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How they did it: Cars Land's virtual reality

By **IAN HAMILTON** | Orange County Register
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Almost 60 miles from Disneyland in Anaheim, I'm standing in the middle of Cars Land.

In front of me, blue skies and wispy white clouds float behind the vaguely automobile-inspired mountains of Radiator Springs, the town from Pixar's "Cars" film. I can't see them, but off in the distance to the right somewhere, there's Mickey's Fun Wheel and to the left the Tower of Terror. They are there, but all I can see from where I'm standing is this view of a quiet old town along Route 66.

[Click here to see cool behind the scenes photos of Cars Land's virtual reality](#)

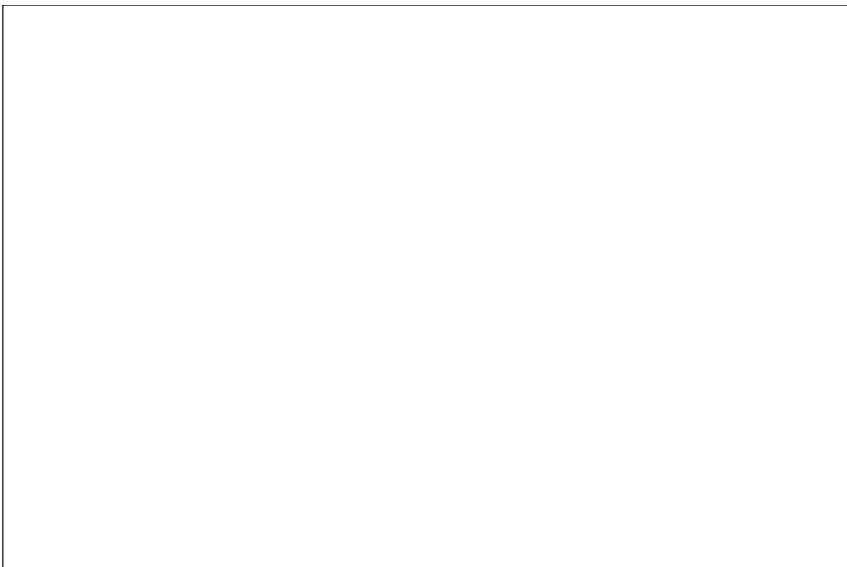
This high-tech virtual reality room at Walt Disney's Imagineering Concept Lab in Glendale allows the magic-makers to immerse themselves completely in the Disney parks, to walk through lands that haven't been built yet and ride attractions still in development. It's called the Digital Immersive Showroom, or DISH, and it could represent the future of Disney's park development as well as entertainment.

"(DISH) is a way for us to allow our designers to experience the attraction from the perspective of the guests early in the design process," said Mark Mine, an Imagineer and director of technology concept design for Disney.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Four projectors beam live-generated views from five computers to paint a 3-D picture of California Adventure's new Cars Land onto the three, 13-foot-tall white walls of the room as well as the floor.





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Typically a Disney Imagineer, but me in this case, dons a pair of 3-D glasses and a black derby hat with a feather on the side and eight small red LED lights glued all over the top. The feather is for style, but the lights are picked up by cameras at the top of the walls telling the system the wearer's orientation and location in the room. With that information, the system generates a view of the land to match the perspective.

Walk a few feet forward, left or right and the system continually adjusts the view accordingly. Approach a physical wall and a grid – vaguely reminiscent of Star Trek's holodeck – is generated, letting me know I'm about to hit something real. Approach a virtual object, though, like a gas station, and everything in my body tells me to avoid bumping into the virtual pumps even if I know they are not actually there.

"You're not scared of heights, are you?" asks Mine.

I tell him no, and he has me whisked to a view of the land no guest will ever actually see, floating in the air near those mountains. Here I can see other landmarks of the park in the distance I couldn't see when I was on the ground – the hotel, Ferris wheel and Grizzly Peak.

"A lot of it is about visual intrusion – so making sure we minimize as much as possible how much you can see things that don't fit into the world of 'Cars,'" said Mine.

This two-year-old room is being used in the planning of major attractions around the world and allows Imagineers to test out a ride long before it is a reality.

A second demo in this room places six people in chairs in the middle, the derby hat situated in the center to provide a common perspective, and together we ride a mockup of the land's marquee attraction – Radiator Springs Racers. No Fastpass needed for this run-through, though the real ride will offer one.

In this seated position, my entire field of vision is the ride. I'm sitting in a chair in the middle of a relatively large room, but inches from my left arm it looks like there's the door to my car. The model isn't detailed – the textures are plain, the colors unrealistic, and the sounds just a scratch track, but the ride still blurs by as I cock my head to all sides taking in the sights as if I was really on the ride.

Could this kind of experience one day become a ride in and of itself?

"These are just working models, but you could build some very compelling experiences for people in a space like this," Mine said, though he added that this particular implementation would be limited in the number of people who could go on it. "We are definitely thinking along these lines."

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