

# FANDOM: IRL

Live fan experiences are coming to a city near you. 

by Victoria Rosenthal, editorial assistant

**Exploring** galaxies far, far away, dining like a fairytale princess, and traveling by caterpillar bus sound like outlandish adventures only possible in fans' wildest dreams, but entertainment behemoths have brought these magical, fictional adventures to the real world. The production of live events and experiences featuring fan-favorite properties is on the rise, and entertainment companies are recreating fantasy worlds for the general public to experience in reality.

The rise of fandoms works hand in hand with the production of fan events and experiences. Fans act as the catalysts and the target consumers who allow these experiences to thrive. Once production companies recognized that this could be the ticket to creating prolonged success in entertainment franchises, they built live fan events and experiences into a multimillion-dollar business.

## One Generation Is to Blame

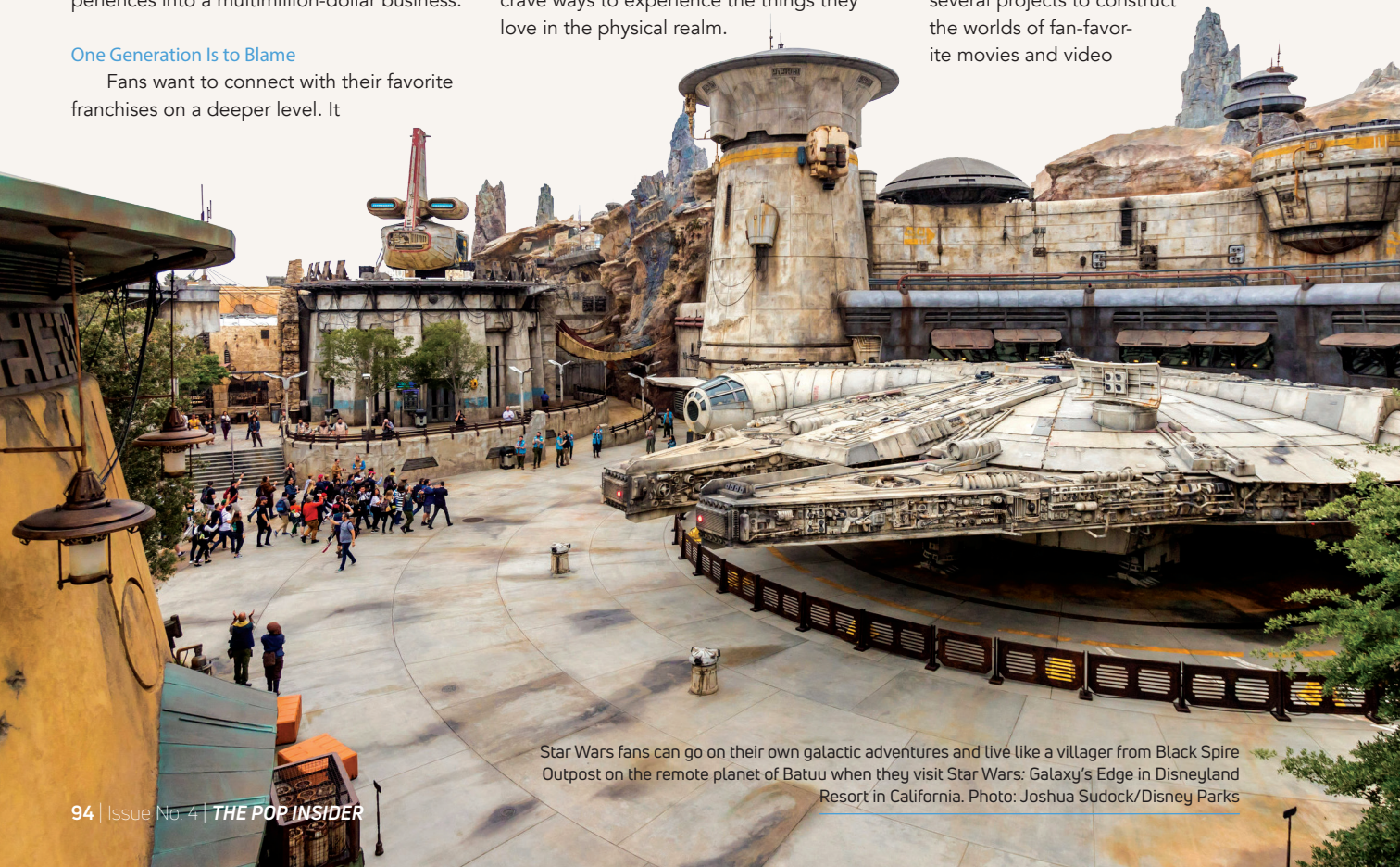
Fans want to connect with their favorite franchises on a deeper level. It

