

It Depends: The Analogous Relationship Between the Castle Rock Activation and Hulu Series

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Abstract

While Comic-Con is a celebration of popular culture, it is also a launching pad for new properties in film and television. In recent years, the conventional thought about how to approach this has changed from handing out free memorabilia such as tee shirts and posters to providing an actual experience in the properties world. This type of advertising is the immersive activation. The goal of the activation is an analogous relationship between the live experience and the mediated, neither serving as the precedent to the other. In embracing this analogous relationship, mediatized and live performances move forward, establishing new entanglements with their audience. The clearest example of this analogous relationship exists in activations. An immersive activation is a live-action event where the spectator is tasked with the moniker of both audience and participant. The shift from “viewer” to “collaborator” is, as Clair Bishop (2012) and so many others have noted, manifested in fascinating and new creations. I take an approach following neuroscientific discoveries, which support this shift through different means joining the brain’s function with philosophy, as I explore the immersive activation.

Stay Classy, San Diego

If you are asked to imagine San Diego in July, numerous images may soar to the front of your mind. Images of waves crashing on the palm tree lined beaches, scenes from the film *Top Gun* and its sequel, visits to the world-famous zoo or Gaslamp district, incredible Mexican food, California's first city, the Mission, and the easiest meteorologist gig in the country. However, for some, July in San Diego means one thing: Comic-Con. While Comic-Con is a celebration of popular culture, it is also a launching pad for new properties in film and television. A number of major studios have chosen to take advantage of the eager crowds to help give their products a head start. In recent years, the conventional thought about how to approach this has changed from handing out free memorabilia such as tee shirts and posters to providing an actual experience in the properties world. This type of advertising is the immersive activation.

The goal of the activation is an analogous relationship between the live experience and the mediated, neither serving as the precedent to the other. This contradicts traditional cultural uses of the live to supplement the mediated, as seen in a visit to theme parks like Disney and Universal Studios. In embracing this analogous relationship, mediatized and live performances move forward, establishing new entanglements with their audience. The clearest example of this analogous relationship exists in activations. An immersive activation is a live-action event where the spectator is tasked with the moniker of both audience and participant. There are moments of instruction and narrativization that require the skills and toolset developed over time by the traditional (i.e. proscenium) theatre audience. This includes critical listening, following visual and aural cues, and understanding theatrical tropes and decorum. These activations also require a level of participation. Though the quantity and details of the participation change depending on the activation, the participant will be expected to perform certain actions to ensure the narrative moves forward—these actions are dictated by the needs of the piece but can range from solving physical or mental puzzles to simply walking into another space. Because of this dual existence, oscillating between participant and audience members for the remainder of the piece, I will refer to them as audience/participants (a/p). The participation is different from that described by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006), as it is immediate,

at the time of consumption. It is a small difference and can be argued to finer nuanced points but is not the focus of the exploration. The shift from “viewer” to “collaborator” is, as Clair Bishop (2012) and so many others have noted, manifested in fascinating and new creations. I take an approach following neuroscientific discoveries, which support this shift through different means joining the brain’s function with philosophy, as I explore the immersive activation.

The activation does not prize either the live nor the mediated. It does not look to preserve any constitutive practices of either, but rather to create a connection to existing or forthcoming property (film, television series, podcast, etc.) through an individual, often interactive, experience. As the words “live” and “mediated” take on new meaning with new technologies and theories, the activation supports Lindsay Brandon Hunter’s (2019) ideas on the decoupling of disappearance and embodied copresence of actor and audience, but in a way she does not predict. Liveness is constituted in the participating audience member while watching the mediated piece. Here there is no disappearance, as the a/p is primed as the embodied media. This happens through remediation, as reevaluated by Alenda Chang (2015).

The activation remediates the body, rendering the participant the ultimate advertising tool of the property as they are both watching and (re)experiencing the property at the same time, oscillating between the live event and the mediated property. This duality utilizes memory and the emotive as a tool. Exploring both performance and new media theory simultaneously, while making it conversant with neuroscience, both explores and illuminates the a/p’s experience.

