

Virtual reality experience could be a game changer for football fans with dementia

Virtual reality technology that helps football fans living with dementia rekindle big match memories was unveiled today at Hampden Park this week.

VR headsets that transport supporters back to Scotland's national stadium in the 1960s were launched at an event attended by Mark Hateley – both ex-professional footballer and Alzheimer Scotland ambassador.

He was shown how the 3-D immersive experience can help recreate the sights, sounds and atmosphere of past historic encounters.

The technology brings to life three key elements of bygone match days – travelling to the game, clicking through the turnstiles and cheering from Hampden's vast terraces.

The VR project – the first of its kind in the UK – aims to offer therapeutic taster experiences and builds on a partnership begun by the charity Alzheimer Scotland and the Hampden- based Scottish Football Museum in 2009.



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Pic caption: Robert Craig, Chair of the Scottish Football Museum, Mark Hateley – both ex-professional footballer and Alzheimer Scotland ambassador and Henry Simmons, Alzheimer Scotland's Chief Executive at the unveiling today at Hampden Park.

Pic Neil Hanna
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Their joint Football Memories Scotland initiative uses old photographs, film and memorabilia to trigger a refresh of moments that were once vivid in people's minds.

Fans from Football Memories Scotland groups have played a key role in shaping the themes and content of the new immersive experience.

VR content, using archive material, has been co-created by people living with dementia, researchers at Abertay University and designers from Dundee-based video game developer crab.Bit.

This initiative has been backed by the Digital Health and Care Innovation Centre, which supports transformational collaboration between universities and businesses.

Scottish Government funding has also enabled Alzheimer Scotland to purchase a Meta Quest 2 virtual reality headset for each of its 26 Dementia Resource Centres.

The charity has trained 35 of its staff to become digital champions, who can offer VR experiences to local community groups.

Feedback from groups who have trialled the headsets revealed that all who took part reported an improvement in mood and 75 per cent experienced a reduction in anxiety.

Henry Simmons, Alzheimer Scotland's Chief Executive said: "We know the tremendous impact that therapeutic activity like reminiscence can have on people living with dementia.

We are thrilled to develop our much-valued partnership with The Scottish Football Museum with the launch of this VR experience. As always, people with their own experiences of dementia were central to the project development and we are so grateful to everyone who made such valuable contributions.

We hope this experience brings many moments of pleasure and enjoyment to everyone who uses it."

Patricia Clark, 73, from Glasgow, lives with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease and is a member of the Football Memories Scotland group.

She said: "As soon as I put on the headset it took me right back to when I was seven years old, when my brother John took

me to my first football match at Celtic park. I could see all the men wearing their caps and could even smell their cigarette smoke. It was amazing. It brought back so many memories that had been buried. Now I've got them back again, it's wonderful.

"It's sparked so many conversations among the people who've tried it, and brought back things that people haven't thought of for a long time. It's even given my family a boost because they were delighted I could remember these things. It gives me a wonderful pride in Glasgow to think of all the people who are going to experience this and benefit so much from it."

Robert Craig, Chair of the Scottish Football Museum said: "The Scottish Football Museum is the HQ for the Football Memories Scotland project, a longstanding and successful partnership with Alzheimer Scotland that has seen us grow our football memory groups to over 500 nationally.

The launch of this unique and exciting VR experience is a wonderful milestone for us all, and we are delighted to welcome many of our reminiscence group members and community members to the museum to try it in the near future."

Dr William Kavanagh a lecturer in Abertay University's School of Design and Informatics said: "Immersive experiences like virtual reality can be a hugely powerful tool for enjoyment, education and healthcare purposes and we're proud to be bringing our academic expertise to such an impactful and worthwhile project.

"Recreating the sights and sounds of such an iconic stadium was an excellent challenge for our graduates and gave them valuable experience of working with a nationally important client on a real-world industry brief with potential to benefit people living with dementia, while also raising awareness of a significant issue. We now intend to use this experience to better understand the impact VR reminiscence can

have when used in similar situations.”