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## Theater as an Experiential Destination: Exploration of Themed Entertainment Design Techniques for Theatrical Productions

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Theater as an Experiential Destination:  
Exploration of Themed Entertainment Design  
Techniques for Theatrical Productions

by

Yunzhu (Jessica) Chen  
Class of 2024

A critical essay submitted to the  
faculty of Macalester College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
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Honors Advisors: Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento and Thomas Barrett

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While Broadway and the West End enjoy relative financial stability as must-go theater destinations, regional and smaller theaters have struggled to rediscover their identity and survive since the COVID-19 outbreak. Live entertainment greatly suffered during the two years following the onset of the 2020 pandemic. Differently from theaters, entertainment districts such as theme parks are returning and at times surpassing their pre-pandemic successes. Like theater productions, theme parks depend on live audiences. Theme park designer and scholar David Younger adds that “it is important to recognize that the theme park, like cinema and theater, is show business, with all due emphasis on each of those two words” (21). So how do these two forms of live entertainment have such different turnouts after the pandemic? How do theme parks attract returning patrons? How can we emphasize such particularities to bring the audiences back to the theater? What can we learn from theme park designers to increase the number of returning patrons to a given performance and what are theater productions that already employ similar tactics? This paper investigates the methods that theme park designers use when designing immersive and “re-rideable” (Younger et al. 395) attractions, their presence in existing theater productions, and other possible applications in different performances to enhance the audience experience and increase reoccurring attendance.

If you go to a theater production at a LORT theater today, you will most likely sit through a performance that is mostly identical to the one performed yesterday and to the one that will play tomorrow. Mainstream theater practices in North America dictate the repeatability and precision of the performances, aiming for each audience member enjoys as similar of an experience as possible on any given day. To the general public then, attending a show at a local, small to medium size theater is likely an one-time experience that is designed to not invite a return. Moreover, going to the theater is a special event that involves setting a good amount of

time aside—it takes spectators some three to five hours to attend a performance. Most households in the United States are located a twenty-minute drive to a local theater. Then patrons must park, walk to the venue, and wait in the foyer until the house opens. They may grab a drink and chat with their company. It will be close to ten or eleven o'clock by the end of the performance and the start of their drive back home. In short, a trip to the theater is special and involves time commitment. To many casual theatergoers, the choices lay as the following: Why should they choose theater to spend three to five hours instead of going to a sports match, live concert, or other activities with comparable time commitment?

The problem lies in that few theater productions explore what makes the art form stand out: the audience's intimate relationship with the narrative and their ability to directly affect a given performance. German scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the audience's placement in a mainstream theater performance as “[watching] the plot unfold on stage, possibly with strong feelings of empathy, but [refraining] from interfering” (12). As *Hudson Review* editor Erick Neher also points out, “the dominant paradigm today ... involves a seated audience, facing the stage, and participating only by laughing, applauding, murmuring or gasping” (108). Sitting behind the fourth wall, spectators are passive watchers of the narrative and remain physically and mentally detached from that world and its characters. The conventions of theatrical spectatorship do not invite audiences to outwardly express their responses to what unfolds onstage.

University of California Davis History Professor Michael T. Saler outlines that “[the] story-world becomes immersive because it feels inhabitable—as detailed as the ‘real world’ and shared with others as sort of imaginary habitus” (17). He argues that the feeling of being immersed in an environment depends on the knowledge that “the place one is inhabiting is ‘not real,’” but the visitors can “engage in a [conscious] suspension of disbelief” if the place

represents inhabitable lands and its inhabitants—other visitors and entertainers in this case—share the same conscious dedication to the fictional narrative. Saler names this active self-persuasion under these communal circumstances “ironic imagination” (14). The rise of ironic imagination in a theater setting requires the performance to be a phenomenological experience for the spectators; as Fischer-Lichte would describe it, a phenomenological experience of the performance must lead the audience to perceive it as immediate and true that is happening at the given moment (89). For example, when watching a ballet performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience observes the characters of Romeo and Juliet performing a love story onstage. The understanding of the signs that tell the story—how they hold hands and kiss, for example—provides spectators with a semiotic understanding of the plot. The immediacy of the dancers’ bodies in the performance—their execution of the choreography, their exertion and sweat, the moments in which they hold precarious balance—such physical engagement gives the spectators a feeling of “here and now” and thus of risk and unpredictability. This gradient of recognition between the semiotic and phenomenal aspects in productions creates the matrix in which the spectators recognize both the symbols that tell the story and move the plot forward, and the experience of the real bodies of performers onstage. Only when spectators engage with the action onstage as real and not fictional does the theatrical performance cease to exist as a representation to become an event in which spectators reverse their role into actors in the theatrical action. To each audience member, their presence in the fictional world is immediate and authentic, regardless of whether they are actively participating in the action or simply reacting to it.

Theater as a space is inherently built to explore ironic imagination and the matrix, and it is perfectly equipped to do so in a traditional seated configuration. The audience recognizes that what happens in front of them has been rehearsed in detail. Knowing the world is fictional, they

are more willing to suspend their disbelief when presented with an unfamiliar world or act. As they immerse in the world through their ironic imagination, the immediacy and the “moments of destabilization” in the performance convince the audience that the actions they witness are immediate and real. Still, it is rare that theater productions engage their audience in a manner that creates this matrix.

Live performances also thrive on the audience’s actions and reactions which promotes the effect of the autopoietic feedback loop. Fischer-Lichte defines the autopoietic feedback loop as the mutual influence that the performers and the audiences exert on each other and is an integral part of live performances (50). As the audience differs from performance to performance, the autopoietic feedback loop also changes. Thus, every new performance is able to give its audience phenomenal experience that is unique. The unpredictability of the autopoietic feedback loop is one of the key reasons live theater performances differ from static entertainment like film.

When looking at recent immersive theater productions in which audience members break away from traditional spectator roles, the commercial and cultural success of productions like *Sleep No More* and *Then She Falls* confirms that performances that engage spectators in a phenomenological experience of the event are not only executable, but also have the potential to be widely profitable. Similar to theme parks, immersive theater productions emphasize the audience-performer and audience-environment interactions while giving patrons a feeling of exploration as they move through scenes. Their attention to personal and ever-changing experiences encourages audience members to revisit in attempts to have a different experience. Unfortunately, and despite their immense success, the level of detail and the scale of investment these projects possess make it unfeasible for smaller regional theater companies to produce this type of performance at that scale.

When attempting to craft similar experiences that attract returning patrons in a smaller setting, we can separate the immersion into what Mark J. P. Wolf calls “physical immersion” and “conceptual immersion” (48). As the name suggests, physical immersion relates to the environment the audience inhabits. The degree of physical immersion fully depends on the objective level of “detailing” of the environment and the ability of the performers, if present, to portray their characters (Younger et al. 178). Conceptual immersion relies on the imagination of the participants. Though conceptual immersion is mostly applied to novels and books, experiential entertainment such as theater and theme parks also allows for conceptual immersion by saturating the visitors or audience with world-building information. Both types of immersion overlap and support each other: the more physical detailing, the greater the opportunity to conceptually immerse the participants. I will go on to examine the way theme park designers craft environments and attractions to best foster physical and conceptual immersive experiences for their patrons.

