

Insight and inside into Efteling

Part 1 of the series on design and psychology of amusement parks

A bold but cruel captain, storms at the Cape of Good Hope, a fateful oath against God and the devil, a curse to eternal cruising on the sea, letters to the long since deceased. These are the core elements of the saga of the Flying Dutchman, which the Dutch amusement park Efteling has chosen as the theme for its perhaps most impressive attraction. Even if this topic has already given us a visually ravishing scenery, there is so much more to it.

by Harald Molina-Tillmann

Ghost ship or complex?

While we are attuned to the ride by nautical paintings and rum barrels in the waiting area, or while we are surprised by a beautiful dim harbor scene in the entrance area, we are being drawn to a spell binding story. This story, in turn, is not only that of a ship, which may never have existed, but at the same time it is also an expression of a process in ourselves, completely independent of our lack of nautical experiences, the risk of contracting scurvy or seeing ghostly sea spirits.

The topic has been chosen excellently, as the saga of the Flying Dutchman is not the product of a single author, but has been handed down and varied over centuries by countless sailors. The story expresses the hopes, emotions and fears of many. It is

collective and thus also relates to ourselves. Moreover, the material leaves a lot of room for interpretation and design, which we not only see in Richard Wagner's opera and in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" blockbuster series, but also in the ride in Efteling.

An ingenious idea of underlining the story takes place on a technical level. The attraction is a combination of a ghost train, roller coaster and water ride. Taking the waiting area and the exit as the first and fifth act, so you have a classic five-act opera from the theory of drama. In the waiting area characters and themes are introduced, what is referred to as "exposition" in drama. According to the theory, the second act contains a "thrilling moment" and the "rising action." The former is achieved through the eerie projection of a ghost

ship, the latter through the ascension of the car in the dark at the end of the ghostly section of the ride. In the third act, the attraction reaches its "climax" with its roller coaster section. The "slowing down of the plot" typical of the fourth act of the drama is literally implemented by braking the car in the water. The "conflict resolution" of the fifth act is represented by the final entrance into the port and the acquisition of the action photo.

According to the saga, the ghost ship can sail without wind, float in the air, dive underwater and go in reverse. Here one could perhaps have been creatively inspired in order to bring each of these sailing techniques into surprise elements of the actual ride.

As for the level of design, Efteling has selected Captain Willem van der

Decken from one of the many possible historical models. The resulting backdrop of a Dutch harbor town from the 17th century is atmospheric. For me as a first-time visitor, it exerted a very special charm in the morning November fog. There are also a number of creatively designed points of reference between scenery and story to be discovered. The saga would provide plenty of additional material for an even better interlinking of these two aspects. The inspiration for further design elements could be, for example, the challenge and reward of the East India voyages, the Dutch captains known for their cruelty, Table Mountain at the Cape of Good Hope, or the dreams and sufferings of the cabin boys.

But why is all this? Why does the saga of the Flying Dutchman have an emotional effect on us, even though we live centuries later and without the fears and worries of seafarers? Psychologically, the cursed ship in the ocean can be interpreted as a complex within the unconscious. If one is in such a situation, one turns in circles and keeps coming back to the same train of thought or behavior pattern, without being aware of it, or at least without knowing why. This turns the saga into a personal story. The ride becomes a target of projection for the psyche of the individual park visitor. This can be experienced as identification with the captain, which is accentuated by the driving technology and creative concepts described above. By directly integrating the user into an attraction, such a process can be further intensified. In the case of non-interactive attractions such as Efteling's Flying Dutchman, this is naturally limited. At least the subtitle of the ride speaks directly to the rider:

"Escape the curse of the ghost ship!"



The name tag of the captain chosen by the designers is almost only noticeable when standing in front of the closed entrance before the park opening time



For those who are able to read Dutch, the story of van der Decken is provided on the outside wall of the bistro



The captain's text to his beloved Catharina is more reminiscent of a contract with Mephisto: "My will is law. I will sail!"



The one-sided and unconnected attitude of the captain to will and success is shown in the waiting area by the crack and the empty right half of the picture



In the separation of queues, the crests of the roller coasters are designed identically in color and drawing. The strong difference of the two colors is accentuated all the more by both colors being at opposite ends of the color spectrum

Water and fire

Rather than to avail oneself of legends, myths or fairy tales while writing a story for an attraction, one can also work directly with the archetypal power and meaning of symbols. In Efteling this is done in an impressive way with a double wooden roller coaster. The attraction is actually called "Joris en de Draak", referring to the legend of Saint George the dragon slayer. However, the use of the two elements water and fire as symbols for the two roller coasters competing against each other is so prominent and convincing that one could even have done without the reference to the legend.

Compared to the other two elements of earth and air, water and fire are both considered to be "spreading" elements, which is reasonably well-placed in a roller coaster design. When it comes to the so-called qualities of the elements, however, the two are exactly opposite. Fire is considered dry and hot, water as damp and cold. All these criteria influence the mood and emotions of the roller coaster riders consciously or unconsciously, regardless of whether or what they have heard about the four-element theory. The associations arise as if by themselves, presumably already, when the rider passes between the oversized blue and red dragon heads in front of the entrance, but at the latest when they wait in the queue and are forced in the waiting line to choose one of the two sides. What is your mood telling you? What appeals to you? What force shall have the upper hand in you? It is no coincidence that the riders somehow perceive the roller coaster competition as their own and greet them with cheers for victory or slight disappointment, even though they have not actively contributed to victory. For me at least it didn't even hurt that on my four trips, for inexplicable reasons, "water" always won.

