

The Initiation:

Toward a New Theory of Immersion in Location-Based Entertainment Experiences



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A senior essay submitted in partial fulfillment for a degree of

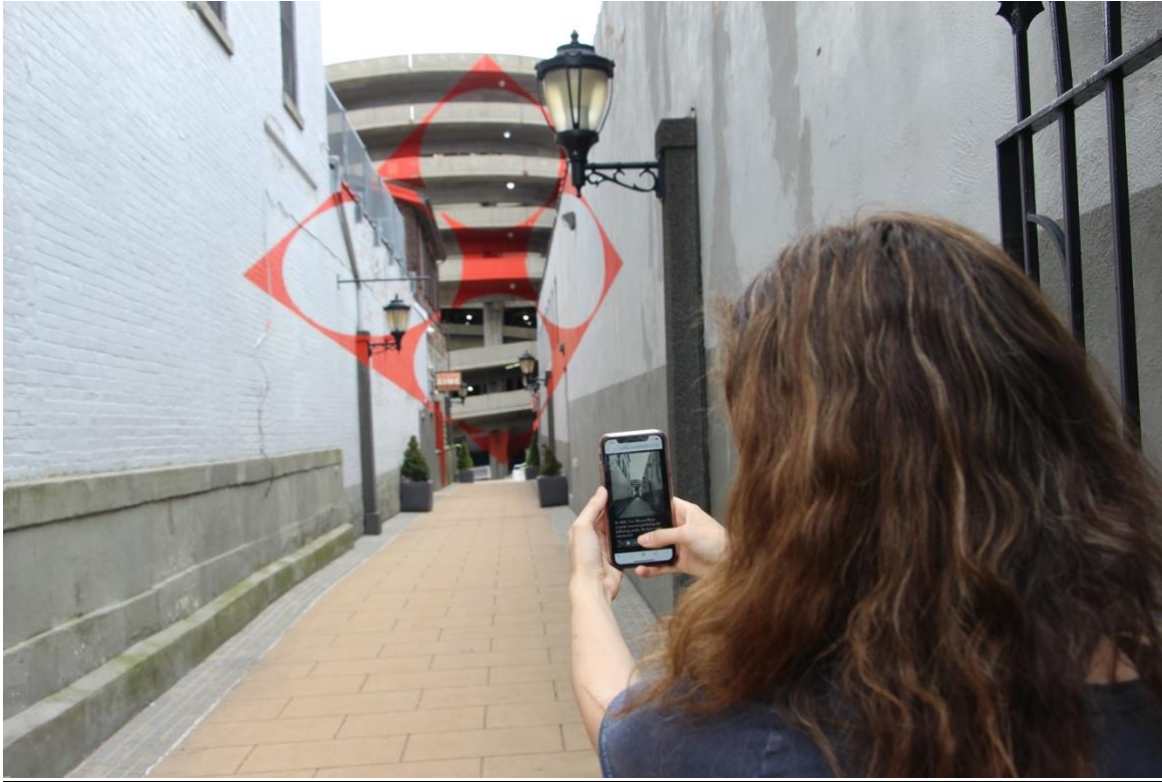
Bachelor of Arts

in the field of

Humanities

Yale University

May 8, 2021



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¹ Photos by Alec Zbornak

I. INTRODUCTION: SEARCHING FOR NARRATIVE IMMERSION

*[T]he expectation is no longer the expectation of a proscenium, but rather the expectation of a dome; the expectation that the story does surround me.*²

In recent years, immersive entertainment experiences have experienced a massive spike in popularity. And with the creation of over seven hundred “new immersive experiences” in North America and a global industry valuation of over fifty billion dollars in 2018 alone, the immersive entertainment industry seems to have massive potential for future growth.³ But what exactly is immersive entertainment? According to one San Francisco-based immersive theatre company, immersive entertainment is anything that “transports the audience and engages multiple senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch).”⁴ Immersive designers use this multi-sense approach specifically to make people “suspend their disbelief.”⁵ Suspension of disbelief is a common tool in other storytelling industries, as well, including theatre, film, and even literature. However, immersive entertainment differentiates itself from these other forms by joining new technologies with spatial and experiential storytelling methods, “[collapsing] the binary between physical and digital contexts.”⁶

This connection to technology is so undeniable that immersive entertainment “has more recently been used to describe developments in the fields of Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and mixed reality.”⁷ Yet the genre precedes these modern technological developments and includes media such as “street games, interactive theatre, and built environments such as theme parks and historic sites.”⁸ In joining different technologies,

² Brigante, “Unearthing Pandora.”

³ “Interactive, Intimate, Experiential: The Impact of Immersive Design 2019,” 2 & 14.

⁴ “What is Immersive Theatre.”

⁵ Younger, *Theme Park Design*, 86.

⁶ Kidd & Gröppel-Wegner, *Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling*, 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

methods, and practices to create story experiences, immersive entertainment boasts a wide range of opportunities for audience members to “pretend to actually be amongst the fictional world” of the experience.⁹ For the purpose of this paper, I will contain my explorations mostly to immersive experiences in built environments, which I refer to as location-based entertainment—that “which takes place in a specific location outside of the user’s home.”¹⁰

As I will show, an increasingly popular kind of immersive experience in the American location-based entertainment industry is choose-your-own adventure, through which an audience member can make decisions that influence the story. While making choices offers one potential avenue for immersive storytelling (currently being explored by major companies like Disney Imagineering),¹¹ it also relies heavily on a neoliberal framework by empowering the individual through choice and by conflating personal agency with decision-making. In exploring other modes of story immersion, I look away from neoliberal choice and toward an ideology on the other side of the political spectrum: Marxism. I use the works of the Marxist aesthetic philosopher György Lukács to explore how different political ideologies support different kinds of immersion.¹² Then, I perform a case study of *The Initiation*, an original, immersive story experience I designed to experiment with this medium. Through this creative research methodology, I begin working towards a new model of audience immersion in location-based entertainment experiences, one that eschews choice-driven agency in favor of something I refer

⁹ Younger, *Theme Park Design*, 86.

¹⁰ “How Location-Based Entertainment is Taking Virtual Reality to New Heights.”

¹¹ Macdonald, “Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge interactive experiences.”

¹² By choosing one political ideology over another, I am aware that this project opens up a door to a critical engagement with these different philosophies. This is interesting and important work, though slightly outside of the scope of this paper. A deep dive into the political implications of theme parks and other location-based entertainment could easily be its own book. However, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the implications of using one framework over another, since, in doing so, I also must take its logics and problematics. While this paper will mostly use theory as it relates to narrative immersion in location-based experiences, I will make sure to point toward these critiques as they arise.

to as totalized immersion—the positioning of an audience member within an interconnected and interrelated story world.

II. CHOICE AND NEOLIBERALISM IN THE AMERICAN THEME PARK

Recently, major location-based entertainment experiences, especially American theme parks, have started heavily experimenting with choice-making as a newfound method of audience immersion. These experiences use a neoliberal concept of choice as agency to make audience members feel that they “play an active role in ... propelling forward the overall story,” immersing them within the narrative world.¹³ In the past few years American theme parks like Knotts Berry Farm, Universal Studios, and Disneyland and Disney World have all attempted to create choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) experiences. For example, Knott’s Berry Farm’s immersive Ghost Town Alive show, which gives audience members the ability to interact with “bandits, cowboys, robberies, [and] judges” in their own “western adventure,”¹⁴ was described as “almost like a choose your own adventure.”¹⁵ Similarly, Disney designed its newest lands, Star Wars Galaxy’s Edge, as a “choose your own adventure”¹⁶ with the mission “[t]o make every visitor feel like the hero of their own Star Wars story in an authentic and believable remote corner of the galaxy.”¹⁷ Through the use of the “Datapad” on the interactive Play Disney Parks app, audience members can choose to take part in different missions and log their progress. As they complete more adventures, the choices they make—including for what team (good or evil) they fight—will influence their character and how the cast members treat them.¹⁸ Similarly,

¹³ Macdonald, “Knotts brings Wild West Stories to life with ‘Ghost Town Alive’ interactive experience.”

¹⁴ “Ghost Town Alive!” Live New Adventures in the Old West”

¹⁵ Macdonald, “Knotts brings Wild West Stories to life with ‘Ghost Town Alive’ interactive experience.”

¹⁶ LeBar, “Disney’s Star Wars Land will basically be a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure.’”

¹⁷ Macdonald, “Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge interactive experiences.”

¹⁸ Mitchell, “Play Disney Parks creators reveal how to use app at Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge.”

Evermore, a new immersive experience hypothesized to be a “prototype for the theme park of the future,”¹⁹ is described as a combination of “elements of the ‘Westworld’ television show, Comic-Con cosplay, a Renaissance Fair and a choose your own adventure tale.”²⁰ Lastly, Universal Studios has even reportedly patented a new “Video Game Ride” technology, allowing riders “to make decisions in the ride that alter the course of the experience.”²¹ Of these experiences, Ghost Town Alive and Star Wars Galaxy’s edge have both won THEA awards, presented by the Themed Entertainment Association to “[reward] excellence for the creation of compelling educational, historical and entertainment projects.”²² That two of the largest location-based entertainment companies, Universal and Disney, have both experimented with choice and that Disney and Knotts have garnered industry respect and praise for their efforts both underscore choice’s growing popularity as a method of story immersion.

But even before the creation of these new kinds of story experiences, location-based entertainment has long used choice in myriad of ways, including everything from the curation of experiences to consumption. For starters, the audience member of location-based entertainment physically moves through a space, whether by foot or on a ride vehicle. With rich, place-making and story-building details all around them, guests must play an active role in directing their attention and bodies to understand the unfolding narrative. They must decide where to physically move their heads and feet; in doing so, they must choose how to curate their experience. With walk-through attractions, including everything from haunted houses to interactive play rooms to themed shopping centers, the audience member has a greater level of freedom to interact with the source material as he wishes—to explore this corner, to look carefully at this detail but to ignore

¹⁹ Macdonald. “Is Evermore the future of immersive theme park experiences?”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bilbao, “Universal patent hints at ‘video game ride’ using wands.”