By definition, theme parks have “areas (i.e., ‘land’) that focus on telling a story” under a united theme (Williams 44). This theme can be a “manifestation theme” that includes “where it is located in space” and “what it is about” or a dramatic one (Younger et al. 47). Examples of the former include a location on or beyond Earth, such as EPCOT in Orlando; a specific time period, for example renaissance fairs; a known franchise like Disney Hollywood Studio in Orlando; and more. In the case of dramatic themes, they describe “how the guest should feel about their experience” (47). That includes but is not limited to the guests’ emotions, broader concepts such as hope or failure, and ideas such as “inner versus outer beauty” (66) Both manifestation and dramatic themes are often used in tandem to each other, creating a richer experience for those at a given park. Themed spaces “attempt to create a fantasy atmosphere of another place and time,



concentrate on a dominant theme with likely subthemes, and have closed geographical boundaries with an admission price at the gate” to engage both passive patrons and those actively searching for human-to-human or human-to-land interactions (Godovykh et al. 4). They are “patterned to symbolize experiences and/or senses from a special or a specific past, present, or future place or event as currently imagined” (Firat and Ulusoy 195). The “patterning of space, activity, and/or senses” is called theming (Younger et al. 47).

Like theater productions, theme parks emphasize world-building alongside a narrative as opposed to mere spectacle or thrills. Such focus fundamentally differentiates in visitor/audience expectations and experience in comparison to an amusement park. A visitor to Six Flags, a staple albeit now bankrupted American amusement park, will have similar goals as a concertgoer or circus showgoer—that is, they have a fun time based on a succession of rides, songs, or attractions. On the other hand, a theme park or theater-goer expects to see both a fully developed narrative world and a well-crafted physical scenic environment.

One main difference between theme parks and mainstream theaters lies in how they see their guests. While theme parks place their guest at the center of the narrative and have stories revolve around them, theatrical events typically place the audience as witnesses of the story. To many themed attractions, “each guest is their own character” (Younger et al. 83). When the audience is put into the place of the main character, the presence of the environment in storytelling needs to be much stronger due to the lack of character expressions present in traditional storytelling (85). Similarly, in numerous immersive or conventional theatrical productions, designers and directors characterize the audience members as active or passive participants. Simply having the characters recognize the presence of the audience in their world transforms their role from spectators to participants.

Punchdrunk's production of *Sleep No More* is both audience-centric and focuses on the matrix of semiotic and phenomenal experience in its design. Each audience member dons a mask that gives "a sense of anonymity," and the masks "make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences" (Flaherty 142). The mask allows the audience to completely fall into the spectator role and enjoy the show from a voyeur's perspective. Some even likened this masked spectatorship with online fandoms, where the viewers take an "explicitly voyeuristic position" (137). Simultaneously, the audience may get invited or pulled by a performer for a private performance. The characters sometimes assign audience members certain tasks or quests to complete, such as finding a ring or delivering messages. The action of such an audience then directly impacts the outcome of the performance everyone experiences that day. This duality in participation or spectatorship is common in other Punchdrunk productions as well. For example, another Punchdrunk production Goethe's *Faust*, produced in London in 2006, also asks the audience to wear a mask and freely roam a four-story building filled with some forty rooms (Sakellaridou 27). A Guardian critic expresses that the mask enables the visitor to "get outside of [themselves] and feel as if [they are] part of the play" (Lichtig). The audience can simply watch the actions in one moment and interact with the performers physically in the next. This oscillation between spectatorship and participant Punchdrunk favors to create builds a complex matrix of semiotic and phenomenal experience in which the audience is fully immersed in the fictional world. Both *Sleep No More* and *Faust* are examples of theater purposefully building the production to nurture phenomenal experience in performance and create a dynamic spectrum of roles between viewer and actor that the audience members can choose to partake in.

The Children's Theater Company's (CTC), a local Children's theater in Minneapolis, production of *Corduroy* incorporated a milder matrix using its interactive intermission with the

kids. When the last scene before intermission ends, the characters leave the stage littered with paper towels and other groceries. As the house light comes up, two characters invite children from the audience who are willing to participate to help clean up the mess onstage. Not only does this gesture engage the children and direct their attention to the performance itself during intermission in a fun and entertaining way, but it also serves to smoothly draw the participating audience into the production itself as actors. The kids who take part in the intermission activity see their contribution build towards the upcoming scenes and are then more likely to be attached to the narrative world of *Corduroy* and be more invested in the upcoming plot. This small invitation to participate temporarily switches the roles of the children and further immerses them into the world of the production.

Like theme parks, Punchdrunk's immersive productions and some other more traditional theater performances is designed with audience's entire experience in mind. However, for most local theaters, pre- and post-show experience is not the responsibility of the designers. Though every second during a performance is carefully designed to look the best, a theater's foyer is the same for every show. The pre-show setting results in an abrupt transition between the fictional world of the performance and the real world outside of the theater walls. In comparison, a theme park designer's attention to detail and world-building extends beyond the attractions.

When the number of park guests wanting to ride a specific attraction surpasses its capacity, the excess guests wait outside the attraction in a line called a queue. The queue of an attraction can simply be some switchbacks and bars that guide the guests on where to line up, but this choice removes any sense of immersion built up by the rest of the land. To eliminate this break in the immersive experience, theme park designers often choose to extend the attraction's theming into the queue area. This theming can be stationary sceneries and props for the people to

examine (Younger et al. 474). They can also be other forms of entertainment to occupy the guests' empty time. Younger describes that a well-themed waiting area around an attraction leads to the perception of a shorter waiting time, statistically improving the audience's satisfaction with the attraction. He says, "By keeping the guests stimulated and entertained in the queue, it will not only keep [guests] happy but has the opportunity of strengthening the theme and heightening the story at the same time"(470). Lead Designer of Main Street U.S.A at Disneyland Paris Eddie Sotto explains theming in queues helps "build anticipation and enhance the experience of the ride" and calls queues "appetizers" to the main attraction ("Eddie Sotto's Take on the Current State of the Parks" 57). Younger adds that "at their best, a queue could be a walkthrough attraction in its own rights" (475).

For example, the queue of *Avatar Flight of Passage* at the Disney Animal Kingdom in Orlando leads the park's visitors through multiple environments from the movie. As one of the most popular attractions in the park, the queue for this ride needs to entertain waiting park guests for up to two hours on most days. The entrance area of the queue takes the guests on a trip around the jungles and floating island of the fictional planet Pandora in the movie. The lines wind through streams of water and forestation with peculiar planets authentic to the fictional world of Pandora. Looking up, you will see the giant floating islands above. The furthest of which is painted with less saturated colors to simulate atmospheric distortion, a flawless use of force perspective to accentuate the islands' scale. The queue then leads into caves where the Na'vi people, native to Pandora, take shelter. There are cave paintings of constellations as they see them from the planet as well as handprints of Na'vi and other creatures native to the planet. After the cave comes the military bunker left by the RDA, the antagonist organization in the film *Avatar*. The rusty concrete walls alongside the flickering florescent tube light create a great

contrast to the blooming nature of the planet. The bunker stretches into areas that are reclaimed by the bioluminescent nature of Pandora. As the visitors walk through the abandoned areas of the RDA bunker, they enter to see the current experiments and scientific tests RDA is currently conducting. The line winds through pieces of equipment, incubators, and animatronics of captured Na'vi. The queue finally arrives at a pre-show where a filmed media introduces the ride to the visitors. Once the pre-show is over, the park staff leads the guests to the boarding area to begin the actual ride. It is not hard to see that average guests spend more time in the queue than at the actual attraction. The details in the queue give visitors familiar with the film a chance to discover hidden surprises while experiencing what they have seen on the big screen in real life. For those getting to know the world for the first time, the lengthy queue introduces them to the beauty of Pandora while showcasing the brute aesthetics of the RDA. Its layout also slowly and smoothly transitions the audience from the nature-focused Animal Kingdom park areas to the futuristic interiors of RDA.

