

5-2013

## Perceptions of the “World”

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# Perceptions of the “World”

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Communications,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
with Honors in Rhetoric and Communications  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.

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March 2012

### Abstract

The overarching question of my research was to discover in which ways adults perceive Walt Disney World, not the Disney brand or Disney movies, but the theme park itself. Much research has been put into discovering what types of “fantasies” or “dreams” the Walt Disney Company has manufactured and subsequently Walt Disney World has stepped in to bring to fruition. However, we have not discovered what it is that others “dream” about who do not buy into the typical Disney fantasies we must look as how it is that adults perceive the park, not just at how children experience it. Perhaps most importantly, we must look deeper into the aspect of control that comes into play at Walt Disney World. How much effort is put into this control and how successful are the anticipated effects? First, I examined how the Disney company controls aspects of park perception. This was done through my own knowledge as a former Walt Disney World cast member. Then I explored what actual guests are saying about their park experiences. Do their anticipated experiences and feelings coincide with genuine outcomes? Furthermore, how do guests view Disney World in comparison to other similar theme park experiences, namely Universal Studios. Through all of the control that Disney exerts on their theme park, does that control garner the anticipated results or is it a vain effort?

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all who have encouraged me along the way of writing this thesis. Professor Harrison who helped me from the very beginnings of this research and guided me along every step. Without her help this undertaking would have been impossible.

Thank you to my roommates and friends, Lauren, Meghan, and Emily who have been there for me through so much and who encouraged me when things seemed too tough,

Finally, an extremely huge thank you to my parents for the countless things they have done (and will do) for me over the years. Nothing in my life would be possible without them.

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### Introduction

The Walt Disney Company has become an integral component of the American childhood through their celebrated feature films, popular television shows, and legendary theme parks. Most children grow up watching the classic Disney fairytales with the hope of one day making the anticipated journey to Walt Disney World to experience the fairy tale for themselves. Even as we grow older, the Disney Company remains ever present in our lives. From the many companies owned by The Walt Disney Company (ESPN, ABC, Marvel, etc.) to the string of movies produced under the Disney label, the Walt Disney Company has made themselves the ultimate name in entertainment.

While some may believe that Walt Disney World has a child-centered atmosphere, the company has made numerous attempts to ensure that guests of all ages enjoy their time at the parks. They have begun to diversify their activities so as to target new audiences. These activities include, sporting events, concerts, car races, wine festivals and much more (Wasko, 2001). In light of that fact, millions of adults travel to Walt Disney World each year in search of that unique experience that can only be had by means of a visit to Walt Disney World. In 2011, park attendance for the Magic Kingdom park alone was 17,142,000, making it the most attended theme or amusement park in the world (*Global Attractions* 2012). Many journey to Walt Disney World for their children or grandchildren, but there are many adults who do so with no children in tow; this trip is solely for their own enjoyment. For a place that so many travel to, it is not clear why we feel so strongly about it as a culture. It is a company known in some

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respect by every American, yet it is hard to explicitly state why it is that we have come to love this brand so deeply.

The answer may lie in the way that Walt Disney World carefully crafts each aspect of the guest’s experience to create the most “magical” vacation possible. Part of the allure of Walt Disney World is the separation that is created from the real world into a world of fantasy and enjoyment. Walt Disney World crafts an environment in a very meticulous way, through the cultivation of appropriate employees and the development of proper settings. If the Walt Disney World experience is understood to be a paramount moment in people’s lives, what was done to create it? The message that is created by Walt Disney World is then interpreted through a cultural dimension that can sometimes distort it. The many symbols that are meticulously constructed by the Walt Disney Company, such as Mickey Mouse and Cinderella Castle, must be deciphered by consumers. Interpretations may differ based on contexts or audiences; or ideally may be perceived as intended by Disney.

## Literature Review

The topic of Walt Disney World itself has not been as widely researched as one may expect. However, the matter of Disney movies has been thoroughly discussed, as prevalent themes and ideologies running throughout the Disney film library have been examined in detail. Researchers have attempted to discover the Disney values through the classic films. They interpret the characters and situations to find deeper meanings. While these findings have been very insightful, the Disney parks have been somewhat relegated into the background.

