

# RETURN TO THE DARK AGES

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MODERN DARK RIDE ATTRACITON BY RICK DAVIS

For more than a century, amusement parks have kept their patrons in the dark, quite literally. The modern darkride can trace its roots back to the late 1800's to "pleasure railways" and mill rides. Many of the early pleasure railways were recreational or educational attractions, such as the Great Coal Mine at New York's Coney Island.

Back in 1902, Edward C. Boyce created and patented a ride "for the purpose of amusement, recreation, and instruction of sight-seers and pleasure seekers." This attraction was a representation of a coal mine typical of the era, and contained scenes characteristic of a mining operation. Inside the structure, tunnels of simulated coal contained life-size figures of miners, work animals, tools, and mining machinery.

Also popular at the time were mill rides such as the Old Mill, in which small boats navigated winding water-filled channels through "gorgeous grottos and musical caves" lit by state-of-the-art electric lights. These early attractions were not the scary rides that most of us are familiar with, but instead featured educational sets or humorous scenes, beautiful vistas featuring exotic places that the people of the time could only dream about visiting.

The attraction that we commonly think of as a darkride today would not arrive until around 1928, when Leon Cassidy pondered a use for an empty building at Tumbling Dam Park in New Jersey. The result was the "Fire Fly", a ride that would later be known as the "Pretzel" for the convoluted layout of its track. Quick to pick up on a great idea,

Traver Engineering of Beaver Falls, PA, was soon building its own version of the attraction. Interestingly, both companies named their rides "Laff in the Dark", an appropriate name since the early rides relied mainly on humorous or surprising scenery. The scary rides would come later.

It has been said that at one time, a new darkride was second only to a new roller

sometimes included a lot of suggestive details. The use of "blacklight" itself was not a new idea. Originally patented in the 1930's by David Humphrey Scott for a darkride at Cleveland's Euclid Beach Park, The Pretzel Company experimented with it in the 1950's, and Disney made extensive use of blacklight in many of its early darkrides as well.

The Disney designers did introduce a new idea to the darkride industry: a well themed storyline. Instead of a collection of "pop-up" surprises in the dark, Disney's rides were more illuminated and took riders on an adventure into the fantasylands of such familiar stories as Snow White, Peter Pan, and Mr. Toad from the Wind and the Willows. Characters came to life as guests became part of the stories. Disney's Haunted Mansion introduced yet another chapter into the darkride history, the marriage of century old illusions, attention to detail, and state-of-the-art ride and audio systems.

In the late 1970's, while the roller coaster was experiencing resurgence at amusement parks and capturing the public's attention, the darkride was quietly fading away. Whereas the darkride was once a common attraction, by the mid 1980's it was becoming a rarity.

Enter the Sally Corporation. The company was originally formed to create animatronic figures, but made a drastic business decision when it thought to inject new life into "an essential element of the traditional amusement park experience that desperately needed revitalization in order to capture the market of the day."

Sally realized that while the competition was fierce in state-of-the-art animatronics, there was an unfilled void for Disney-like darkrides at the more traditional parks. The expensive animatronics based rides were the realm of Disney and Universal, but the rest of the amusement park industry needed something a bit more down to earth.

The answer came in the form of a new twist on an old idea. Instead of expensive animation, they would build a ride featuring simple two dimensional animations (a throw-back to the early days of the industry), add in some blacklight, and introduce a new concept: the riders could shoot at the spooks and bad guys. The "interactive darkride", as it would be called, would actually involve riders in the experience instead of making them passive spectators. Since each rider's experience would be a bit different than that of anyone else (shooting a target causes a change in most scenes), the long sought after "re-ride" could be achieved.

Halloween Productions/Dark Rider of St. Louis, MO, found a way to apply a technique they had been using in Halloween walkthrough attractions to their darkride proposals. Through the use of fluorescent paint, special painting techniques, and ChromaDepth™ glasses, a 3-D effect would be introduced to darkrides such as Kennywood Park's "Garfield's Nightmare" Old Mill ride. They also entered into interactive rides with the installation of their Spiderman Ride at Niagara Falls.

