Evermore Park: Audience Takeover and the Role of the Twenty-First Century Spectator in Immersive Experiences

Elise Raycel Haines
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/8517

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Evermore Park: Audience Takeover and the Role of the Twenty-First Century Spectator in Immersive Experiences

Elise Raycel Haines

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Megan Sanborn Jones, Chair
Kimball Jensen
Wade James Hollingshaus

Department of Theatre and Media Arts
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2020 Elise Raycel Haines
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

Evermore Park: Audience Takeover and the Role of the Twenty-First Century Spectator in Immersive Experiences

Elise Raycel Haines
Department of Theatre and Media Arts, BYU
Master of Arts

Supportive fan bases in live events are more than casual viewers. They are the result of an active audience who have shifted the power dichotomy between producers and viewers via their range of participation. Drawing from scholars like Jacques Ranciere, Henry Jenkins, and Adam Alston, this essay uses Evermore Park in Pleasant Grove, UT, as a case study to review levels of engagement within spectatorship, and particularly how fandom can lead to audience takeover of immersive spaces. Evermore Park is a unique site that sits at the intersection of all three performance genres--immersive theater, park studies, and live action role-play. It is ripe for takeover as the producers encourage audiences to participate in increasingly liberal ways. This paper specifically focuses on the powerful position of the “fan” to contest producers and take over the space through their influence over the narrative, costume design, and online presence.

Keywords: audience, fan, immersion, theme park, live action role-play, co-creation, takeover
I would like to thank Ben Phelan for helping me choose this topic amidst my many interests, and Megan Sanborn Jones for her ever helpful feedback during the writing process and for being an inspiration and advocate for students. I would also like to thank Kimball Jensen for introducing me to the vast world of media convergence and fandom, and Wade Hollingshaus for his feedback and active membership on my committee. I am thankful to the Evermore production team and their excitement and willingness to discuss the park; and to the fans who inspired it all. Lastly, I thank my family—Teresa Osorio for the countless hours of tending Estil. Estil, for her patience and hugs. And Nathan Haines, whose contributions have been remarkable and immeasurable.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spectrum of Audiences and Fans</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersections: The Audience Member in Immersive Spaces</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Takeover</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Takeover</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Over the Show</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Nettleton Mill and pond in Evermore Park ................................................................. 2
Figure 2. Spectrum of participatory spectatorship diagram......................................................... 10
Figure 3. Intricate stage make-up on official Evermore Frost Lady ......................................... 21
Figure 4. First map of Evermore Park 2018 ............................................................................. 23
Figure 5. Map of Evermore Park aurora season 2019-2020 ..................................................... 24
Figure 6. Facebook post by Kris Kingsolver ............................................................................. 33
Figure 7. Original Character Portraits of “World Walkers” in fan-made costumes ................. 34
Figure 8. Roes starts Evermore Spirit Week with Fan Post ...................................................... 4
Introduction

On the evening of Saturday January 25th, 2020, I entered Evermore Park for my fifth time to find that the town of Evermore was holding a trial for a mysterious witch character named Ginley. She was accused of poisoning pies and assaulting various Evermorians. I discovered that the jury who would decide Ginley’s fate would be made up of “world walkers” or audience members who would like to participate. Viewing this as an excellent opportunity to be a participant-observer of audience co-creativity, I entered my name into the lottery. The trial began at 7:00 pm in a large tavern-like hall called Vander’s Keep, where twelve jurors were selected. The majority of audience members had come dressed in homemade costumes, and many were performing as characters of their own. As names were called for the jury, cheers would erupt from various fan groups when they heard that their friends had been chosen to participate. I was not chosen from the lottery, but stayed for an additional two hours to observe the trial unfold. The trial was not rehearsed, it was improvised by the Evermore actors, who brought up various witnesses and interrupted each other with long arguments. Finally, the jury made up of random audience members were taken to a separate room where they decided that Ginley would be dropped of all charges.

The trial I witnessed that evening would never happen again, nor had anyone seen it before. Park directors describe Evermore as a “growing entity”, indicating that the narrative and conceptual content of the evening is determined on what the audience and the actors create

---

1 To enter my name into the lottery I had to first obtain signatures from two Evermore characters, each requiring me to perform certain tasks. One character, a knight, sponsored me after having a friendly conversation with him. The other was a bard and fiddler, who would only give her signature if I agreed to learn a dance. I obtained the signatures and entered my name for the trial.

together. The aim of the creative team is to allow the storylines within Evermore to “grow” according to what occurs that evening between the audience members and the actors. In this example of a town trial, the producers designed an opportunity for the audience members to affect the narrative and take over the performance. The character of Ginley could have been charged with murder and executed if the audience members had chosen to ‘delete’ her character. With a significant role in the decision-making process, the audience members had the power to complete, influence, change, and further the narrative within the performance space. This demonstrates the highly participatory and centralized role of twenty-first century spectators in immersive spaces.

Figure 1. Nettleton Mill and pond in Evermore Park. This is one of fourteen locations within the park.
Evermore Park opened in 2016 in the city of Pleasant Grove, Utah. It is a gothic-styled, European-like village on a plot of eleven acres, built to embody a world of fantasy. The aim is to immerse its guests into a fantastical land known as Evermore. The landscape includes full scale thatched roofed buildings, taverns, mills, a mausoleum with a dungeon of haunted catacombs, an archery range, a faerie garden, and several other ruins and edifices that create a fantastical realm. The characters or “citizens” of Evermore who inhabit this town are stock fantastical characters: witches, fairies, knights, elves, pirates, bards, etc. Evermore invites audience members to come interact with actors who can send them on quests or help them join one of the six guilds by sending them on adventures within the park.

The Evermore Park experience intersects with various genres of performance including immersive theatre, theme parks, and live action role-play or LARPing, which I will discuss more extensively in this essay. It borrows elements from these types of experiences, creating a new hybrid experience park with a loose narrative structure, attempting to place the audience member in a position to influence the narrative and create their own experience. On the official website, the park itself is additionally described as a “blend of theme park...and theatrics,”\(^3\) a “new realm,” “experience park,” and “a fantasy village.”\(^4\) This developing park is an example of a twenty-first century venue which invites audiences to do more than just spectate, but rather to participate in whatever way they choose.

After two years of development, financial struggles, and changes in production teams, the park isn’t what many would consider a polished product. It has many underdeveloped elements, including buildings that aren’t finished, and a rather incoherent and incohesive narrative

---

structural model that leaves first time audiences uncertain of their role in the park.\textsuperscript{5} The producers do not have strict expectations or a clear initial contract, either written on paper or implied through formal theatre etiquette: guests simply enter the park, are handed a map, and then are free to do whatever they like.

Despite these shortcomings, Evermore has acquired a unique fan base who now enter the park donning their own self-made costumes to become a character in a live action role-play style, ready to interact, discover, and even challenge what the Evermore team has in store for them. In many ways, the dedicated Evermore fan base has taken over the park in order to role-play and co-create on their terms. These fan-made characters have such a presence in the park, that the Evermore production team had to create a special Evermore emblem to be worn by the official characters in order to distinguish them from the acting audience members. Since this audience takeover, the park has morphed into what Evermore audiences have co-created with the Evermore actors. These fans actively try to uncover new storylines while also bringing their collective discoveries and fan-made stories together. Notwithstanding its organizational flaws and a rather “fly by the seat of your pants” acting style, the park has still managed to obtain a fascinating following who hold producers accountable for their narratives. Fans do this in various ways, such as tracking narratives, following characters closely, and challenging the creators by revealing plot holes.

