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On the Cover

Lost Island
Themepark
combines an
extensive backstory
and theming with
engaging attractions
in Waterloo,
Iowa, USA.

Photo courtesy Lost Island

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Lessons of immersion, awash in useful tech

**Judith Rubin,
Editor**



Entertainment technology has matured to the point where long-term visions, goals and expectations are being realized and then surpassed. As Trent Oliver (Founder and Managing Director, Blue Telescope) aptly summarized, “It’s all the stuff we talked about for years and it’s actually here.” She was moderating a panel on immersive experience at InfoComm 2022 in Las Vegas in June, where we heard from the forces transforming the industry through milestone attractions such as Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience, AREA15, Illuminarium and more.

As always, venues must renew themselves to retain customers and stay current. “We are constantly swapping things out,” said Mark Stutzman, CTO of AREA15. “Part of our goal is to be insanely nimble. Constant change is the only way to keep guests entertained in 2022.”

State-of-the-art means nothing if you can’t stay up and running. “Be leading edge but also robust,” said Hilary McVicker, VP Sales and Marketing, The Elumenati. “Ten-year-olds can be brutal on technology.”

Markets have evolved. “Audiences now expect interactivity; they think everything is a touchscreen already,” said Brian Allen, EVP of Technology & Content, Illuminarium Experiences. “We are heading toward a truly ‘choose your own adventure’ story – fully interactive, fully personalized.”

Mature technology super-optimizes the ability to fulfill some goals: refreshing content quickly, multi-use spaces, frictionlessness and seamlessness, reaching broader and more diverse audiences. “Van Gogh became a brand everyone wanted to see,” said Mario Iacampo of Exhibition Hub. And they now could. “You would never bring an exhibition to Albany, New York, for six months before this.”

“There’s not an experience on the planet that can’t improve in regard to accessibility,” said Stutzman.

Today’s immersive experience revolution is being accompanied by an equally transformative operations revolution, both empowered by today’s state-of-the-art tools and technology and intensified by guest participation.

Data gathered supports creating better experiences more closely aligned with customer behavior. “We can predict what the market will look like in Vegas on a given day. We can make sure our businesses understand their business better than any of their counterparts,” said Stutzman.

As Iacampo said, “It feels like the beginning of something.”

Judith helps drive content to serve the attractions industry, fostering professional connections, business development and the meaningful exchange of information. She has been contributing to InPark since 2005 and became editor in 2010. Follow on Twitter @JudithRubin



Erica Schwehr, News Editor

Erica is a familiar face to many in the international attractions industry served by InPark, due to her past roles with CalArts (Operations Manager, School of Film and Video) and the Themed Entertainment Association (Director of Operations and Events Producer). In addition

to her themed entertainment industry background, Erica has more than a decade’s experience in live production and theater.

Risk and reward

**Martin Palicki,
Publisher**



Everything seems like a gamble right now. Should I invest in a new attraction? Will people show up this summer? Is it safe to travel to that conference? The pandemic introduced a level of uncertainty that the industry hasn’t dealt with in a long time, and the current global political situation isn’t infusing any real level of stability.

It doesn’t have to be a casino-style gamble, though, where the house frequently wins. Taking calculated risks often leads to rewarding results. The 16th edition of the TEA/AECOM Theme Index and Museum Index, when it is released later this year, will help provide the most recent round of data to help developers and operators make more informed decisions for the future. It provides a snapshot of the industry, highlighting trends around the world. Full disclosure: I’ll be editing this year’s Theme Index on behalf of TEA and AECOM, taking over from IPM Editor Judith Rubin.

Some people are natural risk-takers. While interviewing Eric Bertch for this issue’s cover story, I could tell he and his family were no strangers to risk. After building up a successful cabinet company in Iowa, they decided 20 years ago to build a waterpark and, this year, just opened a new theme park. Adding a second gate to their property is likely to be a catalyst for additional investment in the region.

As I wrote in the article, they mitigated some risk by starting small and growing over time, choosing a waterpark first and then expanding later. The risk will hopefully pay off for the Bertch family, who clearly are doing this as a labor of love, both for the attractions industry and for the Iowa community at large.

Suppliers also have to examine risk and reward. Eleventh Hour, featured in this issue, launched a whole new company division and set of services in anticipation of changing market conditions. The results for them are encouraging.

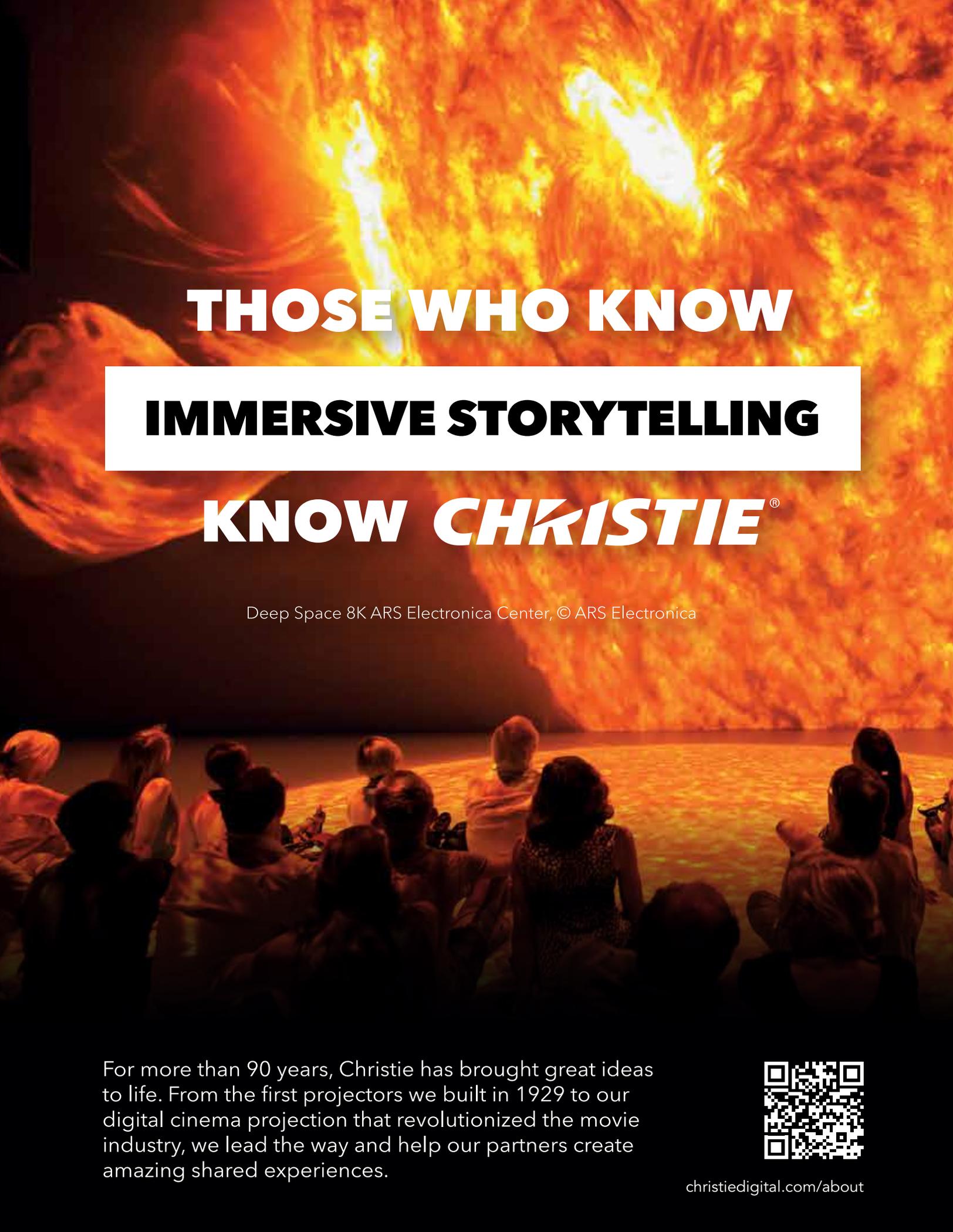
I hope more operators and suppliers are willing to take a risk. The tendency to retreat and entrench is compelling in times of uncertainty, particularly as COVID-19 continues to be a major issue and disruptor around the world. But sometimes the best innovation and development is born out of adversity. So as we continue to move forward as an industry, let’s take smart risks and plan for a rewarding future.

Martin founded InPark Magazine in 2004, combining years of experience working in themed entertainment with a passion for writing and design.



Joe Kleiman, Senior Correspondent

Raised in San Diego on theme parks, zoos and IMAX films, Joe Kleiman would expand his childhood loves into two decades as a projectionist and theater director within the giant screen industry. In addition to his work in commercial and museum operations, Joe has volunteered his time to animal husbandry at leading facilities in California and Texas and has played a leading management role for a number of performing arts companies. Joe has been news editor at InPark Magazine since 2011, becoming the publication’s senior correspondent in 2021. His blog ThemedReality.com takes an unconventional look at the attractions industry. Follow on Twitter @themedreality.



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The new Fønix coaster, a custom creation of Vekoma Rides, at Denmark's Fårup Sommerland. All photos courtesy Vekoma



Unique thrills in Denmark

Record-breaking roller coaster Fønix has risen at Fårup Sommerland

by Judith Rubin and Martin Palicki

At 40 meters (131 feet) in height, 905 meters (2,970 feet) in length and a top speed of 95 kilometers per hour (60 mph), the new Fønix coaster, a custom creation of Vekoma Rides, debuted at Denmark's Fårup Sommerland in April 2022.

At €13 million, Fønix (Phoenix, in English) represents the largest investment in the history of Fårup Sommerland. The park is banking on Fønix's unique package of thrills to differentiate it from other European parks, rival major coasters around the world and help reinvigorate tourism in the region.

"We take great pride in presenting a roller coaster that is without comparison the biggest in Denmark – a fact that will come to leave a significant imprint on both the Danish and the international amusement landscape," said Fårup Sommerland CEO Niels Jørgen Jensen. "We hope and trust that, by way of such a substantial addition, we will be able to attract both Danish and international guests to Fårup Sommerland as well as the rest of the Danish tourist industry in general."

Fønix also represents the continuation of a productive collaboration between Fårup Sommerland and Vekoma Rides. The park's 2013 Orkanen attraction is a custom Vekoma Suspended Family Coaster. Saven, a coaster opened in 2020, is a custom Vekoma Family Boomerang.

"After the success of Orkanen in 2013, something else was needed," explained Stefan Holtman, Sales Manager/Senior Design Engineer, Vekoma Rides. "Fårup Sommerland and Vekoma were discussing a new addition to the park already in 2018. During a joint trip to Legandia Park in Poland, the Fårup Sommerland owners were taken with the Lech Coaster there." (Lech Coaster is a high-speed, high-thrill, compact steel roller coaster version of Vekoma's Bermuda Blitz design, installed at Legandia in 2017.) [See "Heavy Metal," InPark Magazine issue #68.]

"However, as Fårup Sommerland is a typical family park, we were concerned that a Bermuda Blitz coaster would be a bit too intense for their target group," said Holtman. "Therefore we had



Fårup Sommerland is banking on Fønix's unique package of thrills to differentiate it from other European parks, rival major coasters around the world and help reinvigorate tourism in the region.

to work on a less intense version, focusing more on airtime while reducing positive g-forces. This is how Fønix was conceived.” The amount of concept design and engineering work required meant a potential opening was at least three years away. But an eight-year interval between new ride launches was too long. The solution: launch an intermediate ride for the 2020 season and follow it two years later with Fønix, the big thrill ride. “This was the birth of Saven, the first out-and-back Family Boomerang in the world, which turned into a great success for the park and was the perfect step up to the launch of the record-breaking Fønix coaster in 2022.”

Pacing and airtime

In addition to extreme size, height and speed, Fønix was designed to deliver riders substantial “airtime” – the experience of weightlessness achieved through drops, loops and twists – of which the Fønix boasts 14 different occurrences. At the same time, Fønix introduces a unique design feature to the roller coaster community: a so-called “stall loop” that combines the classic loop with an inverse “camelback,” thus providing an experience of zero gravity for 2.5 seconds. Picture a traditional roller coaster loop but with the top flattened down a bit, resulting in more time for the train spent upside down.

“The key design drivers for Fønix’s track design were pacing and airtime,” said Benjamin Bloemendaal, Head of Concept

Engineering, Vekoma Rides. “From the exit of the Stall Loop all the way to the final brake run, the vehicle maintains a breakneck pace leaving no time to catch your breath.” The design focuses on rapid-fire direction changes and repeated pops of airtime. The ride’s three inversions are spread strategically throughout the length of the course to create the best possible variety in the experience.

One of the inversions takes place above the loading station. Guests waiting to board the coaster witness the train fly through overhead, inverted and at near-top speed. For riders, the effect provides a near-miss effect as they maneuver through the station’s structure.

“We first incorporated this element on the Lech Coaster in Poland and it was one of the elements that we definitely wanted to carry over to Fønix,” said Holtman. “On Fønix we actually enhanced this near-miss effect even further, by placing the approach to the flip-over at ground level. The train seems to fly-up to the hole in the building only just in time.”

A brand-new experience

Anticipation among roller coaster enthusiasts in Denmark and around the world had been building ever since Fønix was officially announced about a year ago. From the Fårup Sommerland press release upon its opening: “A ride of this



Guests race to ride the new coaster on opening day. Anticipation among roller coaster enthusiasts in Denmark and around the world had been building since Fønix was officially announced about a year ago.



“The key design drivers for Fønix’s track design were pacing and airtime,” said Benjamin Bloemendaal, Head of Concept Engineering, Vekoma Rides.

nature is simply wonderful news for us here in Europe. The days of jealously looking west at parks in the U.S. are over,” says Justin Garvanovic, founder of the European Coaster Club.

Established in 1975, Fårup Sommerland marked its 45-year anniversary in 2020. Each year, the amusement park is visited by approximately 600,000 guests of which about 80 percent are Danish. Over the years, the park has won an array of awards. In 2021 it was named Europe’s best amusement park (in the category of less than 1.5 million guests) at the Park World Excellence Awards. The park has also received honors from Kirmes and IAAPA. Fårup Sommerland’s vision is to be the epitome of unique family experiences in the entire Nordic region, and its slogan is “The greatest experiences are the ones we share.”

For their part, Vekoma’s team enjoyed the challenge of creating a brand-new experience. “We love when parks work with us to create rides that have never been done before,” said Holtman. “Fårup Sommerland’s great partnership through the years has allowed us to create some truly special attractions.”

Vekoma Rides is a market leader and brought to the project decades of experience and hundreds of designers and engineers. Vekoma coasters can be found at parks on five continents. They have worked with notable clients including Six Flags, Universal and Disney, and several of their projects have been honored with TEA Thea Awards. For more information on Vekoma, visit www.vekoma.com. •••

Fønix at Fårup Sommerland – Details

Technical specifications

- Track length – 905 meters
- Height (structure) – 40 meters
- Maximum speed – 95 km/h
- Number of inversions – 3
- Footprint – 144 meters x 66 meters
- Number of trains – 2
- Number of coaches per train – 4
- Number of passengers per train – 16
- Height restriction – 1.20 meters
- Restraint system – Lap bar with vest

Unique ride elements

- First Drop: 40-meter, eye-catcher ride element with near-vertical 80° descent that pulls out into a trench at a top speed of 95 km/h.
- Stall Loop: A one-of-a-kind, on-ride sensation with an inverted crawl at -0.5G hangtime, twisted vertical drop and 30-meter tall eye-catcher.
- Station Fly-Through Corkscrew: Disorienting, near-miss, on-ride sensation and one-of-a-kind interactions with guests in the station that see the train flip over their heads at a speed of 60 km/h.
- Rodeo Finale: The low-profile track enhances the sensation of speed, rapid-succession direction changes and seemingly out-of-control, seven-fold airtime sensation.



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Doubling down on development

Bryan Hinckley joins 7thSense's growing technology team

interview by Martin Palicki and Judith Rubin

On June 1, 2022, software design and technology solutions provider 7thSense announced that industry veteran Bryan Hinckley was joining the company as Managing Director. Hinckley has served in a variety of roles at Electrosonic over the past 22 years, most recently as their Vice President of Strategic Accounts. Based in the Los Angeles area, Hinckley brings with him a wealth of industry knowledge and relationships. InPark spoke to Hinckley and to 7thSense's Matt Barton (CEO/Owner) and Rich Brown (CTO/Owner) about the company's growth and plans.

Founded in 2004 in the U.K., 7thSense has grown into a prominent, international market leader – well known for its innovation in media servers but having rounded out its product line with complementary processing and control technologies – including the acquisition of Medialon in 2020 and of BlueBox Attractions in 2022. The company today provides state-of-the-art tools and technologies for the kind of storytelling and media

delivery at the heart of today's immersive, interactive guest experiences – and keeping a close eye on the future.