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Arguably one of the most recognizable archetypes in American society is the Disney princess. The functions of the Disney princess have been analyzed by many and they have been interpreted in several ways. While some postulate that the women in the Disney realm have been cast as weak, Do Rozario (2004) suggests that it is the women who hold the true power within the Disney context. The female is typically the one we cheer for. The villain is often times a female as well, giving them the powers of the good and the bad. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel disobeys orders of her father, who is the king of the seas; then she must later save him and her prince from the evil villainess. The male characters take a backseat to allow the strong women to fight it out. The princesses of a Disney origin have changed overtime as well. Under Walt’s direction, the princesses waited patiently to be saved by a male hero. Under Team Disney (those who have taken over since Walt’s death) the princesses break traditions and venture out on their own (Do Rozario, 2004). Again, *The Little Mermaid* portrays a perfect example of these attributes of independence and strong will in the princess.

These princesses have created an ideal in the mind of little girls everywhere. They teach young girls what princesses should look like and how they should act. The apparent other prominent dream of girls is to be a ballerina, which the princesses represent as well as they often dance with their love (Do Rozario, 2004). Through the princess, Disney has created the ultimate dream or fantasy for the average young girl, a character who fulfills the two roles which a young girl most desires. This is a fantasy the Walt Disney Company then tries to fulfill within the Disney parks. This is accomplished through such experiences as The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, which gives young girls the



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chance to get a makeover from a fairy godmother-in-training to look just like their favorite princess.

The most common endings to the classic Disney princess story is they scene in which the princess and her love live “happily ever after”. This is typically guaranteed through their marriage to the prince/ hero. The connection of these elements; princesses, marriage, love and happiness, become linked in girls’ minds. It is even stated by many brides that they feel that their wedding day is a day to feel like a princess. Disney has made it appear possible for a woman to achieve her childhood fantasy of becoming a princess through marriage.

With the construction of a wedding chapel on Disney property, the idea of a fairytale wedding became a real possibility for the average couple (Levine, 2005). A television show was produced to chronicle the first brides to walk down the chapel’s aisle. Disney portrayed these weddings as the real life embodiment of their beloved princesses and prince charmings. This display also solidified Disney’s stance as a heterosexual family company. Furthermore, the wedding chapel brought in a new audience. Instead of just families with children, young couples without children and all of their family and friends came to visit the famous park as the wedding chapel became a part of the overall vacation experience. Once again Disney created the ideal of finding your “prince charming” and living happily ever after and then created a venue through which to accomplish that dream.

Walt Disney World is known to exercise a large amount of control over their guests’ vacation experience. Each scene in the park is just that, a scene that has been carefully crafted to fit into the location and theme. However, it is well known that much of

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what you see in Disney World is an illusion. What is presented to the guest is meant to be taken as reality, even if as a heightened reality. There are many “backstage tours” one can go on at Walt Disney World, for a price, that allow one to see how it is all created though, which therefore makes it apparent that it is not a reality at all. This breaks the illusion of reality yet somehow still adds to some park goers’ experience. This phenomenon is demonstrated in Disney movies that are put onto DVDs; the filmmakers endure a painstaking process to create a realistic world in which the viewer can believe in. Tom Brown (2007) discusses how, despite the effort to create a plausible reality, the special features enable you to see how it was all made. While on a special tour designed to show you how the park operates, the guest is still only shown what the Disney company will allow. Even in revealing “secrets”, the Walt Disney Company still controls what they choose to reveal. The Walt Disney Company can be appearing to tear down all walls even while one is still blocked from complete inclusion.

Janet Wasko (2001) has written an encompassing book on the Walt Disney Company brand as a whole, from its beginnings with founder Walt Disney to how it is applied to today’s culture. She discusses the themes that are present in the Disney culture; themes such as family, fun, happiness, escape, fantasy, magic and memories, and how they come to play out in the movies and the parks. Wasko also presents the controlling nature of the parks, harkening back to Brown’s analysis. She even suggests that control is a theme itself by virtue of its prevalence. Even the subtitle of her book, “the manufacture of fantasy” suggests that the fantastical elements of the park are carefully crafted and not as magical nor spontaneous as one might believe. She further

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discusses what is considered to be “Classic Disney” and what is viewed as acceptable by the company, such as Levine discussed in her research on the wedding chapel.

