Visitor Activities in an Imaginary Country

Abstract

There are more imaginary countries than real ones. And many of them, from Middle Earth to Moomin World, have been turned into tourist attractions. This paper explores one such country, Barbie Land, a fantasy world that young girls visit when playing with their dolls and which, more than sixty-five years after its ‘discovery’, is being ‘realized’ in physical form. Drawing on 187 autobiographical accounts of remembered childhood play, and with the aid of a mythopoeic map drawn up by a legendary literary theorist, Northrop Frye, the paper explores, encapsulates and evaluates visitor activities in Barbie's imaginary country, noting that travellers’ telling tales come in four foundational forms: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony.

Key Words: Myth; Fantasy; Storytelling; Autobiography; Literary Theory; Tourist activities; Barbie behaviours.

Visitor Activities in an Imaginary Country

Introduction

'Most of us,' C.S. Lewis once observed, 'have a secret country; but for most of us it is an imaginary country' (Jennings 2012, 105). Lewis, certainly, is best remembered for his imaginary countries – Narnia especially – even though he was a distinguished scholar, secular saint and high-profile public figure during the 1940s and 1950s (Wilson 2005). The same is true of his close friend and storytelling colleague, J.R.R. Tolkien (1964), who famously drew a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' worlds – the real and imaginary respectively – and whose Middle Earth is the ne plus ultra of the latter (Shippey 2000).

Ultra or otherwise, both imaginary places are integral to today's tourist trade, where fantasy lands, non-place realms, mythical geographies (Lovell & Thurgill 2021) and what Jennings (2011, 108) calls 'unreal estate' are important drivers of visitor activity. Just as New Zealand will forever be associated with Middle Earth (Dittel 2025; Goh 2014), and much as Whitby remains a popular destination for the undead (Goulding & Saren 2009; Reijnders 2011), so too Dublin is dotted with the mythopoeic places and spaces of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Hones 2022). They are traversed every year on June 16, 'Bloomsday', an occasion that attracts countless thousands of visitors to the city, and many other cities worldwide (McCourt 2022).

Indeed, there is a long and illustrious history of literary- and popular culture-related travel and tourism (Agarwal & Shaw 2018; Laing & Frost 2012; Robinson & Andersen 2011; Yu & Hu 2023). Three intertwined strands of which can be readily discerned. Namely, those that foreground the *creator*: Austen's Bath, Ferrante's Naples, Hemingway's Cuba, etc. (Sutherland 2018); those that focus on the *creation*: Sherlock Holmes' London, Philip Marlowe's Los Angeles, Inspector Morse's Oxford and so on (van Es & Reijnders 2016); and those that feature the *country*: be it Narnia, Westeros, Shangri-La or wherever (Gao, Zhang & Decosa 2012; Lovell 2021; Mannheimer, Reijnders & Brandellerro 2022). Our aim herein is to tie these strands together with the aid of a key *concept*, Northrop Frye's (1957) renowned 'theory of myths'.

The foregoing, to be sure, pertain to well-known works of literature. When the imaginary worlds of anime, movies, computer games, graphic novels, TV series and theme parks are included, it's evident that the tourist industry owes almost as much to fantasy as fact (Milazzo 2023). It's a debt that's steadily accumulating as ever more multiverses, secondary worlds and IP-protected brandscapes (such as Universal Studios) make an appearance (Booth 2024). Whereas there are fewer than 200 countries in the world today, there are 1,200, 1,400 or 4,000 imaginary equivalents, depending on who's doing the counting (Clute & Grant 1997; Manguel & Guadalupi 1999; Mendelsohn & James 2012). Whatever the overall total, the present study focuses on one of the most intriguing *lieux d'imaginaire* (Reijnders 2011; Salazar 2013) of recent years, Mattel's *mundus imaginalis*, Barbie Land (Lovell & Thurgill 2021).

It's a country that preteens visit every time they play with their dolls, where Barbie is the travel agent and tour guide, Mattel the mode of transport, and visitor behaviour is uninhibited and unrestrained. This mythopoeic place has existed since the birth of the brand in 1959 but didn't acquire a name until Greta Gerwig did the toponymic honours in 2023. It is one of

those places, perhaps the definitive place, where ‘children make up sagas, often long and elaborate, about their dolls’ (Tolkien 1964, 76).

More than that, it is a place that is still in the process of becoming. A Barbie-centric theme park is in the pipeline and, as such, offers an opportunity to witness the genesis of an imaginary country and incipient tourist attraction. True, there are no actual visitors thus far but, according to Urry (1990), Gnoth (1997) and Selwyn (1996), fantasy, daydreaming and anticipation are important precursors to physical travel and destination decision-taking. ‘Expectations’, Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011, 2) analogously announce, ‘help us to uncover the secret charm of the tourism encounter, the logic that makes tourism a quintessential experience of modern life’. If, indeed, imagination is ‘the motor setting tourism in motion’ (Christou & Farmaki 2019, 144), greater understanding of imaginary tourism in imaginary countries wouldn’t go amiss (Salazar 2010).

Myth Matters

There is more to such attractions, however, than the inherent magic of lieux d’imaginaire. Academically, they owe much to the ‘narrative turn’ in tourism (Moscardo 2020, 2021), business studies (Boje 2001) and the social sciences more generally (Bruner 2002). Whereas, once upon a time, social scientists subscribed to a hard-facts school of thought, they increasingly look to works of literature and similar, narrative-propelled forms of popular culture (Upstone 2017). These are then employed to weave compelling, customer-captivating yarns irrespective of the sector in question, be it apparel, IT or, as Moscardo (2020) cogently shows, tourism.

