

Designing dark tourism experiences: An exploration of edutainment
interpretation at lighter dark visitor attractions

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Abstract

Existing dark tourism literature has explored various aspects of interpretation, including challenges in balancing interpretation efforts with concerns for historical accuracy, and managing ethical issues with interpreting past tragedies for packaged tourism purposes. However, research appears under-developed concerning the influences on the design of interpretation at dark visitor attractions, particularly those considered *lighter* due to their edutainment agenda. This paper thus critically explores the influences on the design of edutainment interpretation at three lighter dark visitor attractions, which are introduced as new attractions for study within dark tourism research. It also discusses the findings achieved that not only contribute to the study's conclusions and recommendations for future research in the realms of dark tourism and interpretation, but also contribute to enhancing interpretation design understanding for both dark tourism research and practice.

Keywords: Interpretation design; Edutainment; Lighter dark visitor attractions; Dark tourism

Introduction

Dark tourism is generally referred to as an act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre (Stone, 2006, p. 146). Now a widespread and diverse area within the tourism industry (Hooper, 2017), dark tourism has become used as an analytical lens to promote academic discussion relating to interpretation and issues of mixing leisure and entertainment with commemoration and tragedy (Dunkley, 2017). Yet, research remains challenged by the range of interdisciplinary studies that offer divergent perspectives on the management and operations of dark tourism activities, specifically interpretation (Jamal & Lelo, 2011; Stone, 2013).

Supporting the topic of this special issue and the broader exploration of how dark tourism experiences are created, this paper explores the influences on the design of edutainment interpretation within dark tourism. Although past publications have addressed interpretation within dark tourism and the issues and challenges underpinning it, much of these publications have largely focused on dark visitor attractions (DVAs) of the darkest nature— those that represent modern tragedies through commemorative and educational agendas (Wyatt, 2019). The preference given to darker DVAs has consequently developed a lack of attention given to DVAs situated at the lighter end of Stone's (2006) Darkness Spectrum. These lighter DVAs, or rather LDVAs, are recognised for their higher tourism infrastructure and commercially driven, edutainment agenda— an interpretation approach that uses innovative and engaging methods to create experiences that are both educational and entertaining (Wyatt, 2019). Although edutainment has been criticised for its use within dark tourism, some studies have demonstrated an overwhelming visitor preference for mixing education with fun in dark tourism experiences (Ivanova & Light, 2018). Thus, by exploring the influences on the design of edutainment interpretation within dark tourism, this paper enhances dark tourism research and understanding relating to the diversity of LDVAs, their interpretation, and the use of edutainment agendas within dark tourism.

Dark tourism, interpretation and edutainment

Dark tourism is a highly complex and multidimensional phenomenon involving visits to real and recreated places associated with death, suffering, misfortune, and the seemingly

macabre (Fonseca et al., 2016; Stone, 2006). Growing exponentially over the last twenty-five years, dark tourism has become an increasingly significant component of the wider heritage tourism industry. However, noting its perceived exploitation and trivialisation of historic tragedies, scholars have suggested dark tourism is, in practice, beset with ethical and management challenges (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Dalton, 2015). Still, as a catalyst for emotional values and knowledge enrichment (Kim & Butler, 2015), dark tourism can offer audiences opportunities to connect with difficult pasts through interpretation.

As an informational and inspirational process designed to enhance understanding, appreciation and conservation of heritage assets (Beck & Cable, 2002), interpretation is an essential component for all visitor experiences. Grounded in the art of storytelling (Cater et al., 2015; Weaver, 1982), Smith (2016) argues interpretation is charged with the task of enhancing visitor understanding through thought-provoking displays that encourage visitors to be less passive in their visits. Key to interpretation, and subsequently the overall visitor experience, is the interpretation design (Roberts, 2014), which communicates interpretive plans into a tangible form (Woodward, 2009). Within dark tourism, interpretation offers visitors emotional, educational and/or entertaining experiences, where they can connect their memories, knowledge, and interests with the history and heritage on display (Kavanagh, 1996). Although some dark tourism experiences are morally contested, the ultimate goal of their interpretation design is to communicate the significance and meaning of heritage to visitors (Grimwade & Carter, 2000), and allow them to utilise their understandings of the past in order to make sense of their visitor experience (Kidd, 2011).

The discourse concerning dark tourism experiences has led to an acknowledgement of the wide range of DVAs. As the physical manifestations of historic death and tragedy, whether in-situ or purposefully constructed, DVAs often occur as a result of the intentional exploitation of dark heritage through tourism activities underpinned by a strategically designed interpretation (Tarlow, 2005). In highlighting the fact that DVAs often render ideological agendas that are intertwined with interpretation and meaning, Stone (2018) suggests they help to reveal the idiosyncrasies of social histories that can provoke feelings of anxiety, remorse, empathy, or fear. Yet, as large memory vessels, DVAs can provide

cathartic, commemorative, or educational experiences that help society to cope with past tragedies, as well as endorse feelings of shock, thrill, and even enjoyment through edutainment agendas. Although the use of edutainment within dark tourism is a contentious topic, Santonen and Faber (2015) suggest it can provide benefits of increased visitor motivation, retention, and active learning. Because of this, edutainment has become a preferred technique within the wider heritage tourism industry.