The controlling nature of the Walt Disney World atmosphere is well noted. As Wasko (2001) suggests, “This is not a world of fantasy or magic run amok. Fantasy is carefully controlled, and little is left to the imagination...” (118). One of the best parks to look at for examples of this is Magic Kingdom. Magic Kingdom is comprised of six different lands; Main Street USA, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, Frontierland, Adventureland, and Liberty Square. Each land has been designed so that every element down to the plants and light posts appear organic to that realm. In Tomorrowland everything is themed in a futuristic manner, harboring a horde of references to outer space, rocket ships and aliens. Even the stores and restaurants located in that land are named so that they coincide with the theme; names such as Mickey’s Star Traders and Merchant of Venus. Nothing is allowed in a land in the Magic Kingdom unless it is appropriate for that land’s theme. Even the trees in Tomorrowland are not the natural trees that would grow in Orlando, they have been fabricated to look as if they could possibly survive in outer space.

As we shall see later, cast members are not allowed to leave their land once in costume. In order to get in and out of the park they must walk through a labyrinth of underground tunnels called the Utilidor (utility corridor). In this way a guest will never see someone on a futuristic costume from Tomorrowland walking through Cinderella Castle in Fantasyland, as that would shatter the illusion. Cast members are further instructed to not bring anything into the “onstage” area that does not coincide with the theme. This means no personal bags or belongings are to be seen by the park guests.

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People expect coherence among setting, appearance, and manner in order to believe what is being presented to them (Goffman, 1959). Nothing is allowed to be seen by the guests that does not conform to the designed theme.

The prestige that surrounds Walt Disney World have been taken into consideration by Simone Pettigrew (2011). Pettigrew took her two young children to Walt Disney World and Sea World for the first time and recorded their anticipated experiences, actual experiences and afterthoughts. During the visits, perceptions were recorded using heart rate monitors and an emotional scale the children used to access their current moods. It was expected by Pettigrew that the children’s heart rates would rise with excitement and joy related to their experiences and this should coincide with happier feelings being expressed by the children using the emotional scale. Both children adamantly stated that the Magic Kingdom was their favorite park, despite this fact their claims were not supported by the heart rate monitors. After analyzing the heart rate data Pettigrew concluded that Magic Kingdom did not produce the overall highest heart rates for the children. The children could not explain why they had chosen Magic Kingdom as their preferred park experience but they seemed positive that it was. Prior to the visit, both children had stated that they were most excited about Magic Kingdom. The children had a set idea prior to their actual experience, and the cues that led to such an idea were so strong that they could not alter it post experience. According to Pettigrew, there is an assumption that Walt Disney World provides a better vacation experience, even without any personal basis for such an assumption. Therefore, because this thought is so prevailing it becomes difficult for one to separate perceived expectations from actual experiences.

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Most previously conducted research has either focused on Disney movies/ characters or children’s perceptions of the parks. Little has been done to ascertain adults’ impressions, especially while still at the parks. We have learned from previous research what types of “fantasies” or “dreams” the Walt Disney Company has manufactured and subsequently Walt Disney World has stepped in to bring to fruition. However, we have not discovered what it is that others “dream” about who do not buy into the typical Disney fantasies (such as becoming a princess). Walt Disney World promises that it is the place “where dreams come true”. If this is so, how does Walt Disney World make someone’s dream come true if the Walt Disney Company was not the one to create it? Furthermore, while Walt Disney World does have a strong youthful aspect to it, it is still a place for adults of every age as well. Many people vacation there with no children at all. Therefore, we must look as how it is that adults perceive the park, not just at how children experience it. Perhaps most importantly, we must looker deeper into the aspect of control that comes into play at Walt Disney World. How much effort is put into this control and how successful are the anticipated effects?