The fountainhead of such narratives, Stephen King (2012, 66) contends, is found in so-called ‘myth pool’. That is, ‘the body of fictive literature in which all of us…have communally bathed’. As Armstrong (2005) and Wolf (2012) bear witness, the primordial myth pool has irrigated innumerable academic articles and attracted any number of mythopoesis-minded theorists from Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes (Armitt 2005, 2020) to Marina Warner and Peter Conrad (Dell 2015; Segal 2004). It is being replenished, furthermore, by a rising tide of ‘modern’ myths (de Botton 2002; Hennig 2002; Holt, 2004) that eschew their classical forebears, though the latter continue to loom large (Thompson, Arnould & Veresiu 2023).

The present paper is predicated on the four-fold formulation of one of the biggest beasts in the myth pool, Northrop Frye. An indefatigable champion of the imagination and its place in ‘the eternal act of creation’, whose myth-informed precepts dominated literary criticism in the 1950s (Eagleton 1996), he fell out of favour in subsequent decades (Colquitt 1994), when deconstruction-minded poststructuralists cornered what Holt (2004, 56) calls the ‘myth market’. Only Fredric Jameson (1981, 69, 73), the crown prince of postmodernism, revered the ‘greatness’ of Frye’s ‘collective and utopian resonance’. He does so to this day (Jameson 2022, 161).

Despite losing out in the myth wars, Frye’s ideas remain relevant to touristic concerns and, as such, are worth revisiting, as are the tools and techniques of literary theory tout court (Upstone 2017). In the first instance, he has written at length about utopia, which was and remains the locus classicus of imaginary countries (Claeys 2010). More pertinently, he specifically compares the corpus of literary utopias to the PR patter of tour guides (Frye 1965). Paraphrased by Angelika Bammer (1991, 11-12), who excavated the vast body of

feminist utopias that preceded Thomas More, she states that for Frye, ‘a typical utopian narrative is constructed as a guided tour: a visitor from another time and place visits the utopian world, is shown around, and in the end returns home’. More than a few guidebooks, travelogues and tourist brochures are predicated on broadly similar utopian principles (Dann 1996; Hennig 2002; Lester & Scarles 2013; Vieira 2010).

Secondly, Frye identified four archetypal forms or modes of mythopoeia (generic narratives termed ‘mythoi’), which have proven pertinent to travel and tourism. Predicated on the mythological Great Year (Campion 1994), the author’s *Anatomy of Criticism* posits that the ‘mythoi’ of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter are paralleled by a quartet of elemental literary forms, *comedy*, *romance*, *tragedy* and *irony* (Frye 1957). Thus Stern (1995) has shown in an empirical study of Thanksgiving, a consumption-rich, travel-triggering annual celebration – brilliantly parodied in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* – that Frye’s model can prove useful when considering consumer responses to such occasions. The framework, furthermore, has been adapted to the myth-encrusted *Titanic* catastrophe (Brown 2015), which has become a demi-dark tourist destination in Liverpool, Belfast, Cobh, Cherbourg, Southampton, New York, Las Vegas and Sichuan province, China (Panayiotopoulos, O’Malley & Patterson 2018).

Building on this body of tourism-tinged work, we apply Frye’s formulation to Barbie Land, an imaginary country which materialised in July 2023 thanks to a blockbuster movie that reinvigorated the brand. For all the figurine’s well-documented failings (Rand 1995), Mattel’s Barbie doll was specifically designed to stimulate children’s imaginations, to facilitate flights of fancy, to transport them to dream houses, dream occupations and, as its standing army of national-costumed dolls attest, to dream destinations around the world (Gerber 2024). And far beyond. Whether it be trips to the moon and back, grand tours of the solar system, or adventures in deep time when dinosaurs walked the earth, all of them are everyday options for imaginative doll owners and their friends.

Barbie’s Background

Whatever else is said about Mattel’s ‘space age fertility symbol’ (Lord 2024, 75), one incontestable fact is that Barbara Millicent Roberts came into being on the 9th of March 1959 at the annual New York Toy Fair (Stern & Schoenhaus 1990). Promoted as the ‘first adult doll’, the figurine was inspired by the daughter of Mattel’s co-founder, Ruth Handler. Barbara and her friends, Ruth noticed, played incessantly with traditional paper dolls, dressing them in fashionable outfits, then fantasizing about their fabulous adventures in far-away places (Gerber 2009). Inspired, Ruth produced a pulchritudinous plastic alternative complete with miniature outfits and accessories. An uproar ensued. Sales rocketed. The rest is history. Mythology rather, since all manner of rumours, yarns, speculations and scuttlebutt surround the doll, everything from debates over its physical proportions (Lobel 2009) to the figurine’s sexual identity (Rand 1995).

The mythification of Barbie, however, attained its apogee in December 2022, when the first trailer for *Barbie* appeared. Attention-grabbing from the outset, it depicted a pair of alternate worlds: one, a barren, windswept, pre-Barbie doll desert where little girls play disconsolately with old-school baby-dolls; the other, a great, good, think-pink place where hundreds of high-achieving Barbies happily greet one another, while enjoying an idyllic beachside lifestyle. Until the ‘real’ world of scuzzy Southern California makes its presence felt. Venice Beach is

depicted as a post-Dantean place where the infernal circles of Mattel-Hell are situated and whose satanic occupants plan to put Barbie 'back in a box' (Gerwig & Baumbach 2023, 43).

Brilliantly counterintuitive and unexpectedly irreverent, Greta Gerwig's divine comedy received a rapturous reception (Ashman, Brown & Patterson, 2023). The trailers attracted 25 million views on YouTube (over 100 million today) and the movie earned $1.4 billion at the global box office, prompting Mattel to capitalise on its intellectual properties (Gerber 2024). Mattel's Adventure Park, currently under construction in Glendale, Arizona, will feature, alongside Barbie, attractions based on Polly Pocket, Hot Wheels and Barney the Dinosaur.

Future plans aside, Gerwig's Barbie movie succeeded in another sense, a mythopoeic sense. It resurrected a brand that had spent the best part of a decade in seemingly irreversible decline (Haines & Jennings 2021) and not only brought the doll back from the dead, but has given it a new lease of life (Gerber 2024).

