By H.P. Newquist

The VR Curmudgeon

Virtual Reality is great for researchers, but it's expensive, hard to find, and boring for the rest of us.

couldn't help noticing the headlines in the New York tabloids a few weeks back. Actually, I can't help noticing them every day, since they scream things like "Coma Baby Lives!" at you from every street corner in three inch bold type. This particular headline, however, was to be of particular interest to anyone exploring the outer realms of technology. It screamed those words that everybody in VR had been expecting to hear for years: "Wife Dumps Husband For Cybersex Lover!" and "Cyberslut!" and "Computer Casanova Seduces Virtual Valerie!"

Now, no one will ever accuse papers like the New York Post and The Daily News of downplaying a headline, but this seemed too good to be true. Cybersex a reality? Hmmm. Maybe those German VR guys I'd met last year had finally perfected their high-voltage teledildonic suit.

Not hardly. The story turned out to be just your garden variety wife-dumps-husband-for-mystery-man article. Seems some woman had gotten carried away with one of her invisible pen-pals in some lonely hearts club forum, and decided that meeting up with this guy would solve all the problems she'd been having with her not-so-invisible husband.

Anyway, there was no sex on the Net, no teledildonics, no digital pressure pads, no Virtual Valerie. Just some steamy e-mail. How boring.

Is It VR Yet?

The fact that this tawdry tidbit had absolutely nothing to do with virtual reality was something of a letdown. I mean, steamy chats and BBs are old news. This story, though—it had promise. But it was not to be. Instead of full-scale VR, we had the far-from-interactive World Wide Web, for crying out loud. This was like finding yet another copy of Howard Hughes's will: It seems like a potentially merry occasion until you realize that even your Uncle Ernie has his own personalized and notarized copy of HH's last wishes.

VR needs a jolt of raunchy reality to make it palatable to the masses. Right now, there's nothing. Sad but true. That's why everybody is heading to the Net. The thought process, and I know at least three people that have thought this out loud, goes like this: "You mean to tell me that I can see naked people in the Playpeople Forum, and I can talk to real supermodels at alt.sex.doberman? Sign me up!" Anybody who's really looked into this stuff knows that the Net's version of steamy sex is so lame that it can't even compete with

advertisements for Fruit Of The Loom jockey shorts. Still, the subject has helped keep the Net in the public eye for the better part of a year and a half, and it's helped get those puritans in Congress in on the act (although I bet that alt.sex.politics-type guys like Bob Packwood and Phil Gramm are spending their well-earned retirement time catching up on those same usenet groups that their former colleagues are trying to shut down.)

But the Net is this year's virtual reality, at least in terms of widespread interest. So where did our VR of last year go? Good question. The answer is not simple. Like all other promising technologies, VR continues to astound and impress researchers with its potential: interplanetary simulations, freeing people from their fear of heights, guiding economists through 3-D models of the Malaysian economy, that sort of cool stuff. Unfortunately, there is no VR for the rest of us. Whatever happened to all those arcade games that were going to offer full VR experiences for anyone with a couple of extra bucks and about 10 minutes' worth of time to kill? Uh-uh. Sorry. Didn't happen. In New York, the only places that regularly do anything that even remotely involves VR are galleries and conventions. There

have been a couple of interesting art shows using VR here in the last year (and they've been heavily subsidized by large computer concerns, not by overwhelming public demand), and there have also been some unusual VR displays at different business conferences. What was the highlight of the last year? Oh, I'd have to say the Hyatt Hotels resort exhibit that allowed travel agents to do a quick virtual tour of Hawaii—surfboard and all.

Are You Getting Any?

Still, it all boils down to this: Does the average person get to see or use any of this stuff? Can you go any place just to experience the joys of VR? Is Ronald Reagan in full control of his senses? The answer to all these questions is an emphatic "no." And that, quite simply, is where VR has failed. Unlike the original Apple computer—the computer "for the rest of us"—there is no VR for people not associated with the technology. Try asking your next-door neighbor about VR. Ask him or her about their most recent VR experience. Chances are that the closest they've come to VR is *Star Trek: The Next Generation.* But I'll bet they know at least something concrete about the Internet, whether from personal experience or second-hand anecdotes. Trust me on this: they're going to spend an entire year typing four letter words into Yahoo! before they ever put on a VR helmet and glove.

Why is this? Cost, for one. Availability, for another. Sure, you can get some VR toy for a few hundred bucks that lets you kick the crap out of an alien karateka in the newest version of games like "Gorefest III: Lassie's Return," but that's like test driving a Dodge Viper over the phone. The reality is kid-like and the only people who would find it intellectually challenging are the people who had walk-on parts in "Deliverance." In short, there is no VR for the masses. And if the masses don't get to use it, then it isn't going to sell.

Of course, sex sells. The pages of this magazine have contained a fair share of cybersex discussions—all of the highest quality, I can assure you. Two hundred dollar kid's games, on the other hand, do not sell. Ask Mr. and Mrs. America if they'd rather have three days and two nights on the beach in San Diego or a high-tech scuba mask and an ill-fitting Isotoner glove that plugs into their kid's CD-ROM player. Go ahead, ask them. Whoops, too late. They're already at Sea World.

We need a compelling VR application that will appeal to adults who no longer live in dorm rooms. To be honest, I haven't seen it. I have seen extremely interesting applications, but I can't talk to any of my friends about those apps because my friends have never had the chance to experience VR—and they would like to. There just isn't any place to do it. As a group of interested participants (those of us picking up this magazine), we need to find ways to make VR less remote, less detached, less unapproachable, less sterile, less supermodel-like. This will not be easy.

Stock Up on Staples

It might be too obvious to suggest great application areas like gluttony or greed or sex—the staples of the tabloids. Even these have their drawbacks. You can't apply VR to food. Eating virtual food means that you're not eating anything, and unless you're a member of Weight Watchers, this doesn't do you an ounce of good. Virtual edibles will leave you almost as hungry as a three-course Chinese meal. As for greed, you can't make money in your VR suit. In fact, it costs money to get anywhere near a VR rig, so that's a losing proposition. Then there's sex. Well, according to the New York tabloids, we're already on our way to achieving success with VR in that area. I do hope, however, that we can do better than that.

Think about it. VR really needs some reality checking, because the reality of VR is that real people don't get it.

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