

[W E R K S T A T T B E R I C H T]

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IscaPark – or, Classical Receptions and Impact in Practice

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“While a theme park may be perceived by most people as simply a destination for a leisure trip, this event will use it as a medium to convey complex interdisciplinary research. Inspired by Exeter in Roman times, a theme park will be reproduced with hands-on activities, screenings, and installations corresponding to different sections of a theme park, from a roller coaster and photo opportunities to midway games. Visitors will go through the installations and are invited to reflect with theme park researchers on the relevance of what they experienced. Through a variety of theme park activities and structures, the event will highlight issues of temporality – from acceleration and slowing down to the necessity of understanding time as a commodity. All welcome.”

This text greeted visitors on the internet site of the Being Human festival 2015, informing them about the unique event that would take place on the 14th November 2015 at the Exeter Library.¹

Being Human – A Festival of the Humanities is a nationwide event organized in the UK since 2014. Funded by the School of Advanced Studies London in cooperation with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, the festival seeks to show the significance of research in human sciences (which might, at first sight, be somewhat less obvious than that in natural sciences) to a broader public, inviting visitors to a plethora of different events – over 300 in 2015, organized by 70 universities in 36 cities. This is an important initiative, not only because it coordinates a large variety of events that, if organized alone, would not attract the same amount of attention, and provides them with funding. It also reminds academics in the Humanities that it is one of their duties to make the results of their research available and intelligible to a broader public – for instance,

1 <http://beinghumanfestival.org/event/theme-park-interactive-game/> (all urls accessed on 26 April 2016).

through the development of outreach and impact initiatives. At the same time, Being Human can be seen as a counter-initiative to the powerful, often politically initiated campaigns against the Humanities that can be found in many Western countries – and that have been spurred by the “ivory tower” attitude of all too many scholars.² And indeed, the bid was successful: not only has the festival been confirmed for a third year in 2016, but the reaction in the press has been consistently positive, and has focused exactly on the problems that the festival sought to point out.³

“Here You Leave Today”: A Research Project and Its Outreach

As a group of scholars from different disciplines within the Humanities, including Classics and Ancient Histories, American Studies, and Drama, and as young scholars who are very aware of the difficulties and the ongoing identity crisis of our fields, we found the call for initiatives extremely appealing and immediately decided to apply to become part of the 2015 edition of the festival.

Most readers will now probably wonder what kind of research project could possibly bring together people from such diverse fields and inspire them to reproduce a theme park in the library of an English city. The project that did all this is called “‘Here You Leave Today’: Time and Temporality in Theme Parks” and seeks to study aspects of time and temporality in theme parks – which we conceive of as one of the new and characteristic media of the 20th century.⁴ Asking questions such as “how are the past and the future represented in theme parks and what do these representations tell us about our present, its conceptions of the past, and its hopes for the future?”, and “How do people spend time in theme parks and what does this tell us about the parks, their design, economy, and ideology?”, we work, both as a group and individually, with students, colleagues from other fields, and theme park designers. Our funding is guaranteed for the years 2014–2017 by the German Research Foundation (DFG) in the context of the SPP 1688

2 See Carlà/Stoffel/Walde (2015).

3 See e.g. the article published on *The Guardian* on the 12th November 2015, which calls for a rapprochement of Humanities and STEM sciences:
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/occams-corner/2015/nov/12/humanities-are-vital>.

4 <http://www.aesthetische-eigenzeiten.de/projekt/themenparks/beschreibung/>.

“Ästhetische Eigenzeiten” (a huge interdisciplinary cooperation on temporality and its representation and perception in the arts).⁵

In this context, we publish articles and books, as scholars usually do,⁶ but we are also particularly interested in reaching out to a general public and engaging in broad discussions. Thus we established an online photo archive that allows everyone to virtually explore numerous theme parks from all over the world;⁷ and Florian Freitag took part in “Thinking Together – The Politics of Time,” an event organized in the context of MaerzMusik – Festival für Zeitfragen 2015 in Berlin.⁸

The Birth of IscaPark

Being Human 2015, however, called for a bigger project: IscaPark. The first idea was easy: we would simply construct a theme park – not a real park, of course, but a simulation of a theme park, with a role-playing game in which every visitor received a fictional character who is visiting the park, has only a limited amount of time and money, and wants to achieve special goals in terms of thrill, relax, and fun points, corresponding to their individual interests. For example, our imagined teenager would be particularly keen on experiencing thrill rides and having fun, whereas our fantasy senior citizen would be more inclined to relax and people-watch. A chance desk, with cards to be drawn every time visitors pass by, added some surprise elements to the game.

