
Reviewing Dr. Seuss



The Dr. Seuss Experience, Mississauga, Ontario.
Photograph by Naomi Hamer, 2019.

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Dr. Seuss has been a hot topic in the news last month regarding racist representations in his picture-books. This has sparked the question: what do we do with problematic children's texts? For the purposes of my research, I take this question further and ask: what do we do with remediations of these problematic children's texts? I propose increasing awareness of the responsibility in physical spaces that appeal to children with a focus on: "The Cat in the Hat" Ride at Universal Studios' Seuss Landing in Orlando, Florida, "The Amazing World of Dr. Seuss Museum" in Seuss's hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts, as well as the "Dr. Seuss Experience" pop-up in Mississauga.

Firstly, let's take a look at what the terms remediation and cultural discourse mean. I use cultural discourse because I look into what these remediations are doing, and to what extent they perpetuate the discourses of their original picture-book texts. This is an argument largely inspired by Dr. Naomi Hamer's research in her article titled "The Design and Development of the Picture Book for Mobile and Interactive Platforms." If the original discourses are problematic, then their remediations only perpetuate these same issues and thus contribute to even more problematic cultural discourses (since cultural discourse also includes "events"—but these spaces could just as easily be categorized under a "system of communication practices" (Carbaugh 169).) I argue then that each space is indeed a remediation of Dr. Seuss' picture-books, although each to varying degrees.

"The Cat in the Hat" Ride at Universal Studios' Seuss Landing is perhaps the most distinctive example of remediation. The ride literally takes you through the story from the picture-book with animatronic Cat in the Hats, fish, and Thing Ones and Twos. It's clear that the ride refashions the picture-book discourse into new media (with animatronics, voice-overs, etc.). But, the Springfield Museum does too. In order to engage young museum go-ers, the museum includes structures from the narratives themselves like: Thing One and Two's fun-in-a-box where children can climb inside, a refashioned wump (which is Dr. Seuss's camel-like animal with multiple bumps) where kids can also sit, as well as a Lorax setting with the Lorax himself and his truffula trees all around. Even though it's a museum, the design refashions much of Dr.

Seuss's picture-books in multiple mediums to bring them to life for kids as they explore. And finally, we have "The Dr. Seuss Experience" in Mississauga where similar remediations from the museum and theme-park are at play. In each case, not only are remediations and such remediated effects as their cultural discourse represented, but the spaces do this through a number of factors. In each space, I look into the similarities, differences, and to what extent each factor such as: marketing, theatricality, and user experience (such as the extent of engagement or active participation) influences the space.

In analyzing these spaces as well as parsing out to what extent they have already considered such factors, I suggest adding a consideration: cultural responsibility. These spaces are undoubtedly contributing to the perpetuation of problematic discourses that are already prevalent in their original source texts—the picture-books themselves. As such, they are failing to consider the cultural ramifications of perpetuating these problematic discourses. And so, I believe that they must consider their own cultural responsibility.

Remediations, in their nature, value marketing. They want to know that what they are creating will sell. Dr. Seuss sells to children. But what message are we sending with this fact? These spaces implicitly perpetuate a narrative that discourages diversity since their source-texts stem from these same problems of race representation. Crucially they're doing so by leaving out issues of race or leaving them completely unidentified, hidden, or even denied. A New York Times review of the Springfield Museum, for instance, points out that "It completely overlooks Mr. Geisel's anti-Japanese cartoons from World War II" (Deb "At the Dr. Seuss Museum: Oh the Places they Don't Go!").

I do not argue that these spaces should be removed altogether. Instead, I argue that they should re-consider which source texts they remediate in the future. With existing remediations, they should demonstrate a knowledge of the racist past of some of Dr. Seuss's work. This is what I call cultural responsibility: do not erase, ignore, or invalidate the racism that exists. Instead, recognize it for what it is—show the audience, participants, readers, and general public that racism is not being swept under the rug because it's uncomfortable or because it involves children. In Philip Nel's *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?*, he argues that, "Attempts to erase racism are interesting failures, displacing and refiguring ideologies of race" (Nel 67) because "If we exclude troubling literary works from the discussion, then children will face pain, bigotry, and sorrow on their own" (Nel 71).

I leave you with a quote that stuck with me as I began researching this topic: "Adults often fail to acknowledge the racism in beloved books, toys, films, or

games from their childhoods because doing so would complicate their affective relationship with their memories” (Nel 22). People think recognizing the problems in their beloved childhood texts and experiences means that their memories are also problematic. This isn’t the case. You can still have good memories with these texts and recognize their problematic discourses today.

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