

# Agent P vs. the Drunks

## Competing Interiorities in the Theme Park Space

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### The Italy Situation

The collision occurred in Epcot's "Italy." It was a Saturday during Food and Wine Festival season, which meant that the park was extra crowded with both local guests and by the Food and Wine infrastructure itself, which adds dozens of booths, distributing food and beverages, to the park. While Epcot has recently become characterized as a party environment, Food and Wine season is known as an especially debaucherous time to be in the park, with alcohol literally never more than steps away. This reputation proved true when, about midday, a giddy, childless day drinker enjoying their glass of wine in their quest to "drink around the world" fell off the steps of the manicured landscaping, stepping on the weary child who was resting halfway through his quest to defeat Dr. Doofenshmirtz, the villain of both the television show *Phineas and Ferb* and the "Agent P's World Showcase Adventure" at Epcot. The drunk adult didn't notice; the child began to cry, as much out of fear of the out-of-control adults as the physical contact.<sup>1</sup>

1. Oliver Kokai-Means, "Personal Interview with Oliver Kokai-Means," July 28, 2013.

The EPCOT Center theme park emerged from Walt Disney's original concept for what he called an "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." Walt's EPCOT would feature some 20,000 residents living and working in this environment, making it the utopian community Disney always desired. Following the company founder's passing, however, plans for his "Progress City" withered. When EPCOT Center opened in 1982, it bore little resemblance to Walt's idea but rather became the Walt Disney Company's second "gate" at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida. Gone were any residential aspects, and instead EPCOT Center existed as something of a permanent World's Fair, split into two halves. At the front half of the park sits Future World, a collection of corporate-sponsored pavilions showcasing the latest in science and technology through rides and shows. At the back sits World Showcase, a ring of pavilions themed to (and partially paid for by) countries from around the world. Conservative columnist Herbert London, writing in the *Orlando Sentinel* a few years after EPCOT Center's opening, called the park "the true embodiment of the American dream," emphasizing the "message of promise" that ran through pavilions such as The Wonders of Life and Spaceship Earth and continued "around the world" through the nations of the World Showcase.<sup>2</sup> This promise, echoing its ancestor the World's Fair, was the notion of progress through benevolent corporations as each attraction was sponsored by and heavily featured a specific corporation's technology.

Gottwald and Turner-Rahman argue that the Disney parks were influenced by what they refer to as the "filmic regime" of spatial planning organized through the storyboarding process. They state, ". . . storyboards provide cohesion. They also work as a diagram—a map of acts, scenes, and transitions between."<sup>3</sup> Adopting this logic, each pavilion at

2. Herbert London, "Epcot Is the True Embodiment of the American Dream," *Orlando Sentinel*, August 21, 1985, 237.

3. Dave Gottwald and Gregory Turner-Rahman, "Toward a Taxonomy of Contemporary Spatial Regimes: From the Architectonic to the Holistic," *The International Journal of Architectonic, Spatial, and Environmental Design*, 15, no. 1 (2021): 115. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2325-1662/CGP/v15i01/109-127>.

Epcot undeniably has such sequences, but Epcot as a park leaves vast swaths of green space between pavilions. Essentially, it leaves gaps where no overt story is imposed upon the space. There is elaborate landscaping design, but that landscape is largely inert.

In his book *The Global Theme Park Industry*, Clavé argues that a theme park includes “a specific narration which runs transversally throughout the whole project and substantivates all of its components.”<sup>4</sup> Clavé describes this overarching narrative organizing the overall tourist experience by “establishing the bases of functioning in the time and space of the universe that is created.”<sup>5</sup> This narrative experience exists within each pavilion, to a greater or lesser degree, but especially with the aging of some rides, dismantling of areas like Innoventions that demonstrated new and changing technological experiences, and the heavily-idealized nostalgia of World Showcase, there is no clear story an Epcot guest can immerse themselves in. Epcot has attempted to address this deficit for children through the addition of optional participatory narrative games and, as we will discuss later, has recently explicitly admitted the lack with the current project to construct a pavilion literally called “Play.”<sup>6</sup> This does not address the absence for adults who also require their own experiences of play and narrative in leisure activity.

