

Where's the line? Theme parks aiming to eliminate them

March 20 2017, by Mike Schneider



This undated photo made available by Universal Orlando Resort, shows the new "Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon" ride in Orlando, Fla. Universal is leading the theme-park charge into "virtual lines" that give visitors options for exploring a park or watching live entertainment instead of the tedium of looking at someone's back as you inch forward step by step to the thrill ride. (Universal Orlando Resort via AP)

At Universal Orlando Resort's new "Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon" ride, waiting in line has been replaced by lounging on

couches and listening to a racy barber shop quartet sing until it's time to enter the ride.

Universal is leading the theme-park charge into "virtual lines" that give visitors options for exploring a park or watching live entertainment instead of the tedium of looking at someone's back as you inch forward step by step to the thrill ride.

"It's kind of a bit of a science experiment for all of us," said Jason Surrell, a Universal creative director said about the "queue-less" waits. "We've known for years that waiting in line is one of the biggest dissatisfiers in our guests' day."

Universal is also trying the concept at another attraction. Later this year, when Universal opens its new Volcano Bay water park in Orlando, visitors will be given wristbands that will alert them when it's their turn to get on a ride.

"I think it represents the future of what we're going to be doing in themed entertainment," Surrell said. "I kind of joke that this is the first step on a journey that will eventually lead us to a generation that doesn't even know about theme park lines. It will be 'What do you mean, wait in a queue? What's that, Grandpa?'"

Virtual lines are the latest evolution in theme parks' efforts to shorten or eliminate waits for rides, or if waits are necessary evils, to improve the experience of biding one's time.

Almost two decades ago, those efforts were concentrated on elaborately-designed "pre-ride" lines such Universal's The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man, which goes past an elaborately-detailed "Daily Bugle" newsroom.

A few years later came the ride reservations systems of the FastPass and Express Pass at Disney and Universal parks, respectively, in which ride-goers are assigned periods of time to show up for rides. But those reservations need to be made ahead of time, for the most part, and visitors can only make them on three rides a day.

Universal opens that concept to everybody, not just advanced planners, with its two new attractions, while also offering entertainment during the wait.

"Everybody is trying to do this, working not only on the rides but how to get you on the rides," said Dennis Speigel, who heads the theme park consulting firm, International Theme Park Services. "Universal is at the forefront right now."

The Jimmy Fallon attraction and the Volcano Bay water park take different approaches to virtual lines.

At the Jimmy Fallon attraction, which opens next month, visitors enter an area made to look like the lobby of a Rockefeller Center building. Instead of getting in line, they can meander through the lobby looking at photos and memorabilia of past and present "Tonight Show" hosts and watch TVs playing clips of hosts Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, Jay Leno and Jimmy Fallon. Up a flight of stairs are a lounge with couches, half a dozen consoles with touch screens displaying "Tonight Show" videos and a theater stage. Visitors can hang out in the lounge area, charging their phones or talking while they wait. They can dance or take photos with an actor in the costume of Hashtag the Panda, a staple character from Jimmy Fallon's show or listen to a performance from "The Ragtime Gals," an incarnation of the barber shop quartet which is also a staple of the TV show.

When they enter the building, visitors are given a card with one of the

colors in the NBC peacock logo. When it's their turn to go on the ride, lights in the waiting area will flash their color and the singers will announce the color. If they don't want to wait in the building, they can return at a designated time.

Universal hasn't released many details about how virtual lines will work at Volcano Bay, other than to say a watch-like device named "TapuTapu" will be given to visitors. It will flash "Ride Now" when it's their time to go on a ride.

Technology and our growing impatience with waiting are driving the move toward virtual lines, Spiegel said.

The proliferation of cell phone apps, along with the development of wristbands that emit radio signals, pioneered by Disney and able to track movement, made the virtual lines technically possible. America's growing impatience with waiting, from speed dating to Amazon Prime's two-hour deliveries makes it culturally imperative.

"Nobody wants to stand in line. We want to be first," Spiegel said. "It's just the way society is evolving."

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