

# DIGITALSPORT

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## VIRTUAL REALITY AND SPORTS FANS



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# INTRODUCTION

## ENGAGING A GLOBAL FAN BASE THROUGH DIGITAL

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Digital technology is developing at an incredible rate and its impact on sports fans over the last decade has been nothing short of spectacular. A world away from the days of fanzines and matchday programmes of old, digital platforms and social media have engaged a global fan base around sports clubs and players.

Teams and leagues require an increasingly engaging and complex strategy to satisfy their fans around the world, who demand a deeper, more immersive experience. Social media platforms count among their daily users a mind boggling number of sport-based followers from all over the world. Real Madrid, for example, has 106m 'likes' on Facebook and, despite being late to the party, Manchester United has 16.6m followers on their official Twitter channels alone. Many of these fans are following accounts in their native languages, too, as the world's biggest teams have a worldwide presence and accounts which post in several different languages with fans in specific regions in mind.

Digital technologies like Facebook have started to level out for sports clubs and they are actively seeking new ways to engage a global and diverse fanbase of young people. For these global sports brands, a large majority of their fans will never physically make it to the stadium. Instead, they consume content on TV and on second screens through social media, but they are also interested in immersive ways of following their favourite teams and players from afar.

## VIRTUAL REALITY (VR)

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This is where creative immersive and engaging simulated environments is an area where technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) can play a key part.

Jackson (2015) defines VR as "the use of computer technology to create a simulated environment". He also explains that "unlike traditional user interfaces, VR places the user inside an experience, so, instead of viewing a screen in front of them, users are immersed and able to interact with 3D worlds". Put simply, the user should feel they are "immersed" in a new environment created by the technology.

Although VR has reached new levels of technology and impact in recent times, it is hardly a new concept. Even in 1860s there were elements of virtual reality through illusion on stage, but the phrase was first coined officially in 1935 with a short story entitled "Pygmalion's Spectacles".

So although it is nothing new, we still have the same - or similar - ideas on what it should look like. In effect, this shows that it's not so much the idea, but the technology that's been preventing VR from penetrating everyday life in the way that other media has done.

# INTRODUCTION

## VR IN SPORTS

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Even so, VR has already been used by sports clubs to help with their training routines and a whole host of ways to improve their competitive advantage. The topic of this paper however is to evaluate the use of VR for fan engagement. This includes the broadcast of matches and the creation of individual virtual experiences of sports.

Mangos (2017), states that a “fan’s engagement options with sports may be changing, and young people may need to find alternative routes into bonding with their chosen teams”. He also discusses the power of digital technology, which “never stands still, and clubs and organisations need to keep pace if they are to match their fans’ constantly shifting expectations”. Across all sports, fans choose their favourite clubs at a young age and often stick with them for the rest of their lives. This is why clubs are so interested in using digital technology to create engaging and impressive experiences to form connections with young fans of all genders and cultures from around the world.

At the University of Salford, we are exploring how to create an immersive matchday experience for sports fans to present a potential solution through a short demonstration and a tablet app prototype to enhance the experience. The development, implementation and testing of the above is based on the fan experience, which is further discussed in this paper. We also evaluate some examples and some of the key articles associated with this exciting area.



# FAN ENGAGEMENT

The sports industry has continued to grow around the world thanks to the unmatched levels of engagement by what is essentially sport's primary asset: its fans.

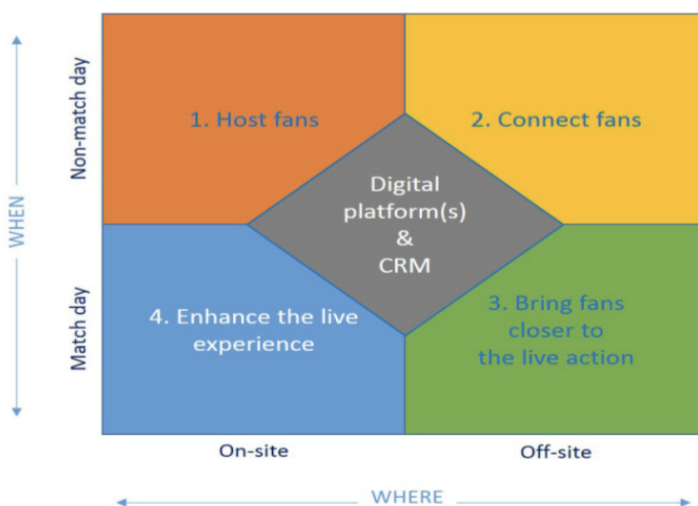
An engaged fan is key to the digital success of their preferred team. They are advocates, creating interest in this club from the people that they are connected to including their peer group and social media following. Their engagement is also a metric used by potential sponsors who use it to evaluate the benefit of partnering with the club. Establishing and maintaining these passionate fanbases is critical for clubs whose existence and growth depends on it.