Mytho-Methodology

Exhumation is no less integral to our methodology, insofar as it required informants to 'dig up' their memories of the doll. Closely related to the 'soft science' turn in tourism research (Wilson & Hollinshead 2015), it comes from a suite of qualitative, self-reflective, research methods, variously known as autoethnography, autobiography, subjective personal introspection, systematic self-observation and me-search (Holbrook 2024).

Whatever they are called, the procedures accord with Salazar's (2010, 6) interpretation of tourist imaginaries which are predicated on 'first-person subjectivities that build upon personal understandings…and make possible common practices' (Gaonkar 2002, 4). The common practices in the present study come from large numbers of young adults' autobiographical accounts of their Barbie-begat behaviours (n.187) gathered over a four-year period. These were complemented and corroborated by a comparatively large number of on-line personal interviews (n.44), with Barbie-besotted informants who ranged in age from 19 to 68.

Clearly, such studies suffer from the vagaries of memory, as do most qualitative research procedures (Hackley 2024). But it was these very recollective vagaries that triggered movie-goers' stampede to the box office in 2023. Gerwig's Barbie movie was targeted at adult audiences – it carried a PG13 certificate – and its success owed as much to consumers' mystic chords of memory as its fabulous fantasy world setting (Gerber 2024).

The empirical evidence we report was reinforced by a wealth of background material and secondary information – both scholarly and popular – on the history and genealogy of the doll, as well as the controversies and commentaries surrounding it. These attained their apogee when Gerwig's movie was released in July 2023 and the world fell in love with Barbie once more. A follow-up empirical study was mounted six months later, when the theatrical run had ended (n.56); and a further round of online interviews took place in 2024-25.

Our dataset comprises 187 autobiographical essays, 44 online interviews, store visits, exhibition excursions and a small mountain of media coverage, summarised in Table 1. We foreground the autobiographical essays here because they are the richest in remembered

detail, the closest to the fantasies that fuel Barbie Land. The interviews and ancillaries played supporting roles: corroborating, complementing, occasionally complicating, but never contradicting (Supplementary Material provides excerpts). Selective foregrounding of this kind is standard practice in interpretive tourism scholarship (Salazar 2006; de Jong & Varley 2017). We follow suit.

The autobiographical essays themselves were gathered with a minimum of steering. No preprepared prompts. No reflexive urgings. No prescribed themes. Informants were simply invited to recount their memories of the figurine – happy, sad, funny, furious, whatever came to mind – in a free-ranging manner. It's an approach not unlike 'passive netnography', which refrains from engaging with those who do the posting (Kozinets & Gretzel 2024). Breadth over depth. Variety over uniformity. Imaginative richness over investigative rigour, to traditionalists' inevitable chagrin (Hackley 2024). But richness, as our findings reveal, has its rewards.

The outcome of our empirical exercise is a dataset that delivers the backstory of the brand (press coverage, store visits etc.) and empirical evidence of both pre-teen and present-day Barbie dollplay (autobiographical essays), as well as necessary cross-national confirmation (face-to-face interviews with 44 informants from ten countries). The autobiographical essays we draw upon in our findings, average 900 words each and collectively total 740 pages of double-spaced text. Our story-rich dataset was strained, sifted and scrutinized according to the long-established conventions of literary criticism (Takhar et al. 2025). That is, the painstaking, line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence approach called 'close reading' (Eagleton 1996). These revealed that various types of activities – idolising the dolls, attacking the dolls, recounting adventures inspired by the dolls and, above all, having fun with the dolls, both solitary and communal – were commonplace. They are themes and tendencies, in short, that broadly accord with Frye's famous if largely forgotten framework. And as the doll owes much to mythopoeia, both in its prehistoric original (Lord 2024, 76) traces its origins to 2,600 BCE) and Gerwigian reinvention (the screenplay includes allusions to Limbo, Noah's Ark, mythical creatures like mermaids and, at one point, Jezebel), exploring 'Here be Barbie' territory appears to be a tour worth taking. And we undertake it in an appropriately light-hearted manner. Hence the less formal than usual tone of the present article. Playtime, in accordance with the 'soft science' school of tourism research (Wilson & Hollinshead 2015), is best expressed in playful prose.

Fourfold Findings

In Greta Gerwig's Barbie movie, when word reaches Mattel's headquarters that the lovebirds Barbie and Ken have fled Barbie Land and are roaming around Los Angeles as 'life sized versions of themselves', a junior employee asks the board of directors 'Um, is Barbie Land like an alternate reality or like our imaginations come to life or…?' *Yes!* the top executives roar in unison (Gerwig and Baumbach 2023, 42, 43).

Few of our informants disagree. For Shelley, 'it's a portal to an infinite universe'. For Jenny, it's where 'my Barbies holidayed in the most exotic locations, *right in my living room*…on a yacht cruising the Caribbean; packed (crammed!) into a jeep on safari in Africa, dolled up and splayed over deckchairs in Italy'. For many preteens, in fact, almost every day is an away-day to the fantasy country of the fabulous figurine. In this regard, it is noteworthy that a fair few informants not only take their favourite doll on holiday – complete with changes of

outfit and bulging suitcase – but to amazing imaginary places where *comedic*, *romantic*, *tragic* and *ironic* activities are evident.

Comedy

All four of the foregoing activities, however, come with a proviso: Frye's (1957) terminology does not accord with the words' colloquial meanings, though it encompasses them. For Frye, comedy means more than funny ha-ha. The genre refers to narratives that are characterised by *happy endings*, are overwhelmingly *joyous*, and often involve a shift in *individual attitudes* or *societal arrangements* or both. They also feature *festive* activities of one kind or another. Such stipulations, far from being restrictive, fit the figurine like the satin evening gloves Fashion Avenue Barbie wears when she's attending imaginary soirees in grand hotels and opera houses.