²² “Thea Awards.”

that one, to try to open that secret door, or to pull this inconspicuous lever. This curation occurs on a large scale, as well. With more attractions, shows, parades, and character meet-and-greets to cover than possible in a single day, theme park vacationers must choose what experiences they want to have. With nine separate lands in Disneyland, each a differently themed area complete with its own collection of experiences, guests must choose on what adventures they want to go. Will they become space explorers in Tomorrowland or meet princesses in Fantasyland? Will they cruise through the jungle in Adventureland or ride in a wild-western mine car in Frontierland? The decision is theirs.

Secondly, theme parks provide many choices for the consumer, as well. They must choose what merchandise to buy, what foods to eat, and at what hotels to stay. And with intense theming, these purchases become part of the narrative. “You can construct your very own lightsaber and bring it to life through the power of kyber crystals,”²³ or you can “[s]hare the fun as your little one enjoys a resplendently royal head-to-toe transformation!”²⁴ with a Disney princess makeover. Deciding whether to eat gumbo in New Orleans Square or corndogs on Paradise Pier is another way that consumers can choose into which narrative they’d like to further escape. Consumption, like curation, becomes a choice that affects the audience member’s overall immersive story adventure.

But from where does this concept of a choose-your-own adventure come? Originally, CYOA was a genre of literature that took off in America in the 1980s and that aimed to make storytelling more immersive and interactive. As readers work their way through these novels, they are faced with a series of choices, each a different option for how the story can advance. For example, in the 1980 CYOA novel, *Space and Beyond*, after a particularly dangerous cosmic

²³ “Savi’s Workshop - Handbuilt Lightsabers at the Walt Disney World Resort.”

²⁴ “Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique.”

accident, readers are given the choice to keep pushing forward in their space ship or to go back to home base.²⁵ Written in second-person narration, this method of story engagement makes the reading process more immersive, by giving the reader a say in the story experience, not to mention elevating the individual to the status of protagonist. As the story goes, Edward Packard invented CYOA novels in the 1960s after discovering that his children were more immersed in their bedtime stories when he incorporated choice.²⁶ Just about thirty years later, by 1999, Random House had sold about “250 million copies [of CYOA novels] all around the world,” making it the “fourth-best-selling children’s book series of all time.”

As author Eli Cook explores, this emphasis on narrative choice was heavily influenced by the political and economic philosophies of neoliberalism present during the 1980s, when CYOA became popularized. Cook writes, “Written in the second person and presenting its readers with two options on nearly every page, CYOA offered its readers – much like the consumer marketplace – interactive choices which gave ‘you’ a sense of autonomy, agency and emancipation.”²⁷ As this quotation and the second-person address indicate, this “autonomy” and “agency” existed mostly at the level of the individual reader, the choice-maker. This was a philosophy of individualism. The CYOA reader relies on the same kind of neoliberal logic of the consumer. Both empower individuals as free agents who can use choice to take control, either of their story experiences or of their lives. Following the lead of this literary genre, choose-your-own-adventure experiences in theme parks also rely on a neoliberal framework.

However, it is important to note that most of these choice-based experiences only give the illusion of authentic agency—making people feel like they willingly and independently chose

²⁵ Cook, “Rearing Children of the Market,” 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

something, when, in reality, the form itself severely limited their decisions or pushed them towards a decision. As Cook notes, “While truly interactive, the structure, parameters and possibilities of the books – including their rules, limits, identities and possibilities – were nevertheless rigidly constructed and controlled by adult authors with no input from the participating adolescent reader.”²⁸ CYOA novels necessarily have a limited number of choices that the reader can make, and all of these have been chosen for readers by the authors, by these “choice architects.”²⁹ The menu was fixed; the readers just had to order. Other times, rather than restrict number of choices, CYOA designers will merely give the illusion of choice. For example, Disney Imagineering has long used a design tool called a Wienie, “a visually interesting and intriguing sight that compels guests to head towards it.”³⁰ By keeping prominent and unique architecture and focal points at the end of long walk ways, Imagineers can psychologically manipulate people to move in specific flows. Disney is not alone. Even theatre employs certain devices to capture and direct viewers’ attentions towards specific moments, numbers, or plot points. The spotlight, sound effects, blocking, and other cues also serve to force the audience to focus on one actor and his or her performance; it’s a way to eliminate some of the audience members’ agency, to prevent them from choosing to focus on (supposedly) less important parts of the story. Whether or not the choices are genuine, it is still significant that an ideology could have such a drastic impact on the immersive experience. This through line suggests that starting with a different political ideology, perhaps one opposite of neoliberalism, would produce a very different model of immersion.³¹

²⁸ Cook, “Rearing Children of the Market,” 8.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Younger, *Theme Park Design*, 252.

³¹ Of course, this connection of American theme parks to capitalistic, consumerist frameworks like neoliberalism is unsurprising. In many ways theme parks are the Platonic ideal of capitalism: high ticket prices, inflated food costs, and, of course, there’s the fact that every ride ends at a gift shop. Neoliberalism has many flaws, outside of its limitations on narrative forms and choose-your-own adventures. Neoliberal economies often face massive problems

III. GYÖRGY LUKÁCS'S MARXIST AESTHETICS

In the twentieth century, there were many aesthetic philosophers, all who offered their own unique interpretations of art's place in the Marxist tradition. Included in this list are Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes, and, the main subject of this paper, György Lukács.³² Lukács was an early twentieth-century Hungarian philosopher, who lived from 1885 to 1971. To better understand how Lukács' aesthetic theories can influence audience immersion, we must first understand his basic ideology and aesthetic concept of totality. Defined simply, for Lukács, *totality* is the idea that everything and everyone in this world are interconnected and interrelated. In a Marxist framework, this concept suggests a vision of some great community or collectivity. Rejecting capitalism's (and, later, neoliberalism's) inherent individualism in maximizing profit for oneself, totality stresses people's social ties and interdependences on each other. Lukács thinks that this totalizing perspective is natural and just needs to be freed from the alienating strangle hold of capitalism.

Lukács believed that the burgeoning industrialism of the early twentieth century pushed people away from their natural totalities and towards unnatural "particular individualit[ies]" via the division of labor and commodification of goods.³³ For Lukács, *particular individuality* (the opposite of totality) refers to the highly individualistic, alienated, and "isolated"³⁴ existences of

with income inequality and a lack of state regulation. From this point of view, a move away from a neoliberal framework and towards a Marxist framework might inherently sounds like a normative claim preferring Marxism to neoliberalism. Rather, I primarily made this shift because I hypothesized that working under the framework of a starkly different ideology would direct me toward an entirely different understanding of immersive storytelling. Regardless, in embracing this new political ideology, I know I take with me the ideology's implications, limitations, and flaws, as well. Later in this essay, in **V.4**, I work through some of the problematics of this Marxist political framework, both from a narrative and political lens.

³² Lukács was a prolific writer of aesthetic philosophy. His works span decades. For the purpose of this paper, I read Lukács and various secondary sources; though, I ended up mostly quoting the secondary sources, including the works of similarly influential aesthetic philosophers Frederic Jameson and Pauline Johnson. I found the secondary sources useful in spanning and tying together his many projects and ideologies into a cohesive—dare I say, totalized?—narrative.

³³ Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetics*, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

modern industrial society, in which the individual is separated and segmented from the world around him. Specifically, he believed that capitalism's "division of labour" reinforced this particular individuality by "atomiz[ing] tasks and activities."³⁵ For example, under this new system, factory workers work individually to complete their respective tasks, separating them from their fellow workers and from the products of their labor, as they only contribute to one part of the creation process and don't get to keep the product.

In addition to the division of labor, capitalism's commodification of goods also favored the particular over the total. As explained by one scholar of Lukács, Fredric Jameson, after the industrial revolution,

It is commodities that structure our original, relationships to objects of the world, that shape the categories through which we see all other objects. Yet such objects are ambiguous; they vary in appearance accordingly as their objective nature or their subjective origin is emphasized. Thus for the bourgeois, a commodity is a solid natural thing whose cause is relatively unimportant, relatively secondary; his relationship to such an object is one of pure consumption.³⁶

As this quotation indicates, in a post-industrial, capitalist world, the commodity becomes the central material unit for the bourgeois, severely affecting and isolating their worldviews; they began to see the world as a series of individual objects, things to consume. And when consuming these commodities, they rarely look past the objects' materiality or "objective nature" to their origins or creation processes. They see the things around them merely as particular individualities. Everything in their worlds are separate, isolated, and alienated.

However, as Jameson explains, Lukács's proletariat worker avoids this bourgeois pitfall to some degree, precisely because of his role in the creation process of these products. Workers, unlike mere consumers, see these objects as "as little more than a moment in the process of

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁶ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 187.

production itself.”³⁷ That is, the worker sees the commodity, not as an isolated, static particular individuality ready to be consumed, but rather as a part of a fluid process of creation. In understanding this creation process, the worker’s knowledge of “tools and equipment” allows him to “see the outside world not as a collection of separate, unrelated things, but as a totality in which everything depends on everything else.”³⁸ Take, for example, the table. When the bourgeois consumer sees a table in a store, he merely sees a complete, particular, and independent object ready for purchase. But when the proletariat worker sees a table, he sees the wood, nails, hammers and materials; he sees the other workers who wielded those tools; and he might even see all of the other objects that have and will be placed on this table and all of their materials and creation processes, as well. The worker sees a totality. This totalized lens allows for a much more expansive, interconnected, wholistic, and perhaps harmonious worldview than that of the bourgeois’ limited particular individuality. Of course, workers aren’t necessarily the only ones allowed this totalized worldview. We can imagine that artisans and artists also view their products as a mere “moment” in the creation process.³⁹ Moreover, the proletariat worker, despite his understanding of process, is not entirely free from the alienations of industrial society; he still suffers from the limitations of the division of labor, mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, from this exploration of the worker, we come to an understanding that process totalizes the world. Process links people to each other and to external things and underscores the complex network of interconnections and interrelationships, which capitalism has estranged from us.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Fleshed out more fully in **V.2**, in *The Initiation*, I follow in this Lukácsian tradition by focusing significantly on the world of artists and architects and their processes at each location on the narrative journey; in this way, I aimed to take the same wholistic, interconnected, processual approach in my analysis of things that Lukács supported.