all traces back to one major theme park: Disneyland. Disney's theme parks were the start of enchanting, movie-inspired thrill rides and character meet-and-greets. Millennials grew up taking family vacations to Disneyland and Disney World. But what if the magic could go beyond a roller coaster in Florida or California? What if theme parks could truly immerse fans in fictional worlds in cities across the globe like never before? Thanks to technological and entertainment advancements, these dreams are becoming a reality.

Millennials have a bad reputation for being glued to their screens, but it's important to note that having direct, non-stop access to content is what bolsters this generation's fandom obsessions. And now, these superfans who are weary of virtual screen time crave ways to experience the things they love in the physical realm.

"What I think got unleashed ... was this yearning for touch — this yearning to stimulate the other four senses outside of the visual," Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, explains. Starlight Runner Entertainment is a producer and consultant for transmedia franchises and story world development. The studio advises big-name companies, including The Walt Disney Co., Coca-Cola, Mattel, and Spartan Race, in expanding their presence across media platforms. Its most recent projects include consulting Disney on the construction of Pandora: The World of Avatar and Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge in its Disney World and Disneyland theme parks.

Since opening in 2000, Starlight Runner Entertainment has teamed up with top Hollywood producers and executives on several projects to construct the worlds of fan-favorite movies and video



Star Wars fans can go on their own galactic adventures and live like a villager from Black Spire Outpost on the remote planet of Batuu when they visit Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge in Disneyland Resort in California. Photo: Joshua Sudock/Disney Parks

games in the real world. The company works with the property owners to make the essence, scents, tastes, and sensations of virtual franchises tangible for fans.

This multi-sensory approach to producing fan experiences and events is necessary because several hours of screen time can be very isolating, according to Jon Gibson and Amanda White, co-directors of lam8bit and the co-creators of Passport to Iron City, a pop-up experience based on *Alita: Battle Angel*. The temporary event based in Los Angeles, New York, and Austin, Texas, focused on this isolation issue and created an attraction inspired by Alita's futuristic world, in which fans can experience real, human interaction and collaborate as a community.

Millennial fans also grew up alongside the boom of immersive attractions, such as escape room experiences, as they had come of age by the early 2010s. Many production companies noticed the popularity of these attractions and realized that these interactive models are the perfect fit for popular brands.

One major event marked this new wave of fan experiences: the opening of Universal Studios' Wizarding World of Harry Potter. The park is designed to look as if it's transplanted from a *Harry Potter* movie set, making guests feel like they are characters within the Wizarding World. Park cast members treat all guests as if they are wizards and witches; guests can eat, drink, and shop like a wizard or witch; and there are dining options and merchandise based on items, food, and drinks found in the *Harry Potter* movies and books. Visitors can stroll down Diagon Alley, enter the shops, dine at the Leaky

Cauldron, and order Butter Beer. Every aspect of the park is designed to bring fans right into the story of the young wizard. With this creation of Harry Potter's magical world within the fans' real world, Universal beat The Walt Disney Co. to the punch.

