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MEDST 255 New Technologies

Profile: Virtual Worlds

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With the dawn of the Internet as a new technology available to the public, people were able to accomplish more than they could have imagined decades ago. The Internet is the result of hundreds of years of development and is premised on the technologies and ideas created by humans. An important aspect of new technologies is its pervasiveness in daily social, political and civic life. Almost anyone can access it and can obtain the skills necessary to use it.

The WWW today consists of web pages and web apps, abundant with multimedia content - information, videos, photos, and interactive content (DeFelice 2018). What is important to understand about the history of the Internet and the history of Virtual Worlds, an Internet technology, is that they are all possible because of innovation and constant and continuous development of digital culture.

Virtual worlds has been a major innovation and a key player in the massively multiplayer online world (MMOW). It is a computer-generated and simulated environment with users who can participate through a personal avatar. Users can explore the virtual worlds on their own or simultaneously with other users participating in activities and communicating with each other. Virtual worlds are a good example of how digital environments are convergent, or meld together the characteristics and capabilities of other technologies.

People experience virtual worlds together. It allows users to gain a sense of being in an environment other than the reality they are in, and to interact with others within that environment. This Internet technology focuses on the sensory experience and differentiates it from any virtual reality, dreams, books, text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), or other phenomena (Schroeder 2008).

Virtual worlds usually applies to online social spaces where people experience ongoing over time with massively large populations which they experience with others as a world for social interaction. This is normally how virtual worlds can be differentiated from online gaming and other massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). Conversely, online games can be considered a sub category of virtual worlds. With the focus on gaming activities such as accumulating points or “leveling up,” there is no specified gaming focus in a virtual world and emphasis is more on social interaction (Schroeder 2008).

There are three generations so far that highlight the convergence of technologies that lead to the evolution of virtual worlds. The first generation (1978-1984) consists of small-scale systems, text-based displays, and fantasy-based games. The second generation (1985-1996) introduces larger scale systems, graphical displays, games and social worlds, avatars, and user control over objects. Finally, the third generation of virtual worlds (1997-present), include massive scale worlds, striking 3D presentation, games, social and edu worlds, highly customizable avatars, user-driven communities, and adult and child user bases (Downey 2014).

One major application of virtual worlds on the Internet are virtual worlds that changed the demographic of users, such as *Habbo* and *World of Warcraft. Habbo* is one of the most successful virtual worlds targeted toward kids and introduced the pre-teen demographic among virtual world players. A customizable space where users have their own furniture, pets, and other add-ons to build their own world with, there is a lot of room for user generated content and creativity. Introduced in 2001 by Sulake Corp, Finland, *Habbo* generated 15 million individual users from 150 countries. In 2007, there was a nearly 50/50 girl to boy demographic, which is considered significant because virtual worlds are usually dominated by males (Downey 2014).

The highest revenue generated from a virtual world goes to Blizzard's World of Warcraft (WoW). Released in 2004, WoW sold 240,000 copies overnight and more than any other game in history (Downey 2014). Compared to preceding virtual worlds like EverQuest who at its pique reached over 300,000 subscribers, WoW gained more than 11 million subscribers globally and dominated the market share of subscription MMOWs for over four years. Not only does WoW generate a lot of revenue, it serves as a great foundation in how to design an easy-to-use, captivating world that attracts different players from different age groups.

Recent innovations in virtual worlds came at the beginning of the 21st century changing trends in user profiles, business models, and the introduction of reality-augmented virtual world platforms. Augmented reality (AR) results in a supplemented or augmented view of a physical, real-world environment through computer-generated sensory input technology. This includes sound, video, graphics or GPS and location data. Essentially, AR is the placement of content on the real world, but the real-world

content and the computer-generated content are not able to respond to each other (Lockhart 2013). An example would be the Google Glass, which is a handsfree smartphone device with access to the Internet through voice commands. Google wanted to share AR with the public (and profit from them) and they will continue to explore its capabilities into the future.

Finally, it is interesting to learn about the application of virtual worlds in the business or corporate world. Many companies use virtual worlds or communities to hold remote meetings or conferences. Instead of arranging travel plans, business people avoid expenses by attending events from the comfort of their own home or wherever they have access to a computer. Although there is always the option for video conferences, companies enjoy the physical yet virtual aspect. A virtual world allows one to “walk” over to a group and engage in conversation or speak to someone off to the side (Lockhart 2013). The physical aspect can also refer to avatars that can provide context - a professor avatar can be at the from of the room and the class would remain seated. This paves a way into uses for education as a space for virtual classes and lectures.

Companies find that virtual worlds (along with most other platforms of technology) are also opportunities for massive scale advertising. Virtual worlds as a technology is becoming increasingly easier to use and more available to people across the world, and through research and development, possibilities are endless.

Works Cited

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