As the amalgamation of educational and cultural activities with the commercialisation and technology of the entertainment world (Hannigan, 1998), edutainment is fundamentally grounded in the notion that learning can be fun. It has been further described as both 'entertainment that educates' and 'education that informs and entertains' (Ron & Timothy, 2013). This concept of linking education with entertainment is traditionally associated with the work of Walt Disney. In observing existing amusement parks as meaningless, outmoded, and lacking any form of educational contribution, Disney developed and popularised the practice of theming (Oren & Shani, 2012), which Åstrøm (2020) suggests is an extension to set design and may be viewed as a staging process that unifies education, entertainment and technology through strategic organisation and structure. Thus, if edutainment is the agenda, then theming is the method.

Scholars have suggested the commercial success of Disney's themed environments and the need to overcome increasing challenges of art shock and visitor fatigue led museums to become the first heritage tourism sector to adopt theming and assimilate education with entertainment in practice (Hannigan, 1998; Hertzman, 2006; King, 1991). As a less didactic and informal method, theming, coupled with storytelling and technology, has been observed as an effective way to focus visitor attention, while maintaining their interest, in order to foster a deeper learning experience (Oren & Shani, 2012; Ron & Timothy, 2013). Since, theming has been shown to provide added value to an array of visitor experiences (Hannigan, 1998), further contributing to the transformation of many heritage attractions into ideal edutainment tourism products (Hertzman, Anderson & Rowley, 2008). Thus, Disney's legacy in relation to other sectors, including dark tourism, is his incorporation of

storytelling, technological advancements, education and entertainment, customer service, and a recognition of consumers' changing consumption habits (Shani & Logan, 2010).

Despite the success of edutainment within the wider heritage tourism industry, much of dark tourism research criticises it and the 'Disney Effect' that has infiltrated dark tourism practice (Dalton, 2015; Isaac & Çakmak, 2014; Stone, 2009a). Although some scholars have questioned whether edutainment is a sufficient and/or appropriate form of interpretation (Dunkley, 2017; Hooper, 2017), others have argued it provides a framework that, through effective thematic storytelling, helps to create meaningful experiences that resonate with visitors even after they leave a location (Heidelberg, 2015; Oren & Shani, 2012). Regardless of research opinions, dark tourism edutainment experiences have risen in popularity in recent years (Heidelberg, 2015) with an increasing number of attractions and tours, such as the Dungeons experiences and commercial ghost tours. The popularity of these attractions is arguably connected to the commercialisation of dark tourism themes, despite the macabre undertones (Bristow & Jenkins, 2020). Still, the growing interest in seeking out scary experiences for pleasure has developed an expanding market of LDVA attractions, and thus becoming an international phenomenon (Bristow & Jenkins, 2020; Holloway, 2010).

Generally associated with LDVAs, dark tourism edutainment experiences are delivered through either a heritage-centric approach that seeks to educate and create appreciation of dark heritage (e.g. Eden Camp, Tallinn Legends, Gettysburg, Colonial Williamsburg), or a fun-centric approach that seeks to shock and thrill audiences (e.g. Edinburgh Dungeons, London Ghost Bus Tour, Jack the Ripper Tour). Both approaches rely on theming and storytelling in order to create an understanding of the history among visitors (Ron & Timothy, 2013). However, research has demonstrated LDVAs are largely criticised as insignificant amusements that sanitise historical truths through narrative softening and omission and whitewashing the environment (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008; Silverman, 2011; Stone, 2006). In response, others have argued that through edutainment, LDVAs actually educate visitors and fulfil curiosities about darker histories of the more distant past through

raw and realistic representations (Magee & Gilmore, 2015; Rodriguez-Garcia, 2012; Welch, 2016).

Despite the academic interest, both research and understanding are under-developed in relation to the range of edutainment experiences within dark tourism, or rather the diversity of LDVAs, and how these experiences are designed and managed over time. This is predominantly due to the issue that few publications have explored LDVAs (e.g. Gentry, 2007; Holloway, 2010; Ivanova & Light, 2018; McEvoy, 2016; Powell & Iankova, 2016; Rodriguez-Garcia, 2012), which is largely a consequence of the continued research attention directed towards the darkest forms of DVAs. The reasoning for this oversight is unclear. However, Ivanova and Light (2018) suggest it may be that scholars perceive the darkest DVAs as more deserving of academic scrutiny, as they raise broader questions relating to commodification and authenticity when compared to LDVAs. Yet, considering the critical views and discourse that surrounds LDVAs, it would be reasonable for research to give them greater attention in order to answer questions relating to their commodification and authenticity.