Evermore fans have also employed the internet and technology to discuss their plot theories, personal costume creations, and their own character development. This power to

\textsuperscript{5} The purpose of this paper is not to criticize Evermore Park’s theatrical failings, but rather to discuss the significant co-creative powers of the unique fan base it has acquired. Thus, I will not focus on the shortcomings of the park (though it would be a compelling critique into immersive structures), but rather I will focus on the audience members who have figured out how to navigate and even take over Evermore.
interact with Evermore Park not just within the immersive space, but also outside it on fan forums, websites, podcasts and more, has led to a larger level of participation and conceptual takeover through media literacy. Media studies scholar Henry Jenkins discusses the influence audiences have in this type of participatory culture. He explains, “Audiences empowered by these new technologies...are demanding the right to participate within the culture. Producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues.”\(^6\) Ironically however, the pervasive participatory culture that Evermore Park producers have employed has swung heavily in favor of audience’s taking control, as producers now find themselves reacting and responding to their audience’s creations and requests. More intriguingly, this precedence has led to a loss of control over the park: the producers built a participatory experience, yet they quickly discovered that they cannot entirely contain the extent of participation.

Evermore Park is ripe for audiences to take over because it sits at the intersection of three performance genres—immersive theater, park studies, and live action role-play—in such a way that encourages audiences to participate in increasingly liberal ways. I argue that Evermore Park is a case study that exhibits various levels of engagement from audience members. In particular, it highlights the powerful position of the “fan” to contest producers and take over the space via their fan-made characters and online interactions.

The Spectrum of Audiences and Fans

I have been in a unique position to track and experience the park firsthand since its opening in Fall 2018. I was intrigued with the idea of the park and first attended during its opening season as a spectator, during which I found myself disappointed with its lack of structure and guidance for audience members. I decided to analyze the park in a scholarly way to determine why the park was struggling financially, personally disappointing, yet performatively intriguing in regards to various levels of fandom and audience engagement. My personal research has included various participant-observer experiences in the park where I documented my experiences, such as the trial scene. I have visited the park during each of their three major seasons, in a largely observational role, while sometimes engaging with characters on introductory quests.7 I also asked guests questions about their experience in the park, introducing myself as a researcher, and then later documenting our conversations as field work.

My primary research into the fan community was obtained directly from spectators sharing their experiences with me via the two active Facebook Fan pages where I posted a google survey for members with three questions regarding their ability to co-create within the park.8 In regards to learning from the production team about their methods, I have conducted live personal interviews and email interviews with key producers. Finally, I attended hours of Evermore production team panels at the Life, The Universe, and Everything Conference in February 2020. Through this research I came to notice the wide range of audience behaviors on display at the park.

7 1) Aurora, a winter season based on Nordic fantasy and a Charles Dickens “wonderland”; 2) Mythos, a celebration of light during the summer season, and 3) Lore, a Halloween experience exploring battles with darkness.
In this paper I will primarily use the terms “audience member” and “fan” when referring to different participants within Evermore Park. There are various names that could be applied to the Evermore audience member: the park itself calls them “world walkers.” Josephine Machon, immersive theatre scholar, describes audience members as, “the audience-participant-performer-player [who] is anchored and involved in the creative world via her or his own imagination, fused with her actual presence, fused with her bodily interaction with the physical (and sometimes virtual) environments and other human performers.” Machon makes it clear that it is difficult to assign a name to these complex audience members, as they simultaneously participate, perform, and play within the space. In this paper I primarily use the term “audiences” in reference to general participants within the park. General audiences attend the park casually, and tend to not frequent the park on a regular basis. I then use the term “fan” to describe devoted audience members who have increased interest in the park, and continually engage with the park, whether in person or online. Fans tend to be the spectators who take over the park, but audience members are also capable of takeover as well.

Audience members have historically been scrutinized by scholars as passive beings who need to be awakened by a Brechtian verfremdungseffekt, or alienation effect, to help them recognize their realities. Immersive theater scholar Adam Alston, describes that the purpose of verfremdungseffekt is to “jolt audiences out of docility...to facilitate the audience’s realisation that fiction is not what they encounter within the ritual of theatre, but in the socioculturally coded world outside of the theatre.” Yet Evermore showcases a wide range of audience interactivity with various levels of engagement that exist within audience members, particularly those fans.

---

who invest significantly and repeatedly in the experience. Jacques Rancière’s theories concerning the emancipated spectator reevaluated historical assumptions about the audience by positing every audience member’s capabilities to critically evaluate and participate in art. His analysis insists that theatre makers should assume spectators have the capability of equal critical thought to that of the producers. Ranciere explains, “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting...viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of position. The spectator also acts...she observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way…”

Ranciere's foundational observations about the inherent power of the spectator are expanded in venues like Evermore, where audiences are not just sitting and watching, but are moving through the space and creating their own adventures along the way. Perhaps some audiences are trapped by passivity, but I suggest that there are various levels of engagement even within emancipated spectatorship.

Here I turn to immersive theatre scholar Adam Alston and his book Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation. Alston’s work on the productive spectator provides a provocative way to look at various levels of engagement. While I do not focus on the neoliberal politics or economic implications that Alston analyzes through immersive work, his notion of “productive participation” illuminates the various means in which audiences participate and produce in live immersive events. Alston explains, “Audiences in immersive theatre are often asked to do something more than watch, think and feel so that they can feel...”

12 Alston, 4.
more of the work and feel more intensely: to interact, to roam freely through a space, or set of spaces, to speak with others, and so on. As involvement increases in immersive theatre, I contend, so does the intensification of audience productivity...“13 As Alston argues, increased involvement in a performance leads to greater audience productivity. Audiences in Evermore Park can choose how involved they will be, and in turn this affects how productive their experience will be on the spectrum of participation.

I argue that there are various levels of audience engagement, dependent on the audience’s productive participation. For example, I visited Evermore various times as a critical observer, indeed, as a productive participant, free to critically think and form connections using my background in performance and knowledge of audience reception. I was more engaged than the casual audience member, such as large families that I witnessed who entered and wandered throughout the park, uncertain of their role, looking for a pumpkin patch experience to entertain them for the Halloween season.

However, I did not ever commit to the same type of spectatorship as the Evermore fan, who produces their own characters and costumes, publishes fan made material, or continually influences the culture of Evermore through online interactions. As fans become more involved with the park, their production and creativity also increase. I argue that fandom is the highest level of engagement on the spectrum of participatory spectatorship, as this “fanaticism” results in not only observers, but in creators (see figure 2 below). The power of the “fan” on the spectrum of participation, and their ability to take over immersive spaces is the focus of this essay. As fans create their own works, they begin the process of takeover, and challenge producers in conceptual ownership.

13 Alston, 9.
Henry Jenkins, media and audience studies scholar, focuses on the merging lines between audiences and producers in his book *Convergence Culture*. His work is foundational to this discussion of co-productive audiences in immersive spaces, as I relate co-productivity to the important performance term “co-creation.” Using media texts, such as *Survivor, American Idol, The Matrix* and *Harry Potter*, Jenkins discusses the complications that arise between participatory audiences and producers. In my work, I translate Jenkins’s astute media observations to the live performance world. Jenkins’s definition of participatory culture serves as my definition for co-creation: “Culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”15 In live immersive spaces this co-creation refers to the productivity of the audience member via their contributions in the form of conversations, presence, and actions to create and circulate new content/storylines within and without the space. As Machon explained earlier, audience members are “involved in the creative world.”16 This involvement via their interactions, especially interactions that complete or alter

---

14 Jenkins, 3.
15 Jenkins, 290.
16 Machon, 62.
the narrative, or establish the concept, all fall under the term “co-creation.” Twenty-first century audiences are accustomed to participatory experiences, and even expect to become involved as a respected part of the production.

