

Virtual reality chatroom app could boost VR industry

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

During the first month of 2018, an app called VRChat shot from [4,000 installs to more than two million](#).

As the name suggests, VRChat is an internet chat application. It can be played either on screen or with an immersive headset. The increase in

potential users wearing [virtual reality headsets](#) could herald a big change for the industry as a whole.

The next big thing

As with any new technology, investors are always looking for the next big thing. So far, progress for VR has been good but not great by investment standards. What is needed is the same kind of phenomenon that drove the rise of the smartphone.

To be clear, installing the software doesn't mean that [two million people](#) are using it every day. The number of daily users [is in the thousands](#), but nevertheless it is significant.

To get the best from the technology, users need to buy VR headsets, either an Oculus Rift, HTC Vive or similar, and a computer capable of running this hardware. That in itself can be a significant investment.

According to a [MIT technology review](#), 400,000 Oculus Rifts and 500,000 HTC Vives were sold in 2016. A two million or more user base would imply that these figures could be doubled in the first months of 2018 alone.

If VRChat was to continue on its upward trajectory, one might expect sales of VR hardware to come on the back of this one application. Of course, once you have the VR hardware then you will start using it for more than just VRChat.

What to make of VRChat

When you enter the first chatroom, you are given an avatar, which you can change. There are many chatrooms and you can walk around inside

them. You can make your avatar talk and make gestures or expressions – and even clever things like flips using the hand controllers.

Engaging in audible conversations with other users is of course the main point. Mirrors are provided in some areas so that you can see yourself as an avatar. Overall the feeling is rather like being in a vast network of strange rooms with strangers, a bit like visiting the mall in cyberspace.

A personal foray into the domain left me with mixed feelings. I own an HTC Vive and have the full panoply of the immersive experience available to me. On a personal level I was unimpressed, but then chat is not really my thing. I found the movement nauseating because one cannot teleport easily around the space.

A basic issue with VR is moving in space without actually moving your body. If you engage a fluid steady movement around a space, this often generates the feeling of nausea because the body is standing still. It is not unlike seasickness. So, in most apps, developers tend to put in a teleport facility on the hand controller so that you can jump from one place to another, which is more pleasant.

Apart from that, the standard avatars available are fun but limited, but it seems people bring their own. Also, engaging in chat with strangers in a virtual space is almost the same as walking into a bar and starting up a random conversation. This doesn't come naturally.

That being said, the graphics and environs are of a good standard, as one might expect. Chatophiles, however, will probably have a very [different view](#), and VRChat is most likely to be [attractive](#) to them.

Pushing VR into mainstream

VRChat is not the only chat program designed for immersion.

AltspaceVR was launched in 2015 with the aim of taking advantage of the new technologies. It had some initial success but almost failed due to [lack of funding](#).

It was bought by [Microsoft in 2017](#) but has not, so far, attained the same heights as VRChat. Why this app is more popular than another is hard to say, just as the popularity of Snapchat or any other internet phenomenon is almost impossible to predict in advance.

Perhaps this is the real virtue of the online community, in that normal business models don't necessarily apply. After all, nobody would have expected a woman putting on a Wookie mask to generate over 10 million views.

VRChat will either continue to rise or peak. However, [Second Life](#), launched in 2003 and is still [generating millions of dollars](#) in revenue both for the owners, Linden Life, and other content providers.

Based on the experience of that model, VRChat is here to stay. Although its contribution to the VR industry is not yet known, it is only a matter of time before this app or something like it pushes VR into the mainstream.

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