Unlike many studies (including Gottwald and Turner-Rahman’s on theme parks and immersive settings) that find their origins in film, we always proceed from their connection to a theatrical legacy. Another way of understanding storyboards is of course to see them as a theatrical script, a visual and literate blueprint for the ultimate product that is a jointly constructed set of meanings made between the producers and the audience. The spatial gaps between attractions in the park can be seen as the construction of a stage, occupied by performers, who have been given no script. The theatrical tradition is one that has found close interaction and influence between audience and performer across cultures and across millennia, often in site-specific locations. From the participatory nature

4. Salvador Anton Clavé, *The Global Theme Park Industry*, (Cambridge: CABI, 2007), 33.

5. Clavé, *The Global Theme Park Industry*, 33.

6. Throughout 2022 it has been rumored that Disney has cancelled the Play Pavilion project.

of the Yoruban Egúngún, with spectators cheering, dancing, and drumming along with masked and costumed processional performers<sup>7</sup> to the well-documented use of pageant wagons in the European medieval theatre, where wheeled structures featuring scenery and costumed actors were processed through towns as part of civic-religious festivals,<sup>8</sup> theatre has historically exploded the boundaries of the playhouse. Shakespeare's famous "All the world's a stage" line is as historically accurate as it has become metaphorically cliché.<sup>9</sup> The avant-garde environmental theatre of the 1960s famously blurred—if not erased—the line between actor and audience, with Richard Schechner's participatory, orgiastic *Dionysus in 69* as the most famous example.<sup>10</sup> Set against this historical backdrop, we recognize the theme park for what it is: just another theatre space. Elsewhere we have argued that Disney tourists are put in the roles of actors when they visit the parks.<sup>11</sup> Physical spaces are not activated as places of meaning making until they are acted upon and against by performers (tourists), and performances cannot ignore the physical space they are located in. Essentially, Epcot's design leaves a lot of room for improvisation.

In this chapter, we explore how these guests choose to create or participate in differing virtual games laid over top of the geographical space and what happens when these alternate uses of the park come into conflict. Each of these performances represents an attempt at collaboration between Imagineer and tourist, or put differently, between designer and tourist-as-actor, and viewed collectively they demonstrate the ways in which interiority collision is an inevitable byproduct of such wide-open

7. Tobin Nellhaus, "From Oral to Literate Performance," *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, ed. Bruce McConachie, Tobin Nellhaus, Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, and Tamara Underiner (New York: Routledge, 2016), 33–37.

8. See, for example, William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages: Western European Stage Conditions, c. 800–1576*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

9. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, V, vii, 139.

10. Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 97–100.

11. Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, "You're in the Parade: Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor," *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, ed. Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1–20; Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, "Disney during Covid-19: The Tourist and the Actor's Nightmare," *Journal of Themed Experience and Attractions Studies* 2 (2022): 17–20, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jteas/vol2/iss1/5>.

themed spaces. That is indeed exactly what was happening in the moment described at the outset of this chapter: both sets of guests were invested in completing their own virtual interior games—both encouraged by Epcot’s architecture and design—but those games were intended to be entirely separate experiences for entirely different audiences, making this physical collision in real space an unfortunate happenstance. Ultimately, it is our argument that guest behavior at Epcot and the imposition of competing virtual interiorities onto the space offer an example of both the promise and the pitfalls of the notion of individualizing a theme park experience through virtual experiences projected onto a shared space.

### Experience and Narrative

“Experience” is generally recognized by tourism scholars as crucial to the success of a theme park for any age. Pikkemaat and Shuckert note, “experiences should offer not only fun and pleasure but also increasingly a clue, a message or sense.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to its lack of a coherent message, in comparison to the other parks, the current iteration of Epcot offers relatively few “experience”-based attractions. An analysis of online comments on message boards, Reddit threads, and vacation-planning services often reveals a single word: “Boring.” One Reddit user called it “easily the worst park on Disney property” calling it “overall very boring and easily the most skippable.”<sup>13</sup> In 2015 a reviewer on TripAdvisor wrote, “The ‘rides’ are outdated and boring. A child with our group fell asleep on one. Waste of a day.”<sup>14</sup> Even prominent Disney tourism sites like *Disney Tourist Blog*, *AllEars*, and *Inside the Magic* often frame their discussion of

12. Birgit Pikkemaat and Markus Schuckert, “Success Factors of Theme Parks—An Exploration Study,” *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 55, no. 2 (June 2007): 197–208.

13. Redditiismyrcrack, “Epcot is definitely the worst park.. Ya’ll are crazy,” *Reddit*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/WaltDisneyWorld/comments/85lwz/epcot\\_is\\_definitely\\_the\\_worst\\_park\\_yall\\_are\\_crazy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WaltDisneyWorld/comments/85lwz/epcot_is_definitely_the_worst_park_yall_are_crazy/).

