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AUDIENCE FOCUS IN HAUNTED ATTRACTIONS

Any type of theatrical presentation requires, for purposes of audience immersion in the show, that viewers be assisted in suspending their disbelief. *Everything* that the audience takes in should support the show being presented, and not detract from it. The audience's frame of perception must not be allowed to stray from the exposition of the story, if the presentation is to be effective.

In traditional theater, the audience is seated facing a proscenium stage, which potentially controls the viewing angles and offers many possibilities for hiding lighting instruments and other effects devices. This artificial archway is a frame (conceptually similar to a picture frame) which defines what has become known as the 'fourth wall.' Stage left, stage right, and the scenery that covers the backstage area form three walls of a 'conceptual space' - that is, the scene that the playwright has defined in the script. The fourth wall is seldom breached in traditional theater. (Asides to the audience are the exception to this rule, as when an actor makes eye contact with the audience and comments on the action of the play in progress. Such interaction is referred to as 'breaking the fourth wall.')

In the latter years of the 20th century, theatrical concepts were expanded to include new and experimental techniques which served to blur the buffer between the play and the audience, bringing viewers closer to the action, and even immersing them in it. Theater-in-the Round eliminated the proscenium altogether. Some avant-garde works have placed characters behind the audience, or even within it.

Well before traditional theater tinkered with the boundary, however, amusement attractions were already turning the entire theater into a stage. On Coney Island in New York, George Tillyou's Steeplechase Park staged a show that herded spectators across a stunt-filled stage and showcased their reactions. The onlookers were others who had already been through this somewhat embarrassing initiation themselves. Here, and in the other parks that later opened - Luna park and Dreamland Park - walk-through funhouses evolved, which let guests take on the role of Alice going Through the Looking Glass into a wacky world with its own bizarre rules and realms. Dark rides later placed customers in cars, and steered them into frightening close personal encounters with creatures from legend, hell, and even outer space. *This was the birth of the dark attraction.*

Naturally, new approaches to lighting and special effects (both visual and audible) were required, and these have constantly undergone refinement ever since the early examples opened. This essay draws from innovations in technique that have come about since the inception of the concept, with the intent of helping designers to produce a more effective show for their patrons.

The following concepts will be woven as threads into the discussion of the individual aspects of an immersive attraction, with the intent of simplifying design and execution, while yet commanding the attention of the patrons:

INTRODUCE AND ADVANCE THE STORY - Patrons need not know the exact storyline of the show word-for-word, but it must be developed enough to guide the look and feel of the show as the attraction is designed and built. This concept is known as 'back story', and all modern amusement attraction design firms use it. It should be on paper - in outline form at least - so that all who are involved in the work can refer to it. Exposition of the story to guests will primarily be done by visual means, and supported by other sensory cues, which should be used to...

INVOLVE THE SENSES AND EMOTIONS - Every attempt should be made to heighten the patron's experience by evoking emotion and involving every sense of perception (in a spectrum of degree from subtle to shocking, as appropriate to the back story.) *This includes the use of:*

- **Performance cues** - The task of the cast and any animatronics to be used
- **Lighting cues** - With an accent on contrast with darkness
- **Audible cues** - Including music, sound effects, and narration
- **Atmospheric cues** - Temperature cues (hot/neutral/cold) - Smells - Humidity (and aridity)
- **Tactile cues** - The sense of touch, both active and passive, and within reasonable limits)
- **Detail cues** - Incidental props, scenic painting, surface treatment [paint, wallpaper, etc.,]
- **Continuity cues** - Elements that logically relate one scene to another. If the back story includes elements such as ghosts, vampires, werewolves, undead, or possession, these should recur throughout the show.)

To assure that these elements dominate the stage, all reasonable attempts must be made to...

CONTROL THE FOCUS OF ATTENTION - In dark attractions, the hiding places for various theatrical artifices - lighting and special effects devices - will pass around the patrons, and ultimately end up behind them, in a series of progressive waves, as they move through the show. The task for the designer (or scriptwriter) of an immersive attraction is to minimize the distraction that mechanical effects elements can potentially cause. Generally speaking, the focus

must always be directed forward, in the direction of the patrons' path. Glances to the left and right should be limited to 'startle scares', which will typically result in a return of attention to the front. (This should be the only path of escape from the perceived danger: one can't run backwards through a line of similarly frightened people. The concept of 'scare forward' is important. If you arrange scares to make patrons jump backward, you will block the flow of traffic and stop the line.)