Further complicating the under-development of LDVA research, past publications have largely relied on ghost tour experiences, the London Dungeons, and Jack the Ripper tours, consequently discouraging the recognition of LDVA diversity. What is more, research on LDVAs and their edutainment interpretation has become fragmented by studies that have explored individual underpinning nuances of interpretation, such as selectivity and narrative development (Spaul & Wilbert, 2017; Watson, 2018); exhibition presentation (Rätz, 2006; Wight & Lennon, 2007); issues with authenticity (Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014); and the role of tour guides in interpreting sensitive histories (Potter, 2016; Quinn & Ryan, 2016). Although these publications have contributed to an awareness of interpretation within dark tourism, they largely report on specific methods and ethical concerns. As a result, the influences and practical processes of interpretation or designing an edutainment experience for LDVAs remains under-analysed. Given the fact that interpretation design blurs the boundaries of exhibition, object display, and the visitor environment, resulting in an immersive and multisensory experience (Roberts, 2015;

Woodward, 2009), it would seem important for dark tourism research to create a better understanding for how and why an experience is designed in the way that it is. In doing so, new light may be shed on the LDVA experience, thereby demonstrating how these products support visitor understanding and meaningful experiences.

Methodology and methods

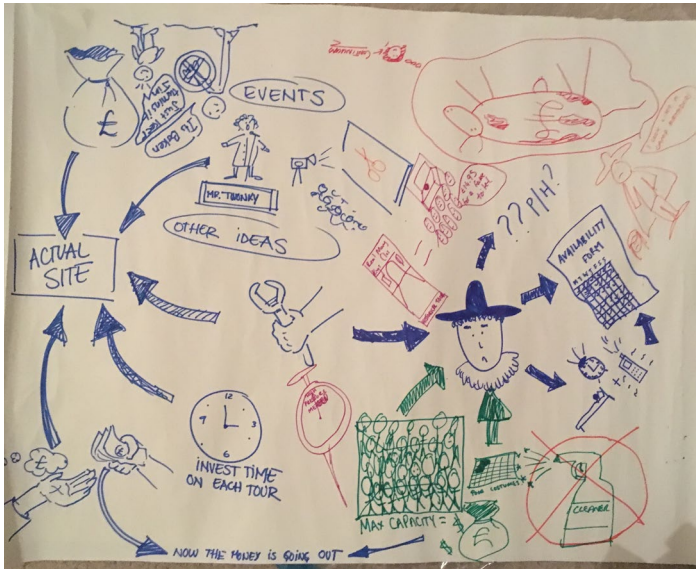
Underpinned by an interpretative perspective, this qualitative, exploratory research was grounded in the subjects of heritage tourism, dark tourism, and interpretation in order to expand knowledge on the design of edutainment interpretation within dark tourism. In particular, it used three LDVAs that were associated with pre-19th century history, specifically the plague– a biological disaster, dubbed ‘the great mortality’, that swept across Europe from the mid-14th to the late-17th century (Platt, 2014), claiming to have killed more people than any other single known historical event (Beaumont, 2014) and is exceeded only by WWII in terms of devastation, human suffering and loss of life (Kelly, 2006). This criteria were selected because when compared to other historical tragedies, research remains underdeveloped in relation to the interpretation of pre-19th century tragedies (e.g. plague, Medieval torture, crime and punishment, persecution, witch burning, etc.). Although the London Dungeon and ghost tours have been the focus of previous publications (see e.g. Hovi, 2008; Ivanova & Light, 2018; Stone, 2009), these studies are predominantly visitor-focused, or are set within the wider realm of heritage tourism studies.

Data collection was completed at three different LDVAs, identified through purposive sampling– The Real Mary King’s Close (RMKC) in Edinburgh, the Sick to Death museum (S2D) in Chester, and the Gravedigger Ghost Tour (GGT) in Dublin. As an in-situ attraction (RMKC), a static museum (S2D), and a bus tour (GGT), these LDVAs were used as example representations of the wider range of LDVAs not yet explored in dark tourism research. They each presented an interpretation design using edutainment, which aimed to educate, provoke and engage audiences through a variety of methods (e.g. self-guided tours, character re-enactment, exhibitions, set dressings, innovative technologies) about the harsh realities of 16th – 18th century life, and, in particular, the plague. These three LDVAs were used since, to date, they had not previously been used in research. In addition, three

LDVAs were used as the literature has been widely conducted through descriptive, and often single, case study approaches (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Ioannides, Halkier, & Lew, 2014; Leask, 2016).

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, of which informed consent for participation and use of job titles was confirmed and obtained. These methods were selected given their preferred use in dark tourism research (Light, 2017; Wight, 2006) and also, that they often lead to a breadth of commentary and analysis, as well as opportunities for transferability (Goulding & Domic, 2009; Korstanje, 2018). Yet, in order to shed new light on current understanding and contribute to existing discourse, rich picture building (RPB) was also used during the focus group sessions. RPB, illustrated in Figure 1, is a data collecting tool used during focus group sessions to help develop discussion and aid participants in expressing, through pictorial representation, their emotions, perceptions, and conflicted understandings about a topic (Ho, 2015). Thus, RPB is seen as a beneficial tool for evoking and recording insight into social situations (Bell & Morse, 2013b). Although RPB can be weakened by a lacking central theme, an overabundance of written words, and inadequate use of colour, its benefit of aiding problem solving and creative thinking has led it to become a useful technique, particularly in the social and behavioural sciences, because humans are thought to communicate more easily through impressions and symbols than words (Bell & Morse, 2013b). Although a tool for exploring social issues and situations, RPB has not previously been used in dark tourism research. Thus, its introduction and use in this study is a key contribution to both dark tourism research and practice.