"It caused Disney to have to kind of raise its head up and look around, and go, 'What's going on here? It's remarkable what those results are. We need to do something in our parks that is this way,'" Gomez explains. Disney did this by revamping its approach to its theme parks and creating the Pandora: The World of Avatar exhibit — a licensed section of the park from 20th Century Fox based on the sci-fi movie *Avatar*.

Following the success of Pandora, Disney created Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, which opened in California's Disneyland on May 31 and will come to Orlando's Disney World on Aug. 29.

"When you go to Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, ... it's stunning. You're truly walking into a piece of the Star Wars universe — a canonical piece of the Star Wars universe," Gomez says.

The experience is much more interactive than simply strapping into a rollercoaster ride. Fans will live the life of a Jedi, as opposed to watching holograms or animations during a ride. Disney brought the planet of Batuu's Black Spire Outpost village to Earth, with spaceships, merchant shops, aliens, Jedi, and dining areas that mimic the look and feel of those found in the movie. Fans can go on their own missions through the two anchor rides, *Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance* and *Millennium Falcon: Smuggler's Run*. They also have the chance to customize their own lightsabers at Savi's Workshop and droids at the Droid Depot.

Fans are truly part of the story thanks to the recently updated *Disney Parks* app. Whenever a guest goes on one of the rides, the status of the ride is shared across the park to cast members. For example, if guests are unable to smuggle the goods during turn on the *Smuggler's Run* ride, that information is relayed to cast members within the park. Cast members will then bring up that fact in conversation with the guests at another location in the park, such as the dining areas,



The first guests arrive at Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disneyland Park on opening day. Photos: Joshua Sudock/Disney Parks



At Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, even classic real-world brands get a fantasy upgrade. Photo: The Coca-Cola Co.

and let them know that a bounty is on their head. They also warn them to be careful and lay low, continuing the story off of the rides.

Disney also incorporated brand partnerships into Batuu that tie fans even closer to the experience. For example, the company has partnered with Coca-Cola as the official beverage for the parks, creating Coke products that fit into the storyline. When fans purchase a Coke, a local merchant from Batuu will hand them a bottle shaped as a droid with labels printed in the Star Wars' franchises' fictional language, Aurebesh. This will allow fans to see familiar brands in a way that aligns with the story.

#### It All Started with a Mouse

Gibson, White, and Gomez agree that live fan events follow the same interactive and immersive approach that Disney and Universal Studios do to entertain fans. Producers of local fan events look to these big wigs to design their own experiences on a smaller scale.

Even though the events are smaller and tend to be temporary, companies that



Fans of *Alita: Battle Angel* collaborate to solve puzzles and missions in the Manga character's futuristic world in the pop-up experience Passport to Iron City. Photo: lam8bit, Fox, and 20th Century Fox

produce live fan events must stay true to the brand or intellectual property — the same way Disney and Universal Studios do in their own parks.

Every detail of these pop-up events must speak to the brand, or it's simply "not cool," according to Gomez. He believes that fully understanding the essence of the brand or intellectual property is crucial when developing these experiences. And according to Gibson, building directly from the narrative ensures it's a realistic and unique experience.

Focusing on the details helps to make live events and attractions unique and memorable in their own ways. Creating memories is engineered into each attraction, and it's also the main goal of the production company in order to maintain and grow the franchise's audience, create a happy experience for them, and give fans a chance to connect.

"That's powerful to commit something to memory through experience because touching, smelling, and seeing something is different than passively engaging with something on a TV screen or a monitor," Gibson says.

In Passport to Iron City, attendees entered the experience in groups of six alongside 10 other groups playing in the same area at a time. This allowed fans to interact throughout the game and join forces to solve puzzles and challenges. They also had the opportunity to share their experiences and love for the manga series and the movie at the Kansas Bar.

