



HOW TO AVOID CULTURAL CLICHÉS IN STORYTELLING

AND WIN OVER AUDIENCES OF ALL AGES

BY JAMES ANDERSON

Our lead creative director explores the touchpoints of storytelling that contribute to unique and successful projects.



Compelling entertainment experiences often depend on attracting people using a cultural hook. In China and South East Asia, social storytelling is becoming the standard for entertainment. Our tight knit social circle, which originally focused on our family, close friends and co-workers, has now exploded to include people who share our interests on a global scale.

We relate to stories everywhere, on our phone, tablet or laptop. That means it's critical to make your characters relatable and interactive; your settings immersive; and your rides and attractions exciting and engaging.

If story drives entertainment success, getting the story right is essential. But how do you do that when dealing with culture? How do you avoid clichés that can undermine the whole project?

As entertainment designers, we focus on three touchpoints that can help avoid the clichés in storytelling: Authenticity in character - who are we empathizing with? Authenticity in setting - where are we? Authenticity in the way the story is told – what platform is being used?



1. AUTHENTICITY IN CHARACTER

Characters are the “who” of the story. Think of The Monkey King, a much-used – some might argue, overused – character. Many theme parks, countless attractions and entertainment centres use him as a quick fix for a story element.

The challenge is the overworked Monkey King brand ends up as a cliché. He is also perceived differently from generation to generation – from action hero to cartoon character. And we all have our own version of the Monkey King living in our heads.

No matter how you portray him, someone is going to be left out, scratching their head and thinking: “That’s not the Monkey King!” And that’s not a great place to start.

So how do we create characters that new generations will relate to in our attractions?



We believe the focus needs to be on original, relatable characters that are well-rounded and become more fleshed out each time we meet them in a different attraction. These characters can directly interact with the guests. Whether it's live actors bringing up guests to participate in a show, or talking to them through media, the characters come alive to the guests on screen. Or we fight alongside them, racking up points as we go through an adventure.

Newer generations are looking for characters that they can connect with, are able to understand and reflect their own personalities. They can see themselves in these characters, which acts as a stepping stone into the story. Without relatable characters, younger generations will not be able to enter the fantasy world that has been created.



2. AUTHENTICITY IN SETTING

The next touchpoint is setting: how do we create an environment that will resonate? How do we develop settings so that they are believable and connect to the audience?

While this may seem outside the world of attraction design, stories can be the glue that holds together any entertainment project. As an example, take a retirement community in Florida called The Villages. FORREC was tasked to create an identity for an ever-growing community, one without any centre, and one would say without any heart or soul: so, we designed not one, but three town centers for the community.

One of them is called Spanish Springs. The story centers around Ponce de Leon, a Spanish explorer, who accidentally discovered Florida, while looking for gold. He went on to try and find the fountain of youth. We established that the spring percolating up through the town square (which we designed), was in fact one that Ponce had believed could have been that very fountain.

All the buildings and storefronts in Spanish Springs have a formed history, tracing all the way back to when some of Ponce de Leon’s crew set up their lives on that very spring.

What was so important in getting this right, is that unlike a theme park that guests visit for maybe eight hours, a day or so per year, the residents of The Villages would come back every day, all year, for many years – to shop, socialize and even dance in the town square.

While the history and the town was fabricated, it became the backdrop to these people’s lives. It’s because they believed the setting to be authentic, that they could create their own stories, their own memories. Which is exactly what we want to happen in the parks and attractions that we create.





3. AUTHENTICITY IN PLATFORM

The platform that we use to tell the story becomes one of the most important touchpoints in engaging our guest with the story.

This includes the type of hardware that we use – coasters, theatres, dark rides, round rides and now virtual or augmented reality. The platforms are the technology-driven elements that keep us relevant for the current generation.

Coasters over the past few years have added ‘trick elements’ – launches, slip tracks, reverse tracks and so on – that can act as transitions where we can engage the guests in exciting new ways. We now have the ability with coasters to marry excitement and story together, ramping up the experience to meet the demands of the current generation.



A case in point: for Dollywood's Fire Chaser coaster, the focus was on the unsung heroes of the Smokey Mountains that saved the mountains from all consuming fires: the park rangers. The ride advertises that arriving guests can be a Fire Patrol volunteer with the call to action: "Get fired up to fight fires!"

The quick launch at the beginning of the ride tied perfectly in the fire train zooming out of the station, responding to an emergency at Crazy Craig's Gas and Fireworks Emporium. Craig is so crazy, he put gas and fireworks into one shop. The switchback became the testing site for Crazy Craig and his fireworks as we get to the site of the impending emergency.

And finally, we enter the fireworks loading bay of Crazy Craig, his prized gigantic firework known as Big Bertha is in danger of catching fire and blowing us up! Which it does, exploding us backwards in smoke and fire! The combination of the track profile, engaging storyline and special effects created a memorable experience for all generations.



THE FINAL ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Character, setting and platform are the touchpoints of good storytelling. If you focus on these elements, with authenticity, you're more likely to have a theme park or attraction that will succeed.



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