Figure 1: Rich Picture



Data collection was carried out through twelve semi-structured interviews across the three LDVAs and included managers and designers that were involved with the design of the interpretation. The interview questions were drawn from the literature that discussed interpretation and design processes. According to the literature, influences on interpretation can include stakeholder roles; experience with designing interpretation; personal preferences; space; access limitations; authenticity concerns; conservation; the budget; and timeframe (Brochu, 2003; Jones, 2007; Knudsen et al., 1995; Roberts, 2015).

Focus group sessions using RPB were also conducted at each LDVA with staff/guides. The decision to include the staff/guides in the data collection was based on the literature, which argued they are the mediators of meaning and the interface between an attraction and its visitors, charged with the responsibility of promoting the interpretation (Bryon, 2012). Due to the LDVAs' size and time in operation, two focus groups, each of five guides, were conducted at RMKC, while one focus group of three guides was conducted at GGT and one focus group of two staff members was conducted at S2D. The focus groups were asked to consider the prompt: *What is your perception of the design and management of interpretation at your attraction?* The prompt was derived from the literature, which suggested guides are constantly making judgments about how an interpretation design is working for audiences (Potter, 2016). The staff/guides were therefore able to provide first-

hand perspectives on how the interpretation design was working for the visitor experience. Using coloured markers and poster paper, the participants were asked to consider the prompt and then collectively draw, in pictorial form, their personal perspectives and opinions about their attraction's interpretation, how it was designed, currently managed, challenges because of the design, and any solutions for overcoming those challenges. These sessions also included group discussions that further contributed to the pictorial representations.

The findings of this research were analysed through thematic analysis, which helps to identify, analyse and interpret themes within collected qualitative data, and capture relevant and significant meaning in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The interview and focus group recordings were transcribed by the author and manually analysed using line-by-line coding in relation to their corresponding LDVA, considering each maintains a distinct purpose, thereby employing different methods for interpretation. The analysis of the rich pictures followed Bell and Morse's (2013a) suggestion of applying Carney's (1994) seven-step process for critiquing art. The decision to use this analysis method is grounded in the belief that it merges formal analysis with interpretation (Bell & Morse, 2013a). By looking at the stylistic features of the pictures, one can better understand the participants' aims and goals, what the participants put into the overall picture and therefore deem as important, and the relationship of the drawings to past and future issues (Carney, 1994). Thus, the pictures were analysed for both their content and context, which allowed for an interpretation of meaning, revealing that the pictures were not narrowly focused, but rather encompassed numerous topics underpinning the LDVAs' businesses, which impact or are impacted by the design and management of the interpretation.

Findings and discussion: Influences on edutainment interpretation

To add to the influences earlier mentioned and as discussed in the following, three additional factors were identified as being influential on the LDVAs edutainment interpretation: pop-culture references, the nature of the content, and other attractions and competition.

Pop-culture references

The findings for this study revealed several pop-culture references were highly influential on the LDVAs' edutainment designs. These include horror movies of the 1980s and the book series and TV show, *Horrible Histories*, which, aimed at 8+ year olds (Berenbroek, 2013), pushes moral boundaries in its blending of satirical imagery and performances with horrible and unfortunate histories of various historical periods from the Egyptians to the Victorians (Scanlon, 2011). Challenging the elitist nature of school history programmes that tend to overlook the lives of ordinary people, *Horrible Histories* is a commentary on the way in which history has been remembered, further arguing that history is merely a version of someone's perspective (Scanlon, 2011). This attitude is shared by S2D's Director, who explained that when designing S2D's interpretation, he wanted to break from the conformities of high-brow institutional thinking and create an interpretation that was unapologetic in its delivery of raw and provoking displays. Inspired by the *Horrible Histories* use of irreverent humour and preoccupation with unpleasant and gory historical accounts (Scanlon, 2011), S2D's Director defined the experience as a union of science, history, and the fun style of *Horrible Histories*. S2D's interpretation was thus designed to encompass gross-out factors, sensory stimulation and hands-on activities that promoted informal learning experiences. Some visitors may be shocked by the image of a disembowelled hanging man used to reflect the internal effects of the plague, or the smells and sounds of a man suffering from either dysentery or intestinal worms. However, the Director explained,

When people are shocked by the displays, they're usually like 'what is this about?' Here, we provoke learning. We're not going to *not* do something just because people might be offended.

