

The digital lifeline for live events

How the virtual space offers options for an industry hit hard by coronavirus.



Stay at home

The single most important action you can take is to stay at home in order to protect the NHS and save lives.

- You should only leave the house for very limited reasons:
- Shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, as infrequently as possible.
- One form of exercise a day, for example a run or cycle - alone or with members of your household.
- Any medical need, including to drop items, provide care or help a vulnerable person.
- Travelling for work purposes.
- Visit from home.

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Introduction: The way we live now...

The coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating impact on any industry that involves bringing groups of people together – from the hospitality sector to education to tourism and beyond. The events industry is no exception. In a survey published in July 2020, nearly half (40%) of companies within the events sector revealed they do not expect the business they're involved in to exist in the same format within the next 12 months^[1]. Faced with plummeting demand and difficult restrictions, whole businesses built around live events are struggling with high levels of redundancies and furloughed staff. The unpredictability of how the pandemic will play out only makes things harder.

But in these times of uncertainty, one thing is certain: digital technology has the power to provide a lifeline for the events industry. In this paper, we explore the ways events companies are adapting to survive by turning virtual, the various options digital platforms provide for live events, and the ongoing benefits that digitising events can offer – even outside the lens of the pandemic.



An industry fighting to survive

With an estimated overall worth of around £70bn^[2] in the UK alone, the events sector covers a wide range of industries – including conferences, trade shows, exhibitions, cultural events, festivals, fairs and music and sporting events. Since March 2020, many of these have effectively been shuttered – not just in the UK, but around the world too.

We can really see this state of affairs by taking a closer look at the University of Westminster's recent survey^[3], which took into account 675 respondents spread across 59 different countries. They found that: over 25% of respondents have furloughed full-time employees, 13% have made job cuts, and 66% have said that a downward change in pricing is needed for the sector to survive.

In the United States, it's a similarly stark picture. A survey conducted of over 100 events companies at the end of July highlighted that nearly 80% of the respondents said they have lost over 75% of their business since March 2020, from a pool of production companies, manufacturers, rental shops, design firms, and distributors^[4].

With few other options, many event companies are leaning heavily on government support where available. And while there are some allowances – for example business events in the UK are still allowed to go ahead for up to 30 people – the fluctuating restrictions make it hard to plan in advance when you take into account the time needed to plan, market and organise an event, let alone implement safe social distancing or facilitate travel for attendees. So it's not surprising that for the events sector – be it production companies, experiential agencies or orchestras – the future looks bleak. The question is: with restrictions ongoing for the foreseeable future, what can we do to help the industry survive?