Although visitor activity in Barbie Land is not without its ups and downs, the experiences for most part, are enormously enjoyable. As numerous informants recollect, the figurines consistently convey them (per Frye's theory of myth) to an alternate imaginary world that's analogous to our own, whether it be surfing on Bondi Beach, ski-boarding in Aspen, sailing around the Greek Islands or simply hanging out, like Veronica, in the way-cool Malibu Dreamhouse:

> I was not only sold by the idea of the character, but I was sold by the imaginary, perfect world that she lived in and the L.A. girl lifestyle – with a pet horse, two dogs and a mansion. I could become this character every time I entered the imaginary world.

That said, activity holidays in far-flung destinations are comparative rarities compared to Hollywood film premieres, Parisian fashion shows and wedding ceremonies in romantic locations. Many of these are elaborately staged events that can take several days to enact and, as often as not, include meta-imaginary moments. That is to say, informants' flights of fancy typically include fantasies within the fantasy: swimming with shoals of merpeople, space travel to distant planets, fending off alien invasions, fleeing from rampaging dinosaurs and lovestruck Ken coming to Barbie's rescue after she'd been kidnapped and held to ransom in the hideout of nasty Ninja Turtles.

No matter how far-fetched some stories become, they do not detract from the fun, laughter, pleasure and satisfaction that day trips to Barbie Land entail. Even the most mundane activities, such as walking Barbie's dog with pink pooper-scooper in hand, deliver dung-filled delights of sorts (Holly). There is, though, a serpent in Barbie's Garden of Eden, a serpent that has shifted individual and societal attitudes. That serpent is Bratz. A gang of five unruly 'bad girl' dolls, unleashed by MGA Entertainment in May, 2001, the Bratz brigade weren't just the antithesis of Mattel's holier-than-thou icon, they represented a rebellious, real-world threat to Barbie's hegemony. They also divided consumer opinion. Informants report that they tended to align themselves with one brand or the other, be it the 'ice queen bitch goddess' (Lobel 2018, xiii) or the freedom fighting foursome who'd happily spit on Barbie's grave:

> Anything Barbie could do, Bratz could do better. I loved and still love the power dynamic of the Bratz dolls friendship group, they came as a whole, there wasn't a leader and they didn't need their personalities propped up by their male equivalents, unlike Barbie. (Rachel)

Rachel's stance notwithstanding, Barbie vs. Bratz wasn't so much a case of 'never the twain' as exercising and exorcising intra-family rivalries, where big sister and little sibling didn't see eye to eye. Bratz, in fact, was 'invented' by a former employee of Mattel, Carter Bryant. The ensuing court case, which exposed all sorts of corporate 'dirty tricks', severely damaged Mattel's reputation in the eyes of the world. Akin to countries whose tourist industry is devastated by natural disasters and unforeseen events (Richie & Jiang 2019), Barbie's sales plummeted (Haines & Jennings 2021). And didn't recover until Gerwig's brilliantly comedic movie brought Bratz devotees, like Alison, 'back on the Barbie bus'.

Fantasy visits to Barbie Land may have been the event of summer 2023, a ceremonial encounter that attracted hordes of pink-clad doll owners, past and present, an eruption of female solidarity, positivity, pride and joy. But the doll has always been associated with festive occasions and feast days, Christmas in particular, not least for Zoe:

> Barbie, Barbie, Barbie. When I think of Barbie, it brings me straight back to waking up at 5.00 a.m. to find out if Santa had brought my new Barbie doll. I would eagerly run down the stairs and…still remember to this day the excitement of whipping off the wrapping paper and seeing the doll. We were stuck together like glue from that day on.

Zoe isn't alone. Many informants recall the thrill of Christmas mornings, unwrapping presents that Santa somehow delivered with miraculous dispatch from the North Pole, to say nothing of the gifts they'd itemized in a letter or spotted during a trip to their friendly neighbourhood utopia, Toys 'R Us. For more than a few, such as Sarah, toyshops were the gateways to getaways in Barbie Land:

> I remember the feeling of being extremely overwhelmed and overstimulated all at once. Rows upon rows of toys that were stacked to the sky – dolls, accessories, everything. Malibu Barbie, Barbie clothes, Barbie dream house, Barbie convertible, Barbie at the beach, Barbie on a plane…Elvis and Priscilla Presley on their wedding day Barbie. The list was endless and I wanted it all…It was like someone had just opened the gates of Heaven to me – and no, that isn't an exaggeration.

Romance

The rapturous response to Warner Brothers' summer blockbuster is entirely in keeping with Northrop Frye's (1957) second archetype, which is symbolically aligned with the summer season of the Great Year. There's more to it though than a twist on timeless holiday romance narratives involving star-crossed teenagers. Exemplified by medieval tales of courtly love (Lewis 1936), Fryean romances tend to be characterized by a *quest* of some kind. Such stirring tales of derring-do, what is more, are not only steeped in *nostalgia* but inherently *allegorical* and perversely *paradoxical*.

When it comes to questing, one of the most striking things about our findings is the sheer number of modes of transport mentioned by informants. These include Barbie-brand cars, camper vans, horses, helicopters, spaceships, cruise ships, beach buggies, BMX bikes and executive jets. Clearly, there's a chicken and egg component to this since Mattel's collection of conveyances is specifically designed to inspire and stimulate fantasy travel. It is equally

unsurprising that many of these materialize in *Barbie*, which is predicated on the quest narrative and features manifold forms of transportation from the iconic pink Corvette to a twelve-seater tandem bicycle. Steeped in the golden glow of nostalgia – the good old days before adulthood beckoned (Becker 2024) – *Barbie* is a journey of personal discovery, as are more than a few of our informants' accounts:

> Writing about Barbie I am overwhelmed with a sense of nostalgia. On 25th December 2012, I got my very first Barbie doll from Santa, the Dreamtopia Twinkle Lights Mermaid doll. I felt like I was ten years of age going into cardiac arrest…Looking back, I can safely say I was unhinged at age eleven. I was an addict and mermaids were my drug.

