

Researchers Find Benefits of Virtual Reality Beyond Gaming

Companies are taking a different approach in hopes of helping patients diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

By CIARA VARONE
Daily Sun Staff Writer

In the glow of a computer monitor, 20-somethings paw at empty air, stumbling through their surroundings. Clunky gear encases their heads, blinding them to the real world.

Pointing to such comical scenes, stereotypes say virtual reality technology has little use besides entertaining Millennials.

But researchers are finding potential beyond youthful recreation.

"VR has a lot of applications that are way outside of the 23, 24-year-old gamer," said Chris Brickler, CEO and co-founder of MyndVR, a VR startup for seniors.

The Dallas-based company markets headsets to assisted living and memory care communities.

Encore at Avalon Park in Orlando is the third in the country to test MyndVR. Residents are participating in a trial to see if it benefits seniors living with dementia.

MyndVR programs provide a 360-degree view of scenes including a 1950s jazz club. Brickler said he was blown away by the reaction of an 85-year-old Dallas woman to the skydiving scenario.

"I don't know where all of this is going, but I do know that the intimacy of the medium is allowing folks to really enjoy things like they've never enjoyed them before," he said. "I've just never seen anything along these lines that actually blends the idea of recreation and therapy together at the same time, like what this medium can do."

There's no scientific backing yet saying VR reduces conditions such as stress, agitation and depression in this population.

"We are absolutely in test mode right now to try to see what makes sense with this new technology and what the seniors want in terms of content," Brickler said.

But he said the outlook is promising.

The minds behind Embodied Labs are taking a different approach in hopes

of helping patients diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Its VR programs target caregivers.

The idea formed more than a decade ago when Rebecca Shaw was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's.

Her daughters, Carrie Shaw and Erin Washington, became part of their mother's care team.

"One of the things that especially Carrie thought about was 'What would it be like if I could actually see what mom was seeing,'" Washington said. "Would that make me better at caring for her?"

Carrie thought about it years later, while preparing her master's project at the University of Illinois Chicago.

"She realized after being in a class with Tom (Leahy), our software developer, that virtual reality technology had gotten to the point where it could simulate a variety of complex conditions from the patient or the person with the disease's perspective."

The team's work culminated in its first lab, We Are Alfred. The 7-minute video takes users into the life of Alfred, a 74-year-old man with macular degeneration and hearing loss, though his eyes.

Washington, curriculum designer for Embodied, said the program is being leased to medical schools in Maine, California and the Netherlands.

The pilot study University of Illinois-Chicago second year medical students using the lab found 30 percent more students said they understood the perspective of an aging patient after experiencing Alfred's story.

They also noticed the students were less likely to use stereotypical terms, such as "old," "frail" and "sick" all the time, to describe the elderly.

"Students are developing complex insight as they go through our simulation," Washington said.

But the creators do not think the programs make users fully understand the struggles of patients after a short video.

"They can show the perspective for that sort of snapshot in time and give people some ideas and strategies," she said.

This fall, Embodied will launch the Betty lab, an Alzheimer's simulation. Washington said we're just beginning to understand the potential of VR.

"Like a lot of developments

The tools are very easy to use and anyone can get involved very quickly and start exploring. I want people to think how can I not just consume, but how can I be somebody who innovates with VR?"

DR. BENJAMIN LOK
professor in the Computer and Information Sciences and Engineering Department at the University of Florida



company, and has been using the technology with medical students at UF.

Before affecting the lives of real people on the job, they are able to interact with virtual patients, preparing for questions such as "What do I do if I can't afford this medication?"

They also are able to build relationships with colleagues, cutting down on operating room mishaps. Studies show poor communication accounts for many errors.

"The human part is an important part of medicine," he said. "These computer simulations provide a safe place for people to practice and get feedback on what they're doing."

Virtual reality, he said, is really about storytelling.

With the technology becoming increasingly accessible — a Google Cardboard headset you can insert your smartphone into can be purchased for \$8 — it can bring about social change.

"Any time you can tell a story, potentially in a different way, you might be able to affect people," Lok said. "They might be able to have more empathy

or understand the situation in a different way."

Instead of reading about homelessness on Skid Row, he said, you can see it.

Lok is one of the co-founders of UF's VR for the Social Good Initiative, which challenges students and staff in fields from chemistry to journalism to figure out how they can use VR to better the world.

