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HIGH-TECH 'TOY' COULD HELP STUDENTS, SENIORS

Librarian embraces virtual reality

Story and photos by Dan Claxton, *Missourian* Features Editor

Virtual reality may be coming to a school or nursing home near you soon used for practical purposes such as job training.



Schink is the outreach coordinator for Scenic Regional Library, which has branches in eight area communities, and she would like to take what many consider a toy and turn it into an educational tool for kids and a therapeutic aid for the elderly.

Virtual reality headsets replace the user's actual environment with "virtual" content like a movie, game, or a pre-recorded 3-D world which allows the user to turn 360 degrees and look around, just as in the physical world, according to XR Today, a tech industry news organization.

Initially, VR headsets were considered high-tech toys used primarily for gaming and entertainment. And they are still used for that. But as technology improved and the price came down, VR headsets began to be

Christy Schink in her office bowling in virtual reality.

the technology in schools and nursing homes. She recalls a conference where participants were telling stories about their experiences with VR. "There were stories about libraries who had taken VR into a facility, and stories about someone who couldn't travel anymore and getting to go see Paris, something they thought they'd never get to do. Or seeing their hometown again after years and years and years."

She says the VR headsets also allow some mild exercise for elderly people, since bowling with them requires the user to actually mimic rolling a bowling ball down the alley, but without the weight. The same applies to golf: You swing your arms, and the virtual golf club swings with them.

Schink found studies, including from the Alzheimer's Association, that support the idea that virtual reality headsets are indeed therapeutic in many cases.

For instance, there are memory-care kits that help stimulate the memories of Alzheimer's patients by showing scenes from the past, such as a city as it appeared in the 1950s.

She ended up buying eight Metaquest 2 headsets for about \$300 each. Every branch of the Scenic Regional Library system has a VR club that meets once a week. For the VR club, the headsets are toys, and the two-hour sessions are meant to be fun rather than therapy.

The headsets contain games like golf, mini-golf, bowling, Space Pirates, puzzle games and more.

First, a boundary is set. The user clears

Christy Schink, Outreach Coordinator at Scenic Regional Libraries, sits at her desk with a Metaquest 2 virtual reality headset.

a space of obstacles and marks it for the computer. When a user puts the headset on, he or she first sees the room they are in — the real room. When the device is turned on, a virtual world appears, including the preset boundary marked clearly on the virtual floor. The VR world doesn't look completely real since the image is animated. But the animation looks pretty good and can be disorienting. For instance, in virtual reality, the user can fly, and sometimes that sensation of flying can cause people to lose their balance or fall. Or, he or she can be immersed in an underwater world.

The controller you hold in your hand becomes a golf club or bowling ball and also controls you in simulated flight.

If someone becomes disoriented or panicky, two quick taps on the side of the device brings the real room back into view.

So far, the units have not been taken into schools. One reason is the problem of supervision. "We don't know what they're doing in there," Schink joked. But after all the kinks are worked out, she looks forward to using them in schools. Kids who use VR have to be at least 13 years old to use the library's equipment. That is a manufacturer's recommendation, not an arbitrary rule, according to Schink.

"We have what we call our STEM playground, with a lot of robotics things," Schink said, referring to some of the educational programming they intend to offer schools. Or, if the school prefers, the units can be used just for fun.

The VR Club schedule for each library branch is posted on the Scenic Regional Library website.