Expanding the design of a theater production's theme into the foyer can lessen the audience's perceived time waiting before a performance begins. Also, the foyer can no longer just serve as a waiting area before the performance but as part of the experience altogether: once the audience enters the foyer, the performance already commences and as such the audience's phenomenological experience. The presence of scenic elements alters the way the audience behaves within the space and diverts their attention to the production's narrative world. With the indications, the audience acts following the conventions set up for a performance space, leading the trivial small talk they might have with their party member to be about the narrative world. While the audience members have their focus on the production itself, their reaction starts to affect and lead that of the others, initiating the autopoietic feedback loop among themselves and

the environment. In preparation for the main performance, the foyer can serve as a bridge between the audience and the narrative world of the production.

In themed park attractions, designers often use a technique called “receding” to bring the guest into the world of the attraction that may be different from that of the themed land outside (Younger et al. 475). For example, in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disneyland California, the ride itself is set in seventeenth-century Caribe while the land outside is themed to mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans. Once the guests enter the gate of the attraction and walk into the building, the lights gradually dim as they advance. Boats filled with guests who have just experienced the ride rocks pass the queue lines—the water element is introduced before the guests reach the loading area. By the time they reach the platform where they board the boat, the lighting finishes transitioning from the broad Californian sunshine to a dim eerie night. The gradual shift in lighting slowly settles into the audience while transitioning them from one theme to another. By applying the receding technique when designing theater foyers or waiting rooms, designers can more gradually prepare the audience members for the world of the production. Instead of having audience members step right from a bleak parking lot or a bustling urban street into the theater space, a designed foyer can also incrementally introduce the audience to information about the show they are about to take part in. As they walk closer to the main theater space, the details around the waiting area grow more representative of the narrative world of the performance.

“Theming” the area preceding the main performance space also provides opportunities to convey necessary information and context about the performance. Theme park attractions often place dedicated pre-shows within the queue to deliver this sort of information. The term pre-show refers to “any show elements the guest experiences before the attraction begins” (Younger

et al. 479). Pre-shows can take the form of a piece of media, live performances, animatronics, and many others. They can serve to “convey safety information and story information” so they do not take the limited scene spaces in that attraction itself (479). They can also carry different goals for their information delivery. Lead designer and director at Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI) John Hench explains that “in the Magic Kingdom, pre-show entertains, while in EPCOT, they educate” (34). This delivery of information in theaters would help the audience members gain any knowledge of the performance’s context that is necessary for understanding.

Jungle Theater’s production of *Cambodian Rock Band* in Minneapolis, Minnesota, cleverly sets up their foyer space to explain the complicated Cambodian history with the Khmer Rouge. This part of history is essential to understanding the conflict in the musical and the exhibition allowed the audience with less exposure to that background a chance to catch up before the performance. Jungle Theater’s foyer is a small space that hosts the waiting area, box office, and washrooms. This spatial limitation, as well as the theater’s budget, would suggest they would simply deliver the necessary information on the paper program like most other regional theaters. However, the Jungle took advantage of their audience’s waiting time before the house opened and established a small exhibit in the waiting area. The mini-installation included many depictions of documents from the government and images and videos of survivors from the Khmer Rouge regime. While waiting or on their way to the washroom, audience members took glimpses at the presentation. By presenting the information in a more engaging way than on the program brochure, Jungle Theater invited its patrons waiting for the start of the performance to spend time acquiring the knowledge, showcasing a simple way of building an engaging foyer for theaters that limited budget and space for pre-show.

Moving into larger LORT spaces with amenities such as bars, restaurants, and gift shops within the same property, theming these spaces can yield the same if not more saturation of the narrative world within the audience group pre- and post-show. The aforementioned production of *Corduroy* by CTC set up small booths and toy stands for the kids to interact with. This foyer served the sole purpose of entertaining the kids before house-open and during intermission. For this purpose alone, it has accomplished the task without a hitch, albeit not elegantly. With the larger dedicated waiting space, there was much more the creative team could do to further immerse the kids into the narrative world of the production. Similarly, a theater space can theme its bar area to the current running show, serving light food and drinks from the fictional world of the performance if there is any. Imagine a production of *Alice in Wonderland* that gives the Drink Me potions as a cocktail and the Eat Me Cookies as a snack to the audience as they enter the main theater space, or a costumed serving patrons beers in wooden jugs at the theater bar for a production about pirates. Serving specialty drinks is already common on Broadway, with many productions having their signature drinks. Having the bar space and bartender decorated and dressed canonically to the performance can further elevate the pre-show experience and immersion.

Once the audience enters a theater, they are often seated for the entirety of the performance. While these audience members stay mostly stationary in a single room, theme park guests are transported from an attraction's one showroom to another. This keeps the capacity of the ride high, and mobile guests minimize any scenery changes in a single showroom. Most themed attractions employ a tracked vehicle system, whether that be a hundred-foot-tall roller coaster or small dark rides. The system moves guests along an established path, i.e., the track (Younger et al. 420), allowing the designer to have full control over the timing and pacing of



how the elements appear in the attraction. In addition, tracked rides have steady and quantifiable guest throughput that is necessary for a theme park like Disneyland California which needs to accommodate over 44,000 guests a day (*Reinventing the American...*).

We can attempt to compare how themed attractions transport their guests to the range of mobility the audience has in a theatrical performance. While the benefit of tracked rides is undoubted in the theme park setting, it is logistically and financially unfeasible and unnecessary for an hour-long theater production—they do not need to siphon thousands of guests every hour like park attractions. With that said, the tracked ride system shares some similarities to the seating of the audience in theater. Tracked ride vehicles such as Disney’s patented “Omnimovers” can speed up, slow down, and turn to a certain side precisely when the designers want it to. This level of control ensures consistency in guest experiences. Likewise, whether the performance is set in a proscenium, thrust, in-the-round, or alley, theater audiences share roughly the same view of the action on stage. Even though they may be looking at the stage from different angles, ideally each seat’s sightlines are carefully checked by the designers and director. The production team has total control over the pacing and the cues of the performance, and each time you visit, the visual experience is roughly the same. Thus, the experience of the performance is controlled to be as consistent as possible through all the runs and across all the audience. Additionally, presenting the performance or attraction in this form siphons the narrative to the audience in a one-sided information delivery. The audience is not invited nor incentivized to actively explore the world and decipher its story.