He said it no longer takes a large investment of time or money for anyone to experiment with the technology.

"The tools are very easy to use and anyone can get involved very quickly and start exploring," Lok said. "I want people to think how can I not just consume, but how can I be somebody who innovates with VR?"

Brickler said with increased demand, VR's reach across industries will expand.

"There's such an appetite for this," he said. "The opportunities are absolutely limitless."

Ciara Varone is a staff writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 9260, or Ciara.Varone@thevillagesmedia.com.

PUBLIC NOTICE BY SUMTER COUNTY HOUSING SERVICES

STATE HOUSING INITIATIVES PARTNERSHIP (SHIP) PROGRAM
Sumter County's Annual Distribution for the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program Fiscal Year 2017/2018 is \$533,775.00. The allocation will be used for the following strategies:

- Strategy #1 Emergency Repair Strategy – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$15,000.00
Assistance shall be in the form of a zero percent (0%) interest loan secured by a recorded mortgage and note unless the cost is \$1,500 or less, then it will be in the form of a forgivable loan.
Maximum Term: Five (5) years for a forgivable loan and Twenty (20) years for a 0% interest loan
Amount Available: \$34,775.00
Application Cycle: **Opening September 18, 2017 and will close on June 30, 2019 or sooner if all 2017/2018 funds are expended.**
This strategy is for extremely-low, very-low, low, and moderate income persons who own their site built home and need assistance for emergency repairs such as roof, septic systems, HVAC, well, electrical and/or plumbing. The strategy will also assist with the cost for the installation of ramps or handicap accessible bathrooms which require immediate attention and will make the residence more accessible for persons who have special housing needs. **Mobile and manufactured homes are not eligible for assistance.**
- Strategy #2 Owner Occupied Rehabilitation Strategy – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$24,500.00
Assistance shall be in the form of a zero percent (0%) interest loan secured by a recorded mortgage and note.
Maximum Term: 30 years
Amount Available: \$49,000.00
Application Cycle: **Opening September 18, 2017 – closing September 29, 2017**
This strategy is for extremely-low, very-low, low, and moderate income persons who own their site built home and need assistance to rehabilitate their existing residence for safe and sanitary habitation or correction of substantial code violations. If the cost of the repairs exceed 60% of the value of the home according to the Sumter County Property Appraiser's market value, the home will be recommended for demolition and reconstruction. **Mobile and manufactured homes are not eligible for assistance.**
- Strategy #3 Demolition/Reconstruction Strategy – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$93,000.00
Assistance shall be in the form of a zero percent (0%) interest loan secured by a recorded mortgage and note.
Maximum Term: 30 years
Amount Available: \$410,000.00
Application Cycle: **Opening September 18, 2017 – closing September 29, 2017**
This strategy is for extremely-low, very-low, low, and moderate income homeowners to construct a new site built home to replace their unsafe structure where rehabilitation is not financially feasible. Funds will be used for the demolition of the existing home and all other unsafe structures that pose immediate threat to the public's health, safety and welfare located on the property. In cases where the homeowner has an existing mortgage(s), assistance will only be provided if the current mortgage(s) are under \$10,000.00.
- Strategy #4 Purchase Assistance without Rehabilitation Strategy – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$10,000.00
Assistance shall be in the form of a zero percent (0%) interest loan secured by a second recorded mortgage and note.
Maximum Term: 20 years
Amount Available: \$40,000.00
Application Cycle: **Opening September 18, 2017 and will close on June 30, 2019 or sooner if all 2017/2018 funds are expended.**
This strategy is for extremely-low, very-low, low, and moderate income persons. Funds will be awarded for down payment and closing costs to assist eligible first time homebuyers with the purchase of a newly constructed or existing site built home. Prospective homebuyers must qualify as a First Time Homebuyer under the HUD definition. **Mobile and manufactured homes are not eligible for assistance.**
- Strategy #5 Disaster Repair/Mitigation Strategy – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$10,000.00
Funds will be awarded as a grant with no recapture terms.
Maximum Term: 10 years
Amount Available: \$0.00
Application Cycle: **Closed**
SHIP funds will be awarded to applicants in need of home repairs directly caused by a disaster that is declared by an Executive Order of the President or Governor. Funds for disaster mitigation will only be allocated from unencumbered funds or additional funds awarded through Florida Housing Finance Corporation for the disaster. **Mobile and manufactured homes are not eligible for assistance.**
- Strategy #6 Special Needs Rental Group Housing – 2017/2018
Maximum Award: \$10,000.00 per group home bed with the maximum of \$40,000.00 per group home. Assistance shall be in the form of a zero percent (0%) interest loan secured by a recorded mortgage and note with no repayment required unless default occurs.
Maximum Term: Twenty (20) years - The loan will be forgiven at the end of twenty (20) years in the absence of default.
Amount Available: \$0.00
Sponsor Selection Criteria: SCARC, Inc. was chosen as the sponsor in fiscal year 2016/2017.
Application Cycle: **Closed**

