Trans-spatial Narratives of the Society of Explorers and Adventurers Across the Disney Empire

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ABSTRACT

The Society of Explorers and Adventurers (S.E.A.), which originated in 1989 as the basis for a Disney nightclub and officially debuted during the opening of Tokyo DisneySea in 2001, is a trans-spatial narrative unique to the medium of the theme park. The mythology of S.E.A.—the story of a group of characters from different periods of time connected by their participation in a fictional fraternity dedicated to the adventuring spirit—is spread throughout Disney's parks across the world. Beginning with the Pleasure Island nightclub district at Downtown Disney in Orlando, for which Disney Imagineering invented a wealthy, fun-loving industrialist named Merriweather Adam Pleasure to use as its fictional founder, the theme park juggernaut has employed this group of characters to provide a backstory for rides and attractions that aren't directly tied to Disney's film and television intellectual properties. Some Society of Explorers and Adventurers members headline attractions such as the colonialist plunderer Harrison Hightower III of the Tower of Terror at Tokyo DisneySea and world traveler Lord Henry Mystic of Hong Kong Disneyland's equivalent of the Haunted Mansion. Others, like Barnabas T. Bullion of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad or Captain Mary Oceaneer of Disney's Typhoon Lagoon water park, play background roles.

References to these characters tie together the different cultures and languages of Disney's far-flung parks using a frame story with themes of travel, tourism, and cultural exchange. Parkgoers who want to participate in this story first-hand must embody the ethos of the Society of Explorers and Adventurers to play along as they tour from the United States to France to China to Japan to experience the story (Garner 2019). By performing a close reading of the Society of Explorers and Adventurers and Imagineering's use of it starting in 2001, we can see how the Society's four tenets—Adventure, Romance, Discovery, and Innovation—emerge as commentary on the theme park as a medium and on the practices of theme park fandom (Williams, 2020). It can also be read as a covert playtest for the kind of cross-park story world (Godwin,

2017) that looks to be a big part of Disney's forthcoming Marvel Comics-themed Avengers Campus and Stark Expo attractions in California, Paris, and Hong Kong.

For example, by valorizing Adventure, the fictional characters of S.E.A. encourage guests to travel to multiple parks as a way of broadening their horizons and having new experiences. Adventure also refers to the somatic experience of actually "being moved" bodily by the various thrill rides available in each park, which enable guests to literally "walk in the shoes" of different S.E.A. members, actually feeling what they felt and thereby vicariously taking part in their escapades. Romance represents a willingness to indulge in the suspension of disbelief and to be enchanted by the clever contraptions of the park. Discovery refers to the practice of hunting down clues in the background of the park's various attractions that reveal the distributed narrative describing S.E.A.'s history. The playful uncovering of this hidden narrative (Baker, 2016) is often accomplished with participation in fan communities online, which enable people to share information gleaned from their own visits and to see parts of the story that they might not be able to access in person. And finally, Innovation refers to the development of an understanding of how the technologies of storytelling employed in theme parks actually work, putting the fan into the mindset of an Imagineer and teaching them to appreciate the craft of design.

Through these four values, the S.E.A. storyline serves as a platform for the storytellers at Disney Imagineering (who most frequently are asked to adapt existing media into theme park rides and attractions) to create an original narrative about the theme park experience that serves as an allegory for their work as designers.

KEYWORDS
Disney, distributed narratives, theme parks, transmedia tourism, fandom

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