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VIRTUAL REALITY

The white knight of festival management education?

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Introduction

A substantial body of research suggests that cultural events and festivals play an important role in the economic and community development of destinations and regions. Impact studies have examined a variety of effects of cultural events and festivals at the local, regional, national and international levels (for a literature overview, see Getz 2010). The study of festival impacts is undoubtedly complex; effects can be both positive and negative, and span across a wide range of areas such as the economic, environmental, cultural, social and personal. Often, many conflicting objectives have to be balanced against each other (Reid & Arcodia 2002). Balancing the various interests of stakeholders to generate an overall positive outcome is a difficult task that requires a well-developed skill set of event managers.

Many events, in particular cultural festivals, often fail due to management issues. A recent example is the cancellation of the Maitreya Festival (scheduled to be held in Victoria, Australia in 2016). Despite an estimated injection of $2.5 million AUD into the Buloke Shire community, the council denied permission for the festival to go ahead, leaving festival organisers with lawsuits and disappointed fans and stakeholders (Griffith 2016). The Buloke Shire council reported that the organisers failed to provide documentation on insurance, security bonds, emergency contingency plans and agreements with Liquor Licensing and Ambulance Victoria (Moskowitch 2016). Getz (2002) has identified several causes of festival failures, of which the majority can be categorised as event management failures such as inadequate marketing or promotion, inadequate or unattractive venue, lack of uniqueness, incompetent event managers or staff, lack of corporate sponsorship and inadequate risk management plans and implementation.

To optimally prepare capable future festival and event managers, event management curricula should be constantly reviewed and updated to reflect market demands, trends and changes in the technological as well as in the economic, political and social environments. With the rapid advancement of information technology and related developments in teaching and learning in the 21st century, student learning experiences and learning outcomes have been significantly enhanced by these developments. One of the more recent developments has been the use of Virtual Reality (VR). Despite its appearance in the late 1970s (Guttentag 2010; Hedberg & Alexander 1994) it is only in the past decade that VR has come
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to the forefront of education in areas of business and leisure studies. In this chapter, we explore how new technology in the form of VR systems can be used to improve festival and event management education.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we review the current state of festival and event management education and practices to identify weaknesses and possible areas of improvement. Subsequently, we look at the potential and limitations of VR used in teaching environments. Then, we evaluate how VR can be used specifically in the event management curriculum. In particular, we are interested in the question how VR can be implemented to improve the teaching of certain event management skills as well as the learning outcomes. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the challenges and limitations of VR in event management education and implications for future research.

Current state of event management education

As an industry, event and festival management has, over the past two decades, become more structured, professionalised and underpinned by research (Allen, O’Toole, McDonnell & Harris 2011; Barron & Ali-Knight 2017; Junek, Lockstone & Mair 2009; Mair 2009). However, events still exhibit a high rate of failure, particularly in the area of festivals (Getz 2002). This is partly due to the fact that many event organisers stumble into the events industry without being adequately prepared for the complexity of running a successful event (MacNeill 2017). However, this does not fully exculpate event management education from problems within the industry. Additionally, over the past two decades, events have grown in numbers substantially and also differ quite significantly in size and type. Event management programmes need to stay relevant to the changes within the industry as well to broader global changes and trends. Furthermore, they need to excite and motivate potential students to study the complex field of event management. For this purpose, event management course designers have to keep up-to-date with current developments in the market and incorporate new relevant technologies into the programmes. This will ensure the attractiveness and industry relevance of event management courses in order to hopefully decrease the number of incompetent event managers who enter the events industry without the appropriate training and education. In addition, event management courses have to develop the fundamental and necessary skill sets for future event organisers’ abilities to plan and manage events and festivals.

Necessary skills include communication skills, numeracy and literacy, and operational hands-on skills. Graduates should be able to budget, plan for risks and crises, be project managers and computer experts, negotiate with performers and suppliers, be creative, be organised, manage staff including volunteers, and have an eye for detail as well as see the big picture of a festival (Allen et al. 2011; Jago & Deery 2010; Junek, Lockstone & Mair 2009; Mair 2009). Stadler, Fullagar and Reid (2014) see the creation, dissemination and management of knowledge as the differentiating factors between success and failure of festivals, whilst Robertson, Junek and Lockstone-Binney (2012) argue that creativity and innovation is one of the competencies seen as vital for a successful event management career. In a similar vein, it is the creative and conceptual aspects of design that pose the major challenge to event designers. Furthermore, the experience aspect of festivals and the added value gained from this has also been highlighted by Robertson, Yeoman, Smith and McMahon-Beattie (2015) as vital to the future of festivals, and in particular to music festivals.

