

# *Visual Storytelling* **within The Walt Disney Company**

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# *Overview*

The Walt Disney Company, commonly known as Disney, is one of the major media conglomerates in our world. Not only does Disney have a wide range of their own films, television shows, theme parks, and merchandise, they also own companies such as ABC, ESPN, Marvel, Pixar, Hulu and many more companies that have solidified its long-lasting success in the media industry. Disney has also made significant strides in the streaming space with the launch of Disney+, a service that houses their extensive library of films and shows. With a commitment to storytelling, innovation, and family-friendly values, the company remains a dominant force in the media landscape.

At the heart of Disney's approach is its commitment to storytelling. Every attraction, character interaction, and even the smallest detail at a cruise ship room contributes to the immersive experiences. The architecture, costumes, and animatronics are some of the key aspects that create a sense of wonder and connection for guests of all ages. Disney's online marketing complements its parks by reinforcing its brand's magical essence. Campaigns often emphasize the nostalgia, family bonding, and the promise of dreams coming true through visually cohesive designs.

This white paper will dive into the ways Disney incorporates emotional design and Gestalt principles to enhance storytelling, branding, and guest/user experiences. By analyzing the design choices in online marketing and within the parks, there will be an understanding of how these design strategies strengthen Disney's branding of bringing their stories and characters to life.

# *Visual Storytelling*

Visual storytelling is the act of using visual elements such as videos, photos, and graphics to strengthen a story. In media, the visuals that are being used should convey a message to the desired audience. The ways that elements are presented need to hook the consumer to stay longer on an image, film, graphic, or photograph. Erica Santiago, a staff writer for HubSpot explains visual storytelling is a useful concept when creating marketing because you can share your mission and visions, positive change within the brand, and where the brand stands on important issues. These marketing goals can keep a company's digital and physical image cohesive so that users can anticipate and remember experiences.



# *Emotional Design*

Emotions can trigger users to communicate feelings and make decisions, such as purchase a product or service. Graphic Designer Ellen Lupton details identifies the tools that allow designers to create emotional designs for their users in the second chapter of her book "Design is Storytelling". Lupton explains, "Designers use color, light, texture, and sound to modulate the mood of a product, service, or place. Allowing these elements to change in pace or intensity makes room for dips and rises in emotional energy." Users go through an emotional journey as they consume media, the easiest way to understand this is thinking about the highs, lows and intended result. While no business wants their audience to face conflict it is likely to occur so identifying these touchpoints in any design is an important step to create enticing experiences.

## *Gestalt Principles*

In combination with emotional design, the use of gestalt principles guide the ways that designers craft visually appealing works of art that consumers will interpret and engage with. The human brain is understood to perceive chunks of information such as color, tone, shape, movement and orientation to be a grouping.

Key principles include:

- Proximity: Closely spaced grouping of related elements.
- Similarity: Using consistent shapes or colors in a group.
- Figure ground: Helps user distinguishing a focus from background or foreground.
- Closure and Continuation: Users can mentally close the gaps of shapers they already know.

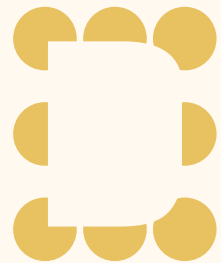


Figure Ground



Closure

# *Onsite Designs*

It goes without saying, the Disney Parks have captivated the world with the extensive creativity and innovation. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore at the Harvard Business Review express that Walt Disney was the experience-economy pioneer. Pine and Gilmore define experience economy as “an experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event”. The Disney franchise continues to thrive because they continue to provide services such as character based dining services, detailed rides and themed lands. Each attraction and space immerses guests in compelling narratives, while music, lighting, and visuals amplify emotional resonance. Designers incorporate interactive elements, like character meet-and-greets or custom experiences, fostering personal connections and unforgettable moments steeped in magic and nostalgia.