### **Research Questions**

Through my research I sought to discover how it is that people view Walt Disney World, not the Disney brand or Disney movies, but the theme park itself. First, I looked at how the Disney company controls aspects of park perception. This was be done through my own knowledge as a former Walt Disney World cast member. Then I explore what actual guests are saying about their park experiences. Do these anticipated experiences coincide with genuine outcomes? Furthermore, how do guests view Disney

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World in comparison to other similar theme park experiences, namely Universal Studios.

Through all of the control that Disney exerts on their theme park, does that control garner the anticipated results or is it a vain effort?

### Methods

I explored in what ways the Walt Disney Company manufactures fantasy and how those efforts are perceived. We know what it is that Disney has created by virtue of their movie and products, but how was it created and how is it consumed in a physical location such as Walt Disney World? We know that people expect a lot of Walt Disney World, but what is it that they have come to expect?

I engaged in two types of data collection in my research; my personal observations and experiences as a Disney cast member and the interviews I conducted with park guests. I used both sets of data in order to gain further insight about the Disney experience. These insights from both behind the scenes and from the front will come together to give a fuller understanding of perceptions of Walt Disney World.

### Analysis

#### Observations of Disney’s production of fantasy:

Due to my strong personal background to Walt Disney World and my desire to be even more enveloped by the “world”, in 2011 I chose to apply for a role as a cast member through the Disney College Program. The college program allows college students to work at Walt Disney World for a semester during college, usually for college credit. After a rigorous interview process I was selected to become a merchandise cast

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member in Hollywood Studios. I worked in Walt Disney World from January 20 until August 3 in 2012. Over the course of this activity I made note of my experiences as a cast member, and analyzed them according to these general themes: training, being “cast member”, and actual work.

Once I arrived at Disney World I went through the crucial training process. All cast members have about a week’s worth of training before they are set free to work on their own. First, every new cast member attends what is called Traditions. This is where I was taught the history of the Walt Disney Company including Walt Disney’s personal background. This is done to give each cast member a sense of pride and personal responsibility in what they do. That is also a way in which Walt Disney World distinguishes itself. It is not just another theme park; it is “One Man’s Dream” that you are now in charge of upholding. It is here at Traditions where new cast members are taught the Disney language that they are to use and which I have been using. As a result of the strong entertainment aspect of Walt Disney World, many components are referred to in that type of terminology. For example, instead of employees we are called cast members, park attendees are not customers but rather guests, and when a guest can see you you are considered to be on stage and therefore are to be performing your role in the show. After Traditions cast members are split up into their work locations and roles to receive further, more specific job training.

I was taught practical specifics such as how to use the equipment that I would need to perform my job duties. My trainers also instilled in me what is expected of you as a Disney cast member. Most importantly, there are “four basics” that every cast member must know and can be called upon to discuss at any time: I project a positive

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image and energy. I treat each guest with respect, even children. I stay in character and play my part. I go above and beyond. These four guidelines encompass what the Walt Disney Company expects from each cast member. As a cast member I was to be always smiling and never be rude or upset in any way despite how hot it was, how tired I was or how aggravated I may have been. My trainers also encouraged me to talk to every guest that I could and to make it personal. For example, when I spoke with a child ,they advised me to kneel down so that I would be at the child’s eye level.

The rule about staying in character is considered by some cast members to be the most important. Disney World views its park in two major sections, on stage and off stage. As stated previously, a cast member is considered to be on stage anytime a guest can see them. Whenever you are onstage you must act according to your work area’s theme. In my case, when I was working at the Tower of Terror I was supposed to be at a haunted hotel in 1939. When people would ask questions such as, “why is the ride shut down?” I was told to reply with something such as “the spirits are angry today” rather than what the actual reason may be. I was to never break the illusion that has been so carefully created. Finally, I was never to say “that isn’t my job.” A Disney cast member should do anything and everything he/ she can to make Disney World the best in the industry.