**Intersections: The Audience Member in Immersive Spaces**

Immersive theatre is a twenty-first century performance form in which audiences are immersed into the performance itself, via the space and design. There typically is no stage, and audiences interact with the environment as well as the actors as a story unfolds around them. For example, in the highly successful piece by immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, *Sleep No More*, audiences travel through the “McKittrick Hotel,” a large warehouse with various rooms to explore. Audience members wear masks, and are invited to watch various choreographed scenes, based on Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The experience of wandering a large warehouse is highly sensory, and places the audience member in a participatory position, as they not only spectate but also co-create within the performance. Audiences co-create with their presence: they alter the blocking, interact with specific performers or set pieces and by so doing create a live co-produced performance. Alston provides an in-depth analysis of the complicated role of the audience member in immersive theatre.

“Immersive theatre centres on the production of thrilling, enchanting or challenging experience, which feature as an important part of an immersive theatre ‘artwork’ that audiences co-produce by doing more than watching, or by augmenting the productivity of watching as a prospectively participating spectators. Audiences might roam freely through spaces, interact and/or dialogue with performers and/or other audience members, or physically engage with a performance environment that surrounds them completely. They are expected to be alert, engaged, involved and prepared for invigoration. And they are expected to put their psychological and physiological capabilities to work, either through some form of physical exertion, or through an intimate involvement in performance that enlivens the affective possibilities of an uncertain future.” 17

17 Alston, 3.
The aim of Evermore Park is to transport its audiences to a new enchanting realm, where they are free to roam through the environment and interact with actors and other guests to co-produce an experience. Evermore audiences are expected to be attentive and alert, indeed, to find ways to alter and physically engage with all of the elements Alston mentioned. These co-creative audiences are not only a characteristic of immersive theatre, but also of many twenty-first century experiences.

The audience involvement in an immersive space like Evermore is reflective of an increasingly popular experience-based economy. In an experience economy, the purchase of a ticket does not necessarily equate to an exchange of goods, but rather to an experience. Alston describes this experience economy in relation to immersive theatre, “Along with theme parks, themed restaurants, experiential marketing, and so on, immersive theatre is preoccupied with the provision of stimulating and memorable experiences…” When one purchases a ticket to Evermore Park, one is purchasing access to an immersive space, with the intention of having an experience of some kind. Evermore Park sits at the intersection of immersive theatre in the sense that audiences are purchasing an experience. Additionally, immersive theatre and Evermore Park both grant the audience a great amount of freedom to curate their own experience by their choice of where to go and how long to stay at each location.

As both immersive theatre and Evermore Park are part of an experience-based economy, both attempt to use theatrical design to envelop the senses in order to produce an experience. Alston describes these kinds of immersive performances as “experience machines” where all of the elements of the production such as dramaturgy, scenography, choreography surround the

18 Alston, 16.
central aim to “place audience members in a thematically cohesive environment that resources their sensuous imaginative and explorative capabilities as productive and involving aspects of a theatre aesthetic.”

Experience machines are a defining characteristic of immersive spaces, and echo the goal of Evermore Park: to create an environment where audiences can escape reality and immerse themselves into a fantasy world. I will refer to this intersection as an “immersive space,” a location which places audiences at the center of the event in order to create a notable experience.

The term immersion is applied broadly and loosely in contemporary performance practices. Machon discusses the complexity of immersive experiences in her book *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. She states, “I am now certain that ‘immersive theatre’ is impossible to define as a genre, with fixed and determinate codes and conventions, because it is not one.”

Machon understands that immersive theatre is a “broad and contestable” field with “pluralities of practice that exist under this banner” of immersive theatre. Evermore Park falls under this category of “plurality of practice” as in many ways it intersects with immersive elements. In her book, Machon identifies elements that exist within immersive practices, including how immersive spaces are those that affect the senses of the audience member through taste, smell, or touch, like being immersed in water or being provided food or drinks as part of the event.

In the Evermore promotional video, the creators describe the world they are trying to build for their audience: “We are building a stage for living theatre, an immersive environment that our guests can step into and interact with the world around them.”

---

20 Machon, xvi.
21 Machon, xv.
22 Machon, xiv-xv.
them.” The park creators have built the immersive space of a fantastical village to provide a location for audiences to interact with and to participate in. This impressive set design promotes immersion, much like a theme park, in the sense that a guest is literally surrounded by full scale buildings and fantastical characters which spark the senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and even taste upon purchase of a hardy village meal from one of the concession stands, or a drink from the tavern.

The theoretical debate within all of these spaces, however, is whether an audience member can actually influence a performance; or whether the audience member is simply completing a pre-planned, purchased scenario. How much can the Evermore audience member actually change or influence the narrative of the park? Jennifer Kokai and Tom Robson also wrestle with this debate in their book *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience*. Kokai and Robson focus on the Disney theme park experience as a site to review whether guests in park spaces are indeed capable agents, or whether they are simply consumerists within the destination theme park, controlled by a group of artists who carefully regulate the environment. Some scholars argue that these fake spaces promote nothing but passive spectators. Kokai and Robson explain that many scholars, “see Disney purely as force for cultural ill...They see a virus created by Disney that has infected culture generally, with artificiality, consumerism, and lack of depth as its manifestations...In 1986, Eco famously characterized Disney as, ‘An allegory of consumer society, a place of absolute iconism ... it is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots.’”

---

in passive robots. Evermore Park could equally be seen as an artificial, consumer machine, built to commodify its audience members and draw them deeper into the machinations of illusionary creativity via their perceived co-productive powers. Certainly there is a degree of robotic consumerism within the world of park studies. Disney theme parks are a part of the experience economy, and as such could be viewed as corporations that commodify the guest as a passive product. Yet this argument of passivity tends to underestimate the agency and the complexity of the audience member, especially their ability to co-create or even takeover the space.

I lean towards the argument of Kokai and Robson regarding a more complicated perspective on guest agency within park spaces, “Disney guests participate far more actively in the onstage experience than many assert.”

Indeed Kokai and Robson go so far as to argue that Disney theme parks are immersive theatre and the tourists are also actors. I maintain that the lack of choreographed structure and loose organization in Evermore Park does not qualify it as a formal immersive theatre production. Yet it is this very lack of structure that has allowed audience members of Evermore Park to participate actively on the spectrum and even take over the immersive space. Audience members of Evermore Park have the option of participating in a highly active manner during their time in the park, interacting with and even changing the narrative of the park.