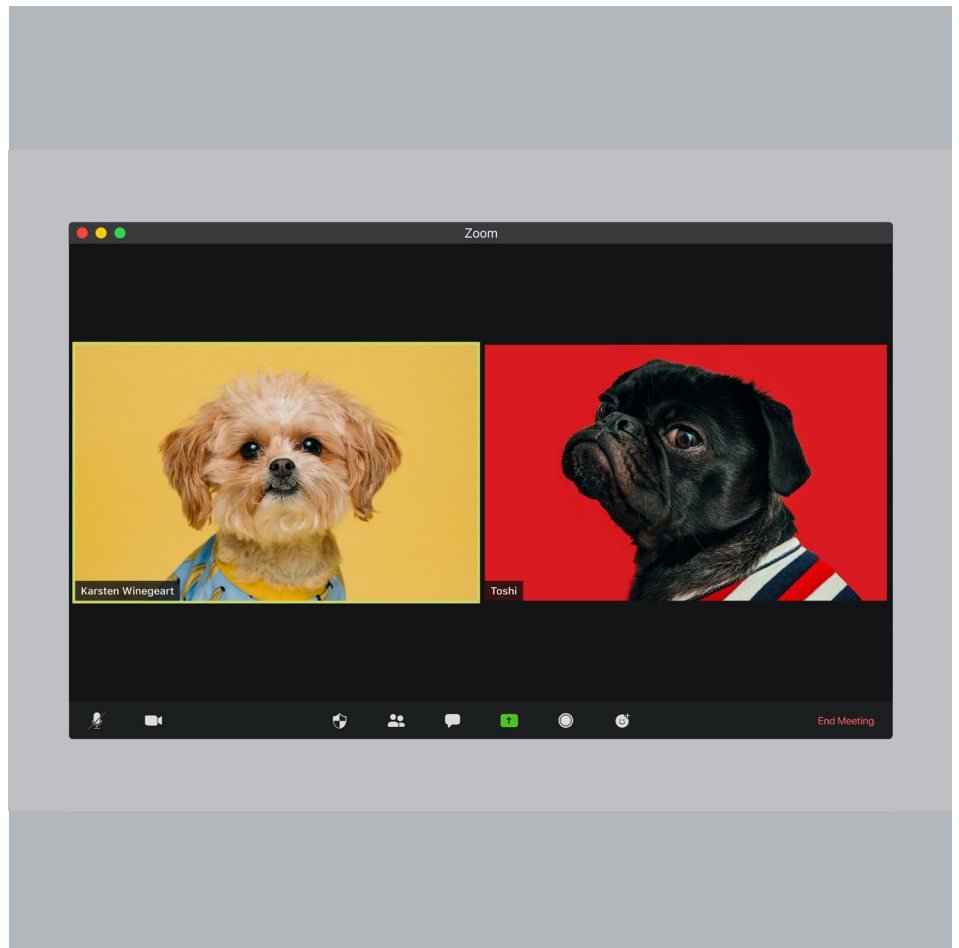
A virtual lifeline

If there's been one good thing to come out of the pandemic, it's the realisation of the power of technology to connect us. From Zoom dinner parties to meetings on Microsoft Teams, the digital space has given us a lifeline not just for our friends and families – but for countless businesses too. For the events industry, it could make all the difference.

Since March 2020, when lockdown took real effect, we've been seeing more and more brands and organisations turn to the digital space to hold events. And with good reason.

Technology today offers so much more than just video calling. Digital platforms can provide a dedicated portal for complex information and synchronised functionality that rivals that of a physical event all through a web browser, while immersive technology such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) experiences offer an alternative and interactive platform for anything from fashion shows to trade conferences. Live streaming and social media platforms also offer easily accessible and instantly engaging ways to connect to an audience and bring people together for events online. Used individually or together as a combination, these platforms are creating a virtual alternative that means events can still go ahead despite the pandemic shutdown.

Previously these types of technology have been used to support an event or installation: now they're forming the main event itself. What's more, in exploring these options, a lot of companies are discovering the multiple benefits digital platforms offer which will continue to apply long after the pandemic has passed – giving them more tools for the future.



So what are the benefits of virtual events?

Cost-effective

In a time when the bottom line is more important than ever, overall digital events generally cost less than physical events with the added value that they can be used again.

Scalable

The beauty of technology is its versatility – experiences can be as detailed or as simple as you like. Web platforms, in particular, are highly scalable with the ability to keep building functionality and adding content for future iterations.

Creative

Technology today is constantly evolving, enabling creative applications that stick in the mind. Whether it's an imaginative AR experience or an animated web platform, clever and creative digital events drive engagement and ensure cut-through.

Accessible

Technology, especially browser-based or mobile app experiences, is immediately accessible wherever you are in the world – giving you greater reach. In a time when travel is restricted, this makes it more valuable than ever.

Environmentally-friendly

Online events by default offer a greener option than hosting an event on location for the simple reason they don't necessitate any travel – national or international.

Data-driven

Building a bespoke digital event platform enables you to include analytics, which tells you how the platform was used by each attendee – in turn leading to precise targeted messaging.

131%
Increase in visitor numbers using the UEA virtual open day platform. ^[5]

65.9%
Of event organisers make their virtual events available on-demand afterwards. ^[6]

