The first theme park was built over 100 years ago in Chicago, playing host to things the public had never seen before such as the world’s first Ferris wheel. Fast forward to the present day and the theme park and attractions industry is experiencing one of the biggest transformations since its conception, with the evolution of several technological innovations including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and wearables creating a new era of visitor entertainment.

As consumer technology advances at a break-neck speed, we are already seeing theme park operators such as Merlin Entertainments and Six Flags integrating VR within rides. Furthermore, promising to deliver the ultimate context-aware and personalised guest experience, industry giant Disney has rolled out its $1 billion ‘MagicBand’, complete with clever sensor and tracking technology.

Theme parks are reaching their limits in terms of the physical nature of ride experiences and are starting to consider how augmented experiences can help them stand out from the competition.

Guests do still want to escape from reality and push themselves to their limits, as well as enjoy seamless, immersive experiences and the theme part of the future will be one that harnesses technology to create new and exciting augmented experiences for visitors.

New Picsolve research, detailed within this report, supports this observation by finding 87% of residents from the most up-and-coming region in the theme park space, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), would be more likely to visit a theme park if VR was included on all rides. A further 90% would like theme parks to include wearable self-service technology for all payments, while almost half (48%) feel that rides that include technology such as lasers and 3D holograms have the power to make their visit more enjoyable.

The theme park and attraction industry is also discovering how the development of technology is having a ‘domino’ effect on existing park services such as photography, with a massive 94% of consumers interested in using VR headsets to browse and view ride photography and videos while at the park.

With guests keen to experience fresh ideas and concepts, the guest journey is moving beyond the immediate adrenaline buzz of a ride towards connected experiences that can provide guests with social media currency that last longer than the visit itself, with unique photos and videos at theme parks and attractions to show off to friends and family online. These findings only scratch the surface of the huge change that is about to take place in the attractions industry, not only for rides but for all photography, retail and even queue line experiences.

To examine how this change will look and bring the ‘Theme Park of the Future’ to life, Picsolve’s special report offers a powerful combination of unique visitor research, exclusive inside expertise as well as visions and predictions from one of the hottest and up-and-coming theme parks of the next decade, Dubai Parks & Resorts.
Technology is rapidly transforming many other consumer industries, but the primary focus is the desire to create seamless, personalised customer experiences, for which technology is merely the enabler.

The theme park and attractions market has traditionally been a slower moving market that has not adopted technology as fast as other markets. Even in 2016, services such as Wi-Fi that have become almost a basic commodity elsewhere in the world are not being properly integrated into theme parks. 13% of guests unable to log onto Wi-Fi in parks and less than a quarter (24%) able to find a reliable connection, according to a recent Picsolve survey.

By 2030, theme parks will have undergone a technological revolution. Consumer technology will be integrated seamlessly with the engineering-led experiences that theme parks are centred on today, to create fully immersive and connected guest experiences that start before people enter the theme park and last for a long time after. Capturing people’s memories of their exciting visits to attractions will be an even more important part of that journey.

Take wearable technology for example, in just four years time it’s expected that 240 million wearables will be shipped each year. It’s inevitable this technology will become intrinsic to theme parks and attractions as a way to bring the guest and the experience closer together without visitors actually having to operate or interact consciously with a device like a smartwatch or phone.

Ultimately, we believe that theme parks need to integrate new technology seamlessly, so it’s not a distraction from the experience, but enhances every immersive environment invisibly, whether through the experience itself or the supporting photo and video opportunities.

However, wireless technologies are the absolutely critical enabler to building this connected guest experience so it is important that theme parks and attractions invest in a solid infrastructure to allow all these new consumer technologies to work together.

If implemented correctly, these new technologies will massively improve the satisfaction of guests at theme parks and unsurprisingly our research confirms this correlation, with 48% of guests having had a better time at a theme park due to experiencing technology on rides such as lasers, 3D hologram and virtual reality.
Queue line entertainment
Waiting in the queue can be frustrating for guests eager to cram as much fun as possible into their day out, so it’s no surprise that 48% would prefer theme parks to have shorter waiting times. That said, the queue lines for popular rides should become part of the theme park experience with visitors almost unanimously (97%) demanding more entertainment in the queue line, with 40% believing this would enhance their trip overall.