Evermore Park does not have nearly as large of a fan base as Disney or other destination theme parks like The Wizarding World of Harry Potter (WWoHP) or The Holy Land Experience, as it does not pull on the nostalgia of any specific beloved story world. Certainly

---

25 Kokai and Robson, 14.
26 Kokai and Robson, 3.
27 Evermore owns eleven acres of land in Pleasant Grove, Utah. In contrast, Disney owns six parks that span thousands of acres in California, Florida, Tokyo, Paris, Shanghai and Hong Kong. It is clear that the numerous fans and locations of Disney’s theme parks greatly outrank the meager village of Evermore Park. Yet, it is precisely
audiences recognize and even attend the park because there is a recognizable fantasy genre being enacted through the stock characters of witches, knights, dragon trainers, wolf tribes and more; but the lack of specificity as well as the wide range of mythology make it a difficult experience to access passively. With no specific text available to reference, the participants who enter the fantastical immersive space must engage and co-create in order to make meaning from the world around them; taking clues from their previous experience with the fantasy tropes on display, but requiring effortful imagination to contextualize a cohesive narrative or a successful experience. Audiences do not have the easy option to simply behave like Eco’s robots or ride familiar theme attractions.

For instance, when one enters the WWoHP, the participants have markers from the world to help create an experience: fans will recognize specific settings from the book such as cloak shops, Diagon Alley, and Olivander’s wand shop. Harry Potter fans can easily take on the robotic consumption role of waving around a $48 wand, watching their interactions become an extension of the carefully controlled machine. In Evermore however, there are no familiar heroes, villains, or markers other than generic locations such as taverns, gardens, and festival locations. Without a particular “beloved” story to lean upon, first time audience members who enter this park are unfamiliar with the Evermorian characters and narrative. Audiences can either awkwardly stroll through the space or they can choose to converse with characters and become active audience members in order to learn more and progress through the park via quests. The very space itself encourages co-creativity and participation from the audience members, if in an awkward manner.

_because of Evermore’s limited resources that make it a location prime for discussing the twentieth century audience takeover within immersive park spaces._

Indeed, it seems that for casual audience members, Evermore Park lives in a space between immersive theatre and theme park: if anything is to happen within Evermore, the audience member has no choice but find a character to engage with, affecting the conversations and even events for the evening. In this sense, I argue that Evermore is a much more participatory space than Disney or other giant theme parks, as the only avenue for entertainment is voluntary action from the audience member to engage with Evermore characters and other audience members. The entire purpose of the park is to fluidly build a shared narrative with actors and other participants. And audiences have used this fluid structure to insert their own characters into the story and seize control of the events of the park.

During the night of the trial I was surprised to find that the majority of jurors selected were in full fan made costumes, and the tavern turned courtroom was filled with audience members who also wore capes, cloaks, dresses—indeed the entire scene looked like a fantastical village had met to witness the trial. The Evermore characters intermingled with the world walkers, as all looked on to watch the trial take place. I observed that the large majority of audience members were fans, choosing to participate as a character they had created; turning the trial into part of a larger live action role-play (LARP). LARP is a rather understudied genre in which the audience and the performers are within the same group of people; in short it is an improvisatory performance form, where participants take on a character and interact in different rule/game systems. Performance studies scholar and LARPer David Owen explains, “A major difference between LARP and other forms of theatre is the relationship between the performance and the audience. In LARP, there is no audience... no one is privy to the full story.”29 For Owen, the full story means that various scenarios can take place throughout the location of the LARP,

and no one participant can possibly know the outcome of the numerous improvised scenes. There are rules in the story, to establish boundaries, and consent, but LARPing is “long-form improvisation.” Similarily, in Evermore Park, no one audience member or producer can track the full story, as over eleven acres of immersive space various events, like the trial I attended, unfold only for those who are there to participate.

The difference between LARPing and Evermore Park is the original intent or purpose of the production. The park hires official actors to be the original characters of the park who are meant to be in control of the story. LARPing events are often more regulated and organized by the participants, and these participants expect to be the performers. Evermore Park was not originally intended to be a “LARPing park;” there is no indication in the initial concept designs that producers planned on audiences creating their own characters in such an active way. The park was meant to be an interactive experience, but there was still meant to be a clear division between the paid performers and the audience members, as in other theme parks. The LARPing audiences, however, rewrote the purposes of the park to serve their own creative designs; in essence, fans started using the park in a way that it wasn’t originally meant to be used by attending in full-fledged costumes and characters. Now the production team seems to cater to this unique fan base, allowing and even encouraging the fans to continue their practices. Little did the creators know that the park would draw out a highly specific fan audience who chose to use it as an arena for their LARPing, and to integrate Evermore’s town and characters into their own improvisational LARPing experience.

These fans are also performers, though unofficial. They certainly do not know the “full story” of the park as Owen describes, as for many of the LARPers the purpose of the evening is

30 Owen, 34.
to work together to discover different histories and events, whether generated from the Evermore producers or from other fans, and enjoy playing fantastical characters. They can then piece these events together afterwards online through forums or podcasts. Evermore Park is now filled with official Evermore characters and LARPing audience members who interact, get to know each other’s characters, and build a conceptual world and a narrative through their interactions. The interplay between the LARPing fan base and the official characters has created a live immersive exchange of narrative and artistic performance, with the audience in a uniquely powerful position of the actor. This leaves the non-fan audience member in a rather observational role on the spectrum, witnessing various performances taking place between fans and official actors.

All three of these spaces—immersive theatre, theme parks, and LARPing—place the audience member in positions of control, with varying ranges of agency, in a unique immersive location. For example, immersive theatre and LARPing both require a co-productive audience. Indeed, LARP uniquely places the audience member in the interchangeable position of observer and performer: the audience member and performer are one in the same. Moreover, the producers of the LARPing experience often also participate as actors, blurring the lines between producer and audience even more. Immersive theatre and theme park spaces are immersive spaces in the sense that the environment itself is often meant to be interacted with, promote immersion, and the audience’s involvement is meant to be considered.

The immersive space of Evermore Park specifically requires actions of the audience member to complete the performance and even create new outcomes for the evening. This agency afforded to the audience member combined with the immersive space intrinsically puts Evermore Park at risk of takeover, as the lack of structure places audiences in a position to do whatever they choose. The audience’s role is even more participatory than that of an immersive
theatre piece or a theme park, as the audience members can literally alter the narrative and can take over the space via their interactions, backstories, and fan-made characters. The LARPing simply adds another aspect where the performing LARPers are in control, working alongside the official Evermore actors. The site is a unique mix of interactivity between an immersive venue, paid actors, and improvisational technique that leave the audience completely in control of their experience. Jenkins writes, “it is the interplay—and tension—between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape.”

The push and pull relationship that Jenkins describes illuminates the relationship between the Evermore production team and the fan base of audience members: their tension is driving the narrative and conceptual changes of Evermore Park, and the audience’s profound influence has taken over the park.

**Narrative Takeover**

The narrative takeover at Evermore Park has been a gradual process which occurred due to a combination of a lack of structure on the production side and a highly proactive audience. The narrative of the park are the scenes and storylines that are planned by the producers, and which unfold within the park. Narrative takeover occurs when audience members and fans alter the original narrative plans of the evening through their own improvisations; it occurs when the actors or producers relent control of the storyline, and the audience’s influence is so profound

---

31 Jenkins, 169.
32 I do not have statistical information about the demographic of who attends the park. From my observational experience, I notice that the majority of fans are adults ranging from their mid-twenties to late thirties. It is an older demographic, with some forty to fifty year olds who are interested in LARP. The repeat guests tend to be adults with jobs who can afford to go to the park on a regular basis. Tickets to Evermore Park cost about $28.00 per evening for an adult. There are no season ticket options, so some fans who attempt to attend as often as possible might spend thousands of dollars per season. The highest I have heard is a fan who attended Evermore 49 times during the Winter Aurora, which would total to about $1372, just for that season.
that they create and control the ensuing narrative. Fans and audiences of Evermore Park are given such a liberal amount of agency within the park, that they are in a unique position to assert their individual control through their improvisations, and eventually take over.