As an aesthetician, Lukács believed that people could use narrative to come to understand their own lives and worlds, a topic he explored in great detail in his works *Soul and Form*⁴⁰ and *The Theory of the Novel*.⁴¹ Specifically, he believed that the realist novel could serve as a liberating force to guide people out of the capitalistic system of particular individuality and back to a world of totality. Lukács was alive during the advent of the realist novel. But its novelty was not the only thing that drew Lukács to the genre. As explained by Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa in *Narratology: An Introduction*, the early novels prioritized a “mimetic aim in the depiction and characters and setting.”⁴² Through this commitment to the “aesthetics of verisimilitude,” the realist novel was filled with the particular individualities of everyday life.⁴³ Lukács believed realist fiction integrated these details into the narrative whole: “While the realist work retains the specific detail of everyday experience, it transforms it from mere particularity into an aspect of the whole. The specific detail is integrated into the work’s whole world.”⁴⁴ Lukács suggests, these details would feel otherwise isolated and alienated from us in real life (due to capitalistic commodification and the division of labor). But in the realist novel, these details very apparently become a necessary part of the greater work, specifically as it relates to the protagonist and plot. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács writes, “the discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolized by the story of his life.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Lukács, *Soul and Form*.

⁴¹ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*.

⁴² Landa and Onega, *Narratology: An Introduction*, 17.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetics*, 41.

⁴⁵ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 81.

And that these details are often taken from the real world proves significant. As a Marxist theorist, Lukács believed that seeing these real-world details connected would encourage a “totalizing reflection”⁴⁶ pushing people towards a “species consciousness.”⁴⁷ That is to say, the reader sees the true totality of the world, through the totality of those real-world details in realist fiction. Whether or not merely reading fiction can actually lead to revolutionary change is outside the scope of this paper. Regardless, I argue that this concept of totality, as Lukács understands it, can serve as a model for immersion in location-based entertainment.

IV. IMMERSION BY TOTALITY FOR LOCATION-BASED ENTERTAINMENT

Certainly, location-based entertainment is very different from realist novels. The former is experiential, the latter read; the former engages multiple senses, the latter only one. However, one kind of location-based entertainment experience, called site-specific entertainment, shares important characteristics with realist fiction. According to the Tate museum, site-specific “refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location.”⁴⁸ So too with site-specific entertainment, a type of location-based entertainment that integrates the site’s specific histories, details, and mythologies into the work. Therefore, site-specific story experiences closely mirror realist fiction in that they superimpose narrative over real places. In using narrative to connect real, seemingly disparate or particular, details of places in everyday life, site-specific story experiences also champion totality. If a designer of location-based entertainment experiences could harness this concept of totality to show the audience that their story world is made up of a network of ever-evolving connections

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetics*, 38.

⁴⁸ “Art Term: Site-Specific.”

and relationships *and* suggest to them that they are a part of this network, then that would pave the way for a new understanding of immersion, what I call immersion through totality.⁴⁹ The immersive moment in immersion through totality, as I define it, comes from the audience's recognition that they are part of the story's totality, as was explored in *The Initiation*.

V. CASE STUDY: THE INITIATION

I designed *The Initiation*, an original site-specific story experience around Yale University and New Haven, as a creative research method. I originally wanted to create an immersive show with actors inside of a theatre. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and on-campus restrictions to performances and gatherings of people, I had to rethink my plans. Consequently, I decided to produce an outdoor story experience without live actors. By creating an experience that can be completed any time, the audience can partake in the production without worry of people gathering. As my set became the outside environment, I realized I wouldn't be able to change or physically build anything in the same way I would in a controlled theatre, where lighting, sound, and décor are all under the control of the director. Rather, I'd have to use an already existent, site-specific landscape and find a way to superimpose my story over it. I would have to find a story that uniquely championed and leveraged the site-specific existing infrastructure, history, and energy of the Yale campus and New Haven city.

I eventually decided upon the story of a fictional secret society's initiation, because of Yale's historical and mythological connection to occult secret societies like Skull and Bones, Wolf's Head, and Spade and Grave. Yale is known for these senior organizations, and the campus is riddled with proof of their existences—windowless, mausoleum-esque tombs, which

⁴⁹ Throughout the piece, I refer to this same concept in other terms, as well, including totalized immersion, immersion of totality, etc.

serve as these societies' meeting places, are common landmarks around New Haven. With these myths and architectural gestures filling the campus, I believed that audience members would easily be able to suspend their disbelief and pretend that they too were being initiated into a secret society.⁵⁰

Altogether, *The Initiation* takes anywhere from thirty to forty minutes to complete. The experience is mediated by a custom-made website⁵¹ that reveals where participants must move around Yale and New Haven. At each step of the journey, a new part of the story is revealed to the audience member. To research further the extent to which totality can serve as a successful model of immersion for location-based entertainment experiences, I interviewed eight audience members after they partook in the experience. The interviews took place either over Zoom or in-person and lasted about twenty to thirty minutes each. Overall, the audience members had different opinions about the experience, but several trends did emerge in their responses to the work's use of character, space, and movement.

⁵⁰ It is important that I note an incongruity in the content of my story and the Marxist theory I am employing. Marxist theory, a revolutionary ideology of class equality, aims to benefit the collective people, specifically those long oppressed by a ruling upper class. Yet, the story I tell features elite institutions (secret societies) at an even bigger elite institution (Yale). The histories of exclusion, power, and privilege, connected to capitalism and classism, cannot be wrestled from either secret societies or from Yale. Thus, it may seem contradictory for me to employ this type of story with a seemingly antithetical Marxist theory. I respond to this critique of secret societies in **V.4** by claiming that my story's fictional society was founded on the principles of total inclusion—and that it was made up of people both in and outside of Yale. This subversion of secret society's traditional exclusion partly serves as an attempt to explore the tensions of Marxist ideology within this elitist world. Furthermore, I also am unable to escape the fact that physically my experience takes place at Yale, a space inaccessible for so many people, in so many senses of the word. I tried to counter this narrative by making my experience completely outside and thus open to the greater public, so that, in theory, non Yalies could undergo this process, too. Secret Society initiation is something that very few people around the world are able to do, and I thought that in future years, should this experience persist, perhaps visitors or tourists might want to take thirty minutes from their day to get the full Yale Society experience. However, this year specifically, what with Covid-19 and restrictions to campus spaces, some previously public spaces are only open to Yale students and not to the general public. Not only do these restrictions serve as yet another reminder of the inequalities exacerbated by the current public health conditions, but also a very tangible reminder of my own inability to escape exclusivity and elitism while championing the Yale site. Overall, I believe this incongruity is significant, though not necessarily damning. Art is often messy and cannot fully be contained within a single consistent ideology. And for my purposes of merely exploring a new medium, using this story did not inhibit me from looking at totalized immersion within the. That said, in future iterations of this project, I think it is necessary that I emphasize accessibility and inclusion in my design even more.

⁵¹ <https://aleczbornak.wixsite.com/theinitiation>.

V.1 CHARACTER

The Initiation champions totalized immersion by making the audience members characters in the story; and, even without choice or other more blatant forms of interactivity, audience members still believe their roles transcended mere observers. One of the hallmarks of location-based entertainment experiences is its ability to position audience members as characters in immersive experiences, to give them roles. *The Initiation* is no different. Audience members' first entry point into the experience is an email from a mysterious account named *The Initiation* with the message:

We've noticed you.
Begin your journey.
[Click Here](#) to learn the truth and begin *The Initiation*.⁵²

From this first message and the second-person address, audience members are led to believe that the correspondence is personalized for them. I attempted to position them within the story world to give them a sense of purpose. And, seemingly, this approach worked. When I asked the audience members what roles they played in the experience, many referred to themselves solely within the framework of the story: "I was one of the chosen people,"⁵³ "I was a protagonist; I was the Initiate," and "I was a recruit for the society."

Following this character introduction, the initiates are told to travel to the first location in which the story takes place, Phelps Gate:

*To learn about our order.
There's much to unearth
Head to Yale's oldest mortar
To begin your process of rebirth
Go to Phelps Hall in Old Campus.*

⁵² Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

⁵³ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

*Click the arrow when you arrive.*⁵⁴



Audience members take on the role of initiates joining an ancient secret society. *Photo by Alec Zbornak*

Upon arriving, the audience members are presented written stories, videos, photos, and audio, all introducing the origins of this made-up society, into which they are supposedly initiating. In designing this experience, I hoped the audience members would connect to the story, as initiates on a quest to learn about the society’s stories. In this capacity, I aimed to channel Lukácsian totality to make the initiates feel connected to the interrelated process that is this group’s narrative history. As Jameson elaborates, “narration itself, is present only in those moments of history in which human life can be apprehended in terms of concrete individual confrontations and dramas, in which some basic general truth of life can be told through the

⁵⁴ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

vehicle of the individual story, the individual plot.”⁵⁵ By showing the initiates how the events, both real and imagined, of their soon-to-be society unfolded in these spaces, I hoped to make the audience members feel part of something older and bigger than themselves. And to some degree this method worked. In fact, one audience member compared this experience to an “[i]mmersive museum tour.”⁵⁶ This comparison demonstrates that the audience members did feel a connection to this unfolding history.

However, as many audience interviews suggested, this connection was relatively passive. One member said, “I felt like a tourist, learning the history as an outsider.... just watching the history of it—where did they go next.”⁵⁷ The use of the words *tourist* and *outsider* suggest a relatively distanced relationship from the story experience, as if he was not a part of it. As another audience member explained, “I didn’t really contribute anything.” It seems that these audience members noticed a bit of a disconnect between their nominal role of initiates and the kinds of passive interactions they have in this “guided tour.” As they articulated, being referred to as “initiate” or “chosen one” might suggest a more active role than merely just learning about a group’s history. This disconnect between assumed character interactions and actual character interactions perhaps prevents the audience members from immersing themselves into the story more completely.

⁵⁵ Jameson, *Marxist Aesthetics*, 201.