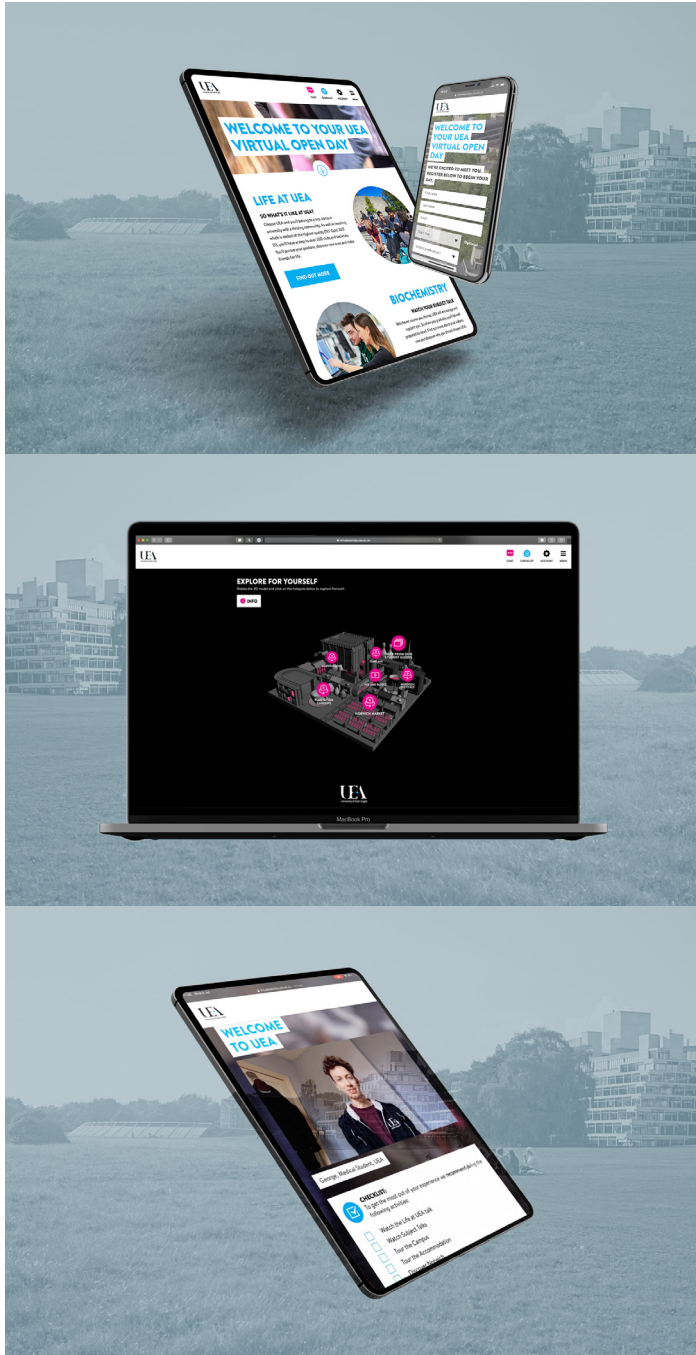
55%
Of virtual event organisers plan to invest more in virtual events next year (2021). ^[7]

Digital events in action

So how are companies using digital platforms to host live events? From synchronised VR conferences to mixed media fashion shows, let's take a look at some of the ways technology is transforming the events industry.

Virtual Open Day – University of East Anglia

A bespoke web platform to attract new students.



The coronavirus pandemic hit universities hard. Not only did it disrupt teaching current students, but large-scale open days to attract new students were off the cards too. So with that in mind, the University of East Anglia (UEA) worked with Immersive Studios to create a highly engaging virtual open day experience in lieu of their usual July event. The bespoke web platform offered the same sorts of experiences, all contained within a similar structure, that students would experience on a physical open day.

The personalised virtual gateway into the UEA was underpinned by four key technological features: subject and academic talks, virtual tours, live chat with student ambassadors and robust data capture to allow the UEA to monitor the success of the event and tailor future communications – all launching on Saturday 4th July 2020. On 'arrival', the prospective student inputted key information such as their name, email address and subject preference before entering the site, which automatically tailored the content to the information provided.

The platform was divided into key themes, with each section hosting a range of custom immersive content, from 360° video tours to talks from academics to explanatory 2D videos. Every user was given a designated checklist at the start of the experience to help guide them through the full experience, from watching the introductory talk to virtually touring campus and accommodation.

What's more the UEA's current student live chat system was integrated into the platform so, on the day of the event itself, prospective students could ask current students anything they wanted about the university.

After the event, the platform remained live so users could go back into it to explore again. And whereas a normal open day would provide a set itinerary for a limited amount of time, the virtual open day enabled students to explore in any order they wanted, for however long they wanted, without the constraints of travel. Overall, it was a resounding success with an 131% increase on visitor numbers, including significant international engagements.

Virtual festival 2020 – Happy-Place Festival

An all digital version of Fearné Cotton's Happy Place Festival.



First launched in 2019, Fearné Cotton's Happy Place Festival 2020 was entirely virtual. The month-long schedule of people promoting mental and physical wellbeing was accessed through a web browser where users could roam the virtual festival grounds and find inspiration from the performances, tutorials and speakers that made the festival special.

With events every day from 12th June to 12th July, there was plenty to do, watch and listen to for everyone, from music to meditation, cooking, storytelling, and craft workshops – and family-friendly activities for the whole household.

