# Beyond the Limits of Narratology: Narrativity in Theme Parks

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Although narrativity has been considered a distinctive characteristic of theme parks by both critics and designers – setting these "story place[s]" (Hench and van Pelt 2008, 69) apart from e.g., amusement parks and themed shops or restaurants – there has been surprisingly little research on the concrete practices of storytelling in theme parks beyond the classic "dark ride" (see e.g., Rahn 2000; Baker 2023), which itself, however, pre-dates the modern theme park. Nevertheless, as (1) a "composite" or "meta-medium" – i.e., as a medium that fuses various media that in themselves have been conventionally viewed as distinct –, as (2) an integral part of transmedia storyworlds, and as (3) a medial artefact that is accompanied by an extensive apparatus of marketing material or "paratexts," the theme park combines, exhausts, and balances the narrative affordances (and limits) of the different media that constitute and flank it – beyond its geographical limitation. Narrativity can thus be found at all levels – from the individual dark ride via themed areas ("lands") to the park or resort as a whole – and in all "phases" – from the design of the theme park element to the memory of the theme park visit – of the theme park experience.

This contribution seeks to (1) discuss the limits and potentials of some pertinent approaches of classical and postclassical narratology and (2) to map the narrativity of theme parks by discussing "extreme" cases related to selected narrative categories: firstly, the fundamental relationship between the mediality of theme parks and their narrativity, which is closely related to the narrator – appearing in various forms and in different degrees, from explicit narrators of individual dark rides such as the "ghost host" of Disney's Haunted Mansion to the (apparent) absence of a narrator in themed lands such as Epcot's Future World. Secondly, and related to that, the aspect of "worldmaking" (Herman) or "storyworld" (Ryan) can be considered as fundamental. With respect to linearity, finally, the theme park offers visitors both strict guidance – via dark rides, where the direction and the speed of the ride vehicles are predetermined by the designers, but also via visual and audio cues in the landscape and through paramedia such as maps and apps – and the (apparent) freedom to create their own story via "explorative" areas such as Disney's Adventure Isle.

Hence, against the background of industry and critical claims that the theme park is distinctly narrative and that due to the rise of the experience economy and transmedial intellectual properties, the sites' narrativity has even become more important over time, we seek to use both historical and contemporary examples to argue that the narrativity of theme parks has always been extremely complex, with extreme "examples" of specific narrative categories often sitting side by side. From this, we will develop some fundamentals of a theme park narratology by exploring inventories, access possibilities and heuristic potentials of postclassical and especially transmedial narratology and by developing cardinal categories of a dedicated theme park narratology.