The Walt Disney Imagineers outdid themselves in June 2012 with the opening of Cars Land at Disney California Adventure. The space revolutionized visual storytelling in Disney parks by elevating the concept of immersive, narrative-driven environments. From the towering Cadillac Range mountain backdrop to the neon-lit Route 66 storefronts, the land replicates the charm and character of the movies with stunning realism. Attractions like Radiator Springs Racers integrate storytelling into the ride experience, combining thrilling mechanics with emotional engagement. Riders encounter beloved characters, participate in the film’s storyline, and race through beautifully crafted desert landscapes, showcasing Disney’s ability to merge physical spaces with cinematic narratives. The success of Cars Land set a new standard for themed lands and influenced projects like Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge.



# Social Media

Disney's marketing campaigns harness the nostalgia, excitement, and emotional appeal that audiences are drawn to. Campaigns that Disney releases, on their various social media accounts, often evoke childhood memories and cherished moments, tapping into the enduring love for iconic characters like Mickey Mouse and Disney Princesses. On December 4th, 2024 the Walt Disney World Instagram account shared the personal story of long time visitors. The ad, on the right, gives context to the authentic emotions visitors feel while at the parks and when they look back on their past trips. There is a call to action at the end of the video that encourages online viewers to share their own stories using [#ThisIsMagic](#). Capturing the Disney World logo on the microphone connects the moment visually to the emotional family moment that Disney thrives to evoke.

User-generated content (UGC) plays a crucial role in amplifying emotional engagement. Disney encourages fans to share photos, videos, and reviews of their visits on social media platforms. When influencers and the average person go to the Disney parks they can tag the park and use hashtags the company is promoting, which leads new audiences to engage with the profile. Kayla Kosuga is an example of an influencer who has taken many trip to the Disney Parks and posts both still and video content of the trip. The UGC fosters a sense of community and authenticity reinforce Disney's role in creating magical memories. By spotlighting fan content, Disney extends the conversation beyond its own marketing efforts, making fans feel like part of the brand's narrative.







# *Movie Posters*

Movie posters that effectively use Gestalt principles significantly influence how audience members engage with a film. Viewers' perception of a Disney film's main characters, genre, and key themes are presented in announcement posters and marketing materials. Each movie poster Disney releases is more than just a marketing tool—it's a piece of art that represents cherished memories, iconic characters, and timeless storytelling, which is why they sold to fans. From 2000 - 2010 Disney released 197 films, according to [D23's list of Disney Films](#), and they all had merchandise and marketing tools that were used before, during and after the movie's release date. The promotional posters all have examples of how Disney designers used Gestalt Principles in their work.



