

THROUGHLINE: HOW WE MOVE

REINVENTING THE THEME PARK: INNOVATION AND DESIGN LAUNCH FANTASTIC IDEAS

By Robert Morast

Disneyland opened to the public at 10 a.m. July 18, 1955, under a sunny Southern California sky. And, if you look at the photos from that day, the scene was what you'd expect: collections of kids — boys with cropped hair and dark rimmed glasses, girls with dresses colored in summery pastels — sprinting through the Anaheim property, their excitement pulling them to magic castles and teacup rides and to a space port with men dressed in spacesuits, years before the first manned space flight. There are so many smiles. ¶ This is the Disneyland narrative we've been raised on, that the Happiest Place on Earth was created as a fantastical Xanadu where kids' dreams could be realized. Where their glee could be amplified. And it's not wrong. There's a reason it's called the Magic Kingdom.

But the first customer to step inside Disneyland wasn't a child. David McPherson was a 22-year-old college student who drove his motorbike through the darkness of a new day to plant himself in line at 2 a.m. By the time the gates opened, a reported 6,000 people trailed McPherson. Many of them were adults. Many of them were waiting to walk into the future.

This is the overlooked legacy of Disneyland. Yes, Walt Disney wanted to construct a theme park where kids could interact with the various animated creatures in the Disney film portfolio. But he also was building a vision of what he wanted America to become: a multicultural society sewn together with uplifting music and friendly faces, a problem-free land where technology and invention eased our daily lives, a nation that dared to dream about the promise of tomorrow. Literally, a Tomorrowland.

In so many ways, Disneyland became an exemplar of American exceptionalism, a testament to the idea that the United States was able to build things no other country could contemplate, that we could create a lifestyle better than what we were expecting. As Disneyland sits empty, closed to the public because of the pandemic, some people are asking why it can't be open, why this iconic California experience can't give us back some sense of normalcy during a very abnormal time. But the better question might be, "Can Disneyland once again provide a better vision of tomorrow?"

* * *

Imagine walking into an amusement park and being greeted by a holographic tour guide. Let's call him Buddy. He's projected from a device fit around your wrist, and communicates with the GPS system and the park's app in your phone. Wherever you go, Buddy leads, explaining, for instance, the history of a given roller coaster as you walk onto its loading ramp. He knows the entire park, each square inch of space, so you'll never be lost. During the rides, he's seated next to you. He screams when you scream. He makes a funny face exactly when that camera captures your most uncomfortable moment. And when you're done, he asks what you want to do next.

But, maybe most importantly, Buddy ensures you're always where

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PHILIP ROSEDALE,
entrepreneur

you're supposed to be. In a post-COVID world, that means not waiting in a line pressed closely to others, it means realizing when you're within 6 feet of someone and not walking to areas of the park that already have too many people for that given space. He's not just a tour guide, he's a public safety envoy.

"I wonder who is going to come up with that first," says Linda Hung, vice president at Forrec, a Canadian company that specializes in designing theme parks. "It's going to be doable very soon."

Buddy is Hung's brainchild, an idea she's considered since the pandemic forced her and her team to reimagine what amusement parks will need to be in the coming years. This is Hung's moonshot idea, a concept so cool and fantastical that a marketing team member asked her if she really wanted to share it with *The Chronicle*. But, she says from a phone in Toronto, she shared the concept because "we want solutions. We want the parks to get back on their feet."

To do that, she says, theme parks will have to adapt. And in her mind, there are three components for these parks to explore before they can safely reopen. The first is the least exciting. It means installing plexiglass dividers between seats and planting hand sanitizer stations everywhere. Daily attendance is capped at a predetermined "safe" number of customers. Roller coasters keep every other seat open. And all transactions are contact-less. That last one gets us into the next phase of reopening and reimagining: design innovation.

This is where Buddy comes up in conversation. And while he's the most interesting thing to consider, there are other, more likely, examples of how tomorrow's theme parks will operate. For instance, they're probably going to have facial recognition software everywhere customers encounter employees.

"That's been slow to North Amer-

ica. It's more acceptable in other places around the world and implemented in other parks around the world," Hung says. "I have a feeling (the pandemic) will push that faster."