One of the major challenges of event management education is to provide students with practical, hands-on learning experiences in addition to the theoretical foundation. Authentic
learning is to bridge the gap between what is taught as the theoretical underpinnings of business courses and the practical aspects of the business world. Authentic learning aims to provide real-world practical experience within a safe and non-threatening learning environment (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989). Similarly, experiential learning allows the participant to acquire skills and knowledge in a learning situation where he or she is actively involved. This involvement resulting in deep-learning (Fotiadis & Sigala 2015; King & Zhang 2017).

To address the need for practical experiences outside of the formal business education, many higher education institutions offer, as part of their event management course, work-integrated learning (WIL). This could be an intensive period working in industry (between 3 and 12 months) or a required number of hours to be spent working at events in a paid or voluntary capacity. Despite the overwhelmingly positive results and pedagogical virtues, as documented in the literature on WIL, this approach is not without challenges (Barron & Ali-Knight 2017; Fanning, MacLeod & Vanzo 2017). Based on the authors’ experiences in the events industry and their roles as event management lecturers and specialisation advisors, students are often, especially in the short-term form of WIL and as volunteers, thrust into working at events and festivals at short notice and without receiving an appropriate induction or explanation about the event’s parameters. For many students, it can be an experience wrought with trepidation and the fear of making mistakes if students move from one event to the next without much understanding of the event.

Additionally, in the authors’ experience as educators, creativity and innovation are areas where students are reluctant, self-conscious or uncertain as to how to be creative when designing events. SketchUp (SketchUp is a 3D modelling software often used in event management courses, see www.sketchup.com) and similar 3D design software can address this lack of creativity and innovation, but they are also limiting and often confronting for those who see themselves as not computer-savvy, beyond the usual suites of programmes students tend to use. VR can provide a risk-free environment where learners are allowed to practice and make mistakes without fear. In using VR, students can interact with and take part in real-world simulations (Guttentag 2010). VR can provide an environment that enables students to learn and practice requisite skills for their profession and can also include authentic assessment ensuring students are equipped with the ‘skills and competencies needed to succeed in today’s workplace’ (Fook & Sidhu 2010, p. 154). Furthermore, employer input can be used to structure relevant activities and scenarios. Perhaps in the future, VR can also make use of avatars for simulation of communication and negotiation.

**Virtual reality and higher education**

There are a number of definitions as to what VR is (Burdea & Coiffet 2003; Gutierrez, Vexo & Thalmann 2008; Vince 2004). For the purposes of this chapter, ‘VR is defined as the use of a computer-generated 3D environment – called a ‘virtual environment’ (VE) – that one can navigate and possibly interact with, resulting in real-time simulation of one or more of the user’s five senses’ (Guttentag 2010, p. 638). In the education sector these are referred to as Virtual Reality Learning Environments (VRLE) (Huang, Rauch & Liaw 2010). The use of VR as a teaching and learning tool has gained importance in many of the technically based study areas such as medicine, engineering, construction and architecture. More recently, tourism has also adopted VR to plan and manage tourist destinations and attractions (Guttentag 2010).

The main characteristics of VR have been described as the I³ which stands for immersion, interactivity and imagination (Burdea & Coiffet 2003). Immersion is defined as a state where the user is surrounded by another reality, to the exclusion of the ‘real world’ (Murray 1997).
In addition, VR is interactive, meaning the user is able to interact with virtual objects in real time (Dede 2009). As Wetzel, Radtke and Stern (1994) remark, full immersion can minimise external distractions and consequently reduce students’ cognitive load. As a result, the VRLE can stimulate imagination and assist in the ability to conceptualise and facilitate deeper learning. Particularly interesting in the context of event management is that VR environments can improve one’s ability to ‘imagine, in a creative sense, non-existent things’ (Huang, Rauch & Liaw 2010, p. 2). As will be elaborated on in the next section, the facilitation of imagination and visualisation can be very helpful in learning to design, plan and manage complex events. Similarly, Moreno and Mayer (2002) suggest that students participating in an immersive learning environment may learn more deeply than others who are observing or learning from the textbook.

**How VR can improve event management education**

As outlined earlier, VR offers new learning opportunities for students in the 21st century, in particular for those areas of study where practical experience, in the form of simulation and immersion, is a valuable tool for learning and understanding (Janssen, Tummel, Richert & Isenhardt 2016). The following discussion addresses how VR can improve the learning and teaching of certain event management skills.