As Annie's dreamtopian experiences indicate, it is impossible to overstate the depth of remembered feeling informants have for their Barbie dolls. In some cases this love, like that of Lancelot and Guinevere, can be disconcertingly obsessive and, indeed, damaging to the bank balances of parents/guardians. The same applies to the mental wellbeing of playroom-sharing siblings who are forced to watch incessant replays of Barbie movies, plus repeated renditions of their singalong soundtracks. But mostly they are pleasantly nostalgic recollections – 'dollstalgic' recollections – remembered with amusement and a wry shake of the head. These range from taking their precious Barbie dolls on an Italian holiday, where they sunbathe beside their owners (Annabel) and going on a fantasy road trip when the pink Corvette runs out of petrol (Mary), to cruising the not-so-mean streets of Malibu singing 'Barbie Girl' at the top of their voices (Catherine). As for Alison:

> In my primary school days, I have strong memories of playing with my friends in my room with the different Barbies, brushing their hair, putting them in their Barbie car and creating these fantasy trips from the beach to Mars…Playing with Barbie helped me go into imaginary worlds and create a dream lifestyle and live it through the Barbie dolls…My guilty pleasure to this day is watching anything Barbie related from the movies to the cartoon series. The nostalgia and innocence of it have me hooked.

What isn't wryly recalled is informants' absolute belief in Barbie's inspirational quality. They owe their success, their ambition, their personal triumphs to the doll's 'you can be anything' mantra. There is nothing they can't do, no glass ceiling they can't shatter, no calling they can't respond to, no place they're afraid to explore. Derring-do is the order of the day, though the derring doer isn't a handsome prince but a feisty young woman such as Cynthia:

> Our days may have been spent exploring the outer parts of our solar system with Barbie's Space Discovery Playset or skimming down the Swiss Alps with her winter sports collection [but] Barbie helped encourage myself, and millions of other young ladies [to believe] that we could be anything we wanted. She empowered us and let us believe we could work to achieve whatever we wanted to achieve no matter how crazy it appeared. Whether it be an airhostess, barrister or the president, the sky was the limit for our innocent minds.

Mattel's doll, in short, is more than a role model, she is an allegory for the road modern women travel in a tumultuous world. That said, there is an incongruity at the heart of informants' romantic quests; a Kenadox. Very few own, or ever owned, a Ken doll. On the contrary, Ken is variously considered a bit of a wimp, a figurine of fun, a dolt who doesn't deserve Barbie, let alone share her globetrotting lifestyle. There are though stand-ins aplenty,

toys like Buzz Lightyear, Sonic the Hedgehog, assorted Lego people and tough-guy Teddy Bears, who perform the necessary arm-candy functions. Ken isn't just a water carrier for the woman in his life, he's a wet, wet, wet watercarrier. It's no accident that the tagline for Gerwig's movie is, 'She's Barbie, he's just Ken'. Yet it is Ken, paradoxically, who not only steals the show – and movie-goers hearts – but it's his undying love for Barbie that holds it all together (Collin 2023). Barbie Land may not be built on Ken, but he's its Atlas.

Tragedy

The dismissive attitude toward Barbie's loser lapdog hardly counts as a travesty, let alone a tragedy. On the contrary, the celebrated scene in *Toy Story 3*, where Barbie tortures Ken by threatening to destroy his designer Nehru jacket is recalled with delight by numerous informants. For a fair few young men like David, it helped transform their perceptions of Mattel's shallow, self-centred, fashion-forward figurine:

> I distinctly remember that one scene where Barbie has Ken tied up and is destroying his clothes. For some reason this scene lives in my head rent free. It is a constant reminder never to upset a woman!

Beyond Ken's maltreatment, there's no shortage of Fryean 'tragedies', where an *hubristic* (s)hero is brought down, *vengeance* looms large and painful *lessons* are learned. Hubris assails informants who took great pride in their adorable Barbies as children only to regret in retrospect the damage the dolls do to teenagers' self-esteem and body images. Stephanie is typical:

> No one can argue against the fact that Barbie definitely portrayed the 'perfect' lifestyle, which just isn't realistic. This affected a lot of young children with their body image and well-being and led them to thinking that there was something wrong with them if they didn't look, talk or act like Barbie.

Hubris is only half of it. 'Vengeance is mine' makes up much of the rest. Former friends, for instance, fall out over one's refusal to share their figurines; twin sisters go head-to-head over who 'owns' what, as well as the direction their imaginary co-created narratives should take; ordinarily adorable mothers do the unthinkable by giving away their daughters' precious possessions without asking permission; and beloved family pets have been known to go rogue by biting off the heads and, to their owner's mounting horror, feasting on the cadavers of unattended figurines:

> I had to share MY Malibu Dreamhouse with my monstrous siblings…Some days the Barbie Dreamhouse would have been called the Barbie war house. Let's just say it wasn't always pretty and pink at times! (Chloe)

> I was at my granny and grandad's for Christmas dinner, got my new Barbie mermaid on the go but she soon caught the attention of their Jack Russell, Patch. You can imagine what happened next. Mermaid Barbie became Patch's new chew toy…That tragedy may have been the beginning of my OCD tendencies. (Tessa)

Such activities, however, are no big deal beside the malice-aforethought activities of revengeful brothers. Mortified by sororal misappropriations of Optimus Primes, John Cenas, Skeletors and similar action figures, who are forced to participate in heinous, humiliating

Barbie doll adventures, they're determined to get their own back. It's a determination that's redoubled by supposedly 'sweet little sisters' who commandeer the family playroom's audiovisual equipment then play Barbie's videos in a never-ending loop, while singing along with the doll's dastardly 'devil music' (Rory). So much so, some informants go to great lengths, far-flung places and key commemorative occasions to get their own back.