Now we will discuss some basic elements of a haunted attraction in the light of these concepts:

I. FACADE AND PRE-SHOW

The facade of a haunted attraction may seem at first to be a waste of time and money during the 'drawing board' phase of the project. Erecting an imposing edifice certainly seems to be a waste of financial resources when compared to what must be staged within. But if you ask any experienced carnival showman what draws business, it is the *flash* (the 'window dressing') that galvanizes the attention of the potential customer. If the facade looks promising, you will draw a bigger crowd than by staging a haunt with a bare, boring entrance. In other words, *first impressions count*.

This is not to say that you can merely dazzle patrons with brilliance, then baffle them with murky garbage, and get away with it; quite the contrary in this day and age. Nevertheless, if your flash doesn't attract people, there is little likelihood that they will be able to imagine a quality show within the confines of a featureless theater. The facade of a haunted attraction must sell a story, and do it well.

Our example here will be a haunted mansion. What follows will be a consideration of the elements of presenting this manse as a realized, physical show. In recognition of the back story, the progress through the attraction takes the form of a loose narrative. Our hypothetical example is structured to show a possible way of accomplishing this, but it could take any number of other forms depending upon the specific nature of an actual haunt.

The back story is very simple: This old manse is possibly a haunted house. Bold explorers have decided to enter and discover if, how, and why the property is haunted. From outside, it looks spooky enough. As they watch, the adventurers get a glimpse of something in a window: hallucinations? Once inside, it slowly becomes apparent that quite a few odd things are happening, and although no one sees an actual ghost appear, evidence abounds (the 'if'.) The would-be ghostbusters soon find that they are surrounded by paranormal activity, and it seems to be focused upon them, with the intent of compelling them to leave by use of strange kinetic effects (the 'how'.) As the uninvited guests probe more deeply, and are assaulted by visible phantoms, until at last they come upon the real source of the haunting: the corpses of the murdered family which are lying in the attic, denied a proper funeral and burial. Pursued by the ghostly family, the interlopers beat a hasty retreat, hoping only to escape with their lives. This story is simple and basic, but provides a framework in which a myriad of scenes might suggest themselves to the designers.

If we don't see a mansion, we can't imagine it automatically. There must be some hints. A Victorian or Queen Anne facade helps immeasurably, even if it is nothing more than a painted 2-dimensional flat erected around the entrance.

If the queue line must be lengthy, it can be segmented by use of barriers (including scenic flats, hedges, small structures with quiet interior scenes, or even small stages with small one-act shows.) The last queue segment should involve visual contact with the haunt facade itself. These segments, each having a focus of its own, will do a lot to relieve the boredom of standing in a lengthy line. When a queue is broken up in this manner, the actual waiting time is less of a factor in customer perception. (Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* attraction uses this technique to great advantage.)

Why all this emphasis on focusing attention before the show begins? For one, if patrons get bored, they begin to chat amongst themselves, and this talk usually ends up turning their focus away from the story. At least some of the intensity is lost, and anticipation (an important preconditioner for fear) is lessened. For another, the show value of the attraction depends to a great degree upon immersive participation by the audience, and this must begin outside. It is unlikely that it will automatically begin at the door.

Suspension of disbelief begins outside the attraction. If all we have is a painted flat, that can be mightily embellished by having cast members acting out the parts of characters connected with the drama to be staged inside. Additionally, soundtrack should be introduced at this point, including music and narrative. Tell the customers what they are facing ("Welcome, foolish mortals, to the haunted mansion," runs a familiar example.)

Every effort to alleviate the potential boredom of customers standing in a long line should be made, up to and including staging a scripted drama to be presented at regular intervals. Actors in this pre-show should be chosen for their ability to improvise and entertain spontaneously, for this is probably the most challenging micro-theater of a haunt. (Once patrons are inside and in the dark, suggestion does a lot of the work for you.)

Now we consider the use of the aforementioned cues to involve the senses and emotions:

Performance Cues: Actors and actor-surrogates (i.e., animatronics) should be present to give life to the concept. The mansion should seem inhabited, and these performers begin the process of envelopment before patrons pass through the entranceway. Their scripts may include the following elements:

Audience by-play: a warm-up technique which includes the use of audience member reactions as a source of laughs. This helps to make guests feel welcome, and also lessens the element of foreboding by reminding them that it's just a show (though not necessarily worded as a disclaimer.)

Preface: A verbal and visual introduction to the back story, in the form of a narrative, which may include information on desired guest etiquette (no smoking, no flash photography, etc.)

Playlets: Mini-dramas using characters from the back story to reinforce the theme. This can include the use of 'ringers' (cast members) planted in the queue line who are pulled aside and used as the focus of narrative advancement. To the customers, this may seem like audience by-play, but it is actually a breaking of the fourth wall as opposed to a warm-up. The blurring of this distinction can really add to guest anticipation of the show inside.