14. James H Terry, “Outdated and Boring,” *TripAdvisor*, April 7, 2015, [https://www.tripadvisor.co.za/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d126541-r264127514-Epcot-Orlando\\_Florida.html](https://www.tripadvisor.co.za/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d126541-r264127514-Epcot-Orlando_Florida.html).

Epcot in the context of complaints that the park is “boring.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most of all, these complaints have stated that Epcot offers little for younger tourists to experience, with the park having relatively few rides when compared with the more child-friendly Magic Kingdom.

Unlike other Disney parks, EPCOT Center (which was shortened to simply “Epcot” in the early 1990s) has historically sought to interpolate guests through abstract concepts like imagination, communication, and movement, rather than the narrative stories that comprise the attractions at Magic Kingdom (1971), Disney’s Hollywood Studios (1989), and even Disney’s Animal Kingdom’s (1998) guided walking paths. Each concept is housed in its own pavilion, similar to a museum. Epcot modeled “the convergence between education and entertainment,” otherwise known as Edutainment, a trend more common to late-20th Century museums than theme parks.<sup>16</sup> While some might argue that it is this focus on Edutainment that is itself dated or irrelevant, especially given the ubiquity of the internet, families still prize embodied experiences with a learning component. Hilbrecht et al. argue that amusement parks (and by extension, theme parks) as family tourist destinations exhibit a “concerted cultivation” attitude towards child rearing.<sup>17</sup>

15. Tom Bricker, “World Showcase: Borefest or Brilliant?,” *Disney Tourist Blog*, <https://www.disneytouristblog.com/world-showcase-epcot-boring/>; Taylor, “The ‘Boring’ Disney Rides We Absolutely Love,” *AllEars*, January 21, 2021, <https://allears.net/2021/01/21/the-most-boring-disney-world-rides-we-actually-love/>; Becky Burkett, “Op-Ed: Think Epcot is boring? These will change your mind,” *Inside the Magic*, January 18, 2020, <https://insidethemagic.net/2020/01/epcot-attraction-artwork-not-boring-bb1/>.
16. Michela Addis, “New Technologies and Cultural Consumption—Edutainment Is Born!,” *European Journal of Marketing* 39, no. 7–8: 730. See also Pierre Balloffet, François H. Courvoisier, and Jöelle Lagier, “From Museum to Amusement Park: The Opportunities and Risks of Edutainment,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 4–5.
17. Margo Hilbrecht, Susan M. Shaw, Fern M. Delamere, and Mark E. Havitz, “Experiences, Perspectives, and Meanings of Family Vacations for Children,” *Leisure/Loisir* 32, no. 2 (2008): 541–571, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2008.9651421>. The semantic distinction between “amusement park” and “theme park” is well documented across Disney scholarship. See, as just one example, Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 56.

A “concerted cultivation” approach suggests that activities for children in middle-class families are carefully selected by parents for their educational and developmental value with fewer opportunities for spontaneous or unsupervised play.<sup>18</sup> Family activities have also been identified as sites of “purposive leisure,” or leisure that is “planned, facilitated, and executed by parents in order to achieve particular short and long-term goals.”<sup>19</sup> Goals may vary, but often include developing family cohesion and instilling family values.<sup>20</sup>

A vacation is less about what it actually provides for the family than an opportunity to perform values for their children and ask their children to do the same for others through mimesis. So, it is not its focus that makes Epcot boring, but rather the way edutainment is deployed in design.

Embedded in the idea of “experience” are the qualities of play and narrative, which Epcot is largely without. They are not spaces one can inhabit nor interpret. Interactive areas, splash pads, or playground equipment have come and gone throughout the history of the park, but these spaces are quite small and, in the case of the metal playground equipment, can be rendered unusable by the brutal Florida sun.

Without opportunities for play, narrative, or experience, guests attempt to construct their own purpose or meaning for their visits, which ultimately allows for a wider variety of virtual interiorities that overlay the same physical space. Disney Imagineers, clearly recognizing this lack of guests’ clear interpretive lenses, have provided sanctioned ways to create a coherent narrative with a clue, message, or sense, like the aforementioned “Agent P” game, as well as ultimately codifying guest-created games like “Drinking Around the World” through the addition of Food and Wine festival passports. That these are both virtual games (or, we might argue, scripts with characters, objectives, and meanings) is explicitly noted by Disney fans such as Bart Scott, who writes in his guidebook

18. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

19. Susan M. Shaw and Don Dawson, “Purposive Leisure: Examining Parental Discourses on Family Activities,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 33 (2001): 217–31.