She explains facial recognition will be part of the ticketing procedure, like a fingerprint, of sorts, that identifies you throughout the park and can monitor your temperature. If you buy food, your face is scanned for payment. Ditto at the gift shop. And when you get on a ride, there's another scan to ensure you have access to that part of the park. It means fewer hand-to-hand exchanges, less up-close interaction with people. Less chance of spreading a virus.

And even though Buddy is some years away from escorting us around, say, Galaxy's Edge, we're already holding a virtual guide: our phones.

Hung says the use of park apps will be paramount in the future, particularly with virtual queueing, which is already being used in Disneyland. Before the pandemic, the virtual queue was a way of organizing our days at the parks so we knew exactly when we could experience the marquee attractions and avoid some time in lines. Now, Hung suggests, it's going to be another way of keeping us safe.

The first step, of course, is knowing exactly when you'll be entering a ride. That cuts down on the congestion that comes from lines. But that app and virtual queueing could also steer us away from congestion in other ways. For instance, what if the app acted like "Pokemon Go"? The virtual game and app compels people to walk in the real world to find cartoony monsters. In amusement parks, the app could have similar game or scavenger hunt components that are enacted to direct us away from areas of the park where crowds are building. The app could do the same thing by sending alerts for, say, free ice cream at a vendor across the park for all patrons who were born in the month of February. These little tricks work against the gravity of each other pulling us together.

Virtual queueing also allows designers to build new experiences as you enter the rides. Hung uses the example of the Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon experience at Universal Orlando. As you walk into it, there are "rooms" you stop in that mimic audience

THEME PARK OF THE FUTURE

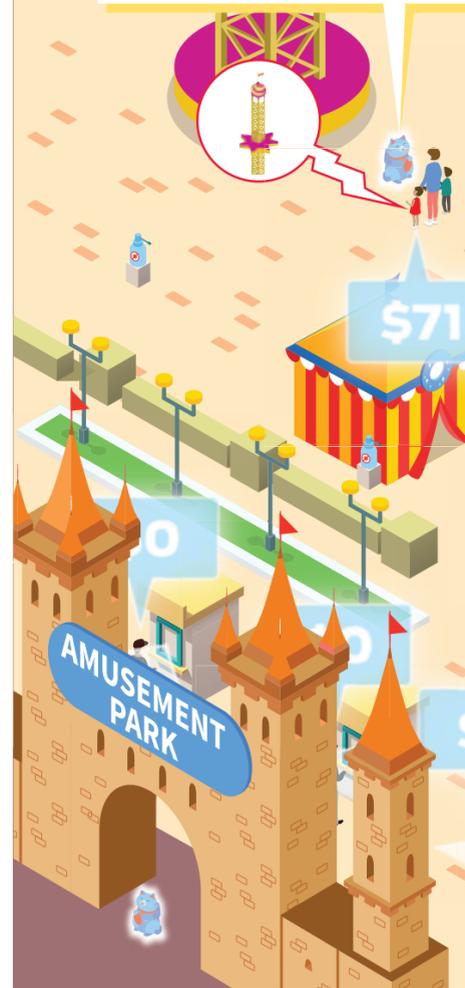
Given social distancing, theme parks are going to have to adapt and be different, but not necessarily worse. Here's a view of a theme park in the near future, informed by people in the know.

FLEXIBLE CREATION

Rather than installing rides and exhibits that remain unchanged for decades, parks could move toward more disposable experiences that last for weeks or months. Built as outdoor attractions that necessitate people exploring them one at a time, they'd promote safety, and they could be more reflective of the moment.

VIRTUAL BUDDY

One fantastical but fun idea is that parks could create a holographic, virtual tour guide that would accompany people or families throughout the park. The guide would provide commentary and information while herding people away from each other to avoid crowding. It would also sit next to you on rides — screaming when you scream — to help you forget about social distancing.



experiences from Fallon's "Tonight Show" tapings. "When you enter the ride, you're still in a queue, it's part of the ride," Hung says. "You don't feel like you're in a bullpen. You feel like you're in the studio. There are singers and you're being entertained, it's almost like a preshow. But you're not in a tight confined show."