But we were still lacking the most important element of a theme park: the theme. Choosing this turned out to be rather easy, too: officially, the event was organized by the Department of Classics and Ancient History of the University of Exeter, where Filippo works. Exeter is a Roman foundation; additionally, the representation of the past in theme parks is one of our research areas, and so the theme park on Roman Exeter was born,

5 <http://www.aesthetische-eigenzeiten.de>.

6 Here are just some of our publications: Freitag (2015); Carlà/Freitag (2015a); Carlà/Freitag (2015b); Carlà/Freitag (2015c); Freitag/Schwarz (2015/16); Carlà/Freitag/Mittermeier/Schwarz (2016a); Carlà/Freitag/Mittermeier/Schwarz (2016b).

7 <https://bildarchiv.uni-mainz.de/Themeparks>.

8

http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/media/2015/maerzmusik_2/downloads_30/mm15_thinking_together.pdf.

and it was called IscaPark, from the Roman name of Exeter, *Isca Dumnoniorum*. IscaPark would not be the first theme park, also among the real ones, to be inspired by an ancient, or more specifically, Roman, topic. The Roman Empire is indeed strongly present in popular culture, not only in Europe, but also in the USA,⁹ from where the theme park as a medium originates – it is enough to think of the many films, novels, videogames, comics, set in that time. The Roman Empire actually fulfills all the pre-conditions for an immersive theme park environment. It is a past (and somehow exotic) society, completely different from ours, but at the same time highly recognizable: basic (visual) elements of it, such as the Colosseum, popularized by travel agencies, documentaries, movies as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), and theme parks (both the façade of the Hotel Rome in the theme park Mt. Olympus in Wisconsin Dells, USA, and that of the Hotel Colosseo in Europa-Park, Rust, Germany, feature replicas of the Colosseum) are known to virtually anybody in the Western world. Additionally, the Roman Empire is perceived as a constituent part of Western identity, in the European countries currently occupying the territories of the former Empire (Italy, France, Spain), in countries whose own imperial experiences gave occasions to establish comparisons (the UK), and in countries whose political system has been inspired by the Roman constitution (the USA). In this sense, experiencing an immersion in the Roman times can have an important impact on the sense of belonging and on the structures of identity of the visitors; this is precisely what we wanted to re-create in IscaPark, too, inviting the inhabitants of Exeter to have fun and experience an immersive environment and to simultaneously reflect on the history of their city and the meaning, for them, of being “Exeterans”.

We do not exactly remember how it happened that a duck – a rubber duck, to be more precise – became the logo and the mascot of IscaPark; it must have simply crossed someone’s mind at some point, and the others found it funny, and so it stuck. With the help of Gordon Grice and Forrec Ltd., a major Canadian theme park design company that created the graphics for IscaPark,¹⁰ our mascot was born [Fig. 1]. Soon one duck turned into two ducks – in reference to Romulus and Remus and the legend of the foundation of Rome, we called them Lostus and Foundus, and we also

⁹ See e.g. Malamud (2009).

¹⁰ www.forrec.com.

decided that they would be the heroes of an “archaeological excavation” attraction.



Fig. 1: IscaPark-logo

At this point we managed, thanks to the Public Engagement Manager from the Research Services of the University of Exeter, to gain the support of the Exeter Library, which hosted the event. And now, it was time to invent the individual attractions and develop the characters for the role game, in order to set up and pilot the game before its official opening on November 14.

A theme park is, by definition, an immersive space that offers “stimulations” for all the senses;¹¹ and this is something that we wanted to reproduce at IscaPark, too – and luck was on our side. Indeed, Erica Rowan, a colleague of Filippo Carlà at the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Exeter and a leading scholar on Roman food, promptly accepted our invitation to be part of the project and to prepare and serve “authentic” Roman food. Her food stand, the “Table of Deliciae”, simulated a restaurant for our visitors and, at the same time, became the location for another important element of theme parks – the shows, here in the shape of a pub quiz, which took place twice during the day. The real cafeteria of the Library also served food and was included in the game – visitors had to use real money here, but also spend time points and could gain relax and fun points. The cafeteria was renamed “Temple of Feasts” and received special IscaPark menus.

Indeed, the theming, including the names of the attractions, the “restaurants,” and the “souvenir shops,” all had to be developed in consonance with the theme, as in every theme park.¹² We started with the

¹¹ For a definition of a theme park, see Carlà/Freitag (2015) 136.