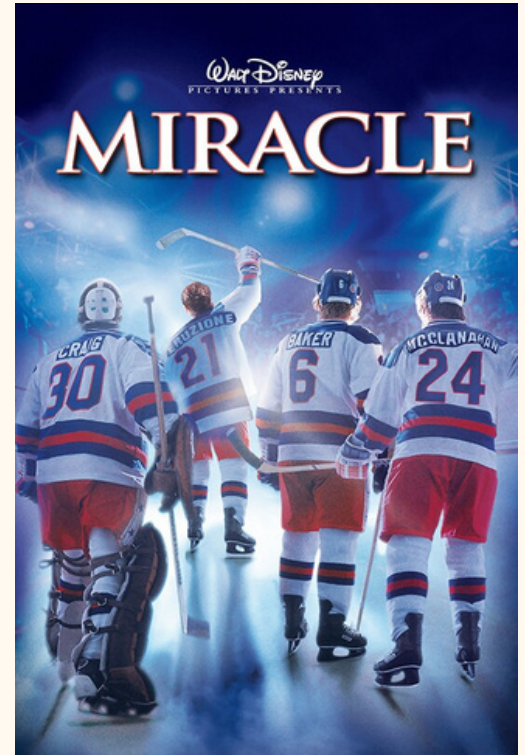
## *The Emperor's New Groove*

After a drawn-out production process, *The Emperor's New Groove* was released on December 15, 2000. The final art created for the movie was by legendary animators such as Joseph Barbera, William Hanna, Tex Avery and Chuck Jones and was the start of Disney's comedic approach to visual humor. Chris Pallant describes the animation to be cartoonal which leads audiences to expect the unexpected. Pallant explains the impacts of the new designing format with a scene breakdown, "Given the film's prevailing cartoonal aesthetic we anticipate that this bridge will collapse, which it does. What is still surprising, however, is the manner in which this happens. When the bridge finally fails, we are provided with a clear example of cartoonal physics, as we see both Kuzco and Pacha defy gravity by hovering unsupported in mid-air a full two seconds after the bridge gives way" (Pallant, 2010). As a family friendly brand, Disney was incorporating humor in their scripts, but it was commonly observed within the sidekick characters.

The cartoon approach was presented to the public through the movie poster which has several Gestalt principles used. The figure-ground principle is applied as the bold, colorful title contrasts with the background, making it stand out. Additionally, the characters are layered in front of and behind the sign, creating depth and helping the central figures capture attention. The proximity of the five characters around the title also suggests unity and connection, emphasizing their shared roles in the story. This grouping guides the viewer to see them as part of different teams but still the collective narrative. The tilted title adds dynamic movement, while the central figures, Kuzco as a llama with the emperor accessory and Pacha, act as focal points that naturally lead outward to the secondary characters. The layout guides the viewer's eyes smoothly across the poster, which is the continuity principle at work.

## *Miracle*

The live action sports movie, *Miracle* was release February 6, 2004 and tells the inspiring story behind the 1980 United States ice hockey team's triumphant Olympic victory against the Soviet Union. The story follows a coach and 26 hockey players who had to become a united team in order to reach the overarching goal of winning the Olympic Ice Hockey Games, is visually seen through the movie poster. While the players are individuals with different numbers and last names the film the poster presents them closely together, emphasizing their unity and collective spirit as a team. Continuity is seen in the direction of the players' movements and body language, such as walking forward or raising a stick, which naturally guides the viewer's eyes upward to the movie title, *Miracle*. Closure occurs with the blurred and incomplete stadium and crowd in the background. Despite the lack of detail, the viewer's brain fills in the gaps, perceiving the environment as a packed arena full of energy.



## *Chicken Little*

On November 4, 2005, Disney release the Science Fiction comedy, *Chicken Little*. The story follows the concept of the one of Aesop's Fables, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, and was Disney's approach to adding a "Pixar-like hyper-realism" element to this discography (Pallant, 2013). The hyper-realism is primarily seen in through the camera movements and lighting but gestalt principles in the poster also represent the sense of realism. Together, figure-ground, closure, proximity, and similarity principles work seamlessly to give the audience an introduction to The *Chicken Little* movie. It is also important to point out the emotions that are conveyed in the art because consumers get a sneak peak into the character's personalities. *Chicken Little* stands out on the black inside of the cracked egg, drawing the viewer's attention right to the main character. This example of figure ground is accompanied by the principle of Closure. The broken egg is still identified to be an egg because the viewer's brain uses context clues and fills the gaps. The principles of proximity and similarity are also present. The surrounding characters are closely grouped together behind *Chicken Little*, suggesting unity and teamwork, while the UFOs in the background are higher in the layout. Their matching shapes, sizes, and colors make them appear as a related group that drive plot.







# Conclusion

In conclusion, Disney's mastery of emotional design and Gestalt principles underpins its ability to craft unforgettable experiences that resonate deeply with audiences. Through immersive storytelling in its parks, engaging online marketing campaigns, and visually compelling movie posters, Disney consistently bridges emotional connections with innovative design strategies. By seamlessly blending these principles, the company not only captivates its audiences but also reinforces its brand identity as a creator of magical, timeless memories. From the architectural wonders of Cars Land to the nostalgic charm of a classic movie poster, Disney continues to set the standard for storytelling and design, proving that every detail matters in creating experiences that last a lifetime.





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