

Archive article 1998. People tend to think of body suits and head gear when you talk about virtual reality. However, huge strides have been made in much simpler systems. These create a three dimensional world on a computer screen allowing you to move around inside a structure or to neatly interact with other people. The technology is well developed. For example, a large exhibition structure was built recently for a computer company in the US. The structure was sent via e-mail and their executives "walked" around inside it a few minutes later before deciding whether to build it with solid materials or not. VR is routinely used to design supermarkets or nuclear reactors or car interiors.

Any number of people can move around the same VR area at the same time (in theory). If each person is given a virtual body then each person can see the others. This is not so much science fiction as you might think.

The other day I dropped into a Virtual Reality Art gallery and met the designer as well as some others from Hong Kong, London and the US. We met in cyberspace at Alphaworld, just one of a global network of 3-D virtual places. We could see each other and talk by entering words on the screen. However it may not be long before we are able to hear each other.