Once my training as a new cast member was finally completed, I began to work. As a merchandise cast member working in gift shops I had duties that included selling merchandise along with the photographs taken on the rides. Other than the obvious aspects of selling photographs and merchandise, I was expected to keep up the visual appeal of the store and most importantly “merchantain” the guests. This is a term



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Disney uses to describe entertaining guests with the merchandise. Anytime you see a cast member blowing bubbles, waving at you with a big Mickey Mouse hand, or doing anything to entertain you using the merchandise, they are taking part in this. They phrase this activity in such a way because they propose that it is not only those in the entertainment line of business that entertain the guests, but the whole park is a show and every cast member participates in the entertainment. All of this is done to ensure that each cast member adds to the fantasy element. Each cast member plays a crucial role in the construction of fantasy for every park guest.

### Interviews with guests:

Working in Disney World for seven months gave me the unique opportunity to conduct interviews with the guests. During my free time I would enter the various parks and shopping locations and spend the day searching for willing interviewees. I conducted a total of twenty interviews, all of which occurred during the month of July while on Walt Disney World property.

I chose to approach people who seemed to not be busy as I did not want to detract from their time spent in the parks. I also chose to focus on adults, those who appeared to be between the ages of twenty-five to sixty. I tried to obtain a mix of male versus female, resulting in a total of nine male interviews and eleven females.

I questioned those who agreed to participate about their experiences and perceptions of Disney World. I began the interview with a few simple ice breakers questions asking where the person was visiting from, had they been to Walt Disney

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World before (out of all twenty interviews every single person had been at least one other time), and if they had any children.

The first substantive question I asked was why that person had decided to vacation in Walt Disney World. This would reveal what some of the pull is to the theme park. Next, I asked the guest to describe to me in their own words the Walt Disney World culture or atmosphere. This conveyed what people think of Walt Disney World using their own vocabulary. It would also let me know if people were adopting the Disney generated terminology (such as magic, fantasy, dreams, etc.) into their descriptions of the park. After hearing the adjectives used in the interviewee’s own words I then prompted them with the Disney terminology. I asked if they had heard the words “dreams” or “magic” being used by the Walt Disney Company in Walt Disney World at all. If they had I inquired as to whether or not they felt that those words held any substantial meaning in regards to their own experiences. Finally, I wanted to learn how it is that people thought of another theme park of similar caliber, Universal Studios. If the guest had been to Universal Studios I asked how they would describe that atmosphere.

In order to analyze the data I had collected from park guests I simply recorded their answers and counted up similar responses. In this manner I could see how strongly certain themes resonated with the guests.

### Question: Why did you choose to come to Walt Disney World today?

Reasons for journeying to Walt Disney World are not always easily expressed. It seems to be that people feel a need to make the voyage at least once in their lifetime,

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although they may not know where this desire originates. When I asked park guests why they had chosen to visit Walt Disney World over another vacation spot I received a variety of answers.

One of the most common answers that was given by five separate people was that they came for another member of the family. This was most commonly either children or grandchildren. Another family member for whom people visited Disney World for was their spouse. It seems as though if one member of the family has a strong desire to visit Disney World, the others will comply. Even though they seem to not want to be there due to their own desires, they do not fight it. They still appeared to have fun and enjoy the experience. No one stated that they were dragged there against their will, simply that it was not they who chose the destination.

A major pull for park attendee seems to deal with childhood. It appeared that with the respondents' age the desire to come to Disney World had decreased, whereas for children it seems that the ultimate dream for adults was to see their children have that fun. The fact that everyone is free to be a kid while in Disney World, regardless of age was noted by one person as the reason they choose to return to the vacation spot. Another interviewee agreed and stated that you can find something to do at any age, it is not limited to fun for children. Another woman stated that since she did not get to come as a child due to a large family and monetary strains she wanted to bring her son as often as possible. There seems to be a desire to feel that sense of youth and carefreeness once more.

An additional reason to visit was based upon convenience, either near another vacation spot or near friends and family. Eight people stated convenience or proximity to

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something else as either the sole reason for the visit or a major reason for the visit. Again these people are not stating a direct desire to make the trip, but more a secondary experience. A third reason that appeared to fall into this same type of category was a park guest that was in attendance for a work conference that was being held in Walt Disney World.

