

## **Virtually There – things we need to know to prepare for the VR tidal wave**

### **To Boldly go....**

Star Trek fans will be very aware of the Holodeck - a recreational area on the Enterprise in the Star Trek: The Next Generation form of the series. The Holodeck is a virtual room that transforms spoken commands into realistic landscapes inhabited by walking, talking humanoids and artefacts so real that they are indistinguishable from reality. The Holodeck is used by the crew of the Enterprise to visit remote places and times, such as medieval Europe and 1930s America. It is an area where crew can escape on long interstellar voyages.

For virtual reality fans, and indeed many scientists working in this area, the Enterprise's Holodeck represents something of a Holy Grail.

How far away is the creation of the Holodeck? Is it simply the product of fantastic imagination? Or is it on a par with much the science fiction writing of authors such as Jules Verne - considered fantasy at the time of writing, but a hundred years later considered by many as almost prophetic?

The truth of the matter is that we are many years from a holodeck-like creation, if indeed it will ever be achieved. Nevertheless enormous strides have been made in virtual reality (VR) developments over the last twenty years. The last ten years have especially seen substantial progress as computer processing power and video graphic capabilities have gone through the roof, and the cost of components has fallen. Many of our young people have computers in their homes that far outstrip anything that NASA possessed just ten years ago.

The purpose of this article is to outline some of these recent developments, describe some of the implications for our young people and highlight some strategies that we can use to assist children and young people handle the coming VR scenario.

### **What Is Virtual Reality?**

Broadly speaking there are three major forms of VR around today:

- **Immersive Virtual Reality** - using a head-mounted audio-visual display, sensors to measure a person's movement and orientation, and tactile sensors, such as a dataglove to permit the user to feel objects in the imagined landscape. Recent developments have involved users wearing suits that provide a more complete sensory environment. The purpose of this is to permit the user to eliminate awareness of the real world and to as fully as possible immerse the subject in the created environment. Whilst in the VR landscape the person can take on whatever avatar or personage he or she wishes. If a man wants to be a woman, a woman wants to be man or if they wish to be anything whatsoever, they can be! And within this world, they can do whatever they want - or at least whatever the programmers permit.
- **Desktop Virtual Reality** - this is a simplified version of the immersive VR technology which permits some impression of the three-dimensional manipulation of environments without the immersive technology. It is used extensively by architects engaged, for example in building supermarkets and other large scale projects.
- **CAVE Virtual Reality** - developed by the Electronic Visualisation Lab at the University of Illinois in Chicago, CAVE is an attempt to deliver immersive VR without the suit. The CAVE is a surround-screen, surround-sound system that permits users to experience immersion in a virtual world via the projection of 3D video onto the walls of a 3m cube, made up of display screens. Sophisticated head and hand tracking systems deliver correct stereo perspective. The cube can be used by groups, all of whom wear stereo eyeglasses.

### **MUD, VR and the search for community**

Of course VR has been around for over fifteen years - in its text-based form. Using computer networks that pre-dated the Internet, large numbers of people used text-based systems to create virtual worlds where they could be and do whatever they wanted. Some revolved around games such as the Multi-User Dungeons and Dragons (MUD) games, which were a sort of text only mix of Myst, Doom and Tomb Raider, played over a computer network. Others were not game related.

People formed online communities - MetaWorlds where they could chat, develop relationships and even have sex (at least of a virtual, masturbatory kind). The story of Allison and Janie shows how strong these communities are, and how attached people become to the relationships that are forged there.

### **Allison and Janie [Suggest that this be put in a separate box]**

Mark Slouka in his important book, *War of the Worlds - the assault on reality*, describes an online relationship that a male, Avram had with Janie. Avram was married and had a daughter. Slouka described him as "level, hardworking, ... reassuringly stable.." And yet Avram met Janie daily online, sometimes chatting in the company of other friends, often going into Avram's `room' for more privacy. Avram's `room' was decked out with Turner prints and rustic decor. It was whilst in Avram's room that they regularly had sex online, "...which entailed basically talking each other through masturbation." Avram and Janie had been meeting in this way for two years. As Meg Ryan asks in the recent film, "You have Mail" "Is this being unfaithful?" What further complicates this situation, is that when Avram first went into this online community he chose to take the form of a woman known as Allison. Therefore, Janie and Allison were having a lesbian relationship - unless of course Janie was a man too!

### **The present - games as desktop VR**

The reference to games such as Doom highlights the fact that many computer games aspire to provide the player with desktop VR. Some of these games provide a graphic scenario that is gruesomely realistic as creatures, including people are destroyed in considerable detail. Many games are now playable over a network where the player is competing with other players, not simply the computer. Most of these games involve violence and a growing number have occult story lines.

### **The future - games as immersive VR**

Computer games are big business often involving budgets that run into millions. With the move towards digital media and the blending of television and the

Internet, games companies are often owned by multinational media companies such as Disney, Sony, and Time Warner. The race is on to produce the first immersive VR game, with all the big players experimenting in different ways to deliver immersion.

Whatever technology wins, the objective is clear. Media companies want to sell players fully immersive game environments where the player can be and do whatever she wants.