As opposed to acquiring companies and products, adding Bryan Hinckley to the 7thSense team is a pure human capital acquisition! How does it fit the longer-term strategy to grow and evolve the company?

Rich Brown: 7thSense is highly focused on innovation and people. Our business is as much about people as it is our products – both our customers and our team members.

We've seen significant growth over the past few years with strong Delta Media Server sales, the introduction of our Juggler® pixel processor, and our acquisition of the Medialon brand and show control product range. Bryan's extensive experience and exceptional leadership skills are a welcome addition as we look to the next exciting chapter for 7thSense!



Matt Barton



Bryan Hinckley



Rich Brown



Matt Barton: Bryan has a lot of experience managing large teams and projects over multiple office locations. As a business, we've expanded to five office locations in the U.K. and U.S. recently – and now have a satellite office in Australia too. Bryan's know-how in this area is really going to be valuable. As we continue to add new people to the team, develop and launch new solutions, and open more offices, having Bryan on the newly expanded board of directors will ensure we have a full set of skills and expertise to take 7thSense onto the next step in its journey.

We pride ourselves on working with an incredible global network of resellers, distributors, integrators and creative partners. As Bryan comes from a long-term and highly valued customer of ours [Electrosonic], he has a great understanding of what integrators look for and can help us to continue to provide exceptional levels of innovation and service to our customers. Rich and I recognize that Bryan joins our team with these same values.

How does Bryan fit into the leadership structure of the company?

Rich: As Managing Director, Bryan will lead our board of directors, reporting to myself and Matt – taking the reins of the business with a focus on our customers and strategic growth.

Matt: Rich and I will remain very much actively involved in the business – dedicated to planning for the future and new technology development as we work closely with customers and support our global team.

Where did your acquaintance begin, and how has your relationship developed to this point?

Rich: We have known Bryan since the early days of 7thSense, working on exciting, technically demanding attractions and themed entertainment projects for Electrosonic.



Bryan's appointment, and the introduction of new products and features throughout this year and into 2023 and beyond, really reinforces our focus on customer support and innovation. We really are there for our customers, and their experiences and the stories they need to tell will always come first.

Matt Barton
CEO / Owner
7thSense

As with a lot of the projects 7thSense supplies products to, we are always pushing the boundaries on capabilities and features. Bryan has always been incredibly supportive as a customer, recognizing the fast-paced environments that we work in and the support that 7thSense brings to our customers.

Bryan Hinckley: I have a background in theater and one of the things that theater people know is “the show must go on!” This mantra has always been at the heart of 7thSense's approach to project delivery. As the technical brains and power behind the show or attraction, the 7thSense culture fosters a passion for performance and values the importance of product and service reliability that our team provides to the industry.

What are some of the projects you've done together over the years?

Rich: There are so many! Sadly, most sit under the strict veil of a non-disclosure agreement, but there've been many fantastic world-renowned brands! To mention just a few – we've collaborated on projects for Kennedy Space Center, One World Trade Center, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures and Expo 2020 Dubai.

Matt: We've worked with Electrosonic on well over 100 attractions from Japan, Beijing and London to Shanghai, Orlando, Dubai and everywhere in between.

Why is now the right time for Bryan to be joining the 7thSense team?

Bryan: I have a passion for the technology that powers memorable experiences. 7thSense creates and builds the engines that power many of the top attractions, museums and immersive experiences around the world, and I've been fortunate enough to collaborate on many of these projects with 7thSense over the years. I've worked with 7thSense for a long time and have always been impressed by their

Bryan joins our very talented, dedicated team to strengthen and lead the company forward as we expand and evolve our product and solution offerings.

Rich Brown
CTO / Owner
7thSense



As theme parks and attractions continue to become more immersive, dynamic, and personalized, 7thSense has the tools and solutions to bring a story to life. I'm excited to lead a team with an incredible culture, a dedication to our customers, and passion for the guest experience.

Bryan Hinckley
Managing Director
7thSense



Matt: We have a lot on the horizon – with some major launches set for early 2023. Think Virtual Production, new hardware, new software releases, multi-platform solutions, next generation video distribution technologies and multi-user cross product programming!

How big is the company now, and where are offices located? Where will Bryan operate?

Matt: We have approximately 70 staff (and counting!) worldwide. Our company HQ remains in the South Downs National Park in Sussex, U.K., but we now also have offices in London, Detroit and Orlando, as well as a growing team in Burbank and a satellite and support office in Melbourne, Australia.

industry-leading customer service, innovative products, and the incredible talent on their team.

As 7thSense launches the next generation of products and several game-changing solutions, I'm honored to help lead this effort as the company continues to grow and evolve.

Rich: Bryan joins our board to strengthen the exceptional team that we have in place already. 7thSense has seen tremendous growth over the last few years, with multiple product launches across new and existing market segments. As we move into 2023, we are thrilled to be lining up some exciting new product announcements making this the right time for Bryan to join our team.

Matt: Bryan brings a commercial background and skillset to the board that ensures we have a well-rounded team of directors ready to strategically serve the business direction that we plan for the future.

What new products and capabilities are on the horizon?

Rich: We've spent the last 19 years developing and evolving our product range and solutions – looking at how our customers want to use the products that we have so that we can develop features that they want and help solve the challenges they're faced with. Over the past couple of years we've doubled down on development and we're excited to soon be revealing the fruits of that effort.

Gaming engine platforms play a growing role in what we're doing as we look ahead. As we bring together media servers, gaming engines, Medialon show control and Juggler pixel processing into a single workflow, we will bring huge benefits to our customers in many areas.

We also have a great network of distribution partners in China, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand that we very much consider to be part of the 7thSense team.

Bryan will be based with our Burbank team in California, but there's plenty of travel in the cards, as is very much normal for folks working in this industry! As we move forward and take this next step for 7thSense – there's going to be more growth, led by Bryan and the board, so watch this space as we continue to expand.

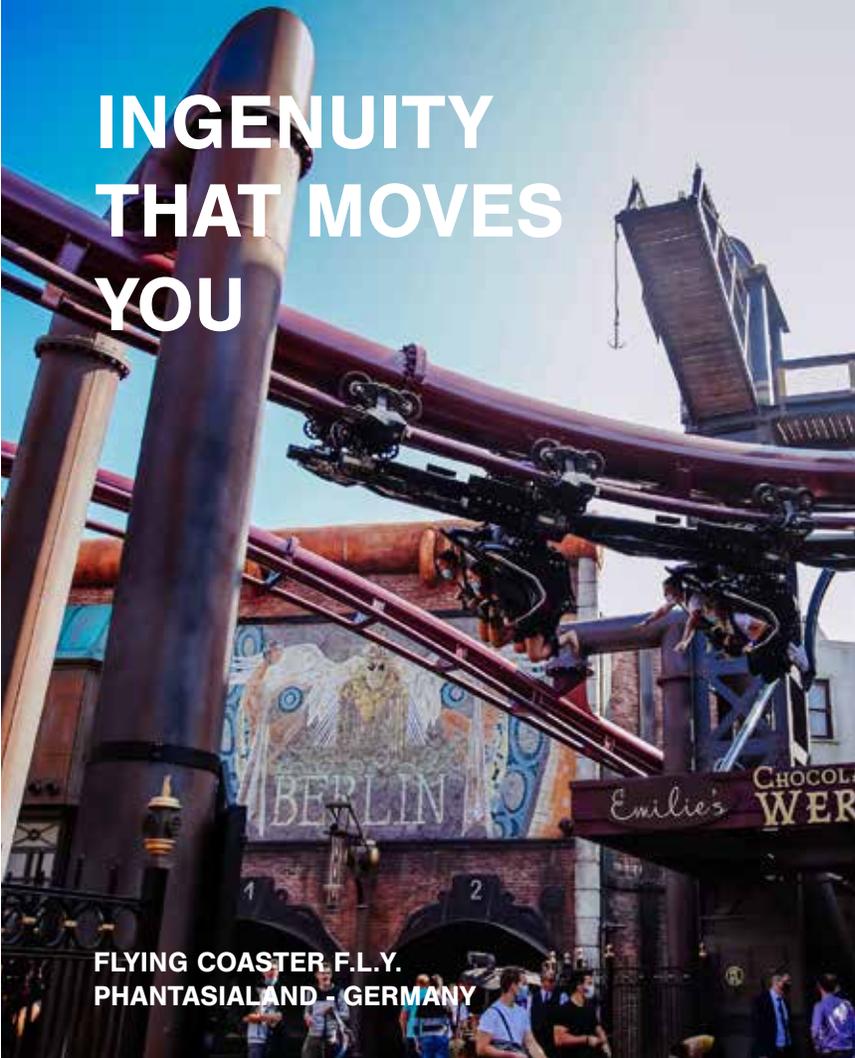
How is 7thSense positioned for the future?

Rich: We are constantly looking into how best to solve problems for our customers and how we need to adapt our product range to stay ahead of the curve. We're strongly invested in next-generation video infrastructure, for example, with all of our product ranges now supporting SMPTE ST 2110. This in itself was a move to solve customer problems, by shifting video output infrastructure to a next-generation, network-based industry-standard, which in-turn results in reduced infrastructure costs and increased remote monitoring capabilities for the customer.

Matt: Bryan will be positioned to lead the company to continue to innovate and ensure we have the right tools that allow our creative users and integration customers to solve their problems, tell their stories and bring their projects to life.

We are always adding the very latest capabilities and leading the way for our customers. Our global office, support and distribution partner network already provides the geographical coverage for our customer base, but this will also continue to expand as we move forward. •••

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Eleventh Hour launches The Collab Experience

The Collab specializes in blending and addressing the ever-expanding breadth of topics surrounding the future of work

by Gene Jeffers

“Today’s workplace is unrecognizable from the environment we knew before 2020,” says Jeff Ganter, co-founder and president of Eleventh Hour, a recruitment and staffing company specializing in location-based and themed entertainment needs. “Our future of work continues to be an ever-evolving concept, impacted by years of fluctuating benefits, accelerated technological advances, inflation upsurges and an unprecedented war for top talent.”

Location-based and themed entertainment companies were hard hit by the pandemic. Theme parks, museums and visitor centers worldwide indefinitely shut down, forcing industry employees to seek opportunities in an unstable and tumultuous market. Now, as industries ramp back up, restart and reopen at extraordinary speed, the demand for talent is generating simultaneous opportunity and challenges at all levels – from executives to creatives to project managers and beyond.

Themed entertainment and LBE “climate change”

“It’s happening. The world of work and workplace environments is in the midst of a massive ‘climate change’ of its own,” says Ganter. “Old approaches to employee satisfaction and retention grow less effective by the day. If companies and their leaders want to attract and retain top talent in this industry, if they want to succeed and survive, they need to take full advantage of what the new workspace and its employees are demanding.”

“Historic employment trends, such as the elimination of pensions and a profit-driven culture of corporate consolidations were already changing the talent marketplace,” says company co-founder Gianna Larsen. “As a result, employee loyalty has been weakening for decades. Add the increased use of technology and the stresses and changes forced by a pandemic and its need for virtual meetings. The result is what many are calling the Great Resignation. People have left jobs in search of something better, something more rewarding, something more engaging. And that’s where we come in.”



Eleventh Hour co-founders Gianna Larsen (left) and Jeff Ganter (right) have launched The Collab Experience. Photo courtesy Wise photography by Nicole

Enter The Collab Experience

Eleventh Hour has created a new division, The Collab Experience. A sourcing and consulting service for themed and LBE industries, The Collab matches specialized coaches from their roster to pave uncharted paths and drive innovative talent strategies.

“The loss of many experienced specialists to other industries during the pandemic combined with the current record low unemployment and the upsurge in experiential design projects post-pandemic have driven the demand for quality themed entertainment talent to an all-time high,” says Larsen. “Companies are having to fight harder to attract and retain the best people with the required skillsets.”

“Past approaches to finding and keeping talent are being driven out of the market,” Ganter adds. “Leaders at the top at large and small companies know they have to rethink, reorganize, ‘retool’ how they nurture people if they want to ensure sustainability and success.”

Beyond seeking increased compensation, skilled employees are looking for opportunities to make a bigger impact. According to Ganter, they are seeking a “greater influence in the business, more variety in the scope of their role, and ultimately personal investment that results in a sense of belonging”

This is often at odds with the culture of smaller or more traditional companies, founded on one individual’s vision. To



Eleventh Hour is a regular exhibitor at the IAAPA Expo in Orlando. *Photo courtesy Eleventh Hour*

solve for and bridge this gap calls for deft coaching and tactful solutions. Additionally, over the past two years, many workers in the industry have adapted to and enjoyed working from home, bonding with family and avoiding the long commutes associated with pre-pandemic demands. Even within a themed entertainment industry accustomed to virtual teaming and working on-site at half-the-world-away locations, establishing a post-pandemic “normal” presents new challenges.

Humanity first

With their expertise in the industry, The Collab provides coaches to themed entertainment companies to innovate and lead the charge toward viewing human resources through the lens of humanity first.

Following the general shift to remote and virtual work during the pandemic, some companies are not planning to bring people back into physical offices at all. Some are looking to a full return to the office, while others are implementing hybrid approaches or shared, common workspaces. Each approach to ‘getting back to normal’ has its own advantages and disadvantages. Determining what is the right mix for each individual company will be key to success.

These new dynamics demand more not only from upper management, but also from mid-level managers. Shifting a company culture with the goal of increased retention and engagement will require continuous effort, trial and error, and

evolving partnership between HR and management to ensure employees feel valued. Unwillingness to adapt will put leadership and its organization in jeopardy.

Central to their mission, Ganter and Larsen believe that companies can make the difference in attracting and retaining their employees by addressing talent as people first – engaging with their lives, dreams and ambitions is as critical for success as assessing their performance.

From traditional workplace themes like career transitions, executive leadership and performance; to less conventional topics related to health and wellness, The Collab/Eleventh Hour team prides itself on a foundation of supportive, responsive, wholistic and compassionate experience. The Collab merges Ganter’s Certified Professional Coach Expertise and Larsen’s Somatic Experiencing Practitioner for Trauma/Stress Management/Anxiety skillset, combined with a curated roster of coaches, to offer wellness resources, think tank experiences, executive development, goal-based coaching, teambuilding retreats and more.

“There is an increased demand for life issues to take precedence,” says Larsen. “Companies need to ensure that employees feel that their company and/or boss cares about their personal well-being as much as their professional contributions.” Larsen adds that, for many, the work-life balance of the past has reversed and reset to a life-work balance of the future.

Personal/professional

The Collab demonstrates a bold willingness to blur the lines between personal and professional. As an example, the think tank offering creates space for companies to openly discuss, brainstorm, develop and chart strategies to solve complex workplace concerns, like burnout and its negative impacts on turnover. The Collab coaches specialize in growing softer skills and tackling tougher topics around mental health, retention, satisfaction and engagement that bridge the gap from past separation of personal and professional life toward a future work-life blend.

The Collab and its advisory scope are founded on nearly two decades of experience in vetting, recruiting and sourcing talent for the experiential design and production industries. “Through our work at Eleventh Hour, we’ve watched workplace trends in this industry evolve, and we have developed strategies to support these changes with an intentional, individualized, relationship-based approach and a unique, problem-solving arsenal,” Ganter says. “Creating The Collab Experience and moving into the holistic/wellness space was the next natural progression.”

“Half of the Fortune 500 companies of 2010 no longer exist and the same is true for hundreds of other companies that used to

support the themed entertainment industry. They did not or could not seize the opportunities that were presented in the last decade,” says Ganter. “Meanwhile, hundreds of new, more flexible companies have entered the industry. Globally, we’ve had more change in the workplace during the past two years than in any previous period in modern history. Now – not tomorrow – is the time for companies to be innovators and leaders. Eleventh Hour and The Collab Experience are prepared to help executives and their HR staff identify and take advantage of the exciting opportunities that lie ahead.”

For more information visit www.thecollabexp.com or email jeff@thecollabexp.com and gianna@thecollabexp.com. •••



Gene Jeffers, former (2001-2013) TEA Executive Director, is currently serving as a board member for the Greater San Gabriel Pomona Valley's American Red Cross and serves on the board of the Historical Novel Society. He continues to write in a variety of genres. Based in Pasadena, Gene and his wife Carol (also a writer) are looking forward to traveling again and spending more post-COVID time with their two daughters, son-in-law and three grandchildren.