20. Hilbrecht et al., “Experiences, Perspectives, and Meanings.”

*Ears of Steel*, “A few years back, Epcot created an interactive, role-playing experience called the Kim Possible World Showcase Adventure . . . that’s great and all, but the reality is there’s been an interactive World Showcase game being played for years, at least by the over-21 crowd.”<sup>21</sup>

### “Listen Up Now Agents”: Theme Park as Spy Movie

Agent P’s World Showcase game was the second iteration of Disney’s attempt to provide structure and intention to the World Showcase for child visitors. The first iteration, opening in 2006, was themed on the television series *Kim Possible* (2002–2007), about a teenage spy working with a team of young people to stop the villain Dr. Drakken. In 2012, the game was retooled to center on the show *Phineas and Ferb* (2007–2015), which also includes a villainous inventor, Dr. Doofenshmirtz, and a superspy—in this case, Perry the Platypus. Putting participants in the role of a superspy was an ingenious choice because it encouraged children (or adults) to view stealth and blending into a crowd as desired behaviors for a good spy, which avoids disrupting guests using the same spaces in the park in other ways.

Both versions originally utilized a flip phone that was loaned to players and allowed them to interact with secret special effects in some of the World Showcase pavilions. This meant that, in the early era, it was quite obvious who was playing the game—just look for those with the flip phones. In 2016, the game was revised to allow players to use their own cell phones or the flip phone, and, in 2018, the flip phones were retired, and guests had to play through the Disney “Play” app. This was much higher quality technology, but it also served to obfuscate players who now just looked like any guest glued to their smartphones, a number which had been growing significantly every year. Additionally, this altered the game to limit accessibility. Guests now had to own a smartphone with a data plan to participate, presenting both economic (cost of an up-to-date device with plan) and practical (skill in downloading and installing apps) barriers.

21. Bart Scott, *Ears of Steel: The Real Man’s Guide to Walt Disney World* (Branford, CT: The Intrepid Traveler, 2014), 51.



In every iteration of the game, players started at clearly marked booths where a Disney cast member would ask them if they were interested in participating and explain the activity. Each group of guests would be issued one phone, usually handed to a child in the family, and then decide which World Showcase pavilion to begin in. Being handed a phone, and therefore controlling the movements of your family group, gives children not only some of the autonomy and independence they value in an experience but also authority over their entire familial group: two of the qualities of experiential play Hilbrecht et al. identifies as highly valuable to children. Different country pavilions housed an entire “mission” although it was randomized by altering the order of activities and exactly which activities were required. Players were instructed to move to certain locations (or sometimes even just to move in any direction for thirty feet or so, presumably to avoid creating traffic jams) to provide answers to questions only available by visually assessing the location. After questions were successfully answered, a hidden special effect would be revealed. Special effects were largely kept consistent from game to game and included characters from the shows popping up, objects like beer steins that had appeared to just be decoration singing, and rockets emerging out of a volcano.

In her overview of play theories, Doris Bergen summarizes Eva Neumann’s foundational definition of play as “how much internal control the person had over the activity, what level of internal reality was present, and if there was internal motivation to engage in the activity. She stated that most playful actions have children in control, making up their own reality, and doing the activity because they want to do it.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike rides, in which visitors are confined to small vehicles and their attention guided, or activities that require payment and thus permission, Agent P’s World Showcase players find their own paths—whether as the game intended or not—largely at will. The game is active and not passive: the players make something special happen at Disney World that maybe only their group observes. There is no prize at all, and thus the reward for

22. Doris Bergen, “Foundations of Play Theory,” *The SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*, ed. Elizabeth Brooker, Mindy Blaise, and Susan Edwards (United Kingdom: SAGE Publications, 2014), 12.

doing it is intrinsic only. Children's motivations could include an affective relationship with the characters of the television shows represented, a desire for completion or "to win," or creating an internal reality and character of oneself as a spy as the game suggests, but all of these are outside of the park's prevailing consumption model.

There are relatively few non-explanatory videos that document groups playing the game, but those that do include participants depict them as being invested and empowered by the experience. One group of four girls huddled around their flip phone shows one exclaiming, "It's vibrating!" and excitedly dashing to the next location.<sup>23</sup> Another shows two very young boys being earnestly spoken to by the cast member who is down on her knees to address the boys directly and give them directions on how to play the game. She gives the two a strategy on how to take turns controlling the phone and the game so both feel included.<sup>24</sup> It is clear from even these limited videos that a major part of the appeal for the children playing is the sense of agency they get from the experience.

