

Memorable Magic

A new model heightens interactive and immersive experiences with participation, challenge, and exploration

Well-designed themed entertainment enlightens, inspires, and transforms. Ask the tourists, students, parents, and community members who have explored SCADstory at Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. An immersive 4D journey, SCADstory transports guests through the university's history, encouraging them to dream and create. One city resident remarks, "I didn't have an appreciation of the scope and wonderful history until we took the SCADstory tour." A student writes, "I cried several times when I experienced it, especially when the bus with students showed up. The storytelling and the special effects are impressive." And a parent

observes, "During our time at SCADstory, my son was moved. Thank you for showing in so many ways what dreaming can look like and what hard work can lead to." As guests increasingly expect epiphanic moments from themed entertainment, unique experiences like interactive wand selection in Ollivanders Wand Shop at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Universal Studios Florida or the immersive Rise of the Resistance attraction at Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios demonstrate how increased immersion in themed entertainment spaces results in guest satisfaction and delight.

Themed Entertainment — the merging of production design, immersive reality, classic thrill rides, and narrative content to create fantastical attractions at theme parks and other designed environments.

Many grand examples of innovative and imaginative themed entertainment come from the Middle East. Forbes reports that malls in the region, immensely popular due to blazing outside temperatures, "try to outdo each other in a bid to tempt customers to shop

there rather than at their rivals. This one-upmanship has led to ... an increasingly outlandish array of attractions." The leader in themed entertainment for malls is Dubai-based company Majid Al Futtaim. Their themed entertainment attractions include

Global Snow, which has an indoor ski slope and a surrounding menagerie. Forbes explains, “It is also home to a penguin enclosure, toboggan slides and snowplough bumper cars as well as huge hamster balls and inner tubes which run down the slope. At the foot of it is a faux-Alpine village with charming wooden chalets, a chairlift soaring above and artificial pine trees. ... the temperature inside is an icy 30 degrees so skiers’ breath looks like clouds of smoke. The World Ski Awards have ranked it the world’s best indoor ski resort for the past seven years running.” Mohammed El Etri, vice president of Global Snow, explains that the key to success is “a strong focus on innovation, unrivaled guest experience, and market positioning.” However, he

notes, “The biggest challenge in my job is ensuring that we continue to provide a unique and exciting experience for our guests, while also managing operational costs and staffing levels.”

From Star Wars to ski chalets, themed entertainment venues proliferate across the globe and seek newer forms and ideas, which can be achieved by employing dynamic storytelling, intentional interactive components, and emerging technologies. By integrating these through advanced character interplay, technology, story, immersion, and more, themed entertainment can continue to achieve memorable interactive guest experiences and advance the field.

How themed entertainment stays future-forward

Guests of themed entertainment require more than fun rides and visual delight — they desire full immersion. In 2022, McKinsey released a report on the theme park industry in China, the second largest global market, to understand how theme parks facing intense competition can “differentiate themselves in a crowded field.” They found, in relation to visitor expectations, trends that drive engagement: “New experiences can draw repeat customers ... [and] consumers are increasingly looking for interactive and immersive storytelling experiences.” Such interactivity and immersion can be cultivated through technological and tactile experiences like character actors, physical props, graphics, dynamic kiosks, maps, booklets, video, radio frequency identifiers (RFIDs), AR/VR, and additional gamified experiences and non-linear narrative overlays. As guests thrive in curated environments, the McKinsey report demonstrates that novel immersion techniques must evolve. SCAD alumna Krista Jarrell has developed

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a new model designed to heighten the immersive experience for a range of themed entertainment venues, from cruises to theme parks and more.



Guests delight in the interactive storytelling at SCADstory in Savannah, Georgia.

The research to create this model was informed by Jarrell's professional experience from her role as narrative and interactive designer at Universal Creative; an interview with Jan Martinez, guest experience strategist and business analyst for Visit Orlando; and secondary research on trends, immersive theater, escape rooms, and video games. SCAD themed entertainment design professor Bill Gorgensen explains that Jarrell's work "is an excellent outline of design standards for future themed entertainment projects, especially given the rapid advance of technology and growing demands of the public for more immersive experiences." Her framework was designed to guide themed entertainment creators through future designs to keep guests enthralled and enchanted.