If the ride or experience was about, say, "Star Trek," that might mean creating onboarding entertainment that mimics being teleported, or the pressurized air experience of a spaceship's air lock. Regardless of the tactic, it allows designers new ways to build magic into the moment.

"That's our job," Hung says. "We design to every aspect, every moment, everywhere the guest looks,

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we try to keep them immersed in fantasy. Now, with the safety measures, we just have to work that into our thought process, too.”

Another idea that’s reemerging in the thought process: hourly pricing.

Right now, if you spend three figures to have a day at an amusement park, you want to get your money’s worth. You want to ride the marquee attractions. You want to be there all day. But, if you were only charged for the time you spent in the park, then you would be less likely to add to the crowds of people waiting to experience the same thing.

“You’re not going to spend your time in queue, because you’re doing hourly pay,” Hung says. “It takes away that kind of pressure.”

An amusement park with less stress? That is a utopian vision.

Talk to almost anyone about the future of amusement parks and the dialogue will inevitably come around to virtual or augmented reality. This has become another trope in our continued forecast of what post-COVID life will be like: users wearing an apparatus that makes us see and feel a virtual world that mimics our own to supplement what we’re missing.

As a way to avoid crowds and the potential of infection, this train of thought makes a lot of sense. There’s just one problem with this premise: The technology isn’t here yet. At least not in a way that can replicate a palpable human experience. And it probably won’t be anytime soon.

“Delivering human connection is very difficult,” says Philip Rosedale.

He would know. Back in the 2000s Rosedale’s Linden Labs created “Second Life,” a virtual world that allowed users to construct avatars and build digital lives. The game took off, but that was part of the problem — too many people thought of it as a game, like an evolution of “The Sims.”

Rosedale wanted it to be more, to become a virtual space that allowed the construction of new economies or societies. It was supposed to help us envision a better world. Kind of like Disneyland, in some respects.

For much of this decade, the San Francisco entrepreneur has been focused on a simpler, but related, project. High Fidelity is a virtual arena that was designed to host everything from music festivals (Future Lands) to talk shows (“Talk-

ing to Myself”). These days, it’s been downgraded a bit, focusing on digital meetings or social gatherings in an online arena that allows people to move about a defined space and talk to other people as we do in real life. Users can engage in one-on-one conversation, have group chats and move back and forth among various clusters. There are event areas for concerts or talks, where audiences could move toward the stage, or away from it to have side dialogues.

High Fidelity isn’t an all-out virtual experience with lifelike avatars representing our spots in the plane. You’re essentially a dot with a name and photo that moves around like an amoeba on a glass slide. But the magic is what you hear. With 3-D

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audio you can hear the distance of sound and gauge proximity or direction from hearing others' voices, or music.

Sadly, that might be the most lifelike virtual experience we have, the audio awareness, because, as Rosedale says, "We haven't yet been able to replace human connection."

Until the online latency speeds are reduced, until we have cameras that can mimic what the eye sees,

until we have avatars that mime our facial movements and other non-verbal communication, it's not worth building a virtual amusement park. Because without the symbiosis that builds from those shared human experiences, it won't be fulfilling. It won't feel real. It will feel like "The Sims" with bulky goggles.

"We're deeply social creatures. And to put on a headset is to be removed from the people near you. And that's not acceptable for human beings," Rose-

dale says. "This (pandemic) is re-exploring the whole story of getting people online and connected. It's hard. But I'm also inspired. Because now everyone has to work on this problem.

"One way or another, we're going to get there. But all the platforms, they're a bummer right now."



Walt Disney is often credited with having said, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

Well, he didn't actually say that. Disney employee Tom Fitzgerald gave us that inspiring maxim. But the point remains. And during an era of being locked in our homes, fantasizing about a life that was, the quote inspires a different question: Can we actually achieve the dreams of right now? Can we build a better life?"

Whether the Disneyland of tomorrow has a virtual Buddy leading you through these spaces isn't really the point of this exercise. The best in-

terpretation of Disneyland isn't literal. Rather, it's a speculative look at a potential future, a better world. It's tempting to think Walt Disney would be trying to solve the pandemic through the prism of his theme parks. Maybe not. But we can dream. And Disneyland has always been a place where dreams manifest to reality.

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