Not every park guest is even aware of the attraction or those participating in it, particularly those without children. The game is intentionally designed to blend in with the pavilions both to maintain their theming and to elicit surprise and discovery when a secret element is revealed: the mapping on top of the geographical space is largely virtual. This is especially true given the move to an individual's smartphone and away from the flip phones. While a savvy spectator could identify who was playing the game, there is nothing in the clothing nor much of the behavior of those participating to identify them as "volunteer superspies." Their new identity is an interior one, a mental framework to reshape existing space and attractions as more exciting and purposeful for those playing. What the choice to construct this as an overlay means, however, is that other tourists have no incentive to make room or defer to the children playing the game. They might not even know the children are playing a sanc-

23. Jason McIntyre, "The girl agents play Kim Possible World Showcase Adventure," uploaded on July 3, 2010, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-\\_Sezpi5jg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-_Sezpi5jg).

24. WorthMelting4, "Family Disney World Vlog / July 2015 Episode 8," uploaded on January 24, 2016, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU5yN60ckdg>.

tioned game with objectives and instead just see them as ill-mannered and pushy in their haste to reach their next target. Because everyone is not in on the game, the objective, or the rules, tourists viewing Epcot through a different framework and pursuing their own agendas might do something like drunkenly step on a weary child spy.

### "Listen I'm Tired of Talkin', Let's Start Drinkin'"

The threats of Dr. Doofenshmirtz within the game are pretend, and the game ultimately lacks actual stakes. Perhaps responding to this as rendering the game childish, adult tourists at Epcot have long constructed play-based experiences for themselves that involve risk through the over-consumption of alcohol. Roland S. Moore writes that "most forms of contemporary tourism are inextricably linked to the consumption of alcohol, sometimes in prodigious amounts."<sup>25</sup> Walt Disney famously refused to allow alcohol to be served publicly inside Disneyland, concerned that, just as at boardwalks such as Coney Island which he abhorred, it would lead to a seedy atmosphere and unwelcome antics.<sup>26</sup> When Walt Disney World opened in 1971, the Magic Kingdom was also dry; alcohol was only served at the resort's hotels. However, when Epcot opened in 1982, the company controversially allowed guests to imbibe publicly for the first time within one of their theme parks. Before long, this popped the cork on an "infamous"<sup>27</sup> tourist activity that has come to overwhelm Disney's second gate in recent years: "Drinking Around the World."

In brief, tourists begin on one side of Epcot's World Showcase and over the course of the day drink an alcoholic beverage at each of eleven—twelve if you count the non-pavilion, vaguely "African" "Refreshment Outpost"—stops. While not officially endorsed by Disney, Drinking Around the World has become one of the most popular pastimes for tourists, especially younger adults, in the park. Jason Cochran, writer

25. Roland S. Moore, "Gender and Alcohol Use in a Greek Tourist Town," *Annals of Tourism Research* 22 (1995): 300–313.

26. As has been documented in numerous broad histories of the parks, Disney did permit alcohol to be served in select private locations, including the earliest iteration of the elite Club 33.

27. Carly Terzinger, "The Ultimate Guide to Drinking Around the World at Epcot," *AllEars*, April 18, 2020, <https://allears.net/2020/04/18/the-ultimate-guide-drinking-around-the-world-at-disney-epcot/>.

for the popular *Frommer's* travel website, refers to Drinking Around the World as “an open secret that visitors have known about for three decades.”<sup>28</sup> While the rise of the internet has increased awareness of this practice, park guests have participated in the game since at least the early 90s.<sup>29</sup>

Scores of Disney travel blogs, fan sites, and community forums have documented the practice of Drinking Around the World since the early 00s. Most of these articles present Drinking Around the World uncritically, which is to say that they present it as either an entirely neutral activity or as a celebratory one. Typical content for these articles includes “best drinks” in each pavilion and guides to completing the quest without spending more than \$100 per person (on top of Epcot gate admission, which in 2022 could stretch to \$179 for a one-day adult ticket). In addition to these written guides to Drinking Around the World, YouTube abounds with videos documenting the pleasure and pain of this adult Disney game.