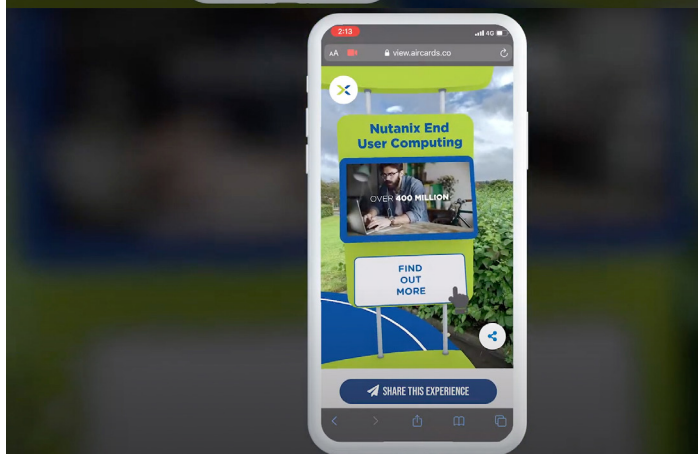
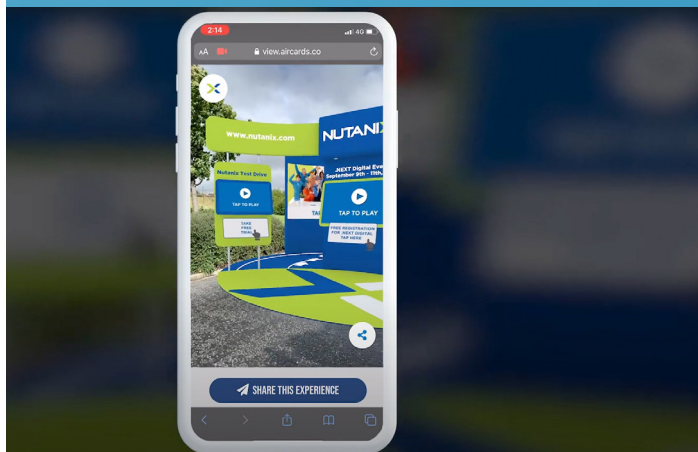
The decision to take the festival digital was driven by the circumstances of the year. Cotton hoped that it would provide a much-needed sense of escapism, serenity, and calm after the events of 2020 and with restrictions on physical contact. She said: "It's clear that community and connection is more vital than ever. I wanted to work out a way of making the festival happen to give people a way of experiencing helpful classes, workshops, and talks for free this summer."

Importantly, by holding the festival virtually, she was able to expand the line-up of events and speakers, saying: "There's even more content than we would have had at the live event and I'm excited for people to enjoy our month's long schedule." In this way, the festival is a great example of how a web platform can be scaled up to include a wide-range of content that targets multiple audiences, as well as timed content that mimics a programme of live events.

Virtual areas at the festival included The Talk Lounge, Meditation Mountain, Family Retreat, Wellbeing Garden, Kitchen, Craft Village, and Pledge Wall. Boutique, ethical, and independent vendors also featured in the online bazaar. What's more, the festival platform remains available long after the event has finished – allowing people to access and benefit from its content even if they missed the main event.

Web AR Event Booth – Nutanix

A virtual alternative to the (usually) live expo.



With their global events and conferences cancelled due to the pandemic, Nutanix teamed up with CXO Strategies and Aircards to deliver an entirely virtual expo experience using web-based augmented reality (AR).

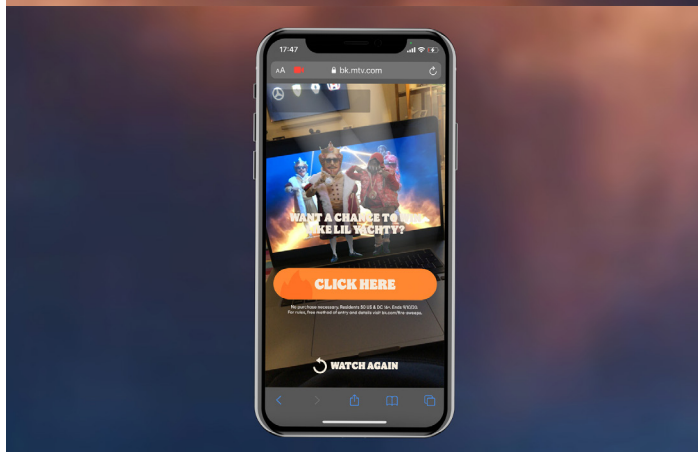
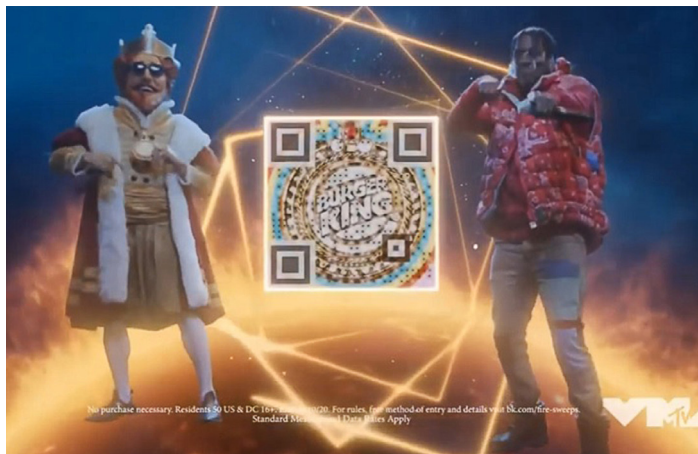
The experience featured a full-scale stand that users could place within their own environment and physically walk around to explore. Multiple interactive touch points were integrated into the scene, each featuring high production-value video content and associated 3D CTA buttons to learn more.