In “Environmental Remediation,” Alenda Chang (2015) states that “our bodies are also environments through which some things pass, while others linger.” In this, Chang is applying Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s remediation outside of the box of media, which is not outside the scope of their theorization but was not the focus of their work. I want to take Chang’s intervention out of New Media and into immersive events, showing that the a/p is remediated. They become the vessel; the liveness of the event lives within

them and can be triggered by the mediated. In the body of the a/p, the reverberations of emotive sentences linger. From here, the live event is merged with the property through the slow uncovering of individual emotive sentences experienced but not contextualized in the activation. Through both body and memory, the (in our case study) streamed series is fused with the activation into a singular experience for the a/p. While Chang uses environmental remediation to explore the world of video games, it is easy to see the activation as an example of the hypermediacy, “the reflexive celebration of form,” that she predicts. The activation’s environment offers choreographic propositions, to borrow a term from Julia Ritter. Because nothing is strictly demanded of the a/p as they proceed through the activation, they have the freedom to choose and bond with elements at will. Ritter’s (2021) language suggests a rigor to these interactions that I believe is not always present, requiring a sequence of cause and effect through formal propositions between audience and performer. The term is still useful in looking at activations, despite its disregard of the incredible complexity of audience-performer interaction. Ritter’s theory is also looser in demands than Rose Biggin’s (2017) formulation of “flow,” which comprises an immersive event in her thinking. “Flow,” which she takes from the work of positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, offers an almost impossible gauntlet of easily broken precepts to follow. This includes the distortion of time, disappearance of self-consciousness, and elimination of distraction. While Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” may have helped the Dallas Cowboys win a Superbowl in the early 1990’s, I don’t believe it is the key to immersion.

Activations are always paired with a larger property. Because of this, it has become a common tool at fan conventions for television networks and streaming services to start the audience-building process for new programming. These activations allow a would-be audience member to experience a show's world in hopes that it translates to viewership and social media promotion. They also have market value in researching audience response and connectivity to a property prior to its premiere. Many companies that create these activations boast the variety of information obtained during them, including social analytics and engagement metrics. Some include surveys either immediately after the event or sent days later via email. The studios who produce these activations tightly hold how these analytics are used and how much credence is given to them. However, due to their

ever-increasing number and production value, activations effectively launch and prolong media products.

The Maine Event

The 2018 Comic-Con in San Diego showcased an activation for Hulu's then-upcoming streaming series, *Castle Rock*. The show is a narrative placed in the much larger entanglements of Stephen King's novels, films, and television series. The story of *Castle Rock* is an original property by Sam Shaw and Dustin Thomason positioned in a larger world teeming with King's past work. Many of the characters, events referenced, and general themes of the series are grafted from King's novels, short stories, and other media properties. The very title is a reference to an invented town in Maine where King has set multiple stories. While following the protagonist of the series, Henry Deaver, through his journey of reconciling his past and uncovering the mystery of his new client, fans of King are constantly bombarded with images, references, and scenes from King's multiple worlds. In *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (2012), Ian Hodder defines entanglements "as the dialectic of dependence and dependency" (89). The series and the activation are both dependent on King's writings and the audience's knowledge of King's writings. The series' success is dependent on both these dependencies branching to further dependencies such as the audience that perpetuates King's popularity, the audience of the show's executive producer, J.J. Abrams, and the audience of horror/sci-fi television in general. Many of these dependencies reside in what Aleida Assmann calls functional memory. In *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (2013), Assmann states, "functional memory draws a flexible and hence productive boundary between, on one side, chosen, interpreted, and appropriated elements—that is those that are attached to the configuration of story—and on the other side, the amorphous mass of unattached elements" (125). It is in functional memory that entanglements are stored and dependencies created. As Assmann continues her evaluation of functional memory, she finds it "consists of vital recollections that emerge from a process of selection, connection, and meaningful configuration...In functional memory, unstructured, unconnected fragments are invested with perspective and relevance; they enter into connections, configurations, compositions of meaning" (127). Not only are the