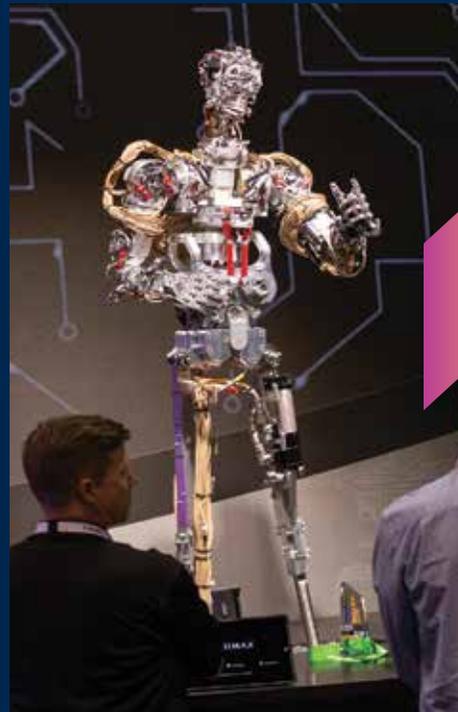
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Gateway™: The Deep Space Launch Complex at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida incorporates exhibits created by Blue Telescope, designed to engage guests in the future of space travel.

Ready for exploration

Blue Telescope helps Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex guests explore deep space

by David Edmonds

How do you inspire the next generation of dreamers and adventurers to face the challenges of interplanetary exploration? You build an attraction with a peek into the future of deep space travel, naturally.

Gateway™: The Deep Space Launch Complex, the newest experience at Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, opened June 15, 2022. It celebrates the present and future of collaborative space exploration, including NASA's partnerships with Aerojet Rocketdyne, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, SpaceX, Sierra Space, and ULA, showcasing next-generation spacecraft launching to the moon, Mars and beyond.

In the style of contemporary, interactive attractions, guests are engaged with one-of-a-kind experiences, artifacts, exhibits, entertainment and education in the 50,000-square-foot, multilevel attraction. At Spaceport KSC, guests are transported to an airport of the future, hearing the atmospheric airport chatter and seeing distant views of active launches and landings through the galactic spaceport windows. Guests then board "spaceships" – in the form of a two-story, motion theater – for one of four journeys: Cosmic Wonders, Daring Explorers, Red Planet or Uncharted

Worlds. Each distinct destination allows for the possibility of a different experience with each visit.

For two exhibits that posed unique challenges, Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex turned to the storytellers at award-winning NYC/Orlando-based experience design firm Blue Telescope. Their small-but-mighty team of creatives and developers were tasked to dream big for the RL10 engine display and the Robotic Space Explorers Interactive Wall within Gateway.

Founded in 2001, Blue Telescope has built a portfolio of audience-focused, engaging, interactive, themed experiences with state-of-the-art technology in museums, theme parks and corporate spaces. The company's motto of "Expanding the Human Experience" was an apt North Star for the Gateway project's goals. And with a name like Blue Telescope, how could they not embrace space?

"The exploration of deep space is a fantastic story," said Trent Oliver, Blue Telescope Founder and Managing Director. "And a story this important needs to be told through unique experiences."

A deliberate challenge

Inside Gateway’s free-flowing, two-story, interactive exhibit space, guests can come face-to-face with models of rockets, sit inside a capsule simulator, and engage with interactive displays to learn more about flight flown spacecraft.

Other exhibits allow guests to explore the next generation of spacesuits or learn about the challenges of spaceflight. Here, Blue Telescope was tasked to help guests understand how the journey into deep space is filled with many small steps towards a larger goal – with success or failure riding on each step.

Built around the RL10 engine, the “workhorse” of the past 50 years of space travel, Blue Telescope created an exhibit where guests must light a second stage booster and move their spacecraft out of low-Earth orbit. But where most exhibits would encourage guests to press a button, create an outcome and move on, Blue Telescope created an experience that challenged guests. “This is deliberately hard,” says Judith Zissman, Executive Creative Director for Blue Telescope. “After all, it’s actually rocket science.”

To successfully light the engine, guests must follow the instructions of launch control, mixing the fuel and igniting combustion at the precise moment. As an experience it is challenging, requiring a certain degree of focus to succeed, mimicking the under-pressure experience of being on a mission team. Guests who don’t complete each step of the game with precision are met with the sputter of an engine and mission failure. However, when successful, guests are rewarded with the roaring sound of the engine as it comes to life with a bright burst of stylized, scenic flame. This unique outcome was created through a combination of audio, LED lighting and scenic, cleverly integrated with a real RL10 engine.



Exhibits utilize interactive gaming created by Blue Telescope to educate visitors on the science of space exploration.

The RL10 engine is one of the unique links between the past and future of space travel. First developed in the 1950s, it is still in use in several next-generation, deep space rockets. For Blue Telescope, using a real RL10 engine added a level of authenticity to the experience. It also required unique creative solutions during design and fabrication. As the modern engine is still a proprietary design, they had to turn to the public domain for engine documentation – in this case, an engine manual from 1964 – to aid in the creation of the exhibit.

Inspiring intrepid explorers

Some of humankind’s most important celestial discoveries have come from robotic satellites and probes that don’t always have household recognition or an emotional connection for viewers. The Robotic Space Explorers Interactive Wall on the second floor of Gateway seeks to change that.

DREAM TEAM

- Dustin Stephan**
Creative Producer
- Judith Zissman**
Executive Creative Director
- Valeria Valoueva**
Lead Developer
- Trent Oliver**
Managing Director, Principal
- Reese Patillo**
Creative Junior Designer
- Ron Cunningham**
Creative Technologist

BLUE TELESCOPE
EXPANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE



Inside Gateway: The Deep Space Launch Complex (left top) visitors interactively learn about rocket technology (right) and explore space using their shadows (left bottom) in exhibits created by Blue Telescope. "Spaceport KSC" photo by David Edmonds. All other photos courtesy of Blue Telescope.

This exhibit showcases just 40 (of the over 400) satellites and probes launched since the 1960s (including offering a glimpse into future missions). Initially envisioned as a video wall, Blue Telescope elevated the experience to an interactive and playful gesture-based adventure, creating engagement with guests as they move through the solar system alongside each spacecraft.

From a satellite kiosk, guests can pull up a mission and learn about it before “launching” it to the interactive media wall along its actual, accurate trajectory from Earth. As it travels across the wall, guests can reach out to “catch” the spacecraft, highlighting facts about the mission and destination and revealing playful “Easter eggs” with additional, behind-the-scenes stories about some of the most interesting robotic explorers.

For Blue Telescope, each of these satellites represents a unique character in the story of deep space exploration. Giving guests insight into the traits and purpose behind each mission was a key goal. “To develop this experience, we had the opportunity to work directly with mission teams and each of us found we had a favorite satellite,” says Zissman. “I want guests to come away finding their own favorites as well.”

From weather satellites that orbit Earth to deep space probes visiting our solar system’s planets and beyond, the exhibit highlights how specialized each mission is, with the media content distilling the stories of these complex, multi-year projects to just a snapshot of their journeys. Select missions include secret nods hidden in the media for guests to unlock (hint: interact with the flight trajectory).

The exhibit focuses on education through dynamic play, striving to be intuitive and fresh. Blue Telescope created an immense amount of content for the experience with room for more. The media system is scalable and adaptable; as new missions make new discoveries, the experience can be expanded. By offering the

option to add new information for future missions, the exhibit serves as a veritable interactive encyclopedia of satellites.

An amazing collaboration

“For Blue Telescope, our goal is that each experience will surprise and delight guests,” says Oliver. The Gateway project was an opportunity to dream big, working with Therrin Protze, COO for Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, and his team, and being encouraged to innovate and experiment. “Therrin and his team were perfect clients with which to push the envelope,” she says. “If we presented new ideas on how to improve the guest experience, their answer was often ‘let’s do it.’”

When a global pandemic created changes in the project’s schedule, the Blue Telescope team embraced the opportunity to experiment with new technologies to improve the guest experience. Already comfortable with working remotely, the team quickly adapted to workflow changes, collaborating with the project team and vendors virtually at first, then on-site in the later months of the project.

Ultimately, the success of the project came from the passion of Blue Telescope’s team, and this shows in the final product. “Space is the dream IP to get to work with,” says Zissman with obvious passion. “We’re ecstatic to have taken part in this project.” •••



David Edmonds is a creative director and entertainment designer from Orlando, Florida. He is a passionate believer in themed entertainment - what it means, how important it is, and how it connects with guests. David has worked on numerous attractions and experiences around the world and loves to share a designer’s perspective on the industry through writing and speaking for industry groups.

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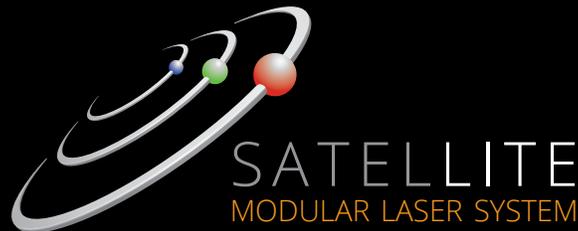
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Placing Lost Island

Midwestern team helps design and build a new theme park in the USA

by *Martin Palicki*

Iowa: Land of corn, the Iowa caucuses, Field of Dreams, and now home to a volcano rising out of a soybean field. Since 2001, Waterloo, Iowa, (population: 67,671) has been home to Lost Island Waterpark, a Polynesian-themed waterpark owned and operated by the Bertch family. The Bertches ran a successful cabinetmaking business for decades before launching into the waterpark business, and though they may not have known it at the time, they were following a time-tested formula for successful attraction development: start small and grow.

Waterparks are often a smarter investment for smaller markets. With lower start-up costs, revenue can quickly recoup expenditures and allow for additional growth. In the case of Lost Island, it led to opening a second gate, also a proven method for extending guest length-of-stay and increasing per-cap spending. Lost Island Themepark opened on June 18, 2022, transforming

a soybean field into a highly themed and detailed park – full of rides, and with an multi-layered, interactive backstory.

A team of well-established Midwestern professionals helped turn the Bertch family’s park vision into reality. BDR Design Group, Weber Group and Bleck & Bleck Architects managed design, engineering, construction and theming for the new park, while dealing with some impressive challenges that cropped up along the way.

The entire Lost Island project actually got started thanks to another venerable Midwestern institution: the self-proclaimed Waterpark Capital of the World, the Wisconsin Dells.

“After a family trip to the Dells in 1994, my father and grandfather decided they wanted to bring a similar type of

amenity to our region,” explains Lost Island General Manager Eric Bertch. “They figured with a longer summer season than central Wisconsin it would work for Waterloo.”

They were right. The family bought farmland on the south end of the city in 1996 and began construction in 1998. Following the 2001 opening, the initial years were challenging as the Bertches learned the ins and outs of park operation. But by 2010 the park had become firmly established in the community and the family started to think about what might come next. They considered an indoor waterpark, FEC facility, ropes course and other ideas before settling on a theme park.

“The research that we had done showed that in locations that had both a waterpark and a dry park, the dry park brought in a minimum of four times the number of visitors,” says Bertch. “That was a pretty compelling argument.”

Planning kicked into high gear in 2016. Construction on Lost Island Themepark began in 2019.

Building a team

A key connection for the Bertches in building the initial waterpark was BDR Design Group in Cincinnati, Ohio. The positive relationship and collaboration led the Bertches to return to BDR when planning the theme park.

“We’ve worked with BDR for 25 years and they’ve always been great,” says Bertch. “Their excitement for the project was really infectious and they helped us come up with new ideas as well.”

BDR specializes in design consulting for leisure attractions, everything from theme parks and resorts to museums and retail spaces. They got their start in the 1980s on projects for Kings Island, Kings Dominion and Carowinds, three parks owned at the time by Taft Broadcasting. Bruce Robinson, President of BDR, says that they have developed “an innate sense of design and efficiency principles that results in an exceptional guest experience.”

BDR Design Group was responsible for developing the master plan for the park including the theme and storyline concept, as well as schematic and design development for the entire Lost Island Themepark. They also worked with ride manufacturers, the architect and the thematic contractor on incorporating theming elements into the attractions.

BDR also understands the critical importance of team culture in building attractions and parks. “We all play our part in a project,” says Robinson, “and it’s that group collaboration that gets projects to the finish line.”

For Lost Island, BDR introduced the Bertches to Weber Group. Weber, in turn, brought Bleck & Bleck Architects to the team. Weber was contracted as the Construction Manager for the park and as the theming contractor. “They have our full company effort behind this project,” says Max Weber, Chief Marketing Officer for Weber Group.

Weber Group is a seasoned design-build company with an extensive portfolio of projects and a comprehensive range of services. They helped Kentucky Kingdom expand from a 10-acre park to a 70-acre park and worked on projects from Great Wolf Lodge to Six Flags – not to mention countless museum and zoos across the country.

Weber constructed all the park’s facilities: food service buildings, restrooms, guest services and other general commercial construction. They oversaw the job site, managing electricians, plumbers, framers and other subcontractors. Weber also had their fabrication shop creating nearly all the theming, with carpenters and installers on site. Many of the elements were built in Weber’s 50,000-square-foot Sellersburg, Indiana, shop and then trucked over to Iowa for installation. Rockwork and some theming was handled by COST of Wisconsin and park signage was created by local Iowa company Signs & Designs in Cedar Falls.

Bleck & Bleck Architects rounded out the park development team. Partners Bob and Chuck Bleck are second-generation architects who got their start in the attractions industry working on The American Eagle roller coaster at Six Flags Great America (then owned by Marriott). They have worked on projects for other Six Flags parks, Kings Dominion (Jungle X-pedition), Holiday World, Worlds of Fun, Crayola Experience, Columbus Zoo and more.

Bleck & Bleck held two contracts for Lost Island. They were contracted to Weber Group as architect of record and engineer of record services for all the buildings and rides. Their second contract was directly with the Bertches for engineering all the ride foundations as well as civil engineering bridges and seawalls for the park’s new 40-acre lake. Midway through the project they took over civil engineering for the entire park. As part of that, they provided engineering analysis for some of the refurbished rides to ensure they complied with Iowa code.



Eric Bertch
Owner,
Lost Island Themepark



Bruce Robinson
President,
BDR Design Group



Stefanie Hawk
Project Director,
BDR Design Group



Bob Bleck
Partner,
Bleck & Bleck
Architects



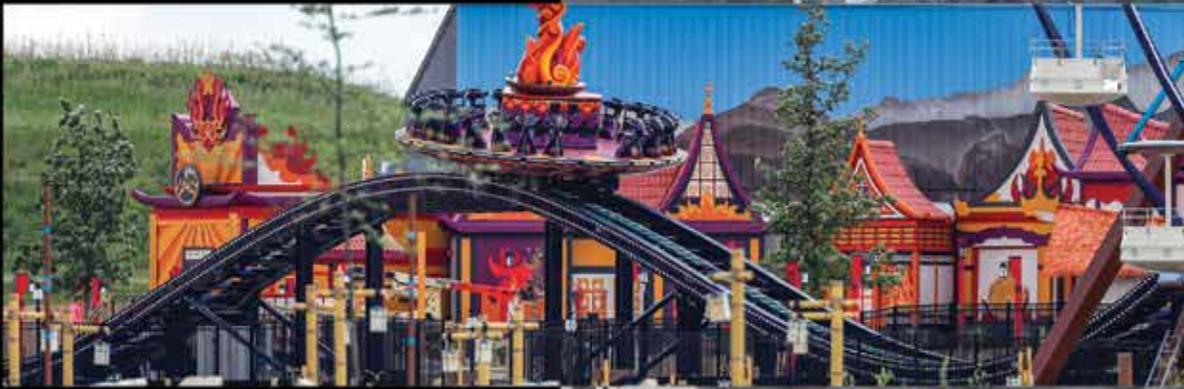
Chuck Bleck
Partner,
Bleck & Bleck
Architects



Max Weber
Chief Marketing
Officer,
Weber Group



Amy Pender
Design Project
Coordinator,
Weber Group



CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR CLIENT THE BERTCH FAMILY ON THE SUCCESSFUL OPENING OF



Bleck & Bleck Architects provided Architect of Record services, including ride integration, ride foundation design, theming integration, and civil engineering.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the talented team delivering WOW moments!

BleckArchitects.com

TheLostIsland.com

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The VOLKANU: Quest for the Golden Idol interactive dark ride is a highly themed attraction based on the park's backstory. Photos courtesy of Sally Dark Rides

One of Bleck & Bleck's strengths comes in their extensive knowledge in code compliance. "Our local municipality is one of the strictest code compliance areas, so it is easy to transfer our skills when we go elsewhere and bring that high level of code compliance with us," explains Bob Bleck. "We know what regulators are looking for and we help make their jobs easy."