On the other hand, when the audience is allowed to move around the space, this is closer to a walkthrough attraction in theme parks. Younger divides walkthrough attractions into Rolling Walkthroughs and Pulsed Walkthroughs. Rolling walkthroughs allow the guests to explore the

space at their own pace, while in a pulsed walkthrough an attraction staff actively guides the guests (461). Giving the audience agency over their time in a space makes walkthroughs deliver “a very personal feeling of exploration” (462). However, it is challenging to ensure quality for every single guest in a large crowd with the number of guests most theme park attractions need to accommodate. Younger cites a response that Eddie Sotto gave in an interview: “It’s hard to entertain the third person in the back row of a group and give them the big effect” (463). In addition to control over experience quality, the lack of control over the scene’s timing and their presentations places walkthrough attractions in a very awkward position. Executive vice president and chief operating officer at WDI Richard “Dick” Irvine describes the guests walking right past the effects and stories designers put in the scene in the *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea Exhibit* at Disneyland California if they are not pointed directly toward them (Ghez and Thomas 213). Pulsed walkthroughs are solutions to both missed information and the inconsistency in audience capacity as park employees guide the audience. However, Sotto expresses how this can easily lead to sluggish and choppy pacing during the “walk a while, load, do a scene, then ... walk some more” process (Younger et al. 464).

When applying the structure of walkthroughs in immersive performances, designers do not need to worry about audience throughput as productions usually sell a definitive number of tickets per performance or per timeslot. In addition to capacity, this enclosed operation also allows the story to be told only once during a single run. The scenes and performers do not need to reset until the next run begins. The problem of the audience missing key scenes in the show can be solved by using focus techniques to the theater’s advantage, which I will discuss later. Depending on the scale of any particular production, the designer may choose to limit or expand the parameters in which the audience can roam. If the goal is to accommodate less than two

hundred people in a space, the area of free roam can simply be the room in which they share. If the goal is to have a large group audience roam around multiple rooms within the same complex in separate groups, the designer needs to consider how rooms or spaces are laid out. Is the story told linearly or non-linearly? If the story is told linearly, will there be side stories for the audience to explore? Will there be a definitive end to the story for every audience if it is non-linear? Will that end be the same for every audience? And lastly, will the audience be guided?

A unique production called *The Car Plays* by Moving Arts in Los Angeles from 2016 demonstrated brilliantly the incorporation of traditional seated performance viewing and guided mobility around the playing space (“The Car Plays”). The production takes place in fifteen different cars parked in a parking lot where an audience member will experience a row of five cars at random per performance. Performers called “car hops” guided each pair of the audience into their respective cars and invited them to take a seat (Osborne). As the door closes on the car, the scene begins as the two characters who were already present in the car unfold the story. Scenes in each car are different and independent from one another. During the scenes, audience members are seated like most traditional performances, albeit in unique seating inches away from the action. Their mobility in between scenes is limited and guided. This special audience placement enhances immersion through the sheer proximity between performer and spectator.

One example of an entirely guided audience movement is the site-specific play *Information for Foreigners* by Griselda Gambaro, a play that talks about the lives of the victims of enforced disappearance. Consisting of twenty scenes performed in different rooms, the audience is split into multiple groups and a guide leads them on a tour of the rooms in no particular order. In the end, all groups converge in a single room for the final scene. In this production, the story is non-linear, and every audience group has different passages but arrives at

the same ending. The guide ensures that the audience is not stepping where they should not and makes sure they witness all the necessary scenes. As the audience roams the building following the guide, watching the stories unfold, the spectatorial nature of their role purposefully detaches their sense of power or control over the scene. Instead of making the audience feel empowered to affect the outcome of the scene, the guided setting creates a phenomenal experience by making the spectators feel powerless against the horrific stories of enforced disappearance victims.

The two Punchdrunk productions discussed earlier, *Sleep No More* and *Faust*, used non-linear storytelling and more unguided movements throughout the performance spaces. Though the characters may invite or pull certain audience aside for a private scene, the audience still has a sense of freedom roaming the multiple performance spaces. Of course, the audience's movements and actions are meticulously monitored by the production company to ensure the best experience for all, the sense of exploration is the greatest among the examples discussed. The path an audience takes is randomized from the beginning and hard to replicate for a second time, resulting in a definite unique experience each time they visit. This is one of the main ways Punchdrunk production attracts returning patrons who appreciate this uncertainty and are willing to explore more.

The benefit of non-linear storytelling like the examples mentioned above is that the audience develops a sense of exploration and discovery as they try to piece together the narrative. Eddie Sotto explains, "Great shows make us take the 'dabs' of detail and story and use our own imaginations to complete the picture" ("Eddie Sotto's Take on the Current State of the Parks" 226). He outlines that it is not exciting when the audience is shown everything at once. It takes away the "Aha!" moment for the audience when they finally connect the dots of the narrative and arrive at a conclusion on their own. Sotto states that audiences like to be challenged

and the job of a good designer is to provide great direction and “[use their] ‘voice’ sparingly so the audience can become involved” (226). This is not to say that linear storytelling cannot yield a challenging quest of discovery for the audience to embark upon. The streamlined nature of the delivery asks the production team to create other ways to stimulate a sense of exploration.

In addition to making the audience mobile, the production can incorporate different senses than audio and visual to enhance immersion. Experimental psychologist Charles Spence of the University of Oxford expresses that olfactory elements have been used in live performance since the Shakespearean era, with the intentional inclusion of such elements in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (“Scent in the Context of Live Performance” 1, 7). While the usage of scent in theater spaces has always been more of a gimmick due to many restrictions and problems, their presence in theme parks is dominant. For instance, Disney Parks heavily favors using olfactory stimuli in their land and attractions. The parks utilize patented “Smellitzer aroma cannons” to deliver “carefully controlled and orchestrated” specific scents to the visitors within very controlled areas, such as “the smell of the orange groves on *Soarin’ Over California*, the African grasses on *Soarin’ Around the World ...*, and the cannons and salty water at *Pirates of the Caribbean*” (Spence, “Scenting Entertainment” 5–6). These scents are what Scent Designer David Bernstein will classify as an ambient smell, serving as an initial impression to transport the audience/participants into the fictional world (“Scent in the Context of Live Performance” 9). Disney uses these ambient smells in both large and small spaces. *Main Street U.S.A.* in Disneyland California is filled with the scent of freshly baked goods and cotton candy, while the neighboring *Frontier Land* has a more dry and wild fragrance.

Bernstein also outlines the use of scent as cues, pointing the audience’s attention to a certain scene or set piece with the corresponding scent. However, this is only applicable for

tracked rides in attractions. Spence unveils the problem with using scent in a traditional sit-down theater space: “the build-up of different scents” within a confined unchanging space overwhelming the senses of the audience (“Scenting Entertainment” 6–7). Most attractions that utilize changing scents rely on the audience moving through different showrooms quickly inside their ride vehicles with very precise timing. The smell of rain will remain in the room with the rain sequence while the next room with the next sequence will have a different device with a different scent. With this restriction, the usage of smell within a stationary theater space can only be limited to an environmental or atmospheric one as described previously. However, if the audience is moving through different spaces, certain atmospheric aromas can function as scent queues.

Let us imagine restaging the *Fête de la Nuit* by Charles L. Mee as an immersive experience and the audience members are characterized as active participants by the performers. The set will be a Parisian Street lined with storefronts and restaurants while the cobblestone road runs down the middle. As they enter the space, servers invite the audience to take a seat at a restaurant table while others guide the audience to roam the shops. Some may be drawn to the bakery by the smell of the fresh croissants and éclairs, and others enter a coffee shop following the scent of grounded coffee beans. The performers enter and blend into the audience as the performance begins. Each pair of relationships develops their story simultaneously in different areas of the set and the audience who chooses to sit or roam around them gets to watch their story. While the servers deliver the audience their food and drinks, they may whisper about their opinion on the relationships or their take on the events. The audience is free to leave their table or stores to walk around to engage with other scenes. Their experience and the story they see entirely depend on their placement and time. If they are willing to chat with a character, the

character may respond—such an exchange would encourage audience-performer interaction.