The park initially opened in 2018 with a loose direction for its actors, inviting them to create their own back stories and then to improvise and interact with guests based on their characters. Actors were cast into a certain role, such as a knight or a witch, and were dressed by the impressive costume and make-up department.

Figure 3. Intricate stage make-up on official Evermore Frost Lady from Aurora Season 2019/2020.

33 Bobby Cody (Evermore Showrunner/Creative Director) in discussion at question and answer panel, LTUE Conference. February 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/encl85whciY.
Much of the character backstory was then fleshed out and improvised by the actors. The narrative power at this point was in the hands of the actors, who interacted with guests and introduced their version of the mythology. The actor’s improvisation created narrative inconsistencies within the park. Furthermore, the creative team’s control over the production began to unravel with fifty-plus actors improvising their own scenes and interactions with audience members.

Additionally, the producers did not have a clear role for the audience member. In an introductory YouTube video, producers described the park “as a place where people can go and experience a living theatrical production. We create a world for you to go visit, there is a story behind it and there’s adventures to have.”34 When I entered the park during their opening season, I wandered through the impressive space, noting the full scale buildings and gardens, and asked a few characters who they were, but soon was uncertain what my purpose was. It was as if the producers assumed the guests would enter, wander, and simply enjoy the elaborate spaces they had built and peopled. This exploratory role was not sufficient, as there were not clear guidelines about how to access the advertised adventures.

The original park map lacked detail or instructions, and many guests never received one as the park would often lack a sufficient amount to give to guests. A “Rules of Engagement” banner sat in a corner by the entryway of the park, but it had little information about how to interact with the park as well, and not every guest would read this. Without the necessary guidance from producers to organize the action, audience members were left on their own to create an experience. This lack of structure combined with the encouragement to interact became a site ripe for audience takeover.

Over time audience members started asking for quests or tasks to perform from the characters they found within the park. These proactive audience members demanded more opportunities to participate with performances within the park. In response, the production team adjusted their approach to become more structured. They formed a small writing team to write a general plan for the season, and worked with actors to build their character arcs. By the end of 2019, the production team added six guilds to the park experience that different audience members could join; introductory and advanced quests became a standard part of the experience and were added to the back of a new map design.

Figure 4. First Map of Evermore Park 2018. Note the lack of instructions, it is a decorative handout, but offers no direction about how to engage with the park or the characters.
Figure 5. Map of Evermore Park Aurora Season 2019-2020. Notice how the producers have developed a map that is more audience friendly, with a key, guild information, and labels. The back of this map also contains a beginner quest.

Yet there is still no set script, and no consistent narrative to present to audience members. Each evening is meant to be a different experience where audiences can discover new and progressing events within Evermore. There are various storylines to find and follow with fifty to eighty different characters a night depending on the season. This lack of a consistent structure is one way that opens an immersive space to audience takeover. Certain audiences however, review the park poorly as a result of their wandering confusion, saying it is incomplete and a waste of time. These audience members finished their progression on the spectrum of creative spectatorship in concerns to Evermore Park (see Fig. 2) and either left the park or refused to interact with it further. Other audience members, however, became invested in the park and decided to take matters into their own hands.
One unique example of these performing fans is the LARPing group called “The Syndicate.” This is an entirely separate entity from Evermore and is not officially affiliated with the park, but rather came about because of the park’s existence. “The Syndicate was founded by fans of Utah’s Evermore Park, a Victorian themed town where fantasy role-play is encouraged and reinforced by a character cast, authentic buildings, and an evolving plot.”35 This group uses Evermore as one of the on-site platforms to perform their LARPing activities. Their website provides in-depth details, and a link to a google drive with various documents describing how to get started by building your own character, and expansive rules with how to interact with others, including instructions how to handle “park guests [who] will assume and approach you as if you are [a] cast [member].”36 Their presence contributes to the atmosphere of the park, and they indirectly build upon the immersive space via their voluntary performances and characters for other LARPers and guest attendees. They also interact with Evermore characters, even if they do not strictly include the Evermore characters within their “gameplay unless specifically approved by a Fateweaver or your Guildmaster.”37

LARPers, such as the Syndicate group, use the immersive space of the park to serve their own purposes and they can even include the Evermore characters in their story. Instead of following the Evermore production team’s narrative, they have created their own, while simultaneously influencing the immersive space around them. They have entire separate storylines and guilds for participating members, hijacking the space for their own purposes. Their group policies are respectful of the official Evermore characters, and they also have options to converse and interact with official Evermore storylines as well. Evermore Park has

37 Ibid.
turned into a site of exchange for LARPers who decided to move in, interact with the narrative that Evermore Park offers when it suits them, and also engage in their own complete separate and unique performance in the shared space of Evermore. In essence, the Syndicate uses Evermore’s narrative for its own purposes, or ignores it and plays within the space with its own cast and story. They are fans who have created their own narrative and rules to follow, becoming self-sufficient players, resisting the original intentions and powers of the park. Writing and enacting an independent narrative within the immersive space is a form of narrative takeover.

Caroline Heim’s book *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* highlights the participatory role of the audience member in theatrical performances. While she is often addressing the traditional audience seated in the house observing onstage actors, her chapter titled “Audience as Co-Creator” applies directly to the performative Evermore audience member: “Whether leading or following, the audience works collaboratively with the actors to create the theatrical experience. If the actors’ performances change because of the audience's performance, then the onstage scripted performance...is also changed. The co-created performance is going to be different every night.”

The “onstage performance” of Evermore is often dependent on the choices of the audience members. Not every outcome is left up to chance, indeed, the creators of Evermore seem to have a goal of what they expect to happen every night. Yet, it is the *manner* in which certain outcomes are created that prove that the audience member is capable of taking over the narrative. Evermore fan, Kirsten Manley, wrote in response to my google survey question, “Do you feel like your agency or freedom to choose affects the stories of Evermore? Why or why not?”:

---

Yes! But not every time. And not always that same night. My friends and I have a saying that when we're trying to affect the plot, it's like throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks. From chatting with the actors, I've heard that there are some things that just have to happen, according to what has been scripted. Other moments completely depend on what World Walkers decide to do. Then, there are some moments where something happens that is completely spontaneous and unscripted and was started by a World Walker. During Lore 2018 and Aurora 2018, the freedom of choice, and affecting the plot was pretty much nonexistent. Then during Mythos 2019, I saw a few moments here and there that were caused by World Walkers. During Lore 2019 and Aurora 2019, it has really ramped up to the point where HUGE story beats are World Walker driven. It's very exciting!

This response from Manley is a very astute observation about the ability for audience members to take over the narrative within the park. She observes boundaries by recognizing that not every flex of her agency will result in a plot change. “Throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks” encapsulates the slightly haphazard improvisation techniques the Evermore production team inspires the audience member or fan to use throughout the course of the evening. Yet ultimately, Manley asserts that her agency does affect Evermore’s theatrical and narrative outcomes, and also agrees that they and other world walkers can change outcomes through their performative actions. She also observes the progression of the park to include the agency of the audience members more and more in developing seasons. In a push and pull tension, audiences and producers of Evermore are balancing co-creation with a narrative. Both producers and audience members are interchangeably following Heim’s “leading” and “following” relationship in the live performance space.