⁵⁶ Greta Browne, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁵⁷ Ben Scher, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

Arguably the most active interaction occurs at the very end of the experience, when the audience members are requested to use Augmented Reality (AR)⁵⁸ technology, once again in front of Phelps Gate, to reveal a hidden portal to the society’s underground meeting spot. They then are asked to take photos of their work of AR and email it to The Initiation email. Interestingly, the same audience members that suggested passivity earlier in the experience heralded this interaction as the moment where they felt most “part of [the experience].”⁵⁹ The audience members felt most like characters



Augmented reality (AR) serves as the final moment of interaction in the experience.
Photo by Alec Zbornak

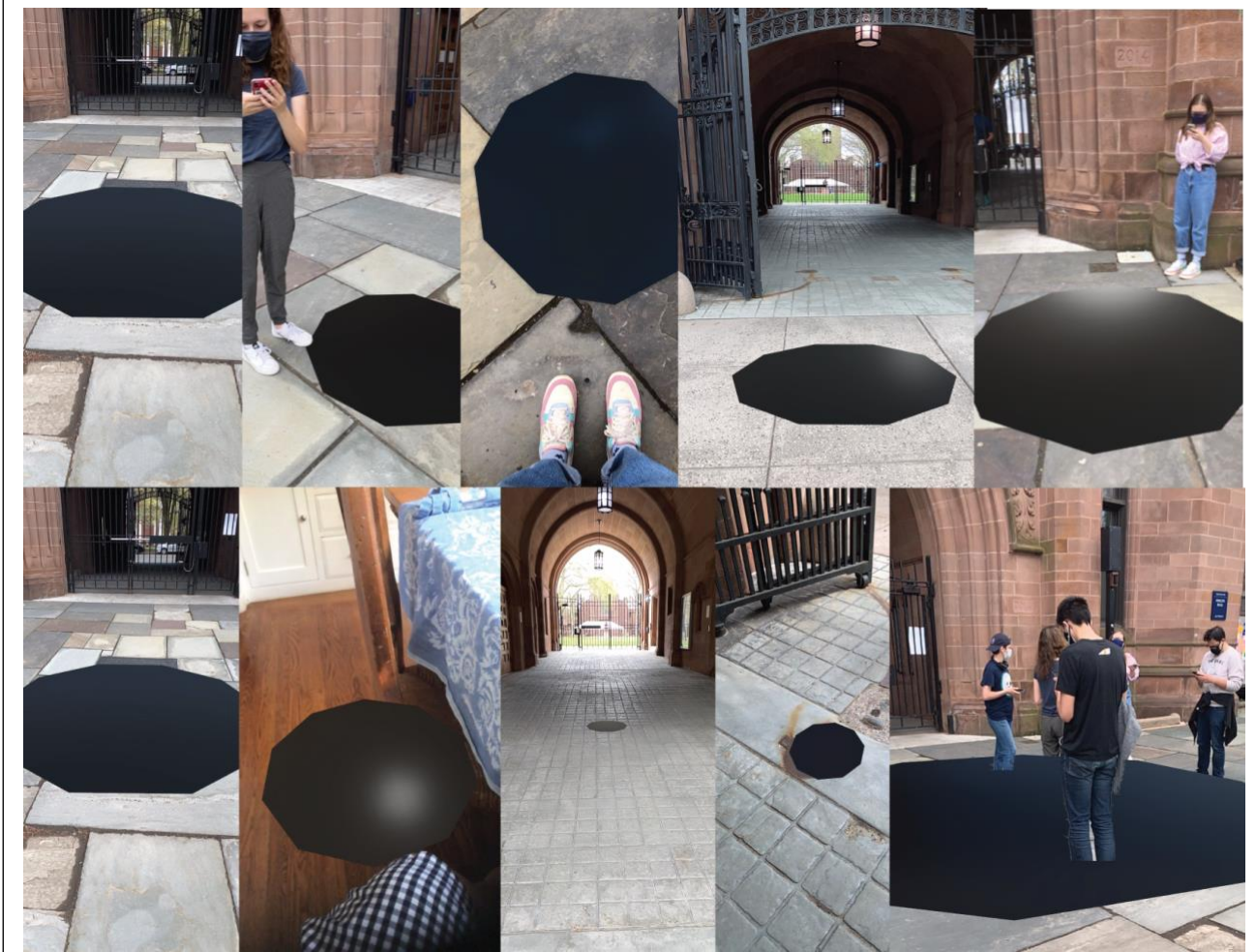
during these periods of active interaction, suggesting the need for increased interactivity in future iterations.

Regardless, making these audience members characters in the experience immersed them into the story world and helped them transcend the role of mere audience members. Members referred to their positions as everything from “audience plus”⁶⁰ to “a participant in an

⁵⁸ AR is a new medium of immersive technology in which the real-world is augmented by other technology. I was excited about using this medium, specifically, because like location-based entertainment or even realist literature, it also has the power to directly superimpose narrative devices on top of real landscapes. In the case of this experience, audience members point their phone cameras at the ground to see a digital black hole dropped on the landscape shown through the phones’ screens.

⁵⁹ Ben Scher, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁶⁰ Simon Rabinowitz, Personal Interview, April 19, 2021.



Audience members use AR to create their very own portals to The Society’s underground tomb.
Photos submitted by my audience members.

experience”⁶¹ to “a mix between an audience member and a protagonist, not quite either of those.”⁶² As these names demonstrate, turning the audience into characters on a mission proved an overall successful method of immersion through totality by quickly and efficiently positioning the audience member as a part of the story world. Yet, this was just one method I employed to think through totality of immersion, the second being place.

⁶¹ Grace Aaronson, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁶² Drew Prinster, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

V.2 PLACE

Like realist fiction, *The Initiation* superimposes story over space to create connections that the audience can perceive between the narrative and real worlds. Before the experience even begins, audience members are given instructions to reflect on the spaces to which they are sent. The rules state, “At each destination, take a moment to explore the real place around you: What do you notice about it? Have you walked here before? What’s different or the same, now?”⁶³ At least for one audience member, this emphasis on reflection encouraged him to think about his relationship to the locations, as noted by his musings on the Statue of Nathan Hale: “I was looking more at the details of it. I was really looking at the statue. I just felt really aware of where I was located relative to other things.”⁶⁴ Another audience member expressed that though she had been to these spaces before, she felt more observant in this context: “I’ve obviously been to these spaces hundreds of times in the past years. But when I got to these experiences, I was trying to be intentional in observing.”⁶⁵

To best connect the story and real worlds, I used the site-specific realities of each location to influence the narrative. For example, I incorporated the Nathan Hale Statue on Old Campus in *The Initiation* by claiming that Nathan Hale was a former member of The Society. I also said that the statue was the physical coverup of The Society’s entryway into their secret underground tomb. I mentioned the historic death of Nathan Hale, but claimed that it was actually caused by an anonymous tip from members of enemy societies. And I researched and included information about the real sculptor of the statue, Bella Lyon Pratt. Further, this attempt to capture the specific details of the site, extended beyond real, tangible details to include myths, as well. Through my

⁶³ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

⁶⁴ Ben Scher, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁶⁵ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.



The Nathan Hale Statue, including its material details, histories, and mythologies becomes a site-specific detail in *The Initiation*.
Photo by Alec Zbornak

research, I learned that Yale tour guides used to tell tall tales of the CIA’s breaking into Old Campus to steal the statue of Nathan Hale.⁶⁶ So I decided to weave this myth into the narrative experience by writing, “It was widely theorized that in the mid-twentieth century, the CIA snuck into old campus to steal the statue of Nathan Hale. ... In reality, these CIA operatives were former members of opposing Yale societies, [attempting] to break into our supposed underground tomb.”⁶⁷ By integrating the histories, material objects, details, and mythologies of my locations into my story, I was able to harness site-specificity to blur the lines between fact and fiction and thus weave a believable,

functionable narrative, connecting all of these seemingly disparate details with a totalizing story. Interesting enough, at the end of their experiences, many audience members asked me how much of *The Initiation* was real. One sophomore audience member even suggested that it might be a real secret society at Yale.⁶⁸ Through the integration of realism, this emphasis on site specificity

⁶⁶ Berson, “To woo students, tour guides blur fact-fiction line.”

⁶⁷ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

⁶⁸ And there’s an argument to be made that it may have become a secret society, even if solely in lore. New secret societies are created every year at Yale. Through this experience, a group of students all participated in a common set of initiation rituals and rites, leaving them with a shared understanding of their group’s values and traditions. That an experience like this could actually create something hints at something potentially sinister and powerful about superimposing narratives over real places. By using site-specific details in immersive fiction, this medium

maintains a connection to totality; both attempt to capture the verisimilitude of real places and real times and to totalize them by demonstrating how interconnected and interrelated every detail is within the story.

Moreover, from a design standpoint, the specific sites shown were also presented in a way that emphasized their interconnections and totality. In choosing distinct sites that are familiar to the audience, I ran the risk of some members seeing these sites as disparate, separate buildings part of a fixed landscape and not as moments in a constantly evolving process. For many students and even some faculty audience members, it may be hard to imagine a Yale without the Nathan Hale statue, created in 1915; or the Beinecke, created in 1963; or even the “Square with four circles” painting, created in 2010. Thus, it could be easy to see them as static landmarks, especially in a campus as old as Yale’s. To avoid these works becoming mere static objects, I decided to emphasize their creation processes. At each location, I signaled to how, when, and by who these works were produced. For example, with the statue of Nathan Hale, I write, “This particular statue was sculpted by an artist by the name of Bella Lyon Pratt, another Yale alumnus and member of the Society of Everything.”⁶⁹ With the Beinecke, I write, “In 1963, Yale began construction on this very Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.... According to myth, architect Gordon Bunshaft, a member of MIT’s burgeoning Massachusetts The Society branch, implemented a unique structural feature to the building.”⁷⁰ And with “Square with four circles” I write, “Felice Varini painted this mural in 2010, the same year he was said to have joined The Society. He is famous for using the real surrounding architecture and environment to

may have the power to positively assert new truths, realities, or fictions. In **V.4**, I will further trace this thread of totalized immersion’s potential power to create and assert propaganda.

⁶⁹ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

produce elaborately complicated works.”⁷¹ This emphasis on creation also encouraged the audience members to think through the spaces as fluid, subject-to-change because of their growing and shifting connections to and relationships with people, such as their creators.