Many others stated that they just enjoy the general atmosphere of Disney World. In total twelve people explained that they came to Disney World for their trip because of some aspect that they personally enjoyed about Disney World. They either stated this reason alone or in conjunction with another motivation factor (such as proximity). These respondents used words such as “fun”, “nice”, “happy”, or a great family vacation. These characteristics are not very specific but more of a general sense of enjoyment that accompanies the experience. No person pinpointed a specific aspect that brought them to the parks but rather made comments on the experience as a whole. This could suggest that no one aspect is that spectacular, but rather the parts coming together to create a greater whole.

While the reasons stated thus far have not given us very concrete ideas of what brings so many people to the parks each day, there were some more identifiable experiences answers as well. One person indicated that Disney somehow made you feel special, that they have a different way of doing things. They attributed this to the employees, the cast members. This guest believed that the cast members go that extra step to make you feel special. An additional reason for making the trip to Disney World was that the parks are always changing and therefore there is always something new to experience. At the time of this interview the biggest expansion of Fantasyland being

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built to date had just partially opened. This would be a large draw for those who had been to the parks multiple times. They might feel the need to continuously come back so as to not miss out on any experience.

### Question: How would you describe the Walt Disney World atmosphere or culture?

Once I had established what brought the guest to the park I wanted to uncover what their thoughts were now that they were actually in the park itself. How was it that these people thought of the atmosphere of Walt Disney World? Some things that people have said of the Disney experience is that it is a festive, fun and happy place. Together these words were said by seven of the interviewees. Along those same lines, the terms cheerful, pleasant and beautiful were postulated four separate instances. Cleanliness was an important aspect to four of the guests as it seems to set Disney apart from other parks. Friendly was a word that was used five times; this was in reference to the cast members who play a large role in the experience of Disney World. One guest even went so far as to describe the Disney atmosphere as perfect. Contrastingly, three people focused on more negative aspects, such as the high expenses involved and the heat (in mid July).

After being asked if they had heard Disney use the word magic many would then agree that it was a magical place, however they did not come to that conclusion on their own. Others did describe the Disney culture using one of the Disney generated adjectives on their own however. Two volunteered it was a magical atmosphere. Another stated that it had a fantasy element while one more said it allows you to follow your dreams. These three words (dreams, magic and fantasy) are used quite often by

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the Disney company and these guests have adopted that language in their own thoughts on the parks. Those that chose to reference the atmosphere as clean could in a way be the guest picking up on the perceptions that the Disney company would like them to. Cleanliness was one of Walt’s focuses when building the parks to make them one step above the rest. The guests that perceive this aspect and adopt it into their descriptions are buying into the Disney generated language as well.

Once the guests had postulated their terms to describe the atmosphere of Disney World I then asked them whether or not they had heard the words “dreams” or “magic” being used in any form by the Disney company. If they had, I then inquired if those words held any substantial meaning in connection to Disney World. Four respondents replied that they had never heard of either “dreams” or “magic” being used by Disney World, even though the arguably most famous park is Magic Kingdom and the banner under which you enter Disney World property reads “Where Dreams Come True”. The remaining sixteen respondents had heard these terms in conjunction with Walt Disney World.

After giving a positive response to the previous question I asked my volunteers if those words held any meaning for Disney World; if they had any magical experience or dreams that came true. Holding true with the responses from a previous inquiry as to their purpose for the visit, eight guests said that any magical or dreams coming true was through children or grandchildren. They told me that they did not see any magic but their children/ grandchildren did and therefore seeing them so happy was their own magical moment. One interviewee explained that being in the parks for the Christmas season was magical. Another said that the Christmas Shoppe in the marketplace was

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magical as well. These responses could relay that possibly the park itself was not magical but rather the Christmas atmosphere, as the holiday is often viewed as a magical time. Another woman said that her dream came true during her birthday party at a character dining experience at which she got to meet some of her favorite Disney characters. “Just being here is magical” is what a man said of the relation to the parks. He commented that just waking up everyday being in the parks is magical. One guest commented that magical may not be the correct word, but rather fun. Whereas another noted how those are simply marketing tactics which may hold not true meanings. These responses presented a range of thinking, from complete acceptance of the atmosphere created by Walt Disney World to a critical reception of it.