Other current state-of-the-art innovations can easily be found from the designers at the Disney and Universal parks. Each park has excelled in creating "hybrid" or "crossover" darkrides, as the Darkride and Funhouse Enthusiasts classify them. These are not your traditional darkrides, but are attractions combining darkride elements with radically different ride systems. Disney-MGM's Twilight Zone Tower of Terror™ couples the suspense of the traditional darkride with the thrills of a drop ride. Universal's Amazing Adventures of Spiderman™ marries the darkride with 3-D video and independently moving motion based platforms. Combining a linear induction roller coaster, animatronics, and the darkride gave birth to Universal's Mummy rides.

Could we be entering a second golden age of darkrides? Quite possibly.

## Top 10 Reasons to Create a Great Darkride Experience

**1 Cost-Effectiveness:** While many coasters can cost from one to tens of millions of dollars, the average interactive darkride ride system may range from about \$750,000 to a mere seven million dollars for a top of the line attraction. The refurbishment of an existing ride could range from a few thousand dollars to a few million. For the budget minded, simple two-dimensional "gags" or 3-D paint may allow the addition of a new darkride at a relatively low expense. On the other extreme, computer controlled animatronics, motion based ride cars, unusual ride systems, and plenty of special effects may be just what a larger park needs to increase attendance.

**2 Small Footprints:** A darkride takes up a relatively small amount of room when compared to most roller coasters, and doesn't require a lot of surveying, tree cutting, and land resurfacing. As a matter of fact, existing buildings of any type may be converted to a darkride, and the ride size may be tailored to the available space.

**3 Flexibility:** Darkrides are re-themeable. If ridership should fall, the ride may be refurbished as a totally different concept while keeping the same basic building and ride system, also keeping costs down. Disney has found great success in re-theming rides like Disneyland's Haunted Mansion for the holiday season, attracting guests to an old ride with a new flair.

**4 Broad Demographic Appeal:** Sally Corporation recently completed a market study to find out just what motivates their clients' decisions. Family appeal was the number one reason that customers bought their rides, says Sally CEO John Wood. Darkrides appeal to a large age group, as families from grandparents to grandkids can enjoy the ride together.

**5 Minimal Regulations:** These attractions are generally not subject to the same strict health, height, weight, and size restrictions that keep some people from enjoying many of the other rides. Accessibility for the disabled is normally not an issue either.

**6 Limited Down-time:** Possibly one the best reasons to install a darkride is that it can operate in any weather. While most outdoor rides must shut down during rain and lightning, a darkride can operate in pouring rain or blazing sunshine, remaining comfortable no matter what the outside temperature might be.

**7 A Relaxing Diversion:** As temperatures and tempers rise and fall for families visiting parks, air-conditioned attractions and the chance to sit down and stop walking for a while are strong enticements. Often, a few minutes of relaxing entertainment are the revitalizing factors guests need to continue enjoying their visit.

**8 High Throughput:** Whereas many of the old traditional darkrides had a low throughput, today's darkride can handle more riders per hour. This not only makes the rides much more enticing to today's larger parks, but also to the guests hoping to not spend their entire day at the park standing in lines.

**9 Branding and Marketing Opportunities:** Many thought that the darkride would become an "evergreen ride" and remain popular for many years, a thought based on their constantly busy queue lines. In the case of licensed attractions such as Sally's Scooby-Doo rides, the recognizable characters in the ride have greatly aided marketability.

**10 Return Visits:** With newer rides incorporating interactive elements and highly-detailed environs for visitors to travel through, guests will look forward to journeying through darkrides again and again.



RIDES

# Whistling In The Dark

*How to keep all your guests happy with a GREAT darkride!*

Article & Photos by Rick Davis

*"A darkride is a piece of theater-entertainment with a tiny audience of just a few people at a time (the occupants of the vehicle), experiencing an unfolding drama. So like any piece of good theater, a darkride should have mystery, excitement, the unexpected, and the unexplainable, together with the more positive emotions of humor and amazement. Before embarking on this 'journey into the unknown,' the audience should feel trepidation. Inside, the experience should be an emotional roller-coaster and when it's over, they should feel a sense of real achievement and fulfillment."*

**- John Wardley, amusement park consultant**

*"Heavily themed sets, '4-D' sensory overload, ride car motion in all directions, and an entertaining storyline tie the experience together into a neat package that makes you want to go back in line and do it again!"*