entanglements stored, but through the functional memory, they are connected into a narrative to produce meaning. These entanglements are used to lure fans of the author's prodigious body of work both into the world of the show and the activation. The activation immersed audience/participants into scenes of a streaming series they had not yet watched, full of emotives and possible entanglements, with the promise that the scenes would gain greater relevance and clarity through the program's narrative.

I liken the creation of this experience to how Greg Siegel in "Double Vision: Large-Screen Video Display and Live Sports Spectacle" (2002) claims the large screen video display (LSVD) works at sports stadiums and other venues "by inducing and sustaining a mode of spectating practice characterized by the dynamic oscillation between immediate and mediated views" (50). In the immersive activation, the immediate view would be the streamed program that is mediated through the memory of the lived experience of the audience/participant. Though live and mediated are not happening simultaneously, the audience/participant becomes a spectator oscillating between memory and media. This is true in Siegel's original theory; time passes as the eye moves from screen to player. There is always a temporal elision involved in oscillation, a queering of time that is accepted because the fraction of a second between the eyes shifting from one point to another does not feel like a passage of time, and time is ultimately sensed through the body. Memory, too, is triggered through the senses and elapses times with ease, creating a sense of immediacy. With these oscillations, the emotive narrative, through the contextualization offered by the show, becomes a perfect experience. This could also be considered remediation through Chang's (2015) work, as she states, "remediation generally cleaves to the rhetoric and logic of immediacy—improving or reforming prior media by allowing even better or more direct access to the real." As the streamed series touches upon moments of the activation, the emotive narrative of the activation resurfaces in memory both kinesthetic and functional, fusing the mediated to the body, creating immediacy within the a/p. This specific immediacy is created through the haptic use of the senses. Visual triggers of smell and touch spring from the functional memory of the remediated body as it oscillates between the memory of experience and what it is currently watching. The oscillation triggers the memory of the experience but also the experience itself and in the

current moment, which is reified through the series because of how the activation remediated the a/p's body.

In the following section we will walk through both the activation and the streaming series together. I do not mean that I will summarize the first season of the streaming series, though some summarization may be necessary for context, but rather that I will relate the emotive sentences of the activation to the events referred to in the series. We will travel through the activation in linear time to reduce confusion and, in the best way possible, extend my sensorial experience to you the reader. I will pause frequently to explore the emotive sentence being experienced in activation and what it is referring to in the series. This will take away from the immersed experience of the activation but mimic how the structure of the activation and the structure of the series operate.

Walking Through Castle Rock

In the middle of the sprawling fountain of San Diego's Children's Park stand three incongruous objects, wholly out of place and in alarming juxtaposition. The first is the figure of a young child dressed for cold weather and floating slightly above the waterline. Within close visual range of the boy is a sign welcoming people to Castle Rock and intoning that it is "A nice place to live and grow." These first two objects act as emotives and immediately displace the a/p, spatially and temporally. The spatial realignment from San Diego, California, to Castle Rock, Maine, is simple enough, enacted through the signal of the literal sign. Also enacted through this sign is a relocation into the series. This begins the process of placing the a/p in the series itself. A further realignment is also being enacted through the child. The child's clothing indicates a spatial dissonance as it contrasts with the mid-nineties Fahrenheit heat that San Diego experienced throughout Comic-Con weekend. The clothing is less specific than the literal sign but works together with the sign to begin an emotive sentence. This emotive sentence includes a temporal shift from summer to winter, repositioning the audience/participant in both time and space. In addition to concrete narrative elements, the emotive sentence contains multiple affective elements to attach to the audience/participant's memory. These elements provide the mood and tone of the series. This is the beginning of the bodily remediation that occurs