Using WebAR provides an opportunity for brands to connect with their audience while conferences and events are cancelled – enabling brands to take advantage of the powerful technology features which mean that users can access the 3D content without ever having to download an app, and with wide-ranging compatibility across both iOS and Android mobile devices. Forward-thinking organisations like Nutanix have moved quickly to deliver an immersive virtual alternative to the standard event experience.

As with all Web AR experiences, the Nutanix virtual event can be activated via a variety of methods, including linking from social media, website or scanning a QR code that links directly to the WebAR page.

Immersive sweepstakes – Burger King

An AR activation to enhance the
MTV VMAs.



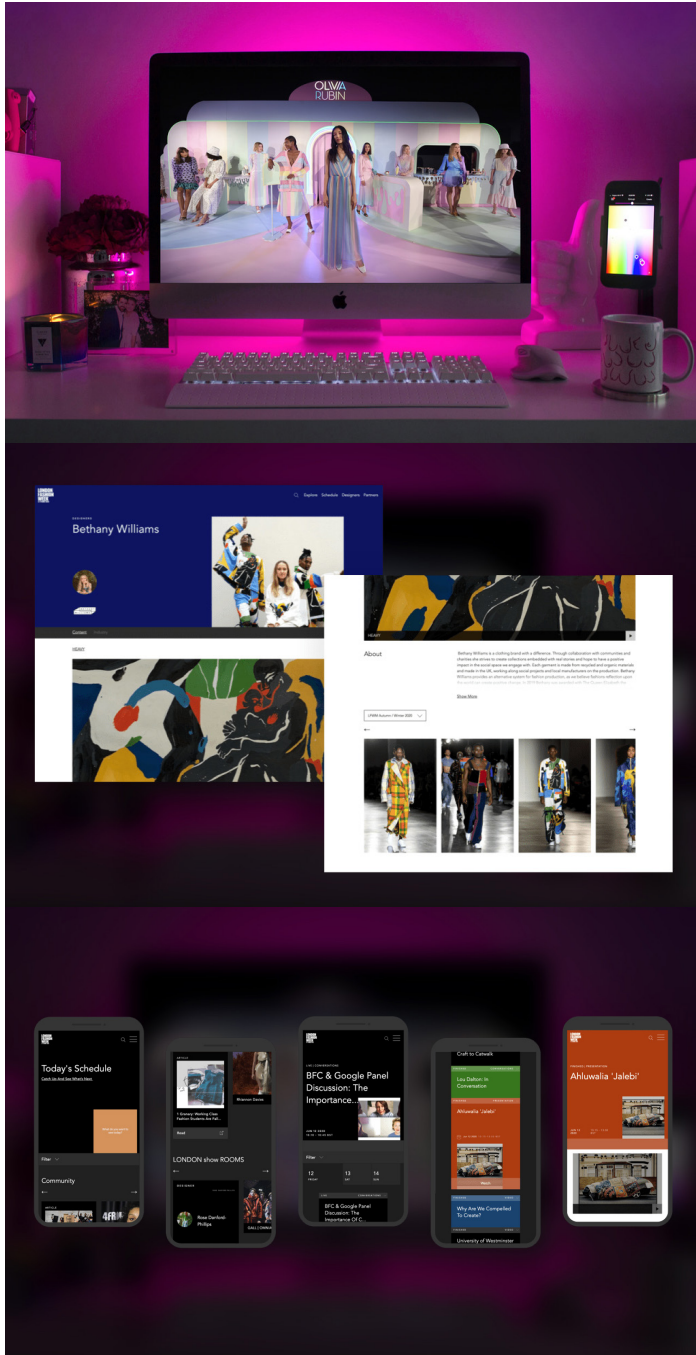
Burger King worked with digital content and experience agency Coffee to create an AR experience that enhanced the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) for viewers at home. They ran an immersive sweepstakes during the show which encouraged users to download the Burger King app and use it throughout the event.

