



Jungle Challenge, Scruffy Dog

Thinking about theming and making it happen

Park World editor, Becci Knowles talks to six key players in the industry about what it takes to create a fully immersive experience



Nigoland, P&P Projects

Unlimited Snow is a leisure development company specialised in snow and ice environments.

Commenting on current trends in theming within this context, CEO Kees Albers says: "For snow parks, we see the considerable change from industrial types of building interiors to highly themed and IP/story-based environments whereby the theming is an important part of the WOW factor."

Kees also notes "increased use of show lighting as well as digital projection on 2D and projection mapping on 3D surfaces as technology keeps improving and is increasingly affordable. It's an economic way of staying flexible and providing new experiences every time, including interactive play and games," he says.

"One of the major trends we see is the need to evolve the already existing seasons in amusement parks, so guests come back several times during the same season," says Lars Nielsen, themed attractions manager, MK Themed Attractions. "More specifically we saw it with the Flower Festival that we helped create for Tivoli Friheden in Denmark during the summer of 2020. The amusement park had a 45% increase in the number of guests compared to the same period in 2019, where they did not have a Flower Festival pop-up event. Hence, we have expanded our portfolio of pop-up-events to include

a variety of different themes and concepts and we are looking forward to explore this exciting new trend."

Walltopia is a company that delivers complete active entertainment solutions, many of which are also themed. Reflecting on current trends in this sector, architect and product manager Konstantin Karamfilov says it's all about immersion. "It has been and will always be the ongoing trend in theming. Disconnecting from reality in order to escape the boring daily routine, has been part of our culture long before the creation of theme parks, hence the phrase "getting lost in a book". I think that it has merely evolved because of the new technology that enables designers and architects to create better themed environments. We can now achieve amazing things and bring stories to life like never before. Think about Disney's Galaxy Edge and the Galactic Starcruiser hotel – the illusion is set in a way that it enchants you even before you step at the check in or ticket desk. Or think about Universal's Hogsmeade where you can actually taste the illusion through simply getting a butterbeer or a pastry.

"All in all, I wouldn't say that there are any particularly new trends – the trends are the same as before. The difference is that people are more demanding than before and not that easily fooled. They are constantly searching for a more authentic and realistic experience.

"However, their desires are the same. They still want to get lost in a magical world for a while and we now have the technology to achieve more authentic results."

"During the last few years, we have seen again a growing interest in original narratives; audiences of all ages demand experiences not only fun and visually appealing experiences, but also immersive. Good storytelling is key to any theme project," says Diego Cid, creative director, Scruffy Dog.

He continues: "Entertainment is more and more present everywhere at global level; at restaurants, museums, exhibits, gyms, retail and public spaces, airports, etc; people expect to be surprised, learn new things, an interact with leisure contents.

"Edutainment, Retailainment, Foodtainment, are some of the current trends, theming has crossed beyond the boundaries of amusement parks, blending with architecture, interior design, urbanism and landscape as never before, and we have more to come."

Philipp van Stratum, CEO and creative director, P&P Projects comments: "What we see is that the current trend again involves a lot of immersive theming. We also see the need of media used in rides. We have seen rides where media was getting the upperhand, we now see the balance is moving toward to physical showsets in combination with screens, and to blend them even more than was done so previously."

ShowTex is a leader in inventing, manufacturing and installing drapes, backdrops, curtain tracks, projection screens, glassless mirrors, scrims and accessories for achieving the creative vision of event and entertainment professionals. "Creativity and durability are key when dressing any amusement park," says the Jan Blomme, managing director, ShowTex, Asia. "Whether you need to prepare a theatre stage for daily shows, decorate thrill rides, create a certain atmosphere or mask off backstage areas, fabrics are essential for any theme park concept. From extravagant flame-retardant textiles and giant holographic projection surfaces to fairytale-like star cloths and waterproof printed backdrops.

