

Jacob Surovsky

Professor Maura Brewer

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The Spread of Nothingland

Welcome to Nothingland. You paid a lot of money to be here. More money by far than you can afford on an average day. But that's okay, because today is a special day. Today, you are at Nothingland. Buy a Nothingland hat. Or a Nothingland shirt. There is nothing here you want to do. Yet all your friends are so jealous of you, because of the pretty pictures you are taking of yourself smiling at Nothingland.

Nothingland is a theme park. You may know it by another name. The ticket you bought likely reads "California Adventure" when you cross the threshold into Nothingland. But California Adventure bears little resemblance to California, and less resemblance to having an adventure. It is a theme park wherein the only experience it offers is to go to a theme park, and as consequence for this grievous fault it offers its guest's a soulless and shallow experience.

As it has grown as a form of entertainment, the primary purpose of a theme park is to offer experiences that fulfill the desires of the guests. Disneyland is a perfect example of this. Disneyland is divided into 8 lands (see Figure 1), each of which fulfills a universal desire. Going to the future (Tomorrowland), the wild west (Frontierland), adventuring in the jungle (Adventureland), or the world of fairy tales (Fantasyland); these are all things most everybody views as a favorable experience. These experiences match the famed thesis of Disneyland which is inscribed over the entryway into the park, "Here you leave today and enter the world of

yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy.” On the other hand, California Adventure’s development left it devoid of a clear thesis, and the experience the park offers has suffered as a result since opening day.

California Adventure’s development traces back to when Disneyland opened in 1955 and had a large beautiful parking lot adjacent to its gate. But then one day in the early 1990’s, company President Jack Lindquist realized the Anaheim Disneyland park could make at least twice as much money if they upgraded that parking lot for a second theme park and turned Disneyland into the Anaheim Disneyland Resort. So in 1995 Disney announced WestCOT, a west coast equivalent to Florida’s EPCOT that they would build in the parking lot. But as these plans were being put into action, Disney was also opening the Euro Disney Resort in Paris, a significant investment which flopped when it opened and sunk Disney deep into debt. Suddenly, Disney would be unable to foot the three billion dollar bill projected for WestCOT and the project collapsed. But CEO Michael Eisner still wanted a second gate at Disneyland instead of a beautiful parking lot. So after a weeklong retreat with fellow Disney executives, Michael Eisner hatched a brilliant and beautiful plan. When people visited Disneyland from far away, they often then went to explore other parts of California, much to Eisner’s chagrin. What if instead, they built a second park next to Disneyland that was all about the beauty, wonder, and history of California, so that their guests would never have to leave the Disneyland resort to see the sights? Instead they would bring California to Disneyland. With a green light in 1998, they bulldozed that beautiful parking lot and constructed Disney’s California Adventure, which opened to the public in 2001.

Disney's California Adventure was designed under the misconception that people would rather visit the artifice of California than the real thing, despite real California existing directly outside the entryway. Unfortunately, due to the limited budget of only a billion dollars, the park's offerings on opening day were incredibly meager (Figure 2). As a result, Disney's California Adventure was built with little to do, and none of it was inherently desirable to guests in the same way Disneyland's offerings were. Attendance suffered immediately as the public rejected this new park, preferring to see the real California rather than a lazy imitation. The main problem was the park's thesis. Though the intention of the park was to bring the attractions of California to Disneyland to create an experience that perfectly paired with going to Disneyland, the lens the Imagineers represented the park through was inherently broken. Creative Lead Imagineer Barry Braverman qualified California by saying, "there's a kind of brash California attitude that we wanted to capture. Much more pop culture and MTV with a little tongue-in-cheek thrown in." (Krosnick, 3). This brash energy did not fulfill the fantasies of many guests, and as a result, guests did not show up like Disney anticipated.

The best embodiment of this broken thesis was seen in an area of the park called Paradise Pier. Paradise Pier. Located in the back right corner of Disney's California Adventure, it is the largest land in the park and themed after a boardwalk series of attractions not unlike Santa Monica Pier. The area is inherently meta, it is a theme park attraction themed like a different themed attraction. Disneyland was originally constructed to offer families an alternative space to spend their leisure time instead of the grimy and gritty pierside carnivals that dominated the 40's and 50's. Given this context, Paradise Pier is inherently oppositional to the thesis of Disneyland, and eviscerates the intention of Disney's California Adventure being a complementary park to

Disneyland. Going to a kitschy pierside carnival is not a universally desirable experience in the same way going to the past, future, and worlds of fantasy is. And furthermore, if one does desire to experience a pierside carnival, they can drive to the California coast nearby and spend far less money for the real deal. Unfortunately, this self aggrandizing tone permeated the original Disney's California Adventure throughout the park, from a Hollywood themed land built like a Hollywood backlot complete with cheap 2D plywood painted sets, to a Yosemite-inspired nature themed area that had been overrun with extreme sports gear to make it more "exciting". And as Disney would attempt to course correct the parks offerings to make up for the initial meager attendance, they would find this initial thematic intention unshakeable from all future changes made in California Adventure.