The campaign asked viewers on Twitter to scan a QR code, which triggered an experience featuring AR versions of the burger chain's mascot and rapper Lil Yachty, who appeared in the red carpet pre-show and during the programme, performing the song 'Top Down'. Burger King then awarded him with the Burger Fire Medallion.

The experience urged viewers to download the BK App and register if they hadn't already, and scan QR codes that appeared in spots throughout the awards show. Once scanned, these triggered offers such as a free Whopper sandwich with a \$1 purchase in the BK App, and a chance to win a year of free Whoppers along with tickets to the 2021 Video Music Awards. The campaign is a good example of how apps have become a critical tool for companies and brands, including both event and hospitality organisations, to connect with their audience.

Interactive Hub – London Fashion Week

A mix of digital activations across the fashion houses.



For June's London Fashion Week, the event was entirely virtual by necessity. However, for the September event, different fashion houses took a mixed approach to holding their shows – and neatly demonstrated how digital technology can work alongside a physical event to enhance and share a live event.

Of the 81 designers featured, only 31 featured some form of physical activation – although this was far from the usual 'front row' experience. Burberry, for example, hosted a show in a forest outside of London without an audience and streamed it live on Twitch.

Roland Mouret, meanwhile, partnered with Amazon Prime and skipped the more traditional catwalk show to reveal his collection via a one-minute video instead. Using Amazon's tech capabilities, the experience created a shareable 'No Show' video, which was a 'no-model, no-location, no-waste' fashion show made with CGI, and also offered customers 360 viewing and personalisation. Plus, a selection from Mouret's PF20 collection is available in Amazon's Luxury Stores, which is accessible to eligible Prime members in the US.

Global platforms such as TikTok are also seeing the opportunity – launching their own version of Fashion Week as a global initiative running for a whole month. The app live-streamed two fashion shows a week, and a virtual fashion show featuring Puma and Alice & Olivia featured new pieces that will be available exclusively via the app.

Also taking a novel approach to using technology within the fashion industry is Khaite. Founder Catherine Holstein created a sensory experience that combined AR and film with a gift box including a printed lookbook, fabric swatches, photos, a vinyl record and a candle. Sent out to editors and buyers, the experience prompted recipients to scan a QR code on the insider cover, which directed them to a new section of khaite.com, which takes over the phone's camera and orientation. It then instructs the user to scan over the book, triggering 3D models of Khaite's new shoes, which the user can toggle between to enlarge, rotate and view in their home environment. For those without the book, the same technology is available to everyone at khaite.com.

Virtual RE-ANIMATOR – Everything Everything

A music gig hosted in VR to launch a new album.



Everything Everything launched their highly anticipated new album 'Re-Animator' with the first ever album release show held in VR. Hosted in partnership with Sansar, 'Everything Everything: Virtual RE-ANIMATOR' was an innovative virtual live concert event that saw the band expand on its theme of blurring the boundaries between humanity and technology in the time of Covid.

