Elana Horowitz

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Profile of an Internet Technology: Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are explorable digital environments which one may roam as the platform allows. Computers are the primary hardware used to run them, though newer technologies, such as virtual reality headsets, are becoming more common. Virtual worlds are an escape from reality in a sense, allowing one to create their own avatar and roam an entirely different plane or existence. They may also promote a sense of community, with games such in MMORPGs (Mass Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) where teamwork is essential, allowing people to connect and befriend one another through similar interests. Exploration and discovery is yet another function of virtual worlds, of which there are many in today’s gaming sphere.

Before Tim Berners Lee and his invention of the World Wide Web, there were text-based virtual environments. The very first virtual world, though a more apt description would be virtual reality, was the Sensorama machine. Created in 1962, this device inserted users into a fully immersive experience via body tilting, scents and surround sound. Of course, being a more futuristic and cost-heavy product, it was unable to acquire the funds to succeed. However, it did provide the 1960’s with a glimpse of what the future held for society. The first precursor to today’s MMORPGs came about in 1978 thanks to Richard Bartle, a bored PHD student responsible for creating MUD, or “Multi User Dungeon”. According to Bartle ”the real world sucked so we wanted to make a better world, so we tried. We did actually: it was a better world”. MUD was a text-based adventure game in which players could interact with and explore together. All future virtual worlds similar to Bartle’s came to be known as MUDs. In the years following the PHD student’s invention, many MUDs began to crop up. The game *Maze*, introduced in 1991, established many elements that would become synonymous with virtual worlds, such as levels, NPCs (non-playable characters) and instant messaging. A few years later, *Alphaworld* was released, a virtual world allowing players to build objects with a click. Jumping ahead to 2003, company Linden Lab releases Second Life, which allowed one to live on their own property. In later years the company would introduce “Linden Dollars”, which could be bought with real dollars, and use them to buy new properties, clothes or accessories. Innovations continued to be made for years, until we come to the virtual worlds of today; rich, sprawling environments with almost endless possibilities. Many subgenres of today’s gaming industry branch off from the original virtual world, such as first-person shooters, RPGs (Role Playing Games) and simulations.

Examples of virtual worlds abound in today’s digital age. A prime one, is the exploratory/survival game Minecraft (a personal favorite of mine). Players can choose to be dropped into a world of untamed wilderness, where they must find food, build shelter and create weapons and armor in order to survive. At night monsters roam the land, making things treacherous albeit much more exciting. There is also the option to enter a “Creative Mode”, wherein the player gains access to all of the game’s items and is given the freedom to build (or destroy) whatever they please. There is also a vast amount of online servers players can join and partake in a variety of activities. A different example of virtual worlds is the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, which has users create their own avatar, battle monsters and joining guilds. Though more straightforward in ideology than *Minecraft*, *World of Warcraft* still has a variety of elements to it that make the game interesting. Chatting with players live while fighting as a team creates a very different dynamic, one much more reminiscent of old virtual worlds described in the paragraph above. The last example is a fairly new one: *VR Chat*. This game (although there are no gameplay aspects to it) allows one to use their virtual reality headset and join virtual chatrooms. While it may sound simple enough, this virtual environment allows one’s avatar to take the form of practically any character they want, be it from an anime, television show or video game. While it allows for a good amount of creative freedom, things can get quite ridiculous and out of hand on *VR Chat*.

Virtual worlds vary on ease of use, however they can be accessed by anyone who owns a computer or smartphone. Games will of course instruct beginners on how to play, with a few exceptions. The controls of such games would be familiar to any casual gamer and easy to use for those only just delving into the world of games. In terms of effectiveness, one can posit that virtual worlds will not be unplugged anytime soon. *World of Warcraft*, which was mentioned previously, was released in 2004 and is still going strong today. By 2017, it became one of the highest grossing video game franchises, ranking just below the *Final Fantasy* franchise. Other than gaming and online chats, virtual worlds can have applications in the field of education, conferencing and other workplace activities. The idea of using virtual worlds for these specific things are not new, however they could be put to more practical use today thanks to our advancing technology.

Works Cited

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