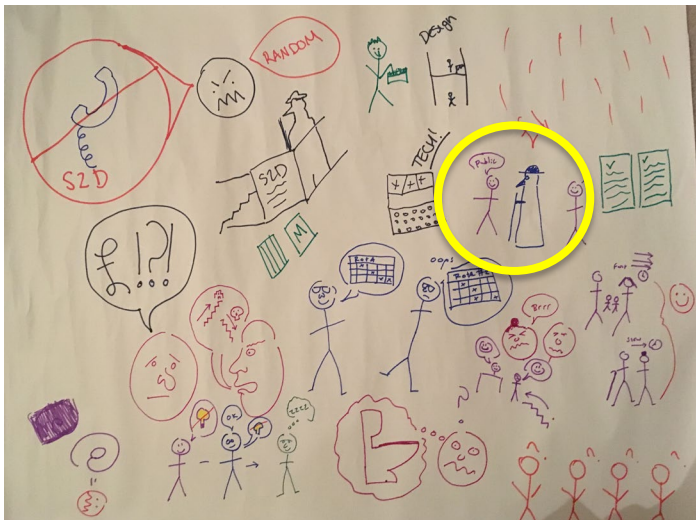
(S2D, Director)

This explanation of provoking visitors is underpinned with an intention to provoke curiosity, questions, and subsequently learning. The Director explained that some of the displays are shocking, but in a fun-science way. For example, he described an initial exhibit of a giant anus that visitors could remove fistulas from while learning about diseases and complications of the bowel. He also had plans to create a green screen exhibit where

visitors could place themselves into a burial procession while learning about changes in burial processes throughout history.

In their focus group, the S2D staff suggested the museum was saturated with learning experiences and could actually do more to enhance the entertainment side of the design. Drawing a plague doctor, as illustrated in Figure 2, one staff member argued that most visitors ask why there are no character actors. In fact, it was agreed that most visitors seem disappointed with the experience because of this. When asked why S2D does not use character actors, the Head of Operations explained it was due to a lack of space, staff and funding. However, they do use a plague doctor and Medieval surgeon actors for school groups or during special events. In place of actors, another staff member suggested the museum could have more hands-on activities and sensory stimulation to enhance the experience.

Figure 2: S2D Rich Picture



Comparably, GGT's tour was also influenced by the *Horrible Histories* series. According to the Manager, the delivery of the tour's narrative was designed to be very much tongue-in-cheek, similar to the *Horrible Histories* satirical style. The Manager commented that they always get people on the tour expecting it to be scary because of how the bus looks and instead they find themselves laughing at a foul-mouthed plague victim spitting in their

hair and making boorish jokes. The staff echoed this, stating that they often get people leaving saying that they didn't expect they were going to laugh so much. Thus, the staff described the tour as a theatre on wheels, poking fun at Dublin's suffering from the plague's devastation, along with other macabre histories. Commenting on the tour's treatment of history and use of terrible toilet humour, the Manager explained that the narrative is based on facts drawn from thorough research into Dublin's macabre history. The Manager further explained that while the tour's interpretation is heavily driven by entertainment values, it does seek to educate visitors about the macabre history of Dublin. This echoes the informal learning objectives of the *Horrible Histories* series, which further demonstrates the close associations between it and GGT.

The majority of the GGT tour relies on the performance abilities of the actors, while the bus and its aesthetic design are themed under the inspiration of schlocky horror movies from the 1980s. Equipped with fake skeletons, ambient lighting and stylised hard foam, the lower deck of GGT's bus was designed to resemble a crypt, which visitors must pass through to reach the top deck that is fashioned with blackout curtains, coloured lights, strobe effects, and fake bones for hand-rails. Both the Manager and Designer emphasised the significance of the film *Evil Dead* as having been influential on the entire tour, including the style of acting and makeup. Speaking of the overall feeling and atmosphere for the tour, they explained that the film and score of *Jaws* was highly influential. Explaining the significance of sound design, the Designer stated,

Sound design is a huge thing. Look at something like *Jaws*– it is cool, certainly not as scary. But that iconic sound builds the tension.

(GGT, Designer)

Creating the right atmosphere and building the tension was incredibly important for GGT. One staff member explained many people on their tour do not speak English fluently and can have a hard time understanding their accent. Therefore, the actors often have to rely on their own animation and the special effects to help build tension and create a memorable experience.

On the topic of building tension, the Manager explained that in his experience he had found no one wants to be scared for too long. Referring again to horror movies, he explained there are points in movies where the audience laughs and points where they are scared, but the aim is to find the right balance. This was echoed in the focus group, where the actors suggested it is not about doing too much of either— comedy or scare. Rather, it is about finding the right moment to scare. They explained,

The whole thing is very basic when you think about in terms of scare attractions. Everyone uses the jump scare, and they use it because it works, even in cinema. But this sort of ‘easy scare’ isn’t really all that easy because it is all about timing and putting people in the right atmosphere, and then it is funny.

(GGT, Actor 1)

It is all about making people feel at ease, making it funny, and then scaring them. Or making them feel uneasy and not scaring them, and then it is just the effect. I use the example of creating the atmosphere like in a movie where it’s really intense, but then the scare is just a cat.

(GGT, Actor 2)

The actors’ discussions about the effect of jump scares corresponds with the thinking of early horror films, such as *Psycho*. As Alfred Hitchcock once said, there is no terror in the bang, only the anticipation of it (Skov & Andersen, 2001). Yet, as the tour was not intended to be overly scary, there was an importance in finding the right balance between scare and comedy. The actors explained, in order to make it fun and entertaining, and to prevent mass hysteria, there needs to be an element of relief through comedy and satire.