The mountain calls

A third attraction, Efteling's bobsled, also has a great idea in terms of driving experience. The bobsleds are not coupled to each other and do not run on rails. In principle, the bobs have a range of free mobility, but are safely directed by the simulated ice track. One gets freedom and security at the same time. The emotional cocktail that blooms from this is rarely found in reality. It is so fabulous that we can experience it in this amusement park.

With regard to the integration of a story and even in terms of design, however, it is a bit bland. This is all the more surprising since the setting entices with three great opportunities. Firstly, Switzerland has some quaint and likable qualities such as neutrality, banking secrecy, cheese fondue, Edelweiss and many more. These qualities could be motivational for stories and design elements. Secondly, the "mountain" symbol is a prime example of the so-called Numinous: terrifying and attractive in equal measure. Thirdly, Efteling's bobsled provides the opportunity for identification and projection, like when children are playing with their sleds but are dreaming of professional bobsledding.

Pappeerrr - Herrrre!

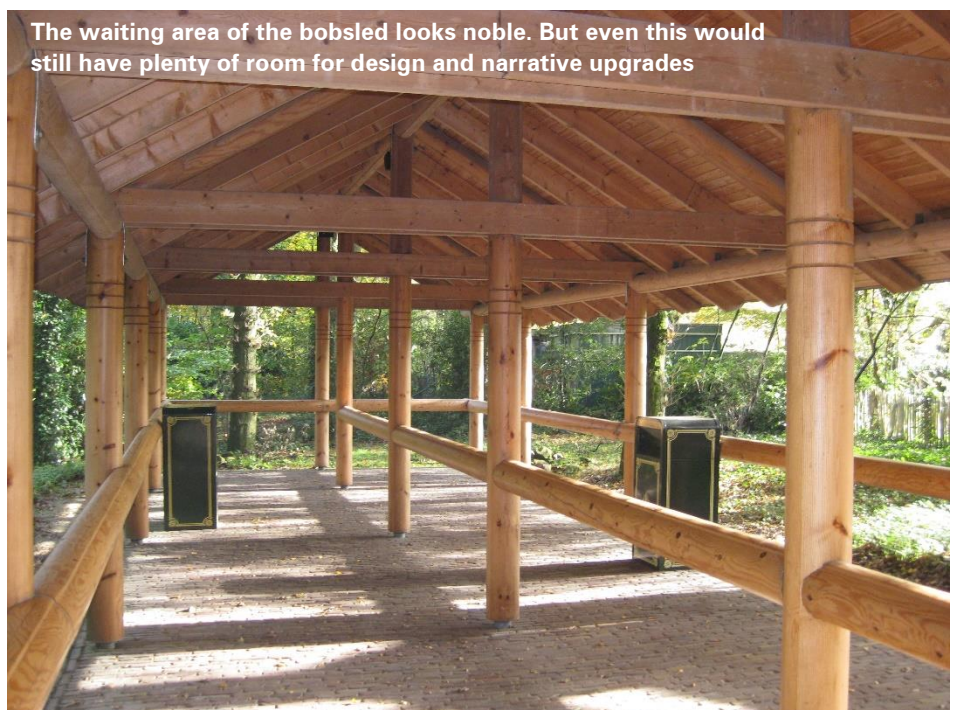
When asked about background information, Efteling offers a brief but striking answer in the "FAQs" on its website:

"Generally, Efteling does not publish any technical background information, because in a world of wonders new attractions are just there ... ;-)."

Even if this is a bit disappointing for interested fans like us, an important aspect of theme parks is addressed: Visitors are not to conquer the attractions, but conversely, the attractions should come to the visitor. Irrational. Like dreams. The attractions are not to be broken down into component parts, but rather experienced holistically. The



The creative use of the colors blue and red in the midst of the dominant wood is unobtrusively and aesthetically placed



The waiting area of the bobsled looks noble. But even this would still have plenty of room for design and narrative upgrades



thrill of a fast-paced roller coaster ride or the visual impression of a theme ride are important for experiences of this kind, but they only make up a part of the experience. In addition to external things such as fun, relaxation and socializing, the implementation of internal processes on the attraction is essential. Only then will the impressions touch you emotionally and are also preserved as long-term experiences.

As we have seen, such an implementation can take place in the technology, design, narrative, and in the park visitor's integration. With the combination of the three types of rides in the Flying Dutchman, the free movement in the bobsled and the doubling of the roller coaster at "Joris en de Draak", Efteling especially shines at the technical level with three exceptional ideas. The saga of Captain van der Decken and the symbolic power of fire and water are two strong themes that have been implemented on the narrative level convincingly. We encounter a plethora of other themes in the fairy tale forest, for which Efteling has been known since its inception. Fairy tales are the classic example of the implementation of stories and internal processes in amusement parks. They are adventure stories, but can also be understood as symbolic timeless expression of an inner development. Efteling's fairy tale forest therefore also works with the new generation, although it has been largely spared from modern technology and modern narrative forms. Thanks to the environmental protection movement, the park is now littered with talking trash cans which were initiated in the fairy tale forest. It is the incessant calling "Papperrr – Herrre!" of the trash can characters named "Holle Bolle Gijs" that is very present throughout the park.



A miniature alpine horn in the corner is not enough to give rise to genuine alpine feelings



The make believe treasure, which is guarded by the dragon and sought after by the young visitors in a timid but brave manner, is one of the interactive elements of the park



There is still much to do for the new coming attraction to Efteling. But the thematically matched new talking trash can "Holle Bolle Gijs" is already set up