

Amusement parks create virtual reality attractions that appeal to gamers

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.01.15

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Knott's Berry Farm visitors Derek Phelps (left) and his brother Tyrus play a round of VR Showdown in Ghost Town. Attractions that include a gaming element are increasingly popular at regional theme parks. Photo by: Luis Sinco/Los Angeles Times/TNS

BUENA PARK, Calif. — The Marine gripped his six-shooter, pointed it at the horizon and took a deep breath.

“Let’s do it,” he barked. He kicked off a brief but furious gun battle with a mob of robot cowboys with glowing red eyes.

Derek Phelps, a Marine stationed at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, was not just fighting off an invading robot army. He was also fighting his 8-year-old brother, Tyrus, who stood next to him, trying to kill off more invaders.

“Ah, first place!” Phelps shouted as he finished the virtual reality game “VR Showdown in Ghost Town.” It’s the newest form of entertainment at Knott’s Berry Farm in Southern California.

Virtual Reality Games Popular With Millennials

At theme parks, attractions that encourage head-to-head competition are growing in popularity. They entice, or attract, video game-loving millennials, in particular. Millennials are young people. Most of them are in their late teens and 20s. Visitors regularly come to the park to improve their score or to beat new challengers.

Virtual reality attractions help the smaller parks compete against big parks. Virtual reality is a copy of the real world that is made on a computer. It's called VR for short.

In Knott's "VR Showdown," players wearing virtual reality goggles stand in an empty room. Overhead cameras watch the players' fake guns and track their shots, while wireless equipment allows players to move around the room. Competing players appear as characters on the goggles' screen and a score appears in the goggles at the end of the game.

These types of attractions are created for the growing number of young gamers. Designers say the challenge is to create an even better experience than what the visitors might get at home.

Emiliano Perez is a student from Fullerton, Calif.. He played "VR Showdown" at Knott's Berry Farm recently. Perez said it is better than the virtual soccer games he plays on his home Xbox system. "It's like you are part of the game," the 13-year-old said.

Virtual Reality Attractions More Cost Effective

The virtual reality ride at Knott's even has a special surprise. It includes secret tips — or "cheats" — to boost a player's score, said Christian Diekmann, a boss at the theme park company.

He didn't want to say how much the new ghost town addition cost. Experts say such gaming attractions can be built for under \$15 million.

Compare that to the big parks. Building the Wizarding World of Harry Potter cost Universal Studios Hollywood an estimated \$500 million last year. Disneyland is spending roughly \$1 billion on an upcoming Star Wars-inspired section.

In 2005, Disneyland opened Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters. The ride puts visitors on a slow-moving car and lets them shoot at robots and aliens with a laser blaster. Three years later, Disney California Adventure opened Toy Story Midway Mania. It's another target-shooting ride with a 3-D effect.

Suzi Brown is a Disneyland Resort spokeswoman. She said there may be more virtual reality attractions in the future.

"We will continue to invest in experiences that use cutting-edge technology," she said.

Larger Theme Parks Have A Different Target Audience

There are no interactive gaming rides at Universal Studios Hollywood. In 2000, sister park Universal Studios Orlando opened Men in Black: Alien Attack. Riders shoot at aliens to boost their score on a vehicle monitor.

Industry experts have a theory. They say big resort parks may not be interested in interactive games. The big theme parks are targeting out-of-town vacationers who want to experience big-budget rides.

Local, smaller theme parks make a lot of money with interactive games.

Six Flags Magic Mountain is also in southern California. This summer, the park will open Justice League: Battle for Metropolis. The 3-D ride puts visitors in vehicles armed with blasters. They score points by helping superheroes defeat their enemies.

“I really believe that Justice League will be compared favorably to attractions that are costing over \$100 million,” said John Wood. He is in charge of the company that built the ride.

Other interactive gaming rides in Southern California include:

Voyage to the Iron Reef opened in Knott’s Berry Farm in 2015. Visitors dive into an underwater world. Armed with blasters, guests shoot at sea creatures. A scoreboard on the vehicle keeps track of the direct hits.

Legoland California is adding a water slide called Riptide Racers. During the ride, visitors race each against each other on floating mats. An overhead scoreboard keeps track of the time it took to slide from the top of the ride to the bottom.