When staging as this free-roaming space, the narrative of each relationship pair is a quest that the audience needs to explore and discover bit by bit. Their experience will also differ from each other as they choose to follow different characters.

While the scenography elements described above examine the quality of the audience's experience in the theater space, conceptual immersion enhances their experience both during and after the performance. As I have noted, conceptual immersion implies saturating the visitors or audience with world-building information and highly depends on one's familiarity with the context and world of the production or the themed lands and the amount of detail and information provided to them onsite. The more information the audience possesses about the narrative world, the more conceptual immersion they experience.

If the performance or attraction explores commonly known historical events, the creators may assume the participants will have some background knowledge of the historical or geographical context. Thus, the experience needs less exposition. For lesser-known historical events, such as the Khmer Rouge in the *Cambodian Rock Band* example I gave earlier, the use of the foyer and the pre-show is great for exposing the audience to the play's subject before the start of the performance. If the world of the play or attraction is fictional, the most common way of assuring prior exposure to it is through the use of Intellectual Properties (IPs). Younger describes IPs as “the brands, stories, and characters originating in another medium which are brought into and adapted to” the situation (59). Modern themed entertainment is very saturated with the usage of IPs with most theme parks “[adopting] pre-existing intellectual properties as a foundation for the theme concept development” (Milman 231). Younger outlined that one benefit of utilizing IP is that the “designer can build from the [pre-established cues]” and the audience would already

know the “characters, places, and events of a world,” leading to better resonance between the visitor and the content (59). Walt Disney Parks and Universal Studio Resorts are the most prominent examples of the use of numerous franchises and rights under their parent corporation as the main themes of their parks. Disney showcases lands, characters, and stories from their own film and animation studio, Pixar, Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios, and more, while Universal Studios displays those of Universal Pictures, Paramount, DreamWorks, NBC, Warner Bros., and Nintendo. These IPs and franchises draw significant crowds into parks through their already-enormous fan following and these fans already possess a thorough understanding of the worlds of such IPs. Naturally, the fans will be able to imagine and understand the narratives within their surroundings without any more information, given that the physical space is well executed.

This straightforward use of IPs can also be found in theater. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, *Wicked*, and all of Disney Theatrical Productions are the strongest examples. However, producers can benefit from the use of IPs even if they are not working with big commercial names. For example, the audience is familiar with Shakespeare’s plays. Biographical productions such as *MJ the Musical*, *A Beautiful Noise*, *The Neil Diamond Musical*, *Tina—the Tina Turner Musical*, and *The Cher Show* draw from the fanbase of artists. Productions such as *Hadestown* by Anaïs Mitchell, *Eurydice* by Sarah Ruhl, and the plays in Charles L. Mee’s *The (re)making project* adapt existing mythological stories or classical plays. Additionally, plays or musicals that have been extensively produced or have year-long runs such as *A Doll’s House*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *West Side Story* have gained their own fanbases. When productions adopt IPs well, familiarity and reputation can aid in attracting audiences and retaining them by further immersing them into the world of the play.



Younger emphasized that it is important for designers to consider the suitability of an IP to the theme of the park (62). While the characters or scenery of the IP can bring in fans, the poor application and execution in themed lands drive more loyal and old customers away. Examining the current conditions of Disney's theme parks, it is easy to observe the executive's decisions to pack in as many in-house IPs as possible to maximize revenue. For example, Disney's *Animal Kingdom* was first idealized to showcase the beauty of nature and animals. When the science fiction and futuristic *Avatar* franchise is introduced with the land of Pandora, the coherent environmental theme of the park is put at risk. This led to many public speculations about the "appropriateness of the sci-fi setting in a park about the value of nature" (63). Though the team of Imagineers led by Joe Rhode subverted people's expectations and flawlessly incorporated the land into the entire park with its pro-environment message, it is still hard to fathom this imaginary land among the striking depiction of the African Safari and Himalayan Mountain. The incorporation of Disney Princesses such as Moana into the lands of Animal Kingdom is far less than ideal in comparison to their *Avatar* counterpart. Moana is far from the only Disney Princess forcefully shoved into the narrative of the land at Disney Parks. Recent instillation of *Frozen* in Epcot's Norway pavilion and many others led to people concerned about Disney Parks becoming "more of a museum" than a theme park (Levine). Thus, basing a production on an IP does not guarantee good conceptual immersion for the audience. This is also evident from *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*. Both utilize the most famous IP but fail to obtain any critical success.

When designers and directors prepare the audience by offering a context to the world they are about to encounter, the additional information presented during the performance will push the spectators' immersive experience to the next level. Wolf explains the three stages of

informational immersion through a water analogy: absorption, saturation, and overflow.

Absorption is the learning curve the audience has to the newly presented world: as the performance absorbs the audience, simultaneously the audience absorbs the world of the play or attraction, transposing them into their subjective interpretation in their mind. Saturation is the result of the environment's transfer of as much information as the audience can hold about that world. The immersive experience will enter the third stage "overflow" once the information imparted is more than one can process and hold (Wolf 205–06). By doing so, the massive amount of information will drive the audience to experience the performance again to fully understand all the details. Of course, this is provided that the narrative of the production is of good quality and the information delivery is not forceful and unpleasant. The lead designer of Disneyland Paris Tony Baxter explains how designers should "think about the tenth ride through the experience and design for that tenth ride" (Younger et al. 395), and "[the designers have] got to want to go on it at least ten, twenty, thirty times, and get as much value out of it on that last ride as the first one" (Niles).

Detailing is an effective way of achieving overflow. As the name suggests, detailing is when the designer puts elements related to the theme that may or may not be related to the main story in the physical environment. Examples include the horse hoof prints on *Main Street U.S.A.*, the moving animatronics inside shops of *Diagon Alley* at Universal Orlando, and the endless game references in *Super Nintendo World*. These details help enhance the sense of reality and guest's belief that they are in a living, breathing world. Younger brought up the principle of "targeting the five percent" in themed design. The five percent is the group of people who would notice the effort designers put into creating the details. He mentions that even though the majority will notice the work, the five percent that do will likely speak it to the group (183). Park

Designer X Atencio outlines what he calls “the cocktail party technique” in theme park design when talking about the *Pirates of the Caribbean* at Disneyland:

As we went through the scene there was noise on all sides. I kind of apologized to Walt [Disney]. You couldn't seem to hear what was going on. “Oh hell,” he said, “it's like when you go to a cocktail party. Tune in on this conversation. Tune in on that conversation. Every time they go through [the attraction] they'll hear something different” (Frost).

The cocktail party technique entices the audience to come back a second time if they want to understand the whole story.

This creative team of *Sleep No More* clearly draws heavily from this technique. The audience is restricted by its design to only have access to a portion of the story during a single visit. The entire plot of the production is hidden in several narratives developing in parallel to each other simultaneously. This parallel storytelling enables the production to expand the storylines of supporting characters and the so-called side quests, giving those who are already familiar with one perspective of the world another path of exploration. Coupled with the sheer number of details and interactive props and scenic inside the space, *Sleep No More* easily achieves saturation and overflow regardless of the number of prior visits a patron has.