To that end, Stander (2016) argues that "sport fan engagement has been established as a critical contributor to commercial success and development of sport and specific sport clubs". While this is true, less is known about the understanding of the fan engagement experience through emerging digital technologies.

According to Fowler et al (2016), sports clubs "recognise that fan engagement must play a central role in their overall growth strategy" and this also "represents an opportunity to collect data that can drive further value to the club".

## HOW CAN CLUBS INCREASE THEIR FAN ENGAGEMENT?

Fowler et al (2016) found that clubs have struggled to understand how to improve the matchday experience for fans and engage with them offsite. They presented four key strategies shown below for keeping their fans engaged with the club. The authors placed "digital platforms and CRM (customer relationship management)" at the centre of their solution. This is the most important part, which keeps all the strategies connected, and it is implicitly accessible from each of the four areas. Therefore, technology may be the solution to managing the relationship with fans at a distance. VR offers a digital platform which can bring fans closer to the live action, connect fans and even enhance the live experience.



# FAN ENGAGEMENT

So how do sport clubs today work with technology to keep their fans continuously engaged? Hart (2017) states “the sports industry experience is inextricable from digital innovation as clubs and teams invest in new and exciting ways for fans to engage anytime, anywhere. From pocket betting to batting stats, live streams to live tracking, fans can get closer to the action than ever before”. Hart (2017) gives the NFL as an example of improved fan engagement, as “they have perfected the ‘connected stadium’, with larger venues now offering 700-plus wireless access points so fans can access social media, complete food-and-drink orders and engage with adverts”. The NFL has been using VR for training, but then in December 2017, the Vikings became the first club to launch a VR app for the popular VR platform Oculus Rift.

At present, clubs can’t reach the majority of their fans by creating VR content, but as the technology becomes more widespread, the ways in which they can engage their fans will increase. Indeed, clubs creating VR content now may have greater experience in understanding which types of content work best on the medium, and ensuring that they are relevant on the platform as it grows in popularity is of great importance.

## DO FANS EMBRACE THE IDEA OF TECHNOLOGY/VR IN FOOTBALL?

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Collins (2017) invites us to just think of the connection we have with our favourite team, or the emotive memories of playing with friends and teammates. And states that, “when you combine this with an immersive VR experience, it translates powerfully”. As reported by Abboud (2016), “millennials in the US and UK aren’t watching as much sport as their predecessors and with an unprecedented cornucopia of entertainment options at their fingertips, many younger consumers aren’t finding live sport as exciting as their older counterparts”.

But technology is one of the important entertainment options for fans of all ages, and as Collins (2017) mentions in his article, “social continues to help blend these worlds, and people follow their chosen club on mobile, providing a portal to an often seemingly exclusive world”. He gives a general example: any Premier League football club’s Twitter, and discusses that “Q&As, consistent streams of high-quality video and artistically-designed images feature are all designed to create strong engagement with followers”.

Beyond clubs themselves, the unprecedented rise of ‘culture and lifestyle’ content based around sport shows that live action isn’t the only part that matters. Football’s fan channels, the increasing popularity of podcasts, and the social media personalities of the world’s biggest athletes all play into the idea of sport as entertainment with clubs increasingly at the forefront.

# FAN ENGAGEMENT



## HOW HAS VR BEEN PREVIOUSLY USED IN SPORTS?

From enhancing training routines, to gaming or simply watching live, there are examples of VR applications in sport.