### Question: What would you say of the atmosphere of Universal Studios?

When questioned about another similar vacation spot, Universal Studios, people did not seem to have very positive things to say. When inquired a person said that Universal was worse than Disney. Furthermore, one guest stated that there isn't that little difference that Disney has, Disney goes the extra step. A woman found Universal to be rushed, unfriendly, have no relaxation element and was an overall hassle. She continued to say that she would not want to go back. Out of the twenty interviews nine people had negative comments regarding Universal Studios, either based on its own merit or in relation to Disney World.

Two of the people interviewed could not quite recall how Universal Studios compared to Disney World due to the fact that they had not been to Universal in so long. However, they did remember that there was a reason that they have not been

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back. Commenting on the fact that it was not up to their standards where as they had returned to Disney World multiple times.

The prestige that surrounds Disney World was well noted, making the park itself the standard to which others are compared to. Many respondents could not describe Universal Studios without comparing it to Disney World. The term “sub-par Disney” was used by one respondent. Another comment that was made was “its not Disney”. Along those same lines a guest commented that it was nice but Disney was better. One interviewee went so far as to state that Universal couldn’t hold a candle to Disney. All of these comments seem to show a pattern of holding Disney World to a higher standard to which Universal does not compare.

Six of the interviewees did not seem to think of Universal Studios as any better or worse than Disney World, but rather as just a different experience. Some adjectives that had a more positive theme to them that were used to describe Universal Studio’s atmosphere were fun and adventurous. It was also perceived to be more amusement park like, not any better or worse than Disney but rather a different focus. One said it was just as fun as Disney, but not as “princessy”, making note of that aspect of the Disney culture and how prevalent it is. The rest of the interviews that are unaccounted for involved those that had never been to Universal Studios.

## Discussion

My experiences bear strong resemblance to the findings of Goffman (1959). Walt Disney World is all about presentation and the preservation of that presentation. There is a clear front for the performers, or when put in Disney’s terminology, there is a clear



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on stage area for the cast members. On the park’s side of the interaction, much is done to exhibit oneself and the environment in ways that are not natural. This portrayal is meant to be seen as reality, as Goffman states, “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (1959, ch. 1, p. 17).

A great deal of effort is put into making the illusion seem real to the millions of park guests each year. At times this effort even goes so far as to force the cast members to engage in “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983). There are many times when cast members are forced to appear happy and pleasant even when they may be miserable. I can recall multiple situations in which I was made to smile and engage with guests when I was ill-tempered. One particular circumstance occurred in July when it was extremely hot outside and my shift was to sell merchandise outside. I was very hot, tired, and cranky due to the circumstances. I tried to go backstage for short breaks in order to get water and cool down, however the managers did not approve of this. They wanted me to go back on stage and be even more active than I previously was. I knew that I did not have the physical or emotional capacity to interact with guests in my normal fashion. This did not seem to matter much to the bosses. In their eyes, Walt Disney World guests deserve the same level of service regardless of when they choose to attend the parks. Therefore, how I felt at that time needed to be changed, not the circumstances that led to those distraught feelings. On a much smaller scale, anytime a cast member is having a bad day, for whatever reason, they are not allowed to let that show to the guests. This would break their character and as a result the illusion of the park. While this quest for perfection has created an experience for guests that is viewed

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as the best in its line of business, at times the cast member’s emotional well being is put at stake to achieve this. To attain this ideal standard, the performances of cast members must conceal any action which is inconsistent with the espoused values of Walt Disney World (Goffman, 1959).

Walt Disney World’s thorough training process is done to ensure that park guests only see the finished product of a cast member. They are not to know how that person acted prior to their Disney grooming or once outside of the Disney realm (Goffman, 1959). This training expresses the need to conceal any distress a cast member may feel. In this manner, the controlling aspect of Walt Disney World extends to the emotions of their cast members.