Again, using *Fêtes de la Nuit* as another example, the multiple couples may have their storylines progressing at the same time. It is then up to the audience to decide which conversation they tune into. It is again physically impossible to learn the stories of every single character's story in one experience. Since there is extra time available by having all stories take place at the same time, the production can expand upon the existing backstories of each character and relationship.

The accompanying creative portion of this honor project employs the technique of immersion overflow, mobile audience member, and themed foyer in an immersive experience of the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman without the presence of performers. This experience leads the audience through the physical and emotional journey of the female protagonist as she battles with post-partum depression. The audience is intended to be split into groups of no more than three people, each going through a series of seven rooms and their connecting hallway as if they are the female protagonist herself going through the painful treatment prescribed by her husband. The space is designed to be one-way only, serving as essentially a half-guided walkthrough. The linear nature of the short story and the progression of the protagonist's mental illness determine that a linearly told and uninterrupted narrative structure is best to convey the theme and emotions of the piece. The experience aims to overload, and even overwhelm the participants with information and emotions through the details and expressionistic depictions of what a mother might experience and feel during post-partum depression. This portion of the project is presented as an exhibition that showcases the drafting, scale model, and design philosophies (see Appendix A).

The audience first enters the "performance" space in the front yard of a 1920s countryside estate. As they walk into the building, they are greeted by a hallway towards the next scene in front, a living to the right, and a multipurpose room to the left (see Appendix B). These rooms serve as waiting areas and reception areas. Once inside, the audience is encouraged to start their exploration of the stories hidden behind the mansion and their owners and occupants. As each room and hallway are intended to have only a single group occupying them at a given time, the living room and multipurpose room serve as the waiting area for the other patrons waiting for their turns.

The two-story house presents with real and fake doors that may or may not lead to another space, asking the audience members to actively seek out the path they should take next. Each room a group enters offer hints about the story of the female protagonist and her family. Some objects in the room may be lying on the table in plain sight, while others may be hidden in a cabinet or under the bed. While the individual rooms act as the physical manifestation of the character's mental world, the hallways serve as bridges that connect one stage to the next. As the group processes further through the scenes, the rooms draw more and more from abstract expressionism to depict the world felt by those experiencing anxiety, nervousness, sleep deprivation, hallucination, and more (see Appendix C). The final room is identical to the first, leading the group to a copy of the foyer they visited at the beginning of the performance with minor changes in detail from the progression of the story. The audience groups can choose to stay and explore that space a little more or to proceed to the exit. There is room for the addition of performers for characters such as the husband and the sister. These characters, if added, will interact with the audience groups at certain points of the plot.

This immersive experience is designed with the intention of the audience gaining a different experience and understanding of the narrative based on the level of effort they put into their exploration. Thus, hopefully attracting them to return and find details they might have missed in the first round.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* can be and has been produced as a traditional theater performance many times. The difference in narration between the honors project and past productions lies in how the audience member is characterized inside the story. By placing the audience into the role of the female protagonist, I hope to foster better immersion into the story and create a better understanding of her emotional journey.

In reflection, the integration of immersive techniques found in themed environments into theatrical performances and immersive experiences presents both opportunities and challenges for storytellers and audiences alike. While these techniques have the potential to enrich the pre-existing stories, attract returning audience, and create a more rounded and encompassing experiences, they also carry risks and limitations that must be carefully navigated.

These techniques can deepen the audience's engagement and attachment in the narrative world of a performance. Themed pre- and post-show environments, dynamics in audience mobility, and the concept of overflow can create a complete immersion into the story in a way that traditional theater may not, enriching the overall experience and encouraging repeat visits. Moreover, techniques such as the cocktail party and narration structured around fostering a sense of exploration rewards the audience with new discoveries and insights upon each visit. With the audience following clues and developing the story by themselves, they generate a sense of ownership and investment in the narrative and cultivate a community that discusses the performance or experience after their visits.

On the other hand, amidst the potential benefits these techniques, there is a risk that they may overshadow or distract from the core themes and messages of the performance. When the audience members focus more on the "gimmicks" used to present information than the narrative themselves, both the story and the storytelling medium fails at their core duty. The purpose of a well-designed and well-executed performance is always to either convey a story or to evict an emotion or feeling from the audience. Every technique and design in a production should serve towards this purpose.

Moreover, the incorporation of these immersive elements can be resource-intensive and technically complex. The production team of each performance should carefully consider their

budget, both financial and temporal, and allocate them to achieve the best outcome. Traditional theater as a form itself can perfectly present a story that is both captivating and memorable. If immersive techniques are used just for the sake of innovation or attracting attention, they may take away from the phenomenal experience the traditional format can generate on its own.

In conclusion, the integration of immersive techniques and themed environments in traditional theater presents a gradient of opportunities and challenges. While these techniques have the potential to enhance storytelling when used thoughtfully, they also carry risks and limitations that must be carefully considered. Ultimately, the lasting success of a production lies not solely in the spectacle of immersive elements, but in the emotional resonance and thematic depth of the story being told. Balancing innovation with storytelling integrity is essential to creating truly impactful and memorable theatrical experiences.

## Appendix A: Honors Project Exhibition



Figure A.1. Overall space of the exhibition. Guests enter from the far-right corner. The scale model is displayed in the middle, while drafting and other presentations are on display boards around the room. The colored fabric drapes on the far wall aims to recreate the pattern of the wallpaper in the house along with colors that are common in a 1920s countryside estate.

Lighting Design: Wu Chen Khoo and Kai Yamanishi.