The nature of the content

Understandably, the findings also revealed that the nature of the content was an influence on the LDVAs edutainment interpretation. Unlike darker DVAs that require a sense of gravity in their retelling of more modern tragedies, the temporal distance between the present day and the historical events of the plague have allowed for the LDVAs to take on a more light-hearted approach. On this topic, GGT’s Manager explained their use of comedy for this history is justified because,

It was a shared tragedy and it happened absolutely everywhere. To be honest, most people's ways of dealing with something horrific is to joke about it. Sometimes the only way you can engage people is to disguise it as entertainment, so they learn something without realising they've actually learned.

(GGT, Manager)

It is apparent that there were no concerns relating to the nature of the content and the need to be sensitive in its delivery. GGT's Manager supported this by explaining they were not creating a museum piece. Therefore, there was no obligation to be sensitive towards the history. The edutainment purpose of the tour is the reason why it was designed like a set for a horror movie. To further elaborate, one actor explained that the main character is a nameless plague victim, removing any onus to someone's memory. On developing the main character of the tour, he commented,

The plague was spread over hundreds of years. We did research, but because it wasn't specific to a period, we weren't dealing with a specific character or a specific time, it opened the character up to be whatever we wanted.

(GGT, Actor)

Yet, the Manager stated they were careful not to push certain boundaries too far. Acknowledging that they talk about horrific events, the Manager explained that they do it in a way that is not necessarily horrific. He commented,

We are not gory for the sense of gore, or for shock tactics. People are perfectly capable of going to that place themselves. It's not necessary. Some of the stories we tell, like of the Dolocher, are horrific, but we tell them in such a way that you get the story. It would be so easy to be gory with things that are horrendous, but we don't. We let it sit and you can go as far into it as you want.

(GGT, Manager)

Comparably, the nature of the content was also an influence on RMKC's interpretation, and in similar fashion, the design was not created for shock tactics. Rather, the CEO explained that prior to coming under the ownership of Continuum Attractions, RMKC had been operating as a ghost tour that claimed people with the plague had been bricked up and left to die. Research proved this to be untrue; and wanting to correct the mangled history

in order to create a fact-based experience that would educate their guests about the real history of life on the Closes, their focus became presenting a story that would deliver accurate information while debunking the myths. Still, recognising the commercial viability of popular public assumptions relating to the ghostly atmosphere of RMKC, the CEO stated,

We are not supported by external funding. Therefore, we do use terms like 'deep beneath the streets' or 'deep beneath your feet.' The script is factually correct, but we can't get away from people leaving thinking it was spooky. So, are we playing to it? We are using it to get people in, but we are certainly not deceiving them when they come through.

(RMKC, CEO)

Contributing to this discussion, the Head of Development explained that when taking on RMKC, they knew they had a set of stories that could be difficult to handle due to the nature of the history. However, they maintained the perspective that it was a just part of history. Therefore, certain elements that they added to the physical design, like the vomit bucket in the plague room, which was fitted with a smell pod that emits a vomit scent, was not meant to create a darker or more horrific experience. Rather, it was to create a real and fact-based experience that was true to the history. In agreement, the General Manager explained,

The facts about Edinburgh are scarier than the fiction that people make up. We are telling Edinburgh's story, and Edinburgh's story is a lot more intriguing, dark and uncomfortable than any of the best Stephen King or Clive Barker stories. We bring that to life.

(RMKC, General Manager)

It is clear that the narrative was written to deliver fact-based information, and according to the Designer and General Manager, less was more in terms of the set dressing. The furniture and props used were researched for likeness to what would have been used in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Designer explained they relied on the ambient lighting and sensory effects to help bring the story to life.

However, in discussing the added elements of lights, the staff voiced concerns over the placement of some lights and the use of coloured lights. For example, one staff member stated,

I understand the intent of the coloured lights. We have a green light on in the plague room because it is not a very pleasant colour and it was this horrible disease. But at the same time, it is a historical tour and they wouldn't have had this bright, blinding green light in the 1600s. It's distracting. People have to find the right position to block their eyes from it. It is taking away from the experience.

(RMKC, Guide)

The staff continued to explain that on occasion the lights will malfunction and circulate through all the colour options, creating a disco-like light show for the visitors. This is not appropriate considering the nature of the content. Further commenting on the satirical elements of the script, one guide stated,

The plague killed half the people on the planet at one point. But because cognitive distance is created, because of the historical barriers and media, people have become desensitised. So, we have mock-up models of people dying, people covered in boils, one is a child, and one is a baby. But its people dying.

(RMKC, Guide)

In discussing the nature of the content, one guide stated that they are telling guests how people used to live and genuine things that happened to them, but because of the desensitised perspective that visitors bring with them, they are often left underwhelmed by the lack of scare and shock tactics. Yet, in discussing their rich picture, another guide commented that they think the interpretation is actually airbrushed, or softened, and that parts of the script could be more descriptive to really show how horrible this time in history really was.

Equally, S2D's interpretation was also influenced by the nature of the content and further managed by finding a balance between it and its delivery. Although the Director talked about adding more gore and blood in future, he explained that it is always grounded in fact-

based science in order to educate their visitors. The Director commented that during the planning stages there was apprehension among the other managers about some of the graphic details and how much blood and guts they were using. However, he argued that he was not bothered with pushing the envelope.

