

Make or break for virtual reality

Operators know what they need – it's up to manufacturers to produce it

The keys to successful VR have been picked up from the hard lessons learned by those that risked operating the first systems. But what are the requirements these operators will need if they are ever to consider buying another system again?

The hardest factor operators have had to contend with when operating VR is the need for an attendant. For the first time (other than for security reasons) attendants have been needed to help players in and out of the attraction, and to explain the nuances of the games. The cost of employees and the downtime wasted in loading, unloading and in explanation have all impacted the equipment's profitability. But the failure of game content, to enthrall, captivate or sometimes even interest the players has been the one factor over any other that has turned operators away from buying another system. The lack of game innovation, interesting narrative, playability and an attract mode are just some of the complaints. Virtuality's licensing of Pac-Man is the last hope regarding playability, with the feeling being voiced, "If Pac-Man can't attract the players, nothing will."

The plain fact is that at least half the games on most VR products could be played more interactively on a conventional 40-inch screen. The move to tethered HMD's and new, mounted visual units could remove this factor,

but by their very nature, tethered HMD units limit the free movement of the player. The operators may prefer smaller footprint systems with tethered HMD's, but a profitable, repeat player system would always win the operator's money.

The price paid for these VR systems has proven a major sticking point too. The recent drastic reduction in some systems (more than 33 per cent in some cases) has failed to increase their popularity and, in some cases, has

detracted from the machines' appeal as some operators feel cheated having paid higher prices only months earlier.

The inclusion of PC graphics technology has also proven a double-edged sword in the creation of cheaper VR platforms. Most operators now need systems that offer a high quality of graphics, and the current low-cost VR systems underperform even alongside outdated video hardware.

Virtuality, for one, has found it difficult to compete with the large Japanese manufacturers. Operators running the new low-end VR machines are becoming increasingly concerned that the gap in quality between home and amusement technology is reduced with PC graphics systems. When some of the new systems are running near exact versions of popular home games, slightly altered for coin-op application, more concerns are raised.

It is more likely that operators will be enticed towards the new small simulator systems, possibly incorporating aspects of VR, rather than be attracted back to buying straight VR units.

And for VR manufacturers, dreams of selling linked multi-player units, offering teamed VR scenarios as well as the possibility of better game content (due to the involvement of Microsoft) seem problematic due to the technology's past history.

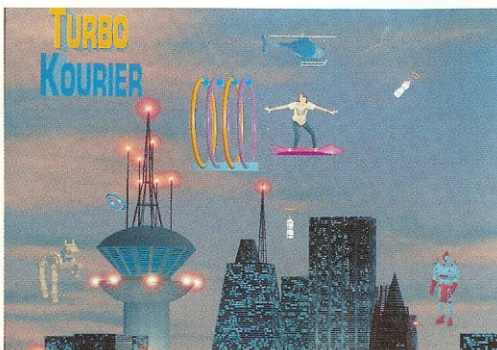


Pac-Man is Virtuality's great hope

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FEATURE: VIRTUAL REALITY



Vivid's unique approach appeals to the FEC market

to FEC operators who are looking for a VR experience that can appeal to all ages.

The most revolutionary of all the current

designs available, again using a new-look tethered HMD system, is Immersive Technologies Inc's Kimera. The application of the design is the most original part of the concept, as the option of a tethered VR system was first seen back in 1993 from a company called VR8. The Kimera system is impressive with its use of the company's new Immerse-O-Scope system, a mixture of submarine periscope and targeting turret. The game depends on enhanced PC graphics which is hoped to do

its game, Pyramid Pilot, justice.

One of the few profitable VR attractions in London's new look Trocadero is the

Virtuality 2000SD and the three Virtual Glider systems developed by Evans & Sutherland. The latter's no-HMD, body movement experience has proved particularly attractive and an agreement with United Artists in America could see more attractions of this nature emerging into the VR sector from E&S.

One option to both increase the perceived value of VR and to gain player appeal is the mixing of conventional simulation technology with VR presentation. Currently either in development >