throughout the activation. Chang (2015) reminds us of Eugene Thacker’s biomedica: “a kind of cross-platform compatibility between the biological and the technical that exists in constant tension between abstraction and materialization...” She uses this to look at the body as both medium and mediator. To decode, retain, explore, and bridge the streamed series and the activation, the body must enter this dual modality. The remediation includes the tonal elements that stick to the corners of the mind, such as the supernatural suggestion of a child floating above the water, the muted colors, well-weathered sign, isolation, and distance between objects. All of this signals the danger awaiting the a/p if they proceed with their journey. The final of these three objects is a grey sedan plunging hood-first into the fountain. This object is on the opposite side of the fountain from the other two and is clearly meant to be visually separated from the child and the sign. How the car ended up in the fountain is a mystery, as there are no roads above the fountain that could account for the steep angle of its entry. As more time is spent visually exploring the car, it becomes clear that it is not wrecked where its hood has hit the bottom of the fountain but seems to pass through the fountain. In fact, it seems that the sedan has been dropped into this reality through another and is on its way to a third.

The car, the child, and the sign are all encountered in the series’ first episode. The car is the first of these three objects that the audience will encounter. It is owned by the warden of Shawshank prison, whom the audience is quickly introduced to before watching him leave his home to commit a visually gruesome suicide that plunges the sedan off a cliff and into a lake far below. The angle of the sedan at impact, and the sedan itself, will be very familiar to any who wandered by the Children’s Park during the activation’s run. This event and image serve as the inciting incident of both the series and the activation. The Castle Rock Bed and Breakfast that the audience/participant will access at the official beginning of the activation is the warden’s former home. Next, the sign is used to signal the movement of the show’s protagonist, Henry Deaver (played by Andre Holland), from Texas, where he is a death row defense attorney, to the township of Castle Rock. His transference from one location to another is no different from those who experienced the activation, meaning he ends one scene in Texas and, through a very similar sign, is transported to Castle Rock. This swift spatial relocation is a well-used trope in visual

storytelling, both on screen and on stage, and effectively moves the audience with the character into the next scene. This oscillation in time is as quick as an eye's movement from screen to field, relocating the body of both the character and the viewer. In the case of this activation and the streaming series, the remediated bodies of the viewer may have a similar experience to Deaver being suddenly dropped into a new reality, oscillating between experience and present, dealing with the triggers placed in the memory from the last time they found themselves transported to Castle Rock. Finally, it is revealed that the child is, in fact, a younger version of the protagonist who is lost in the snowy woods surrounding Castle Rock, standing on an iced-over lake and wearing the exact clothing as the image floating above the fountain. The protagonist's difference in age between the present and the flashback is 27 years (a number specifically chosen for its reference to *IT* and the antagonist of that story's cycle of terror, which occurs every 27 years in the nearby town of Derry).

Moving from the fountain into the queue for the activation, a few more emotives are introduced. The first of these is a key to the Castle Rock Bed and Breakfast, which exists both in the series and in the activation. To obtain this key, the audience/participant must sign a series of waivers containing content and safety warnings. Before each episode of the series, a written content warning appears on the screen. The similarity in the priming for both series viewer and activation participant is significant in that it is a ritualized action that must be consented to physically and mentally before beginning the experience. Mimicking this precursory action is yet another gesture blending both activation and series. While waiting, the audience/participant is surrounded by a corridor papered with missing-child posters. These posters refer to Henry Deaver and describe his dress and length of time missing, a total of eleven days. What happened during these eleven lost days is a major question in the series and is not addressed until the season's final episode. As for the missing child's clothing, the description perfectly matches the levitating figure in the fountain from earlier.

