

# WHAT THE HECK IS MIXED REALITY?

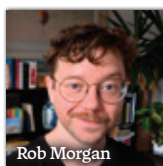
A New Way To Wow Your Guests

By Brandon Willey

**B**owling centers and FECs are built on the promise of social fun and shared memories, but as guest expectations evolve, savvy operators are asking what's next. Increasingly, the answer may be found in Mixed Reality (MR), an emerging technology that is reshaping how people experience physical spaces.

Mixed Reality might sound high-tech, but at its core, it's simple: it's real life with digital extras layered on top. Instead of putting guests in Virtual Reality (VR) headsets that pull them out of the action, MR keeps people together in your center while adding special effects that make the experience more fun and shareable. Imagine birthday rooms that instantly transform into a jungle or space adventure, or lanes that erupt in fireworks when someone rolls a strike. For operators, it means you can refresh your space without tearing down walls or starting a remodel.

To better understand what's coming, I sat down with Rob Morgan, author of *Storytelling for Spatial Computing & Mixed Reality: The Art of Augmenting Imagination*. He explains that MR is poised to transform entire venues not by pulling guests into digital worlds, but by *bringing digital layers* into the real one.



## MIXED REALITY EXAMPLES

One familiar example of MR is lane projection effects, such as Brunswick's Spark, which enhance the game without altering its

fundamentals. Beyond lane effects, personalized touches can make play feel like a show; for instance, players choosing their own entrance music or triggering lighting effects when it's their turn to bowl.

Another example of MR comes from Verse Immersive, which can turn unused corners of a venue into short, interactive adventures. It can also transform party rooms into magical playgrounds with interactive walls and floors. Verse Immersive is a holographic theater where guests wear augmented reality (AR) glasses that layer digital characters and effects into the real room around them. Instead of just watching, guests move, talk, and interact with the story. It's like stepping into a 20- to 30-minute live video game or mini-play. Even better, it doesn't require much space, making it easy for centers to repurpose unused areas.

## VR VERSUS MR: THE DIFFERENCE

So how is Mixed Reality different than Virtual Reality? The key difference comes down to connection. Instead of isolating players in virtual spaces, MR enhances the physical environment, keeping people together in the same real-world venue. Morgan continues, "Virtual Reality blocks out the real world around the guest and places him or her into a virtual world. By contrast, Mixed Reality is integrated into the real world and places digital graphics into real spaces, anchored to real surfaces and able to respond to real actions taken by the user."

# Competitive Strategies

## THE TIME IS NOW

Mixed Reality is arriving at the perfect moment. Younger generations aren't looking for the same bowling experience of yesteryear. As Morgan explains, they crave interactive, share-ready, game-like environments that merge the physical and digital. They want activities they can enjoy in real time, and just as importantly, moments they can post [on social media] and relive later.

This desire for shared experiences and real-world interaction plays directly to bowling's strengths. MR doesn't pull players into isolated digital spaces; it enriches the social experience of bowling, making it more immersive and infinitely more shareable.

## WHY IT MATTERS

For guests, MR makes the familiar magical. An ordinary game can become an alien planet filled with erupting volcanoes or a celebration where players are showered in digital confetti after a strike. It's intuitive, inclusive, and instantly rewarding—easy for first-timers to pick up while still exciting for seasoned players. And because MR visuals can be swapped out at will, centers can rotate seasonal themes or license popular brands to keep the experience fresh.

For operators, MR is a strategic advantage that goes beyond novelty. It helps centers stand out from local competition while generating new revenue from families, birthday parties, and corporate events. It encourages guests to arrive earlier, stay longer, and come back more often. Most importantly, it allows operators to add new layers of experience without major construction, turning the venue into a flexible storytelling canvas.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Currently, most MR experiences run on lightweight headsets such as the Meta Quest 3S, which tech outlet UploadVR reported as the best-selling game console of 2024. These devices are fueling new entertainment concepts, such as the world's first downloadable theme park, Dream Park, which has recently attracted a million-dollar seed investment to create hybrid physical-digital spaces where players physically interact with environments while navigating Super Mario-like worlds.



## MAKING SENSE OF MIXED REALITY

**Virtual Reality (VR):** Guests wear headsets and are transported into a fully digital world, separate from their surroundings.

**Mixed Reality (MR):** Digital effects are layered onto the real environment—walls, lanes, tables, or party rooms—so guests stay together in your center while the space around them comes to life.

### What it looks like:

- Party rooms where walls transform into a jungle or outer space, or lanes that burst into fireworks when someone rolls a strike.

### Why it matters for guests:

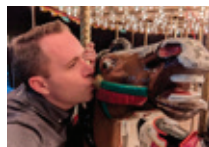
- Celebrations become unforgettable, game-like experiences that are fun for kids, easy for first-timers, and exciting for regulars.

### Why it matters for operators:

- No costly remodels required; you can refresh your center with digital themes, seasonal overlays, or sponsor tie-ins that keep guests coming back.

Morgan notes that, "Today, these headsets are still relatively bulky. Looking to the future, Meta, Google, Snapchat, and Apple have all announced they are working on smaller, fully see-through mixed reality form factors which resemble ordinary glasses." The time is soon approaching when the social experience of bowling and other family entertainment attractions can be enhanced with spectacular digital graphics and dynamic heads-up displays, either using headset technology kept on-site or via consumers' own personal devices.

Mixed Reality isn't about replacing what makes bowling great; it's about enhancing it. Whether on the lanes or in another corner of your building, MR keeps guests immersed in the real, social world of your venue while delivering the digital spectacle they increasingly expect. For operators, it's a creative canvas that can bring experiences to life, spark social buzz, and position your center as the go-to destination for the next generation of guests. ●



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