Jaunt VR recently showcased The VR 360 experience with Manchester City Football Club, which included “exclusive access to the players’ changing room and a first-hand look at the players arriving on the famous Blue Carpet,” presenting the viewer with a unique experience of the club, Match Day (2017). And as reported by Collins (2017), “the video had over 1 million views in the first few days after release.” Very high engagement, then, with thousands of comments and shares on social channels. Sky Sports have also developed a VR app in which they have captured the highlights of Chelsea’s 4-0 win over Manchester United in October 2016 whilst BT Sport broadcasted the Champions League Final match on 360-degree VR earlier this year. (Butler, 2017)

Another side to VR’s use for fans is the John Terry Academy app – “the world’s first virtual reality football academy”. As advertised on its’ official website, johnterryacademy.com (2017), the app features “immersive and digital experiences designed exclusively to educate and entertain from beginner to advanced (professional) levels.” This is still fan engagement, but it taps into the idea of training as well, and so could be classed as a hybrid between the two.

# FAN ENGAGEMENT

The concept is that fans get unprecedented access to virtual tuition in football, fitness, and nutrition; exclusive interviews, and personal highlights of John's accomplished career from his treasured trophy room.

Similarly, Floyd Mayweather has released a "Boxing + Fitness" VR extension to his gym franchise, allowing users to train with the former World Champion and even step into the ring with him in VR.

<https://www.mayweather.fit/vr.html>

Other applications have more to do with providing a new angle on the action. Dutch company Beyond Sports "gathers player data from football matches in order to create 3D simulations of the game," allowing users, "to explore the game from anywhere in the stadium." Rather than aim at fans, however, players and managers can use it to "replay and analyse the game from different perspectives." (Dickson, 2016)

Another interesting example is the FascinatE project, which developed "a system to allow end-users to interactively view and navigate around an ultra-high resolution video panorama showing a live event, with the accompanying audio automatically changing to match the selected view". This enables an experience through a headset or a tablet ([fascinate-project.eu](http://fascinate-project.eu), 2017)

## WHY IS VR NOT FULLY ADOPTED IN SPORTS ALREADY?

Dickson (2016) mentions how "one of the strongest arguments against the use of VR in consuming sports content is the fact that it takes away the social experience".

Virtuallylive.com (2017) have come up with a potential solution to this, by implementing a technology similar to that of Beyond Sports. As described on their website, "the use of a headset displays a virtual reconstruction of the stadium and players in near-real time, and fans are invited to step in and view the environment from any viewpoint they want". They make the experience more social by implementing a technology where "fans appear as avatars and can interact with each other through VoIP. The firm wishes to thus make it more compelling for people to get together and watch games in VR".

The applications mentioned above imply the use of a headset, but fans might prefer to not have to have to resort to this option, simply because changing the view mode might be complicated (for example for young kids or the elder) or because they would not be able to socialise in the usual way whilst wearing the headset.

# FAN ENGAGEMENT

Grubb (2016), who has watched an American football match using the Fox Sports VR app, has described it as “a miserable experience” on one of his blog posts, because “it was hard to keep the headset steady to prevent the image from shaking” and “switching between the five cameras also required a few seconds of loading – every second is precious when you are watching something live and fast paced like football”. Building a “Virtual Stadium”, would not require the use of a headset and the fans would be able to enjoy the social aspect of going to a football match by interacting with the people around and still getting the feeling that they are at their teams’ stadium.

There are also technical limitations with headsets and sheer size of the data and processing power to create an accurate virtual re-creation of the speed and buzz of sports, especially live. If the VR experience is slightly off, it can cause the end user to feel disoriented, sick or disillusioned. But technology is improving all of the time.

Facebook have acquired VR system Oculus Rift and this gives an indication as to the potential direction of the sector. Social media platforms have also expressed great interest in sports content and video because of the sheer volume of interest it generates. We are just starting to see successful VR in sport, but the technology and appetite for immersive and social experiences continues to grow. Marrying the two will be important.





# CONCLUSION

VR is not a new technology, but it has improved in recent times to show some exciting new applications to engage sports fans worldwide. We have looked at some examples of applications which bring football fans closer to the action or simply for gaming. With new platforms and applications emerging, the social and technological barriers for VR adoption are beginning to break down. This opens up incredible opportunities for sports clubs to engage with fans around the world and even to create social VR experiences many miles from the stadiums.

VR will continue to recreate the atmosphere and excitement of sports and will open new markets and ideas in the future.

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