As one audience member expressed, “All of those things [the different locations] did feel connected. . . . [I]t was connected with the storyline—society being linked to different spaces on campus.”⁷² She even went so far as to express that she had “never linked those spaces together in that specific context.”⁷³ For the audience, these connections occur at two different levels: primarily at the story level and secondarily at individual level via people’s memories. Many audience members suggested that while they are standing in the spaces, they find themselves thinking about all of their other associations they have in the space. Phelps Hall, for example, represents both The Society’s old meeting space and the place where one audience member first came to visit Yale. He referred to this newly defined relationship as “[a]dditional narratives I was laying onto my associations with those places,” and he explained that “In each location there was both the story and my own memories that I carry with me.”⁷⁴ This combination of personal memories joined with narratives connecting places and people, story and real world, situates and immerses the audience members clearly within an interconnected, totalized world. Yet, to access these different spaces and to see the interconnections at play, *The Initiation* requires that the audience members physically move from one site to the next.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Grace Aaronson, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Drew Prinster, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

V.3 Movement

As the audience responses demonstrated, movement proved to be the least effective method of totalized immersion in this experience and served less as an active part of the story and more as liminal periods of reflection between major narrative beats. One audience member went so far as to call this period of movement “interim or intermission between heavier narrative parts.”⁷⁵ In terms of the story experience, nothing happens narratively to the characters while they are on route. Every story point occurs once the audience member arrives at the instructed place. In designing this piece, I had hoped that this act of physically moving between spaces to unveil the story would make the audience feel like they are a necessary part of the narrative



An edited video in *The Initiation* shows this building, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, disappearing into the earth. *Photo by Alec Zbornak*

⁷⁵ Ibid.

process—that their movement allows the story to continue. Yet, because the act of moving didn't contribute to or reinforce the story at hand, it seems as if movement became less about the process more about getting to the different independent story beats. Later, a different audience member compared this period of movement to “turning the pages of a book.”⁷⁶ It feels safe to say that most readers don't consider page-turning a major contribution to the story. Because movement made up a majority of the experience temporally, through my failure to make these hefty transition moments “feel like part of the story,”⁷⁷ I risked isolating the major story beats from one another and interfering with the interconnected totality.

There seems to be two explicit problems that led to transition moments taking people outside of the realm of the story, de-immersing them: a lack of content and extra-story interactions. First, there is no officially designed content leading the audience member through these liminal periods—one audience member suggested that I include music to thematically and tonally keep my audience within the world of the story.⁷⁸ Not only would additional eerie music, she believed, maintain the tone of the piece, but also, it would practically help to eliminate the hassle in putting on and taking off headphones at each location. Similarly, in future iterations, I can also add other audio like mini radio-plays or dialogues during these liminal periods, something to better use this walking time. Thus, the first problem is a lack of guiding throughout these liminal spaces, which prevented the audience members from feeling immersed and connected to the story during much of the experience. The second major problem with these transition moments is the presence of other people outside of the story world.

⁷⁶ Simon Rabinowitz, Personal Interview, April 19, 2021.

⁷⁷ Greta Browne, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁷⁸ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

Many audience members expressed that their journeys between places were filled with interactions with random people. Of course, this production took place on a college campus and my participants were students, so many of them knew various passersby.⁷⁹ In designing this experience, I hoped that the audience members would be able to integrate these people and these connections into the story network, further establishing this sense of an interconnected, totalized world of which they are apart. Instead, as the results indicated, these random meetings seem to remove the audience from the story world, altogether. One Good Samaritan audience member talked about how she went on a ten-minute excursion from the story to help a stranger whose grocery bag ruptured near the “Square with four circles” painting.⁸⁰ Another stopped to talk to a recently admitted college student and her mother in front of Phelps Hall about his experiences at Yale. And when I was play-testing the experience, I happened to see Yale’s beloved mascot, Handsome Dan, on cross campus and couldn’t help but take a few minutes to say hello. These extra-story moments even extend to interactions within groups of participants who went on this journey together. Several of my audience members took part in the experience as a group, and they expressed that during their transition periods they rarely talked about the story. As one noted, the periods of movement “didn’t feel like part of the story—maybe if it was an individual [journey] it would. We would talk about other things.”⁸¹ As this quotation expresses, these audience members could easily leave the story world with other conversations.

⁷⁹ In addition to being more likely to have random interactions, that my audience members were all students has many other implications towards their experiences with the piece. Overall, they were much more familiar with the environment and the site-specific details than first-time visitors would be. They knew how to get around. Also, it meant they were all of a certain age, which, I imagine, helped them seamlessly use the technology without any major hiccups. If I were to redesign this experience for a truly diverse audience, then I might need to rethink some of the assumptions I made knowing that my audience would mostly be peers—namely, familiarity with site, navigability, and user-friendliness of technology.

⁸⁰ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁸¹ Greta Browne, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

This aversion to a collective experience of this project proves a bit worrying for a model of totality through immersion, as does extra-story interactions. In these cases, the real interactions of everyday life, both with people outside of the story and with fellow participants, prove distracting to the overarching story. From an immersive design perspective, totalized immersion is supposed to make people feel like they are part of a network of interconnections within a story world. From a Lukácsian perspective, totality is supposed to make people feel interconnected to the world around them. Thus, there is a tension with the idea that certain kind of connections and relationships that people experience along their journey can actually take people out of this story world. As demonstrated, this phenomenon was most apparent during these transitional periods of movement, when there was no major story experience and in which they often ran into people on a crowded college campus.⁸²

However, it is interesting to note, despite all of these random interactions, most audience members said they never felt completely out of the realm of the story. Some even expressed that these transitional periods served as useful moments of narrative reflection: “I was thinking about it [the story] while I was going to the next location; I was reflecting on it.”⁸³ One audience member said that the story “was always on my mind.”⁸⁴ These audience members said they never felt completely removed from the story experience. But they also conditioned this remark with the caveat that it was the previous and next locations, mainly, that kept them invested in this story experience, not the walk. One member explained that “It was more about the destination

⁸² There’s an argument to be made that perhaps, if I had chosen a different, less secretive storyline, these interactions wouldn’t have felt so drastically out of place. And this objection is probably true to some degree; however, I maintain that, as I will elaborate in **V.4** when putting on experiences in real-world spaces, there is always the possibility of some unpredictable, infelicitous interaction or random occurrence taking the audience member out of the story. Therefore, it’s not solely a problem with this specific narrative, and rather a symptom of the medium.

⁸³ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁸⁴ Drew Prinster, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

than the journey”⁸⁵ and another said, “To some extent, the only capacity that I was thinking about the story was [through] the next destination and knowing I’d learn more when I got there.”⁸⁶ These quotations demonstrate that, while *The Initiation* integrated character and place well into the experience, it failed to use movement as an adequate platform for totalized immersion.

V.4 PROBLEMS WITH *THE INITIATION* AND TOTALIZED IMMERSION

While these aforementioned flaws in *The Initiation* appear most notably in these periods of movement, they also exist more broadly to some degree in other aspects of the experience. This idea that extra-story interactions, other people, other things, other connections, can remove audience members from the immersive experience pervades all aspects of the location-based stories. For example, regarding the audience role, some people felt like *The Initiation* would have served better as a solo experience, both because narratively the experience seems to invoke a single hero and because participating in a group leads to conversations outside of the story world.⁸⁷ And, regarding place, even once the audience members arrive at each site, they are still faced with factors of the outside world that de-immerses them from the story: cars honking, people asking for photos, and friends approaching to see what they’re doing.⁸⁸ Even just the act of watching people outside of the story world interact simultaneously in the same space as the immersive experience, is distracting, one audience member expressed.⁸⁹ Site-specific entertainment, like *The Initiation*, lacks the kind of control that other location-based

⁸⁵ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁸⁶ Drew Prinster, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

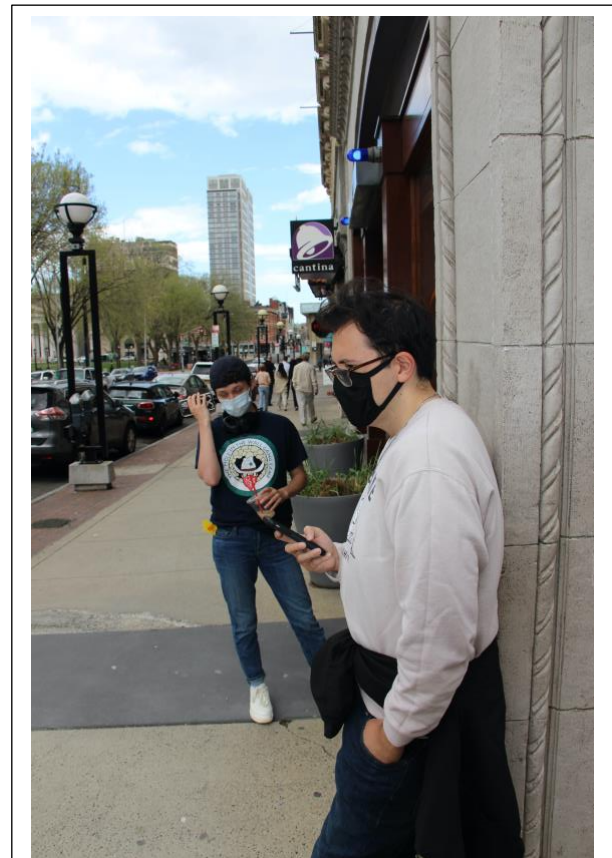
⁸⁷ Grace Aaronson, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁸⁸ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

⁸⁹ Simon Rabinowitz, Personal Interview, April 19, 2021.

entertainment experiences, such as theme parks offer. Accordingly, when all of these factors are out of the designer’s control in site-specific experiences like *The Initiation*, there can exist a tension between the narrative world and realist world. This begs the question, how can site-specific designers of totality through immersion respond to these factors seemingly outside of their control?