The act of Drinking Around the World prompts an analysis of various theorized modes of tourism, among them alcotourism,<sup>30</sup> limit tourism,<sup>31</sup> and party tourism.<sup>32</sup> Bell establishes “the ‘letting go’ that comes with intoxication,” and points to the way that alcotourism creates “an ambivalently sanctioned liminal zone” within its location.<sup>33</sup> Carlisle and Ritchie establish a distinction between alcotourism and party tourism, noting that alcotourism—often associated with visiting wineries, pubs, etc.—“does not habitually mean participating in a period of disruptive alcohol consumption and transgressive behaviour which challenges the customs and

28. Jason Cochran, “How to Drink Around the World at Disney’s Epcot,” *Frommer's*,

<https://www.frommers.com/slideshows/848005-how-to-drink-around-the-world-at-disney-s-epcot>.

29. Personal conversation with former Epcot cast member, recounting their time as an employee in 1992.

30. David Bell, “Destination Drinking: Toward a Research Agenda on Alcotourism,” *Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy* 15, no. 3 (June 2008): 291–304.

31. Paul Cloke and Harvey C. Perkins, “‘Cracking the Canyon with the Awesome Foursome’: Representations of Adventure Tourism in New Zealand,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16, no. 2 (April 1998): 185–218, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d160185>.

32. Sheena Carlisle and Caroline Ritchie, “Permission to Rebel: A Critical Evaluation of Alcohol Consumption and Party Tourism,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure* 4 (2021): 25–44.

33. David Bell, “Destination Drinking.”

norms of the environment.”<sup>54</sup> The linkage between tourism, alcohol, and transgressive behavior is well established within US culture, perhaps most explicitly with the recent marketing of Las Vegas.<sup>55</sup> The collision of engagements in Epcot align more neatly with their vision of party tourism, but even that term fails to capture the complexity of the situation. In Carlisle and Ritchie’s party tourism, participants are guided by tour groups and companies, traveling explicitly to destinations to drink at. Meanwhile, Drinking Around the World is a formally unsanctioned—or perhaps “ambivalently unsanctioned,” to return to Bell’s analysis—activity contained within a space that is not on its face principally about alcohol consumption.

Tom Bricker, one of the few Disney bloggers to acknowledge the complexity of public drunkenness in a family theme park, describes many of those who participate in Drinking Around the World as “drinking ‘teams’ replete with matching shirts and obnoxious attitudes.”<sup>56</sup> Unlike the children playing a sanctioned game that is designed to be undetectable to other Epcot guests, visibility is often important for guests Drinking Around the World, either in the form of clever, drunk Disney pun shirts or “checklist” shirts where tourists literally write on their clothing with sharpies to celebrate their successful alcoholic conquering of a new “country.” At the time of this writing, a cursory search of Etsy reveals over 5,000 results for the search “Epcot Drink Around the World Shirt.” One YouTube video featuring a particularly telling chronicle of Drinking Around the World features participants wearing shirts with phrases like “Bibbidi Bobbidi [sic] Booze” and “Can You Feel the Buzz Tonight.”

54. Carlisle and Ritchie, “Permission to Rebel.”

55. Ironically, at the time of Epcot’s opening and the invention of the drinking game, Las Vegas was undergoing a time of financial and tourist decline and shifted to adopt a “family friendly” marketing and attraction approach, as seen in Diana Tracy Cohen, “Family-friendly Las Vegas: An Analysis of Time and Space.” *Center for Gaming Research Occasional Paper Series* (2014): 1–12. The slogan “What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas” was adopted in 2000 and shifted perceptions of Vegas to be “no longer being defined by its former attractions, but rather by concepts embracing adult freedom.” Mike Beirne, “Playing for Keeps,” *Brandweek*, October 11, 2004.

56. Tom Bricker, “Drinking Around the World Showcase at Epcot,” *Disney Tourist Blog*, <https://www.disneytouristblog.com/drinking-around-world-epcot-world-showcase/>.

A video, posted by social media “influencer” Showmelovejete, reveals the scale of impact of this particular theme park virtual interior game on the overall park environment. After a brief introduction, Jete says, “Listen, I’m tired of talkin’, let’s start drinkin’!” The video shows the participants not simply sipping their drinks but chugging them. Over the course of their celebration, they repeatedly violate Disney guidelines for guest behavior. One member of the party disassembles a post in the fencing in front of the water. By the midpoint of the video, the subjects begin slurring their words heavily. At another moment, a young woman climbs onto a table directly in front of the fence separating the walkway from a dropoff into the World Showcase lagoon. Clearly heavily intoxicated in this moment, one wrong step would send this young woman tumbling into the water below. At the end of their travels, the entire group poses for a photo with them all lying on the ground in front of the entrance to the Mexico pavilion, pretending to be unconscious from intoxication and taking up significant space. Through it all, they cheer and scream for the camera and themselves, prompting one to wonder what tourists from outside their party must be experiencing in their presence.<sup>37</sup>

