It was anticipated from many people in our industry over the past several years, and finally it emerged: Media drives most of today’s major new attractions.

While roller coasters and other rides remain mainstays around the world, 4-D theaters over the past five years have led the charge in these types of high-tech attractions. This trend opened the doors to a new generation of 4-D dark rides, dome attractions, and flying theaters. Here is a look at how these variations manifest themselves in our industry.

4-D Theaters
Seminal versions of media-based attractions (MBAs) include numerous Disney shows, such as “Michael Jackson’s Captain EO,” “Jim Henson’s Muppet Vision 3-D,” or, what I consider the first genuine 4-D attraction: “Honey, I Shrunk the Audience” (first introduced at Epcot in Orlando in 1994). This launched the global phenomenon of 4-D theaters, which are popular in a variety of entertainment and educational venues. 4-D attractions combine 3-D film or video presentations with special effects and animated seats, immersing the audience in the experience. These were a natural next step from 3-D film exhibitions, which in the mid-1990s were not yet widespread in multiplex theaters as they are today (for more on the effect mainstream 3-D is having on the attractions industry, see this month’s cover story on p. 24).

Flying Theaters
The flying-theater concept simulates a gliding/soaring flight and was first introduced at Disney California Adventure in 2001 and is the newest MBA success story. “Soarin’ California” takes 87 guests at a time on a simulated hang-glider tour of California. The vehicle consists of three rows of seats under a wing-like canopy. After guests have been safely restrained, the canopy descends and a cantilever system lifts the chairs forward and into the air with the guests’ feet dangling free. The vehicle is lifted forward so that guests look into a large, concave movie screen onto which the film is projected. Since the vehicle is moved forward into the dome, the effect is such that guests can only see the images projected on the screen and are given the sensation of flight; the experience is completed with blasts of air and scents to accompany the onscreen visuals.

Successors to “Soarin’” are in development in the Middle East, Asia, and Canada. Right now as many as five companies claim to have ride systems that provide similar experiences.

4-D Dark Rides
The combination of 3-D film, special effects, and a transportation system to drive past elaborate physical sets and film projections adds up to a 4-D dark ride. Outstanding examples include “The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man,” at Universal Studios parks in Orlando and Japan, and “The Curse of DarKastle” at Busch Gardens Williamsburg in Virginia. The main transportation systems found in the genre are track based, providing maximum versatility in speed and motion design to boost the experience’s dramaticity. In midway attractions, we also find many trackless systems that are wire guided. While these systems are much easier to integrate, the slower speed does not offer the same flexibility as track-based systems. Boat rides are also used occasionally as transport systems.

Dome Attractions
Planetariums have been out in the market for decades, and the big central universe projector is still a main centerpiece at many of these facilities worldwide. However, more advanced digital projection systems now enable dome attractions to capture the entertainment field at rapid speed. Multiple projectors with intelligent software and auto-aligning cameras allow resolutions above 4, 6, or 8K and a seamless projection for a full dome in 2-D and 3-D stereoscopic. The
“Dragon’s Treasure” show in the City of Dreams in Macau was honored with a Thea Award for outstanding achievement as best attraction globally. The success that now draws millions of Chinese guests into this casino directs a lot of Asian developers to create similar projects for their shopping mall or theme park projects.

In addition to the main projection and sound system, many kinds of special effects can be found at such attractions. These range anywhere from flying objects to water cascades; everything is possible to create the unusual.

**Hybrids**

Though the four above designs are the main media-based attractions in the industry, you can also find several less widespread hybrids. Examples include: Madame Tussauds London, which combines a 4-D theater with a dome; Universal’s “The Simpsons Ride,” which mixes a motion simulator with a partial dome; and at last year’s World Expo an interesting combination at the Shanghai corporate pavilion that used a full dome and a 360-degree motion platform that moves back and forth on a track.

**Content**

MBAs rely on a ride or theater setting combined with a cinematic presentation. These attractions are highly versatile because of the cinematic element: the media content can address any kind of topic and provoke a range of emotions for the visitors. Best of all, it can be exchanged without rebuilding the full attraction. While thus far only 4-D theaters had the opportunity to license a wide variety of films, now the first library of flying theater films is already available in the market. 4-D dark rides, which are mainly combined with a comprehensive theme, still do not have a library supplier, so mostly expensive custom productions are being made in these formats. For dome attractions, several developments are slowly entering the pipeline to deliver full dome films in 2-D. Some 3-D stereoscopic are also in development.

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