Sound Engineer: Lucas Martin

Stage Manager: Kai Yamanishi

House Manager: Audrey Smyczek

Technical Director: Thomas Barrett



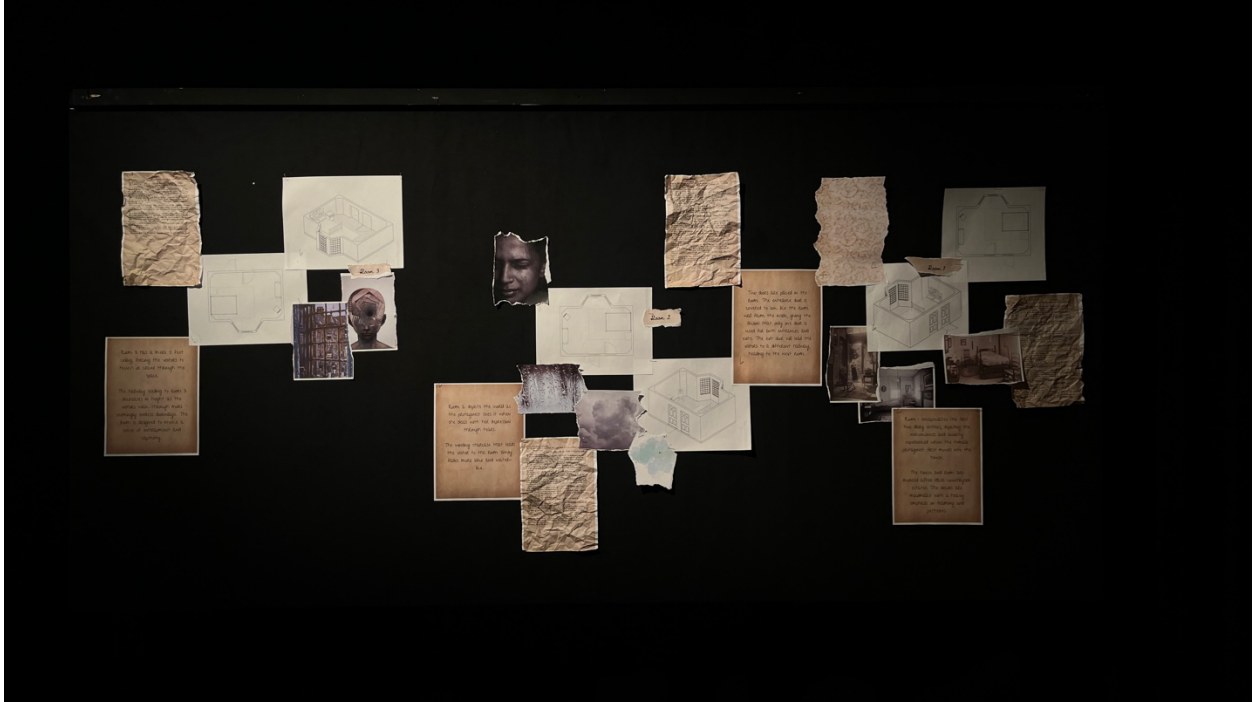


Figure A.2. Room one to room three descriptions, ground plans, and reference images.



Figure A.3. Room four and room five descriptions, ground plans, and reference images.



Figure A.4. Isometric rendering of the first floor.



Figure A.5. Isometric rendering of the second floor.

## Appendix B: Front Lobby and Multipurpose Rooms

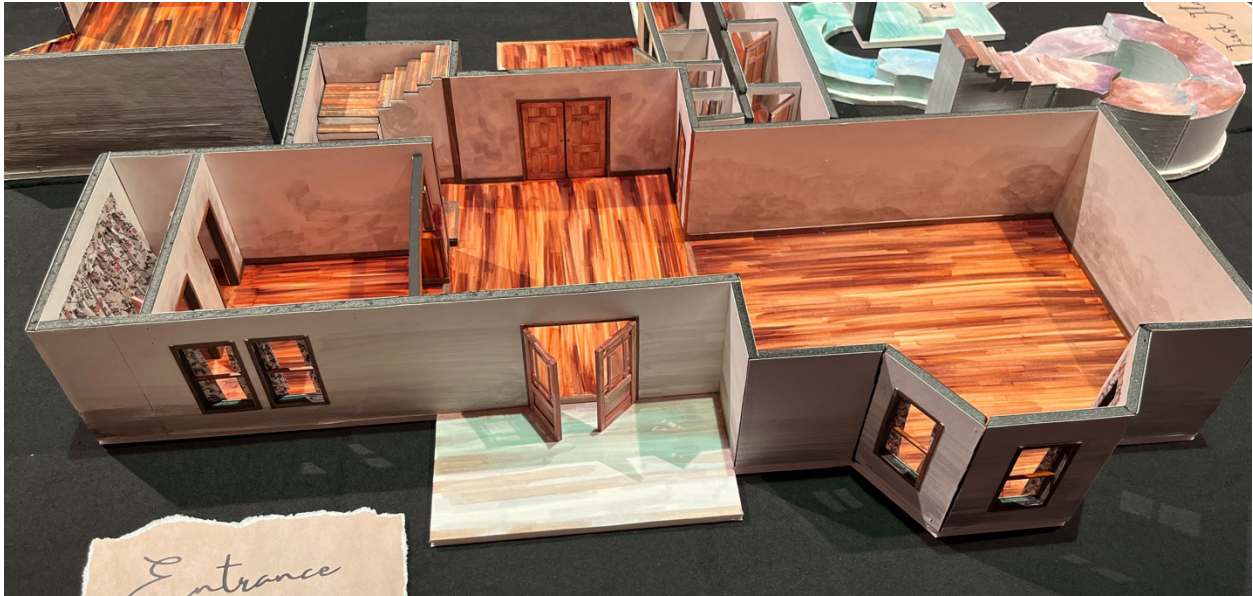


Figure B.1. Overall view of the space as a 3/8" scale model. Already opened doors indicates that they are real, and doors already appears closed indicates that they are fake. Furnishings and decorations are not included in the displayed model.

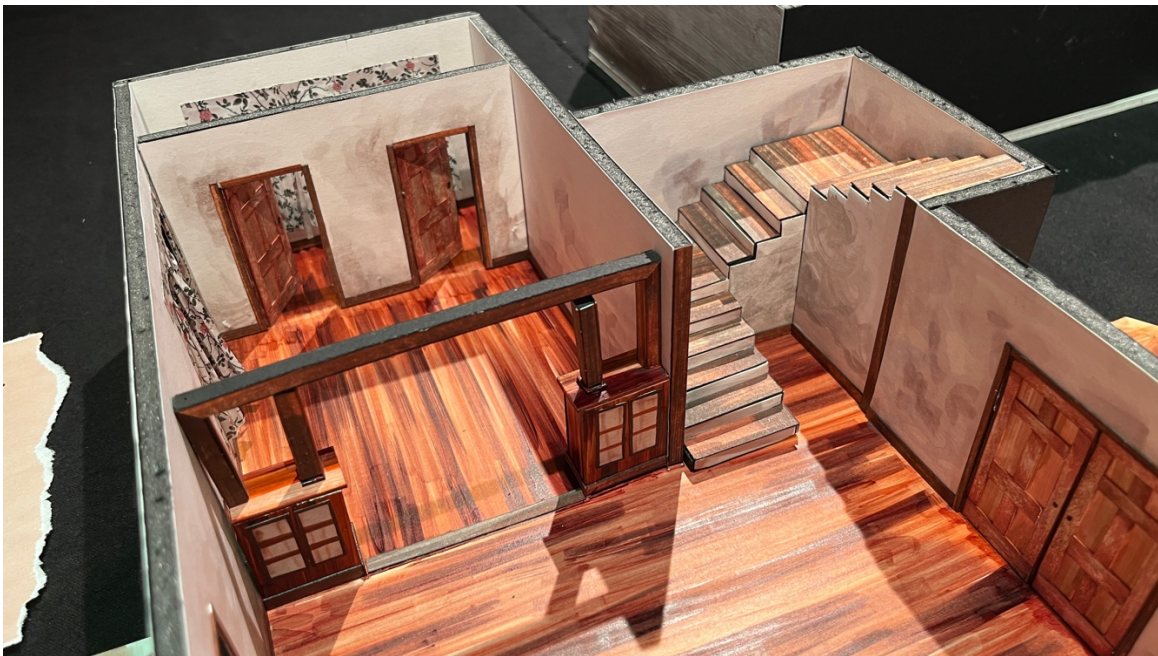


Figure B.2. Detail of the left side and staircase leading to the second floor.