"Of course, the holograms and immersive experiences are very much in demand at the moment. Covering complete rooms in immersive projection surfaces or XXL printed backdrops are a relatively simple way to pull visitors into that fantasy world. The fact that ShowTex offers materials that are certified to be fire retardant is an asset that becomes increasingly important as well.

"We also notice increased use of glassless mirror foils in theme parks. The lightweight alternative to glass mirrors is extremely versatile and more convenient to set up. By playing with light on and behind the reflective surface, mirrors are a great way to create amazing optical illusions. They trick visitors by challenging their sense of space and understanding of visual reality, giving them an experience to remember."

The process

Asked what's involved in bringing an immersive experience to life, Unlimited Snow's Kees Albers comments: "For us the story is leading the experience with an eye for detail while new adventures in the story (also as AR, VR) can be added at any time. Our main rules to create a great guest experience are: 1) guest friendly operations, 2) WOW factor, 3) fun to do activities, 4) safety."



Liseberg Underlandet 2, P&P Projects



Ocean Park, Hong Kong, ShowTex

Walltopia's Konstantin Karamfilov agrees: "The first thing is to create the story behind the attraction or simply put – entangle the theme and the attraction. Some themes are based on IPs and others are completely new; both these approaches hold a certain appeal and have their pros and cons. However, in both cases in order to create a good immersive attraction, one has to come up with all the intricate details and story points and make sure that they are believable in order to speak to the public. For example, in our Angry Birds attraction we have connected the Rollglider which is a zip coaster ride to the flight of the birds in a way that the rider in a way becomes the bird. This brings us to the last part – execution. It must simply be meticulous. Every detail is important and everything needs to look as authentic as possible in order to trick the mind of the public. We should never forget that the magic behind themed attractions is very easily broken. This is especially true if the attraction is based on a beloved IP. In these cases, one is not only competing with reality but also with the imagination and expectations of each and every single visitor. This is precisely what makes the job very demanding and why creating a themed attraction takes a village – architects, engineers, user experience specialists, operators and enormous doses of patience and dedication from everyone involved."

"First and foremost, you need imagination and courage," says MK Themed Attraction's, Lars Nielsen. "If you do not really believe in your experience or do not put the necessary effort in doing it right, the experience will have a hard start. Secondly you need a lot of inspiration including best practises that you should strive to make even better. Finally, it is truly important to have suppliers



Angry Birds in Doha, Walltopia



Kees Albers, Unlimited Snow

“It all starts with a good story. When you have a story that fits your park or attraction, it almost becomes easy to create the immersive worlds around it.”



Tivoli Friheden 2020
Blomsterrfestival, MK
Attractions



Unlimited Snow park day

that are trustworthy and capable of dreaming along with you, so your ideas can be turned into your wildest dream, keeping in mind how the end-result will be.”

Phillip van Stratum of P&P Projects agrees: “It all starts with a good story. When you have a story that fits your park or attraction, it almost becomes easy to create the immersive worlds around it. When you add characters and backstories to the characters, this will be a great tool to create the landscaping (what kind of environment do they live in?; city, forest etc.) architecture (what house or building or neighborhood do they live in?), atmosphere (dark versus light, happy versus grim), vehicles that the characters use (cars, planes, jet packs, any tool of transportation really) and what kind of objects are used, for example what they wear and eat (which you can use in the merchandise and restaurants)?

“Once that is done, we create concept arts and if an IP is involved, we enter an approval process. This then results in a schematic design and detailed design.

“We create 3D computer environments to make sure everything works, we design our work in 3D computer programmes (both technical and for visual references). We use VR technology and work with BIM 360, but also traditional scale models are used in the process, as a guideline for the production teams.

“Once all plans and construction drawings are ready and the sample programme is done and approved, the production starts to create the immersive worlds, animated props an animated figures, special effects, as well as the video and music content and lighting design.

“All of this is done prefab and pre-setup which includes testing of the experience. Lastly, all elements are shipped to site where a team of specialists puts it all together.”