Jete’s post is but one video example of guests behaving in this manner in Epcot. Nearly all videos show people slurring their words and most show people feeling sick, with reports of vomiting. YouTuber Kyle Pallo’s video shows people jumping around, cheering, screaming, and dancing.<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Dolan of *Thrillist* best sums up guests’ rationale for the construction of their virtual cognitive model of Epcot: “When your parents take you to Disney World as a 20-something, you have to justify things. For instance, why would I spend a day in relatively close proximity to the Mad Tea Party spinning cups? Because I’m a grown-ass, responsible adult, the answer was simple: a drinking game.”<sup>39</sup> However, this celebration of adult freedoms is not being held in an adult-focused space like Las Vegas. Even beyond the distasteful potential for vomit, research indicates that playing

37. Showmelovejete, “Drinking Around the World at Epcot / Our 21st Birthday (Vlog),” uploaded on March 9, 2021, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or\\_aDm4b1vM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or_aDm4b1vM).

38. Kyle Pallo, “The Only Way to do Epcot! – Drink Around,” uploaded on April 4, 2018, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_KGZ5GDQ5Mw/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KGZ5GDQ5Mw/).

39. Rebecca Dolan, “Epcot Bar Crawl: Your Game Plan for Drinking in 11 Fake Countries,” *Thrillist*, February 4, 2015, <https://www.thrillist.com/drink/nation/drinking-around-the-world-drink-at-epcot>.

this game in this space is not entirely harmless, despite the intentions of the participants. Research shows that even very young children can determine when an adult is intoxicated and when that limit crosses to highly intoxicated. In a *BBC* survey, 30% of children said the presence of inebriated adults was scary, as they became stupid, silly, aggressive, or weird (essentially unreliable as larger powerful figures now with no assurance of security or authority), and research by the Institute of Alcohol Studies indicated that seeing heavily intoxicated adults normalizes such drinking for children and ultimately influences their adult alcohol consumption.<sup>40</sup> Performing adult leisure as based upon excessive alcohol consumption in front of children does negatively influence their long term health outcomes, adding a new underrecognized element of “losing” to this particular game.

More than enjoyment of the alcohol itself, the adults in these videos or accounts demonstrate a focus on “winning” the game of proving adult independence. This is best illustrated by a video posted by Kate Lindinger, of the YouTube channel “Princess Minnie.” Her plan originally appeared to be to distract part of their group, including the children with them, with the Agent P game while two of the adults drank around the world. “These are the people involved in the mission,” she mutters, panning her phone over three other adults and the one child huddled over the phone. “My mission is margaritas,” she says, turning the camera back to herself and wiggling her eyebrows. However, only minutes later she is sucked into the game and declares “I want to do this!” and “That is SO cool” as they trigger the appearance of Doofenshmirtz and his evil invention on top of a roof. As the video goes on, she grows more and more enthusiastic about the Agent P game, which she recommends for adults, while continuing the Drink Around the World game, even to the point of ordering beverages she states she does not like. “It’s not bad,” she says after sipping her alcoholic iced coffee, “but it’s not good.” The women repeatedly chose drinking—even drinks they have expressly declared they do not like—over

40. See “Third of Children ‘Scared’ by Adult Drinking,” *BBC News*, July 4, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10491057>; Jose Luis Vazquez Martinez, “Like Sugar for Adults: The Effect of Non-Dependent Parental Drinking on Children and Families,” published by the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) (2017): 1–82.

the Agent P game, which they confessed they did like. After five drinks, one woman has a sixteen-year-old girl helping her walk, and, after seven, she drunkenly slurs that they're taking a break from alcohol while their family goes on rides.

This example provides insight into why people engage in Drinking Around the World (even while saying they don't like the drinks and harming their own health). Drinking Around the World, by virtue of legal drinking ages and costs, is a game only available to adults. But it is play. Reflecting on Bergen's definition, the motivations are internal but significant to players, even when "winning" seems to involve drinking things you don't like and in quantities that aren't good for you. Players are asserting authority and control over themselves, paradoxically by doing something bad for themselves and potentially destructive to other guests in the shared space. And, as the game is not officially sanctioned by the park, those in a drinking "team" create their own reality—both through their conception of themselves as a team on a quest—and by the mind-altering effects of the alcohol itself.

