FieldReports | By Diane Robson & Jeremy Kincaid

Introducing VR

To support the changing needs of faculty and students researching mass media, popular culture, and video games, the University of North Texas (UNT) Media Library, Denton, began developing a game collection in 2009. This collection first included console games and in-house access to gaming PCs and then grew to include tabletop games in 2010. Because virtual reality (VR) headsets and devices are a natural fit, we included VR equipment on our wish list until 2015, when we finally had funding for an Oculus Rift DK2 ($350). It was possible to add this to our collection partly because we already had gaming PCs (Alienware Area-51s, $2,336 each) and laptops capable of running the software, which minimized the funds required. In 2016, additional funding was granted for the purchase of an HTC Vive headset ($700), a computer with the necessary specifications to run it, and a pair of Google Cardboard–style cellphone VR headsets.

Our success in outreach and programming related to this collection has played a large part in making our case for funding to acquire further new technologies. We know our patrons and include them in discussions to gauge their needs and wants, which helps build a community that then leads to increased participation in our programs. VR is a technology that our students, faculty, and staff can use not only in game design classes but also in new media, journalism, music, and psychology courses.

VIRTUALLY MANAGEABLE

At this time, we use Steam VR as our primary platform for VR programs because of its ease of use. Most students who frequent the media library already have a Steam account to manage personal game collections. The HTC Vive, our most used device, is available in-house in a room that includes a large screen and projector for viewing from the user's perspective. This space can be reserved by students, staff, or faculty for up to two hours. We do require that at least two people use the device at one time because of the headset's visibility and mobility limits. It takes staff about ten minutes to set up and put away the equipment before and after each reserved session, which includes wiping the headset and cleaning the lenses.

The HTC Vive was checked out 100 times between September 2016 and mid-December. The Oculus Rift has been checked out 55 times since September 2015. Both VR devices have been used during events and for outreach on campus.

Basic computer skills are all that is needed to run software and firmware updates and troubleshoot. Most of our staff and student workers can handle these issues. Larger problems are handled by our tech department, but those have been minimal. Owing to a universitywide contract with Dell, we employ Alienware Area 51 PCs that easily support VR technology. Our gaming laptops, also Alienware, are not as powerful as their desktop counterparts and did not meet the minimum GPU specs to run the Oculus Rift software, which caused concerns. This limited the portability of VR outside of our library for the past several months, but new software has been released by Oculus to fix this problem. Hardware troubles have included a damaged Vive controller, an Oculus headset HDMI cord, and NVIDIA graphics card. Because we work with game consoles and systems regularly, all issues were resolved through contacting the respective companies.

VR ON A BUDGET

The UNT Media Library had an established base, including VR-ready gaming PCs, when we acquired our VR equipment, but cost should not be a barrier to showcasing this technology. 3-D media and 360 video are growing rapidly and can be quite innovative. Libraries can introduce patrons to this technology with VR cases for smartphones for $20. These cases can be checked out to users or used for outreach and programming. A few sites to explore are the Virtual Reality channel on YouTube, With.in, and Google Daydream. VR is exciting, and there are so many possibilities for immersing patrons in different worlds and ideas. The growing availability of a wide range of products with varying resource requirements makes introducing this new technology well within reach of most libraries.

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In addition to books and serials, the library houses more than a million photographs, manuscripts, original art, and other ephemera from the museum's nearly 150-year history. For the third annual AMNH hackathon, the library was chosen to highlight its rich content and develop tools that would enliven its digital materials, a growing and important component of the library's collection. Based on challenges they've faced in increasing access to this historic repository, the library staff developed ten tasks that participants would tackle at "Hack the Stacks." Among them, the teams were asked to develop a unified interface for more efficient searching across all library systems, digitally reassemble fragments from the scientific notebooks of Charles Darwin, and virtually re-create the museum at various points in history using archival photographs.

As they developed the challenges,