In addition, guests would prefer to see the following top five features within the queue line as a standard:

- Dedicated selfie photo points (45%)
- Hologram videos to watch (42%)
- Performing actors (41%)
- An app related to the ride, with games, videos and entertainment (40%)
- Sensory experiences, for example different smells or things to touch and explore (38%)

Creating a virtual world
Theme park entertainment specialists, “Landmark Entertainment” predicts there will be 170 million active VR users by 2018, with the theme part of the future very heavily focused on incorporating this technology. The demand is clearly apparent even today, with a massive 94% of our survey sample claiming they would be more likely to visit a park if VR was included. In addition, 87% say they would visit a theme park if the actual rides were VR based, highlighting the huge demand for a more intensive multi-sensual experience.

For the theme park of the future, VR will not just be creating opportunities for rides and attractions but also for guest’s photography moments. A large majority (95%) of visitors surveyed would be interested in using VR headsets to browse and view their ride photography or videos while in the park.

Wearable technology
Consumer wearables, such as FitBit and Apple Watch, are popular mainstream gadgets that are slowly breaking into other niche industries. PicSolve’s research discovered a massive 82% of guests are keen to use wearable devices to create a connected experience within theme parks.

For the theme park of the future, the biggest reason cited for using these devices was to check how long queue waiting times will be (93%) while 90% agree it would make an ideal purchasing method. The water park industry has the biggest potential for this as a payment use case, as guests are less likely to carry around their personal belongings and have to return to lockers to make any payments. Using wearables to make payments accessible at any point of the visitor’s day will help create additional customer spend and boost sales.

Other guest demands for wearables in the theme park of the future included to linking their theme park photography all in one place (88%), tracking their heart rate and adrenaline levels on rides (86%) and monitoring the amount of steps they take throughout the park (84%).
Photography and video

Digital photography is already taking the attractions industry by storm in 2016 with the ability to capture photo memories from rides increasing the overall enjoyment factor for over half of guest’s surveyed (56%). With the roll-out of integrated photography apps within 2017, we should certainly expect print photos to be virtually non-existent. Instead, emphasis will be completely on memories sent instantly to a guest’s phone or mobile device as soon as they finish a ride or experience. Face recognition technology will also make this process more seamless and personalised.

Video technology has the biggest potential in theme parks, providing guests with short, exciting clips of their time on the rides and attractions that can be shared quickly and easily across social media. This is hugely popular, with 90% of guests confirming they would visit a theme park if it offered on-ride videos. A further 88% would consider visiting a theme park if it included digital images that used AR video technology to further bring their treasured moments to ‘life’.

Retail experience

In theme parks today, a guest’s experience with purchasing photography, merchandise and even food will typically involve interacting with employees at dedicated stations. In 2016, guests are already pushing their desire for self-service to be a standard feature within theme parks, with 90% stating they would be more inclined to visit a theme park if it included wearable self-service technology for all payments in the park. A further 89% would consider visiting a theme park if it included self-service checkout as opposed to staffed stations. For photography specifically, guests would largely prefer to remove retail interactions altogether, with 90% preferring their photos to be sent immediately to their mobile phone.

Moving towards 2030, the physical retail experience could be further usurped with the rise of the virtual store, where guests could use VR headsets across the park to browse and select gifts and products for collection or delivery after their visit. 85% of our Dubai theme park goers claimed they would be more likely to go to a theme park if it had the ability to shop for merchandise in a virtual store.

Dubai Parks & Resorts: Industry Vision 2030

Guido Zucchi, VP Revenue Operations at Dubai Parks & Resorts

“The Dubai Parks & Resorts development has been one of the largest in the region to date, taking years of meticulous planning and hard work. However, for this industry, the development is just the beginning of something extraordinary in which ‘the impossible’ will finally become ‘the possible’.

In the not too distant future we believe that virtual reality and video technology will be common place in theme parks, augmenting the physical experience for guests, but we’ll also be seeing advancements such as 4D holograms, advanced lasers and wearables infiltrating many more rides and experiences to fit in with the consumer demands that Picsolve’s research has highlighted.

While it’s true that this industry has traditionally been a slow adopter when it comes to the latest technological innovations, especially in the race to match consumer expectations to their day to day life, I would expect this transformation to accelerate quickly now. The theme park and attractions industry of the future will focus on creating experiences that cater for guests not just looking for an adrenaline rush, but an all-encompassing ‘escape’ from the world around us.”
Dubai is already known as one of the world’s fastest-growing tourist hotspots with 5350 billion being invested into leisure projects by 2020, making it one of the most lucrative opportunities for the UAE. Accelerated by huge developments such as Dubai Parks & Resorts, offering a connected cluster of parks such as ‘Motiongate Dubai’ and ‘Bollywood Parks Dubai’, the region is set to be a hotbed for integrations of the latest technological advancements that enhance the guest experience.

