Interactive Media Merging with the Theater Experience

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Abstract: Interactive storytelling has been incorporated into our culture in different ways. There are many interactive shows, interactive amusement park attractions, and of course, interactive films. Most interactive films in existence happen to be short films. On top of that, most of these interactive short films are meant to be viewed by one individual who makes all of the choices rather than in a group setting. I am proposing to further investigate how interactive storytelling has been incorporated into media and distributed in an attempt to determine if it is feasible to create a steady flow of interactive feature films that are meant to be shown in a movie theater setting. I will specifically take a look at trends in the ways that movie theaters have expanded over time, potential audience and theater interest levels in the concept of interactive features, the feasibility of creating interactive films, and the ideal layout to create them. My findings will be written up in paper form and will hopefully allow my audience to understand a direction that the entertainment industry may be heading.

Introduction –

Theaters have been continuously finding new ways to heighten the movie-watching experience for audience members. Take the introduction of 3D theaters, 4D theaters, sensorama films, and IMAX theaters as an example. These theater reality boosters positively contribute to the suspension of disbelief that audience members might feel while watching a movie because they further immerse them into the storyline (Başci and Orhan); however, none of these examples add to the overall narrative of a movie.

Adding to the storyline of a movie would require media narrative boosters (Başci and Orhan). The most common example is interactive storytelling. This, however, has not yet been seen in a theater setting. Knowing the expanse rate of movie theaters, it would not be a surprise if interactive media is on the horizon for the movie theater experience to further heighten audience engagement. Interactive storytelling in movies would allow the audience to be part of the story and make important plot-driven decisions along the way.

Interactive storytelling has been incorporated into our culture in many different ways including live theater experiences and even amusement park attractions. Theater experiences that involve audience participation include The Rocky Horror Picture Show, The Dinner Detective Murder Mystery Show in Los Angeles, and Sleep No More in New York City. Rides involving rider participation include Mission: SPACE at Disney’s Epcot, The Virtual Jungle Cruise at DisneyQuest, Ollivanders Wand Experience at Universal’s Islands of Adventure, and Men in Black: Alien Attack at Universal Studios. All of these examples have something in common: they are media narrative boosters because the interactivity allows for positive –and possibly negative– contributions to the storyline (Başci and Orhan). A lot can be learned from these examples to help the interactive film genre expand into theaters.

Knowing this, I will be studying how interactive storytelling has been incorporated into different forms of media and how this media can be successfully distributed because I want to find out if it is feasible to create a steady flow of interactive feature films that are meant to be shown in a movie theater in order to help my audience understand a possible direction that the entertainment industry is heading.

Background –

There are currently many interactive films in existence that vary in terms of their interactivity. For example, *Possibilia* is a short film that depicts a young couple going through a breakup. The audience can choose from various timelines to watch their fight, but all of the timelines lead to the same ending. In contrast, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is an interactive TV show that has multiple endings; however, the show will direct you back in time to make a different decision if you chose “incorrectly” at certain points in the show. While there are options to choose from, there is ultimately a correct path that the audience is driven towards. This layout is quite different from that of *A Heist with Markiplier*, a YouTube interactive film that has multiple “Game Over” endings. If you choose wrong, there is nothing the film will do to set you back on the right track. After understanding these different layout types and how this can affect audience enjoyment, an ideal layout can be created that can help structure interactive feature-length films.

A well-pieced-together film can only be truly successful with proper output. Taking a look at the theater output of 3D films over time provides a proper example as to why this is the case. 3D movies were exciting developments because they first mimicked our natural way of seeing the world. This immersed audience members into the movies even more. The 3D effect on box-office numbers was quite promising, especially during opening weekends when 3 times the revenue per screen of 2D cinema was generated on average; however, 3D movies suffer greatly from the lack of available 3D screens (Mendiburu). Creating 3D movies will never be less expensive than creating 2D movies. The main challenge is improving the cost-to-advantage ratio (Mendiburu). Looking at how these problems have been tackled can directly apply to how interactive features can be introduced into a theater setting.

Interactive attractions can also provide insight on how to properly incorporate interactive storytelling into our culture. For example, an interactive ride at DisneyQuest –a virtual theme park in Orlando and Chicago– opened to the public in 2000 (Sehell and Shochet). This ride was called Pirates of the Caribbean-Battle for the Buccaneer Gold. While this ride was being constructed, the creators had to take into account the importance of making sure that each ride is a great one while giving control to the riders over the ride (Sehell and Shochet). After all, the interactive rides must provide a real-life experience meant for a group setting that can’t be done elsewhere to be worth the price of admission. Like interactive rides such as these, interactive feature films should follow a similar structure as they are meant to be seen in an immersive group setting as well.

It is clear that a lot of interactive media has already been created; however, a great majority of the media is short films rather than full feature-length films despite the success of interactive feature films that have been released. CtrlMovie is a production company that created an interactive crime thriller called *Late Shift* in 2016. This film played seamlessly in theaters while the audience got to make decisions for the protagonist on their phones using an app. The majority vote determined how the story changed (Elnahla). This interactive film was screened at New York Film Festival and Raindance in London. *Late Shift* received positive feedback and CtrlMovie has received an increase in funding from US financier Starlings Entertainment since the release of *Late Shift* (Dalton), but more films like this have not been put out since. This might be because of the lengthy production process involved or because of the lack of movie theater interest in taking on films like this.