Audience takeover occurs when audiences take the lead in the co-creative relationship, and as Evermore lacks a strict structure, audience takeover is more common than in immersive theatrical productions or park spaces. During one of the question and answer panels at the 2019 Life, the Universe, and Everything (LTUE) conference, an audience member asked the Evermore

production team, “With audience participation being so integral with the progression of Evermore, in some cases even affecting the story, what kind of challenges does that present for all of you and how do you control that?” The challenge, as articulated by this audience member, is one of control—how do you limit one’s participation when it is so foundational to the exploratory and participatory nature of the park? For example, immersive theatre company Punchdrunk employs a mask and a code of silence to be kept by audience members, as a form of controlling their participation in Sleep No More. But this is an impossible tool for Evermore Park to employ, seeing as they prohibit masks and they encourage audiences to speak with characters. Evermore isn’t attempting to “control” the audience’s participation at all, rather they are encouraging it and experimenting with where it will take them. Bobby Cody, Evermore actor and now creative director for the park, answered with his own story of how audience members directly changed the events of the evening with their agency and performativity:

“When we first started, the actors created everything for themselves. I created this aspect of my character that was a body thief, hopping from body to body...missing its soul....most people would brush it off...but eventually there was a group of guests that took it very serious. And they were like, ‘we are going to save your soul, we are going to find your soul!’ They spent three and a half hours that evening, thanks to someone, who sent them on this crazy quest, that was just seriously made up in that moment. I quickly ran to the producers at the time and said, ‘so that thing I set up two almost three seasons ago, it's just been activated. They were trying to figure out how to deal with it. In the end, after they [the audience] spent all that time I didn’t want them to think that I would just shut it down. Cause that would be the worst thing, “I just spent three hours of my night to just hit a dead end?” So that ended up expanding this major story arch that happened last summer that changed the entire season in so many ways, because the being I was possessing was basically a mass homicidal murderer that they just unleashed upon the park. And we had to change everything really quick. We had to shift a lot. We weren’t as structured back then; we are definitely a lot more structured now.”

40 Bobby Cody (Evermore Showrunner/Creative Director) in discussion at question and answer panel, LTUE Conference. February 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/encl85whciY.
This anecdote from Cody implies an interesting power struggle with audience members. Cody wanted to respect the work of a specific audience group who had invested three and a half hours of their time to participate and find a character’s soul. In a single night, the entire season of Evermore was transformed in dramatic ways: when this dedicated group of guests managed to release this character’s soul, they also released the homicidal mass murderer plot that the actor had simply added to his backstory seasons ago on his own. The murderer wreaked havoc on the park, and completely uprooted the current season’s narrative. The audience’s ability to affect the narrative was structurally challenging for producers, who didn’t anticipate the actor’s backstory, and more importantly, granted the audience members power to take over the narrative, as they were determined to uncover said backstory.

This account demonstrates that when twenty-first century spectators are given the opportunity to be at the center of the performance, they become powerful enough to take over the production by their labor, especially when the production team relents their control. The audience’s agency significantly changed the following performances that occurred at Evermore and caused the production team to scramble to keep up with the audience who was exposing plot holes within the production, as well as to re-work and re-write future narratives for the park. Evermore fans are now accustomed to their ability to influence the narrative—if the producers decided to have stricter rules or roles for audience members, it could potentially backfire, and anger the fans they have gained. The producers of the park now must balance an attempt to control a narrative structure that has already slipped into the audience’s hands.

Mandy Stout-Johnson, actor and writer for the park, shared an anecdote that is another demonstration of producers responding to the demands of an audience who expect to participate in the performance space of Evermore:
“We had a character who flickered to another realm... A couple of people got really invested in bringing her back. That was not something we had planned for. We had characters running up to me because I was on point that night, we have people who want to do this, this, and this to either contact her or bring this back. What should I do? So, then we talked to [Production team members] Mallory and Chance and we can make this work [sic]. So, it was an on the fly decision for a completely new scene, for a completely new ending [for this character], that we had not even considered! We wanted these world walkers to feel justified in wanting to help this character, because no one else was helping her. Alright, we are going to help you do that, but that was a scramble to find everyone in the park to help put that together in thirty minutes.”

Stout-Johnson’s story is an excellent example of audience members bringing about completely new scenes and endings to Evermore’s narrative. Stout-Johnson also mentions how she wants audience members “to feel justified” in their engagement, and thus didn’t inhibit or stop them. Instead, she scrambled, and allowed the story to grow and react to the performance of the audience member. Both of these anecdotes demonstrate a theater production’s reactionary model toward audience members taking over a pre-set narrative. The Evermore fans rewrote the narrative, and the production team relented. These examples are typical of the various ways that fans take control of the narrative, and the ways in which the producers facilitate their agency.

**Conceptual Takeover**

Fans do not only reshape narrative structures within designated immersive spaces, they continue to create and interact with the artistic renderings outside of the immersive venue, influencing the cultural expectations of the performance. These creations lead to fan-led art, fan-led culture, and in essence a fan-led story. Conceptual takeover occurs when audiences and more particularly fans, set the cultural tone or the expectations for the immersive event. This happens most frequently in Evermore through the fan’s costume design and as well as through online

---

41 Mandy Stout Johnson (Evermore Writer/Actor) in discussion at question and answer panel, LTUE Conference. February 12, 2020.
influences, such as fan pages and video channels. Sharing artistic and narrative interpretations online leads to audience conceptual takeover, the ability to take over the culture and concept of the park via posting expectations for the overall experience.

I believe many of Jenkins’s discussions surrounding fandoms apply directly to the unique Evermore fan base. He explains: “Consumption has become a collective process—and that’s what this book means by collective intelligence....None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power.”

I proffer that this sort of collective intelligence can also be viewed as a form of “collective creating.” It is a source of co-creative power for Evermore fans to come together and share their findings within the park along with their own fan-made creative materials. I am interested in Jenkins use of the word “power.” This is the root of the argument concerning immersive spaces; who indeed holds the power, the creators or the audience members? This idea of collective intelligence being “an alternative source of power” takes an interesting role in an improvisatory experience like Evermore Park, where audience members are oftentimes also creators.

A major part of the collective creative power within Evermore Park is through the fan’s costume design, the primary material culture of the park that helps audiences conceive the world of Evermore. Online fan pages facilitate collective costume design discussions, as fans post pictures of their costumes and receive feedback on their work. The instantaneous conversations provide a collective power to the fan base, as they can set the tone for the type of attire to be worn in an evening in the park, and further take over the culture of the park. Heim demonstrates the importance of costumes to participatory audience members, “Twenty-first century audience

———

42 Jenkins, 4.
performers often arrive at the theatre warmed up, in costume and enthusiastically await their
onstage co-creation.” As mentioned earlier, for my recent visit at the end of January 2020 most
guests had extensive costumes with official Evermore guild patches sewn onto hats and vests that
represented the guild the Evermore fan had chosen to join. Impressive theatrical makeup,
including full prosthetic elven earpieces, colorful contact lenses, and horned headgear was worn
by various audience members. This type of costumed fandom was not present in my earlier visits
to the park, where it was much more common for audience members to be dressed in jeans. The
costume concept developed, and is a manifestation of the hyper-engaged connectivity from the
fan groups, as well demonstrates a certain amount of labor and effort. These fans clearly
prepared and acquired their costume pieces ahead of time, and created characters based on their
understanding of the Evermore world.