This desensitised perspective of the nature of the content and how it is delivered through the interpretation's design does not only appear shared across all three LDVAs, but S2D's Director explained he had recognised a morbid fascination among the public that seems associated with the concept of mortality. When asked if he was concerned about the nature of the content and motivations for why visitors wanted to see blood and gore, he stated,

I have no issues at all with people having a morbid fascination with the body, death, and dying. Morbid curiosity is just as good as any curiosity. Our objective is to get people to learn or become interested in the history. We certainly want learning, having fun, and enjoyment, and if morbid curiosity is something people are interested in, then that's fine as well.

(S2D, Director)

The emphasis on science, medicine and education was reiterated by S2D's Head of Operations, who, like the Director, dismissed any concerns for needing to be sensitive in relation to the delivery of the content. In discussing some of the physical features of the design, she explained that they wanted to have a lot of hands on activities. Visitors are able to touch replica body parts afflicted by various diseases, take pictures with leprosy victims, observe the plague under a microscope in a replica plague house, and touch human skulls impacted by disease and trauma. In creating these activities, the Head of Operations stated that their attitude towards the nature of the content was that it was just history and science. Some people might think it is gory, but in reality, it is what happened. She explained,

There is nothing wrong with discussing the realities of Medieval life. We wanted to say, 'this is what it would have looked like.' There are certainly the gory elements of it, for example the hanging man. You could maybe say we took a strong approach to that, but we do make people aware of it before they turn up so they can make their choice to come in or not come in.

(S2D, Head of Operations)

For this reason, the Content Expert stated that in comparison to other museums that recreate this time period, S2D is certainly more upfront about the more unpleasant aspects. She further revealed that the light-hearted *Horrible Histories* approach seems to help with delivering the heavier content that can sometimes be difficult to cope with. As her role was to ensure S2D was not playing into the myths of the plague that had been created in film and mass media, the Content Expert explained that the overall message being conveyed was that Medieval life was hard and people of that time were far less fortunate than we are today, particularly in terms of treating diseases, such as the plague.

Other attractions and competition

Given the fact that LDVAs maintain a higher tourism infrastructure and are commercially driven, it is logical that the interpretation of LDVAs for this study were influenced by other attractions in the market. On this topic, the Head of Development for RMKC explained how their interpretation was influenced by Jorvik Viking Village, Canterbury Tales, and the York Chocolate Story. Discussing the nature of the content and how they considered its delivery, he explained from their experience in creating the 'Eric the Bloodaxe' display for Jorvik Viking Village, they knew that the darker stories and slightly more graphic designs appealed to people. It was for this reason that the plague became a focal point for RMKC. However, because RMKC is located beneath the streets of Edinburgh, and as the plague is a primary focus, there were concerns that RMKC would be viewed as a dungeon experience. To avoid this, RMKC was contractually obligated by the City Council not tell ghost stories or the same stories that were being delivered in the Edinburgh Dungeons. In addition, the script was written to include a history of why and how RMKC came to be underground.

It is important to note the difference between RMKC and the Edinburgh Dungeons, because it was revealed to have been an influence of what RMKC did not want to do with their interpretation. According to the General Manager, unlike other attractions in the city, RMKC tells the real story of Edinburgh and life on the Closes in the 16th and 17th centuries without the support of ghost stories and scare factors. Describing the Dungeons as an

adrenaline experience, he explained RMKC is different because they rely on nature of the story to scare people. He further commented,

The adrenaline that we create is naturally created from peoples' apprehensions, perceptions, and expectations. Going back to plague room, visitors will see the silhouette of the plague doctor and make an assumption that someone is going to jump out and scare them. There is a heightened adrenaline, and then that doesn't happen. The adrenaline drops and then the chemical imbalance in their body happens and they feel a bit queasy or faint, why? Because they got themselves worked up. We don't deliberately do that.

(RMKC, General Manager)

Supporting the General Manager's statements, the Guiding Manager explained that RMKC tries to keep the interpretation on the lighter side, like the Dungeons. However, he argues the Dungeons is more about historical passion with entertainment and lacks the same heritage element that RMKC holds, which sets them apart. He explained RMKC does have an entertainment value, but it is more educational than entertaining.

In discussing RMKC's entertainment features, the use of smell pods to create a sensory experience was also inspired from their work with Jorvik, where this technique had been successful. Moreover, the IT Manager explained that the decision to use character actors to deliver the tour was an idea that had developed from the Canterbury Tales attraction— an interactive tour of Geoffrey Chaucer's stories, which has now permanently closed. According to the Head of Development, the idea was,

When you have something that has been well-received, don't re-invent the wheel, just replicate it and work it around the different storyline.