Morris, for instance, hurled his little sister's favourite Barbie doll into the English Channel, en route to a family holiday in France. Stephen celebrated Halloween by throwing big sister's bestie-Barbie on to a bonfire and laughed maniacally as the figurine slowly melted. Eric borrowed cousin Kassie's newly-bought Barbie bike to go on a road-trip with his mates, albeit not before 'pimping his ride':

> I removed the sparkly pink tassels on the handles, took some skateboard and football stickers and put them over any Barbie symbols…and sprayed [red paint] over the most noticeably pink parts. Then I went off with my friends, happy as could be.

Little did Eric know what was waiting for him back home. Painful lessons were learned…

Deplorable as boys' revengefulness can be, the real wreckers are doll owners themselves. As numerous studies of Barbie doll-play show (Jones 2002; Rand 1995; Stone 2010), butter-wouldn't-melt girls are much more destructive than bad-to-the-bone boys. Everyday atrocities include scalping, scorching, stabbing and beheadings beyond number. Attributed by the perpetrators to necessary acts of sibling retribution or because it seemed like a good idea at the time, the plain and simple fact is that the Malibu Dreamhouse is a slaughterhouse.

Figurine-owners' fantasy travels, furthermore, include a multi-car pileup in Los Angeles where everyone in Carol's cerise convertible is killed in the collision, then continue their vacation in Heaven, the ultimate imaginary country (Jennings 2023). 'That was a bit weird,' she concludes, 'quite dark and morbid' (leaving the rest to readers' macabre imaginations).

But it's not as weird as Weird Barbie from the Gerwig movie, who serves as Stereotypical Barbie's tour guide and route planner. Mercilessly manhandled, the mutilated figurine was not only instantly recognized by numerous informants – 'I had one of those!' – but the majority firmly believe that they were the only people who'd ever treated their Barbie dolls in such a despicable manner. 'I didn't know that everyone had a Weird Barbie', Claire confesses, 'I just thought I was a monster who wrecked my toys'. Discovering otherwise is a relief, a release, living proof of story scientist Will Storr's (2019, 202) statement that 'to enter the flawed mind of another is to be reassured that it's not only us'.

Stranger still was the fact that Mattel released Weird Barbie figurines as tie-in items of movie merchandise. As Mia ironically observes 'Why is Mattel mutilating a Barbie then selling it back to me?'

Irony

Whatever else is said about Warner Brothers' guided tour of Barbie Land and its inhabitants, one thing is certain. It is nothing if not ironic. From its irreverent opening when feminist actor Dame Helen Mirren declares that Barbie has single-handedly solved all the problems facing womankind, to its final flourish when the sexual organ-less doll seeks an appointment with a gynaecologist, *Barbie* is irony incarnate. As is its accompanying tagline, 'Even if you hate

Barbie, you'll love *Barbie*'. As is Mattel Inc.'s official position on Gerwig's interpretation of their icon, claiming to be 'comfortable about being uncomfortable' (Carroll 2023). As is the soundtrack, which includes a version of 'Barbie Girl', the song by Aqua that the SoCal corporation tried and failed to 'litigate to death' (Lobel 2018, 127).

For Frye (1957), however, irony is characterized by a *twist* in the tale, an *inversion* of expectations and, as befits the depths of winter when the weather is doing its worst, a countervailing sense of *uplifting*, life-enhancing *good humour*. It's ironic perhaps when a typical big-budget, seemingly disposable, summer season movie, meets all the criteria itemized by Frye sixty-five years beforehand. And did so at a time when the figurine (based on German sex toy) was incubating in Ruth Handler's fertile mind. Yet the doll was initially sold as a demure, clean-living, small-town girl next door, who travelled far and wide (to New York, San Francisco, Hawaii and beyond, according to the early Barbie novels) in pursuit of her career as a 'teenage fashion model' (Rand 1995).

The apotheosis of irony, however, is attained in consumer reactions to the icon's cinematic incarnation. Many informants adored the movie, rhapsodising about Barbie-lookalike Margot Robbie, charmed by Ken's child-like naivety, and thrilled by the depiction of its Dreamhouse-dotted Barbie Land setting, where every day is 'the best day ever' (Gerwig & Baumbach 2023, 14). However, it was Mattel's acknowledgment of its manifold missteps (during the credits sequence) and Gloria's tour-de-force speech on the everyday ironies of being a woman, that gave an ostensibly frivolous film its emotional hold on Assumpta and scores more:

> The most standout piece in the movie for me was the character Gloria's speech…which highlights the contradictions of being a woman [speech quoted in full]. To me, this speech highlights perfectly the lessons we must learn as girls and young women in order not to be frowned upon by society and attract a negative reputation.

Ironically, though, *Barbie*'s greatest impact didn't come from the film itself. It came from the cinematic experience of seeing Gerwig's paean to the plaything in a packed auditorium, filled to overflowing with women of all ages, from all walks of life, all dressed in pink from head to toe, all revelling in the community spirit of the cinema-going congregation (Wiseman 2023). Being there to sense and see it, to participate in the accompanying, appropriately irreverent promotional razzamatazz – lobbies and foyers were filled with Barbie Land signposts and signage, as well as full-sized Barbie boxes for Instagrammable photo opportunities – proved to be an unforgettable physical visit to the wonderful world of their pre-teen dreams. Some revisited several times:

> Seeing floods of people walking into the cinema, head to toe in pink clothes, with their partners, mothers, best friends, children, it was so refreshing and made me a bit emotional. This movie was bringing women everywhere together to enjoy something nostalgic in the most fun way. I could not stop laughing and smiling the whole way through…I felt so warm and fuzzy after seeing this movie and it made me want to go back again and again. So I did! (Gabby)

Equally ironic, albeit in a much lower key, over a much longer period, is the fact that informants' fondest, longest-lasting memories do not involve the actual Barbie doll. It's the ancillaries, like the Malibu Dreamhouse, the private jet, the pink Corvette, the designer

outfits, the TV shows, the computer games, the perfumed packaging, the branded cosmetics, handbags, backpacks, cell phones and jewellery – as well as the wonderful imaginary worlds of much-loved CGI movies – that are the most significant, never-to-be-forgotten markers of the figurine's meaning.