Everything from the futuristic, industrial design and live actors to the food and drinks drew details directly from the movie and the manga series. These

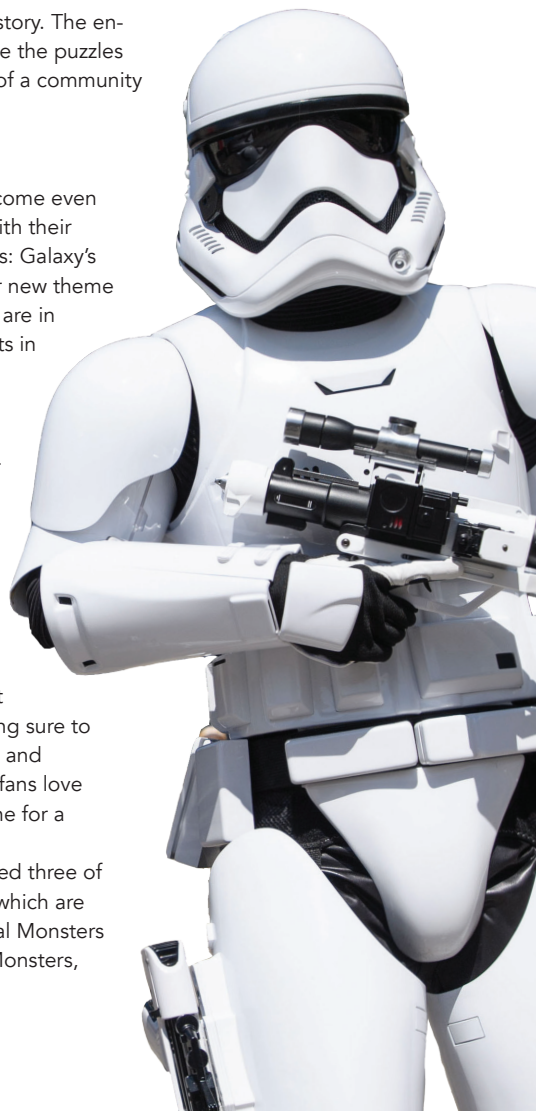
made fans believe they're part of the story. The encouragement to work together to solve the puzzles helped fans feel like they were a part of a community within the world that they love.

#### Getting More Immersive

Live fan events are on track to become even more intense to keep fans engaged with their favorite brands or franchises. Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge is finally open, and several other new theme parks based on fan-favorite franchises are in the works. Plus, there are annual events in store for every type of fan, such as Universal Studios Halloween Horror Nights.

Universal Studios takes the hands-on experience into the horror genre with its annual Halloween Horror Nights. It works off of a combination of fear and enjoyment of scary movies and stories, using Hollywood-style special effects to make it more extreme and realistic. Universal Studios has been perfecting this event and its horror mazes since 1991, making sure to incorporate classic and current slasher and sci-fi movie and TV show themes that fans love while adapting the essence of each one for a realistic experience.

In fact, Universal Studios announced three of this year's 10 haunted houses, two of which are based on horror fan favorites, Universal Monsters and Stranger Things. With Universal Monsters,



Universal Studios is throwing it back to the original horror movies, with classic monsters, including Dracula, the Wolf Man, and Frankenstein, coming to hunt guests. The theme park plans to have each monster in its own turf, including Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, Dracula's gothic castle, and the Wolf Man's Bavarian forest. The hunt will continue as fans of *Stranger Things* return to Hawkins, Indiana, in the park's second *Stranger Things*-themed haunted house. They'll walk through a maze of scenes from the show's second and third seasons and come face to face with Demodogs.

Even more fan-favorite TV and movie characters are making their way across the U.S. in theme parks, including hits from Nickelodeon. Triple Five Group is developing a new Nickelodeon Universe in the upcoming American Dream Mall in East Rutherford, New Jersey, scheduled to open this summer, despite several delays. Taking notes from the original theme park at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, the 8.5-acre Nickelodeon Universe will have rides and attractions based on classic and current Nick characters, including *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and the *Monster Machines*.

