

## Mixed Reality at Mega Events: Bringing the Games to You?

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**Mega events are experienced by an increasing number of spectators outside of official venues through the medium of public viewing areas, Live Sites or Fan Parks (Frew and McGillivray, 2008). For event owners and host cities alike, these ancillary events (Chalip, 2006) have been popularized since the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games where they were a crucial part of delivering a widespread cultural legacy for the Games.**

As well, the 2004 football UEFA European Championships in Portugal organized their first fan zones, where traveling ticketless football fans could congregate and sample the atmosphere of the tournament without actually attending matches. This pilot was extended during the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany where over 13million visitors were attracted to Fan Parks across 10 host cities from Munich to Berlin (Frew and McGillivray, 2008).



Live Site Beijing 2008 Olympic Games

As London 2012 prepares its public viewing spectacle, what can be learned from how such spaces have been curated and delivered by organizers?

Mega event hosts have also made significant improvements to stadium media technology to ensure that spectators enjoy greater immersion in the event experience, but the limited number of available tickets limits what organizers can do to engage a wider public. As such, public viewing areas are increasingly attractive to organisers because they provide a means to interact with the host population and the opportunity to produce co-created experiences for event hosts, sponsors and spectators alike. These micro-festivals have proved extremely popular over

the years, with every major event now hosting parallel fan experience activities alongside their core programme delivery.

The Olympic Games has embraced the concept of Live Sites and Celebration Zones over the last two decades and advice on the provision of dedicated spaces for spectator celebration is now enshrined within the Technical Manual for Ceremonies which is part of the Host City Contract (IOC, 2005). Live Sites and Celebration Zones are viewed as a fertile way to bring the Olympic Games closer to the host population alongside the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and the Torch Relay, 'to provide a forum for people to come together in peace to celebrate the excitement of the Host City' (IOC, 2005: 86).

The London 2012 Games is the first Olympics to develop permanent Live Sites as part of a wider commitment to public space broadcasting, achieved through its network of 22 venues spread across UK towns and cities. Since 2005, large screens have been erected throughout the UK, run in partnership between the London 2012 Organising Committee, the BBC and local authorities and in association with British Telecom and Lloyds TSB. Funding comes from the National Lottery through the Olympic Lottery Distributor. Featured national and local content is generated in partnerships with local

authorities, media and cultural organisations.

Supplementing the permanent Live Sites are a number of temporary venues created specifically for Games-time activity (e.g. Weymouth Live Site, where the Olympic sailing events will be held). These temporary Live Sites are designed to animate public spaces in and around London and other official Olympic venues, providing the opportunity for mass celebrations connecting the Games with an audience unable to sample official venues. The third London 2012 event type is the Community Live Site, designed to promote locally relevant celebrations throughout the UK.

The three-tier model of Olympic Live Sites draws on the experiences of the football World Cup where the 'official' Fan Parks were the outlet for FIFA-endorsed content and rights-owning media activity. The community Fan Parks in South Africa 2010 were much more local, populated almost entirely with local people and receiving very little mainstream media attention.

Moving from the descriptive to the analytical, it is necessary to look beyond what Live Sites are, to what organizers intend for them to achieve. Live Sites are not merely open, accessible and governance-free celebration zones in the eyes of Olympic organisers. Recent research from

SPEAR (2010) suggests that Live Sites can produce a series of planned externalities (or 'legacies'), including community outcomes associated with public health, social cohesion and community self-esteem. These anticipated outcomes are based on the premise that Live Sites can bring 'places to people' (SPEAR, 2010: 4), helping to create different types of social experience for a range of community members.

These ambitions stem from a belief that Live Sites encourage spectators to move from a passive to an active role, becoming immersed in the event through participation in the multitude of sporting and cultural activities offered in these dedicated spaces. Moreover, as they involve partners from LOCOG, local authorities and their cultural providers, these events are also perceived to represent authentic encounters with the spirit of the Games stressing community involvement and the production and distribution of meaningful local cultural offerings.