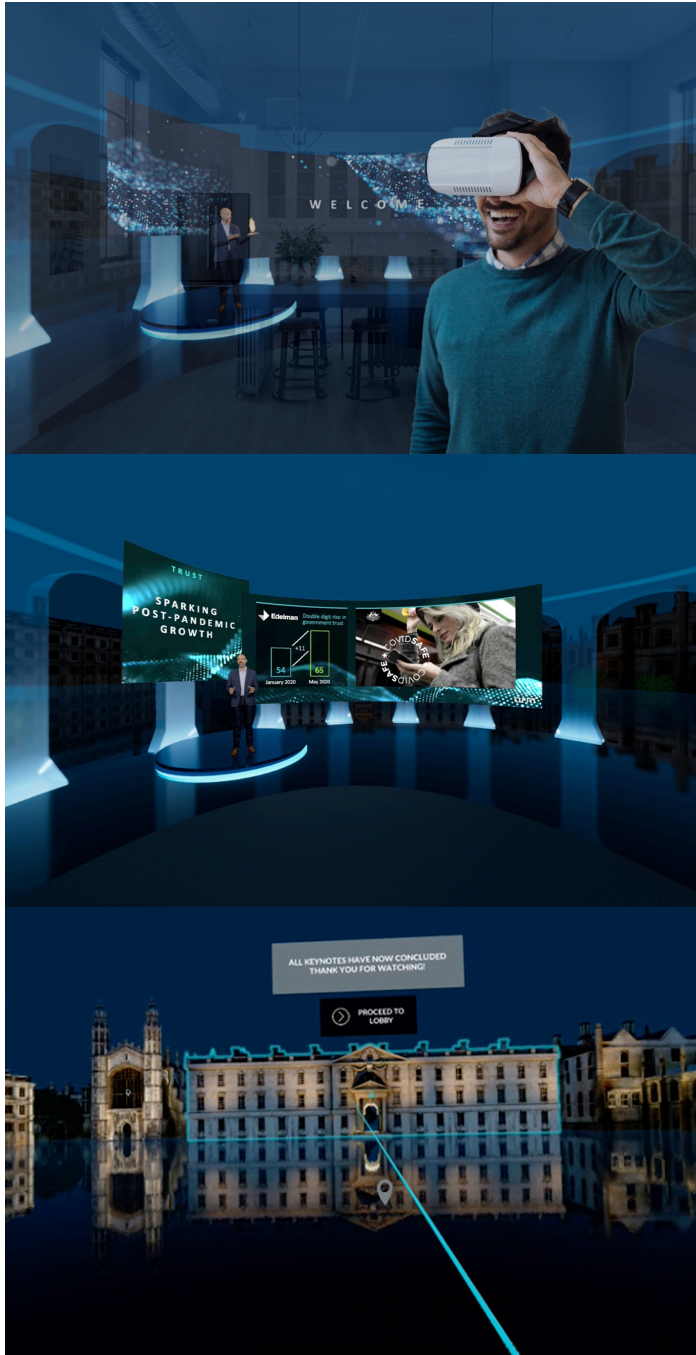
'Everything Everything: Virtual RE-ANIMATOR' was held in a bespoke virtual event space on both the 10th and 11th of September. Fans paid £10 for an entry pass and once inside could watch the gig and enjoy a range of interactive real-time experiences, including meeting the band, connecting with other fans, wearing virtual merch and even flying above the band as they performed.

The band performed a live show, premiering material from the new album for the first time, alongside fan favourites from their critically acclaimed back catalogue. The show was complemented by a range of visual elements, drawing on the video content and aesthetic of the album campaign, as well as elements inspired by their first four albums.

For the full experience viewers needed a PC and headset compatible with the Sansar app, but it was also available to view on mobile and desktop.

Virtual Partner Meeting – Arm

A synchronised VR conference for tech industry leaders.



As one of the world's tech giants, Arm Holdings took a highly innovative approach to their annual partner meeting by creating a three-day conference that took place in VR. To make sure their audience could take part, they sent out Oculus Go headsets in advance and invited them to download the bespoke conference app.

Designed in structure to be as close as possible to a real event, the virtual conference featured talks from key speakers timed across the three days in August 2020. However, the experience fully embraced the potential of its VR stage: creating a digital world that mixed filmed footage with animated 3D assets to create a space that could only exist in VR. The key speakers were filmed in 360° and superimposed into the virtual auditorium, in front of the keynote slides which were scaled up to take full advantage of the 3D space. What's more, at specific points in the presentations, CGI animations would play out to illustrate the point being made or the process being discussed – creating a striking and memorable experience.

The VR app also contained a range of supporting content, including an interactive animated 3D model of Cambridge – Arm's HQ – alongside video content about the company and the topics discussed in the presentations. The keynotes themselves were synchronised to play back during set sessions across different time zones.

Created in partnership with Arm's agency Smyle and technology provider Immersive Studios, the virtual partner meeting was a great success with positive feedback from the attendees – demonstrating how a virtual conference can provide an engaging and successful alternative to the usual face-to-face event.

What to watch out for...

So you've decided to take your event online. What next? Firstly, you need to make sure you're fully prepared.

The processes involved in creating a virtual event, whether that's a fully immersive VR experience, mobile app, web platform or video stream, differ from hosting a physical event.

Here, we run through some of the key points to bear in mind before you get started.

Finding the right tech

Firstly, you need to make sure the digital platform you choose is appropriate for your event. Consider how many people will need access, how much content you want to share, the types of content that will be featured and whether the platform will be something you want to repurpose in future. There's a huge choice out there for all budgets and event types, so make sure you find a tech partner you can trust to help you find the solution that's best suited to your needs.