Building a story

For the Bertches, a compelling story was critical to the new Lost Island Themepark from day one. Not only is it more fun for guests but it's smart business. Park visitors looking for more than just thrill rides seek an entertaining and engaging story that gives them a reason to return and explore the park further. Once visitors are invested in the story, it opens doors to themed retail and dining options and even expansion into digital and virtual worlds. It's a page taken from the playbook major park operators developed years ago, but is now regularly used by regional parks, pop-up attractions and newer experiences such as the Meow Wolf and Illuminarium venues. It's placemaking writ large, and it requires a special brand of architects, engineers and designers to understand how that story integrates into a project to give it a sense of place.

Bertch explains how the story was developed: "We started with just extending the Lost Island Waterpark concept to the theme park, creating a tropical oasis with a bunch of rides. The more that we thought that over, we realized that there needed to be more than just a fun environment.

"At a waterpark, people are looking for the ambience of waves crashing while they are lying in a lounge chair. In an amusement park there's very little sitting going on; people are eating, or they're walking around, and once they've ridden the rides they want they leave.

"So how do you get them to stay in the facility? There has to be more. That was where we took the island theme and really expanded it from just a representation of a tropical place to an actual immersive story-based concept."

Having worked on the waterpark, the BDR team was familiar with the Polynesian theme and how the Bertch family wanted to expand the story into the theme park. BDR's team developed the initial story concept and helped bring the story into the park's lands, designing at least one major ride for each land that helps convey the narrative.

The park is centered around five realms (each with their own themed land): Mura (Fire), Awa (Water), Udara (Air), Yuta (Earth) and Tamariki (Spirit).

As the backstory goes, long ago a mysterious event created the fire demon Volkanu, who, in turn, obliterated the island. The five realms were able to capture him and put him in a temple of fire in the volcano, locked in by a golden statue. Someone has stolen the idol, allowing Volkanu to break free and potentially destroy the island again. Guests are encouraged to help the realms find the idol and keep Volkanu imprisoned.

Throughout the park, guests learn more about the event that created Volkanu as well as the histories of the realms and their peoples. Information is shared through ride queues, scenery throughout the park, and through a custom app. In addition to providing pertinent logistical information about the park, the app also includes story-enhancing games and features for guests to explore. The app was created by Holovis and inspired by a mobile game they created for Cedar Fair called "The Battle for Cedar Point."

The story reaches a zenith at the VOLKANU: Quest for the Golden Idol dark ride, built by Sally Dark Rides. The 4D interactive ride brings all the elements of the story together and lets guests have a hand in determining the outcome.

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Sally is well respected for their interactive attractions that bring destination-park quality rides to regional operators around the world.

Max Weber credits the Bertches for bringing Sally to the park and says it best: “Having a Sally dark ride in the middle of Iowa is incredibly impressive.”

The story has been a part of the park since its inception and is fully integrated into the park design. “We have a language that people can pick up and learn. There are messages and slogans hidden throughout the park. Each of the realm characters is geo-located in the app, so you can virtually collect them as you’re exploring the rest of the park,” explains Bertch. “From the start we have been focused on cultivating a sense of wonder and getting guests to feel the authenticity of the place and want to find out more about it.”

Building a park

With a fully developed story and a strong team heading up design, architecture, engineering, fabrication and construction, Lost Island Themepark was well on the path to success. But building a brand new theme park out of a soybean field comes with some significant construction and engineering challenges.

One of the first involved water. It’s hard to have an island without water and the soybean field had only a small creek that ran diagonally across the land.

“From the beginning we envisioned a large feature lake to be along one whole side of the park, using that water feature further to create the ‘island’ at Lost Island Themepark. Initially we wanted to expand the existing waterway to create the lake for the park,” explains Stefanie Hawk, Senior Project Designer and Project Director for BDR. “But the approvals process to enlarge the existing waterway was prohibitive, and it ended up being easier to reroute the waterway and create a lake for the park.”

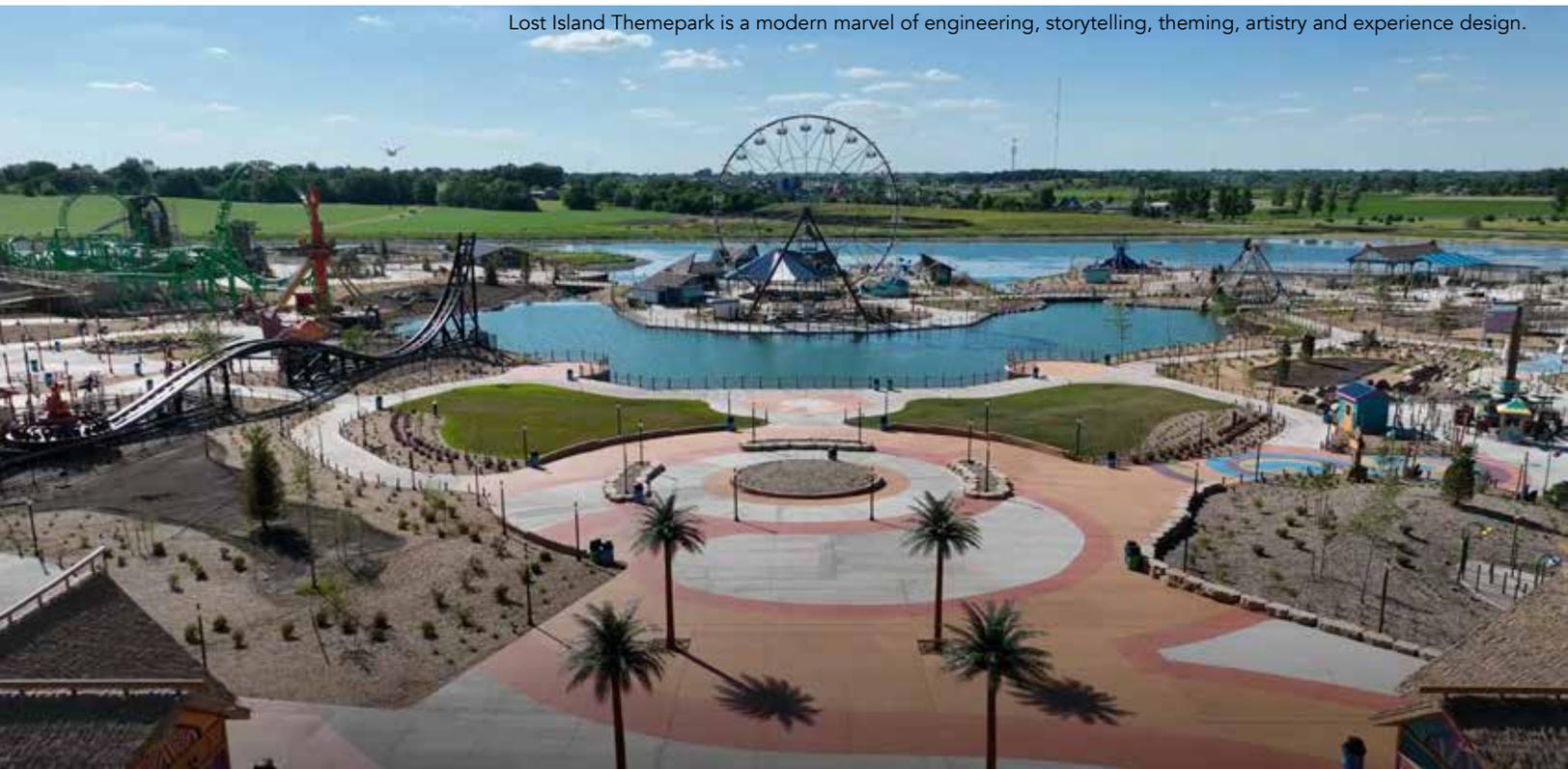
Bleck & Bleck also assisted with the civil engineering and stormwater management. “The Chicago region is a leader in water resource management, so we are very familiar with those policies and best practices,” says Chuck Bleck.

In addition to engineering safe waterways, Bleck & Bleck was charged with ensuring the entire park was built in a safe manner while making risk management systems invisible to the end user. “It needs to look thrilling and risky, but not actually be risky,” explains Bob Bleck. This expertise comes from truly understanding what Bob and Chuck Bleck refer to as “the confounding nature of amusement rides (specifically, a self-propelled ride vehicle inside a building or on a track).” They cite their work on the VOLKANU dark ride as an example. The flame effects within the attraction require a specialized smoke detection system be installed and integrated with the other building safety systems.

One engineering problem the team helped solve actually involved moving rides around in the park. According to Bleck & Bleck, original designs had the Matugani launch coaster from Intamin where the Yuta Falls flume ride is now located. But the soil under that site was not stable enough to support the specific requirements of the coaster without the use of an expensive driven pile or drilled concrete pier deep foundation. However, in excavating the park’s lake a large amount of compactible high quality fine sand was available and mined from the lake bed and spread under the Yuta Falls flume area. Since the flume has more tolerance for variations in settlement and the sand can be easily compacted to minimize settlement, the location of the two rides was swapped, saving a large amount of time and money. Moreover, the move enhanced the guest experience by having the guest midway pass underneath Matugani’s top hat element. As both rides were in the Yuta Realm of the park, no re-theming was needed.

The three companies often worked together on theming and employed their collective knowledge on the special use nature of different buildings in a theme park. Design is reinforced through

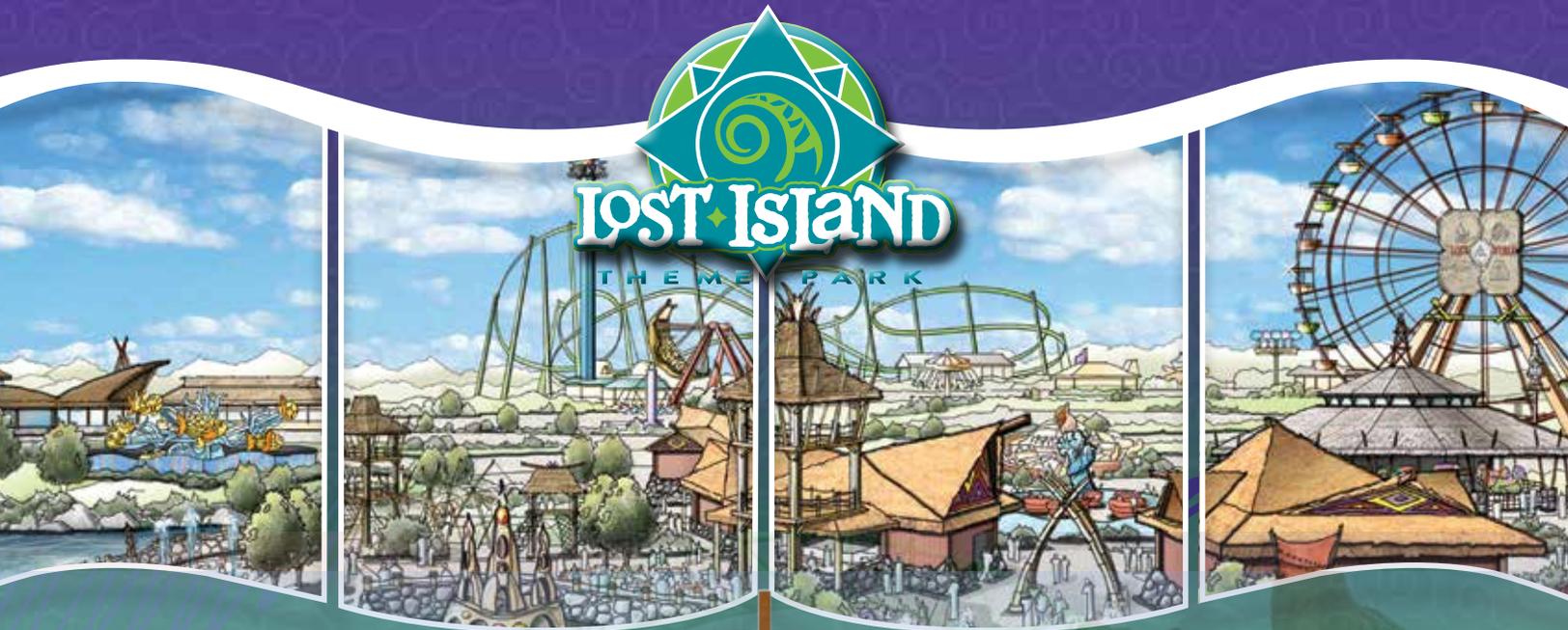
Lost Island Themepark is a modern marvel of engineering, storytelling, theming, artistry and experience design.



*BDR Design Group Congratulates
the Bertch Family for
Achieving Their Dream!*



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Simply Amazing



Lost Island Themepark gets ready before its opening in summer of 2022.

creative engineering and thematic fabrication. The Luau Center at Lost Island is a great example with its structural steel painted to look like bamboo and large timber truss beams exposed. “It adds so much visual intrigue when you can express a beam,” Chuck Bleck says. “Compare that to the Volkanu dark ride, where you want to hide as much of the building structure as possible.”

The park was also designed from the start for expansion. Each realm has at least four rides operating, and BDR designed additional rides for future growth as well as preserving expansion areas for each realm. Notably, the opposite side of the lake has prime real estate available for eventual development. All of it was designed in service to the park’s narrative.

“We wanted future expansion to add an incremental dimension to the story,” says Robinson. “So we planned precisely for that opportunity.”

Building an island

The entire team agrees that the genius of Lost Island is in the attention to detail. The story is woven throughout the park, in building design, small set pieces and in ride queues. At first glance, the depth of detail is rather hidden. Having been built out of a soybean field, the park is relatively flat, so you get to see just about the entire park as you walk through the front gate.

“There’s a big reveal element right away as you get to see the park,” explains Amy Pender, Design Project Coordinator for Weber Group. “But the real payoff comes when you start to slowly walk through the park and pick up all the details that are literally around every corner. Everywhere you look there’s something cool to see, which you don’t always find in smaller parks.”

Weber helped fabricate a lot of those details. In addition to fiberglass construction and theme painting they built decorative gables, building facades, thematic props for each of the five realms, and, according to Pender, “so many murals.”

“Being able to be the construction manager from the ground up on a project of this size and deliver so much of the theming work

has been an honor for us,” says Pender. “This project has really shown how Weber likes to figure things out. I think that’s what we do best.”

Building a legacy

The entire team faced challenges throughout the park build, including harsh winters, a pandemic, excessive rain (by some reports, the cumulative rain days extended the project by almost a year), rapidly rising materials costs and a steady labor shortage. Most were remedied by relying on the team as well as the leadership of the Bertch family. Everyone repeatedly mentioned the ease of working with the Bertches and the benefits of the tight-knit family team.

“The Bertch family was hands-on the whole time, which was fantastic,” says Weber’s Pender. “When you’re doing design work, having a client that wants to be involved in all aspects of it is so helpful.”

“They made decisions right then and there,” says Max Weber. “There was no red tape because the Bertch family really streamlined the decision process.”

“We were essentially designing it for friends,” says Bruce Robinson. “So we wanted it to be as great as they expected.”

“I think the thing that separates Lost Island from other parks is that they’ve spent not only the investment of money, but also the investment in an idea, a theme, and getting this team of industry professionals to create and craft that story,” says Chuck Bleck. “It’s fine to say that it’s a theme park that has a lot of rides, but it’s really much more than that. The Bertches took Lost Island Themepark to the next level.” •••



**Listen to our interview with
Lost Island Owner Eric Bertch**

InPark Tracks #35

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Buildings in each of the five realms of Lost Island Themepark are intricately detailed and support the park’s storyline.



Go West

FlyOver Las Vegas takes guests on a journey through the American West.
Photo courtesy of Pursuit

A world-class team brings Pursuit's signature FlyOver attraction to the Las Vegas Strip

by Joe Kleiman

Pursuit builds its brand in Las Vegas

FlyOver Las Vegas is not only a state-of-the-art flying theater experience in the entertainment capital of the world; it also represents an emerging breed of standalone attraction.

Open since September 2021, FlyOver Las Vegas is the latest in the FlyOver series of attractions that have delivered a string of successes for tourism and leisure company Pursuit. A FlyOver attraction immerses guests in an audiovisual environment and takes them on a simulated aerial journey through the combination of a half-dome shaped screen and motion seats that suspend them with feet dangling, plus other effects such as wind, lighting, scents and mist. Each is in a destination location, designed to capture the vibe of the city and region.

It began in 2013 with FlyOver Canada in Vancouver, which in 2016 was acquired by Pursuit (at that time, the Viad Travel and Recreation Group) with the intention to expand the brand into new markets. Vancouver was followed by FlyOver America at Minnesota's Mall of America and FlyOver Iceland in Reykjavik. The Vancouver, Reykjavik and Las Vegas locations are fully owned-and-operated venues, while the FlyOver location at Mall of America is operated by a third-party licensee.

