Chapter 15

Location–Based Entertainment: How Immersive Technology Can Make Us More Human

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ABSTRACT

This chapter goes on a journey through time, highlighting key milestones, present-day realities, and future possibilities in the unbounded world of location-based entertainment (LBE). It explores the constant human desire for connection and play and looks at the role immersive entertainment has played in getting us out of the house, thus encouraging social interaction and mental stimulation in the most unconventional of ways. The chapter explores the impact that this growing industry will have on the (traditional) entertainment, retail, hospitality, art and education spheres, and touches on the history and background of venues and players (old and new), demonstrating diversity, creativity, and inimitability in execution. By taking a look at the power of immersive storytelling, the authors touch on the future of location-based entertainment and its ability to inspire ideas, conversation, and community.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 10-15 years, we have witnessed a growing addiction to our screens, from social media to video games. Technology has become a divider between people and the real world, resulting in a more disconnected and dysfunctional social discourse.

Human beings are by nature a social species, and connectivity is our core human need, vital to every aspect of our development. In his book, Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect, scientist Matthew Lieberman (2013) reaffirms that “our need to connect is as fundamental as our need for food and water.”

With exponential growth in what has now been coined ‘the experience economy,’ we are seeing a move away from isolation, towards socially connected experiences. Over 70% of Americans believe that attending a live event or experience makes them feel more connected to other people, to their community and the world at large.

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Location-Based Entertainment

A study commissioned by Eventbrite, released in 2017, states 78% of Americans choose to spend their money on experiences versus stuff, preferring to accumulate memories over material things (Eventbrite, 2017). This fact is validated by the 70% increase in the US that consumers spent on live experiences over the last 30 plus years, an increase that will likely keep growing as we seek out more interactive, participatory experiences.

We want to be participants in our lived experiences, events and entertainment mediums. We want to be able to engage en masse, connect with a purpose and share the moment for inspiration, awareness—and more times than we’d care to admit—for pure vanity.

Living in a digital world, we crave real world connections to create memories over material experiences, a perspective shared across generations, and led by millennials. Our bar is set ever higher as we expect to have purpose-driven entertainment made available to us, especially at a time of intensified political debate across the globe, and an increasingly deteriorating environmental climate.

80% of Americans believe it’s essential for people to come together in-person to promote positive change, and 84% believe that all sorts of events (not just political), can inspire positive change. (Eventbrite, 2017, p. 3)

These statistics continue to grow with the increasing popularity of location-based, immersive and experiential entertainment. The LBE market witnessed crazy growth between 2017 and 2019, with a significant number of LBEs coming to market in the US and abroad. We are seeing variety and quality through the evolution of existing, and the introduction of new, business models and experience types—many of which have been built around the notion of connection, community and play.

With the current political and socially charged climate in most democracies in America and Europe, our physical and social environment is left to deteriorate at a faster pace than has been witnessed in the last half-century. Growing divisions amongst the world’s publics calls for new means of mediation of viewpoints, and transmission of new and better ideas. We need to look to immersive entertainment as a means to an end on several fronts: to platform ideas and dialogue and to catalyze and inspire change. Immersive entertainment gives us tools and platforms of opportunity to create experiences that evoke empathy, compassion and love in the most visceral of ways—by reconnecting with ourselves, with each other and with Mother Earth.

We are seeing new paradigms developing in entertainment, ones that are more immersive, interactive, collaborative, purpose-driven, influential and socially adaptive by design, connecting our lives at the intersections of storytelling, and human connection.

WHAT IS LOCATION-BASED ENTERTAINMENT (LBE)?

Location-Based Entertainment (LBE) is any form of entertainment that is experienced at a particular location that’s not one’s home. Also referred to as immersive entertainment, experiential entertainment or digital out-of-home entertainment, LBEs are diverse and can include family entertainment centers, multisensory digital experiences, theme parks and immersive art installations.

LBE was born from the traditional out-of-home entertainment (OOHE or OHE) industry, a label given to experiences housed at theme or amusement parks, as well as regional venues from cultural institutions to family entertainment centers.