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VR Products

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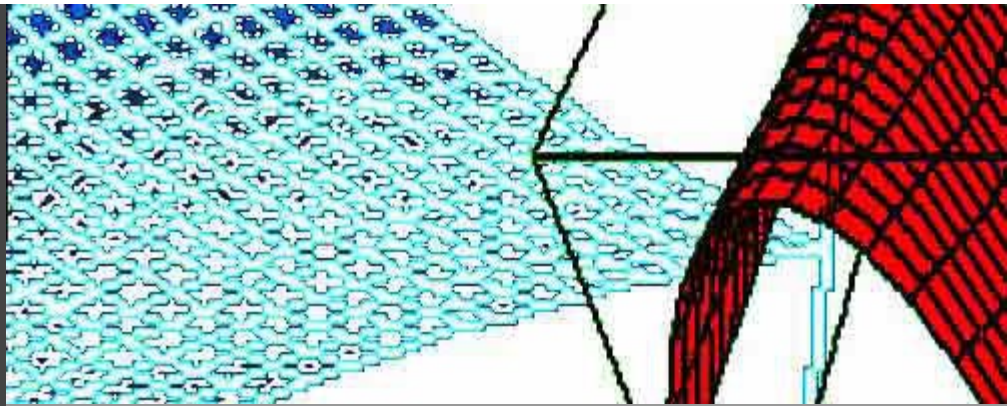
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VR Products

P.D. Quick on Sep 1 1995

issue 02

Virtual Reality Products

I eye i-Glasses

Virtual I/O's **i-Glasses** are one of the coolest products I saw at the conference. Even in spite of their low resolution these are one of the best head mounted displays (HMD) available for the money, although still somewhat prohibitive in price for most of us. I tried them out while playing Descent, a Doom-like 3D Computer Game. They were a real kick. The i-Glasses were lightweight, unlike many of the other HMDs I've used. They also provide you with the option of being fully immersed in your virtual world or, by removing a detachable cover, seeing the real world in the peripheral space around the image screen. I checked this feature out at my local retailer while simultaneously watching Space Ghost on TV and all of the other shoppers stare at me. It was a surreal experience. I highly recommend it. The i-Glasses come in a standard version for TV and video game viewing (\$599) and a PC version with an optional head tracking module (\$799).

Smart Model/Smart Product

Another cool product on view at Siggraph was **Multigen's Smart Model**. Smart Model is an amazing new 3D modeling package that incorporates the use of an HMD and **Pinch Gloves** to construct and manipulate 3D models and move around within your virtual workspace. I was mesmerized while watching the demos at the Multigen booth. The demonstrator would simply reach forward with both hands, press his thumb and finger together, and pull himself through a scene. And just as easily, he would reach out, pick up objects and move or modify them. It was like a scene right out of the Johnny Mnemonic movie. Smart Model also has 3D browsers and toolsets that you can call up and use within your virtual workspace. According to Multigen, this product is so simple and intuitive to use that "nontechnical" users can begin building models and scenes in no time.

Turbo Kourier

Although not exactly a true VR system in my book, Vivid Group's Mandala Virtual World system allows you to engage more than just your eyes and hands while playing its new title Turbo Courier. The Mandala system is a Location Based Entertainment (LBE) system that utilizes video cameras and chroma key technology to superimpose the player's image onto a videogame scene which appears on a monitor in front of the player. In Turbo Kourier, players control a skyboard -- a Jetsons-like skateboard that flies through the air -- by ducking, jumping, and moving left and right. The goal is to avoid the bad guys and collide with others to earn points. I was actually winded at the end of the game but I had fun playing.

3D Virtual Theater? or not?

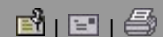
Straylight Corporation has a long way to go before their 3D Virtual Theaters are going to be worth my hard-earned cash. This virtual experience fell short of the claims that Straylight made in their promotional materials. Their virtual theater consisted of about 10 chairs with HMDs. Our virtual experience titled "U.F.O. - Upon Further reservation" took us through an alien abduction of a little boy who we watch fry ants with a magnifying glass in the opening scene. After the boy is beamed up to the ship, we see the aliens and their spaceship from the boy's point of view. Actually there were several times that it was unclear which p.o.v. we were seeing. The graphics in this virtual film were also less than desirable; the characters were poorly animated and rendered. But the most irritating element of this experience was the "motion seat" which rumbled through the entire animation for no apparent reason that I could detect. The rumbling never seemed to coincide with any particular event and it never stopped. Imagining a virtual theater in which the audience "experiences a journey through cyberspace together" is enticing. Visions of the holodeck, or experiences that allow a number of viewers to control the experience on some level, come to mind. But don't expect any of this in "UFO." The experience was not virtual and I have doubts about its definition as theater.

Red Planet/Dead World

Red Planet by Virtual World Entertainment Inc., a software title that runs on their Tesla LBE virtual reality gaming system, is another example of a good idea that didn't quite go all the way. Unlike Straylight's virtual theater, Red Planet is interactive. The problem is that it isn't immersive. Unless you consider sitting in a cockpit and watching a monitor immersive. Red Planet is a 3D (albeit viewed on a 2D monitor) interactive, multi-user racing game. The goal in Red Planet is to complete as many laps as possible in the allotted time through "the canals of Mars," a race track reminiscent of the Star Wars Death Star canal scene. They even have huge reactors with energy beams projecting from them at each end of the race course. A few simple changes and this video game would have become more of an experience. The simple addition of an HMD or a larger screen with a cockpit that moves or provides some sort of physical feedback would have made this a much more thrilling experience. I guess as video games go, this one is entertaining. But as a virtual experience it fails. I probably would have been more disappointed if I had paid for it.

Venturer S-2

A roller coaster at Siggraph? Yes, you heard it. Venturer S-2 is an LBE system by Thomson Entertainment Systems. This is more like an amusement park ride a la Star Tours. Riders enter a small pod which holds two people (larger models hold up to 14 people). A panel on the dash of the pod has several buttons used to select your choice of several different rides. Alas, the demo had only one choice. Once started, the pod moves in conjunction with images that appear on the monitor/ window to simulate your ride on a futuristic, otherworldly roller coaster. The best part is when the car flies off the tracks, and then lands on another set after flying in the air for a few seconds. This happens at several points along the course of the ride. It wasn't as effective as Star Tours but it combined elements of the Tesla cockpit and the Star- light theater much more effectively. (continued...)



::CrossReference

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:: VRware Beware:VR at Siggraph - Sep 1 1995

:: VR Projects - Sep 1 1995

:: VR Products - Sep 1 1995