**- Leonard Pickel, editor of Haunted Attraction Magazine**

*"I think it is the unique and unexpected experiences that really make an impact, and leave people with a long-lasting, fond memory of that ride."*

**- Dan Faupel, Production Designer for Creative Visions**

While everyone has a differing opinion on what makes any ride "great", industry experts agree that it's the unexpected that makes darkrides so much fun. One feature of a great darkride is its uniqueness. Unlike flat rides, its structure has its own characteristic look, one that ties that ride to that particular park. Even in this age of licensed rides, the exterior of the rides must remain distinctive. While ride interiors may be radically different from each other, scary or comical, realistic or fantastic, traditional or high

tech, with normal lighting or blacklighting, they all have one thing in common: they allow the guest to escape everyday life and to enter into a fantasy world for a few moments.

Another common factor of great darkrides is the pacing and timing of the ride. Coupled with well-planned lighting, sound effects, and music, a great ride creates an immersive experience that encompasses the rider without drawing attention to any one element. A well engineered ride will provide reliable entertainment, and hopefully preserve a low maintenance cost as well.

Never underestimate the element of surprise; that Alfred Hitchcock feeling of suspense where you just KNOW something is going to happen, but not when or where. Related to that is the build up to a "scare" that turns out to be a comical scene; surprising in its own way.

Well themed and detailed rooms with scares that are located just out of reach of the rider rank high in guests' minds. Surprisingly perhaps, most enthusiasts enjoy a "scare" but do not want to see gore in a darkride. Guests also like rides with a healthy

dose of humor, pointing out Disney's Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean as examples of truly great darkrides. Theeming should totally encompass a room and contain more details than a guest could possibly notice in one ride, thus encouraging them to get back in line. Of course, enthusiasts want a long ride, traveling through time and distance so they can savor the fantasy world.

One ride that has this down pat is the Haunted House at Knoebel's Amusement Resort. Many people are quite surprised that the darkride, built in-house in 1976, consistently is named a favorite of both the Darkride and Funhouse Enthusiasts and the National Amusement Park Historical Association in their annual member surveys. When asked why this ride tops its more

expensive cousins, most enthusiasts cite the key factors listed above.

Many darkrides start out as good attractions, but start losing their appeal with the public as "minor" failures occur. It might be a burned out spot light, a prop that stops working, or maybe distorted audio. Imagine going to a theater where the film was blurry or you couldn't hear the actors: Would you ever pay the admission price again? A well-maintained darkride is important to its riders.

One person with a unique perspective as an enthusiast, a ride builder, and owner is Tom Gore, proprietor and creator of the Dungeon Haunted Ride in 3-D. Tom quite literally took a pile of rusted rail from a burned out darkride

and pieces acquired from all over the country and created a 10,000 square foot darkride in the heart of the tourist area of Oklahoma City. Tom's

success seems to be based on two things: passion and common sense. The love of what he is doing drives Tom, but the common sense brings in the customers and the profits.

While Tom knows he can't please everyone, he also knows that he can attempt to please most of his customers by talking to riders before they leave. Each and every rider is asked for feedback on the ride. Tom says that it works much better than a comment card, and that most patrons really appreciate the fact that their opinion is important. That simple idea costs very little, and aids greatly to future improvements in the ride.

Amusement parks must always keep an eye on the future while remembering the past. Since darkrides have been a part of amusement parks for over a century, the question still remains: Are darkrides a desirable feature for the future success of your amusement park? If you ask major parks like those of Disney and Universal, I'm sure you would find the answer is a resounding "yes".

**inpark**

## Ask the Expert: InPark talks with Gary Goddard, of Gary Goddard Entertainment, about Darkrides

### What makes a darkride great?

The best rides are more than just moving along on a track. They engage you emotionally. Haunted Mansion did this really well by having the ghosts hitchhike home with the guests at the end of the ride.