I believe that looking at other forms of interactive storytelling and how people have responded to them is an important step in determining the future of interactive media, especially when taking into consideration how it can be incorporated into movie theaters and successfully distributed. By studying how feasible it is to create a steady flow of interactive feature films, I will be able to highlight a potential direction that movie theaters are heading towards.

Methods –

I have put together a 4-step approach to answering my proposal. I would like to learn if theaters would be interested in dispersing interactive features in their theaters, if interactive features are feasible to create in general, if there is a certain layout that sustains the audience’s suspension of disbelief best, and if there are trends that might suggest that movie theaters are expanding in a way that could involve the use of interactive media. By looking at these four aspects, I will be able to gauge all aspects of whether or not it is feasible to create a steady flow of interactive feature films that are meant to be shown in a movie theater setting.

The first step of my approach is to investigate the interest level in interactive features. For interactive feature films to be successful, both movie theaters and audience members have to be interested in the idea of interactive media. Audience interest can be determined through polls and group screenings of interactive films, shows, and/or rides. Theater interest can be determined through research of other forms of films such as 3D, 4D, and sensorama films to see how distribution can come about.

Secondly, I plan on investigating the ideal structure of interactive features. I would like to determine how interactivity affects audience engagement to be able to determine the best layout for an interactive story that is longer than most that have been released in the past. To do this, I plan on watching a variety of interactive films, attending interactive shows, and going on interactive rides to learn what works and what doesn’t work in terms of interactive storytelling. This way, a rough layout can be presented on how to create a successful interactive feature film.

The third step of my approach is to investigate the plausibility of creating interactive features. There are lots of factors to take into consideration including the cost and the lengthy production process of creating interactive media. Additionally, movie theaters would need to create new theaters that have the necessary technology to screen interactive media. This would also add to the cost of distributing interactive media. Through further research, I plan on finding and drawing attention to potential roadblocks for creating and distributing interactive features so that solutions can be determined more easily.

The fourth step of my approach is to analyze current interactive media, analyze the expanse of movie theaters, and see how these two might combine in the near future. I will take a look at the increase in the production of interactive media and how the structure has changed over time. Additionally, I’ll focus on the trends in the ways that movie theaters have expanded by researching the 3D, IMAX, and XD theaters. Additionally, I plan on watching the same movie in multiple theater forms in an attempt to see which forms allow for the greatest amount of audience enjoyment and suspension of disbelief. My hope is to be able to determine if introducing interactive media into theaters is something that will fit these movie theater development trends.

Expected Results –

By following through with this research, I will be able to provide my audience with a paper reporting on my results. Hopefully, I will be able to predict if it is possible to create an interactive feature film that can be shown in a theater setting successfully and regularly. I will also be able to propose a potential layout for interactive feature films that can be used in the future that can best sustain an audience’s attention.

Conclusion –

Movie theaters have always been finding new ways to up their technology and heighten the movie-watching experience for movie-goers. Typically, this has been done by incorporating more reality boosters into movie theaters: tools that allow audience members to feel like they are actually there in the movie. Examples include 3D projection and sensorama films. Another form of audience engagement is a narrative booster: a tool that allows audience members to add to the storyline itself. Narrative boosters have not yet been used in the theatrical environment despite their prevalence in other forms of media. The most common example is interactive storytelling which is prevalent in many video games, live theater shows, amusement park attractions, and short films. It is possible that incorporating narrative boosters into the theatrical environment is the next step for movie theaters to up their game.

I would like to research how interactive storytelling has been incorporated into different forms of media and how this media is successfully distributed. By focusing my research on this, I will be able to determine if it is feasible to create a steady flow of interactive feature films that are meant to be shown in a movie theater setting. This knowledge will help my audience understand a possible direction that the entertainment industry is heading.

To conduct research, I plan on analyzing interactive media output and theater developments over the years to see if these two can combine in the near future. I will take a look at the plausibility of creating interactive feature films, I will take a look at the audience interest level, and will compare this to the theater interest level in dispersing interactive media. Lastly, I will propose an ideal structure for these interactive feature-length films. My findings will be written up in paper form.

Works Cited

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Budget

* Cost to watch/stream various interactive films:
  + Late Shift -- $9.99
  + She Sees Red -- $7.99
  + MADE: Interactive Movie 01 -- $14.99
* Cost of Movie Theater Tickets:
  + 2D Regal movie -- $14.15
  + SCREENX 2D Regal movie -- $15.15
  + IMAX 2D Regal movie -- $20.95
  + ICE IMMERSIVE 2D Regal movie -- $25.20
  + 4DX 2D Regal movie -- $27.20
* Interactive Amusement Park Attractions:
  + Roundtrip tickets from LAX to MCO through American Airlines -- $243.11
  + Renting a car for 3 days at MCO airport -- $331.80
  + Cost of a hotel for 2 nights -- $182.20
  + Universal Orlando 2 Park 1 Day Ticket -- $213.00
  + Disney World Park Hopper 1 Day Ticket -- $225.78
* Interactive Live Theater:
  + Cost of Uber roundtrip to Landmark’s Nuart Theatre -- $37.80
  + The Rocky Horror Picture Show tickets -- $155.64

Total Cost: $1,524.95