¹² See Bryman (2014) 15: “Theming consists of the application of a narrative to institutions or locations. Typically, the source of the theme is external to the institution

essential of every theme park: a roller coaster – or better, a video-simulation of a roller coaster, the “Colosseum Wagon Race”. After that, we needed a carousel, and since it would be hard to install a real one inside the library, “Epona’s Carousel”, named after the Celtic goddess of war, had to be some other spinning object – a zoetrope. The attraction consisted thus of a table at which visitors could, under the expert guidance of Marta García Morcillo, who came to support us from the University of Roehampton, create their own reels for two zoetropes, kindly lent to us by the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum.

After that came the fairground attractions: an “archaeological excavation” called “Lostus and Foundus”, in which visitors had to find ancient objects, and the “Roman Duck Hunt”, a hook-a-duck game, both of which tied in nicely with our two mascots. A scavenger hunt, in which Lostus and Foundus guided visitors through the history of Exeter-Isca and provided them with historical facts about the town and its archaeological record (clues were realized in cooperation with the Royal Albert Memorial Museum), a photo opportunity (two cut-outs of Roman legionaries, one without the head, formed the “Colosseum Backstage Pass”), and the chance desk (“Temple of Fortuna”) completed our offerings.

Even if it might seem quite obvious, it became clear to us that theme park designers need to know quite a bit about the theme they choose for their park. Even a “light theming” in the decoration requires research into the chosen society’s visual arts and their reception, so that the theming becomes recognizable for a broader audience; in our case, the fact that both Filippo Carlà and Erica Rowan are Classicists and the help of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum for the more local aspects made this part of the job easier than it would be for, e.g., architects and designers.

Yet we were far from being done. In fact, we were still missing a crucial element of any theme park: the souvenir shop. We used the opportunity to create yet another “channel” for disseminating the results of our research project. The shop was named “Imagines”, after an international research network investigating the reception of Classical Antiquity in the visual and performing arts¹³ with which we cooperated during the realization of IscaPark. It consisted basically of a table at which visitors could look at

or object to which it is applied. This externality is usually revealed as being external in terms of space, time, sphere or any combination of these sources.”

13 <http://www.imagines-project.org/>.

copies of our books (and order them with a generous discount!), a screen showing short divulgation videos about Classical receptions (realized by the Imagines group and also available on their YouTube channel “ImaginesTV”),¹⁴ offprints of our articles to take home, postcards of IscaPark and Imagines, and balloons with our logo (the balloons were also used as prizes for the fairground attractions) [Fig. 2-3]. The shop was constantly staffed to provide interested visitors with information about our research project, its relevance, its connection to the event, and so on.



Fig. 2: Gifts



Fig. 3: Zoetropes and reels from Epona’s Carousel (the zoetropes were lent by the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, Exeter)

14 <https://www.youtube.com/user/ImaginesTV>.

Zoom In: The “Table of Deliciae” in Detail

In order to provide the readers with a more precise idea of the kind of work involved in the preparation of each individual attraction, from the starting idea through the activation of the academic knowledge about the ancient world and the practical aspects of the organization, we provide here a more in-depth analysis of the birth of the “Table of Deliciae”, an extremely successful station of IscaPark, which attracted a lot of attention among the visitors and represented a perfect example of the coordination of research, teaching, and impact [Fig. 4].



Fig.4: Table of Deliciae

The act of food consumption is an inherently reflective experience whereby an individual at once determines whether or not an item is safe to consume. Beyond the initial evolutionary function of taste in preventing illness, foods can be classified under a range of headings such as familiar or strange, good or bad, and of course, sweet, salty, sour and/or bitter. Food consumption, however, is also a deeply embedded cultural activity, and in addition to the basic stimulation of the five senses, the “Table of Deliciae” acted as an important space where people could reflect upon the act of re-creating Roman food within a modern context. Visitor comments and personal

reflection upon the experience allowed us to identify three essential elements that made the table both popular and an effective educational tool. These three elements were: the strong taste of the food; the bread; and the participation of the students who were taking the Food in Antiquity module at Exeter.

