

## Ready Year One

### Lessons Learned During Our First Year of Virtual Reality

Dalton Bennett

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You may have heard the phrase “orange is the new black,” and while you might think of the Netflix show, I want to focus on the root of the idiom, which refers to trends. Technology is ever-changing, and as a millennial, I’ve witnessed firsthand the evolution of trends in consumer technology, such as the transition from “dumb” phones to smartphones. But with this rapid change, technology often alienates large portions of our community, making it feel less accessible. How did I get here? How did I survive my first year in virtual reality (VR), a technology that sharply contrasts the tech landscape of a rural community? Let’s begin at the beginning.

#### OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2023

In 2023, I hit the ground running. After successfully navigating two rounds of interviews, I accepted the role of Digital Services Specialist at the Paul Sawyier Public Library, located in Frankfort, the capital of Kentucky, which serves a population of 52,000. This position marked an exciting milestone — my first library role following graduate school, where I had focused heavily on emerging technologies in information services and education.

Upon starting, I learned that the library leadership had already begun exploring the idea of incorporating virtual reality (VR) into our programming. Inspired by national trends, my predecessor had introduced the concept as a way to expand educational and recreational services for our community. Libraries across the country were slowly adopting VR, offering it as an innovative way to travel and learn beyond traditional means. For example, Arlington Heights Memorial Library in Illinois used VR to transport seniors in assisted living facilities to global landmarks like the Eiffel Tower. Meanwhile, on the West Coast, the Seattle Public Library partnered with the University of Washington in 2020 to create a VR platform aimed at helping teens learn about mental health through nature simulations.

Seeing the possibilities, our library leadership envisioned launching a VR program — not just as a novelty, but as a strategic addition to our technology services, bridging digital literacy, education, and entertainment for all age groups. Frankfort, KY was ready to step into the world of virtual reality. But one question remained, “Am I ready for VR?”

While I was selected to take on this role, there was still a lot that I needed to learn. My experience with virtual reality was limited and the cost of VR equipment was inaccessible up until this point in time. However, I felt secure in my abilities and knowledge of technology to adopt and facilitate a program that met initial expectations.

Step one was to learn more about VR. What tools do I need? How many? And most importantly, is VR expensive? (Yes!) With the Meta Quest 3’s release approaching, I decided to purchase the best

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consumer VR model at the time. It promised higher resolutions, hand-tracking, and many other features. Best of all, Meta marketed these headsets as being a gateway to groundbreaking, multi-generational experiences all of which were relatively user friendly. Sounds good to me—SOLD!

Next, it was time to pull out the trusty credit card. With a budget of \$3,500, the possibilities seemed endless—or so I thought. Each headset cost \$499.99, so I bought four to allow for as many participants as possible. I also bought accessories, such as Elite Straps (\$70 each), which are the best solution for easily installing and removing the headset from patrons, silicon faceguards (\$40 each) which are ideal for sanitary reasons, and carrying cases (\$24 each), bringing my total to roughly \$2,500. Then, I allotted \$700 to a range of gaming software, from mini golf to scuba diving. Little did I know, that was a mistake.

**Figure 1.** Virtual reality equipment



The last step was to connect to the internet and begin setting up the headsets. Much like computers or gaming consoles, each headset requires a unique account during initial setup — specifically, a Meta account. While Meta accounts can be created using a Facebook account, this is not recommended in a public setting.

My biggest tip during this phase is to create Meta accounts using a series of email aliases. An email alias acts as a decoy address that redirects communications back to a primary email account. For our headsets, I worked with our IT department to create four separate aliases, all connected to my staff email. Although I must maintain access to each alias for account management purposes, all communications and authentication requests are conveniently routed to my main inbox.

To stay organized, be sure to label each headset and its corresponding controllers with the account information. This will make it easier to track which account, and equipment, is associated with which device.

## JANUARY–MARCH 2024

By January, it was time to put VR to the test. The first challenge was battery life. The Meta Quest 3's average battery lasts only two hours, so to offer more than two hours of experience, I needed to rotate the headsets—charging and cooling down one while others were in use.

Scheduling was another challenge. VR experiences vary in length, from hour-long campaigns to short, 15-minute documentaries. Do I offer one-day drop-in sessions and risk overwhelming crowds, or encourage patrons to make appointments? To be continued...

In February 2024, I partnered with the Kentucky Career Center (KCC) to host the Transfr VR program. This program offered workforce simulations, like changing car oil or overseeing a surgical procedure. KCC provided the software and staff at no cost! I used this opportunity to observe best practices in facilitating VR with multiple headsets and limited time. Here's what I learned:

- Understand the experience thoroughly to assist patrons without seeing their actions.
- Maintain a 2:1 ratio of VR headsets to staff, if possible.
- Charge headsets when not in use.
- Expect unexpected and/or late attendees.
- Be transparent about health side effects (e.g., motion sickness). Participants were required to sign a waiver prior to participating.
- VR headsets can accommodate eyewear, but not all eyewear will fit comfortably.
- Time slots worked well; a drop-in system could've worked too.
- Sanitize the headsets thoroughly.
- Be patient!

