8 The virtual event experience: Exploring the potential of Zwift

Adrian Devine, Frances Devine, Amy Burns and Garry Nugent

Introduction

Technological developments are changing the ways people experience physical and virtual environments, including events. Flavian et al. (2019) discuss how the development of portable and embodied devices, together with highly interactive, physical-virtual connections, are changing the customer experience landscape. Since the 1990s virtual technology has been used in sport to improve elite performance, and a more recent trend has been to use it as a platform to host events. This was accelerated in 2020 when Covid-19 forced most sports to cancel their live events and organise virtual events for the first time (Helsen et al., 2021). Golf, motorsport, athletics, rowing, skiing, and cycling, which is the focus of this chapter, are all examples of sports that have organised virtual events during the pandemic.

According to Pine and Gilmore (2020) however, it is no longer enough for event organisers to deliver an event, the experience must be engaging and memorable. Whilst much has been written on the live 'event experience' (Berridge, 2006; Lee & Kyle, 2012) limited research has been conducted on the experience within a virtual context. To address this gap in the literature this chapter will examine the experience of cyclists who have competed on the virtual platform Zwift and discuss the factors that shaped their experience at virtual events. Drawing on the Human Interaction literature (Faric et al., 2019), it examines the virtual event experience from a 'technological perspective' (embodiment and the technical features of the games), 'behavioural perspective' (the level of interactivity and in-game control) and 'human perspective' (the sense of presence, immersion and social interaction).

New technologies within the event landscape

The advent of virtual reality, augmented reality and mixed reality technologies are shaping a new operating environment for event professionals. Despite their rapidly emerging technological capabilities the boundaries between the different types of virtual environments have not been clearly defined (Helsen et al.,

2021). Yung et al. (2022) discuss these definitional issues and attribute some of this ambiguity to the limited consensus in the application of existing terms when new platforms are released (Yung et al., 2022). In an attempt to provide some clarity, Buhalsi and Karatay (2022) refer their readers to Applied Art & Technology's simplistic but effective visual representation of the difference between Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality (see Figure 8.1). Based on this depiction, the cycling platform Zwift could be classified as Mixed Reality (MR).

Rauschnabel (2021:2) discusses how MR "*seamlessly integrates and merges realistic-looking virtual content into the user's physical environment*". In the case of Zwift, a participant's bike is connected to an indoor trainer and the Zwift app takes the input from this device and uses an algorithm to translate the rider's input data into their avatar's speed on a virtual course. In total, Zwift has eight different virtual worlds for its users to race on (Watopia, Innsbruck, London, New York, Richmond, Yorkshire, France and Paris) and it hosts on average 300 virtual events per day. Zwift also features a multitude of gamified elements such as 'Powerups' that riders can use to their advantage, for example, the 'feather' option reduces the weight of the rider by 10% for 15 seconds allowing them to climb hills faster.
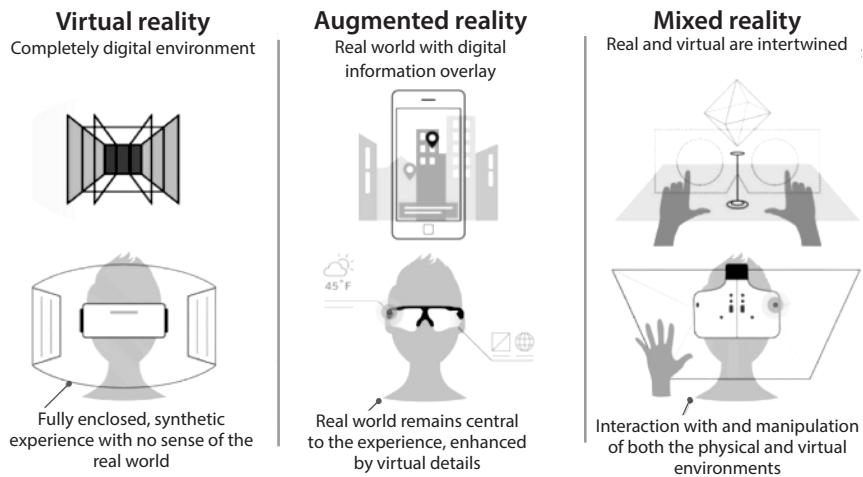
Figure 8.1: Difference between virtual reality, augmented reality and mixed reality (Source: Buhalis & Karatsy, 2022: 19).

In its promotional material, Zwift promises its customers "*a real-life experience in a virtual world*" and its catchy branding slogan 'Fun is Fast' places experience at the heart of its product. This is why, except for the mythical island of Watopia and the futuristic setting of New York, the routes were designed to replicate real-life cycling courses such as the 2016 World Cycling Championships in Innsbruck, Austria, and the infamous Mount Ventoux climb in the French Alps. It should be noted that Zwift is not the only virtual platform that hosts cycling events, with BKool and RGT as its main rivals. Virtual technology is also increasingly being used to host events in other sports such as rowing, motorsport, and golf where products such as the TGC 2019 Golf Simulator allows players to compete on virtual courses from all around the world. Despite this growth in virtual sports events, research into the impact of virtual technology on sport has focused on health (Banos et