Through audience interviews and my own personal reflections on the medium, I have come to two major responses to real-world phenomena interfering with the story immersion: suppress them or co-opt them into the story. I employed both methodologies to some degree in my design, but they have drastically different implications for how we view totalized immersion. *The Initiation* employs this first response—ignoring or hiding real-world distractions—through its use of music and soundscapes. At the beginning of the experience, audience members are told that the story “works best with headphones”⁹⁰ and throughout specific parts they are requested to listen to audio while reading. This attempt to control what people hear through headphones cancels out distracting noise from the real world that might take the audience out of the story. As mentioned earlier, one



Audio components, like soundscapes and radio plays, function narratively and, for headphone-wearing guests, as a way to mitigate distractions from the outside world. *Photo by Alec Zbornak*

⁹⁰ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

audience member suggested “it’d be cool if the music continued while you were walking from place to place.”⁹¹ Furthermore, there is the possibility that encouraging audience members to wear their headphones throughout the duration of the experience might make others less willing to approach them and interrupt—though, this, of course, is merely a hypothesis. While this method may assert some greater control over the sea of factors that arise in site-specific storytelling experiences, it is by no means complete. Even with headphones, loud abrupt noises like honking cars or crying children can still prove distracting.

Furthermore, the implications of this method for a totalizing immersive framework are a bit worrying. By hiding details from the outside world for the purpose of creating an immersive story, narrative could actually make people feel more separated from their real worlds, or alternatively, the real world could make people feel separated from the narrative. From a Lukácsian perspective, this sense of isolation or ostracization created by the apparent distance between the narrative and real worlds, seems to me to be counterproductive to the Marxist model. Totality in narrative, for Lukács, is supposed to reveal and encourage deeper Marxist reflections on the inherent interconnections that pervade our everyday lives. So if a narrative forces people to shut out these natural interconnections and relationships—that talk with a friend or meeting of a stranger—then it does not seem to be actively championing true totality.

Of course, there is the second type of response to these random interactions: integrate them into the story experience, like we did with each major site on our journey. The reason that these distinct places feel more like part of the story than movement and random interactions is that we found a way to integrate their specific details. Obviously, this becomes much more of a daunting task when our site is a sprawling landscape constantly in flux. As such, there are

⁹¹ Katherine Arackparambil, Personal Interview, April 21, 2021.

infinite factors that the designer is unable to control: random interactions with people, constantly shifting background noise, drastic lighting changes, constructions, road blockages, etc. But, perhaps we could expand the reach of the narrative to include some more of these factors, once thought to be out of the designer's control. This method suggests finding a way to expand the scope of the narrative to integrate site-specific details beyond a few locations—that is, to include sizably more things that the audience member might face on their journey. Under this method, interactions with friends, run-ins with a stranger, ambulance sirens could all, in theory, be integrated into the story, could become another part of the ever-connected network of things making up the story world.

This attempt to include everything from the real world in the story world has its limits. It would be difficult to suspend the audience's belief to the point that they start to suspect that even the most innocuous details, like a piece of litter or a bird's chirp, are important components that contribute to the story. And in radically shifting environments like college campuses, it is impossible to predict what things might make their way into the set. However, broad attempts can be made to expand the reach of the sorts of details that this genre of story covers. For example, were I to better harness this method in *The Initiation*, I might have added a sentence early on along the lines of, "On your journey, you will see many people, familiar and strange. Are they secret members of our order? Or perhaps enemy agents seeking your destruction. You can never be too sure." This gesture might help to reframe these random, de-immersing interactions as details that support the story. Within the context of *The Initiation*, a seemingly innocuous talk with a friend might read as a coded conversation about The Society. The drawback of this method is that this attempt to include everything coherently into the story is

untenable. If Lukács's realist novels referred to everything in the real world, they would no longer be novels. They would be encyclopedias.

In fact, I used *The Initiation*'s narrative to highlight this failed attempt at total inclusion. The Society's official charter reads, "Dissatisfied with the constraints and alienations of the Linonian and the Brothers of Unity, we see the need for of a new kind of society in New Haven, one that prioritizes the bonds of all people growing together as one, one community, one people, one species."⁹² This fictional society, unlike others at Yale was supposedly started by a combination of Yale students and New Haven residents with the intention of foregoing typical concepts of elitism to include everyone who wants to join. Yet, as the story unfolds, the audience learns that various threats to this society and its members' safety made total inclusion increasingly difficult. Their radical inclusion causes The Society's membership to "quickly outpaced that of its peer institutions, angering those other societies' more powerful alums, who wanted vengeance. ... So The Society began meeting in secret, no longer out in the open in front of Phelps Gate. Most assumed we disappeared—that we disbanded." Thus, as this part of the story demonstrates, total inclusion, while a lofty goal, proves untenable for The Society. So too with these types of story experiences. While designers, like myself, may be tempted to attempt to include everything within this story framework—to make the storyline perfectly parallel with our real world—it often simply isn't possible. *The Initiation* both formally and narratively illustrates this tension that arises with totality of immersion.

What's more is the potential dangers of trying too hard to force every aspect of the real world into the world of the story. Communist and socialist movements have long and complicated histories with totalitarianism. Far more than a linguistic link, the connection

⁹² Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

between totality and totalitarian cannot be ignored. In fact, according to scholar Martin Jay in the mid-twentieth century work *Dialect of Enlightenment* by philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “totality lost virtually all of its positive connotations and became almost a synonym for totalitarianism.”⁹³ Essentially, these thinkers worried that totalizing a random world verged on an attempt at “the domination of nature,” in which people too “were treated as if they were natural objects to be mastered.”⁹⁴ While these thinkers thought through totalization mostly in terms of the hyper-rationalized of all things in everyday life, the concept of an attempt at “domination of nature” and people remains valid in a totalized narrative framework, as well. Thus, while potentially beneficial for totalized immersion, claiming that everything in the real world is but a component of some overarching story, has grave totalitarian implications. It could be read as an attempt to enforce cohesive single narrative themes, truths, ideologies, or “propaganda”⁹⁵ onto an exceedingly “accidental and meaningless” world being, in which “everything that is, could just as well be otherwise.”⁹⁶ And while this works within the realm of fiction and narrative, it seems increasingly dangerous to assert totalized narrative cohesion in site-specific entertainment, when the story world can be wholly indistinguishable from the real world.

Narratively, as mentioned earlier, immersive entertainment relies on the suspension of disbelief. Coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the full term was originally the “willing suspension of disbelief.”⁹⁷ This first word *willing* indicates that one has to agree to enter into the story experience, almost like a contract, to suspend his or her disbelief. Obviously, this is not to

⁹³ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 261.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁶ Lukács, “Metaphysics of Tragedy,” 180.

⁹⁷ Böcking, “Suspension of Disbelief,” 1.

say that an audience member can easily decide to do this; rather it stresses the importance of consent in this process. In the case of totalized location-based experiences, it seems a bit unclear whether someone can actively consent to having their real world totalized, or dominated, as Adorno and Horkheimer would say, into something unfamiliar. Can one consent to propaganda? Should one? On the one hand, we might respond to this fear, like Younger does in his treatise *Theme Park Design* by saying “No guest will ever actually believe they are in another world of course.”⁹⁸ In this view, perhaps we need to have faith that our audience can enjoy the experience just for what it is. People can hold more than one thought at the same time. Audience members of totalized immersive experiences can simultaneously know that they are in the real world, that they are in a story world, and that they are currently participating in an experience that’s putting them in the story world. On the other hand, considering the recent uptick in cases of fake news and lies propagated on other communication and social media platforms—and the notable harm they’ve caused—using a story format that relies on blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction in the real world may be irresponsible and dangerous.

VI. CONCLUSION: A MARXIST THEME PARK?

“The point in question is the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being as a member of the community.”⁹⁹

This quote proves useful in comparing and contrasting the two opposing models of immersion I’ve explored today. While neoliberalism stresses the individual choices of a decision-making agent, Lukácsian totality stresses the collective interconnectedness of all things. Stated simply, the former emphasizes the individual and the latter emphasizes the communal. Of

⁹⁸ Younger, *Theme Park Design*, 86.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetics*, 28.

course, both ideologies, come with their own flaws and limits. But this is not to say that we can't still experiment with these forms to create story experiences that aim to immerse audience members in a narrative, as I attempted to do with *The Initiation*.

Through my creation and research process, I've learned a lot about totalized immersion and how to use it to integrate character, place, and movement. As such, were I to revamp *The Initiation* or to work on a similar project to champion totalized immersion, I'd do some things the same and some things differently: I would make sure to pick a basic storyline that is more inclusive than something like a secret society, and I would ensure that, to the best of my ability, everyone in the community would be able to partake in it, not just students with swipe access. I would continue to make the audience members characters, though I would make sure that their interactions fit the type of characters they were. I would continue to integrate site-specific details into the narrative. I would still include movement, though I think I would incorporate more theme-setting audio for these transition moments. Practically, I'd want to make the experience a bit longer and to perhaps include more active interactions. Most notably, I would want to experiment a bit more with thinking through ways to integrate random occurrences into the storyline. The method would vary with the narrative, but as a general rule, I think I would want to precede the audience's journey with something along the lines of

*On this quest strangers or peers, you may see,
But be wary of their true identity.
For in this world you never know,
Who is friend and who is foe.*

I believe that so long as this framing device is fantastical enough that the audience member would never truly believe it, then there should be no major worries of propaganda from totalized immersion undermining their world view.

Overall, though, *The Initiation* served as a very helpful prototype for me to think through totalized immersion; and, not insignificantly, it gave a group of students a fun and safe story adventure to take part in in-person during a particularly tough semester of pandemic collegiate life, when just about everything else is online.

The Initiation, has, however, left one major question ringing through my mind: Where do these totalized story experiences go? That is, where—and what—is the Marxist theme park? While this is majorly a topic for a different paper, I'd like to preliminarily conjecture a few things. As I see it, the Marxist theme park could not be a paid experience and thus part of a capitalistic project.¹⁰⁰ It could not rely solely on choice or the heroism and power of an individual. And it could not exist in a highly themed or entirely controlled environment, acting more as caricature of a place without real responsibilities or implications. Rather, the Marxist theme park, would have to be accessible to all people, regardless of socio-economic class. It'd have to be free. It would have to champion, not the individual, but the collective, the totalized whole. It would have to weave its narrative experiences over and through the site-specific details of a real environment. Perhaps, every now and then, some efforts for totalized cohesion would tread the totalitarian line and verge on propaganda. But perhaps others would use unifying narrative arcs to position the entire community around political change: a living wage, free education, social welfare, free health care, and new models of community care.