Designed for success

Complementing Pursuit's operational acumen and innovative business model is the world-class creative team brought together to design and implement each FlyOver attraction – a roster of distinguished filmmakers and animators, sound designers, composers, AV integrators and technology firms. Within the themed entertainment industry, each is a recognized specialist and leader in their field with a portfolio of acclaimed projects and numerous awards.

Leading the external creative team is Rick Rothschild, Founder and Chief Creative Officer of FAR Out! Creative Direction, who has served as Creative Director on all the FlyOver attractions to date. During his time as a Disney Imagineer, Rothschild was Creative Director on "Soarin' Over California," the 2001 attraction that gave rise to the flying theater genre (the one that started it all!). He continues to consult on a number of high-profile media-based attractions worldwide. On Pursuit's internal team, Rothschild interfaces with Eric Sambell, FlyOver's Global Director of Construction and Entertainment Technology, who has overseen the technical side of FlyOver projects since the initial Vancouver location.

Core to any flying experience is a motion theater designed and engineered to uplift and exhilarate a broad, multi-generational audience. Taiwan-based Brogent Technologies Inc. has provided motion bases for all four. Its next generation i-Ride flying theater technology provides a full six axes of movement to turn guests into delighted passengers gliding, swooping and soaring over and through the projected environment.

The AV integrator for the ride portion of the attraction was Austria-based Kraftwerk Living Technologies (KLT) a key supplier to projects in theme parks, museums and attractions worldwide. “At KLT, we concentrate on the presentation of the content for the ride,” says Kevin Murphy, the company’s Senior VP of Sales and Business Development. “We concentrate on the AV and the screen, making sure they work well together and that everything is transparent. We worked closely with Eric and his design team and with Rick on the creative end to make that happen for FlyOver.”

FlyOver Las Vegas marks the second time KLT has been part of Pursuit’s FlyOver team (following FlyOver Iceland). The company has a strong track record supplying customized systems for unique rides and attractions including flying theaters. “Since the popular Voletarium at Germany’s Europa-Park [see “Uniquely European,” InPark Magazine issue #69], we’ve worked on a total of fifteen flying theater auditoriums over the past few years,” says Murphy. “Each one is different and requires a unique approach.” The company was recently honored with a 2022 Inavation Award for its work on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai.

Moment Factory (Montreal) is another specialist that reprised its role on the FlyOver team for the Las Vegas installation, working with Rothschild in designing the preshow experiences. At its heart, Moment Factory is an international multimedia studio with a full range of production expertise under one roof. Their projects are multidisciplinary in nature, utilizing live action, animation, graphics, lighting and physical elements. The company has created experiences worldwide, including for various theme parks, museums, airports, retail outlets and concerts. Most recently, Moment Factory transformed Madison Square Garden into a “deep-sea dreamscape,” where giant drones shaped like dolphins and a whale “swam” feet above the audience during an Earth Day concert by the rock band Phish. The company has collaborated with Rothschild on the preshows for all Pursuit-owned FlyOver attractions since Vancouver.

Vegas trends

The signature experience of FlyOver Vegas, “The Real Wild West,” shows how the region is continuously changing and adapting. Like the wider Western United States, Vegas continually evolves to reflect changing markets. It has many nicknames, but from an industry point of view it might well be called The City That Never Stops Planning and Rebuilding, or The Eternal Entertainment Laboratory – a place of great creative opportunity and a proving ground for fresh approaches.

Reflecting urban travel destinations such as Hollywood Boulevard and San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf, the Strip has become very pedestrian-friendly. Whereas in the past an attraction of this kind might be tucked away inside a casino, today the entrance to FlyOver Vegas sits directly on the Las Vegas Strip – a separate experience outside the framework of a casino and a model to watch and learn from.



The entrance to FlyOver Las Vegas on the south end of the Las Vegas Strip. The entrance leads to a series of long hallways that take visitors toward the back of the building where the attraction, gift shop and bar are located. Photo by Joe Kleiman

Motion simulation attractions first came to Las Vegas in 1990 as part of a concerted effort to broaden the city’s market appeal with more family-friendly options in entertainment as well as retail. This strategy led to a number of innovative and even influential and trend-setting simulator attractions in resorts either on or near the Strip, such as Luxor’s “Search for the Obelisk,” Caesars IMAX 3D “Race for Atlantis,” and “Star Trek: The Experience” at the Las Vegas Hilton. These high-budget projects were all positioned as tentpole attractions to augment casino time with some family leisure options. FlyOver, the first major simulation attraction in Las Vegas in two decades, takes this trend in a new direction, serving a broader demographic with less intensity and more ambience, exhilaration and storytelling.

Entry and deceleration

While the exterior of the attraction screams “Las Vegas Strip excitement,” guests will find the interior more tranquil. Once inside and past the ticket counter, guests enter a “deceleration zone” with LED mood lighting, digital panels and calming music, departing from the hustle and bustle of the Strip. This zone repurposes the area connecting two former retail spaces – a shoe store and a multiplex cinema – that were reconfigured to house FlyOver. According to Julien Demers-Arsenault, Moment Factory’s Multimedia Director on the project, “the idea is to take the guest from the noise and steel and concrete of Las Vegas to a more relaxing place. Inside the hall are kaleidoscopic images of nature – flowers, streams and more.” Throughout the hall and the preshow areas, an ambient soundtrack plays, designed by Oscar-winning sound editor Sylvian Bellemare (*Arrival*, 2017). Following its successful implementation in FlyOver Iceland [see



Evocative of canyon terrain, the preshow for Flyover Las Vegas sets up the historical background and context of the American West.
Photos this page courtesy Moment Factory

“Visualization Vectors,” InPark Magazine issue #80] Pursuit selected Smart Monkeys’ ISAAC platform to control the preshows and house management.

Retail, refreshments and photo ops are all part of the package and are presented with a Western motif. At the center of the lobby sits the Lost Cactus bar, which serves libations themed to the attraction’s signature show.

Preshow and authenticity

The flight itself is only half of the FlyOver experience. “Every aspect of FlyOver is about getting the guest ready to take flight – both physically and emotionally,” says Lisa Adams, President of FlyOver Attractions for Pursuit. “We take an anthropological deep dive. We connect to the senses, offering a sense of discovery. Throughout the experience we have moments of deceleration, then we tell the story of the land through the preshow, giving our guests an understanding of where they’re going to fly.”

FlyOver Las Vegas takes guests through two preshow rooms, followed by the main event (the simulated flight). The entire experience lasts an average of 25 minutes. In the first preshow theater, guests are separated into boarding groups while viewing animated vignettes of locations to be visited during the flight. Moment Factory’s Demers-Arsenault shares that the images were based on the title sequences of classic Western films. The second preshow room sets up the historical background and context of the American West, evoking canyon terrain. It features a circular screen suspended in the middle of the room, surrounded by six floor-to-ceiling screens on the exterior walls of the space with topographical features at their base, creating a 360-degree space. “By utilizing three separate floor-to-ceiling screens on each side of the room, we could concentrate on the experience



without worrying about image blending,” says Demers-Arsenault. Recesses in the floor feature LED lighting choreographed with the action on screen.

“We knew we wanted a bigger story than just the city,” says Rothschild, whose credits also include EPCOT’s pivotal history presentation, The American Adventure. “We went to a map, put a pin in Vegas and drew a big circle to determine our audience that was within a day’s drive, about a 500-mile radius. When we did that, we ended up with most of the American West. We began thinking about what that provides as a storyline and what the relevance of Vegas is in context to this greater area.”

The main preshow media begins with the audience submerged in an ancient sea. “We wanted to surprise the guest,” says Demers-Arsenault. “They are expecting the Wild West but instead enter into a prehistoric ocean.” As the preshow progresses in time, the style of animation changes to match the era.

“It was an appropriate start to the geological history of the West, as Las Vegas was once under an ancient ocean,” says Rothschild. “As the preshow progresses, we move from natural factors to human and cultural factors. We start with Indigenous people, who are also featured during the ride itself, while not ignoring the eventual subjugation that one culture places on another. We engaged consultants to assure we were being true to history while also appropriately acknowledging sensitive subjects.”

Creating the best AV experience

FlyOver Las Vegas currently houses two identical 40-seat theaters, each with a 52.5-foot diameter dome screen and its own preshow rooms, with space to add a third. It is also showing the film from the Iceland location and double feature tickets are available. According to Adams, the two theaters at FlyOver Las Vegas and the retrofit of the existing spaces cost \$45 million in all.

KLT’s Murphy talked about technical goals, challenges and solutions in providing AV integration for the ride auditoriums. “We have high standards of quality. Vegas was our second FlyOver attraction after Iceland, and the AV design went through many iterations and changes in conversation with Rick, Eric and the team. When it comes to equipment, we are agnostic – we choose what’s right for the project. We chose three Christie D4K40 projectors for each theater for this project because they have the right reliability, light output, color gamut, and lenses we were looking for. A primary goal is to ensure that every guest gets the ‘best seat in the house.’ We had to take into consideration the projection angles, the screen shape, and the brightness. In the end, if we’ve done our job right, the guest receives the best audiovisual experience but doesn’t notice the audiovisual equipment.” KLT built its show control and blending software for the projection and audio off of Brainsalt’s BSM 4K media servers.

The FlyOver Las Vegas flying theater features a 15.1 sound system, specified and installed by KLT, consisting of five top, five middle, three lower middle and two bottom speakers all behind the screen, combined with four subwoofers all from JBL. Brogent added two speakers behind each seat during the ride build.

Fly like a bird

Each theater has two floors, with two 10-seat gondolas on each floor that are launched forward and suspended over the screen in Brogent’s recent

all-electrical upgrade of i-Ride (previous versions were hydraulic). “It’s the proven i-Ride system, which allows the 10-seat gondolas to move in six degrees of freedom (dof): heave, surge, sway, pitch, roll and yaw,” says Stefan Rothaug, Marketing & Sales at Brogent. “FlyOver Las Vegas is the first delivery of an improved, next-generation i-Ride with all-electrical design. Guests will have the same magical flying experience, but for operators it makes maintenance and daily checks much easier.” Elemental effects, including wind, mist and natural scents, are emitted from Brogent’s i-Ride motion base, at levels moderated to subtly complement the experience but not overwhelm it.

While Brogent has a longstanding sales and marketing relationship with Vekoma for distributing its products to theme parks, it worked directly with FlyOver on its location in Vancouver. The relationship continued after the acquisition by Pursuit. Rothschild had made a point of researching the Brogent technology and its capabilities. “I went to visit them in Taiwan and experienced their first version of a motion base created for a local theme park there,” says Rothschild. “With that experience, they were willing to redesign the ride vehicle for us to assure all of our expectations.”

For all shoots, Rothschild flew in a helicopter with Sherpas Cinema’s Dave Mossop, director of the flying film, along with a director of photography. In one segment, the ride vehicle appears to slow in mid-flight to hang momentarily while rotating to the side. Rothschild explains that the film was conceived as if the riders were birds. “Birds can float on the thermals and, while turning, subtly change their perspective,” he says. “We’re doing the same thing using the helicopter with our camera, a RED Monstro which captures with native 8K resolution.” In another scene, riders enter a simulated barrel roll following a fighter jet. With Clemson University Professor Eric Muth, an expert on motion sickness, acting as a consultant on the project, the barrel roll was designed to deliver the sights and sensations without risk to audience comfort and safety. “It’s very important that the vehicle is programmed in sync with the image onscreen, or you get sick,” adds Rothschild.



While waiting for their flying experience, guests can visit the lobby bar and gift shop. Photo by Joe Kleiman



FlyOver Las Vegas wouldn't be complete without a flyover experience of the Las Vegas Strip. Photos this page courtesy of Pursuit

Transitions

Rothschild discussed the workflow of FlyOver media production. “We have a lot of freedom working digitally through the pipeline from the start,” he says. “Dave would take one element in the environment, focus on it, and use digital tools to make the rest of the environment change around it. The brain accepts this as normal.” These smoother transitions allow guests to experience a single, organically connected experience, easing them in and out of scenes.

Some of the shoots for “The Real Wild West” only took a few passes, but a few were more complicated, such as a low flight through the middle of an Old West shootout in the ghost town of Goldfield, Arizona. “That was our homage to the classic Clint Eastwood western *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*,” says Rothschild. “We shot it in about three hours, and it was one of the most sophisticated shots ever for a FlyOver film. It involved six or seven takes, with 35 performers, stuntmen, extras and animals – a nest full of classic live-action challenges!”

Sound design and safety spiel

Rothschild worked on the safety-spiel segment of the preshow with former Disney animator and Imagineer George Scribner, along with Will Martinez as animators – endeavoring to bring something new to the form. “For each new location,” he points out, “we try to bring something unexpected.” For FlyOver Las Vegas they chose a young woman as a central character. She’s accompanied on screen by two prairie dogs named Midnight and Snake Eyes. Rothschild points out that their names are Vegas ‘Easter eggs,’ being terms for the casino dice game craps.

Tom Holkenborg (better known by his stage name Junkie XL) composed the attraction’s score. Sound Sculpture’s Ben Harrington (son of legendary Walt Disney Imagineering media designer Joe Harrington) created the audio for the safety spiel and the main ride experience, while long-time collaborator Craig Krueger provided the sound mix for the dome. Both Harrington and Krueger have previously worked on several major attractions at Disney parks.

Where to FlyOver?

As noted, unlike previous motion simulator attractions in the city, FlyOver Las Vegas does not require a walk through a casino or a journey to the back of a resort to be experienced. Rather, it is easily and directly accessed streetside in a bustling area of the Strip. “Foot traffic was first and foremost in determining a location,” shares Adams. “The area we chose in the Showcase Mall is an area with a lot of development. There’s a new pedestrian overpass that’s advantageous to us, connecting directly to the New York-New York and Park MGM hotels and the T-Mobile Arena. The popular M&M’S store is next door to us. All of our locations

involve a large external presence, which showcases our brand.”

While FlyOver Las Vegas is the brand’s newest location, it is far from its last. “Our next location, FlyOver Canada, between the CN Tower and the Rogers Centre in Downtown Toronto, will run \$100 million and be our biggest. It was scheduled to open this year but has now been pushed back to 2024 due to delays from the pandemic. It will feature a new film on the Canadian Rockies.”

When selecting a new location, Pursuit looks at three major criteria. First, it needs to be a big tourism center. Second, international tourism has to play a big part. Third, that needs to be offset by a large domestic tourism market. is picking up,” Adams expects that 80% of the Vegas location will be out-of-town domestic tourists. “People come to Vegas for concerts, events, dining, and wedding throughout the year,” she says. “And we’re also seeing quite a few Nevada locals coming in.”

Pursuit recently announced a new FlyOver location on Chicago’s iconic Navy Pier. “Our parent company operates a collection of attractions, lodges, and tours in North America and Iceland,” says Adams. “Our resorts tend to be in ecotourism areas, while the FlyOver attractions are in high foot traffic tourism centers in large cities. All of Pursuit’s operations have the same goal – we tell the story of a people and a country in spaces with accessible price points. FlyOver offers an experience of nature, culture and the feeling of flight, and lets people experience what they might not be able to in other locations.” •••





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Focus on EMEA

The evolving regional attractions industry in Europe, the Middle East and Africa

by Edmond Chih, Director, and Edward Shaw, Principal, of Entertainment + Culture Advisors (ECA)

The attraction industry is rapidly evolving to move beyond COVID-19. New developments and operational approaches in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) provide a case study of the industry’s evolution. Having worked extensively throughout the region over the past decade Entertainment + Culture Advisors (ECA) has outlined the changes occurring in the regional industry and the path ahead as highlighted by major attraction trends and new projects.

The EMEA region highlights the three fundamental phases of attraction development – inception, growth and stabilization.

- **Inception:** Early-stage markets are characterized by family entertainment centers (FECs) in retail malls, lower-investment outdoor amusement parks and waterparks. Most projects are unbranded.
- **Growth:** The quality and pricing levels of indoor attractions and waterparks increase, and higher-investment theme parks are introduced. Branding and licensed intellectual property (IP) are used to heighten the profile, pricing power and drawing power of the projects.

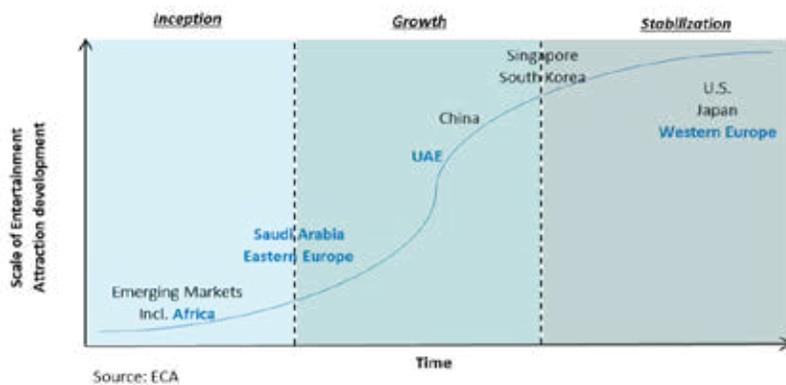


Edmond Chih



Edward Shaw

- **Stabilization:** As markets stabilize, the growth of new large-scale projects decreases and most investment is focused on reinvestment in existing projects. Smaller indoor attraction projects continue to evolve as older projects are replaced by newer concepts. Branding and IP are key points of competitive differentiation.