The participation of the students and the taste of the food were closely related. Students were given two recipe books¹⁵ and asked to select recipes they felt comfortable reproducing. Recipe choice was primarily influenced by the cost of ingredients, availability of kitchen space and materials as well as cooking experience. Most students chose simple recipes that involved honey and sesame seeds with the result that visitors were left with the impression that Roman food was often quite sweet. Although all the ingredients used were historically accurate (from the perspective that all were available for purchase during the Roman period) the emphasis on sweet tasting foods is more a reflection on the cost, popularity and availability of modern foodstuffs than ancient diet. Both honey and sesame seeds, for example, would have been expensive goods (sesame was imported into Italy from Egypt or India)¹⁶ and thus not widely available or frequently consumed. This information was passed on to visitors whenever possible.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the other strong and memorable taste present on the “Table of Deliciae” was garlic. Erica Rowan prepared a rustic peasant dish called *moretum*, known by way of a 1st century AD poem of the same name. The dip, accompanied by bread, is composed primarily of cheese (Pecorino Romano in modern recipes) and enormous amounts of raw garlic. In modern popular culture, Roman food is associated with strong pungent tastes, and even in antiquity, strong garlicky flavors were believed to be reserved for peasants and gladiators. Despite the strong smell of garlic coming from the table and a gentle warning as to its strength, most visitors were willing to taste the dip and greatly enjoyed it. Similar to the honey and sesame, the popularity of the garlic reveals somewhat more about contemporary food preferences and ingredient familiarity than actual consumption practices taking place in the Roman world. However, unlike the sweet foods, the modern perception of garlic, as an old and traditional food, as opposed to the more recent rise of sugar consumption (often

15 Grant (1999); Dalby/Grainger (2000).

16 Cappers (2006) 125.

popularized in the media), seemed to allow visitors to more easily conceptualize Roman diet.

Bread of Devon, a local family-owned bakery made the bread served on the *Table of Deliciae*. Erica Rowan provided the bakers with two Roman recipes: a spelt loaf and a 50/50 spelt and whole wheat loaf with a layer of cheddar cheese in-between. The bakers were looking forward to trying the new



Fig. 5: Roman Bread

recipes and attempted to use traditional methods whenever possible [Fig. 5]. Brochures for the bakery were placed next to the bread display and could be taken by visitors. As the table was run by staff and students from the University of Exeter, the incorporation of local food producers helped

make the event about Exeter, and thus about *Isca*

Dumnoniorum as a whole rather than simply a university event. Moreover, it allowed visitors to reflect upon the differences between home cooked food and large scale production in both the modern and ancient world. In ancient Rome, people would have purchased bread from a bakery or stall on the street and only the wealthiest homes had their own ovens.

Last Preparations

Yet before we could open our park we of course had to make sure that potential visitors were made aware of it! Sabrina Mittermeier therefore became our “marketing manager”. First, she created two official Social Media channels for IscaPark – a Facebook page and a Twitter handle (@IscaPark), invited interested friends and scholars to “like” and “follow”, and coordinated the marketing efforts with the Being Human team. We came up with several ideas on how to keep the marketing for the park lively in the weeks leading up to its opening. We used our mascots, the rubber ducks – by now an armada of the squeaky creatures – and followed them on

their adventures around Exeter. They visited with some of our helpers at the University, but were also spotted having a coffee on campus, and we even



Fig. 6: Mascot on tour

had a “correspondent” at the Munich Oktoberfest [Fig. 6]. Further, we used our social media channels, as well as an entry published on the Exeter Humanities Blog,¹⁷ to educate our visitors about the Roman history of Exeter and the significance of IscaPark’s theming – and of course also about the relevance of the Being Human festival, which also coordinated an impressive marketing campaign all over the country. It was fascinating to see how many diverse events were taking place, and how much creativity was put into them – IscaPark was indeed in good company! In the days leading up to the event, our social media channels were full of pictures of our preparations – our followers could see how everything was coming into shape. Ariane Schwarz had drawn a detailed park map that visitors would receive when entering IscaPark and could also study it now upfront online. Erica Rowan presented us with some of the beautiful – and delicious! – Roman breads she had made for the Table of Deliciae, which we of course just had to try right away. Ariane Schwarz and Sabrina Mittermeier had travelled to Exeter a few days before the opening of IscaPark to get everything ready, and we were excited to share it all with our followers. Soon the day would be here!

The Inauguration

And then, on November 14, 2015, on a rather rainy day – Exeter *is* located in the southwest of England, after all – IscaPark finally opened its doors for the first (and until now, last) time. Entering the library, visitors received a map of our park, a description of the attractions, the rules of the game, and a character for the role game [Fig. 7]: would they be Sophie Breckenridge, a local senior citizen enjoying some time with her grandchildren, Carson

¹⁷ <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/humanities/2015/11/23/iscapark/>.

