

Virtual reality 14835

Technology



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Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality is considered one of the most exciting technologies today, constantly evolving and improving. According to Eric Drexler, a world known pioneer in this field, VR is " A combination of computer and

interface devices (goggles, gloves, etc.) that present a user with the illusion of being in a three dimensional world of computer generated objects." The term ^virtual reality,^ is not finite in its meaning, but generally includes desktop VR, immersion VR, where the goggles and gloves are used, and projection VR.

The virtual reality technology is not yet perfect and still too expensive for the common man. The use of high-end VR is mainly restricted to larger companies, and to special areas such as medical surgery and pilot training. Home users are limited to desktop virtual reality programs, which lets them navigate in three-dimensional worlds,

but seldom gives the feeling of actually being there. The entertainment industry has yet to embrace the technology in full scale, but in his book ^Virtual Reality^ Howard Rheingold states ^Used today in architecture, engineering and design, tomorrow in mass-market entertainment, surrogate travel, virtual surgery and cybersex, by the next century ^VR^ will have transformed our lives.^

Will VR cause people to lose their grip on the real world, or is it

just a continuation of previous developments that took people to

imaginary places?

People seem to always have escaped to ^imaginary worlds^, to get a way

from the stress of real life and to relax. We have all experienced

Greek theatre, read novels and been to the cinema, and lived ourselves

into fiction stories that we identify with. Our imagination creates a

fiction world, which leads us away from real life for a moment of time.

In our own utopia, we forget contemporary problems of reality.

Even though the virtual reality technology creates a utopia for us to

explore, it is in a lot of ways different from other developments we

know so well today. June Deery, from the Rensselaer Polytechnic

Institute in Troy says ^whereas in fiction we imagine and empathize, in

cyberspace we are supposed to ^actually^ step into the other world.^

This means that the other world is not created in our minds, but is

already there. We have to move in that world and take part in it, not

only with our mind, but by using our senses, such as seeing, hearing

and touching. These are our navigation tools. This world is imaginary

in the way that it is not of something real, but a result of the

programmer of that world's imagination. It is ^virtual.^

In previous developments, such as theatre, novels and cinema we passively follow a linear storyline, with a start and an end. The author of it predetermines all the happenings in a particular story. We have no participation in the play, but identify with it and our imagination creates a generic feeling that we are a part of the story.

In virtual reality however, we do participate actively in a non-linear story, we are a part of the plot. How the story evolves, depends on what we do, and when we do it. What we get to see of the story, depends on where in the virtual world we are. We are able to see, hear and touch the elements in the story and interact with them. We have become one of the actors, with the freedom to rewrite the play along the way!

Human beings are social creatures that like to communicate. ^Because computers make networks, VR seems a natural candidate for a new communications medium^ (Heim, Michael 1993). Just as the Internet has become our time^s biggest communication network, virtual reality could have a great impact on how we share information. Imagine a meeting with

people from all parts of the world in a virtual room, or playing cricket with people from Pakistan.

As mentioned above, we identify with stories, and also the characters within them. We often think ^if I were him,^ or ^if I looked like that,^ then ^I would.^ We imagine and wish for a moment that we were something else or lived another life. In time, as virtual reality improves, maybe we will get the chance to do just that by strapping on a set of goggles and a sensory suit. Using this technology we could be able to choose a desired identity and act it out as our imagination wants us to. But what if that virtual world is better than the real world?

John Suler, with a PhD in psychology, at Department of Psychology at Ryder University states in the website ^ Computer and Cyberspace Addiction^ that ^People become "addicted" to the Internet, or act out pathologically in cyberspace, when they have dissociated it from their f2f life. Their cyberspace activity becomes a world unto itself. They don't talk about it with the people in their f2f life. It becomes a

walled-off substitute or escape from their life.^

It seems like the virtual reality technology is inevitable. ^People initially use technology to do what they do now-but faster. Then they gradually begin to use technology to do new things. The new things change life-styles and work ^styles. The new life-styles and work-styles change society^. and eventually technology.^(Fubini^s law)

Before we know it, virtual reality might be as usual in contemporary life, as television has been for decades. We will be presented with a new way to escape from reality, which seems to be ten times as powerful as previous developments. We will open doors to fascinating mazes, that some of us may never come out of. Worlds that we don^t even want to come out of because it appears better than the chaos we daily are surrounded with, the real world. It might even be another addiction. Or as Jerry Garcia put it ^they made LSD illegal. I wonder what they^re going to do with this stuff.^

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