**Figure 2.** A patron utilizing a VR headset



**APRIL–MAY 2024**

By April, I realized I had spent \$700 on VR experiences for the Meta Quest 3 with little awareness of the free content available through Meta’s apps, like Meta Quest TV, which offers free VR documentaries, animated shorts, and 360° videos. Note to self: Don’t waste money on paid games and experiences—start with the free stuff!

For our first two VR programs, we featured two free experiences: *Anne Frank House VR* and *Maestro VR*. The *Anne Frank House VR* offers a self-paced, hyper-realistic tour of the Secret Annex with narration from Anne Frank’s writings. The program lasted about 45 minutes, so I scheduled it with appointments over two months. *Maestro VR* allowed patrons to participate in a conducting masterclass using hand-tracking. I provided skewers to simulate the conducting experience. Despite some difficulties in assisting patrons, the program was a success. This program worked best as a single day, drop-in offering.

**Figure 3.** A screenshot featuring a room in the Anne Frank House VR experience



By the end of May, we had completed two VR programs, both of which catered to different audiences. Plus, it was easy to connect them back to library resources for future VR opportunities—score!

**JUNE–SEPTEMBER 2024**

By summer, our VR programs had been received with open arms. Most of our audience was adults, and though VR typically appeals more to young adults, we were seeing participants from their 30s to their 70s.

However, a new challenge emerged. I partnered with a colleague to offer a monthly program called VR Demo Day. Each month, we would schedule a gameday where adults could learn to play

a particular VR game. Titles ranged from *Among Us* to *Beat Saber*. However, for many adults, VR was a new experience with a steep learning curve, which led to low participation. Despite success with *Anne Frank House VR* and *Maestro VR*, our VR Demo Day lacked interest from the older adult population. This was most likely due to the games' lack of relevance to our older population and the games' need for advanced dexterity.

It reminded me of reader's advisory: finding the right book can be challenging, and similarly, finding the right VR experience requires discovering the right genre for your audience.

#### **OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2024**

A profound impact that comes with VR are the stories that shortly follow. Let me explain. Of the many people that I have had the honor of introducing VR, there are two that stand out, and for privacy reasons, I will refer to them as Greg and Stacy. Both Greg and Stacy are, most likely, in their 70s and approached virtual reality with hesitation, primarily due to a lack of understanding about what it is and how it works.

Between October and November, our library purchased a VR documentary license from TARGO Productions titled *JFK: Memento* (this license consumed the remaining \$300 of my budget). Designed for VR, the film immerses viewers in the report of JFK's assassination. Both Greg and Stacy scheduled viewings, and were both thoroughly amazed.

Greg, local and eager to adapt to new technologies, quickly embraced VR. He's returned for every session and often tells me how life-changing the experience has been, never imagining such innovation was available in his own community. In fact, Greg purchased his own VR equipment and has been demonstrating his newly acquired skills to his family, claiming that he is witnessing the future.

Stacy, while also interested, tends to offer advice. She regularly asks about upcoming VR experiences and has become an integral part of my learning process. Stacy doesn't hold back—if she thinks something needs improvement, she tells me. While it felt blunt at first, my advice to any library introducing VR is to welcome feedback. So, I began holding 5-10 minute debriefs after each experience. Both Stacy and Greg eagerly shared their memories and reflections during these debriefs, thus deepening their connection to the experience

#### **JANUARY 2025**

We've reached the finish line—our first year in VR is complete. This inaugural year witnessed a total of four VR experiences and attracted over 50 adult participants. Through a combination of marketing efforts — including our website, social media channels, library newsletter, and in-house promotions — we were able to generate strong community interest and engagement.

If I could offer one last piece of advice, it would be this: never underestimate the curiosity and capabilities of your patrons. Introducing new technology can be intimidating, especially when it's unfamiliar. But fortunately for us, most embraced the challenge and found themselves craving more, even if the start had a few bumps along the way.

And now, year two is already underway. We're kicking things off strong with *The March 360*, a powerful VR experience that places viewers alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the March on Washington in 1963. In April, as part of our *One Book One Frankfort* initiative, we'll step into Greek mythology for the 2025 season. Patrons will have the chance to explore a private virtual art

museum showcasing Greek art, from statues to paintings. And lastly, another incredible TARGO Productions film titled *Surviving 9/11: 27 Hours Under the Rubble* will be available for patrons to view in VR later this fall.

With so many exciting opportunities ahead, I'm thrilled to continue growing our virtual reality program and building lasting connections with those experiencing VR for the first time. One thing is certain: VR is definitely the *new black*—at least here in Frankfort, Kentucky.