Sumter County must meet the statutory requirement to utilize twenty percent (20%) of its local housing distribution to serve persons with special needs. The first priority of these special needs funds must be to serve persons with developmental disabilities as defined in F.S. § 393.063, with an emphasis on home modifications, including technological enhancements and devices, which will allow homeowners to remain independent in their own homes and maintain their homeownership.

For more information about the above strategies or to pick up an application, please call Denna Lafferty at (352) 569-1515, or come to the Housing Services office located at 319 East Anderson Avenue, Bushnell, FL 33513. The hours of operation are Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

SUMTER COUNTY, FLORIDA DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE ON THE BASIS OF RACE, COLOR, NATIONAL ORIGIN, RELIGION, SEX, MARITAL STATUS, FAMILIAL STATUS, DISABILITY, PREGNANCY, OR AGE.

Theater Group Donates Show Proceeds to Charity

The Villages Theater Company has more than doubled its donation this year compared to last.

By SARAH WILSON
Daily Sun Senior Writer

A dramatic comedy performance is helping a charity battle one of the most deadly cancers, as well as provide an outlet for children with serious illnesses in the coming months.

For the past three years, The Villages Theater Company has donated partial proceeds from its live theater shows to local charities. That tradition continued with its summer drama presentation of "Fridays," which was performed Sunday and Monday at Mulberry Grove Recreation Center.

Villages Theater Company President Judy Prior, of the Village of Belle Aire, said thanks to cost-cutting and an increased interest in its programming, the company has more than doubled the amount it has been able to donate to charity this year compared to last.

"The generosity of The Villages public to come and support our plays has turned into us being able to help the community," Prior said.

In 2017 so far, the organization has donated \$22,500 to charities, up from \$8,060 total in 2016.

Beneficiaries have included the Leesburg High School band, the Cancer Research Institute and Boys & Girls Club of Lake and Sumter Counties.

"Once we knew we were safe and able to afford all of our expenses, we started giving," Prior said.

The Villages Theater Company, a registered nonprofit, Prior said, works to provide budget-friendly high-quality live theater to The Villages community, while also doing what it can to give back. The company hosts three fully staged shows each year, as well as three one-act plays and a summer feature.

The performances of "Fridays," a dramedy about love, death and friendship, were dedicated to the memory of Villages Theater Company member Karen Martin. She passed away last month after a four-year battle against pancreatic cancer, Prior said, participating in theater activities up until a week before her passing.

"She still wanted to live life every minute that she could, and she did," Prior said. "She was an inspiration to all of us."

Prior said the proceeds from the show will be donated to two of Martin's favorite charities: Camp Boggy Creek and Pancreatic Cancer Action Network.

Both organizations received \$2,000 donations from the company earlier this year.

Wendy Proctor, major gift officer for Camp Boggy Creek in Eustis, said the donations help

further the camp's mission of creating a free, safe and medically sound camp environment that enriches the lives of children with serious illnesses and their families.

A \$2,000 donation, Proctor said, can send an entire family to a retreat weekend at Camp Boggy Creek, and \$2,500 can cover the cost of a camper's entire weeklong session over the summer.

"All the money that they give is going to help those campers and those camper families come to Camp Boggy Creek for free," Proctor said.

In general, Prior said, the theater tries to focus on supporting charities that benefit children, particularly donating to schools where children are in need, including Villages Elementary of Lady Lake and Fruitland Park Elementary.

"It's just amazing the poverty that is around this area that most people are not aware of," Prior said.

Recently, the group also donated \$2,000 to help the Melon Patch Theatre in Leesburg fund its summer youth program.

"We like to see community theaters succeed," Prior said. "And we're always trying to look around the community to see where we can help."

Sarah Wilson is a senior writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 9245, or sarah.wilson@thevillagesmedia.com.