Take Evermore Park in Pleasant Grove, Utah, which Jarrell examined in her secondary research created in 2012, the fantasy-themed, medieval and Victorian-inspired immersive park encourages guests to "Create their own stories and adventures as they explore the park's various themed areas, interact with costumed performers, solve puzzles and riddles, and participate in thrilling story-lines." The park's attractions include knife and axe throwing, a battle arena, an archery range, and a train ride. In September 2023, the Daily Herald out of Provo

reported rumors, spread on Reddit, of Evermore's demise. Carlene Coombs reported that the park had troubles in the past. She explains that Evermore "had come close to bankruptcy that year [2020] with multiple lawsuits at the time from various contractors who worked on constructing the park." Evermore CEO Ken Bretschneider, in a statement to the Daily Herald, said, "Our team has been working hard to deliver Evermore's most amazing season yet." On his Facebook page, Bretschneider wrote of their autumn event, "It's not over yet and [I'm] very excited for what our wonderful creative team has put together this year." Fan responses indicate enthusiasm for Evermore's seasonal "Rippers Cove murder mystery" stating, "The crew was awesome and they do a great job of making you feel immersed." Jarrell acknowledges the park is highly immersive. However, she observes that the park is not "very adaptable or scalable. It would be hard for another park or experience to take their [Evermore's] creation as a base and make it their own." Jarrell's model emphasizes flexibility. It allows any narrative to be placed on top, which can be original or franchise-based, and it allows for adaptation to variable locations and stations (places in the experience where guests stop to interact). Jarrell's model rests on three core pillars developed from her professional experience, observations, and research.

Three pillars form the foundation for immersive innovation

The three pillars of Jarrell's model contain industry-standard elements organized and defined through her experience and research:

1. Participation — *Provides guests with the feeling of realistic immersion and control in the experience.*

Jarrell notes, "Passive experiences have ... been a staple of the themed entertainment industry," and refers to Netflix's "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" as an example of emerging trends in a wide swathe of entertainment industries to implement interactivity. In 2023, Melissa Oviedo, the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) international board president, visited the award-winning Universal Studios in Beijing and blogged about their "awe-inspiring" experiences. She highlights the Jurassic World Adventure there as a prime example of "a new level of immersion" that comes in the form of a full-sized walking "Indominous Rex (that actually chases you!)." With the understanding that many venues cannot accommodate a budget for colossal animatronics, Jarrell turns to immersive theater for the inspiration to inform her model, analyzing the "Sleep No More" theater experience in New York City and Evermore Park in Utah, and by examining murder mystery dinners. From the analysis, Jarrell observes increasing trends in guests desire to participate and interact while emphasizing that, "Each member of the audience chooses to engage in their own way." For example, the utilization of live actors allows guests to achieve their desired comfort levels with interactivity as the actors adapt to varying levels of engagement.

2. Challenge — *Draws guests deeper into the story with goals and engagement in a contest, competition, or task.*

Jarrell observes from her research that "the element

of challenge is a key component" to gamification and analyzed escape rooms and their success in balancing challenges that engage guests without being too hard or too easy. The former Star Wars Galactic Starcruiser attraction in Orlando, Florida, which won a 2023 Thea Award from TEA for Outstanding Achievement in Brand Experience, serves as an example of how activities and challenges keep guests engaged. The immersive multi-day experience allows those "onboard" to learn and operate the starcruiser's systems, participate in secret puzzles and missions, and become fully involved members of the attraction. When considering challenges such as puzzles, Jarrell notes that if a guest does something once, then they can't repeat the experience with the same level of novelty. Her model acknowledges this and course-corrects by continually changing themes, storylines, characters, and puzzles, and offering seasonal overlays.

3. Exploration — *Accommodates spaces designed for guests' multidirectional curiosity to discover and travel to unmapped locations.*

Jarrell draws from the world building in video games to show how an exploratory-based world further encourages guest engagement. She writes, "The creation of extremely immersive lands in themed entertainment has naturally pulled in the ideas that open-world games are based on," defining an open-world game as one that allows players to engage with the game in a non-linear fashion. Jarrell offers Diagon Alley at Universal Studio Florida as an example of how open-world exploration manifests in real life. By applying "player" archetypes to guests, creators can build in appeal by determining guest wants. The

idea of applying archetypes to gamers stemmed from Richard Bartle's research in the psychology of game design. In that discipline, the archetypes are: achiever, explorer, socializer, and killer. Jarrell shares that, in themed entertainment, the archetypes are waders (who don't seek a deep experience), swimmers (who enjoy the story, engage, and learn

unique facts), and divers (who seek designer-level details and backstories of the world). She explains, "the richer the environment, the larger [the] group," and embeds exploratory world-building into her model.