While Walt Disney World has aimed to make their park an experience for people of all ages, during my interviews the most common answer to the question as to what brought that person to the park was that they were there for another member of the family, yet it did not seem that anyone was unhappy to be there or that they regretted the decision. Why is it that these people did not have an inclination to visit Walt Disney World for themselves? If we combine the three most popular answers for reason of attendance, here for another family member, convenience, or work, each which state a passive desire to visit Walt Disney World, it seems odd that it should be the most highly attended theme park in the world (*Global Attractions* 2012). Perhaps these people did not want to say that they wanted to come to Walt Disney World for themselves as adults since it is believed by some to be a place made for children. Furthermore, many responses dealt with the theme of childhood directly. It seems as though Walt Disney

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World is firmly rooted in the minds of many as a place for childhood to run free, either for actual children or the child inside of an adult.

The responses that gave rise to perceptions of the Walt Disney World atmosphere were not very strongly worded. For a vacation spot that is viewed as the best in the business and who themselves use such strong vocabulary, the adjectives expressed by park guests were quite weak. They simply suggest a general enjoyment, not a place capable of making dreams come true as promised. A few of the respondents even focused on negative aspects. For a place with such an overwhelmingly positive projection these negative aspects are quite incongruent.

Many interviewees created their own words to describe the atmosphere but when presented with the words that Walt Disney World chose they then agreed, although they could not always state why these words rang true. Walt Disney World focuses a lot of attention on magic, in the movies that are brought to the park, the theming of the rides, and the crafting of the environment. Despite this, park guests seem to be unable to pinpoint any magic experience that they have had for the most part. If magic is such an important aspect of the Walt Disney World experience, why can't more park guests express that they have felt it for themselves?

The interviewees that made note of the prestige of Disney were multiple. Walt Disney World has garnered this prestige through its connection to childhood and innocence. Disney products are typically a part of every American child's life. Therefore, Walt Disney World becomes associated with childhood and innocence, making it a sacred place for many (Wasko, 2001). These respondents view Walt Disney World as the best of the best, as the one who sets the standards which no other can reach.

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However, as stated before, not many people had strong words to describe Walt Disney World. This falls in line with Pettigrew’s findings (2011) that perceptions of the park do not always align with actual experiences. Guests would relay to me that Walt Disney World is the best vacation experience, yet they could only postulate that it had a “fun” atmosphere, which could also be said of a normal day out. Why then is it that Walt Disney World is the best of the best when it is only perceived by some to have the same characteristics of a normal day? There were those that did not think of the other theme park in question, Universal Studios, as any less of an experience. These people appear to not buy into the aura of Walt Disney World. It is unclear what has happened to make it so that certain people are not as impressed by the Walt Disney brand. Perhaps the company has gone too far in the area of control that has made it too much of a contrived experience for some guests.

## **Future Research**

Although I believe that I have gathered some well rounded information from both sides of the table I do admit that there were some mistakes made in the production of my research, which I would correct if I had the chance to do future research on the topic. Due to time constraints of my leaving Walt Disney World I had to conduct my interviews before I fully knew what my research questions were. Had I fully thought out the paper prior to the formulation of my interview questions I may have gone into more detail with the guests. I would attempt to discover where the disconnect enters the equation. I would also have made better note of my experiences as a cast member. I could have made a journal of any relevant information, such as training procedures or

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interactions that led to emotional labor. There was not much forethought prior to the inception of this analysis. If I was able to attempt this undertaking again a lot more would have been put into the planning stage.

## **Conclusions**

It seems to be apparent that Walt Disney World has a prestige that no other can match. Whether this perceived prestige has made Walt Disney World a seminal company or the prestige is the result of years of excellence is hard to distinguish. Somewhere there is a divide between perceptions and experiences that occur within the realm of Walt Disney World. That is not to say that the Walt Disney Company is not the best or that it is not a magical place for everyone, I just mean to suggest that the intended impressions are not translated to every guest in the same manner. There seems to be a crucial ingredient missing for many park guests, the actual “magic” within the park. Is this absent ingredient a failure on the part of Walt Disney World despite their control over the park or is it due to misgivings of the consumers?

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