Diego Cid explains the Scruffy Dog process: “The creation of an immersive experience is a complex process and a coordinated effort of different specialists, from Bluesky to the opening day, from an escape room to a massive theme park, each project has its own process, but regardless of the scale and budget, they usually share a common start:

“We start every project with a deep analysis and research, so we make sure whatever we propose is original, innovative and different to the rest of the existing leisure destinations in the area.

“Next we create a strong narrative; once we identify the character of the region, which historic, social and cultural elements are distinctive and how we can preserve this uniqueness to conceive a story that can only be

experienced if they come to this place and nowhere else.

“Masterplanning is crucial, considering all the aspects of the project, site study, climate, type of venue and contents, theming, technology, operational needs, financial model, budget, programme and else, a proper layout for the experience is key for a successful development.

“Theming design is the star of an immersive experience. Here is where the magic starts, after a strong storyline and a deep research, we start visualising every environment, every scene, sets, logos, characters, backgrounds, props, textures, signage, sounds and effects. Either is a sequential or an open-layout experience, we study every aspect of the narrative and the best way to make the guest feel part of the story.

“Now, visualisation is the cherry on the cake. Here our Art and Technical teams make every project shine, delivering spectacular presentations, with stunning concept visuals, beautiful colour plans and high quality 3D Renders and animations.

“Once the conceptual stage is completed and approved, we proceed with the technical development, bringing all the ideas from schematic to detail Design, so they are ready for production.

„During the production stage, project management and art direction are the best way to guarantee the Design concept is successfully translated into the final product along with the full compliance with the quality standards.

“There are many great professionals in this Industry in every speciality - design and planning, architecture, engineering, attractions, theme construction, operations, project management, but most times, only those companies or groups with the most versatile and multidisciplinary teams can really respond to the highly demanding projects out there, and bring them to life. We are proud to be among them.”

“Apart from the extra-wide projection surfaces, the latest innovations in printing technology and curtain suspension allow us to use technical textiles for large scale wall and dome coverings,” says Jan Blomme, ShowTex. “Having such an XL backdrop wrap around the full venue truly immerses the audience in the experience. Besides their huge visual impact, printed fabrics also have an acoustic benefit that really enhances the full guest experience. Flexible curtains on automated tracks can even be used to block sounds in rides or between different scenes. They also absorb light instead of reflecting it, which means the drapes can be lit up with conventional stage lighting

to really bring characters and landscapes to life. The combination of all these things truly triggers all senses and only adds to the overall immersive experience.

"In an entire experience, the fabrics are often just a fraction of the budget, while they can make or break the desired effect completely. Even if you have the latest projectors, a beautiful room and impressive content, if the projection surface is not tailored to the situation, you will not get anywhere. That's why we always assist clients in choosing the most suitable material for their project."

Future trends

On the subject of future trends, including how social distancing might impact design, P&P Projects' Phillip van Stratum says: "[Social distancing] is indeed a hot topic nowadays, especially in queue lines. We are of course having these discussions, but at the moment the current projects do not require these kinds of adjustments in design. When we bring up the subject with our current customers all of them believe we will get back to pre-corona situation, although in the restaurant business we do see that there is more space between seats now. Only time will tell if this will be a situation that will last or not."

Picking up on this point, Unlimited Snow's Kees Albers says: "Social distancing increases the queue length by three times, which makes this completely unsustainable in the future. Presently queueing is part of the business model, as it can host a lot of people in a small space. Without the queues people would need to be hosted elsewhere in the park and as such this would affect the design, with the need to have sufficient circulation space, additional F&B space and the capacity to keep people distanced while seated and even increase the size and number of attractions to accommodate the same amount of people.

"www.queuefreethemepark.com provides a solution for this with an attraction, show and F&B reservation system that totally eliminates queues. Ofcourse the story related pre-show theming remains part of the attraction, but queues are now often starting before the pre-show starts and pre-show is only fun when it is not stagnating. For indoor parks there hardly is space for long queues."