The EMEA region represents all three stages of development. Western Europe is a stabilized and mature market with most parks constructed several decades ago. Within the Middle East, the industry in the UAE continues to grow but is nearing a stabilization point as the focus shifts to reinvesting in existing large-scale parks and exploring new smaller-scale concepts – meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is transitioning quickly from inception into growth, as both public and private sectors are looking to introduce a broad range of international-standard attractions to the region including branded large-scale parks. Africa remains in the inception stage with limited commercial attraction development as leisure tourism continues to be driven by nature-based and cultural experiences.

Lessons for EMEA from global attraction industry trends and COVID-19 considerations

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a dramatic disruption to the tourism and attractions industries worldwide. In 2020, closures and reduced capacities led to an attendance decline of upwards of 75% or more across leading destinations. Some improvement was observed in the following year as an increasing number of attractions reopened with a dedicated focus on operational efficiency and customer safety which have been crucial towards maintaining profitability under uncertain market conditions.

From an experiential standpoint, the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic has spurred developers and operators to lean further into more cost-efficient attraction formats, such as temporary and traveling pop-up exhibits, immersive art experiences, and drive-through attractions. Within the attractions themselves, there has been an increased use of both outdoor and indoor space, where possible, to mitigate capacity constraints. In addition, the pandemic has continued to accelerate the implementation of in-attraction technologies with some attractions becoming increasingly touchless for transactions.

As we reach the halfway point of 2022, pent-up demand for travel and outside entertainment continues to be strong. Leading attractions are seeing higher revenues because of less discounting, more ticket-related upcharges, and higher in-attraction spend. In addition, governments have been acting to help support the industry. For example, VAT rates in selected European markets (notably in the United Kingdom) were temporarily reduced to further encourage consumer spending.

For many attractions, the resurgence in attendance has been driven primarily by local and regional residents with tourism still on the upswing. Local

and domestic tourism is naturally recovering more quickly than international tourism given fewer travel restrictions along with the cost and convenience of traveling closer to home with staycations. But with tourism restrictions continuing to ease in many regions, international travel from a global perspective is reemerging.

Europe

Europe, particularly the western region, is one of the larger and more mature theme park and attraction markets in the world. At approximately USD 126 (EUR 120), headline pricing at Disneyland Paris trails only the Disney parks in the United States, which are priced at USD 159 for peak days, but is well above the counterparts in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai. Outside of Disneyland Paris, the European theme park market is primarily characterized by smaller theme parks and amusement parks that are more regional serving.

Among theme parks, current development in Europe is primarily focused on in-park expansions and content upgrades, e.g., new lands, zones and smaller second gates, such as indoor/outdoor waterparks. Disneyland Paris is undergoing a EUR 2.0 billion multi-year expansion effort that will add, among other various attractions, lands for *Star Wars*, *Marvel*, and *Frozen* to Walt Disney Studios Park. Efteling in the Netherlands is adding a 143-room hotel within the gate as well as a new indoor attraction due to open in 2024. Phantasialand, based in Brühl, Germany, recently debuted Rookburgh, an immersive new land with a steampunk aviation theme, complete with a themed hotel and the world's longest flying roller coaster. Futuroscope in Poitiers, France, is investing EUR 300 million over 10 years to upgrade the theme park as well as add a new waterpark and hotels. Additionally, Puy du Fou in Toledo, Spain, completed its EUR 183 million Phase 1 development, which includes the large-scale outdoor show "El Sueño de Toledo," which debuted in 2019, as well as a 30-hectare park attraction, which opened in March 2021 and features multiple shows and a cultural village.

The industry in Europe is also seeing a renewed focus towards mall-based/urban entertainment attractions and branded experiences. In Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, Mattel just opened Mission: Play! – a 4,000-square-meter family entertainment venue that provides physical and digital play experiences, edutainment, events, and experiential retail with themed areas for Barbie, Hot Wheels, and MEGA Bloks. New LEGO Discovery Centres are scheduled to debut in Brussels, Belgium, this year and in Hamburg,



“El Sueño de Toledo” show Courtesy Puy du Fou España

Germany, next year as part of mixed-use retail entertainment destinations.

Immersive walk-through experiences are also gaining traction. The Game of Thrones Studio Tour just debuted in Banbridge, Northern Ireland, featuring a self-guided tour on how the show was created, complete with official costumes, props, and set pieces. Harry Potter: A Forbidden Forest Experience is returning to Cheshire, England, this year after a successful inaugural run in 2021, offering guests a nighttime forest trail with illuminated sets and themed food and experiences for fans of the Harry Potter movie franchise. And Frameless, which will be London’s first permanent immersive digital art experience, is slated to open in the West End later this year.

Middle East

The modern leisure and entertainment industry in the Middle East remains concentrated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), specifically Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The region has successfully established itself as a global leisure destination through the rapid development of world-class attractions, entertainment, hospitality offerings, and supporting transportation infrastructure over the past 15+ years.

Already home to region-leading waterparks, internationally branded theme parks, and events, the landscape in Dubai and Abu Dhabi continues to evolve. SeaWorld Abu Dhabi, a combined marine-life theme park and research, rescue, and

rehabilitation center, is anticipated to open in 2023, adding to the Yas Island destination cluster.

For large-scale park attractions in the UAE, reinvestment in existing properties is a priority over new development as the market continues to absorb the current supply. Dubai Parks and Resorts recently expanded the Lionsgate zone of Motiongate – which now features two new rides in John Wick: Open Contract and Now You See Me: High Roller – and opened a 250-room LEGOLAND Hotel in 2022. Aquaventure Waterpark at Atlantis Dubai debuted a major expansion in March 2021, increasing the overall size of the park by a third and introducing 28 new water slides and activities. The WB Abu Dhabi, a 257-room themed hotel integrated with Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi on Yas Island, opened at the end of 2021.

Additionally, developers continue to explore opportunities for indoor location based entertainment in shopping centers and tourist locations. Consistent with development trends in other major markets, there is an expanded interest towards “eatertainment,” which combines social games with a quality food and drink program in a trendy setting. Topgolf is a premium example, offering a fun and hospitable environment with a gamified driving range experience and chef-inspired menu. Topgolf Dubai, with a three-level facility spanning more than 5,600 square meters, in addition to the driving range area, has a capacity to accommodate 1,100 guests, and has quickly become one of the global flagships for Topgolf since its public debut in 2021.

While the UAE is the established player in the Middle East attractions space, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the region’s emerging player that is fast entering the growth stage of the

attraction industry development curve with several ambitious attraction, tourism, and resort development projects in the pipeline.

The catalyst behind this transition is KSA's Vision 2030, an aspirational framework focused on creating a well-diversified economy with a more vibrant, open society throughout the Kingdom. Entertainment is a priority sector in this strategic effort, and significant public funding has been committed to elevating KSA's leisure industry from 2030 and beyond.

In prior years, KSA's commercial attraction landscape has been primarily limited to mall-based family entertainment centers and basic amusement parks with off-the-shelf activities. Now, with the direct support of the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, there are several large-scale destination projects being planned for key regions in the Kingdom. One of the most anticipated is Qiddiya, an entertainment megaproject spanning 334 square kilometers just outside of Riyadh, which will contain the region's first Six Flags Theme Park, a world-class waterpark, and numerous other sports, arts, and attraction components. Six Flags Qiddiya is scheduled to open in 2023+ and will feature 28 different rides and attractions spread across 32 hectares.

Additionally, Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN), a fully owned subsidiary of PIF, is planning a destination waterpark in



Harry Potter: A Forbidden Forest Experience Courtesy Fever

Dammam as well as an adventure park in the southwest city of Abha.

There are also several other megaprojects – dubbed “Giga Projects” – planned throughout KSA. They include: Amaala, a luxury wellness and resort tourism destination in the northwest of the country; the Aseer Development Project, a mountainous resort and tourist destination in KSA's southern highlands; Diriyah Gate, which centers on a UNESCO World Heritage site, northwest of Riyadh; the resort and island based Red Sea Project on KSA's west coast; and the most ambitious of all, NEOM, a \$500 billion Smart City being developed in the northwest of the country. Each giga project is envisioned to include a selection of theme parks, waterparks, and other entertainment and cultural attraction components.

Efforts are also being extended beyond large-scale parks and destination megaprojects. SEVEN is currently planning up to 20 urban entertainment complexes across the Kingdom. Each complex will range from 50,000 to 300,000 square meters and feature a combination of unique shopping, dining, and recreational experiences. The goal is to bring these modern, integrated developments to not only the major cities, but also the smaller markets outside of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Eastern Province.

While the public sector is the main driving force behind the ambitious development, the private sector is also being engaged. Abdullah Al Othaim Investment Co., a regional market leader in construction, management, and mall operations, is looking to create new mixed-use destinations throughout the Kingdom comprised of restaurants, attractions, cinemas, and residential units.



World's first MammothBLAST™ Water Coaster, part of Atlantis Aquaventure Dubai's phase 3 expansion Courtesy ProSlide



Topgolf Dubai Courtesy Topgolf International

Africa

Leisure tourism in Africa remains driven by nature-based and cultural experiences. These include numerous national parks, nature/wildlife reserves, and natural landmarks and formations. Leading destinations include Victoria Falls in Zambia/Zimbabwe, Kruger National Park in South Africa, the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya, and Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania.



Victoria Falls Courtesy Zimbabwe Tourism Board

In terms of branded, international attractions, one notable project that has been several years in the pipeline is KidZania Johannesburg, which is slated to be the second KidZania location in Africa after KidZania Cairo. However, in general, interest for major commercial attraction development in Africa is limited as the focus of developers and operators continues to be on other established markets in the EMEA region and reinvesting in existing assets.

Looking forward

While the world continues to adapt to the new normal, uncertainty still exists. It remains unclear whether there will be longstanding effects on tourist behavior once the pandemic phase ends. Additionally, new infectious variants may arise, or the rate and severity of infections may increase, which could lead to reactive changes to public and private policy that directly impact consumer travel and consumption.

That said, the industry in EMEA is trending in a positive direction. Attraction operators are still much better prepared than ever before with the proper tools and health and safety protocols in place should another outbreak occur. Significant development activity can be found among both public and private sectors, particularly in the Middle East, and many owners and operators are actively reinvesting in existing projects as they position themselves for the long term. •••



Mission: Save Christmas featuring Elf
All photos courtesy of Bungalow Scenic Studios

How Bungalow saved Christmas

Orlando fabrication specialists Bungalow Scenic Studios makes things happen

by Gabrielle Russon

Christmas was coming, but the artisans responsible for carving two million pounds of ice for the Gaylord Hotels' signature holiday shows were stuck in China, unable to leave home due to travel restrictions. The pandemic had ruined so many events, and it seemed that Gaylord's annual festivities were at risk of becoming another disappointment to add to that list in 2021.

Gaylord executive Niko Nickolaou called Bungalow Scenic Studios.

"We've worked on this concept. We want you to be our designers/fabricators/installers of this experience. It needs to happen at four properties across the country in less than 90 days," was how Nickolaou's phone conversation began with the fabrication specialist.

With the clock ticking, the Orlando-based Bungalow got to work building massive sets, a 16-foot-tall Mr. Narwhal, and an exact replica of Santa's Kringle 3000 sleigh for Gaylord's experience based on the holiday classic *Elf*. "Every aspect of it was over the top," said Nickolaou, Senior Director for Special Events and Creative at Gaylord Hotels.

Just like that, Bungalow helped save Christmas.

The appropriately titled "Mission: Save Christmas featuring Elf" shows opened on time in Orlando, Dallas, Denver and Nashville. The 400,000 visitors were undoubtedly unaware of the tight deadlines and the COVID-19 challenges that lurked behind the scenes.



Todd King

“We’re able to execute anything that we’re put up against within our industry,” said Bungalow Chief Operating Officer and co-owner Todd King.

Serving multiple markets

What makes Bungalow unique is the variety of work it tackles under one roof, handling everything from foam to steel to 3D-printed plastic pieces. “That versatility has really been our claim to fame,” King said. “We own a lot of technology that allows us to expedite things and get down a path quicker and gives us a very broad range of the things that we can do.”

The company’s client list includes Disney, Universal, Merlin Entertainments (LEGOLAND), Gaylord, Ernst & Young, Tekcapital, Invesco Trust, Encore, Freeman, E.W.Scripps Company, and numerous other distinguished players.

Roughly 50% of Bungalow’s work is fabricating custom items for themed or immersive environments. “Often, that is literally stuff that we’re building to 10- to 20-year life cycles that’s going into a theme park or retail space or something of that nature,” King said. The other side of the Bungalow portfolio is building custom scenery and staging for temporary use at corporate events. These items have a short life.

Every day, Bungalow straddles these two worlds with disparate needs, and according to King it’s rare that one firm can expertly handle both. “They’ll do one or the other. They’ll do theme park work and immersive environments, or they’ll do temporary, quick-turn stuff. And the reason why is that operations of those two are just complete opposites – how you design it, how you build it, how it gets engineered, how it gets installed, how it gets maintained,” King said.

A full-service shop in Orlando

Orlando being a primary hub of the themed entertainment industry, suppliers like Bungalow are positioned to readily serve clients in the region. Bungalow’s offices and production facilities are situated on 10 acres in an industrial area northwest of downtown. The company employs about 100 people and operates



Bungalow’s massive 90,000-square-foot production space

its own fleet of trucks to deliver finished products across the state. Even some of Bungalow’s own clients are surprised by the company’s vast footprint when they visit for the first time and see its 90,000-square-foot production space, King noted.

Co-owners Mark Gentry and Colin Murphy recently celebrated their 10th anniversary of founding the business in 2011. The company has grown steadily and revenue-wise, 2021 was one of its best years, according to King – a record it hopes to beat as it continues to expand its market share in attractions and immersive entertainment projects. Sometimes they are brought on the team directly by the operator and other times as a subcontractor.

“We really encompass all of the disciplines,” said Marketing Director Lauren Hatfield-Day. Bungalow’s vast shop was a bustle of activity on a recent morning as she toured us through the facility and showed off the warehouse spaces organized by specialty.

All the disciplines

The full carpentry shop builds simple Hollywood flats for theater, up to finished laminate work that might be used in retail or broadcasting. A full metal shop handles ornate metal sculpture, all the way up to steel and aluminum structural fabrication. “We have the highest certifications possible in structural steel and aluminum,” King said.

The shop’s full electrical department does anything from basic lighting to automation and programming. The fiberglass department handles bodywork on pieces to get them paint-ready as well as casting, mold-making and building large items such as boats.

Bungalow’s automotive paint shop has a full-size booth able to accommodate a full-size bus. Workers airbrush props or characters to give them a lifelike finish. The full scenic department includes the skill to paint realistic bricks or design other textures.

The sculpture department handles the items coming off the CNC routers to add crisp details. “If we’re going to carve something out of foam and use that as the end piece, we’ll hard-coat it by spraying on a polyurea substance,” King said.

When work is ready to go out the door, Bungalow also has its own assembly team. “We have installers somewhere in the country pretty much any day of the week, throughout the course of the year,” King said.



The team at Bungalow Scenic Studios

pushing our equipment to its limits. What can this machine really do? What can these programs really do? What will happen if we get a different tool?” King said.

To make the company more transparent and get employee buy-in, Bungalow regularly holds project kickoff meetings so workers can give feedback on the construction process. “By doing that, everyone’s pretty much on the same page from day one. They’re getting to collaborate. They’re getting to have a say on how that project goes and how those things get built,” King said.

Capacity and innovation

To meet clients’ needs, Bungalow is often innovating and testing the limits.

One project that stands out is when Bungalow built three giant performance stages for a theme park show that also incorporated parade float technology. The mobile performance stages had screens and stairs built into the chassis that pulled out to be used during the daily shows before it was put away every night.

“Getting all the mechanics and engineering was a huge feat,” King said. “Bungalow will do whatever it takes to get a project done right. We do what we do because there’s a magic to this business that we love.”

Helping expedite the process to meet project deadlines is Bungalow’s state-of-the-art technology.