As the a/p reaches the front of the line, they are introduced to the Bed and Breakfast, as well as to their hosts, Lilith and Gordon. Each audience/participant has a quick

conversation with each character, just long enough to know something is not right. The small talk Gordon makes is loaded with references to King's wider universe, asking audience/participants if they came to town to see where the boy was discovered near the railroad tracks (a reference to King's short story *The Body*, later made into the film *Stand By Me*), or where the dog that went on a killing spree lived (*Cujo*), or perhaps where the strangler did his business (*The Dark Half*). Throughout the interaction, Lilith and Gordon's characters consistently touch the audience/participant in non-threatening but noticeable ways. This is to reinforce the memory of the interaction through haptic means. The characters of Gordon and Lilith also make an appearance in the series, buying the old warden of Shawshank's house, made available through his untimely death, and turning it into the bed and breakfast at which the audience/participant is now a guest. The façade of the B&B is exact to the one in the series. The B&B does not appear until well into the series, but temporal displacement is a major theme of the show as well as the activation. Time is anything but linear in Castle Rock and is, as Marks (2002) asserts of digital media and body, "mutually enfolded in material processes" (xxi). The representation of time from the missing posters to the jump to the Bed and Breakfast is malleable and dependent on material markers for reference. The most tangible of these markers is the use of the audience/participant's cellular phone to snap pictures of them with Lilith and Gordon upon their arrival at the Bed and Breakfast. This clearly places them in the present, while the signs are dated 1991.

After the meet and greet, the front door is opened, and the audience/participants are led to the lobby of the B&B. Here, rooms are assigned and rules given: follow all directions, stay together, and do not lose your key. Every countertop and wall of the lobby is covered by something that will either be part of the series or comes from a different King property. This includes a real-estate mailer from Molly Strand (portrayed by Melanie Lynskey), who sells Gordon and Lilith the Bed and Breakfast; a typewriter with paper sticking out with the repeated line "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" (a reference to *The Shining*); and a copy of *IT*. The typewriter is of particular interest; not only is there a character named after the troubled antagonist of *The Shining*, who is later revealed to be his niece, "the shining" or "touch" (depending on the King property being referenced) plays an integral

part in the plot of the series. It is revealed early on that the realtor we are introduced to through her mailer, which was located next to the typewriter, has a version of this “touch.” She can hear not only thoughts but feelings and emotions, too. The paintings on the walls have significance, too, as they are all expressionist portraits of the character known on the show as The Kid (portrayed by Bill Skarsgård). These portraits play a major role in Gordon and Lilith’s story arc in the series, inspiring Gordon to murder. The oddities and uneasiness of the activation’s Gordon can be explained through this information as the series and the paintings work together to establish the context of his interactions.

At this point, it is already clear how the series and the activation work to reify each other and form a singular experience through emotive sentences. Each emotive sentence folds into and permeates through the series. Next, audience/participants are instructed to open the doors of their rooms simultaneously and enter their personal rooms. Each room is a small, confined space with a door opposite the entrance. As the a/p enters the room, the door behind them swings shut. The door in front is locked. A dim light shines. Each room is themed after a different King property that in some way appears in *Castle Rock*; this may include red balloons and the storm drain from *IT*, the Raquel Welch poster from *The Shawshank Redemption*, or an avatar of the small child recently witnessed floating over the fountain outside. From here, how the room is utilized in the narrative is uniform. The lights fail and sound fills the space. The individual sounds are distinct to the room: balloons popping and Pennywise’s voice in the *IT* room, or prison alarms and inmates rioting in *The Shawshank Redemption* room. Noise rises to a dizzying crescendo mixing environmental blasts with speech and an ominous underscore. Straining to disentangle the sounds becomes maddening. The volume climbs to its climax, a light begins to pulse, speeding to a menacing strobing. Finally, the door flings open and drops the audience/participants into a space that can only be described as threateningly ethereal, illuminated by the headlights of a grey sedan plunging through the roof. This is the warden’s car again, or at least the portion that is not in the fountain outside. Green-blue swirling lights are projected on the ceiling that indicates our place as beneath the water, time frozen as the car is stuck mid-plunge. The a/p has gone through a “thinny,” a term used in King’s works to indicate a place where the edges of a world have grown thin, and one can pass into another world.