Lars Nielsen of MK Themed Attractions agrees that while the queue lines of the future come with certain issues, none are insurmountable: "When designing new experiences, we believe amongst others that the queue area will be important. Queue lines are places where guests are standing still, close to each other, and with limited possibilities to escape from a sudden sneeze. Creating distance markings in the floors or setting up walls or windows between the lines are tools that have been widely used during the pandemic. However, it does not look nice, and using distance markers reduces the capacity of the queue area significantly. In this new reality elements for social distancing or protection must be worked into the queue lines, but why can't this be entertaining or beautiful and still build up the tension for the ride to come? We truly believe that the distancing elements have to be creative, eye catching and encourage people to keep safe."

Walltopia's Konstantin Karamfilov has this to say: "I think that Gamification of the experience will be something that more parks will introduce in the future. Gamification especially in the form of augmented reality



mobile games can add tremendous value to otherwise "lost" time like queuing or strolling around attractions and value to the free roaming between the attractions and during the attractions, giving visitors additional things to do. As for social distancing – it is too early to speculate on any lasting impacts that COVID might have especially with the vaccines that are now out. However, we might see some temporary changes in queuing areas, the interaction between customers and staff members will be reduced significantly, and maybe VR will become more popular as it can transport us in a safe interactive environment."

"The importance of video projection and VR in entertainment will undoubtedly continue to rise, as video is increasingly taking over the role of conventional lighting and projectors are constantly evolving," continues Jan Blomme, ShowTex. "Thanks to this increased flexibility, holography is now within reach of all kinds of off-stage applications. Even outdoors, because the fabrics keep evolving as well. The quality of today's projection meshes and the ever-increasing sizes in which they are seamlessly available makes them more popular than ever. The holographic PepperScrim is currently 7m wide and the outdoor Cielorama goes up to 15m without a seam. Such fabrics will only get wider in the future. Especially in combination with creativity, these developments provide theme parks with endless possibilities to ensure the best quality of their projected visuals and special effects.

"In terms of social distancing, we see some design opportunities as well. The ride experience already starts at the waiting line these days. Combining see-through foils or semi-transparent mirrors with lasers and projection could both help with social distancing while adding an element of fun to the waiting process."

"The last decade we've been witness to a new revolution in digital technology, virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, beacons, drones, 5G... are transforming our lives, and with it, the way we spend our leisure time," says Diego Cid, Scruffy Dog. "Incorporating digital technology in theme projects is not only allowing designers and imagineers to create incredible experiences, but also improving the guest's experience in many ways. No doubt we will see amazing new innovations and developments in the upcoming years."

"But no doubt the future will bring also many challenges," he continues, "so sustainability will become an important trend in leisure venues too. As the entertainment industry grows globally, we must

Plopsaqua Water Park, ShowTex



Angry Birds in Doha, Walltopia

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“ Themed areas must also be designed properly, scaling queue lines and access based on the new regulations. ”

start incorporating the use of renewable energies and sustainable resources, as well as construction and fabrication techniques and recycling programmes which are respectful with the environment. Smart Cities will need smart leisure. Our team has professionals highly experienced in sustainable planning and architecture and we are already applying these principles in many of our ongoing projects.

“And of course, another important challenge will be social distancing in all aspects of operations: capacities, services, mobility, accessibility, safety, waiting and circulation areas, hygiene measures, etc. All these factors must be carefully considered in masterplanning. Themed areas must also be designed properly, scaling queue lines and accesses based on the new regulations, incorporating the necessary touchless technology, such as RFI readers, as well as smart devices for guest behaviour and flow control.”