Lighting Cues: This is the time for visual dramatics to begin in earnest. Whether it be lightning or the sudden appearance of a major interior character in a window, lighting cues grab the focus of the crowd in a macro fashion - that is, grabbing the attention of the entire queue line - especially when combined with...

Audible Cues: Thunder, screams, laughter - or whatever - yanks the queue standee away from casual conversation with family members, friends, or dates - and demands their attention for a few seconds. Naturally, audibles are an aid to the building of mood, whether it be excitement or foreboding.

Atmospheric Cues / Tactile Cues: These include such effects as sprayed water droplets spread by a hidden fan to fall upon onlookers, confetti cannons, pyrotechnics, distinctive aromas, or similar effects.

Detail Cues: The classic example of this is an array of tombstones with clever epitaphs. Other examples would include glowing eyes appearing from within foliage, moving props (such as a skeletal hand reaching through the soil covering a grave) or a croaking raven up in a tree.

Continuity Cues: Already, guests should have a good idea of the theme, and each element of the outdoor pre-show should advance it. The theme of 'ghost... ghosts... oooh, ghosts!' should be building all the time in the minds of patrons.

By the time the guest enters the attraction, his or her attention should be completely engaged by show elements. With the facade, forward-directed focus is easy to maintain. The ticketing gate and parking lot are boring when compared to what lies before the guest. Once inside, the forward focus must be maintained if the show is to be advanced properly.

II. INTERIOR ELEMENTS

Once guests are inside the attraction, forward focus is most easily achieved by continually drawing attention to the scenic elements that lie in the path of the walking (or riding) audience.

It is highly desirable to hide lighting and audio sources creatively. This is most easily achieved by making what is to come more interesting than what is passing by in peripheral vision. Generally speaking, each scene should be treated as a stage. The entrance to the next scene

(stage) should be framed by a portal of some sort, which becomes the subsequent focus of attention. As in any drama, interest should intensify as the story progresses. (This technique will lessen the chance of patrons becoming bored and looking backward to examine the particulars of stagecraft.)

Generally speaking, all lighting instruments (spotlights, blacklights, strobe lights, etc.) should be above and behind the spectators. The exceptions to this rule are accent lights on certain individual props, which may be located below, or to the side of the elements which they must illuminate. In these cases, the instruments should be shrouded or placed in reflectors such that they are not made a focus in and of themselves. As mentioned elsewhere on this site, blacklight should not flood spectator areas, as it causes clothing to fluoresce and become an unintended light source, possibly detracting from an intended effect (and yes, white underwear tends to glow through most normal fabrics.)

As the show reaches its climax, the theatrical aspects should reach their zenith. By the end of the tour, all the elements and themes are fully exercised (exorcised?), and finally enhanced in chorus, which brings the opus to a close. In its classic form, the dark attraction saves its best effect for last: the denouement ('day-noo-MOHH'), or concluding story element(s). This is the 'dramatic arch' of the attraction.

Using the back story, the haunt is finally designed and structured as follows:

Introduction

The introduction is the role of the facade and outside pre-show, and basically states the thesis of the back story. Our designers have chosen to have the members of a fictional ghost-hunter society present the introduction via a video presentation. Also present are a few of the society's members, who interact with the queue-line standees in an improvisational manner, and using some themed magic tricks as 'psychic demonstrations' to show that the house is metaphysically active. Thus, the patrons are wrapped up in the story (and presumably entertained) before they enter.

Theme and Exposition

After the exterior preamble, the audience knows the premise all too well. As they enter, the play begins and runs according to the theme, which is determined by the narrative structure of the back story. There are two basic methods used in touring guests through a walk-through haunt, and we will consider the use of both of them in advancing the theme.

If the attraction is to use guided tours, the narrative is easy to exposit. The narrator assumes the role of the head of the expedition, and the guests form the rest of the party. Stops for focus upon the chapters of the theme are thereby easy to arrange, and our actor/actress can generate the proper mood as required.

If the crowd must pass through continually due to capacity requirements, the narration could take the form of recorded spiels that repeat. Or, preferably, the narrative can be implied by the scenic elements. The strongest method of exposition for a haunted attraction is the visual one, and this starts immediately upon entrance. (This is the prevailing method in use in October haunted attractions.)

The story has a definite rising action, and this must be relentless until the 'why' element is exposed. This requires...