Daley, a famous journalist writing a report on popular culture and on theme parks, or another one of our 16 profiles? We encouraged people to experience the park in groups so they would have to “negotiate” the budget and the goals of the individual characters and thus reflect on various topics: for instance, on how a theme park, often thought of as a “fun place” without “intellectual” implication, is actually a significant cultural and commercial institution; on how the space of a theme park is designed so as to make visitors move in certain patterns; and on how time – real time, represented time, perceived time, bodily time, the time of the day and time of the year – is present at every corner, conditioning the visit.¹⁸

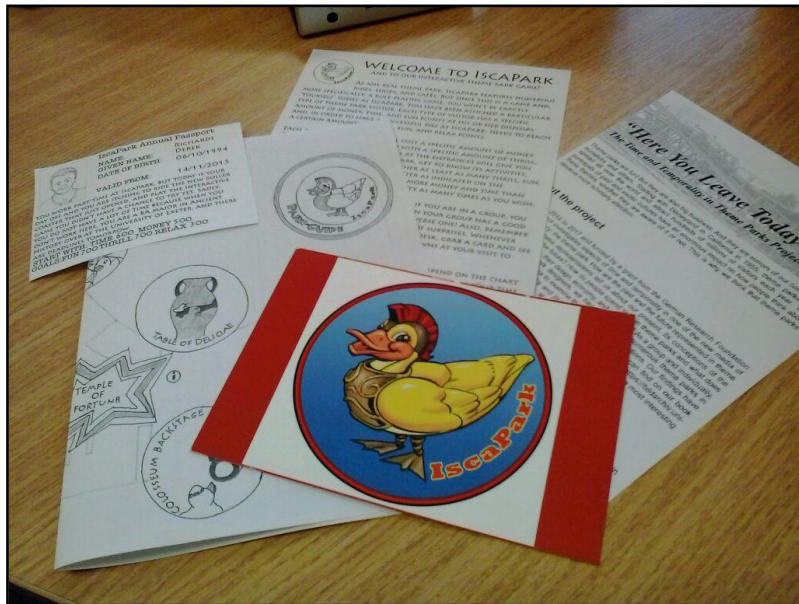


Fig. 7: role game

Besides the “Table of the Deliciae” and Erica’s pub quiz, the two most popular attractions with the longest wait times soon proved to be “Roman Duck Hunt” and “Lostus and Foundus”, which were both set up in the library’s children’s area. Here, young – and young-at-heart – Romans could play and learn about Roman history at the same time. At the Roman duck

18 On this from a scholarly perspective, see now Carlà/Freitag/Mittermeier/Schwarz (2016a).

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hunt, visitors had to catch IscaPark's mascots to win a price, while at Lostus and Foundus, they could "excavate" some ancient objects – and then had to determine which of them actually came from Roman times. To help staff all of our attractions, the five of us were joined by Marta, Erica's students, the student ambassadors (Laura Burgess, Megan Dyson, Liv Hildebrand, and Meghan Hopkins), and the colleagues and friends who, very willingly (Sharon Marshall, also from the Department of Classics and Ancient History of the University of Exeter) or much less so (Christian Uhin, Filippo's husband), were dressed in Roman costumes and animated IscaPark. The over 700 guests who visited our park were thus confronted in their daily present with a represented past, could learn about the exciting research field of theme park studies, and were encouraged reflect on an experience, such as a theme park visit, that many of them actually already had had in the past.

Like other immersive spaces with a didactic component (e.g. living history museums), then, IscaPark sought to offer historical knowledge to a broad public in an affective, playful manner. Unlike these spaces, however, our park also invited visitors to reflect on the medium – in this case, theme parks – itself. Indeed, through their evaluation forms, which we later thoroughly analyzed, visitors revealed that they had learned not only a lot about Roman culture, particularly food culture, and that they had had an amazing day, but also that IscaPark had the power to "make you actually think what a theme park is, and that it is actually a construction". We could not have wished for more!

Further Reading

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: The IscaPark logo.

Fig. 2: Composition with an IscaPark balloon © Paola Bassino.

Fig. 3: “Epona’s Carousel” © Sabrina Mittermeier.

Fig. 4: “Table of Deliciae” © Sabrina Mittermeier.

Fig. 5: Bread from Bread of Devon, baked for the “Table of Deliciae” © Sabrina Mittermeier.

Fig. 6: “Duckus Bavaricus” © Sabrina Mittermeier.

Fig. 7: The material provided to the visitors © Filippo Carlà-Uhink.