Ninjago, which opened last year at Legoland California, is an interactive dark ride. It allows visitors to use martial-arts-like hand movements to shoot fireballs at ninja warriors. Points are scored with direct hits.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Larger Theme Parks Have A Different Target Audience."
Select the sentence that suggests there is a logical reason why some parks choose NOT to have interactive games.
- (A) There are no interactive gaming rides at Universal Studios Hollywood.
 - (B) The big theme parks are targeting out-of-town vacationers who want to experience big-budget rides.
 - (C) Local, smaller theme parks make a lot of money with interactive games.
 - (D) It allows visitors to use martial-arts-like hand movements to shoot fireballs at ninja warriors.
- 2 Read the section "Virtual Reality Games Popular With Millennials."
Choose the paragraph that BEST supports the conclusion that virtual reality at theme parks is developed for the purpose of attracting millennial visitors.
- (A) Virtual reality attractions help the smaller parks compete against big parks. Virtual reality is a copy of the real world that is made on a computer. It's called VR for short.
 - (B) In Knott's "VR Showdown," players wearing virtual reality goggles stand in an empty room. Overhead cameras watch the players' fake guns and track their shots, while wireless equipment allows players to move around the room. Competing players appear as characters on the goggles' screen and a score appears in the goggles at the end of the game.
 - (C) These types of attractions are created for the growing number of young gamers. Designers say the challenge is to create an even better experience than what the visitors might get at home.
 - (D) Emiliano Perez is a student from Fullerton, Calif.. He played "VR Showdown" at Knott's Berry Farm recently. Perez said it is better than the virtual soccer games he plays on his home Xbox system. "It's like you are part of the game," the 13-year-old said.
- 3 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Some virtual reality rides offer cheats that can give players a higher score.
 - (B) Virtual reality attractions tend to cost less to build than attractions at big parks.
 - (C) As of now, Universal Studios Hollywood does not have any interactive games.
 - (D) Legoland opened the interactive ride Ninjago last year and is soon adding Riptide Racers.
- 4 Which answer choice describes two MAIN ideas in the article?
- (A) Virtual reality rides are growing in popularity with millennials and are helping small theme parks compete with larger parks; large theme parks, however, tend to still offer big-budget rides to appeal to tourists.
 - (B) Virtual reality rides aim to give theme park visitors a better experience than they would get at home; some of the popular rides include the use of cameras and laser blasters.
 - (C) Virtual reality (VR) technology makes a copy of the real world on a computer; "VR Showdown in Ghost Town" is at an attraction at Knott's Berry Farm that encourages head-to-head competition.
 - (D) Virtual reality attractions can typically be constructed for less than \$15 million; rides at big parks that do not involve interactive gaming can cost more than \$100 million.
- 5 What is the MOST important reason why smaller parks want to build virtual reality attractions?
- (A) to attract out-of-town vacationers
 - (B) to compete against video games
 - (C) to appeal to young gamers
 - (D) to surprise regular visitors

6 What is MOST likely the reason the author included the following quote in the the section "Larger Theme Parks Have A Different Target Audience"?

"I really believe that Justice League will be compared favorably to attractions that are costing over \$100 million," said John Wood.

- (A) to highlight the perspective that interactive gaming rides can do as well as big-budget rides
- (B) to show that the people who build interactive gaming rides are passionate about them
- (C) to make potential visitors curious about trying the 3-D Justice League ride
- (D) to offer the opinion that big parks waste their money on building expensive rides

7 Read the paragraph from the section "Larger Theme Parks Have A Different Target Audience."

Voyage to the Iron Reef opened in Knott's Berry Farm in 2015. Visitors dive into an underwater world. Armed with blasters, guests shoot at sea creatures. A scoreboard on the vehicle keeps track of the direct hits.

How does using the word "armed" affect the tone of the paragraph above?

- (A) It conveys a sense of excitement that visitors feel on the ride.
- (B) It conveys the realistic nature of the visitors' experience.
- (C) It conveys the anger visitors feel toward the sea creatures.
- (D) It conveys the sense of enjoyment visitors feel on the ride.

8 Read the following paragraph from the section "Virtual Reality Attractions More Cost Effective."

Compare that to the big parks. Building the Wizarding World of Harry Potter cost Universal Studios Hollywood an estimated \$500 million last year. Disneyland is spending roughly \$1 billion on an upcoming Star Wars-inspired section.

The author uses the word "roughly" to mean:

- (A) \$1 billion is the maximum that Disneyland will spend.
- (B) \$1 billion is the expected cost for a Star Wars-themed section.
- (C) \$1 billion is not the exact amount that is being spent.
- (D) \$1 billion is too much to spend on an attraction.

Answer Key

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