The production process

The process of devising and building a digital experience is pretty different to hosting a live event on location. One of the most important things to be prepared for is the difference in production timelines. Creating a virtual experience often requires long lead times to allow for processes such as the submission and approval of apps, and then time for rigorous user testing before the event. A digital event should ideally be fully signed-off weeks in advance of the event actually taking place to allow for user testing and bug fixes.

Deploying devices

How will your audience access the event? Consider whether you need to send out physical devices or props, for example a VR headset or an AR marker. If so, make sure you include clear instructions and give users enough time to get their head around the technology – some audiences are more tech-savvy than others. The good news is that since the pandemic hit, downloading apps is now more of a standard practice, which widens your options.

Connectivity issues

The last thing you want is for your event to be undermined by connectivity issues or technical glitches so it's best to be as prepared for these as possible. Consider how you can mitigate these issues: for example, do you prompt users to download an app in advance of the event or do you include a disclaimer in your communications that a good internet connection is required? All preparation for the smooth-running of a virtual event should be underpinned by thorough user testing to identify and solve any potential issues early on.

Guiding your audience

Like any event, a virtual event needs marketing. But it's worth bearing in mind that some of your audience will be likely to need more hand-holding than normal when it comes to using certain tech platforms. Think about sending pre-event communications with helpful information and advice, for example troubleshooting support or FAQs.

Choose a good partner

This is possibly the most important thing you can do. If you find a trustworthy tech partner who knows their way around the different digital options, with a proven track record in delivering good and dependable virtual experiences, then you don't need to worry – they will guide you through the whole process. A good partner will always want to create the experience that's the most appropriate for your event and budget – and should not be reluctant to challenge the brief if it means creating the best experience possible. Delivering your virtual event in the most seamless and reliable way will always be a good tech partner's main priority.

Conclusion: a ray of hope for the industry

The coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on the events industry – and with fears of a second wave spreading across Europe throughout the winter, it's fair to say the situation is not going to get any easier any time soon.

Luckily, the virtual space offers a lifeline for the events industry. While it cannot offer the same experience as a physical event which brings people together in the same room, a digital event can nevertheless connect people all over the world with the same content – allowing brands, companies and organisations to continue to reach out and share their message, despite the restrictions that stop us from socialising.

There has been much speculation that the world will not return to how it was before, once the immediate threat of the virus has passed. There are many reasons for this but, for the events sector, it's possible that this time will have allowed greater exploration of creativity and technology that mean live events going forward will continue to be enhanced by, hosted and supported by digital tech. For accessibility and environmentally-friendly reasons alone, digitising live events has the potential to reach many more people globally than a venue-based event.

In the meantime, while the pandemic continues to restrict how we live and work, virtual events offer a ray of hope for an industry hit among the hardest by the pandemic.



Want to learn more?

We're experts in creating immersive digital experiences. Get in touch to find out more about how we can help you with your online event.

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Immersive Studios is an award-winning production studio and one of the pioneers of innovative immersive experiences. For over five years, we've been creating exceptional content for clients all over the world.

Technology has always been at the heart of our services and therefore at the heart of our growth – giving us a versatile and rapidly-evolving platform on which to found our business. Our strength lies in our creative ideas and the pioneering use of technology behind them. We've built up an expert team that includes 3D modellers, filmmakers, storytellers, illustrators, artists, developers, designers, fabricators and creative technologists who all work closely together to create award-winning work.

For the last half-decade, we've been among the pioneers in the fields of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and 360° video – creating cutting-edge digital experiences for a range of clients, sectors and agencies. Our whole business is shaped around creating the best possible experience for our clients and customers. We enable them to use immersive technology to share their message and achieve their aim – and our approach has seen us nominated for multiple awards and attract long-term local, national and international clients, such as Ericsson, Yamaha, IKEA, the Imperial War Museum, League of Legends, Harrods and Mazda – to name just a few.

Throughout the pandemic, we have guided our clients in the best uses of creative technology to help them reach their audiences and continue to thrive, even in the most challenging of circumstances.



UK Government

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• Any medical need, including to drop items, provide care or help a neighbour.
• Travelling for work purposes.
• All other essential reasons.

Endnotes

- [1] <http://eventindustrynews.com/news/covid-19-business-impact-study-global-perspective#:~:text=As%20a%20service-based%20industry,decrease%20due%20to%20the%20pandemic>
- [2] <https://www.livedesignonline.com/business-people-news/2020-pandemic-impact-covid-19-live-events-industry>
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- [6] <https://www.markletic.com/blog/virtual-event-statistics/>
- [7] <https://www.markletic.com/blog/virtual-event-statistics/>