Much of the plot of the series revolves around a “thinny.” In King’s works it is an opening where worlds, time, and dimensions can be traversed. The audience/participant has disappeared from their reality through a “thinny” and has been transported to Castle Rock. This “thinny” offers the audience/participant what Laura Marks (2002) points out existential phenomenology also offers:

Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is constituted in mutual acts of perception, such that the world's look upon me, while it challenges any notion that I might exist separately from it, is not out to annihilate me. This in turn allows us to identify and negotiate with particular opportunities not for shattering, but for becoming. (54)

Becoming, from this point forward, is the goal of the activation and the journey of the series. The audience/participant is being driven through a world, by a world, into a new understanding of the world. Their perception is consistently challenged from here to the end of the experience. Following Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, there is no separation of body and mind; engaged action is the arbiter of self, and though it is not clear during the activation, through the streamed series who the a/p became reveals itself.

Hurried from this room by an avatar of the boy in the fountain, the audience/participant is led to a tight room with a bathtub in the center. In the bathtub is an array of mannequin parts. A man who looks and is dressed like Gordon, the B&B owner, cleans the mannequin parts while talking about how he did not want to commit the “act.” The audience/participant is never told what that “act” is, but from the tightness of the room and intensity of the speech, it is clear it was dark and violent. This is a reenactment of a scene from the series. In the series, Gordon is talking to himself, but the activation makes use of the a/p’s presence and Gordon delivers the lines directly to them with ominous effect. As he begins to threaten those in the room, a new door is thrown open, and the a/p’s are beckoned to follow a woman in a red coat.

This coat becomes an important costume in the show, as it is how Molly Strand is recognized both in the show’s present and in flashbacks. The character leads the audience/participant through a hallway of mannequins whose heads rotate to follow their

progress. One child mannequin is present, wearing a child's version of Molly's costume. Again, this refers to Molly's function in the narrative. She is the continual savior of Henry. She leads the audience/participant to a long and dark hallway and disappears down it. As the audience/participant follows her down the hallway, its walls close in. The walls and ceiling are made with fabric and inflated, so the audience/participant is smothered and isolated. It is loud with the sound of rushing air and the screams of other audience/participants. The suffocating walls must be pushed through. This takes a decent amount of effort due to how tightly the inflated fabric presses against the body. This hallway mimics the emotional state of Henry as he is kidnapped and locked in a tight, soundproof room. When viewing the series, it is at this moment that it becomes clear that while traversing the hallway, the audience/participant was becoming Henry.

Once the hallway is negotiated, the a/p finds themselves at a prison, witnessing a lethal injection. This is Henry's first scene in the series. This is once again deliberate to enfold the audience/participant's journey with Henry's. This enfolding of the live event and the series is also experienced on the way out of the activation. The audience/participant passes a bank of security monitors. Some of the monitors show the rooms of the activation, while others display footage of a mass shooting from the series. This mass shooting is displayed in the series by following the shooter from one room to another on security monitors. The a/p can pass the monitors without stopping or take the choreographic proposition and watch the slaughter which will mark a climax of one of the series episodes.

The physical activation ends here, but the experience does not. Through viewing the series, it becomes clear that the activation structure (skipping from location to location, forward and backward in time) mimics Ruth Deaver's (portrayed by Sissy Spacek) sense of reality. Ruth's thought process is corrupted by dementia and requires the placement of triggering totems to tell the difference between memory and her lived reality. She utilizes chess pieces as her keys to the world, telling her what is happening in real-time and what is simply the repetition of memory. If she opens a space where she has placed a chess piece and it is missing, she knows she is trapped in a memory. That momentary warning about losing the key in the B&B's lobby is critical, as it is the audience/participant's tether to reality before

they cross worlds. The key they were told to hang onto acts like these chess pieces to ground the audience/participant in their reality despite being plunged into *Castle Rock*'s.

