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Exploring Virtual Worlds

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Everyone needs an escape from time to time. Whether it’s an escape from our own reality, or just a journey we take ourselves on to forget our responsibilities and enjoy. Games like “Fortnite” or “Runescape” are prime examples of the virtual worlds we’ve come to create, and have become worldwide phenomenon’s that people have become obsessed with. Virtual worlds have been in existence for quite some time, but recently have reached new levels of interactivity and design. One can almost feel like these games are for real. These worlds span over different consoles, computers, and portable game technologies. Not only do virtual worlds exist in games, but also Virtual Reality simulations in spaces like galleries or public domains. These are a bit more expensive for companies to get out to the general public, but help create intimate experiences that confront relevant issues or just make the viewer see something in a new way. Before we know it, everyone will experience virtual worlds, and the possibilities within these programs will continue to unfold.

First, virtual words started off as merely text oriented role-playing games. They are click through story games where the user uses their mouse to click through the story and make it progress. At first, the user did not have control over how the story played out. “Worlds Chat” was the first of these games, created for PC, in 1995, (Artifact). The whole game was to just communicate with people as different characters on an open platform. The story was pre planned so that the result would always be the same, but the user would still be playing as a character in the story or multiple characters Once people started to get hooked on this kind of experience, games like “Runescape” and “W.O.W.” were created and took the communicative aspects of gaming to more intimate levels. These games started off in the 70s and 80s, and then took shape into more visual based gameplay in the 80s and 90s. Some examples of this are first person shooters, fantasy role playing games, and social virtual worlds. In these kinds of games, the user can choose where they want to explore, determining what adventures they embark on or what they learn. The social virtual worlds focus on interaction with other players. One may trade with other people, go on missions together, and communicate through text/audio. This changes the experience drastically since the creators of the games do not have control of what users say or do. They just create a platform for people to explore and the user creates their own experience within the boundaries of the game.

Virtual worlds create a space in our mind for endless exploration. One feels like they are living in this world for the time that they are engaging with it. If something jumps out at you, you feel scared as if they were right over your shoulder. Even though people understand these simulations are not reality, they create a very real experience that brings out fear, excitement, envy and the many other emotions within us. The first kind of virtual world is just a storyline that one can click through, usually on a website, that makes you feel like you’re going through the story with the character/characters in the game. There’s a game called “Depression Quest” by Zoë Quinn that came out in 2013, that takes you through a depressive episode in a very real way. The game asks you questions with only a few or one option, and progresses depending on how you answer each question. The character you pretend to be in the game could either end up healthy, or even more depressed by the end of the story. Some would argue this does not count as a virtual world, but the person playing is immersed in the experience, feels empathy for the character they are playing as, and changes the storyline based on their own actions. There are no amazing graphics, but a game like this is the perfect example of how virtual worlds first started to come into existence.

This technology became so popular so quickly because of how easy it is to access. Most people nowadays have access to computers or some other handheld device that has access to many different virtual worlds. “Runescape” is totally free to play, so all one has to do is sign up on their website and then they’re ready to play. Not only does one get to go to places that have never existed before, but they also can make strong friendships with people through the game. People create groups who will meet up daily and go on quests together, and a lot of times they don’t ever meet in person. These virtual worlds allow those who are antisocial, and “homebodies” to interact in a much more confident way since they are behind a screen. One gets to pretend to be a warrior, wizard or some other character that they’ve never been seen as before, and fabricate whatever kind of persona that they want to be. “A new study, [published in the](http://bjpo.rcpsych.org/content/2/1/74.article-info" \t "_blank)*[British Journal of Psychiatry Open](http://bjpo.rcpsych.org/content/2/1/74.article-info" \t "_blank)* on Monday, suggests that VR therapy could reduce depressive symptoms by boosting feelings of self-compassion and alleviating self-criticism,” (Huffington Post). There was a study done where adults were set up to communicate with virtual children, who are programed to be in distress. Comforting these children in a virtual state came back with results that showed the adults were able to heal themselves by healing these VR children. So based off this, it would not be surprising that people who are experiencing depression or other mental health issues could really benefit from communicating with people in these different virtual worlds. These worlds are open to anyone, and give people a place to go when the physical world around them isn’t enough.

Sources

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