



The Visionary Position: The Inside Story of the Digital Dreamers Who Are Making Virtual Reality a Reality

Fred Moody

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America leads the world in the creation of new industries. From personal computing to Internet start-ups to biotechnology, hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in value have been created from what were nothing more than figments of imagination in the minds of entrepreneurs. But moving from a dreamy vision to the hard realities of companies operating in the marketplace is a messy business at best. Finding start-up capital, dealing with the clash of egos and personalities, getting the technical specifications right, building the product, and marketing it to the right audience are all stressful, expensive, time-consuming, high-risk endeavors.

A writer's worm's-eye view of an industry coming into being provides the reader a unique perspective on just why America is the world's capital of progress and innovation. Fred Moody spent a year tracking developments at the center for virtual reality research, a cluster of Seattle companies formed around the University of Washington's Human Interface Technology Laboratory, and in *The Visionary Position* he chronicles the birth of the VR industry.

Virtual reality products hold out immense promise, not only to those hoping to make money from new companies and products, but to those in need as well. Some VR products have the potential to help people with severe sight problems or Parkinson's disease overcome their handicaps; others can help people with severe psychological problems treat their phobia and depression. VR entrepreneurs are looking in these and other areas for the spectacular, high-payoff, commercial breakthrough that will bring widely used applications to military and consumer markets. It's not surprising, then, that an unholy combination of profit motive and idealism brought together an odd group of people at the HIT lab and the companies it spawned: Virtual i/O, F5 Labs, Microvision, and Zombie Virtual Reality Entertainment.

Fred Moody's year at HITL resulted in incredible fly-on-the-wall reporting. He gets inside the lives of an almost unbelievable cast of characters who are trying to make high-tech history: the buttoned-down academic who spent twenty years doing military research before becoming director of HITL; the male software developer who thought nothing of wearing his best dress to corporate presentations; the venture capitalists interested in only one thing--a high return on the investment they would make; the oddball hardware and software engineers more interested in invention than convention; and the company executives at VR start-up firms working desperately to commercialize products and bring them to market.

Today there are approximately 400 companies in the United States at work on virtual-reality products. *The Visionary Position* is an up-close and very personal look at where it all began. It tells the tale of an industry ready to break out into many markets: business, medicine, exercise, gaming, the Internet, communications, and mass entertainment. It is also an important study of the American way of creating and doing business, and of the American technopreneurial character.

A Man

"Tom Furness--more formally known as Dr. Thomas A.

Furness III--is an exotic commodity in the Pacific Northwest. . . . His enthusiasms are highly contagious, bewitching investors, entrepreneurs, students, fellow faculty, and journalists alike. When he talks about his hopes and dreams for virtual reality, you find yourself reflexively reaching for your wallet--whether to hand over its contents to Furness or to hide it from him, you're never quite sure. . . ."

A Vision

"Now the speech was building to a crescendo . . . Furness was offering the museum an opportunity to change the world, to shift the paradigm of education, to "open the portal between information and the mind." With the system he envisioned, "if you want to, you can crank it up to a hundred Gs and juggle on Jupiter." Even after more than thirty years of work on this interface, he was still reduced to an awestruck kid when he thought about its potential. . . ."

A Business?

"One message that crossed my screen included an attempt at explaining [the employees'] obsession with the misfortunes of their [bosses] . . . 'Everyone needs some source of drama in their life. And VIO has it all, sex, . . . office politics, backstabbing, power struggles, good and evil, money, set in a hi-tech world. Dallas with circuit boards.'" . . . to conceive a new industry.

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