"The Nickelodeon Universe at American Dream will give kids and families in the New York Metro area the opportunity to interact with their favorite characters like *SpongeBob* and the *Turtles* on a grand scale, through rides, attractions, and Nick-themed party and event spaces," Sarah Levy, chief operating officer of Viacom Kids and Family Group, said in a statement.

Fans will be front and center in the world of Nickelodeon that they grew up with, especially viewers who watched throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The roller coasters are already visible in the development, including the Launched Euro-Fighter and the Spinning Coaster by German roller coaster manufacturer Gerstlauer.

#### A BRIEF VISIT

Pop-up events are taking notes on this approach to design and applying them to fan experiences across major cities in the U.S. For example, the world of DreamWorks' movie and Netflix TV show *Trolls* has made its way to New York in *Trolls the Experience*. During the event, which has dates into September, attendees can party like a Troll with charac-

ters from the franchise, including Poppy and Branch. The event space is designed to look like the whimsical Troll Village from the movie, with its vibrant colors and unique woodland creatures. Parents choose an admissions package depending on the type of experience they'd like for their child.

Families play games as they travel through the village, creating a mini-orchestra with the movie's critters at Branch's Musical Mash-Up, gathering decorations from the Caterbus or a big Best Day Ever celebration, and playing virtual tag on a large touch screen in Critter Creek.

Kids can also become their favorite Trolls character with a full makeover, becoming Poppy, Branch, or Guy Diamond. Depending on the admission package, kids will either receive a cardboard hat shaped in the hair of their choice or get a full makeover with a trollhair wig and face paint. Later, attendees can join Poppy's Best Day Ever! Celebration in 3D with colorful visuals, party lights, and music from the movie. At the end of the event, attendees will go to the Memory Mile room to take photos, create a scrapbook, and meet Poppy, adding the memory-making aspect to this interactive event.

In Salt Lake City, Mystery Escape Room is working with NBCUniversal International Studios to bring the bustling world of *Downton Abbey* to the U.S. this summer in an escape room. Fans of the global TV series can become a character within the escape room designed as an exact replica of the *Downton Abbey* set. They'll have the chance to solve a mystery based on the original characters of the show while touching set pieces and interacting with their team members. Mystery Escape Room and NBCUniversal International Studios plan to stay true to the hit series while urging fans to bond within the cooperative game.

Mystery Escape Room focuses on several pop culture-themed escape rooms like these, including one based on the legendary action hero Zorro. The attraction, called *The Sword of Zorro*, lets fans become the masked hero. They must find his sword, which Zorro hid in an old hacienda to keep safe until it's needed again. Fans enter a hidden training room — transporting them to 1900s Spanish California — and try to pass Zorro's test to find the sword and be deemed worthy of using



Head to the Cupcakes and Rainbows Retail Cafe for treats and merchandise inspired by *Trolls*. Photo: Feld Entertainment



Universal Studios' Wizarding World of Harry Potter, Diagon Alley

it. The one-hour cooperative game for four to 12 players brings the Zorro fan community together to solve puzzles and riddles while appreciating the swashbuckler's story within a space designed as his world.

Another pop-up event — an unofficial Pokémon-themed bar — will travel to Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Denver this year. Australia-based Viral Ventures will hosts its Poke Bar with Pokémon-inspired food and drinks, along with a DJ. The fan event producer plans to design the space to look like the world of Pokémon by creating seven rooms based on different regions found in the video games and TV series. During the two-hour experience, fans will enter each room to try to catch their own Pokémon and battle them in a tournament. Prizes will also go to attendees who come dressed in a Pokémon costume. When trainers get hungry, they can dine on special food and cocktails inspired by the franchise, including Pokémon burger sliders that are dyed to look like fan-favorite characters.

With these new experiences, fans can enjoy themselves, make memories, and connect with their communities in a galaxy far, far away, the Upside Down, or the Trolls Village, if that's their speed. 🌟