

WHITE PAPER

ELICITING EMOTION

Why *The Simpsons Ride* and Cirque du Soleil's *LOVE* make odd bedfellows.

by

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July 30, 2008

Books, motion pictures and theatre can elicit strong emotions in their readers or viewers because the creators have the benefit of time to deliver compelling stories and characters with emotional resonance and plots that can tug at your heartstrings and provide the audience a rare opportunity to care. Dimensional experiences—things that happen off the screen or pages of a book—have a harder time eliciting emotion because the medium is much more short-form (certainly in the case of museum exhibitions, theme park attractions and brand environments).

Cirque most definitely falls into the theatre category, but they also offer productions that border on dimensional experiences, particularly with a show like *LOVE* that is in the round and delivers theme park-style effects and immersion. Further, Cirque shows are hardly narrative in nature and therefore can lack an emotional resonance that other forms of theatre can deliver.

Why is eliciting emotion important? Creating truly compelling experiences must include emotional resonance, otherwise the experience itself cannot be deemed compelling. By helping the audience to *feel* their experience becomes more valuable to them. The greater their perceived value the more loyal they become and the more ardent an

evangelist they will be. And they will want to come back to experience that rare feeling again.

Our days are often emotionally hollow. Home, commute, work, meals and even our entertainment options are more than likely not delivering any kind of true emotional experience. Sure, there are thrills and surprise, but these simple emotions are low hanging fruit. It's much harder to get us to feel awe, sadness, wonder and joy or be truly inspired by what we see and experience.

Dimensional experience creators are often happy enough to grasp at that low hanging fruit because it's easy to reach. Scares, more than any other emotion, are what we typically deliver. Thrills and surprise are sure to follow. Disney is astonishingly adept at delivering wonder, but they have decades of emotional currency to bank on. As visitors to Disneyland we carry our childhood memories with us and often those alone elicit an intricate array of emotions in us when we visit.

So I was surprised recently when I rode *The Simpsons Ride* at Universal Studios Florida in Orlando (also at Universal Studios Hollywood) and subsequently experienced *LOVE*, Cirque du Soleil's ode to the Beatles at The Mirage in Las Vegas that I was enjoying a palette of emotions I normally didn't feel.

The Simpsons Ride is a simulator attraction that takes guests on a journey with Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and little Maggie through Krusty the Clown's theme park and all of Springfield that was retrofit into the old *Back to the Future* attraction domes at the moviemaking theme parks. Riding this, I found myself doing something I rarely do in any theme park (and even less in a simulator ride). I was laughing out loud. The sarcastic humor, visual puns, happenstances and other ricocheting events within the ridefilm were a blast. I exited the ride nearly wiping tears from my eyes.

Wow, I thought. *That felt good.*

Less than two weeks later I was in Vegas eyes agog at *LOVE*, a visual and aural feast that takes the artistry of Cirque du Soleil and the music of the Beatles and combines them into a theatrical extravaganza I had never experienced with previous Cirque shows. I laughed. I was awed. At the end of the performance when John, Paul, George and Ringo wished us good night (via ephemeral projection and artfully edited actual audio of the Fab Four) I had tears in my eyes.

What's up with that? I thought. *What are you crying about? It's just a Cirque show.* Yes, *just* a Cirque show. But there was more to it than that.

After a group of us from Thinkwell exited *The Simpsons Ride* days before, Dave Cobb, Creative Director on one of our projects, summed up the issue of emotional resonance with regard to the attraction the best. He said, "We have twenty years of connection with these characters, situations and settings. It's easy for us to 'get it' because as fans of the show we know it so well." In other words, we brought our own baggage to the ride. A glance from a two-dimensional Krusty can send us howling. A simple exchange between two characters have years and multiple plotlines of meaning. Superficially, *The Simpsons Ride* is a hoot. As a fan, the ride has emotional resonance no generic experience can muster.

Similarly, *LOVE* delivered first and foremost through the theatrical artistry that Cirque brings to everything they do, but the production had elicited true emotion (something that I haven't really experienced before at a Cirque show—other than wonder and possibly a wee bit of awe) because of the Beatles' music. I had tears in my eyes because of the music and the emotional baggage I carried with me into the show. Almost 40 years of baggage.

Those emotional touchstones mean something. First of all, they allow the creators such a wide range of possibilities in terms of creating compelling dimensional guest experiences. For the audience, the experience is so much richer as a result of having all that prior history with the music or TV show. We brought to these experiences our love of the intellectual properties and a whole lot more. We've been on dates with the Beatles music playing. We've been to Simpsons viewing parties (at least some of the nerdier of us have). We've all had moments either around a TV set or at a party that involved both of these pop culture icons. Songs we've loved. Characters we've cherished.

What *LOVE* and *The Simpsons Ride* have in common is they both have a history with the audience that spans years if not decades. That history brings with it its own emotional baggage. Baggage that's easy for experience creators to scratch at and draw from. In the end, both of these experiences are more valuable to us than other superficial entertainments because, in the end, they make us *feel something*. And that's important.

As experience creators we must do more than just pluck the low hanging fruit. We may not have an obligation to elicit emotion in what we do, but we should have a professional imperative to do so. Loyalty, quality, strong word-of-mouth and surprised fans will be there to appreciate that emotional resonance when we do.