

all revved up

how a french race car simulator center is keeping it real

By Claire Dumbreck

I-WAY shows how attractions can use the latest professional sports technology to exploit the need for speed and get truly interactive for less than 100 Euros

Motorsport globally is on the up. Formula One's television viewing figures are expected to rise to around two billion per season within the next few years; spending by North American companies on motorsport is predicted to rise to \$3.3 billion in 2010; and the construction of new race tracks in the world's emerging markets is providing new fans for global brands and car marques. We are also seeing a rise in the number of motorsport-themed attractions. North America's five NASCAR Speed Parks were joined by the NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte in May this year; in Germany, the ring° werk attraction at the Nürburgring race circuit aims to "make every visitor feel like a Formula One driver"; and in March, more details of a \$280 million race track and motorsport-themed entertainment facility, the Changhi Motorsports Hub, were announced by the Singapore Sports Council.

A passion best simulated

While the fun end of the motorsport business has been exploiting race fans' hunger to own or experience a piece of the action for years through merchandising, kart tracks and 'track days', behind closed doors (at the serious end), the professional motorsport simulation industry, ignited recently by track testing bans, has been quietly creating a new generation of state-of-the-art machinery and software. These simulators are now heavily relied upon by the world's top level race teams in Formula 1, NASCAR and Indy Car to train racing drivers, develop new race cars and test components and race strategies. In 2005, a Netherlands-based simulator developer, Cruden B.V., realised the potential for professional equipment to provide hours of addictive, highly competitive fun. Not an arcade style game but a full motion, interactive system that provides the same accuracy and realism as relied upon by Formula One teams to replicate their race cars and borne out of flight and US NAVY submarine simulators.

One of Cruden's first customers was a trio of Frenchmen with a dream. Driven by a deep passion for motorsport, they strived through an attraction called I-WAY, to find a way to get ordinary people in a car as close to a real Formula 1 racer as possible and allow them to race against each other, truly pushing themselves, safely; all for under 100 Euros. Today, thanks to 18 Cruden Hexatech simulators and a carefully created professional motorsport-themed environment, I-WAY has achieved its goal.

"It costs between 3,000 and 5,000 Euros to drive a real F1 car on a track, and for that you get no race, you are not capable of pushing yourself to go really fast, and it is not entirely safe," says Pierre Nicolas, one of the founders and a former professional tennis player. "With karting, you get the racing but not the car and certainly not the realistic exclusive motorsport environment. I-WAY provides access to the most realistic motorsport event that non-professionals can hope for, from just 90 Euros."

Located in central France in the trendy technology quarter of the country's second





Photos courtesy of Cruden and I-WAY

largest city and around 450 kms from the famous Le Mans track, I-WAY, which has been open for two years, is organised around three simulation areas with six simulators in each. Guests can choose from Formula 1 cars, Endurance Pescarolo sports cars and Citroën C2 Rally cars. While I-WAY will always be considered a niche attraction, it has cleverly expanded its offering to cater for the corporate market, female visitors and the passing lunchtime trade. Continuing its cool and exclusive, premium offering, I-WAY offers several other luxurious areas – a spa, an alcohol-free bar, a lounge bar, a restaurant with two terraces and four conference rooms for corporate events.

Reality and interaction

From the outset, Pierre knew that industrial technology would play a significant role in delivering the I-WAY concept and that to provide the most accurate, affordable and safe experience, he had to use simulators. Wary of creating nothing more than a glamorous video game, he found Cruden simulators which provide six degrees of freedom (6DOF) or full motion. "If the experience is to be real, you have to have a system reaching high bandwidths so you can feel the realistic up and down movement of bumps and rumble strips, just like a racing driver would," explains Pierre. "When you drive a car, you have inputs in six degrees of freedom. To provide anything less is not to provide a true driving simulation. You will always miss something."

The simulators – real car bodies mounted onto motion platforms concealed under a raised floor – come complete with 100%

realistic steering feedback and wraparound screens. Following an ambitious project to install 18 simulators in less than 18 months, they have been in operation for two years without any breakdown or disruption to guest programmes.

The simulators are expected to endure around a further ten years heavy use before requiring an overhaul. I-WAY gets online support whereby Cruden connects remotely to resolve any technical issues and if necessary, be on site within 24 hours.

Racing forward and with potential to expand

I-WAY enjoys good awareness within France as a destination for driving enthusiasts, despite its location miles away from a race track. At weekends, all 18 simulators are almost at full capacity and with corporate clients representing half of I-WAY's visitors, the facility performs well during the week. Pierre Nicolas concludes: "It took us four years from the blank sheet of paper to opening the doors. I truly believe there is strong potential for the I-WAY model to succeed in other global markets.

So, race fans, it appears, are everywhere. And if you believe I-WAY, they know their Playstations from the real thing. As professional simulation technology – the motion hardware systems, the accurate motion-cueing that drives them and the realistic vehicle and track software models – is only just becoming accessible to the masses, the attractions industry might just need to revise its understanding of what simulators are really about.

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