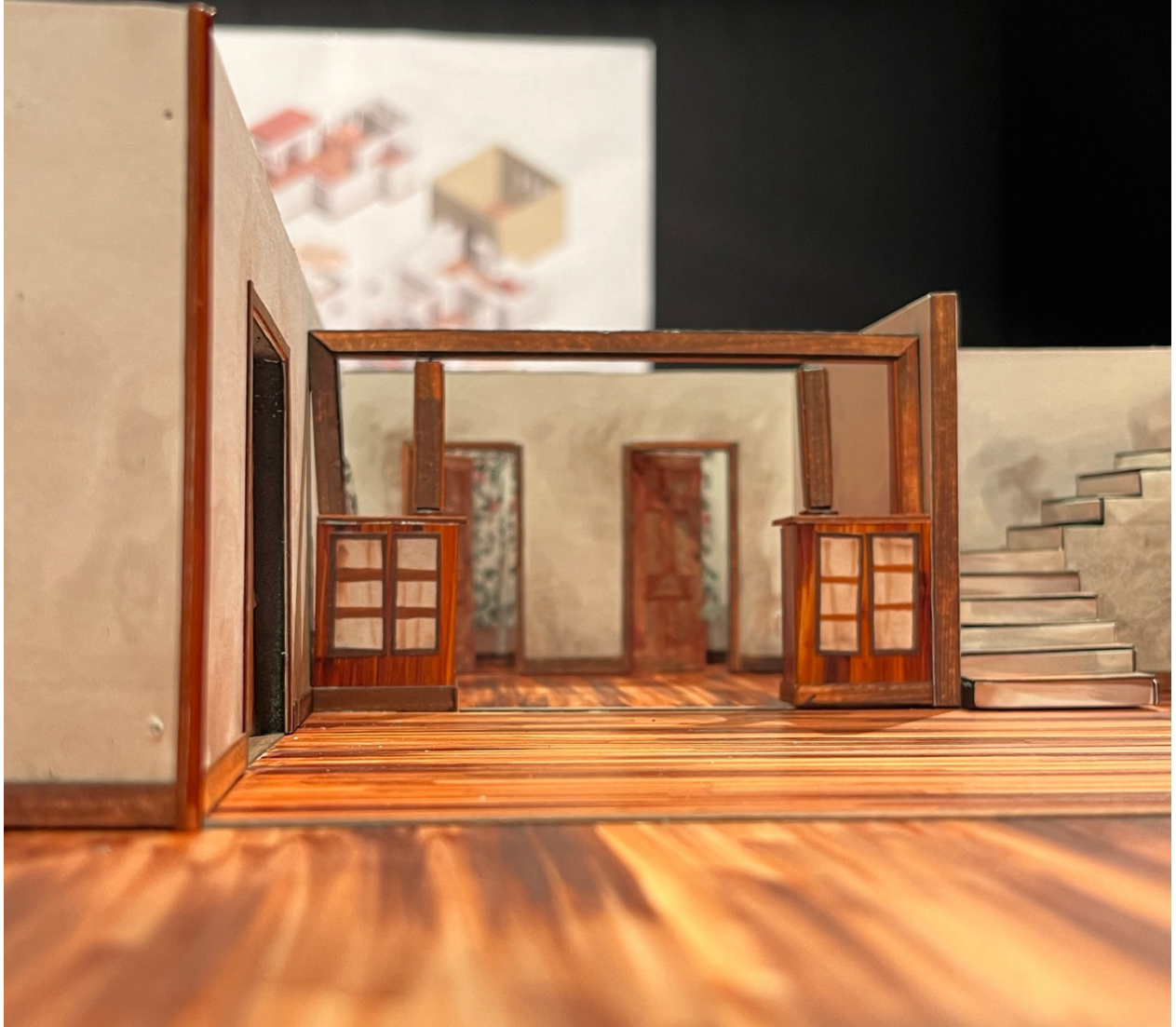


Figure B.3. Audience perspective view of the space.

## Appendix C: Individual Rooms and Connecting Hallways

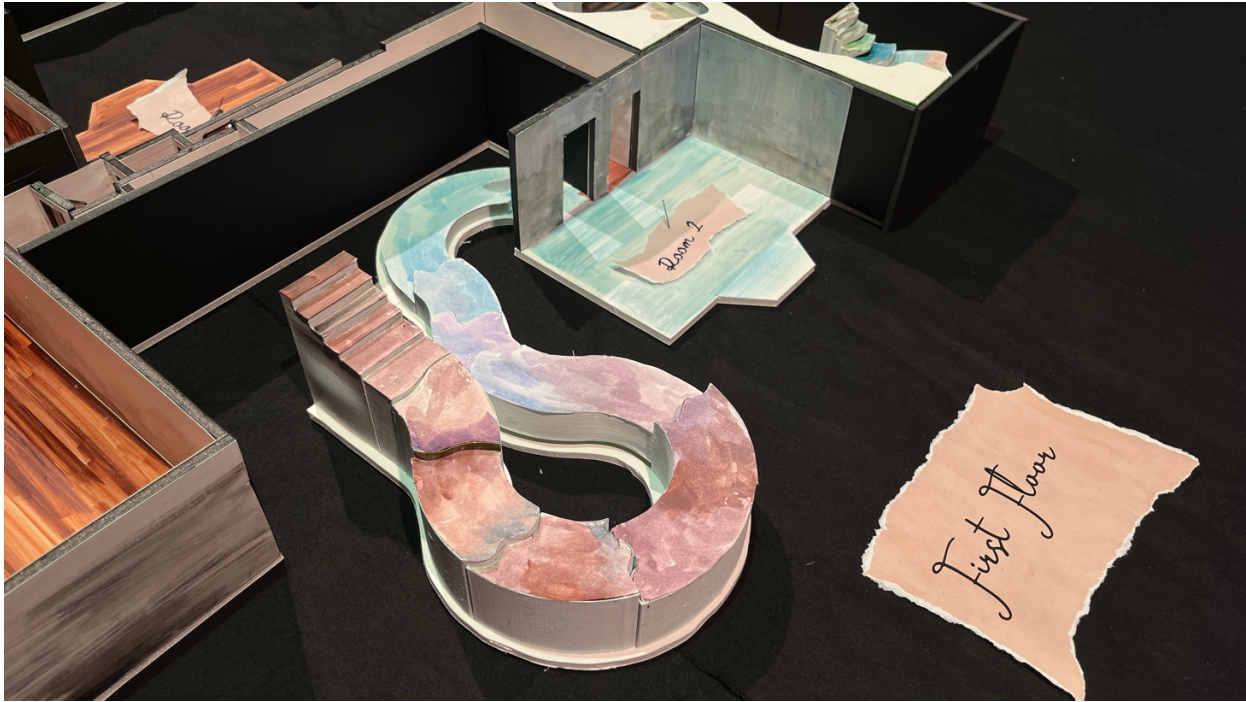


Figure C.1. Staircase connecting room one to room two. Room two depicts when the protagonist deals with her depression through tears. The winding staircase that leads the visitor to this room slowly fades bluer and more water-like.



Figure C.2. Hallway connecting room two to room three. The hallway leading to room 3 decreases in height as the visitors walk through more seemingly endless doorways. The room is designed to invoke a sense of entrapment and captivity with its five feet ceiling, forcing the visitors to crouch or crawl through the space.



Figure C.3. Hallway leading from room four to room five. Room five showcases the world as the protagonist becomes fully engulfed by her depression and hallucinations. The world is no longer as the visitors usually understand. The walls are bent, staircases curved, and furnishing morphed.

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