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An intriguing example of success that employs the three pillars is Meow Wolf's "House of Eternal Return" in Santa Fe, New Mexico, an interactive and narrative-driven immersive art installation with a high level of discovery. The storyline unravels as guests progress through the space, an experience that differs depending on where they decide to begin and what direction to pursue. The non-linear narrative of exploration unfolds like a video game, but each guest — if they choose — can eventually learn the secrets and solve the mystery of the house and the

family who once lived in it. Conversely, guests can also experience the space in a nonnarrative capacity, investigating the exhibit for its myriad artworks and curiosities while never attempting to understand or follow the storyline. While Meow Wolf does not offer interplay with character actors, the immersive experience remains refreshingly unique to each guest, providing an individualized environment designed to lead people on their own journeys and challenges.

A flexible model for designers to create immersive interactive experiences

Jarrell formed her new model by combining some of the industry's biggest and most current trends into a unique experience. The model includes:

- A narrative that can come from any existing intellectual property or original material, which requires a beginning, dynamic middle, and end.

Applying new stories or seasonal overlays to encourage guests to return allows novelty without excessive new investments.

- Variable locations and stations (where guests stop to interact). If space is limited, like in the case that a comic book convention employs the model as an up-charge experience for attendees, then the number of stations can be scaled back. The model's user needs to judge the available physical space accordingly and adapt the model to provide the best quality. Jarrell's model employs 16 stations of three types that change clues daily. Six are actor-free stations with tap points that reduce the cost of performers. The rest of the stations are actor-based.

- Judicious application of technologies, depending on users' budgets and desires. The flexible nature allows for tactile engagement while considering whether it is beneficial for guests to have a hands-free experience.

Themed entertainment designers who use Jarrell's model can create an experience where visitors take active roles, explore, or immerse themselves within the world-building according to their preferences. The intensity can vary from Miasma and McKamey Manor, extreme haunted houses where guests receive an immersive horror experience tailored to their own fears, to the interactive and gamified challenges at Super Nintendo World in Universal Studios Hollywood and Japan, where patrons compete individually and in teams to collect achievements. Narratively, these themed experiences feature a natural beginning and end, allowing for flexibility by both the creator and the guest to decide what happens throughout the experience. Jarrell's model requires a linear story that must unfold in a specific order for events to make sense, yet the station tech allows guests to have the illusion of free exploration. Jarrell explains that as guests collect clues, the back-end system will need feedback at every technology-based station while the interactive system knows which clue the user is on through an RFID bracelet and triggers the

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appropriate video or audio. At actor-based stations, actors can scan the RFID and get the clue they need to provide via phone, tablet, or earpiece.

Jarrell explains that her model "opens additional paid content to a lost audience," the "waders" who do not enjoy rides, wait for other members of their party, and wander in shops or elsewhere. The model provides an additional avenue for guests to spend money and engage in content that has the potential to carry more interest. In addition to potential added revenue streams, the flexibility of Jarrell's model can apply to a variety of contexts, including theme parks, cruise ships, conventions, and other venues.

The future requires tailored approaches to expand possibilities and invoke awe

Immersion and interactivity guide the future of themed entertainment by providing a feeling of endless exploration and a unique experience to all guests. Encompassing theme parks, resort hotels, cruises, and conventions, the desire for interaction and immersion in themed entertainment continues to expand, as should approaches to these experiences. Industry evolution can apply physical touchpoints and modern technologies to keep innovation alive. From

narrative-driven experiences like SCADstory to the explosive global growth of themed entertainment venues like those created by Majid Al Futtaim's Global Snow division in the Middle East and Universal Studios Beijing in China, embedding unique and immersive experiences is key to capturing the feelings of wonder that guests anticipate.

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This executive summary was researched by Krista Jarrell (M.F.A., themed entertainment design, 2023; B.F.A., furniture design, 2020). Contributors include Subin Cho, designer; Joseph Housley, senior writer and researcher; Paula Mogollón Mejía, SCADask principal design researcher; Michael Shreve, associate vice president for academic services; and Sarah Snook, senior writer and researcher.

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