**Event marketing and promotion**

As with other leisure business areas such as tourism, fashion, music and entertainment in general (Bolan 2015; Guttentag 2010; Saad 2015) VR will become an integral part of future event marketing and promotion campaigns. In this context, VR can function as an engaging pre-event promotion tool and also as an event capturing device to generate appealing content for future event marketing campaigns. For instance, in 2016 the music festival Coachella offered ticket buyers a VR headset which they could use with Coachella’s official VR mobile application. The festival’s website describes the added value as ‘Before, during, and after the festival in April, fans from all over the world can be immersed in performances from top artists, experience 360-degree panoramic experiences from around the festival grounds, and watch VR experiences created by other festival-goers’ (Coachella 2016). Interestingly, not only ticket buyers but also fans without tickets had access to the content. This shows how the organisers use VR as a marketing tool to establish its market position as an early technology adaptor who resonates with its target audience of technology-affine young adults. The application also allowed users to upload their festival experiences and share it with the Coachella community. This way, Coachella enabled a high degree of involvement and instilled a community feel where fans become part of the Coachella brand.

To optimally prepare students for this changing environment, they need to develop digital literacy in VR technology. Inadequate marketing and promotion is, in the most cases, not a question of resources but a question of skills. An event organiser can spend a lot of time and money on marketing campaigns with a low level of efficacy. The future generation of event managers needs to be proficient in new technologies such as VR, and how these can be used in integrated event marketing campaigns. Event management courses in the higher education sector should not only adopt new technologies early but should also lead the change. This can only be realised if the change begins in the classroom to translate acquired skills and knowledge to the professional event industry.
Virtual reality

Venue selection

Venue selection is an important aspect of attendee quality perception as well as sponsor satisfaction (Michelini, Iasevoli & Theodoraki 2017). Learning how to select appropriate festival venues, indoor, outdoor and across multiple locations, is an important part of event management education but can be difficult to teach from a theoretical perspective. The needs of all stakeholders must be taken into account, such as risk factors, size, access and budget. Due to lack of experience, students often have difficulties matching venues with event types and audiences. When faced with selecting venues and spaces, students tend to choose safely, meaning the venues they know or have physically experienced. Selection of different or unusual venues is not often considered as it is difficult for the students to visualise the event faced with a two-dimensional representation and specifications. Problems arise when students try to bring together the multitude of considerations without being able to experience the venue or space in view of those considerations.

The visualisation of, and interaction with, spatial environments in a VRLE can help students in the selection, evaluation and design of adequate attractive venues. For instance, VR offers the possibility of showcasing multiple perspectives of the venue to spot potential problems and opportunities. Students can learn the optimal set-up and decoration of a venue by interacting with objects such as placements of sponsorship banners, seating arrangements, food trucks, stages and many other elements of event planning and implementation. These interactive, immersive virtual representations of real venues can stimulate experimentation and creative thinking, which can potentially lead to new and creative matches between venues and audiences.

Event concept development

Bowen and Daniels (2005) suggest an event’s success depends largely on the development of an innovative event concept. The authors write,

Festival managers who rely on the music itself or a specific artist to draw large crowds may be sorely disappointed with their turnout. Equally important is creating a fun and festive atmosphere that offers ample opportunity to socialize and have new and non-musical experiences.

(Bowen & Daniels 2005, p. 162)

The question, however, is how can students learn to create a fun and festive atmosphere that offers ample opportunity to socialise and have new and non-musical experiences on a piece of paper in the classroom? The creation of such festival experience requires a high level of creative thinking. A major challenge in developing innovative event concepts is to anticipate how the concept will translate into a real experience. What will a stakeholder’s journey be like during event day? How will vision and sound be perceived from different locations on the floor? Is there enough space to socialise? Traditionally, students rely on a piece of paper or, in more advanced educational programmes, on software-based modelling platforms such as SketchUp. A VRLE offers a significantly enhanced simulation of festival experiences and can provide immediate feedback on how changes will affect the event. Bladen and Kennell (2014) see a big difference between ‘doing’ a design and ‘learning a design’ (p. 12). Through visualisation and interactivity students are immersed in the doing. Such a design environment enables an iterative design process. After the idea generation, a prototype is created.
and tested by users. The gathered data on how users experience the prototype will then be incorporated into a revised prototype, which after a number of iterations, will lead to the much-improved final product. Such an efficient design process is not feasible with traditional event design teaching methods as students are unable to experience how their concepts translate into experiences. A simulation of their event in a VRLE including sound, vision and interactive elements can approximate a real-world experience from different perspectives, such as an attendee, a performer, a sponsor or a staff member. This can help to test different concepts and solutions as well as identify shortcomings and build on strengths.

Another advantage of VR in the event concept design and development stage is to help students in understanding the financial and technical limitations of event concepts better. The next generation of integrated event management platforms such as Metavents (Metavents is an integrated festival-planning software featuring VR, see www.metavents.com) can provide integrated supply chain logistics disclosing market purchase and renting prices for event equipment such as PAs, stages, banners and stands. Hence, students receive immediate feedback about the incurring costs when designing events. This can help students to omit unrealistic event concepts in an early stage as they can observe how the costs of certain design concepts can quickly spiral out of control.