### What things does a park need to consider when adding a darkride?

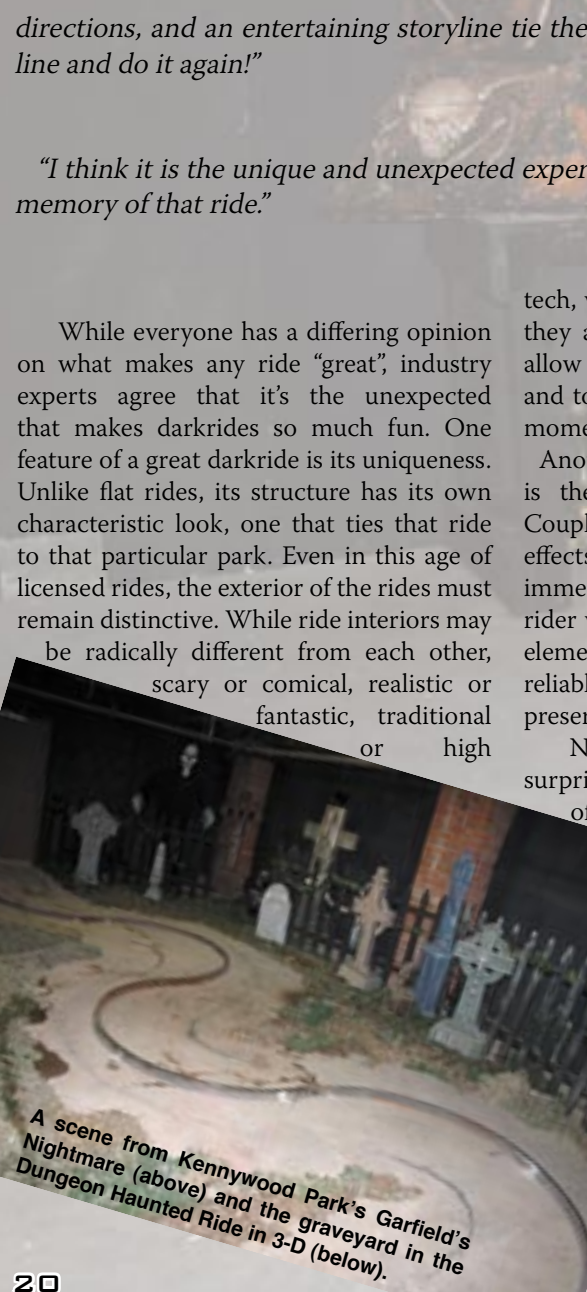
When thinking of adding a family attraction, don't just imagine a kiddie ride. The dark ride is the perfect vehicle for grandparents, parents, kids, teenagers and little kids to enjoy the experience together. Also, parks need to consider who the audience is. If the ride is for kids, the cars should probably not be whipping around corners with high g-forces.

### How can a small facility compete with a large park's darkrides?

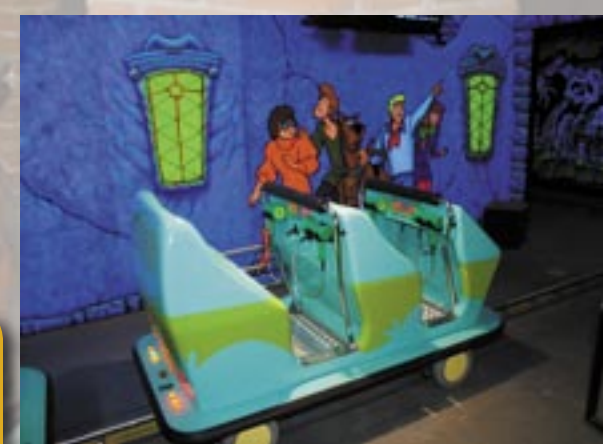
The key is to find the right idea and merit for the ride. The 3D show we worked on for Hersheypark is every bit as good as a Disney show, but was a fraction of the cost. Parks just need to be clever in how they allocate their money.

### What is your favorite element of a darkride experience?

The ability to immerse people in an environment and figure out what the best way is to tell the story. It's not about the technologies or the effects, but what story you are trying to tell and what is the best way to do that.



A scene from Kennywood Park's Garfield's Nightmare (above) and the graveyard in the Dungeon Haunted Ride in 3-D (below).



Center: Tom Gore's restored ride cars. Above: Garfield's Nightmare, Disney-MGM Studios' Tower of Terror, Scooby Doo and the Haunted Mansion at Kings Dominion, and Knoebel's Amusement Resort's The Haunted House.