Revelations like these help explain the ironic fact that the stupendously popular *Barbie* film didn't cause an equivalent increase in the sale of Mattel's physical dolls (Douthat 2023). It also accounts for the equally ironic fact that the premier producer of plastic playthings now sees itself as a seller of IP rights rather than a maker of physical products (Boles 2022; Turvill 2025). If that's not a twist in the tale, nothing is. Except, perhaps, something Annabel stated more than two years before Gerwig's Barbie Land became consumers' imaginary destination of choice, something that resonates with the research approach adopted herein and accords with storytelling approaches to literary tourism (Laing & Frost 2012; Robinson & Andersen 2011):

> I think that Barbie for children is the equivalent of reading a novel for adults. The reason people read novels is to escape their everyday, sometimes boring lives and plunge themselves into a fantasy world full of adventure and thrill. I often imagine myself being the main character in one of these books as I can escape from my average life as an eighteen-year-old going to university. Barbie dolls give the same escapism to children because they can be fairies, princesses, supermodels and even mermaids. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination. Anything you want to be you can be.

Dolltopian Discussion

If tourists can be construed as 'children' (Dann 1996) and if tourism can be considered a form of 'play' (Lett 1983), then there is much to be learned from the playtime activities of large numbers of children. This paper has examined the remembered playtime activities of 187 young people in order to better understand visitor behaviour in the imaginary country of Barbie Land. True, the country wasn't christened until 2023, but it is a tourist destination that young women frequented for sixty-four years before Barbie Land was named and identified as such.

Imagined places, to be sure, aren't the preserve of young people. Tourism tout court owes much to 'the creative or constructive facility of the mind' (OED). Salazar (2012, 876), for instance, states that 'tourism spaces… are in part spaces of the imaginary, of fantasy, and dreaming. 'Tourism', Hennig (2002, 185) concurs, 'creates a fantasy world within which physical activity takes place…Thus a myth as part of imaginary word can become reality in tourism'. Modern mythologist Alain de Botton (2002, 27) goes even further, drolly recalling that 'there are no finer journeys than those provoked in the imagination by staying at home slowing turning the Bible-paper pages of British Airways Worldwide Timetable'.

But as Lengkeek (2002) makes clear, childlikeness is conducive to the creation of imaginary, mythopoeic places like Merryland, Milk Wood, Middle Earth, Mole End, Moomin World, the Matrix and many more, not least More's Utopia (Claeys 2020; Jennings 2023; Wolf 2018). 'Imagination', he states, 'creates a fairytale theme park in which to wander, childlike and vulnerable, communicating with spirits and animals' (Lengkeek 2002, 200).

This paper has embraced, explored and extended such standpoints by examining one such place from a mythic perspective. It is an imaginary country that is still in the process of becoming. Opening shortly, Mattel's Adventure Park in Glendale Arizona will feature several Barbie-themed attractions (Gerber 2024). Although its unveiling has been delayed on several occasions, the deferment will only serve to increase the park's allure. Heightened expectations may not be the be all and end all of the tourist trade, but they play a large part in real-world destination choice (Bruner 2011).

The real world is one thing, the Land of Academia is another. According to a prominent commentator on fantasy literature, scholarly analyses of imaginary places are hopelessly inadequate (Armitt 2005, 193). The secondary worlds of unreal estate, which are filled with magic, marvels and adventures that 'stretch imagination to its breaking point' are ill-served by academics who have 'fallen far short' of what the fantastic genre deserves, as does our desiccated academic prose.

That may be so, but Frye has fallen less far short than many. Not least in the works that focused on fantasy in general and utopias in particular (Frye 1965, 1980), which have often been likened to travellers' guidebooks (Vieira 2010). Utopia, furthermore, figures prominently in Frye's 'theory of myth', used herein to conceptualise the imaginary activities of visitors in the 'perfectly perfect' world of Barbie Land, where every day 'is the best day ever!' (Gerwig & Baumbach 2023, 14). His 'archetypes' encapsulate the mythopoeic essence of fantasy travel in so far as comedy features in festive celebrations, romance emerges in questing narratives, tragedy appears in vengeful retributions and irony surfaces in expectation-inverting twists in the tale.

Frye's mythoi, admittedly, are predicated on the corpus of world literature rather than the computer games (Super Mario World), cartoons (Peppa Pig World), children's toys (Legoland) and even brand mascots (Tayto World) that sometimes serve as tourist-attracting temptations. But, as postmodernists demonstrated many years ago, these too can be treated as texts (Baudrillard 1986; Jameson 1991). And, if Barthes' *Mythologies* is considered the locus classicus of such studies (Conrad 2016), it is apt that its publication coincided with the opening of Disneyland.

Limitations and Likelihoods

This is not to imagine that the present analysis is as 'perfectly perfect' as Barbie Land. On the contrary, it is primarily predicated on controversial research methodology and limited to the autobiographical recollections of mostly Irish undergraduates. Our online interviews with 44 informants in ten countries, however, intimate that the above visitor activities are evident everywhere Barbie is obtainable. And there's nowhere, bar some Islamic states, it isn't on sale in some shape or form.

Another limitation, arguably, is that our study focuses on the 'consumer' rather the 'producer' of the attraction – the tourist instead of the tour operator, as it were – which is true. It could, of course, be contended that doing so is very much in keeping with lit-crit's 'death of the author' thesis and concomitant 'reader-response' theory (Eagleton 1996). But it also indicates that there is ample scope for what Canavan's (2019) calls 'literature-in-tourism', which is just at the start of an potentially exciting scholarly journey. Producer-predicated studies of Mattel's 'myth market' wouldn't go amiss either.