Elaboration

Kinetic effects abound. Doors bang, objects move on their own, and odd sound effects draw attention to visuals that advance the theme. Distractions draw the attention of the patrons, until they are assaulted from an unexpected direction. Eventually, a few isolated spooks appear, interacting with one another and with the patrons. Thematically, the ghosts are aware that they are being observed, and demonstrate it by all methods of which they (by courtesy of the haunt's designers) are capable.

Climax

Guests arrive in the attic, and discover the 'why' element. The specters become increasingly and aggressively interactive, with the obvious intent of scaring the intruders away. The pacing of events following the climax becomes frantic.

Finale

As guest near the exit, the ghosts get 'up-close and personal.' The threat reaches its maximum, and just as the guests are about to be caught, they exit through a final climactic scare, to their relief.

Now we will consider the use of the various cues in support of our example's dramatic arch, with an eye on keeping the focus of the audience riveted on the story:

Performance Cues: All castmembers inside the attraction should be thoroughly aware of the back story, know their character roles, and stay in character throughout the hours of operation, save for break time. Actors should never be observed chatting with each other by the guests, for example. A successful show places the most capable performers in the key roles, and the more inexperienced players are given roles they can handle without tiring.

Naturally, animatronics can be relied upon to be consistent (assuming they are mechanically reliable to begin with,) but they should never be given key roles unless they are especially

elaborate and expressive in their delivery. The two best uses of animatronics in an attraction on a realistic budget are:

Accents (quick, repetitive scares) which would become boring for any actor over a long period of time

Distractions, which pull the attention of the guests away from the direction of the scare.

Lighting Cues: This is perhaps the most important issue in staging a haunted attraction, but it is often overlooked, or treated as an afterthought. No other element deserves more consideration in the planning stage of a haunted attraction than lighting effects. If you decide to storyboard your haunt (and it is recommended) use quick and simple illustration that suggest the lighting to be used in each. Recruit someone who knows lighting well (someone active in community theater or a paid professional) and have them do a lighting plot for each scene. Do not depart from these ideas as you execute the staging.

In a dark ride, the designer has the luxury of using pitch darkness as a plot device, and indeed it is a most effective one. Nothing tops cold darkness for generating anticipation! In a walkthrough attraction, the guests must be able to see their way, or their safety and comfort are compromised (remember, you are not offering them *real* horror, just theatrical horror; it's only entertainment.) Cold darkness appears only on mini-stages or scenes as the guests pass by, only to be punctuated by a quick accent designed to show the scare to its best effect. The temptation, for many a haunt, is to buy a case of strobe lights and use them in every scene. This quickly becomes not only expected, but even *boring* to the more sophisticated guests. Yes, they do work to scare people; but what is the better show - a lot of darkness and sudden flashes that simply confuse them, or a rich diorama in which unexpected turns come from out of nowhere, leaving them to want another tour in order to see more of it?

Audible Cues: As with lighting, there are two main categories of audio in a haunted attraction:

Soundtrack - that is the overall sonic wash that flows through the entire show. It may change from zone to zone, fading from one theme to the next as in a movie or musical, but it is continuous and dramatic. This audio comes from sources arranged so to present the audience with a consistent level. It never shouts at one ear close up, nor does it give away the source from which it emanates. The speakers playing this track should be well-hidden and not draw attention to themselves.

Accents (or 'hits') - these are the bits or samples that accompany the sudden dramatic cues; the 'boos', if you will. The speakers should be hidden well, but placed so that the sound appears to come from a definite source (the dramatic accent piece or actor.)

Atmospheric Cues: Fog machines, fans, chillers, heaters and other such devices provide these stimuli. Scents can be placed in foggers to provide aroma cues as well.

All too often, atmospheric cues are overused, and become a distraction in and of themselves. Like lighting, they must be used properly, and not just placed at the last minute. The following guidelines may be helpful:

Foggers: Keep it subliminal, keep it subtle. Don't spray patrons with it, for some may be allergic to fogger juice contents. Remember that fog migrates quickly, and may stray into areas where it will hurt rather than help the scene. Keep these machines under observation periodically, and don't trust their safety shutoff devices absolutely. Appoint a person to fill them at the beginning of each night of operation and see that they are shut off _at the unit itself_ at the end of the night. If you use scented fog, sparing use is especially important!

In our example haunt, fog could be a cue for the presence of a spirit or two. A scent - such as roses - can signify the presence of another main character. The prefiguration for these cues should come in the narrative material that precedes them.