The extensive costume designs in Evermore’s fan base has led to an audience takeover of
the dress etiquette for guests in the park and has reaffirmed fantastical identities and character
designs for the in-park space. Perhaps this is precisely the reason why Disney theme parks
prohibit guests who are fourteen years or older to wear costumes: it is a tool for controlling the
roles the audience plays and prevents character takeover of the park. Essentially, the Evermore
audience inserted themselves as stylized performers via their costumes, challenging official park
characters and staging a conceptual takeover.

Kris Kingsolver posted a photo of her homemade masquerade costume for Evermore
Park. She states, “Though the Masquerade has been postponed, I’m still working on my
outfit!” Despite events being postponed due the COVID-19 outbreak, fans are still actively

---
43 Heim, 153.
44 Kris Kingsolver, “Though the Masquerade has been postponed. I’m still working on my outfit!” Facebook Post,
building and sharing their work. The image of a bodice in front of a sewing machine and other sewing materials signifies creation and labor, and literal refashioning outside of the park in preparation for active engagement within the park. This post depicts an audience member on the participatory spectator spectrum. Kingsolver uses her knowledge of Evermore park and interprets the performance space, she then refashions her interpretation into a tangible costume creation, making her more than a casual audience member and marking her as a fan.

![Facebook post by Kris Kingsolver. Here she shares her own perception of what sort of outfits could be worn to the masquerade, and shares her design labor.](image)

Additionally, this type of participatory creation generates a culture and perception of what sort of fashion is worn within Evermore. The fans in this case are the costume designers for the production and are dictating what the magical concept is according to their perception and interpretations. Attending the park in costume is certainly not required, as the official Evermore
website does not encourage costumes anywhere on the site other than clarifying that masks and weapons are not allowed on the premises. Instead, this costume-based performance is audience led: through sharing their Evermore costumes online, fans have set their own dress standard for an evening in the park. This is a different standard than originally conceptualized by the creative team. Producers have mentioned that audiences attending and transforming into a character is purely audience driven. This is a manifestation of the impressive control the fans have on the atmosphere and dress expectations for other audience members attending the park. General audience members can still attend in jeans, so the costumes seem to provide a clear classification between casual audience members and fans on the spectrum of participation.

Figure 7. Original Character Portraits of “World Walkers” in fan-made costumes. Their extensive and detailed costuming has led to the majority of audiences attending in costume. Photos posted by Ever More Adventuress on Facebook Fan sites.

The Evermore fan is able to share their costume interpretations of the park with others on fan sites and networks. The act of sharing and connecting online is a co-creative venture between audience members, who build their personal experience through their search and enrich their fandom via these outlets. The conceptual takeover continues as fans use the internet to share other fan made materials. Just as the fans took over the park’s dress etiquette for audiences via their extensive costumes, fans are continuing to take over the conceptual space through their online discussions and sharing their fan made materials. Jenkins describes these fans as “grassroots intermediaries” or “participants—for example, bloggers, or fan group leaders—who actively shape the flow of media content but who operate outside any corporate or governmental system.”

Fan intermediaries are an essential part of Evermore Park, as they shape the information about the park effectively, and circulate the Evermore culture through their online power. These fans reach a high level of engagement on the spectrum through their invested participation. Intermediaries update fan groups via blogs, chats, Facebook sites about the events in the park, and lead out conversations much like a dramaturg would for a live post-show discussion. Continued co-creation that occurs when intermediaries or fans post fan-made art, homemade costumes, poems, songs via the internet expands the audience member’s influence on Evermore culture, leading to conceptual audience takeover.

In a panel interview with the Evermore production team, production members mentioned how audiences hold them accountable with what I observe to be collective power. Bobby Cody, current showrunner and creative director for the park said in a panel interview, “We really listen to our audience, like we really listen. We read the spoilers list [online fan conversation about

---

47 Jenkins, 285.
park quests], we read all of those things, we take into consideration what the audience wants. Now most of the suggestions they make we’ve already attempted and tried and failed at those things.”48 This type of listening from the creators suggests that they are also making decisions within the park based upon what the collective audience discusses on their spoiler and fan pages. Not only are fans and audience members leading actions within the park, but their shared creations and discussions outside of the park is a power that influences the conceptual decisions. Cody recognizes that the production team has even tried to implement some of the audience’s suggestions into the Evermore narrative. Even if some of these attempts fail, it is still an example of the collective audience using their powers of direct engagement to influence the very concept of the experience.

In Kristen Daly’s *Cinema 3.0*, she discusses how the digital age has ushered in a new kind of cinema, what she calls the “cinema of the user.” This new kind of cinema can also be applied to a new kind of theatre, a live performance space where interactive audiences participate with the content of the immersive space across various media platforms. “Movies...are made to be one artifact in multimedia, interactive cinematic experience involving websites, video games, DVD’s contests, mobile media and so on. Thus, many film narratives are constructed with these other platforms in mind; together they create the full experience.”49 I translate Daly’s interactive cinematic experience to this live immersive space, as the Evermore production team attempts to speak to the audience members through various mediums and therefore must have these other media platforms in mind. However, using these various mediums can be difficult to track and maintain consistency across various platforms. The Evermore production team is spread thin, and

---

48 Bobby Cody (Evermore Showrunner/Creative Director) in discussion at question and answer panel, LTUE Conference. February 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/encl85whciY.
from my observation, is unable to consistently maintain the various publications it attempts to host, again leaving the opportunity for intermediary fans to use their adept skills to take control.

For example, Evermore Park publishes various materials for audiences to engage with and co-create, such as an adventure card game containing all of the characters from the park with information about them or a YouTube channel. The YouTube channel has been poorly updated, with the latest promotional video being from December 2019, and then the next most recent being from December 2018. Compare this to an intermediary fan like Ever More Adventuress, who updates her YouTube channel monthly with updates about the current happenings in the park, clear through the 2020 season. The production team has also published a novella of four chapters titled *Evermore Historium: Coins of the Revenant*, for fans to read and discover more about the history of Evermore. ⁵⁰ They have also started publishing weekly newspapers in the park, titled the “The Evermore Gazette” containing updates on the events of the park in case an audience member missed attending. Fans, however, repost the official novella and “Evermore Gazette” newspaper on fan sites, to ensure everyone has the opportunity to see them, as the official Evermore Park is not always up to date with their information.

On the website tripadvisor.com, a guest recommends “checking out some of the Facebook groups before attending as it will help you get to know what is currently going on as there is a story which progresses.” ⁵¹ This reviewer also mentions that doing this type of “research beforehand” is very helpful for the experience. The fans are controlling the conceptual presentation to outside audience members. Audience take over through online spaces occurs


when fan intermediaries set the perception and expectations about the story and experience, before their interaction with the narrative even begins. The fan’s ability to communicate and post updates and prepare the audience more effectively than the park’s production department demonstrates how the audience have taken over the publicity, image, and content of the park. The capability to disseminate information quickly and effectively place fans in positions of control over the production as they can select the content that is spread and generated among the community.

“Ever More Adventuress” is an intermediary fan who hosts live interviews of official Evermore characters on her Instagram page. She is in control of the interviews, and instead of the park hosting guests, the audience member hosts the characters. Her goal for her fan Facebook page and additional blogs is to “share photos, videos, stories, cosplays, and more to help as many as possible connect with this incredible place whether they come to the park often, once a year, or only hope to come someday. I want to connect you with the story, the people, the details, the Adventure [sic].” The content is self-generated, her website contains various resources for fans to piece together the park, including a blog, plot recaps, a YouTube channel where she also hosts summaries of the events in the park. “Ever More Adventuress” is generating an impressive amount of transmedia information that is contributing to the participatory culture and content that is Evermore.

