

Advertising in Tomorrowland



Brian Cooper —
Executive Creative Director

WHY EVERY GOOD BRAND NEEDS A GOOD STORYVERSE

“Black Sunday” is a phrase one usually associates with a massacre or a financial crash. Not with Disney (unless I missed the subtext of Frozen completely. A film cryogenised Disney would identify with). However, Disneyland’s opening day was dubbed just that by the park’s employees back in 1955. It seemed like Walt’s new venture was set to be the crappiest place on Earth.

Flash back twenty years earlier and our man Walt is enjoying a lovely summer’s afternoon with the fam. Back then there weren’t the kind of amusement parks that Walt would make famous the world over. If you wanted some family fun in 1930s Los Angeles, you took the kids to the fairground piers, home to any number of wholesome pleasures: organ grinders, caged animals, hookers, freak shows. I know, it sounds great. But this was clearly no place for Walt and his daughters.

“I’d sit there thinking there should be something better,” he said, “a place where adults and children could have fun together.”

So Walt set to thinking. He dreamed of a more salubrious, family friendly amusement park. One based, perhaps, on his string of already successful movies. It was a completely original concept in entertainment—one that extended the Disney brand from the silver screen to a magical in-person experience. Disneyland. Where dreams come true.

The vision was a ‘storyverse’ come to life.

A place where you could visit Snow White’s enchanted castle, hang out in Davy Crockett country, or cruise round Autopia for a taste of the yet-to-be interstate system. Not to mention Tomorrowland, a vision of 1986 pieced together from the leftover set of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, featuring picture phones, microwaves, and lots and lots of plastic.

It was an incredible vision. A vision so incredible that no one had a clue what Walt was on about. He struggled to convince colleagues and investors. Even his own brother Roy thought he was nuts. When he started diverting money from the profitable studio business, his bro’s scepticism turned to outright hostility. It soon became known as ‘Walt’s Folly’.

But plucky Walt wasn’t going to give up that easily. Twenty years after first thinking up the idea, he secured \$17m in funding and 160 acres of orange grove. But his troubles were only about to begin.

Construction was a nightmare. No one had ever built a princess’s fairytale castle before. The artificial rivers and lakes leaked and ran dry. The opening got pushed back, and pushed back, until finally the ribbon was set to be cut—right in the middle of a scorching summer. As the day approached, the heatwave descended. The mercury hit 110 fahrenheit, and the plumbers union went on strike.

As the gates opened it soon became clear that someone had been printing quite a few counterfeit tickets. The park had been expecting 15,000 visitors, but 28,000 passed through the turnstiles. The place was overrun with petulant crowds. Queues for the popular rides extended to hours. And the less popular rides were just awful anyway. Cries of WHERE’S MY CORNDOG abounded as the food and drink ran out only a few hours after opening.

A TV host called Ronald Reagan covered the opening for ABC. But even his soothing tones couldn’t cover up the fact that the day was spiraling out of control. There was a gas leak in Fantasyland and a sector had to be evacuated. The steamboat in the background nearly capsized.

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“Walt’s dream is a nightmare... a fiasco the like of which I cannot recall in thirty years of show life,” said Variety. “Probably for the first time in his career, Disney has disappointed thousands of youngsters,” harrumphed the Associated Press.

But we all know that this didn’t last forever. Disneyland has been providing screaming kids and bleary-eyed parents with a break from the shitshow that is reality for over 60 years. And since that fateful Sunday nearly a billion people have traipsed through its gates across the globe, from Orlando to Shanghai.

But none of this happened by accident. Disneyland is what it is today for two reasons.

NUMBER 1: PERSISTENCE. WALT KEPT CHIPPING AWAY, SORTING OUT THE COUNTERFEIT TICKETS, REBUILDING TOMORROWLAND. DISNEYLAND WAS STILL OPEN THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY, AND THE ONE AFTER THAT.

NUMBER 2: HE STUCK TO HIS STORYVERSE. DISNEYLAND IS SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE PEOPLE HAVE AN APPETITE FOR FICTION, AND WHAT COULD BE A MORE IMMERSIVE FICTIONAL EXPERIENCE THAN A REAL-LIFE FANTASY LAND THAT YOU CAN TOUCH, WALK AROUND IN, AND EAT QUESTIONABLE THEMED SNACKS?

They say that fiction is seductive because it is an escape from reality. But such an all-encompassing storyverse as Disneyland is seductive because it bolsters the solidity of our own lives. ‘Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real’. Cheers Baudrillard for that badboy.

So, where was I? Oh right, advertising.

All the best brands, like Disney, create their own storyverse.

A world in which consumers can engross themselves in, time and again. A world in which their participation in the fiction validates their sense of realness—making them believe that their choices truly are rational, truly are their own.

A storyverse can have multiple narratives – but they all feel part of a unified whole.

In the same way that ‘secret agent + crazy weapons + villain + hot girl = Bond film’, a coterie of colours, images, signs and symbols denote that something is McDonalds or Nike or Coca Cola, even without a name or logo. These storyverses allow consumers to fully participate in a brand, whether that’s watching an ad, in the store or just staring at two mountains next to each other and thinking ‘heck, I want a cheeseburger’.

And, if you keep at it like Disney, a robust enough storyverse will last you for generations, with a boundless scope for new stories and directions.

In this latest series we’re going to explore what makes a great storyverse (and a terrible one), and why this kind of approach to advertising is our last attempt to reach the consumers of our very own Tomorrowland.

Can’t wait for for episode 2? Get in touch with Mark Mulooly, Aesop’s Business Development Director on +44 (0)20 7440 5550 mark.mulooly@aesopagency.com