OBJECTIVE:

To provide the Director and the Administrative Team at San Mateo County Libraries with information on virtual reality systems and programs that can be implemented in their libraries and asking that said programs also focus on adult communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

San Mateo County Libraries’ tagline is Open for Exploration. With a goal to offer inclusive environments for learning and enriching experiences, the libraries can provide services to adults in their community through emerging technologies for the main purpose of exploration and infinite learning. San Mateo County Libraries has invested in Virtual Reality systems for each of their libraries but the programs are geared towards teens and gaming during the afterschool hours (SMCL). Virtual Reality (VR) systems can be beneficial to adults as a way to embrace and encourage continuing education. With new programs and games, VR systems offer adults many options to learn about new technology and remember the joys of exploration.
INTRODUCTION

Virtual Reality systems are perfect for libraries whether you have a makerspace or not. In the article Libraries and Makerspaces: a match made in heaven, the author states that "public libraries have always been places where skilled information professionals assisted the general public with the eternal quest to understand the world" and I agree completely (Doctorow, 2013). The world is changing and is accepting various technologies in our daily lives. If libraries can invest in Virtual Reality systems, they will continue to be these places where people can come to better understand the world. Adults looking to come back into the work force or simple find a way to understand the confusing technology that teens and younger working professionals are inviting into their lives. can come to a library and try out a Virtual Reality system or simply learn that it exists. When I've worked in a library, adults would come by full of curiosity for such a system. I've heard realtors explain how they could use such a system to sell homes or senior citizens use it to visit places on this earth that they never got a chance to visit.

WHAT IS VR?

Virtual Reality is defined as a “technology by which computer-aided stimuli create the immersive illusion of being somewhere else” (Rubin, 2020). The name is fitting. With the aid of a headset, we can place ourselves elsewhere – a reality that may exist or may have been created by developers. While they were past attempts for virtual reality systems in the past, the first virtual reality system is said to have been introduced to the world in 2012 when John Carmack, a software cofounder, came to the E3 videogame trade show with a borrowed a prototype of a headset created by a 19-year-old named Palmer Luckey and hacked it to run a VR version of the game Doom (Rubin, 2020). After that, Luckey’s company, Oculus, raised over $2 million on Kickstarter to produce the headset, which he called the Oculus Rift and in 2014, Facebook purchased Oculus for nearly $3 billion (Rubin, 2020). Such a technology can be great for gaming but VR has proven to have other great impacts.

GLOBAL IMPACTS

VR has had a great impact on this world for adults, especially in healthcare and education. According to an article in the Harvard Business Review, VR has assisted in educating students in becoming better surgeons “placing the user inside an experience” by using the OSSO VR platform (Blumstein, 2019). The same article mentions that training on the OSSO VR has improved surgical performance by 230% compared to former traditional training methods (Blumstein, 2019). VR systems are also being used to alleviate pain and calm patients who would otherwise be using opiates or other medications (Bajpai, 2020). As seen, VR systems act as an aid to various professions and I believe it can also be used to educate adults on a smaller scale. For example, a library program using Google Earth can help an adult job seeker find their interview spot by placing the adult in the street of their interview location so they can find the entrance and be ready for their interview. Doing so may also help with interview day anxieties and worries by brining a sense of calm and confidence in seeing the location ahead of time.
NEGATIVE ISSUES

That’s not to say that there are no negative issues. The price of the VR headsets and computers are expensive. The Oculus Rift costs around $599, the Playstation VR costs $399, and finally the HTC Vive can cost around $799. In addition to the systems, people who purchase a VR may also need a strong enough computer for the graphics to be clear and worthwhile. In addition to the price, the lack of physical social interaction when using a VR system can be seen as a negative. It can be very solitary as there is only one headset and the games and activities as single player games. Users are placing a headset on and their friends are forced to watch the screen as the user experiences the virtual world on their own. If you’re lucky enough to have friends who can afford their own VR system, there may be multiplayer actives to make the experience a little less lonely. Rachel Metz wrote in an MIT Technology Review article that even the social aspect of VR isn’t perfect. Spaces, a program designed to link up with other people who own a VR as a social media platform, is a step towards fixing this negative issue however Metz states that even if she does meet up with friends in Spaces, “it gets old quickly, you’re forced to stand around a virtual table the whole time” (Metz) For those that prefer single player experiences, this shouldn’t be an issue and it may or may not bring up issues in libraries. Programs can be made where users have five minutes to try out the VR system. Waiting in line for a turn can seem daunting for a child or a teen but adults don’t seem to mind as much. If anything, they view the screen as they wait their turn and get ready for their own experience.
Some libraries already have VR systems and if they do, I commend them for their progressive purchase. However most of them see VR as a game for teens. My own personal experiences of working in a library system have shown me that VR tends to be popular with early teens and the mid and late teens are busy with sports, drama club, or homework. If the VR is alone, adults slowly gravitate towards the TV and while a bit reluctant to try it, they marvel in the technology that can transport them into another world.

Implementation would prove easier for libraries who are not looking to stay as traditional libraries whose sole focus is on books as well as those with a budget for new technologies. Once a library see’s the educational impact of a VR system and chooses to expand their library services beyond books, the public will also have the chance to open their eyes to the emerging technologies of the world. If funds could then be allocated towards programs that focus on emerging technologies as resources for patrons along with training, libraries can be successful is such programs for adults. San Mateo County Library has done well so far and has bought VR systems for each of their libraries and training opportunities for all of their staff. The American Library Association (ALA) states that “libraries have long served as points for the public’s first exposure to new technologies” and the ALA believes that libraries “could again play that role with virtual reality” (ALA). I recommend using the ALA website as a guide to bringing VR programs into a library but taking it a step further and not just focus the programs on children and teens. Adults can get some physical exercise with an archery game or learn about the world with Google Earth or simply see the technology available and find a way to fit it in their own lives and professions (realtors, artists, travers, writers).
CONCLUSION

In the year 2020, Virtual Reality systems seem more relevant than ever. Many of the systems have worked out their bugs and provide a seem-less user experience. Once a person understand how to use the controller, the rest of the trick is exploring the virtual reality you place yourself in. I've been lucky to try out a few different VR systems and can see the potential of showing other adults how far we've come with technology by placing the systems in public libraries. In 1969, we took humans to the moon and provided a new reality. Now, we have a virtual reality that can just as easily show us a world and public libraries can help show that world to adults in this lifetime.

WORK CITED