Through this, the UAE is undergoing a vast transformation to become a "genuine world-class entertainment and leisure destination.”

The government in the UAE hopes to double the number of tourists travelling to the region over the next six years to more than 30 million visitors a year and this factor combined with the region’s increasingly tech-savvy consumer guests, suggests that the UAE attractions industry will accelerate more quickly than other destinations. The government investment alone will assist with propelling the market forward with even more parks due open in the next year such as ‘Six Flags Dubai’, scheduled to open in Jebel Ali, late 2019 and a ‘20th Century Fox’ theme park within Dubai Outlet Mall, expected in 2018.

However, the United States and Asia are looking to rival the UAE’s bid to become the ‘ultimate location for theme parks’. Within the US, Orlando is a strong front-runner and is a location that Picsolve already has a strong foothold in. For the attractions industry specifically, this city holds a huge market opportunity with a record 66 million tourists visiting within 2016 – a result of popular theme parks such as ‘Universal Orlando Resort’ and ‘LEGOLAND Florida Resort’.

The competition for a share of the guest wallet is fierce and theme parks and attractions that want to remain ahead need to focus on delivering immersive experiences through imaginative concepts and innovative technology that optimise guest enjoyment. As we’ve highlighted throughout the report, the theme park and attractions industry is undergoing one of the biggest transformations since its inception a century ago. While parks have always been focused on delivering the ultimate guest experience, technology such as VR has now reached a point where it can be integrated seamlessly into the traditional ‘ride’ construct to create an even more immersive experience for visitors. With the rapid pace of advancement and commercial viability of other technologies such as augmented reality, wearables, and even holograms, we can expect even more creative and exciting attractions and experiences to be developed over the coming years.

Our research supports that the consumer demand for such experiences is already there, as expectations have been set through innovative developments in other consumer focused industries. As well as being transported to an alternate reality for a day or two, guests also want assurance that their unique memories can be captured and shared, both instantly for social media capital, and savoured for many years to come. We will expect to see similar advancements in how technology underpins the image capture element of the guest experience too and how seamless photography can drive a transformation in the theme park retail operation as well as further augment the enjoyment of visitors.

With massive investment in the United Arab Emirates region and across the rest of the world, the theme park and attractions industry is booming, with the competition to entice guests to visit experiences looking as fierce as ever. We don’t know exactly what the future will look like exactly for the industry, but it’s really gearing up to be an exciting 10-15 years and we’re delighted to be involved in helping shape the transformation.

Regional growth opportunities

Conclusion

Biography of Guido Zucchi

Guido Zucchi is the VP Revenue Operations at Dubai Parks & Resorts, leading a team to support the business and financial acumen including operations and P&L budget management.

With 16 years of experience developed in world-class retail organisations such as Carrefour and Dixons Retail, Guido holds eight years of experience in the leisure business, achieving consistent financial results and increasing customer satisfaction.

Prior to working with Dubai Parks & Resorts, Guido was the Amusement Parks Division Director EMEA at Parques Reunidos and responsible for six theme parks across Europe, including Mirabilandia (Italy), Bobbejaanland (Belgium) and Movie Park (Germany). Here he was responsible for the strategic development of theme parks, including new investments, organic growth and commercial plans.

Biography of Michael Schaefer

Michael Schaefer is the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) at Picsolve, pioneering and leading new ventures and transformation programmes that will significantly improve the customer experience, dramatically enhance value and drive business success.

Having joined Picsolve in July 2016, Michael brings a wealth of experience from his previous roles at Iris Software, KR Group and Savvis, where he displayed the ability to exploit technology in a way that supported organisational growth.

One of Michael’s major achievements involves him delivering a new ‘Innovation Centre’ that developed a 12% sales increase by introducing innovative solutions providers, startups and ISVs to European end-user businesses. Being a creative thinker and resourceful problem solver allows Michael to present complex technical problems in a manner that is simple to understand.
By 2030, theme parks and attractions will have undergone a technological revolution.

Consumer technology such as wearables and virtual reality will be central to creating more immersive guest experiences.

The guest journey will have moved beyond the immediate adrenaline buzz of rides towards connected experience that starts before visitors enter the park and last until long after.

Digital image capture will be a central part of this connected experience, seamlessly supporting and uniquely personalising each and every visitor journey.

To find out more about Picsolve’s Insights, email insights@picsolve.com or visit www.picsolve.biz