Those tools include two flatbed CNC routers and a Kuka robotic arm that cuts large objects in 3D. Bungalow uses the Kuka for cutting foam and routing wood with the device that had once been used as a welding arm on the General Motors assembly line until the technology was repurposed and reprogrammed to do sculpting. “The Kuka is very broad in its application. With a Kuka arm, with the right attachment, you can cut stone,” King said. “Its capabilities are endless in that realm.”

In addition, workers use several 3D printers – a Massivit, four Filament and four Resin printers.

Culture and collaboration

Hatfield-Day’s tour leads past iconic pop-culture creations scattered throughout the building – foam busts and plastic figurines, plus various themed accessories. These industry pros are also fans at heart. Building something special lets them practice their skills and test the equipment.

King encourages employees to conduct research and development (R&D) regularly during lull periods. “It keeps us competitive,” said King. R&D could mean testing new lighting capabilities, experimenting on 3D printers or testing new approaches to any number of processes. “A lot of R&D is

“You create this work environment that’s very open, and you’re just trying to get down the path most efficiently. And I think that’s where we really thrive.”

Some workers never get to touch the finished product since they are involved in early steps of the process. That’s why King said he prioritizes communicating with employees to make them feel connected and makes sure to show them photographs of the end result. Their pride in a job well done is the other side of fulfilling the client’s vision for a great guest experience.

“They’re blown away,” King said. “They’re like, Oh, my gosh, I never realized those things that I was working on eventually turned into that.”

To make an appointment to meet with Bungalow Scenic Studios, contact lauren.hatfield-day@bungalowsenic.com. The company will be at the 2022 IAAPA Expo in Orlando in November. •••



Gabrielle Russon (gabriellerusson@gmail.com) is a freelance journalist who lives in Orlando. She previously covered the business of theme parks for the Orlando Sentinel, earning several statewide and regional honors for her coverage over theme park injuries, the economic challenges facing theme park workers and the pandemic’s impact on the tourism industry. A Michigan native, she is a Michigan State University graduate and has worked at the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, the Toledo Blade, the Kalamazoo Gazette and the Elkhart Truth during her newspaper career. In her spare time, she loves visiting Orlando’s theme parks and running marathons.

Peter van der Schans

IAAPA's executive director and vice president of the IAAPA EMEA region talks about the association and the upcoming Expo in London

interview by Judith Rubin

IAAPA welcomed Peter van der Schans as executive director and vice president of the IAAPA Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region in April 2022. To his new role, van der Schans brings a broad range of attraction management experience including zoos and theaters as well as theme parks. In this exclusive interview, van der Schans shares his unique perspective on IAAPA and the EMEA region, how he will serve the association, and what to look forward to at IAAPA Expo Europe (September 12-15, 2022 in London).

How will you build on your past experience in your new role at IAAPA EMEA?

I think this will work two ways. Of course, I do know IAAPA well enough as a member. I have participated in the Expos in Europe and Orlando and I have attended the IAAPA Institute for Attractions Managers – all experienced as a member. I have also worked outside of our industry for a few years during my career. Doing that was such an eye opener. I think we sometimes take for granted what a wonderful industry this is. It is impressive to see how well we work together and how much we are willing to share with each other. This is something that is not usual for every industry. It is very important to be aware of what we have achieved and still want to achieve together.

Tell us about your vision for growing membership. Where do you see opportunities?

The biggest way to grow our membership is to continue showing the benefits of being part of IAAPA. We have so much to offer and sometimes we should communicate this better to our members. It is our goal to support our members in a variety of aspects including continuing education and professional development, creating connections and opportunities, and representing our members to political bodies such as the EU.

Part of growing membership is in maintaining our presence by hosting events in and around the EMEA region. Last year's IAAPA Expo Europe was in Barcelona and this year we're in London. We rotate the Expo host city to better reach the members we have throughout the region. Additionally, we're actively working to host new regional events in the Middle East and Africa.



Peter van der Schans
Photo courtesy of IAAPA

It's a given that we always want to grow membership, because it strengthens us as an industry. However, at the same time it is most important to stay relevant for our current members and increase their value gained out of our work. I firmly believe new members will join because of that. The growth is not a goal in itself; it is intertwined with the other goals we want to achieve for our members.

Tell us about your vision for member services – how is this evolving for today's member needs?

Our industry will always be changing and it will always be innovative. And so will IAAPA. COVID prompted us to change our way of thinking and working – just as all of our members did. And now our industry is facing different challenges such as labor shortages, supply chain issues and increasing prices. Like we did with our response to COVID, IAAPA will show leadership in sharing knowledge, bringing people together, and finding common solutions and answers. We look, of course, for answers within our industry, but also on a broader level.

And it works! In May we visited three Italian parks, and they all shared their stories of dealing with recent crises, challenges – including COVID – and other problems as well. And each park had a different way of handling it. We will always look for stories, questions and answers, no matter what is going on in the world, our industry or with one of our members.

What will be some new and special features of IAAPA Expo Europe this year?

We will bring back Sustainability Day, which was first introduced in 2021 to support members in addressing this important issue. In 2022 it will take a holistic approach covering the three pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

We continue work on our opening ceremony, and the What's New video showcasing operators' innovations will be back. We're hoping this year's video will carry a sense of optimism and hope as the industry can celebrate a return to normalcy after several trying years and uncertainty felt globally. The opening ceremony will remain free again to offer access and inspiration to all attendees.

IAAPA facility members can continue benefiting from a number of free Expo entry tickets to support our mission of creating connections, and we want as many members present as possible.

What are some of the unique characteristics of the industry in the EMEA region?

We have a very loyal base in the European continent and also in the Middle East, while we still aim at expanding our presence

there. But we must grow in Africa. Diversity remains a very big and important topic in our region. Our team is proud to recognize that and support members' needs for that.

And similar to the Asia Pacific region, in EMEA we have to cater to dozens of languages and cultures. The IAAPA EMEA team alone speaks a collective 15 languages to ensure we're best connected to members and non-members alike. That's a real team achievement and something I am really proud of.

Has IAAPA been an important resource for you through the years?

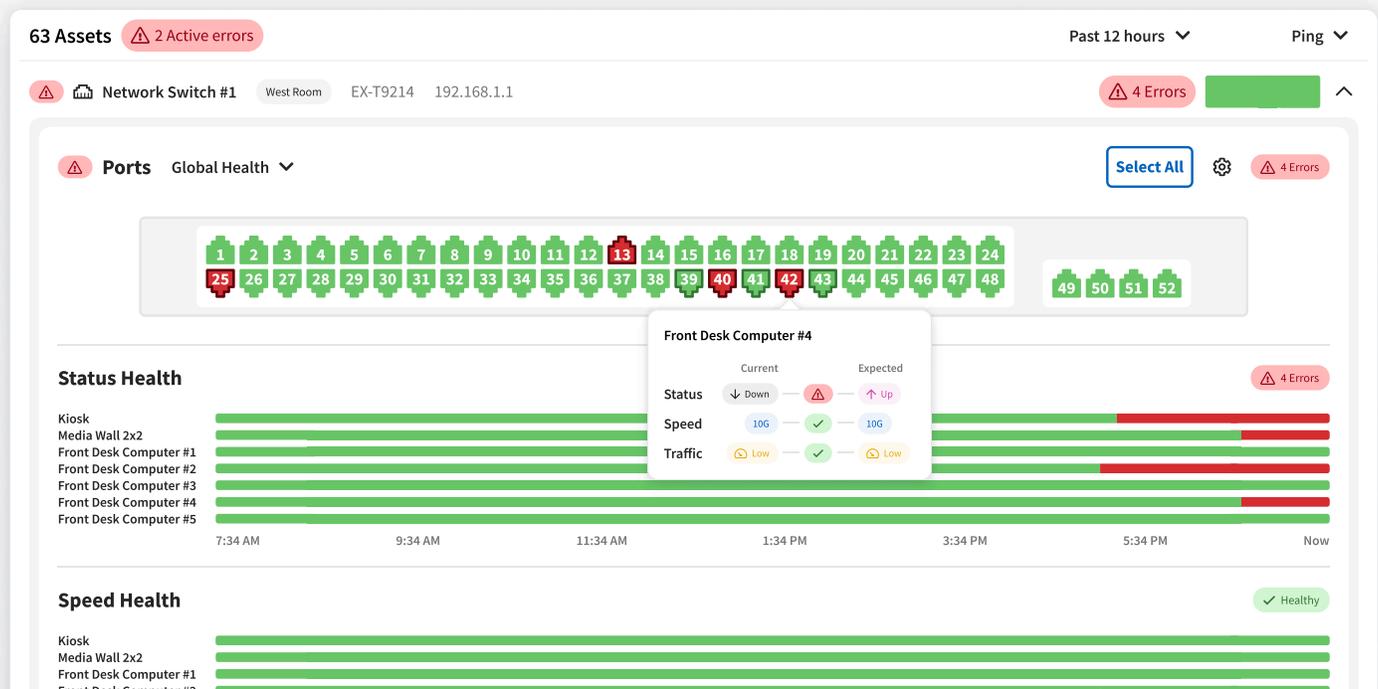
It has been much more than that! It is not just a resource. I think IAAPA has defined a culture and created a global community. And it is a community that we can be proud of. We rarely see each other as competitors and we share a lot. I, personally, have gained friends through our network and I know others feel the same. I'm fortunate to see how our members have all shared and received valuable information while attending an IAAPA event, or after one, through the connections they made during the event. I will always keep striving for that and am proud to have the chance to make sure my own positive experiences are shared by others. •••



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Cyberlight LED fixtures hidden in ceiling All photos courtesy of ETC

Spotlight on innovation

Reinventing the High End Systems Cyberlight as LED for themed entertainment

by Joe Kleiman

Recently, a major international theme park operator approached ETC looking for a robust, modern luminaire suitable for long-term live shows and attractions. The operator sought a product that would use less power, require less maintenance and have more mounting options than theatrical fixtures currently on the market. ETC responded to the challenge by designing the new Cyberlight LED, an update of its Cyberlight rotating mirror luminaire, manufactured by ETC at its plant in Austin, Texas.

ETC owns High End Systems, which introduced the original Cyberlight in 1994 as a spotlight for theatrical presentations and concerts. The term “luminaire” indicates that the product’s light source, rotating mirror, gobos, color wheel, and other components are all included within a single chassis.

Matt Stoner (Marketing Product Manager, ETC) and Scott O’Donnell (Themed Entertainment Specialist, ETC) anticipate the new Cyberlight LED will be a popular upgrade for parks and attractions. They pointed out some of the features that make it a competitive choice in terms of technology and creative potential, whether in new projects or swapped for older models in existing installations.

High color level and energy conservation

According to Stoner, the new Cyberlight LED makes colors pop more, with a high color rendering index (CRI) and a cooler operation and longer life than earlier Cyberlight models. “When you use a high-powered traditional bulb, you sacrifice color,” he says. “With the Cyberlight LED, we get a color rendering of over 90,” he says. The CRI measures a light source’s ability to reveal colors compared to natural light. A rating of 90-100 is considered excellent.



Cyberlight LED features



Cyberlight LED rotating mirror

The Cyberlight LED is touted as cooler by half than its predecessor and offers 50 times longer life than the arc lamp version. The Cyberlight SV utilized a 1200-watt MSR (Medium Source Rare-earth hot-restrike) bulb, producing an ambient (environmental) temperature heat signature of up to 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Because light emitting diodes (LEDs) run so much cooler, the wattage is reduced to 470 watts, producing 12,570 field lumens, with an ambient temperature of 104 degrees.

According to O'Donnell, who is based out of ETC's Orlando office, "Unlike its predecessor, the Cyberlight LED dims out the LED array instead of using a manual gate, which means energy is being saved between performances or guest vehicles."

Stoner adds: "When Cyberlight was new to the market, people didn't think about energy conservation in lighting the same way they do now. The older model of the Cyberlight had a life of about 1,000 hours. Because you conserve power with the LED, we've calculated that the new light source has a lifetime of over 50,000 hours."

Focusing on gobos

The new model also features an expanded creative range. "Earlier Cyberlights were very simple, based on a color wheel and a rotating gobo," says Stoner. "Now it has multiple gobos and animation effects in addition to the high color integrity [CRI of 90+]. You can see the difference in the new lighting engine." The Cyberlight LED has two rotating gobo wheels, each with seven patterns.

An eight-lens system allows for differing impacts from the gobos. According to Stoner, "Its eight lenses are divided over two moving groups of lenses for both zoom and focus. Retaining a significant, historical design feature, the new Cyberlight LED has a long focal length that allows the fixture to produce unique effects when focusing across multiple optical planes. Also, because the two moving groups of lenses include the main lens, or object lens, the fixture is able to more easily achieve sharp focus across a variety of distances without the need for constant lens adjustment."

Stealth and speed

Quieter operation and flexibility in how the new version of the fixture can be mounted and connected are also significant improvements that open up possibilities for where and how the Cyberlight LED can be installed, and how it interacts with other elements – all benefits for adapting to the unique needs of attraction design and integration.

O'Donnell says, "Extreme effort went into making the Cyberlight LED as quiet as possible, ideal for performance venues or a dark ride." Because of the LED and newer fan technology, the Cyberlight LED operates quietly in the background, and the rotating mirror emits practically no noise.

While the Cyberlight can be mounted via a yoke to a rigging fixture, O'Donnell explained that it can also mount behind scenery or in the ceiling, with only a small opening for the mirror. "It is simple to hide," he says.

O'Donnell adds, "The speed and accuracy of the Cyberlight LED mirror also help make it a perfect fit for attractions. The rotating mirror is able to hit its targets faster than older models, which required rotation on a yoke." Using a technology called Whisper Home, the mirror will automatically return to the desired start position on startup or at the end of a cycle, a procedure that previously could only be accomplished with a hard restart of the fixture.

Like all High End products, the Cyberlight LED is DMX connectible. "It's a very simple procedure," says Stoner. "In fact, it's as easy as attaching any moving light to a program. You patch into the DMX console, address the fixture, then you have options to run it in DMX mode or not. There are 40 channels in DMX mode."

Swappable

Per Stoner and O'Donnell, Cyberlight LED's profile is slightly lighter but replicates the dimensions of its predecessors, and those who have the older models in place will find them easy to swap out for the newer. "Matching the original Cyberlight's size makes the Cyberlight LED a perfect option for replacing the existing Cyberlights in your attraction," says O'Donnell.

"Our clients in the themed entertainment industry are looking for the same quality product they've used in the past," says Stoner. "The Cyberlight LED delivers that, with ease of maintenance, superior performance, and ease of programming. This is the drop-in replacement built around stealth and speed." •••

The odds are on SATE Las Vegas

A conversation with SATE co-chairs Shannon Martin and Gregory Senner
interviews by Judith Rubin

The Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) return to in-person events in 2021-22 has included the revival of the SATE conference series on experience design. Preparations are underway now for SATE Las Vegas, October 13-15, 2022, hosted at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV).

The SATE acronym stands for Story + Architecture + Technology = Experience. SATE also alludes to a collaborative culture of production, in which designers, technologists, producers, developers and operators work closely together from the early stages of a project, in a team structure often more horizontal than hierarchical.

Registration for SATE Las Vegas is now open, and TEA welcomes inquiries about sponsorship. Visit www.teaconnect.org for details.

InPark editor Judith Rubin posed some questions to the SATE co-chairs, Shannon Martin of Color Reflections Las Vegas, and Gregory Senner of Scenario. Shannon sits on the TEA International Board of Directors and previously co-chaired SATE when it met in Seattle in 2019. Greg is President of the TEA Eastern North America Division, and this is his first time as a SATE co-chair.

Tell us about your working relationship as co-chairs of TEA SATE Las Vegas.

Shannon Martin: I have had the pleasure of getting to know Greg Senner over the years through our love of the TEA. I was so excited to have him join the team this year for SATE Las Vegas. I like to think Greg and I share a love for collaboration. We work hand in hand together on every aspect of this program and we will also be engaging a small content committee with diverse voices and perspectives to see an even bigger picture as we review all the presentations submitted.

Greg Senner: I have wanted to work on something with Shannon for years. She brings such a unique enthusiasm and energy to the TEA that exemplifies the idea that the energy you

put into TEA gives you so much more back in return. We also share the desire to challenge expectations, and after the long wait, we plan on delivering to the membership the best experience ever.

What are your priorities as you organize and plan sessions?

Shannon: Insightful, diverse topics as they relate to innovation in our industry and beyond, particularly in segments members don't hear about every day. What can we learn and how can we collaborate with other disciplines to make our industry stronger? Our goal is to bring new, innovative experiences to consumers that they never expected.

How are you making the most of the Las Vegas setting and UNLV as host?

Shannon: I am so excited to be able to host in Las Vegas! You talk about innovation, Las Vegas is the place to be. Las Vegas



SATE Las Vegas Co-chair Shannon Martin of Color Reflections Las Vegas sits on the TEA International Board of Directors and previously co-chaired SATE when it met in Seattle in 2019.