**Induction and training of staff**

Events of all sizes and types rely heavily on the engagement of volunteers. However, tight budgets often prevent event organisers from providing adequate induction and training of volunteers. A number of authors suggest that volunteers often receive insufficient training (Dekker & Halman 2003; Flood, Gardner & Yarell 2006; Miller, Pauline & Donahue 2017) which can lead to volunteers not returning, thus resulting in a high turnover of volunteers. Here VR can be useful in tailoring training needs of different types of festivals. This can be done by setting up virtual scenarios that simulate emergencies, orientation issues, crowd control and marshalling. Trainers can also use simulations for assessment and problem solving. An additional benefit of digitalised virtual simulations lies in its location-independent nature. This can save significant costs for both volunteers and event producers in the form of travel and time savings.

**Sponsorship acquisition and management**

Corporate sponsorship is one of the most important sources of funding in today’s festival industry. Sponsorship spending on music tours, festivals and venues shows robust growth over the last years, increasing by 4.8 per cent from 2016 to an expected $1.54 billion US in 2017 (IEG and ESP Properties 2017). Despite increasing spending from corporate sponsors, festival organisers report that a lack of sponsorship is a common cause of festival failure (Getz 2010). This shows that while some festival organisers successfully manage to secure corporate sponsorship, others struggle. In this context, finding, selecting and persuading suitable corporate sponsors is an important skill to develop for future event managers, and thus forms an important part of event management education. One of the biggest challenges for students in the creation of sponsorship pitches is to communicate complex event concepts in a persuasive way that clearly demonstrates the benefits to potential sponsors. Traditionally, a sponsorship pitch consists of text documents potentially including some visual components such as past event photos, sketches, graphs or logos. VR can significantly improve the presentation of event concepts for sponsorship pitches. In creating a simulation of certain event situations,
potential sponsors can get a more realistic impression of the value they get in return for their engagement. Students can also experiment with the placement of sponsorship banners or the design and location of sponsorship stands. Sending a personalised event simulation where sponsors can experience how their brand will be perceived from different perspectives, can help event managers convince suitable sponsorship partners.

**Risk management**

The past two decades have seen a much more stringent and regulatory approach to safety and risk management for festivals (Brown 2014). This has resulted in a more complex process involving a multitude of plans, permits, forms and going back and forth to councils with revised plans. The development of risk management plans involves numerous meetings with stakeholders often in different location over an extended period of time. If new risks arise during that time, the impacts of these need to be assessed and can take further time, effort and documentation. Failing to provide adequate risk and emergency plans to councils is a common cause of festival failure, including the previously mentioned Maitreya festival.

VR in the learning environment offers several advantages in the learning and teaching of risk management. Students can go through different scenarios and learn to analyse, evaluate and act appropriately on these scenarios in a VRLE. The simulation of incidents can provide students not only with the factual complexity of managing problematic situations but can also elicit an emotional response. Managing dangerous situations in the real world involves a high level of stress. Such stress situations can lead to decision-making based on emotions rather than rationality. Preparing future event managers by simulating stressful situations and decision-making under pressure can help make future festivals safer for all stakeholder involved. Another advantage of VR in the risk management domain is the ability to better communicate risk and emergency plans to stakeholders. Presenting festival simulations to stakeholders such as politicians or the local community, who may not be familiar with the details and complexity of such events, can reduce reservations about safety and risk, and potentially result in increased funding and positive perceptions about different types of festivals.

**Limitations of VR**

Although we stress the benefits of VR in its ability to enhance event management education, a number of challenges and limitations need to be considered. First, teachers and tutors have to be trained and skilled in VR and its applications. Second, there is still an undeniable gap between experiencing real-world scenarios and virtual simulations of such scenarios. Hence, we see VR not as a replacement of other learning practices but rather as a complementary tool. The strengths of VR become apparent when it is used as an integral part of a larger events ecosystem. In this way, we see VR also in the classroom as a fundamental part of a broader teaching methodology.

**Conclusion**

Learning by doing is crucial in event management education to prepare future event managers for a practical field such as event management. However, situating a student in relevant real-world environments often comes with insurmountable obstacles. VR allows students to be immersed in an interactive environment that simulates the planning and managing
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of festivals. We argue that this immersive, practice-orientated training can address many common mismanagement issues that often lead to festival failures. In this regard, VR can play an important role in the promotion of teaching effectiveness in event management programmes. With the rapid advancements of new technologies, especially after a mass market adaptation, in the words of Hedberg and Alexander (1994), we believe that VR can indeed be the ‘white knight in the arsenal of event management education’.

References


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