

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW & NOTES

Aeon Drifter (a themed attraction by Eric Larkin)

OBJECTIVE:

To take guests on a new kind of adventure, which is simultaneously thrilling and thought-provoking.

CONCEPT:

Aeon Drifter is a first-ever opportunity for guests to venture back in time to an ancient civilization - in a hot air balloon, with 360 degree views - getting so close they can smell the plum blossoms. They will encounter a sudden storm and a choice: go back or forge ahead to explore. A surprising detour presents them with possible futures - and the bracing reminder that we *create* the future.

DRAMATIC THEMES:

1. **Clear-eyed HOPE** - Remember the greatness & frailty of human achievements
2. **BOLDNESS** - Rehearse the act of making bold choices
3. **AGENCY** - We create our undetermined future *in the present*

THE SHOW SPACE & VEHICLE

The show space is a 360 degree cylindrical LED screen wall, with domed LED screen ceiling and floor. As on a cyclorama wall, there are no corners. It approaches a spherical shape. It is the next iteration of ["The Volume"](#).

At the center of this room is the ride vehicle: a hot air balloon basket, crowned with a vertical structure that looks like the bottom half of an inflated balloon, with ropes, a burner, etc. (The top half of the inflated balloon is projected, though only partially visible, and at an extremely low angle, as guests on- and off-board.)

Some limited movement capabilities, akin to a motion simulator, could support the sense of movement: for example, leaning a bit one direction as the balloon picks up speed or turns. However, the sense of movement would mainly be through the show projections on the screens which completely surround the guests. And it's a balloon, not a Delorean - so if the basket itself moves at all, it should be gently.

A lot of the lighting can come just from the screens themselves. Other show action equipment (fans for wind, for example) can be placed in the vertical structure above the basket, since the guests' views straight up should be obscured by the bottom section of that facade.

To load the vehicle, guests are led from inside the queue area across a simulated path into the basket. The load path is itself part of the LED floor, but is projected as a path during and after the show proper. This is a challenge.

Emergency exits are pretty tough in a completely spherical, screen-covered room.

Could the proper signage be located somehow *inside* the show vehicle? As opposed to floating in mid-air over the ancient city of Cahokia? This is also a challenge.

- *Variation:*

If a complete 360 degree surround screen proves impractical, one possible solution is to aim for 340 degrees (or thereabouts) and attach a "practical propulsion system" to the vehicle (a propeller? a giant fan like in a swamp boat?). The *story* reason is that it converts a mere float-y balloon into an airship. The *design* reason is that it provides a way to mask the entry/exit, the emergency exit, etc. -- There could still be screens in that space, but they would not have to be as seamless as the rest, since they would never be in guests' full view. And note that the basket itself never has to *turn*, since turning action is simulated by the show projections on the inside of the sphere.

NOTES:

Opportunities & Challenges

- **Don't try this at home**

One of the existential requirements for theme parks is giving guests an experience that they cannot have anywhere else. In some cases, the spread of virtual reality has made that more difficult. Though you can certainly experience the 360 degree immersion that Aeon Drifter offers with a VR home system, you can't do it *and look over at your friends* as you share the experience. VR is still a fairly solitary experience.

And you certainly cannot feel the wind on your face in your living room.

- **Aeon Drifter can work in any part of the world, in multiple eras.**

Since balloons have been around for thousands of years - in fact, the ancient Chinese used balloons ("sky lanterns") for communication - this attraction can be placed in many time periods and cultures. Also, since every culture on the planet has some sort of past, the trip back in time can be to their *own* past. There is nothing essential about North America and Cahokia. Thus, this adventure could easily be adapted for an Asian park, a Middle Eastern park - South America, Europe, Africa -- anywhere and almost any *time*.

Thus, the "dramatic theme" (what it's about) can stay intact with a change of "manifest theme" (setting, style, etc.) as needed by the park and/or land.

- Queue area

The story layers of the queue area are a treasure hoard of potential interactivity which I've barely explored so far in this design. One thing I have thought about, however, is connecting people through the "communication hub" elements. For example, imagine that there is an Aeon Drifter attraction in several parks around the world. Each location could be connected to the others via a live video feed (just think of Zoom) that is up and running for as long as the several locations share operating hours. Say, in the morning, folks in St. Louis can interact with folks in Shanghai, and then at night with folks in Dubai.

- No IP? No problem.

While this is not an IP based ride, there are abundant precedents with non-IP success stories: Expedition Everest (most roller coasters, actually), most "transportation" attractions, the classics (Haunted Mansion, Pirates, Jungle Cruise), Soarin', etc.. Consider how Aeon Drifter will be described between guests:

"It's like Soarin', but... ok, you know how you're on Soarin', and it's awesome, and you cruise over those elephants with that red-dirt smell, and you almost hit that mountain - but then - you look over to your left - and it's just a bunch of dorks on porch swings? And you're like, oh yeah - I'm on a ride. In Aeon Drifter, you look over to your left - look up, down, any direction you look - you're still in a hot air balloon surrounded by storm clouds!"

Which relates to...

- ... Re-ride-ability

The completely enveloped, spherical show space means that the guests' views will be different depending on what side of the balloon they sit on. There are 4 main vistas, each featuring a variety of details to be noticed over multiple trips.

- Scents

Old news, perhaps, but the [sense of smell is connected to emotion and memory](#). The scents of the various locations in this attraction are emphasized in order to make the contrasts between possibilities in the "future scene" memorable and emotional.

- Dramatic Theme: What's It About?

We're not doomed.

We used to talk about the future. Now we just talk about survival.

We used to get excited about exploring the galaxy, curing cancer, ending poverty, finding ways for nations to work together to end war. We valued growing and learning and discovering and conquering all of mankind's ancient foes.

But believing that we can do better, that we can actually overcome the very intense challenges we face as a species, has come to seem naive. That cynicism makes us desperate and willing to accept anything just this side of annihilation. That mindset makes us frantic, rather than energetic. Instead of innovating or aspiring, we settle.

I want to challenge that, even in some small way, with Aeon Drifter.

The future doesn't just come out of nowhere. We make the future - most of it, anyway - with what we are doing *right now*. That's a bit scary, of course, that responsibility - but I believe it is also empowering. The future doesn't happen *when we get there* - it is something we are shaping en route.

So, the themes of the attraction are: we've been great in the past, and we've also made mistakes. Humans are like that! Then, right now, let's practice making a bold decision: do we go through the rift into the unknown, or do we just go home? The rift? Excellent. Okay, good rehearsal and now the show: what kind of future are we going to make? That's the call to action.

At this level of theme, the goal is for a kid - or maybe an adult who's teetering on the edge of despair - to have stuck in their head the idea of "Oh yeah, what I do now affects what comes next. And I *choose* what I do now."

It's small; it's basic. It's also true.

Anyway, that's Aeon Drifter: clear-eyed hope, boldness, and agency.

Credits:

- all images by Eric Larkin, unless otherwise noted
- sound by freesfx.co.uk