

## The future of fun

### SCI-TECH SCENE | Advances in software, hand-held devices let you experience theme parks, 'Idol'

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Today's technology enables sci-fi-like experiences ranging from creating Mandarin-language characters on a cell phone to make-believe auditions for "American Idol."

Speakers talked about these latest technologies and the largely unreported experiences they enable at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business' Media, Entertainment and Technology Summit.

People intent on getting their money's worth now expect they can use technology to get detailed previews of their getaway plans, including at theme parks, said Cliff Warner, principal and CEO of Thinkwell Design & Production, a Pasadena, Calif.-based design and production company.

"The ability to tour resort properties online, to experience theme parks virtually first, helps people decide whether to make the trip and to plan for the visit," Warner said.

Online visitors can even change other visitors' real-life experiences.

Players online can activate targets on a real-life Buzz Lightyear ride at Disneyland, enabling the riders to earn extra points by hitting the online targets in their fight against the Evil Emperor Zurg.

Engineers and technology experts work behind the scenes both online and at the theme parks, said Rachel Hutter, director of engineering services at Disney's Animal Kingdom and a member of the Central Florida Section of the Chicago-based Society of Women Engineers.

Computers and integrated controls enable Hutter, who served on the team that built Animal Kingdom, to see the real-time status of the park rides' vehicle maintenance from her desktop.

"It used to be an administrative nightmare to keep track of that paperwork," she said. "Now, the maintenance technicians do their work on handheld devices and see the status of their work in real time."

Software designed at Disney assures that each technician is properly certified to check rides, and that each vehicle ride is checked daily and at required intervals.

Monitors also figure out whether the theme park's motorized characters, such as gigantic dinosaurs, are leaking hydraulic fluid, and if so, alert the maintenance team.

Visitors who use Verizon wireless phones can get real-time views of their own. They can access the availability of an attraction in real time, receive messages from characters, and locate shows, restaurants and Disney characters inside the parks.

Visitors also may act as wanna-bes or as judges in a mock set-up of the American Idol TV show.

Cell phones are another aspect of the technology-as-experience phenomenon. People in Latin America can download a music-identification program to their cell phones that announces the song playing on a nearby radio and links them to the band's closest concert venue and a Web

site where the music is sold.

And people in Asia using Motorola's Motosurf A3100 use handwriting recognition software to create thousands of characters in Mandarin.

In the United States, Motorola's Krave ZN4 detects movement and changes the display so users can view video and images in landscape or portrait mode.

These are just a few examples of the breakthrough technologies coming to mobile hand-held devices, said Parrish Hanna, global director of experience planning, consumer experience design at Motorola Mobile Devices.

"Consumers can already identify where their friends are" through downloadable applications, said Hanna, who spoke at a panel on mobile media at the Chicago summit on Feb. 27.

That's just the beginning as Motorola starts relying on third-party software developers using the Android platform to develop more extensive applications, such as allowing a cell phone user to map friends' travels. The fun part is that a person who OKs his identity as a friend can "drag and drop" himself anywhere in the world.

"I can put myself in Russia or Antarctica in one or two clicks," Hanna said.

These kinds of real-time technologies are expanding with the growth of smart phones.

Smart phones accounted for 23 percent of all handsets sold in the final quarter of 2008, up from 12 percent a year earlier. Half of the smart phones sold had touch screens, and 66 percent had high-speed 3G connectivity, the NPD Group said.

"Technology is becoming part of everyone's everyday experience," Warner said. "We're just scratching the surface of where this kind of interactivity will head in the next decade."