### Epcot's New Horizons: The Pitfalls and the Promise

Both the anecdote at the start of this chapter and the Princess Minnie video demonstrate how one tourist's individual engagement with the themed environment and the construction of their own interior game manifests in a manner that clashes with another tourist's narrative or what happens when performers try to enact two different and conflicting scripts on the same stage. Among the many Disney bloggers who discuss Drinking Around the World, few acknowledge this reality. Among the exceptions are the previously cited Bricker, who reminds readers, "Never forget that Epcot is a family theme park, and while Drinking Around the World Showcase can be a ton of fun, that fun should not occur at the expense of your fellow park guests."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, an article appears on the website *DisneyLists.com* that closes with a note from the site's publishers but not the article author herself: "While drinking around the world can be a lot of fun, please remember you are in a family park with lots of

41. Bricker, "Drinking Around the World."



children around. As you near the end of your journey, please keep your language and behavior appropriate.”<sup>42</sup> From the other point of view, the “super spy” children (or adults), indistinguishable to other guests and focused on their own objectives, can also provide conflict by demanding access to unmarked spaces in pursuit of their goals.

As the Disney parks continue to evolve, and as guests have continued to seek alternative modes of engagement with these themed environments, Disney has continued to add reactionary signage making actions explicitly prohibited.<sup>43</sup> They have also begun significant renovations on Epcot to create more sanctioned experiences and transmediated experiences that explicitly privilege Disney character intellectual property over the abstractions of its origins, and begun adding virtual ways to engage in all the parks. The Play Disney Parks app provides guests a means of passing time in the park that does not involve riding rides, seeing shows, or consuming food and drink. The app also has tremendous interface opportunities with the technology in Disney’s newest theme park land, *Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge*, and many Disney fans and commentators expect to see further integration between the Play Disney Parks app and theme park spaces in the years to come, especially as COVID-19 restrictions recede. In this way, we see Disney promoting an organized, sanctioned set of virtual interiority possibilities to its guests. These are designed to appeal to a variety of ages and individualize experiences while at the same time promoting consistent usage of geographic space and minimizing the danger of the guest-created experiences. These have proven only moderately successful with guests who complain that the games are rarely updated.<sup>44</sup>

42. Caitlin Corsello, “7 Tips and Tricks for Drinking Around Epcot’s World Showcase,” *DisneyLists.com*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.disneylists.com/2020/04/7-tips-tricks-drinking-around-epcots-world-showcase-2/>. When an intoxicated guest climbed the

outside of the pyramid of the Mexico pavilion in World Showcase, Disney sought additional means to at least marginally restrain behavior.

43. Matt Mauney, “Video Shows Man Climbing Pyramid at Epcot’s Mexico Pavilion,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/gone-viral/os-man-climbs-disney-epcot-pyramid-post.html>.

44. “Controversial Changes Are Quickly Tiring Out Disney’s Top Fans. Can They Bring Back the Magic?” *Theme Park Tourist*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.themeparktourist.com/features/20211216/32127/controversial-changes-are-quickly-tiring-out-disneys-top-fans-can-they>.

While it is evident that theme park designers seek to provide experiences that center individual users, responding to the development of video games and the rise of smart phones and managing traffic patterns with large volumes of guests in contested shared geographical space will ultimately necessitate creating more scripted and controlling experiences. For some guests, this will likely provide a more solid message or through line to their visits and make their visit to Epcot (and other parks) feel more meaningful. This could help introduce some of the experience, play, and stakes that visitors crave and diminish more disruptive activities. At the same time, this will ultimately diminish feelings of agency and exploration for guests. While these virtual overlays may be successful, they will likely also always disappoint a segment of the audience.

At the same time, retrofitting virtual overlays into the park does not ultimately redress the spatial gaps of Epcot: the holes in the storyboards—increasingly filled with food and beverage carts—mean that it will be a challenge for the park to truly eliminate potentially destructive games like *Drinking Around the World*. This seems reflected in the construction of the Play Pavilion, specifically designed for small children and perhaps to shield them from the out-of-control adults in the World Showcase. However, the literal and metaphorical collisions now seem endemic to the Epcot experience. The more scripts being performed on the same stage space, the more conflicting objectives being pursued, the more potential for conflict between guests. The unstructured space of Epcot holds tremendous appeal to some, a throwback to the pleasure gardens that served as amusement- and theme parks' ancestors. But guests who see that aspect as a feature stand apart from the legion of Epcot guests who alternatively view the park as “boring” or as a stage for their own performances of adventure. Perhaps apt for a Florida theme park in the 21st century, Walt Disney's original optimistic vision of global unity through science and culture has been replaced by one in which personal pleasures are seemingly destined to collide.

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