Four other fans of Evermore Park have created a podcast titled “World Talkers: An Unofficial Evermore Fancast.” The podcast covers “the stories, the characters, the production,

---

54 Ever More Adventuress, “Ever More Adventuress,” YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXLjDDx7hbD6H__ee05hDvQ.
and the experience of Evermore Park.” From my monitoring of the fan pages, this is where a vast number of fans turn to listen to updates about the park as they generate podcasts bi-weekly and find summaries of the events for the different seasons. These fan sites and fan podcasts are the places with the most up to date information about the park. As an audience member interacts with these various mediums, they merge their personal experience with the narrative of Evermore Park and learn about the culture and even history of the world of Evermore through the fan’s perspective and creations. The fans are setting the tone, sharing the history, and the updated narratives of what is happening in the park: via their online fluency they have taken over the conceptual information that is transmitted and have set the standard for what to expect within Evermore.

On the week of March 23-28, 2020, Evermore fan Ariel Roes helped organize an Evermore Spirit Week. As Utah valley was on quarantine hit by COVID-19, the fans could not go to the park. This Spirit Week was meant to be a dedicated week “that is about making and sharing art that embodies how you see Evermore to others. Like a favorite scene or place in Evermore or characters from there.”55 During this fan led spirit week, fans were invited to draw, paint, craft, dress in costume, sing a song, write a story, create a dance, share a moment of themselves at the park, spotlight another world walker or park character, or write a love letter to Evermore Park. This is audience-led collective culture setting via online takeover: fans mobilized to create their impressions and experiences within the park. They shared their ideas, asked questions like “Does this look like something you think the pirates would wear?” and received feedback on their interpretations through a week of collaboration. Through their

interactions the fans interpreted what the “spirit” of Evermore is, and collectively expressed the culture of Evermore.

Figure 8. Roes starts Evermore Spirit Week with Fan Post, calling for a sharing of interpretations.

Various fan artists, including Lily Wright, invited others to post photos of themselves in costume and offered to sketch free fanart of their character. “Finally found my stylus so I guess I’ll join in! Comment a picture and I’ll sketch your character! Edit: If anyone wants their drawing fully colored and finished let me know! I’d be happy to do it!”56 This was an act of co-creation between audience members, crossing mediums of costume design and illustration.

56 Lily Wright, “Finally found my stylus...” Facebook Post, April 5, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/groups/everfolk/permalink/2643491422603104/.
Wright’s post generated 80 comments, and the artist drew black/white and color sketches of each submission.

This is collective creation. Additionally, it demonstrates an amount of artistic fluency and literacy within the collective audience, and such literacy can lead to conceptual takeover. Jenkins explains, “Literacy is understood to include not simply what we can do with printed matter but also what we can do with media. Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves.”

Literacy leads to takeover, and in a world where audiences can create and quickly circulate content in online spaces, they assert their conceptual control and expectations. The Evermore fan not only asserts control within the park through live performativity and interactivity, but also demonstrates further directive powers and artistic literacy by processing, translating, and creating their own works inspired off of the performative event; further blurring the lines of authorship and gaining conceptual control over the park.

**Taking Over the Show**

Supportive fan bases are more than casual viewers. They are the result of an active audience who have shifted the power dichotomy between producers and viewers via their participation. Jenkins writes, “Corporations imagine participation as something they can start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market...Consumers, on the other side, are asserting a right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish.”

---

57 Jenkins, 170.
58 Jenkins, 169.
an example of a corporation experimenting with their audience, constantly changing their structure in reaction to the demands of their powerful audience. Trevor Ballard, one of the producers and creative team members wrote in an email correspondence with me:

“Our strategy for making the audience the heroes has gone back and forth multiple times across the seasons. In the original Lore 2018, we had the champion quest line, which allowed a select few World Walkers to become named Champions of Evermore. This was excellent for capturing that idea of being a hero for those specific guests, but was actually disastrous for every guest in the park who didn't happen to complete that quest; quite a few guests left the park furious about it. So, we redirected from that, but unfortunately over-corrected and caused guests to become flat-out bored in Aurora 2018 and Mythos 2019. We found a decent middle ground in Lore 2019, and have attempted to perfect the idea from there. The Wolf Ceremony at the end of the Wolves of Winter questline in Aurora 2019 was a major success. However, it's still a work in progress. We're constantly asking internally how we can involve the World Walkers more. How we can make them feel like the heroes. How we can give them meaningful decisions that change the course of the story. We're not there yet, but each season we get closer.”

The Evermore production team is navigating the difficult structural questions of freedom, control, and how to manage the highly engaged audience of the twenty-first century. Evermore is not a large corporation like Disney or Warner Brothers. They are much more dependent on the reactions of their fan base and consider the role of the audience in the design from season to season. Ballard’s statement is filled with language that keeps the audience at the center of their work and incorporates the audience’s agency as the ongoing goal. Ballard says at the end of his statement “we’re not there yet, but each season we get closer.” He is describing the interactive relationship the producers have with the audience. They are constantly striving to “get closer” to what the audience wants and finding the balance between power and participation, or between a structured event and an empowered audience. Evermore Park producers are navigating Jenkins’s

---

59 Trevor Ballard, email message to author, April 17, 2020.
60 Trevor Ballard, email message to author, April 17, 2020.
convergence culture, and in an interesting role reversal, are trying to “keep up” with their fans versus restricting their materials from getting out of the corporation's control.61

William W. Lewis argues for theatre educators and makers to consider the multi-task oriented audience of the twenty-first century. He argues that “contemporary media users—specifically iGen students, born in the 1990s through 2010—see and operate with(in) the world in a fundamentally different manner.”62 Lewis points to the internet, smart devices, and other mediums that have fostered a generation of multitaskers. He further argues that, “These students have adapted their way of seeing and interacting to a media-saturated environment where they are connected to multiple times, places, and things simultaneously. Because the iGen is habituated to a deluge of constant interactivity based in media use that puts the individual at the center of creation, I argue it is also necessary to adapt theatre practice into a model that puts the audience at the center of the event.”63 This is where Evermore Park comes in, a space that is built to promote interactivity and that puts, as Lewis promotes, the audience at the center of the event, even at the center of creating the performance. It is an immersive space that, due to a lack of structure, is trying to manage and design for the incredibly proactive fan base that has moved into the park to make it their own.

Perhaps this is a cautionary case study of what can happen if producers do not have clear guidelines for their participants and controls in place for how to manage highly participatory audiences. It would be wise for producers and directors to take into account the changing landscape of theatre performances with the context of interactive mediums and transmedia

61 Jenkins, 282.
63 Lewis, 10.
communications. Audience members interact pre-show in their preparation for the event online and in costume decisions, during the show with their body and agency, and post-show in their online consumption, collective sharing, and artistic renderings. Fans participate in performance spaces in various mediums and ways, and producers need to be prepared to handle audiences who demand the right to be at the center of the event. If the production team does not plan for divergent audiences, who have the ability to multitask in masses and circulate new content, it could result in an audience who takes over the performance space because of their own affluency in co-creation and design. Anticipate the collective intelligence spectators have access to, and the powers that can lie therein. Otherwise, the audience may just come and take over the show.
Bibliography


Ever More Adventuress. “Ever More Adventuress”. YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXLjDDx7hbD6H__ee05hDvQ.


46