Regardless, with this speculative world looming in its wake, *The Initiation*, as a free, mostly accessible story superimposed over a real world, aiming to reinforce people's connections to their worlds and to each other, might serve not just as a model of totalized immersion, but also as a model of a new kind of Marxist theme park.

¹⁰⁰ Clément, “‘They All Trust Mickey Mouse’: Showcasing American Capitalism in Disney Theme parks.”

VII. APPENDIX:

Click Here to Access the Story Experience

VII.1 THE RULES

Using the clues given to you on this website, you will go to four different places in the Yale-New Haven area along this narrative journey. At each destination, take a moment to explore the real place around you: What do you notice about it? Have you walked here before? Then, look back to the website to unlock and discover the secret stories hidden there. The experience should take about twenty to thirty minutes to complete, and you can do so at your own pace. You need a smartphone or tablet with internet access to complete the narrative. It works best with headphones. The experience can be done individually or in a small group.

VII.2 THE STORY¹⁰¹

This story begins with a call to action. It's a message. A mysterious message. In your inbox. A link to a cryptic webpage with a single sentence on the landing page:

*We've noticed you.
Begin your initiation.*¹⁰²

Next Page.

We are part of ancient society. You've most likely never heard of us. Those who wish us harm have forced us underground for quite some time, now. But, we hope to rebuild. To come back even stronger. To do this, we need your help. You must learn about our world, about our mission, and about our story. You must learn to see the process in the prosaic. And if you do so successfully, you will join our order and learn the Truth.

Next page.

*To learn about our order
There's much to unearth
Head to Yale's oldest mortar
To begin your process of rebirth*

*Head to Phelps Hall in Old Campus.
Go to the next page when you arrive.*

There's a photo of their first destination—Yale Old Campus, Phelps Hall.

¹⁰¹ Zbornak, *The Initiation*.

¹⁰² For the purpose of this paper, anything that the audience member reads on the website is italicized and/or centered.

Next Page.

There's a swirling video of the view from Phelps Hall.

On April 8th 1773 in the middle of the night, a group of five Yale College students and five New Havenites performed a series of initiation rituals to celebrate the founding of a new kind society at Yale. The ground was covered in candles, wax dripping on the stone. Cloaked figures stood motionless in a semi-circle, humming softly in the New Haven night. The only other sound was the gentle swaying of the Elm Trees. One student approached the center of the circle, removed a piece of parchment from his cloak, and read aloud the following declaration:

Below there's "The Society Charter" a scan of a yellowed-out, burnt-edged founding document, dated April 7th, 1769. Accompanying audio is played.

Dissatisfied with the constraints and alienations of the Linonian and the Brothers of Unity, we see the need for of a new kind of society in New haven, one that prioritizes the bonds of all people growing together as one, one community, one people, one species. For the greatest bonds are those that have existed all along, by the nature of our relationships to and with each other—that is, by the nature of our human condition. So, we, Society of Everything, do formally announce our founding on this April 7th 1769.

Below that is more font.

Though widely forgotten today, The Society was once an active force at Yale, New Haven, and Connecticut, at large. It attracted hundreds of members all convening every Wednesday and Saturday in front of Phelps Hall—open for all to see, for all to join. Membership quickly outpaced that of its peer institutions, angering those other societies' more powerful alums, who wanted vengeance. They vowed to bury us.

Next Page.

With this, a video of original view in front of Phelps Hall comes back, except, everything other than the pathway heading to the statue of Nathan Hale has been dimmed, leading them towards their next destination. Below

To learn about the society's demise, use the following clue to head to your next destination.

*He was a spy for his nation
With but one life to lose.
Learn the truth behind his tale
And discover that of our creation
With the first of your three clues
At the Old Campus Statue of Nathan Hale*

Next page. There's a video of the sign by Nathan Hale statue.

Congratulations, you've made it to the first site on our journey—The Statue of Nathan Hale. Nathan Hale is widely known as one of America's first spies. He lived in Connecticut Hall, where you currently stand. For a while, he was a member of Linonium. But he soon grew dissatisfied with the club's elitism and ostracization from the rest of the community. The day before his graduation from Yale, Hale decided to leave Linonium and join The Society. His former Linonium members took the news of his transfer as a betrayal of the highest degree. When he began spying for the American forces during the revolutionary war, they found the perfect opportunity to strike.

An anonymous letter was delivered to a British captain on September 21, 1776. It had but one line: "All Hale the rat -- L."

Nathan Hale was executed the following day at the hands of the British forces. It was then that he uttered his famous last words, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." He wore The Society pin in his final moments.

Below is an image of the pin, which looks like the "Square with four circles" painting featured later. Below that

In the years following, Hale became somewhat of a martyr for our society—and a warning against the dark, outside forces that wish us harm. As we came to learn, openly being a member meant being a potential target. So The Society began meeting in secret, no longer out in the open in front of Phelps Gate. Most assumed we disappeared—that we disbanded. But some rumored that we started meeting elsewhere...

Next Page. A photo of the Nathan Hale Statue.

This statue was sculpted by an artist by the name of Bella Lyon Pratt, another Yale alumnus and member of The Society. Some believed that he built the statue to cover up a secret entrance to an underground tomb: a complex network of people and things stretching underneath the city of New Haven—and the assumed site of our newest meeting place. When day turned to night, it was rumored that our members took to this rising world below.

Our enemies were determined to force their ways in.

As the story goes, in the mid-twentieth century, the CIA snuck into Old Campus in the middle of the night to steal this very statue. Most assumed they wanted the original work for their headquarters to commemorate America's first intelligence agent. But we know their true intentions. These operatives were former members of opposing societies at Yale. They weren't trying to steal the statue—they wanted to move it to break into our "underground tomb" to learn more about our order's presence. They scaled the walls in the middle of the hazy New Haven night, approached the statue, and pushed it to the side, all they saw was dirt and stone. "They're gone."

Next Page. A photo of Beinecke Library.

Head to the next stop on our journey to discover more:

*Where the marble glows bright
And the books are primary
Go to your next site
Outside the Beinecke Library*

Next Page. A swirling video of the tiles of Beinecke Library is revealed.

After we supposedly left Old Campus, it was suspected that we were in search of a new meeting location, one that could properly conceal our identities from those that wished us harm. In 1963, Yale began construction on this very Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, complete with a large underground area connected to an elaborate system of steam tunnels. According to myth, architect Gordon Bunshaft, a member of MIT's burgeoning Massachusetts branch of The Society, implemented a unique structural feature to the building: In the event of an emergency, the entire Beinecke could submerge completely underground, protecting its priceless collection of works.

Next page. A brief video: After a few seconds of a still shot on Beinecke, a rumbling sound starts and the building submerges into the ground.

Until the early twenty-first century, night-owls reported seeing and hearing strange things coming from the Beinecke. Every so often, passersby even swore that the building disappeared entirely, though local authorities brushed these claims off as mere figments of the imaginations of a few drunk bar patrons.

However, as members of our enemy societies rose to power within the Yale administration, the Beinecke, along with most other potential meeting locations on campus, became virtually impenetrable. If we were to meet, we'd have to do it secretly in downtown New Haven.

Next Page. A photo of the Varini Painting in Downtown New Haven.

Head to the next stop on our journey to discover more

*Across from the NH Green,
Where protests do rally
And Next to Zinc's modern cuisine
Lies a hidden mural in the adjacent alley*

Head to this painting in Downtown New Haven.

Next Page. A swirling video of the painting's plaque.

Felice Varini made this painting in 2010. He is famous for using his architectural environment to produce elaborately complicated works. Some speculated that Varini was also a member of The

Society. After being invited to New Haven to paint this mural many saw a striking resemblance between his work and our pin, leading some to think it was the site of The Society's newest meeting spot.

Below is an image of the Society of Everything Pin, which bears striking resemblance to this painting.

Next page. A photo of the painting. An audio file, presenting an interview between Varini and his friend talking about how this meeting location was a bit of a placeholder, though did a lot for including members of the New Haven community. At the very end, one of them intimates that they were planning on moving back to their founding location in front of Phelps Hall, but need someone to help.

In 2020, New Haven Plaza security cameras picked up the following audio. We have since obtained it:

X: Oh, good; it's you.

Y: Who else?

X: You can never be too sure these days.

Y: Fair enough.

X: You know how I feel about the new site.

Y: Too open.

X: Too vulnerable.

Y: In due time.

X: What?

Y: In due time, we can return below.

X: Say more.

Y: I overheard the elders talking, and they are planning a great return

X: A great return?

Y: Yes... back.

X: You don't mean back to PH, to the world below?

Y: Precisely. It could just be a rumor.

X: What are they waiting for?

Y: For the right person.

X: Wait do you see that?

Y: Is that a camera?

X: It's been listening to us.

Y: Grab it!

Cue rustling noise and then a few beeps and cut to silence.

Next Page. A photo of Phelps Hall.

*It all ends where it all began.
Back to Phelps Hall.*

Next Page. A photo of the society symbol superimposed over Phelps Hall.

Congratulations. You have uncovered our histories, walked in our footsteps, and learned our story. We haven't been back here in a while. We've been waiting for the right person to bring us home. And, clearly, that person is you.

Next Page. A photo of the pin. Accompany audio to be played while reading

As we are sure you've noticed, we care a lot about our history, not for reasons of power or prestige. But because it tells our story, it makes sense of our realities. Everyone, everything, every place has a story. And, as you've learned, uncovering them, living and reliving them is a process—a process of attention, of movement, of looking, and of listening. Our members are special. They know that to see the Truth is to see everything as a process, as a story. Everything: friendship, history, art. This journey was your process. And it's the beginning of your initiation into The Society.

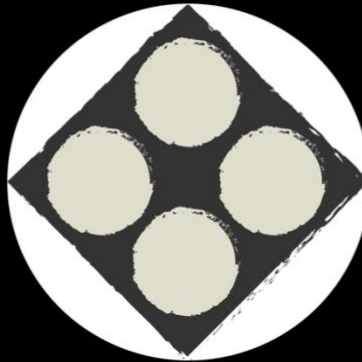
*You've just reached the precipice.
Welcome below.*

Click the following "Enter" button to open up the tunnel, your portal, to the world below. It will open in a different tab. Click the AR button. Follow the on-screen instructions and use your fingers to adjust its size on the ground in front of Phelps Hall. Take a photo of your portal in the world and send it to theinitiation@gmail.com to receive something special.