The Disneyland resort has always been strapped for expansion space. Why else would one dig up a perfectly good parking lot to build a subpar theme park unless they had nowhere else to build? But California Adventure didn't seem to be built with ease of future expansion in mind. This is disappointing considering that when Disneyland was constructed, it set the industry standard for all theme parks to follow (Salvador Anton, 23). Disneyland was built in a layout called the hub and spoke method (Figure 1). Guests enter up Main Street to the center of the park. This round courtyard offers entrances to the four main lands in the park--Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Frontierland, and Adventureland--that support the park's thematic core of worlds of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy. Here, guests are faced with the choice of which land to explore first. If they ever get lost in the park, all they have to do is retrace their steps back to the central hub. But as most guests prefer to travel in a circular pattern (Zhang, 84), the layout allows for ease of navigation and gives guests the most agency as they craft the narrative of their day.

The hub and spoke layout also allows for an ease of expansion. By leaving plots of land between the different spokes, you can build new attractions while still making them feel like a natural part of the park's layout, rather than building on the outskirts.

California Adventure's layout (Figure 2) follows no intuitive ground plan, and as a result set the park up for future failure when expansions began. When guests enter the park, they reach the end of a short plaza and are given the choice to either go left to Hollywood Land, or right to Grizzly Peak. Hollywood Land is a dead end, in order to get out of it guests must walk out the way they came in. Grizzly Peak offers a circular route around the titular peak, which connects to Paradise Pier which offers yet another circular route around the titular pier. Additionally, the sightlines of the park are not made with immersion in mind. In many sections of the park you can see one end to the other, making the park feel small and the lands feel incomplete. With a weak layout as a foundation, when Imagineers started adding in expansions there was no central hub to base the new lands around, just as there was no central thesis to ground them. What resulted was a park made up of a patchwork of lands with no cohesive flow between them (Figure 3).

After six stagnant years, in 2007 California Adventure embarked on a major 1.6 billion dollar expansion to revitalize the park and make it a worthy compliment to the original Disneyland. This included sprucing up all the existing lands primarily by removing the uniquely Californian kitsch and adding Disney intellectual property and characters all around the park including a Toy Story, Monsters Inc., and Little Mermaid rides. However, none of these additions fit the theme of California. Even the largest addition, a new 12 acre land called Cars Land based off of the 2006 Pixar film *Cars*, though set on route 66 which ends in California, was definitely not set in California. Suddenly, Disney's California Adventure faced a very real

identity crisis. What is the point of a park devoted to the high concept of California if the experiences offered inside have nothing to do with it? Now California Adventure was simply a theme park about going to a theme park. The self aggrandizing seed planted in Paradise Pier in 2001 had taken on like a cancer and spread throughout the entire resort. But as bad as Paradise Pier was, Cars Land is even worse.

First and foremost, Cars Land carries with it a glaring contradiction. The world of *Cars* (here meaning the world in which the *Cars* movie is set) has one distinguishing factor from our own world: it is a world where there are no humans, instead everything has been purpose built to accommodate cars. As this is the case, it is not an incredibly inviting environment for humans. The existence of Cars Land does not fulfill the universal fantasies of its guests in the same way Tomorrowland or Fantasyland does within Disneyland. Yet it was still almost single handedly responsible for boosting attendance at California Adventure. Since opening, Cars Land has been incredibly popular with guests, with its E-Ticket attraction Radiator Springs Racers still having a wait over two hours the majority of the time. So why do people rush to Cars Land if they never saw themselves in the world of *Cars*?

Despite its thematic flaws, Cars Land is gorgeous. It is one of the most beautiful, wholly complete lands Disney has ever built. The rockwork is detailed and completely overwhelms the senses. It truly feels as if you have stepped right into the world of *Cars*. And because it is so well done, people flock to it like a moth to a light. In this way, Cars Land has invented its own mythos. Guests do not make the pilgrimage to Cars Land to immerse themselves within the world of *Cars*, as they go to Fantasyland to immerse themselves in a world of fantasy, instead they go to Cars Land to go to Cars Land. The excellence of immersion is at such a level that the

park is worth visiting because the immersion is so excellent. As long as Disney builds experiences at this high a level of excellence they will ascend to a new dimension of fantasy fulfillment. California Adventure will no longer have to exist to fulfill the fantasies of its guests, it will prescribe the fantasies for its guests. Nothingland is real, and everyone is dying to go, because Nothingland has decreed it so.

Consider the offerings California Adventure now presents to its guests. A Hollywood Land that lacks the authenticity of the real Hollywood studios so closeby instead featuring Marvel, Monsters Inc., and Frozen attractions. A Yosemite-esque land that lacks all the sights, space, and natural beauty that makes Yosemite so special. A Santa Monica pier ripoff with a kitschy Pixar overlay. And a town purpose built for cars now overrun with tourists. None of these experiences are inherently desirable. Instead, they are desirable because they are all offered at California Adventure. This self aggrandizing agenda on the part of the parks reinforces our complicity as consumers. We have entered an age where any blockbuster film can be re-adapted as a theme park attraction without considering the long term implications. The parks take advantage of this complicity because the average theme park attendee is not trained to approach their theme park experience with a critical lense as they may a book, song, or film. Thus Disney continues to strip the California from California Adventure without worrying about the public response, and pump the hollow shell of a park full of unrelated intellectual property because it makes them more money, while the original Disneyland sits across the courtyard moldering in the nostalgia of a bygone era. That is of course until Galaxy's Edge (a Star Wars themed land) opens behind Frontierland this summer. Then Disneyland will also contradict its original thesis, and begin to succumb to the mediocrity of being a theme park for theme park's sake.