Upcoming projects and examples of best practice

Phillip van Stratum comments on what's coming up from P&P Projects: “At the moment, we are working on five immersive projects, and one that is already finished, but has not had the chance to open yet. This is the Uderlandet Ride for Liseberg in Sweden; an immersive darkride which was heavily themed, had lots of details in the showsets and a large amount of AV and lighting. We had the greatest of fun while working on this ride!

“Additionally, we designed and built a unique outdoor experience for KongoParken in Norway and more exciting developments which are about to open in 2021 and some in 2022.

“Furthermore, we are involved in five other very high quality and IP related rides and attractions for various clients.

“All projects are fully immersive, some of them real modern classics, and two of them are the next generation of dark rides, including a design-build project for Movie Park Germany which includes not only great show sets but also, AV, special effects, animated huge figure and more and some new developments and the realization of Madam Tussauds Dubai.

“We are also working on a few exciting immersive experiences, for state-of-the-art attractions for a major worldwide organisation in our industry. Unfortunately, as with most of our work, this is all under NDA. But stay tuned and hopefully the parks and our entire industry will be able to be fully operational again later this year and get out of this horrible situation.... fingers crossed.”

Scruffy Dog's Diego Cid comments: “We feel fortunate that despite all of the challenging times for the global industry, we have managed to keep providing our clients undivided attention and delivering our projects successfully, every time. We started 2021 working as the lead entertainment consultant on the world's largest new project in Saudi Arabia, along with some ongoing projects, as well as new contracts which are currently confidential. However, I can anticipate that our agenda will include some exciting projects, like the overall design of one of the largest indoor theme parks ever made worldwide, the technical development of two FEC's for a renowned toys brand, opening new locations in Europe and the Emirates, the concept design of several venues in a large scale leisure development in the Middle East, or the creation of an exclusive Water Park Resort in Asia, as well as working as the lead entertainment consultant on the world's largest new project in Saudi Arabia.

“And of course, these projects ahead will take not only an important amount of creativity and effort, but also the application of as many of our best practices as possible to our design: scaling themed venues must be scaled to a realistic financial model in order to be sustainable; smart planning and architecture must be sensible with the environment; adding green roofs and optimal use of water; suggesting renewable energy solutions; anticipating accessibility and inclusive standards; proposing clean mobility strategies for guests; planning with the best safety and health standards in mind; keeping strict art direction and production supervision from start to finish; working always under the code of conduct for our industry.”

Commenting on upcoming projects from MK Themed Attractions Lars Nielsen says: “This year Paultons Park's Tornado Springs will open, and we look forward to showing the interesting tornado theme that we have produced and installed for the English amusement park. We will also deliver more IP characters for Jesperhus Feriepark and we are currently working on a re-theme for Djurs Sommerland, along with a brand-new parade-float for Europa Park.”

Jan Blomme of ShowTex says: “Examples of upcoming projects are difficult to give due to NDAs, but there are a few impressive ones in the pipeline,” says Natalie Roeland, ShowTex. “Recent collaborations include Puy du Fou (France), PlopsAqua (Belgium), Heureka Science Center (Finland), Disneyland Shanghai (China), Dubai Parks and Resorts (United Arab Emirates), Plopsaland (Belgium), Ferrari World (United Arab Emirates), Plopsa Indoor (The Netherlands), Futuroscope (France), Ocean Park (Hong Kong), IMG World (United Arab Emirates), Efteling (The Netherlands), Mayaland (Belgium), Holiday Indoor (Germany).”

“We are finishing something quite big in China right now so stay tuned,” promises Konstantin Karamfilov, Walltopia. “As far as our older work goes – I've already mentioned Angry Birds in Doha where we synced the theme and the attractions very well, so this is something to be proud of. Another example is Chang Chung where we aimed for a very immersive environment. Actually, many believe that active entertainment products such as ours are difficult to theme and while this may be true to an extent, if one keeps up with the trends and strive for technical perfection it is possible to have great themed attractions that are also physically challenging.”



Wuxi 2, Unlimited Snow

High-resolution printed backdrop at Mayaland, Belgium

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