In the immersive game of the future, the player will be able to take on whatever form whatever avatar - she wishes. She will be able to look around a landscape that she inhabits, look down at her body and see whatever shape she has chosen to be, and move about this landscape in real time. She will be able to pick things up, and talk to other characters that she meets. If it is a combat game, she will be able to kill or maim in the most graphic detail; if it is a relational environment she will be able to chat with others, form relationships and even have sex.

### **The Digital Age**

We have already seen the development of digital television, but this is really only the beginning. As digital technologies converge the boundaries between television and the Internet will disappear. The Internet will become fast enough to deliver high fidelity video images. Not only will we be able to see hundreds of channels, but we will also be able to interact with programmes. When this is combined with immersive VR technologies, the degree of interactivity will be spectacular.

### **DOOM meets the Gladiators**

Now to some, of course, this all sounds great - more realistic games and role playing that is more satisfying. And incredible educational experiences! Just imagine walking around a medieval castle, or even on the moon. Visiting a rainforest, or taking part in a Shakespearean play with famous actors. Even taking part in your favourite soap or - and this is more likely - a mixture of DOOM and the gladiators. You need never be bored again!

## **A Faustian Bargain**

According to Medieval legend, Dr Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for whatever he wished. The deal struck, Faust enjoys 24 years of power, until the devil comes to claim his side of the bargain. Clearly there are benefits to be gained from VR, and its related developments. But what's the other side of the bargain? Why should people be so concerned? What are the spiritual implications of these developments?

In a very real sense, VR provides people with the power to create their own reality, their own world, in their image. 'This is almost the culmination of the original devilish temptation in the Garden of Eden - you can be as God, knowing good from evil, ruling over a world of your own making.

It's a control freaks paradise. Reality as you want it to be, rather than as it really is. The nudiest teenager can take on whatever avatar he or she wishes. (If current trends continue, however, it is more likely to be a he.) And having taken on the appearance of a movie star, he can now create the girl of his dreams, and do whatever he wishes with her. No consequences, no health risks - the ultimate safe sex experience.

The issue of actions without apparent consequences is an important one. In VR you will be able to kill, maim, drive a car over a cliff top engage in graphic sex, and be able to walk away. Of course, virtual experiences leave real memories, and psychologists are already expressing alarm at the likely development in new syndromes, in people unable to come to terms with their VR experiences.

VR will also lead to a change in the nature of community. Increasingly people will develop significant relationships in VR. The story of Avram and Janie will be multiplied thousands of times in full digital colour.

For Christians, these are important matters. However, the spiritual dimension of VR creates an even scarier scenario. Post-modernity is already leading people to adopt a multiple reality perspective on life. VR delivers it in trumps. Magazines such as *Wired*, not only declare the goodness of change, but they clearly expound a redemptive belief in VR simply being another, equally legitimate version of reality.

The implications for evangelistic work in the future are considerable. Young people will not believe in a different reality, they will actually inhabit their chosen reality, and regard our belief in real reality as invalid or, even worse, as medieval. In a VR world where actions have been detached from consequences, talk of sin, judgement and the need for repentance will be meaningless. And increasingly, relationships will not be based on friendship and increased dependence, but rather on selfish desires and uncertainty. In a VR world where you can never be sure, even of the gender of s friend, this is inevitable.

### **A Call for Action**

The VR tidal wave is building, but it's not here yet. We have a window of opportunity perhaps lasting a few years, certainly no more than five - to get slightly ahead of the action.

Here is a 7 point plan for those working with young people and children (remember that today's 8 year olds are likely to hit this full in the face):

- Know what's going on. Read a few books, check out Wired magazine every few months. Take a look at some of the games-orientated computer magazines;
- Find out what's going on at the moment with your young people. Talk to them, or even undertake a written survey. Find out what games they are playing, and how often they use the Internet.
- Work with others. Set up a working group of youth workers and others who are interested from local churches that can not only share information but also prayerfully discuss responses. This is particularly useful in helping youth workers who don't play computer games to find out from those who do;
- If you often play computer games, prayerfully consider your motives. You ought to be able to get behind the game and critique what is going on;
- Technology is not neutral. It has a spiritual dimension. Personally, within the working group, and with your young people, spend time considering what the spiritual dimensions of digital technology in general and VR in particular, really are;

- Urge church leaders to be involved in the working group, so that churches can be forewarned;
- Train your young people to biblically critique current developments in computer games and other forms of media, such as television. If they are not able to bring a biblical perspective to the current scene, then there is little hope that they will in the future.

## Further Help

For those who want to read further

*Virtual Morality*, by Graham Hoston, (Apollos, Leicester, 1998, 0-85111 461)

Not too heavy but an excellent book that raises some important questions that all youth workers and church leaders need to address

*War of the Worlds - the assault on reality*, by Mark Slouka (Abacus, London, 1995, 0-34910785-8) Though not written from a Christian perspective, Slouka is THE essential reading on this subject. This is an easy to read book that will make you sit up and wonder where we are going

*The metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, by Michael Heim (OUP, Oxford, 1993, 0-19-509258-9) Don't let the title put you off, it really is an interesting book.

*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (ROC, London, 1991, 0-14-023292-3) A good cyber-novel.

*Cyberia*, by Douglas Rushkoff (Flamingo, London, 1994, 0-00-654792-3) Once again, an excellent - and easy to read - way to find out what cyber culture is about.

*Wired* - published monthly, a powerful magazine expounding the benefits of technology in general. It's what the thoughtful Generation X/Y techies are reading.

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