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Virtual Reality Transports Patrons Out of This World

You can walk the plank, drive a race car or fly over an iceberg at one of several VR experiences in New York City



Drivers competed in a race-car game at VR World NYC in Manhattan this month. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By

Anne Kadet

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The other day I made a terrible mess in my cubicle, flew over an iceberg, and sliced through floating watermelons with my samurai sword.

No, I wasn't high. I was visiting VR World NYC, a virtual reality entertainment center that opened this summer in Midtown Manhattan. With a \$39 all-day pass, guests can sample a buffet of VR experiences ranging from rock climbing to a rain forest visit.

The multistory center, located in a former Bolton's store on 34th Street near the Empire State Building, offers a series of bays where guests donning earphones, a head set and hand controllers can battle ogres and space aliens in sessions lasting 4 to 15 minutes. The action also appears on an overhead video monitor so others can cheer them

on.

The place is definitely in beta mode. The afternoon I visited, 2 of the 40-odd attractions were on the fritz, and 12 had been rotated out make way for new content. Marketing Director Jessica Gray said the center's tech team sometimes has trouble keeping up with the bugs. But customers understand the technology is new and tend to be forgiving.

Sandy Friedman, a Midtown East resident on hand with three grandchildren, said the kids were having a blast. "They tried shooting each other, they tried the car racing, they tried walking the plank, which scared them," she said. "They loved it though."



Eleven-year-old Misty Brown played a painting reality game called Tilt Brush this month at VR World NYC in Manhattan. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

VR World says 85% of its patrons are between the ages of 24 and 51, and there's some oddly adult games. My favorite was an attraction called "Job Simulator" where you could choose to work as a retail clerk, auto mechanic or fast-food service drone. I chose "office worker."

The game puts you in a 90's-style cubicle where you're supposed to complete office tasks issued by your robot overlords. Instead, just for fun, I went berserko, throwing coffee mugs across the office and scattering books across the floor. Then I opened the box of doughnuts and put a cruller in the copy machine. To my surprise and delight, it produced another doughnut.

An attendant issued a mock scolding. "You're making a mess!" he said. "You're in big trouble with the boss!"

I was more impressed with the center's friendly, funny human guides than the technology. When I froze while walking the plank over a virtual city 48 stories up, for example, a guide offered her hand and walked me back.

Most of the guides have a background in occupations such as theater

or social work and are trained in both technology and the art of helping nervous newcomers, Ms. Gray explains.



Dorothy Nagle, 80 years old of Virginia, donned a headset at VR World NYC in Manhattan this month. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Indeed, VR World aims to be more than a futuristic version of a gaming arcade such as Dave & Buster's. It's planning lectures and panels for the VR community, art installations and a VR history exhibit.

It's not a first in New York City. Several pop-up VR installations have appeared around town in recent years. But there's a good business case for a permanent installation like VR World, says futurist Amy Webb, who teaches strategic foresight at the New York University's Stern School of Business.

Video arcades boomed in the 1980s because few had the resources to enjoy a decent Pac-Man experience in their living room. We're at that point now with virtual reality, Ms. Webb says. "There is a growing curiosity. People are curious about VR and don't have the technology at home."

If the VR World concept bears out, its founders plan to launch as many as 30 locations nationally during the next few years.

For now, they're winging it and experimenting—adjusting the number of guides and puzzling over the cafe menu. There's no precedent, says Ms. Gray. An early stage of the pricing process, for instance, involved gathering staffers in a room and asking, "How much would you pay for this?" Ms. Gray said.

Ms. Friedman probably has the right idea. When I asked her what VR World might look like in the future, she said: "Crowded!"

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