(RMKC, Head of Development)

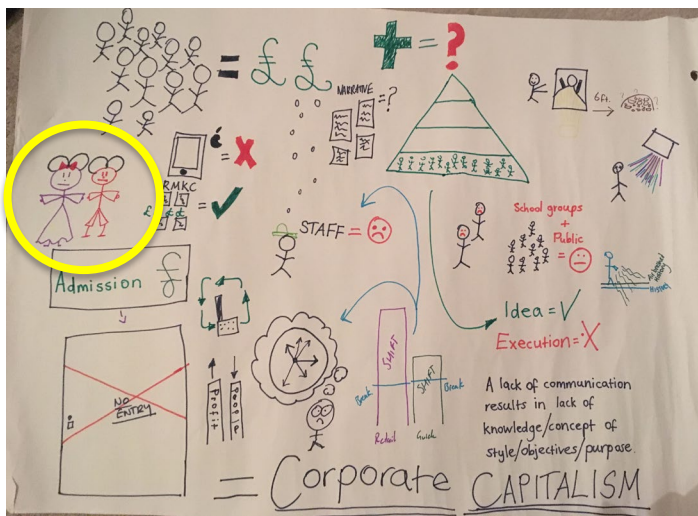
However, referring to their rich picture, as illustrated in Figure 3, and in discussing the use of character actors, the guides expressed concerns for the sense of authenticity of both RMKC's history and the site. One guide commented that the costumes do have an element of Disney and that the tour would feel more like a heritage tour if the guides were in a

standard uniform. Discussing how the guides are meant to act like characters from the 1600s, one guide commented,

There is a strong focus on ‘don’t make modern day references’, ‘when you’re outside, you are in character’, ‘don’t forget when you’re in costume people think...’ No, they don’t. People do not think that! They don’t see a regular person dressed in slightly odd clothing and think ‘oh, they are from the past.’ We are not Disneyland.

(RMKC, Guide)

Figure 3: RMKC Group 1 Rich Picture



Despite these perspectives, there seemed to be an agreement among the guides that if they were to continue with the character actors, there was a need for more engagement between them and the visitors, as well as more actors on site to recreate different stories and enhance the overall experience.

It was revealed that RMKC’s interpretation was further influenced by the York Chocolate Story, another attraction owned by Continuum Attractions, which uses the technology of talking portraits seen in the *Harry Potter* movies. Considering the success and positive visitor feedback for the portraits, talking portraits of Mary King, Dr. Arnett and Sir Archibald Johnston of Warriston were used to replace the original gobo lights in RMKC’s Gallery Room for RMKC’s 10th anniversary. Subsequently, with regards to this particular

feature, RMKC's interpretation was influenced by the York Chocolate Story and, indirectly, by the *Harry Potter* movies.

It was also revealed that S2D and GGT were influenced by other attractions. While the concept GGT's tour came from the Manager's experience working with an on-site theatre tour that took place on location of the stories told, S2D's Head of Operations revealed most of their displays and exhibits were copied from various attractions in York. Specifically, the exhibits on blood-letting, urine analysis, herbal remedies, and some of the hands-on activities were copied from the Richard III museum and amalgamated into the S2D experience.

What is more, discussing conceptual developments of S2D's interpretation, both the Director and Head of Operations referred to the London Dungeons as a form of inspiration in the sense of shock factors. The Head of Operations explained that some of the gory interactive features and entertaining narratives are very much like what is being done at the Dungeons. However, the Director was explicit in stating that S2D is much more academically grounded, as it is focused on educating with elements of entertainment.

Conclusions

The findings present a clear understanding that although influenced by pop-culture references and promoting edutainment agendas, the LDVAs each sought to design their interpretation in a manner that would educate their audiences and provide historically accurate and academically grounded information. Despite the temporal distance of the history, higher tourism infrastructure, and commercial elements, there was a recognition among the LDVAs of the importance in providing a fact-based experience. Through raw and real recreations of the history, the LDVAs sought to provoke visitor learning and engagement. It was further demonstrated that none of the LDVAs sought to embellish the history or create gore for the sake of gore. These findings are suggested to be the result of a desensitised perspective among the LDVAs' management teams for the nature of the history. However, as demonstrated in the focus groups, there was a common understanding that most visitors share this desensitised perspective as a result of film and mass media,

which has consequently led to their expectations of greater scare and shock factors. Although the goal to deliver a fact-based experiences was challenged by commercial concerns to maintain business, there was a shared understanding among the LDVAs' management and staff that the history was priority and finding the right balance between the education and entertainment was essential.

To conclude, in contrast to current understanding of LDVAs as being unconcerned with matters of facts and historical accuracy, this study has demonstrated they are in fact specifically concerned with these. The findings thus demonstrated that an edutainment agenda is capable of not only entertaining visitors, but also educating visitors about difficult histories. It is suggested that this is further enhanced with the use of multiple methods within the interpretation design, including hands-on activities, innovative technologies, light and sound design, character actors, and exhibits.

By exploring the influences on the design of edutainment interpretation, the findings of this study contribute to dark tourism understanding as they contradict much of the literature that argues LDVAs are generally unconcerned with matters of historical accuracy and more often than not, trivialise history through myth-making. In addition, by exploring the influences on interpretation, this paper has contributed to the progress of this under-developed topic in dark tourism research. Subsequently, this paper contributes to the practical understanding of interpretation design within dark tourism, specifically edutainment interpretation at LDVAs. Finally, this paper argues greater attention in future research is required to continue the development of research and practical understanding of LDVAs and their edutainment interpretation agendas.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Edinburgh Napier University Research Repository at <http://researchrepository.napier.ac.uk/Output/2455103,338.4791> Tourist Industry.

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