

# Virtual reality comes to Western Piedmont Community College

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By simply wearing a headset and holding a couple of hand controls, a person is able to step into the world of virtual reality.

Virtual reality is a computer driven technology which can immerse a viewer, visually and audibly, in another world. The participant wears a headset which provides the visual and audio information while a computer tracks every movement by the participant.

Through virtual reality, a participant can fly in an fighter plane or avoid being caught by a pterodactyl. "Virtual reality is a full immersion into another environment that fools the senses into thinking you're in a different world," said Sam Daniel, an operator of virtual reality.

Local residents were able to enjoy this relatively new technology Tuesday at a demonstration held at Western Piedmont Community College. The virtual reality demonstration was provided by Kramer Entertainment Agency of Grand Rapids, Mich.

Around 270 people participated in the virtual reality demonstration, which was sponsored by the student government.

"It was pretty crowded throughout the day," said Paula Leonard, coordinator of student activities.

Leonard added the demonstration may return in the future.

The general public has become aware of virtual reality only within the past few years. In the films "The Lawnmower Man" and "Total Recall," virtual reality has been portrayed as a futuristic technology



Photo by Mark Hannan

Sam Daniels of Kramer Entertainment Agency shows Western Piedmont student Stacy Johnson how to use the virtual reality equipment.

with sinister implications. However, the idea of virtual reality has been around since the '60s when it was developed for military uses, according to Daniel.

Now, virtual reality is quickly becoming a popular form of entertainment. The technology is capable of placing a person within a video game or any other kind of simulation.

In the standup version, the partic-

ipant climbs into an enclosed booth and puts on a headset. Through the headset, the participant sees the visual information while hearing sounds through earphones. All of this is generated by a computer which constantly adjusts the visual and audio information for the participant.

At the same time, video monitors display the visual image, seen by participants, for the operators and spectators.

and tries to shoot his opponent while dodging a pterodactyl which flies overhead.

As the participant moves from level to level, the feeling of movement becomes more vivid and the ambient sounds add to the realism.

"Some people get nauseous or dizzy because of the movement and they are not used to it," Daniel said. "When they get used to it, they like it better."

In another version, the participant sits in a chair while wearing the headset and holding to hand controls. The computer simulates the cockpit of a fighter plane complete with sound and the surrounding terrain.

In the game, the participant must shoot down three enemy planes, get his plane refueled and land on the deck on an aircraft carrier.

As the participant moves his head, the visual information changes to reveal the simulated world around him. The hand controls steer the direction of the fighter plane as well as the velocity.

The games last for about four minutes.

"I played it myself a few minutes ago and I did real badly," Leonard said. "I was blown away."

Although virtual reality is being introduced to the public for entertainment purposes, the uses of virtu-

al reality are unlimited, according to Daniel.

"Anything that you can create visually, you can create in virtual reality," he said. "That is why it is such a powerful technology."

Furthermore, the computer images generated by virtual reality will become realistic as the technology progresses.

One of the many uses for virtual reality will be in education. For example, virtual reality could be used to place a student in 19th century London and show what life was like in that place and time. Students could also learn how to rebuild an engine or drive a car using virtual reality.

In addition, children could be taught how to avoid dangerous situations through the simulations of virtual reality.

In the future, virtual reality will also be available for homes. In fact, a person can now purchase a virtual reality computer and equipment for around \$15,000, according to Daniel.

"It's coming down," he said. "It will be available in five years. That gives you a very powerful computer you can use also."

"It's an interesting field. It will take a few more years but it's incredible."

If a participant moves his head to the right, the computer will constantly generate the images to follow the movements.

"Wherever you move, the computer can interpret that and move the screen exactly as you do," Daniel said.

In the standup game "Dactyl Nightmare," two participants can play against each other while standing in separate booths. The participant "walks" through several levels