Fans: Don't place fans in plain sight. Find ways to hide them, including painting them black against a black background. Don't let light stray onto them. If possible, use blowers instead of bladed fans, and be sure to diffuse the output (use louvers to spread the airstream, for example.) Don't allow moving air to tangle critical props. FCG's and other marionette-style animatronics may benefit from a slight breeze, but don't overdo it!

Obviously, moving air will be immediately sensed as a contrast cue; and - in the context of our example - could be a great cue for an apparition's appearance.

Chillers/Heaters: If air conditioners are used as spot chillers in a haunt, remember that the backside will be blowing even more hot air in the opposite direction. In order to chill a space, a window unit must exhaust outside, or to someplace where heat isn't a problem. If you have a cold room at one place in the haunt, and a hot room in another, this can be the best solution. Whatever you do, do not use electric or (heaven forbid) gas heaters in a haunt, unless they are central units! (Fire Code forbids such heaters in haunts anyway.)

In our haunted mansion, either extreme of temperature could be of great use if the narrative sets it up: "It is said that there is a cold spot in the house that is always present..."

Tactile Cues: These include such items as hanging threads of very thin monofilament (fishing line, for example) in a darker passage, sudden and directed compressed air streams, fabric hangings that must be brushed away, or any number of other similar items. Keep in mind that the patron must never be placed in jeopardy by a tactile element, and great care should be exercised to make sure that this cannot happen. If you are in doubt, don't use tactiles.

Compressed air at reasonable pressures and distances is utterly harmless, but remember to keep it directed away from the patrons' eyes! If your actors are wielding air nozzles, make sure they are OSHA certified, and supervise their use. Another factor in the use of compressed air is noise. Although air cannons (for example) are a great scare, they can also damage hearing under the

right conditions. Operators should wear hearing protectors, and the nozzle should be far enough from patrons that the sound level is safe. If in doubt, lower the air pressure!

IMPORTANT CAUTION: Actors should *never* touch patrons. This is often the source of legal entanglements in haunted attractions, and although specific legalities will not be discussed here, it is important to remember the litigious possibilities of direct touch and avoid it. A guide holding a frightened patron's hand may be okay, but a castmember grabbing a guest's arm is another thing altogether.

Detail Cues: Other than lighting, this is one of the too-often-ignored dramatic plusses. It is a well-known source of repeat business, as well. It is not necessary to blow a large portion of the haunt budget to achieve detail. Obviously, many accent props may be found at garage sales, junk (second-hand) stores, or dollar stores. Cheap-looking props can often be made to look exotic with a mere coat of paint and a bit of dry-brush antiquing. Whole books have been written on this subject, and theater people are a great source of advice, as well.

Our example is an old house, so the presence of antique-looking accents is paramount. Details also perform as cues when - once again - the narrative sets it up in advance. One good example is a toy doll that cries 'ma-ma!' at an unexpected moment.

Continuity Cues: This is the 'dramatic arch' embodied in a series of events. As was mentioned above, the story much follow the rising action curve until its climax. In order to achieve this, each dramatic scene should build upon what came before it. Don't provide a series of anticlimaxes. In other words, don't present your best effects at the beginning of the show. Keep a contrast between quiet scenes with a more narrative focus and startle scenes with the intent of scare. Alternate the two, but don't necessarily 'checkerboard' them.

For example, one scene may be an ominous view of an exterior scene of trees and scrub, seen through a window in the house. It suggests a potential scare, which is actually delivered around the corner as the audience steps out on a porch to face the lurker. This is *immediate* continuity, as opposed to the back story's dramatic arch (large scale) continuity. One scene leads logically into the next, in the same way as two camera shots in a film set up a dramatic incident. As mentioned above, don't always pair setup and scare scenes as contrasts in the same manner. Try setup...setup...scare and scare...setup...comic relief, for example. [Yes, I am an advocate of comic relief in haunts, but not in large, inappropriate doses. Goofiness is for funhouses and bad contemporary horror films; enough said.]

III. EXIT / EPILOGUE ELEMENTS

When patrons exit, the show may be over, but don't simply dump them back into reality with a metaphorical cold shower. Keep them immersed in scenics, and gradually bring them back to reality. Don't shove the concession stands and souvenir booths in their faces immediately. Keep

the audio cues present (in a diminished form) and offer an epilogue in either narration or visual form. Give them a sense of the outcome of the story in which they have just participated.

When they do enter the concession area, the theme should be at least loosely present - and it will actually enhance the possibility that they will patronize shopping opportunities. Have salespersons in character as actors, and don't spare the charm. Here is yet another sense in which the show (as they say) must go on.

Ideally, patrons will go home re-running the show in their imaginations, and perhaps even embellishing it. From this may come your best advertisement: word of mouth!

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