A further limitation concerns the porous boundary between real and imaginary destinations, which has become a live question in tourism scholarship. Huang, Yang, Liu and Wang (2025) show that younger tourists experience authenticity through heritage games in ways that unsettle 'the real' as an evaluative yardstick. Barbie Land sits squarely within this expanding terrain: a country reached through play rather than passport, but no less consequential for its visitors. How imaginary countries are authenticated by those who visit them deserves sustained attention in its own right.

Doubts, too, could be raised about the relevance of Frye's 1950s framework for contemporary cultural circumstances. Granted, the uniformities of mythical traditions, the universality of storytelling structures and the global appeal of local idols like Harry Potter and Hello Kitty, suggest otherwise. These are suppositions, though, that need further testing. For now, our findings indicate that Frye's framework is sufficiently capacious to accommodate all the short stories, tall tales and flights of fancy that Mattel's icon engenders. As the cultural commentator Peter Conrad (2014, 36) points out about myths, 'they are endlessly susceptible to interpretation'.

Creaking or not, classic or otherwise, Frye's conceptualisation can be applied to the current crop of imaginary countries. There is no shortage of opportunities, that's for sure. As Wolf's (2019) inventory shows, there are many thousands of such places, most of which remain unrealised in the physical forms that attract tourist traffic (Earthsea, Gilead). Lots have indeed been realised but either failed to meet tourist expectations (Willy Wonka Experience, Dickens World) or their appeal has diminished as the original source of inspiration loses traction (Peter Pan's Playground, Westeros possibly). Some are at the apex of their popular appeal (the Potterverse, Legoland) and are unlikely to lose lustre anytime soon. Other imaginary countries, increasingly, are reached not on foot or by car but through a headset. Preece, Rojas-Gaviria & Whittaker (2026) describe such *lieux d'imagination* as virtual portals to elsewhere, conjured by what they term the embodied enchantment of magical realism. A fair few, furthermore, not least Barbie Land, are in the process of becoming gradually emerging from the frozen earth, so to speak, as Frye's Great Year of mythopoeia slowly turns.

These springtime stirrings, however, don't sprout from nowhere. They are nurtured by the fantasies, daydreams and expectations of would-be visitors, the very precursors to physical travel that tourism scholars repeatedly identify (Urry 1990; Gnoth 1997; Selwyn 1996). Places like Barbie Land are dreamed into being long before they are built. The 187 autobiographical accounts analysed herein are testament to sixty-five years of imaginative tourism in an imaginary country. If expectations really do uncover the secret charm of tourism, as Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011) maintain, then Mattel's Adventure Park arrives pre-charmed. Its future visitors have been rehearsing for decades.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that very many secondary worlds are 'retroscapes' (Brown & Sherry 2003). The imaginary places they depict are more likely to be neo-medieval than ultra-modern. They are draped in the raiment of heretofore, embedded in the amber of 'mellostalgia' (Goulding 2024). As the myth pool attendant Stephen King (2011, 700) artfully puts it, they are set in the 'Land of Ago'. Or as Roberts (2012, 23) analogously notes, exhibit 'misty-eyed nostalgia for a medieval past'. If Frye's four-fold formulation is pressed into further service, there is a bright future for the past. One obvious possibility, for example, is traditional tourist brochures and guidebooks (Hulme & Youngs 2002). Notable travelogues like Bill Bryson's *Down Under* (comedic), Dervla Murphy's *Full Tilt* (romantic), Paul

Thoreaux's *Dark Star Safari* (tragic) and Geoff Dyer's *White Sands* (ironic) clearly fit the Frye framework. Ditto Diana Wynne Jones' (1996) *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, which was ahead of its time, as was her anticipation of today's overtourism outbreak and its unhappy consequences (Jones 1998).

Equally noteworthy is the fact that, towards the end of his academic career, Frye (1980) collapsed his four-fold framework into the master-mode of romance, which venerates imagination and valorises nostalgia. The present study of imaginary countries, arguably, is an equally nostalgic, misty-eyed exercise. It has excavated a once legendary, latterly bypassed conceptualisation that remains relevant to visitor behaviour in imaginary countries such as the wonderful, never less than retrotastic world of Barbie Land. The recent rapid rise of 'romantasy' fiction (Economist 2024) – a bestselling literary genre set in imaginary countries like Ilya (Roberts), Empyrian (Yarros), Middren (Kaner) and Prythian (Maas) – suggest that a Barbie Land-led building boom is not inconceivable. Package tours will surely follow.

Concluding Comments

There's a bronze statue of a wardrobe in Belfast, the hometown of C.S. Lewis. There's a statue of Lewis himself, holding the wardrobe door open, ushering visitors into his anteroom to Narnia. It's a departure lounge that'll be full to overflowing when Greta Gerwig's next film is released, the first of two Narnia stories. This paper has examined visitor activities in Barbie Land, an imaginary country that existed for sixty-four years before it was identified, mapped and named by 'Greta the Great' (Moshakis 2023). Newly christened, Barbie Land is a country that is cheap, easy to get to and, unlike many holiday destinations, doesn't suffer from overtourism. It's a 'perfectly perfect' country, a 'dolltopia' of sorts (Douthat 2023), that we explored with the aid of an ancient mythopoeic map by a conceptual cartographer – and fantasy world aficionado – Northrop Frye (1980).

Frye, like Barbie, fell out of favour. Both were written off as yesterday's news. Both, it turns out, still have something to offer. His four mythoi proved remarkably apt for an eleven-and-a-half-inch figurine and the imaginary country she calls home. Whether other imaginary countries yield to similar analysis remains to be seen. We reckon they will.

Account after account of visitor activities, however, reveal that many tourists' behaviours are less than perfect. They are often antisocial, occasionally amusing and, more often than not, barbaric. But no less enjoyable for all that and much less alarming than their real-world equivalents. Welcome to Barbie Land!

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