California Adventure was born an anomaly, but through changes both in the park and throughout the industry, it is slowly becoming the theme park industry standard. Every park is conglomerating into one central vision, a self aggrandizing mishmash of intellectual properties tied together under the weakest of premises. Soon it will not matter if you spend your money at EPCOT or Universal Studios, California Adventure or Islands of Adventure, you will have merely bought another ticket to Nothingland, and your friends and family will be more jealous of you than ever before.



Fig 1, Disneyland Map



Fig 2, California Adventure on Opening Day

Pacific Wharf

ATTRACTIONS

21 The Bakery Tour (hosted by Boudin Bakery. Watch as bakers create fresh sourdough bread before your eyes.)

DISNEY DINING

M Pacific Wharf Distribution Co. featuring Karl Strauss handcrafted beers.

N Cocina Cucamonga Mexican Grill Tacos, burritos, fire-grilled chicken and more!

O Lucky Fortune Cookery Stir-fry flavors from Asia.

P Rita's Baja Blenders Frozen margaritas & blended non-alcoholic specialties.

Q Pacific Wharf Café Salads, soups and sandwiches featuring Boudin Bread.

R Ghirardelli® Soda Fountain and Chocolate Shop Chocolatey goodness and incredible ice cream!

S Alfresco Tasting Terrace Featuring the Disney Family of Wines and appetizers.

T Mendocino Terrace Wine and snacks.

U Wine Country Trattoria Italian favorites with California Wine Country influences.

V Sonoma Terrace California Craft beer and wine.

Paradise Pier

ATTRACTIONS

22 California Screamin' Zoom on this high-speed coaster. (Minimum height 48"/122 cm)

23 King Triton's Carousel Ride a whimsical carousel of sea creatures.

24 Toy Story Midway Mania! Take aim and ride this 4D attraction!

25 Games of the Boardwalk Test your skill at these pay-to-play games.

26 Mickey's Fun Wheel Sail up and over the face of Mickey Mouse aboard this spin-sational ferris wheel.

27 Silly Symphony Swings Enjoy boardwalk fun at its "swinging" best! (Minimum height 48"/102 cm)

28 Goofy's Sky School Climb aboard your training vehicle for a zany roller coaster ride! (Minimum height 48"/102 cm)

29 Jumpin' Jellyfish Drop down through a colorful forest of kelp. (Minimum height 48"/102 cm)

30 Golden Zephyr Rocket around in spinning spaceships.

31 The Little Mermaid-Ariel's Undersea Adventure Be part of Ariel's world aboard this attraction!

32 World of Color Experience a magnificent nighttime water spectacular! (See Times Guide for show times and days)

DISNEY DINING

W Ariel's Grotto Ariel's Disney Princess Celebration®, Character dining, World of Color dinner packages.

X Cove Bar Beer, wine, cocktails, non-alcoholic specialty beverages and light appetizers.

Y Paradise Pier Ice Cream Company Soft serve ice cream.

Z Bayside Brews Pretzels and beer.

AA Boardwalk Pizza & Pasta Pizza, pasta and salads.

BB Paradise Garden Grill Marinated grilled skewers.

CC Corn Dog Castle Corn dogs.

Grizzly Peak

ATTRACTIONS

33 Redwood Creek Challenge Trail Earn your Wilderness Explorer badges as you scramble across rope bridges, slide down hollow logs, climb rock walls and more! (Weight and age requirements - certain challenges only)

34 Grizzly River Run Roar down this whitewater raft adventure. (Minimum height 42"/107 cm)

35 Soarin' Over California Soar and swoop over famous California landmarks. (Minimum height 48"/102 cm)

DISNEY DINING

DD Smokejumper's Grill Burgers, chicken sandwiches, fries and drinks.

EE Refreshment Point Hosted by Coca-Cola®

Select Paradise Pier attractions close early due to World of Color. Please visit an Information Center for operating hours.

Mad T Party At Hollywood Land. (See Times Guide for days and times)

World of Color Viewing Options

Get a FASTPASS+ ticket Available at the Grizzly River Run FASTPASS+ distribution area.

Ariel's Grotto Dinner packages include a ticket for access to reserved viewing. Make reservations by stopping by or calling 714-781-DINE (3463).

Non-ticketed viewing is available around Paradise Bay.

Carthay Circle Restaurant Dining packages include a ticket for access to center stage viewing. Make reservations by stopping by or calling 714-781-DINE (3463).

Wine Country Trattoria Dining packages include a ticket for access to reserved viewing. Make reservations by stopping by or calling 714-781-DINE (3463).

*FASTPASS+ tickets and dining packages are limited.

Fig 3, California Adventure Map Post Expansion

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