Due to its dismissal of an intermediary party or avatar, this bodily remediation surpasses the ability to envelop an audience/participant contained in other transmedial endeavors, such as computer and video games. Using the hotel key as the tether to reality allows for an escape from the activation/embedded self. Navigating the activation often involves the audience/participant's hands, and the key was commonly stashed in a pocket or bag. This removes the key from the audience/participant's sight and out of haptic interaction. In essence, the key's tangible metaphor for reality transcends the literary into an actual binding talisman. This talisman's invisibility affects the functional memory in different ways than the constant reminder of the third-party avatar utilized in computer games, leaving the participant with a different affective experience. Video games doubtlessly have great affective power and utilize the body similarly to immersive experiences, but they also have distancing agents built into the architecture of how they operate. For instance, the off or power button is the most powerful tool of a frustrated gamer. The power button for a console or computer has nothing to do with an individual game and is a neutral party to the experience of that machine and what it can offer. The key is the off button in the *Castle Rock* activation, but it is far from neutral. It is a reminder of the "other" reality, the one lived and accessible on the other side of the screen. It is a door you have passed through. Once opened, the door can never truly be closed. The power can never be turned off; the experience is yours, or perhaps that of another you, but one that lives in you regardless.

The *Castle Rock* activation was painstakingly crafted so that every detail embellished the series' world and remained through emotive sentences within the active memory of the audience/participant. This points to significant strides in immediacy and the remediation of the body. This remediation enfolds the series into the activation and forms yet another becoming; that of the human body into the series. No further tools for immediacy are needed, as remediation has conjoined the live with the mediatized; the oscillation between the two is internal.

In the last decade, activations have become convention staples, and the vast majority of them have been less than successful or memorable. The task of connecting an audience to a property is not effortless, and without a great deal of planning and thought it is easy to fall through the cracks. As a consummate convention goer, I can attest to having swag from multiple miscarried properties handed out at the end of activations that failed to connect to both myself and a larger viewing audience—shows buried deep in the original’s queue of Amazon Prime or Hulu or simply canceled off network television before completing a season. This doesn’t diminish the power of the activation but, rather, displays what a valuable tool it can be to both connect and enhance a viewer’s experience. In *The Sea We Swim: How Stories Work in a Data Driven World* (2021) Frank Rose calls the process “narrative thinking,” which is analogous to design thinking which he defines as “a five-step process—*empathize* with the user, *define* the problem, *ideate* around it, *prototype* a solution, *test* it, and then start over if necessary” (15). While Rose writes authoritatively on immersion, he is often doing so from a marketing standpoint. This makes failure, which is baked into design thinking as a satisfying outcome, acceptable, but from a performance view, connecting with an audience at its most pure level starts at first contact with a product or property. An activation fails not only when it does not connect to an audience, but more catastrophically when it affectively marks the audience causing them to reject the product.

The ability to physically connect an audience to a series opens up new lines of exploration in materiality, narrative, and the functions of memory in media. As Rose notes in *The Art of Immersion* (2011), “immersiveness is what blurs the line, not just between story and game, but between story and marketing, storyteller and audience, illusion and reality” (15). As techniques refine and audiences become more adept at seeking out these multidimensional experiences for their media consumption, the opportunities seem limited only by budget and imagination (resources the studios producing these activations seem to have in spades). These explorations may be able to further conjoin properties entirely,

fulfilling the goals of transmedia practitioners¹, opening both entertainment and theatrical industries up to new and undreamt-of potentials.

¹ Here I am referencing Henry Jenkins' March 21, 2017 blog post "Transmedia Storytelling 101." In it, he lays out the tenets for transmedia storytelling. This is a space where the activation could fit, but I would argue that because this activation was made in service of the series and cannot be understood without it, the series would still remain an Ur-text.

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