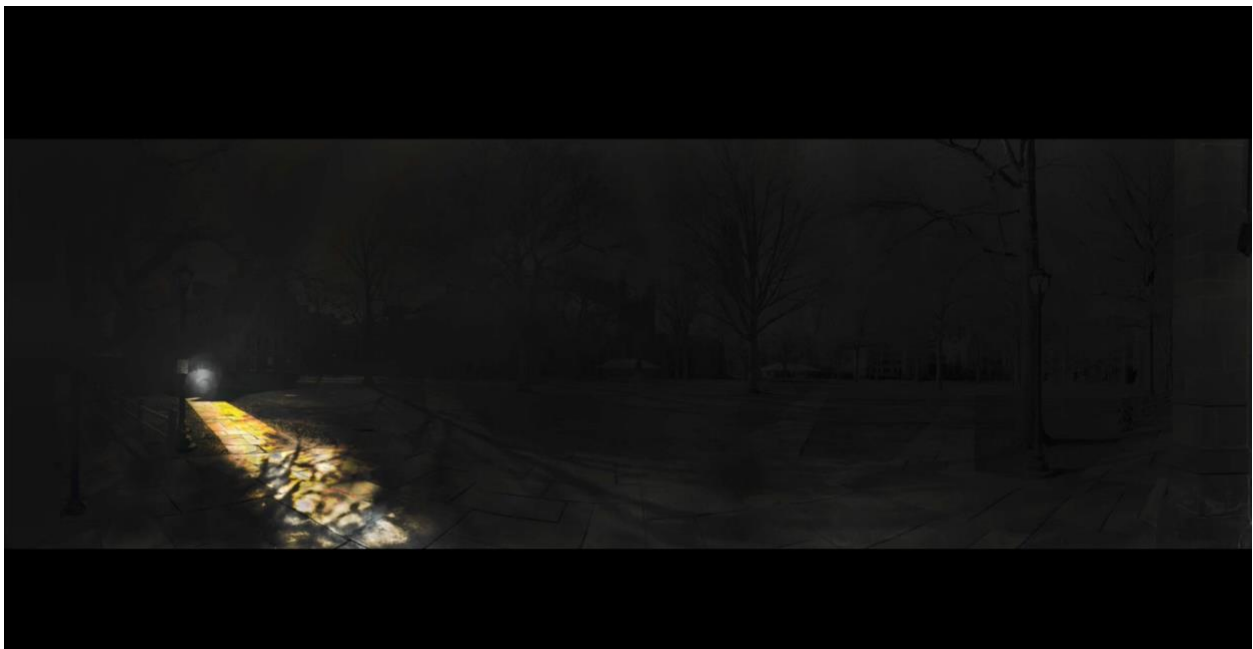
As they accept, they will have the ability to use their phones to access the AR view of a portal, the tunnel showing to the Society's newest tomb, back where it all began.

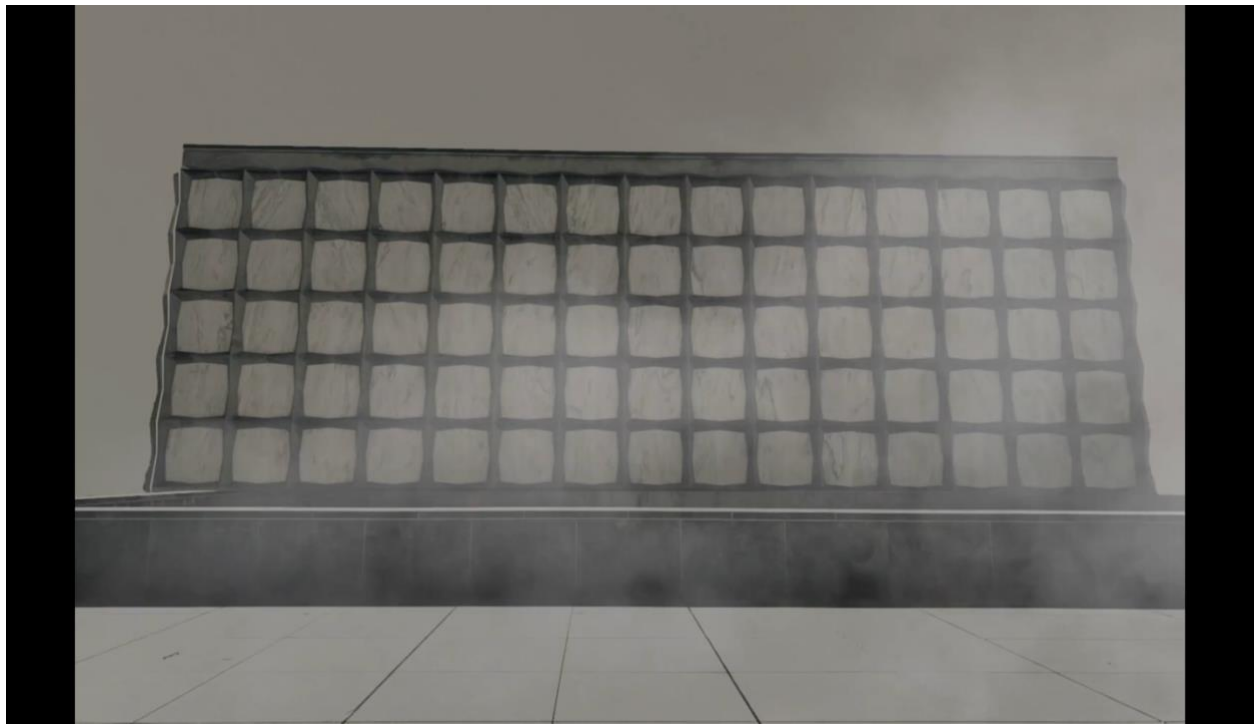
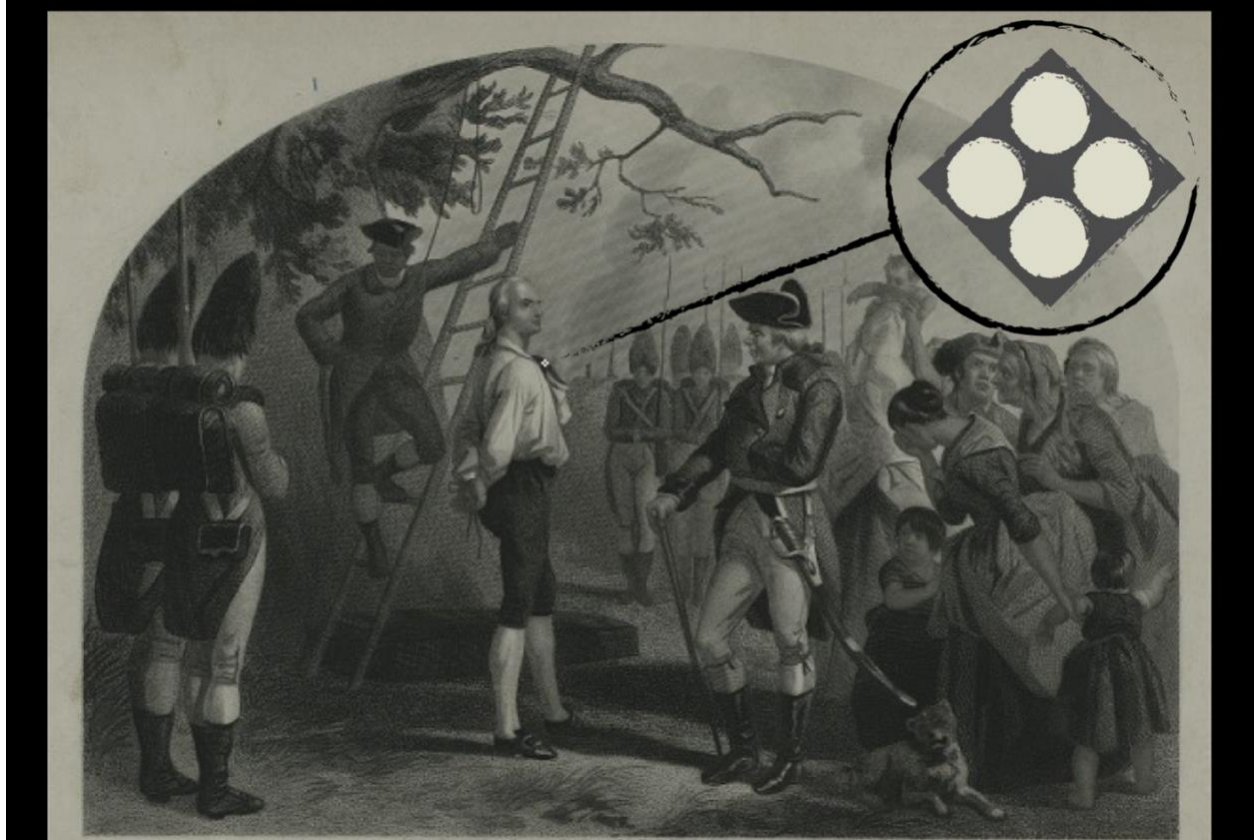
--The End --

VII.3 SCREENSHOTS FROM THE WEBSITE



We are part of ancient society. You've most likely never heard of us. Those who wish us harm have forced us underground for quite some time, now. But, we hope to rebuild. To come back even stronger. To do this, we need your help. You must learn about our world, about our mission, and about our story. You must learn to see the process in the prosaic. And if you do so successfully, you will join our order and learn the Truth.







Head to the next stop on our journey to discover more

*Across from the NH Green,
Where protests do rally
And Next to Zinc's modern cuisine
Lies a hidden mural in the adjacent alley*



*Congratulations. You have uncovered our histories, walked in our footsteps,
and learned our story. We haven't been back here in a while. We've been
waiting for the right person to bring us home. And, clearly, that person is you.*

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