However, although Live Sites have avoided the charges of exclusivity (and exclusion) made against ticketed Olympic events, they continue to be tied to a corporate discourse. In much the same way that FIFA World Cup sponsors use Fan Parks to activate their brand messages to a captive audience, Olympic brands also view Live Sites favourably as a means of securing

greater reach and positive exposure. For example, Lloyds TSB, an official London 2012 sponsor, has been extremely successful at exploiting the themes of locality and community to raise awareness of its Olympic sponsorship and to secure positive exposure for the company at time when banks are facing unheralded public condemnation.

Lloyds TSB's slogan, 'bringing the Games closer to you' emphasizes its community focus, providing an antidote to the perceived excesses of global financial institutions. Lloyds TSB has chosen to partner with Live Sites and exploit social media effectively to create widespread awareness of the company as an Olympic sponsor. Whilst purporting to extend citizen engagement, interaction and ownership and contribute to greater civic involvement in the Olympic Games, Live Sites continue to be framed by the language of commerce.

Both permanent and temporary sites are bound by agreements signed with LOCOG, under which they are expected to be dressed appropriately with Olympic branding and be available for exclusive use by sponsors for the purposes of greater activation of their messages. Even Community Live Sites have to adhere to quite stringent LOCOG guidelines in order to be registered.

If these spaces become overly-determined by the corporate imperatives driving the Olympic juggernaut, then opportunity presented for creative engagement with the Games themselves will be jeopardized. Indeed, there is already substantial disquiet over the way that Olympic sponsors contractually restrict cities to ensure a blank canvas to work with at Games time, where existing advertising space must be removed to permit a takeover of the host city's urban space.

Live Site organisers are already required to accept that sponsors have exclusive branding rights of these spaces and local authorities have a responsibility to prevent ambush marketing from taking place. While towns and cities are needed to resource Live Site management and content generation (also subject to LOCOG restrictions), they must also agree to extensive concessions in how they use public space when the Olympic narrative takes over.

Taking on the requirements of LOCOG and its commercial partners, while also having to resource the Live Sites and manage the expectations of the local population, leaves officials in an almost impossible political position. Yet, this scenario is an inevitable outcome of the global event policy environment within which mega events are bid for and successfully won. To deliver a successful Olympic Games the

generation of commercial return is imperative. Incentivising commercial return requires the protection of sponsor investments and careful brand management (Rein and Shields, 2007).

As such, it is little surprise that there exists a tension between the need for greater citizen engagement and participation in aspects of the Olympic Games and the commercial imperative to ease the means of consumption (Ritzer, 2005) at each and every opportunity. Live Sites provide an opportunity for local cultural producers and other content generators to populate public space broadcast with creative and, hopefully, critical commentary related to local concerns as well as interpreting the Olympic story from a diversity of viewpoints.

However, as I have argued elsewhere (Foley, McGillivray and McPherson, 2011), the use of events (including Live Sites) as a key tract of populating the consuming city (Miles and Miles, 2004) often creates exclusionary processes. Instead of opening up the city and its civic spaces to a wider section of the population (as Live Sites are intended to do), corporate culture can colonize, mark space and define who belongs and who does not.

Moreover, while the integration of new media and social media into these Live Sites to create interactive experiences may enthuse citizen journalists who

wish to recover authorship of their Games experience, it may also be used as a device to placate such citizens and avoid their being disruptive by other means. This is why greater technological immersion in Live Sites may limit the revolutionary potential of social media.

Olympic organisers argue that Live Sites and Celebration Zones provide an antidote to the privatisation of space. However, to fulfil this promise, local creative and cultural content must find a space on the programming and, crucially, be able to present critical interpretations of the Olympic Games relevant to local circumstances. Only then will the Games be brought closer to their principal beneficiaries.

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