterhuber, Pollono, & Shafer, 2018) and entire curricula can be set up with academic-industry partnership in mind (see Pizam, Okumus, & Hutchinson, 2013). Most public and formal discourses are primarily for either academics or industry professionals, so there is still a lot of work to do in terms of academic-industry crossover and collaboration. Groups like the Themed Experience and Attractions Academic Society are making inroads and hint at a more interdisciplinary future within the academic study of theme parks. Similarly, themed entertainment industry publications like *InPark Magazine* or *Blooloop* now print more research from academics.

For the fan perspective, scholars now look at their communities to examine their practices and creative production. It would benefit scholars unfamiliar with fan studies to look into it so that more balanced and nuanced perspectives can be applied. Likewise, several parks have established a dialogue with supportive fans to gather feedback. While guest satisfaction data collection is a basic part of theme park operations, fans are often willing to give more detail and soliciting their views gives them an increased sense of value as stakeholders. Since these fans act as inspirational consumers, influencing others to be interested in a brand, leveraging their specialized knowledge assists companies' goals (Jenkins, 2006).

I have been lucky enough to witness and be a part of some successful collaborations in the themed entertainment industry. Multiple times now, I have worked with Breda University of Applied Sciences and the Efteling theme park, which have a strong relationship. I spoke at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) Expo with a panel that consisted of a theme park creative, a theme park manager, and an academic. Similarly, I was a part of a panel at the University of Florida twice now, with an academic, architect, and operations executive detailing the theme park industry in China. I have presented numerous educational sessions for Slice Creative Network, a freelance attraction designer network. I have consulted on projects because of expertise in narrative, and I often interview theme park professionals in my academic work to understand their creative processes and perspectives. I have written and presented on fan practices and culture, as again it lends to vital conversations. In academia, working with colleagues from other disciplines is rewarding, and using multiple disciplinary perspectives in my work has helped me see subjects in new ways.

A common line from Walt Disney Imagineering is that they employ 140 disciplines to create theme park attractions. If that is true, it seems fundamental to listen to even a couple of other disciplines, perspectives, and types of stakeholders. While many entertainment genres are intricate and multidimensional, the theme park is one of the most interdisciplinary forms in the world. They have high visitation, with over 500 million visitors to the top ten operators in a year (Rubin, 2020), so a need to grasp the guest experience is something all stakeholders would likely agree on. For many reasons, theme parks are compelling subjects of study. The knowledge one can gain is only multiplied by leveraging varied domains of knowledge.

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