The 2019 TEA SATE Seattle conference in full swing. Photo courtesy TEA

is constantly reinventing and innovating itself. It has immense hotels and casinos, one-of-a-kind entertainment venues, and most recently, has become a destination for major sporting events. The city that once seemed unable to land a major league team now hosts its own NHL and NFL teams. Now, with the possibility of getting MLB and NBA teams, it really seems there is nothing you can't do in Las Vegas.

To have the opportunity to host at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) is an incredible honor. UNLV is known for its Hospitality Program and the SATE opening mixer will take place at the William F. Harrah College of Hospitality. This program has been ranked the #1 national hospitality program in North America and #2 in the world and also gets points for affordability. Students work and intern at the epicenter of the industry. The new Hospitality Hall is a modern, interactive learning laboratory that closely mirrors the industry. This will be a one-of-a-kind event! UNLV also recognizes the importance of themed entertainment and has some exciting things on the horizon that will benefit the industry. More on this to be revealed at SATE.

What makes the TEA SATE conference unique and important for the themed attractions community?

Greg: SATE by definition is the DNA of themed experiential entertainment. Having a conference that focuses on these four pillars (Storytelling, Architecture, Technology and Experience) brings everything our members could want out of a conference. When you combine those with SATE's mission to travel to new venues, and the expansion of the conference to other parts of the world, SATE provides the best opportunity for education, networking exploration and benchmarking.

SATE Las Vegas was originally planned for 2020 but was sidelined by the pandemic. Have your ideas for the event evolved in any important ways during that period?



SATE Las Vegas Co-chair Gregory Senner of Scenario is President of the TEA Eastern North America Division.

Shannon: Funny you should ask this. We literally had everything cooked and ready to go when we were canceled in 2020. As I went back to review the topics we wanted for SATE Las Vegas 2020, I realized the content was even more powerful, more meaningful now than ever. I got goosebumps reading it again. There were a few wordsmith

changes but the topics just seemed to be more important than ever. I was now looking at it through a different lens.

What are your tips to help one get the full value from attending SATE?

Shannon: This industry is mesmerizing! The people, the projects, the technology! You will see and hear so much during this program from the up and coming to industry legends. My only



William F. Harrah College of Hospitality at UNLV Photo courtesy UNLV

advice would be to attend everything you can. From the opening mixer Wednesday night to the close of the conference on Friday, this is Vegas, baby, and it will not disappoint! Oh, and as I always say DON'T FORGET YOUR BUSINESS CARDS.

Greg: SATE is my favorite TEA event of the year. Beyond the amazing content, I really love how SATE rotates through different topics and locations. This year couldn't be more perfect matching innovation and Las Vegas. There will be so much wrapped into this year's program, you will not want to be the person hearing about it later.

And spoiler alert, make sure you plan to stay for it all. •••

For all inquiries regarding sponsorship of SATE Las Vegas, please contact SATE Co-Chair Shannon Martin at shannon.martin@crvegas.com



Happiness is a scratch for every niche

Find and own what makes you and your company special

by *Scott Harkless*

Fun fact: Did you know that Laserdisc players came out four years before CDs? It's true! They first shipped in 1978, only two years after the launch of VHS and four years before CDs were a thing. This isn't common knowledge mostly because VHS became the popular choice for distributing content to consumers in the 1980s. It did the job well enough by storing feature-length movies, allowing people to record episodes of *MacGyver*, and coincidentally the VCR slot was also the perfect size to insert a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

As we all know, what works well for the consumer world doesn't necessarily work well in themed entertainment. There's just something about the concept of "Be Kind, Rewind!" that didn't fit with our incessant need to run attractions nonstop, day after day, for years on end, with as little maintenance as possible. For that reason, film projectors continued to be the primary method for presenting visual experiences in attractions for quite some time.

It wasn't until the late 1980s that digital alternatives like Laserdisc players started to gain popularity in our industry. They presented a low-cost, low-maintenance alternative to the more complex film projector systems. There was a hiccup though. At the time,



A vintage Magnavox Laserdisc player
Photo by Marcin Wichary, courtesy of Creative Commons



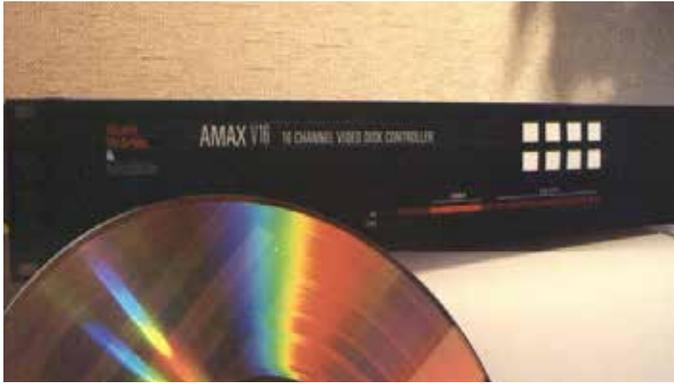
Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are for eating, not VCR slots.
Photo by Matias Garabedian, courtesy of Creative Commons

there were no control solutions on the market that enabled system integrators to synchronize more than one of these players – something theme park attractions needed to do often!

Then along comes this spirited group of theme park engineers with experience designing custom control systems that do oddly specific things for theme park attractions. Unfortunately, I wasn't there at the time because I was obviously too busy watching *MacGyver*, eating PB&J, and getting dragged to the VCR repair shop by my very disappointed mother. In my imagination, though, what happened next resembles a stereotypical '80s montage of engineers pointing at chalkboards, drawing schematics, soldering circuit boards, and high-fiving each other to the tune of "Eye of the Tiger." Although it probably happened a little differently in real life, the V16 16-channel Laserdisc Controller was born, and Alcorn McBride suddenly became known as the industry experts on "synchronized A/V." We had officially established ourselves as a niche company.

A niche company is geared toward a very specific aspect of a larger market. They understand their strengths, respect their limitations, and know how to apply laser-like focus to their specialty...whatever it may be!

There are numerous advantages to operating a business this way. When a company consciously decides that they want to be the experts at doing a specific thing, it provides their staff with a crystal-clear mission. Product designers and engineers know exactly what they are trying to create and are motivated to work hard to make their company the best at what they do. Marketing and sales team members can craft a very specific message to share the company mission and devote time to the customers that will benefit most from that message. The ability to fine-tune the company's specialty also gives owners and leaders some control over how small or large they want the company to be, allowing the organization to operate efficiently and profitably, minimizing financial risk.



Alcorn McBride's original V16 show controller, from 1988 and the current V16x version *Photos courtesy Alcorn McBride*

Owning your niche

More importantly, this type of specialization also makes it clear to your customers what you do and why you do it. They immediately think of your company (and know exactly who to call) when they are facing a particular kind of challenge or discussing a relevant aspect of design. This is the power of brand awareness for a niche company. Simply owning your niche and doing your job well builds powerful brand awareness in your industry.

In themed entertainment, our industry's collective mission is to deliver unique experiences that visitors can't find anywhere else. The challenge is that the same "uniqueness" that makes attractions so successful is also the very thing that tends to make them very challenging to build! We all know that these projects also have special considerations when it comes to innovation, schedule, budget, and lifespan. And in my opinion, it is just these factors that make niche companies the ideal partners for building the best attractions. They understand the nuances; they offer skills and solutions that accommodate them. Their focused specialization means attraction designers can rest a little easier knowing that their project will be treated with the attention and priority it needs to be successful.

For Alcorn McBride specifically, the V16 was only the beginning of our journey as a niche company. It may have started with Laserdisc players, but we quickly realized that our mission is to create the best ecosystem of tools that are used to bring show systems to life. This drives our engineers to research and deploy technologies like IEEE-1588 synchronization, network audio distribution, fiber-optic transmission of video, and communication protocols that work under-the-hood of our products to make that possible. It's what steers us toward engineering purpose-built, embedded designs that meet the niche needs of these projects and last long enough to keep the attraction running for many years. By making it our mission to take care of these things, the tools we present empower attraction designers to focus on the creative intent of the attraction without worrying about the nitty-gritty details of how it's all going to work.

Laser focus

Perhaps the philosophies I've discussed sound like common sense, but it takes a conscious effort to filter out the noise and keep your eye on the big picture. It's easy to get distracted and disrupted by what happens day to day. It's always worth asking a few questions to ensure you're still on track. Is the company mission clear to both staff and customers? Are you and your co-workers investing your time on things that best serve that mission? Are you engaging the right industry and clients to match your skills and strengths? Are you hiring vendors that meet your specific needs and treat you with the priority and level of service you deserve?

I'll leave you with one of my favorite Abraham Lincoln quotes: "Whatever you are, be a good one." Obviously, this applies to each of us as an individual, but I also appreciate how this same philosophy is precisely the reason niche companies are so vital to the success of our industry. And that's why, when a group of uniquely talented and focused specialists come together on an attraction, the results are likely to be spectacular. •••



As Chief Innovation Officer at Alcorn McBride, Scott Harkless works closely with clients to determine their biggest areas of need and leads a talented team of problem solvers to create the products used in many of the world's most popular attractions. He draws upon his experience in product development, system commissioning, client training, marketing, and sales to ensure that the products stamped with the Alcorn McBride logo exceed client expectations and offer value to the entire industry. Visit alcorn.com



Building Big

Big Blue Blocks are a defining component of Plavi Svijet (Blue World Institute) in Croatia. Photo courtesy of Imagination Playground

Imagination Playground – the Big Blue Blocks that can

by Wendy Grant

The versatile, customizable playroom products can quickly transform a space into a place for play, engrossing children in hours of creative engagement

The original Imagination Playground installation in 2010 was the result of a collaboration between Rockwell Group and New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Award-winning architect David Rockwell was inspired by watching his own children play. His firm, Rockwell Group – known for stunning designs in hotels, restaurants, theater projects, and more – studied playgrounds and identified a need for open-ended activities. Ultimately, they created a permanent space in Burling Slip, featuring sand and water elements and the first Imagination Playground of Big Blue Blocks – what became the company’s signature, customizable block sets. The Burling Slip installation was an immediate hit and was named a top 10 playground in the United States by Early Childhood Education Zone.

Jim Stallman acquired Imagination Playground in 2018 and continues to operate it from company headquarters in Providence, Rhode Island. Over the last decade the company has built a strong presence facilitating “loose part play” with its block sets – serving museums, educational institutions, and attractions, and expanding into themed entertainment markets.

Now well established with representation around the world, Imagination Playground can turn any area into a fun and utterly absorbing space for kids. Its U.S.-manufactured, customizable products offer a versatile, durable, affordable solution for venues in need of a temporary play space or a permanent, kid-focused attraction. Kids in 60+ countries use Imagination Playground products to create creatures, contraptions, and construction projects.

Imagination Playground block sets come in a range of sizes and are suitable for indoor and outdoor spaces. They are made of a proprietary closed-cell foam that’s lightweight, waterproof, and durable. Indoor uses range from tabletop to large playroom pieces; outdoors they can be used on the ground or in sand or water, including on splash pads. The blocks go beyond traditional shapes and are produced with curves, holes and angles.

A newer product is Loose-Part Bones, available in three sizes, which can be used to assemble creatures like dinosaurs. The concept for Loose-Part Bones grew out of a collaboration with the Boston Children’s Museum.

The power of loose-part play

The Imagination Playground assortment of block shapes was specifically developed to encourage loose-part play. Loose parts are materials that don't have specific goals or functions and don't necessarily join together for a pre-arranged result. Many toys and equipment for kids have specific functions – think of a dollhouse, race car, puzzle or swing. But when children play with loose parts, they use their own creativity and critical-thinking skills to determine how to interact with the items and what to build from them.

Stallman talked about how loose-part play stimulates a child's development. "It helps kids learn to observe, inquire, investigate, and engage with others and with the world around them," he says. "Our blocks offer a safe environment for kids to design, construct, and deconstruct to reach a common goal." And, he says, the product is more relevant than ever. "When COVID hit, kids were in front of screens more than ever, and worse than that, they were isolated. Now we're even more adamant than ever that kids need to be outdoors, moving and playing collaboratively. And that's exactly what the blocks do."

Its creative versatility also means the product can be readily adapted to specific markets and needs. Imagination Playground clients have reported adults with memory loss designing "flowers" from small blocks and kids in a physical education class developing a relay course out of large blocks. At Spain's Le Méridien Ra Beach Hotel & Spa, the blocks keep kids entertained outdoors while parents relax on the patio. The Great Explorations Children's Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, uses the blocks in multiple ways, including the on-site preschool and adult team-building exercises.

Croatia's Plavi Svijet (Blue World Institute) provides an entire blue world – an environment of Imagination Playground Blue Blocks for open play, as the main attraction for birthday parties,

and in educational workshops. Playroom manager Sunčana Sinković says, "Kids don't want to leave our playroom, even after three or more hours!"

Portable and customizable

Part of their inherent versatility is that the block sets are lightweight and extremely portable and offer options for quickly transforming a space. "They can be put in a cart and easily wheeled to a new location," says Stallman. "If you have a temporary empty space, you can bring in the blocks quickly and have a fun, safe play area. Or we can build a custom wall or furniture and create a permanent play space. The blocks also can be used for events or, since they're lightweight, they can be taken out into the community."

Custom block sets can fit an intellectual property (IP) or brand, enhance a promotion or special event and even lead to a new loose-part play concept. "Our team can create custom logos, custom walls, and specific parts for each location if that's what the customer would like," says Stallman. "We can take a concept and bring it from prototype to design to delivery very quickly." He says that his company also facilitates conversations between their customers so that everyone is learning from each other. "All of that knowledge leads to new design and new uses."

Liz Rossiter, director of Mud Kitchen, the distributor for Imagination Playground in Australia and New Zealand, says, "There is no better investment for our next generation. The blocks are a high-quality product that do not become stale or static but can grow with children. Our customers are never disappointed!"

The blocks have a five-year warranty, and can be cleaned and sanitized easily. Imagination Playground offers a Block Wash Kit as well as a list of commonly available products that can safely clean the blocks. Some organizations even make an event



At the Imagination Playground booth at the 2022 ACM MarketPlace in St Louis: Kellie Flury, Client Relations and Jim Stallman, Owner. The company's customizable block sets are manufactured in the U.S. and are popular with museums, educational institutions and attractions.

Photo by Judith Rubin



Part of their inherent versatility is that Imagination Playground block sets are lightweight and extremely portable. Photos courtesy of Imagination Playground, unless otherwise noted

out of it by holding a “Blue Block Bath” and inviting kids to help give the blocks a scrub.

A labor of love

Imagination Playground as a company began as a partnership between Kaboom! – a nonprofit playground installer – and Rockwell Associates. Stallman’s foam fabrication company, Eco Global Manufacturing, was brought in to develop the proprietary formulation and cutting technology and to manage manufacturing and logistics. “When we started, it was a small project for us. It was a labor of love,” says Stallman.

Demand for Blue Blocks grew quickly. More parks departments began purchasing them, as did museums, attractions, schools, and camps. The UNICEF P.L.A.Y. Project, in partnership with Disney, has brought the blocks to more than 13,000 children in Bangladesh and Haiti. As production increased, a management team suggested moving manufacturing overseas, but Rockwell and Stallman wanted to maintain control over the raw materials, the quality, and the production.

In 2018, based on this shared vision for growth of the brand, David Rockwell sold his interest, and Stallman became the owner of Imagination Playground. “It’s a lot of fun to be involved from the very first blocks up to now,” says Stallman. “And we’re continuing to design, develop, and come up with new products every day.”

Play on

Imagination Playground participates in numerous trade shows throughout the year. In the latter part of 2022, they will exhibit at the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) conference in September (Phoenix, Arizona) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Conference & Expo in November (Washington, D.C.). “If kids are at the show, they always find their way to our booth and hang out there all day, playing,” says Stallman. “If you’re wondering where your kids are, just look for the Blue Blocks.”

Imagination Playground’s website: www.imaginationplayground.com. International distributors: HAGS UK <https://hags.co.uk/en-gb/home>; MudKitchen Australia/New Zealand <https://mudkitchen.com.au/>; Korea <https://www.ssnrt.kr/>; Japan <http://www.kompan.co.jp/> •••



Wendy M. Grant has worked in marketing for more than 25 years. She served as Director of Marketing and Communications for San Diego’s Fleet Science Center; home to the world’s first IMAX Dome Theater, where she directed marketing for all exhibitions, films, shows and events for 13 years. She served on the Marketing Committee for the Giant Screen Cinema Association and she was a board member for the Giant Dome Theater Consortium. Since 2019, Grant has worked as a communications consultant, writer and editor, with clients in the education and entertainment fields.

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