

Virtual reality brings field scouting to your recliner

BY PETER GREDIG

The promise and hype surrounding virtual reality (VR) is based on the ability to experience an activity or location without actually being there.

Cameras that capture high-definition video and 360-degree views enable VR access. The easiest way to participate is to purchase an entry-level viewer, load a VR app or video to your smartphone, put your smartphone into the viewer – and watch. You can link a controller to your phone and navigate through whatever environment you're in.

I swam with whales, rode a rollercoaster and took part in a WWII fighter plane dogfight – all from my recliner. It's a compelling experience, even with a \$40 viewer and free apps. The sensation of "being there" ranges from hokey to very realistic, but you quickly get used to being able to look around you in all directions in a 3D environment. It's cool.

No surprise, gamers looking for more lifelike experiences are dominant drivers of the technology. But there are real world opportunities for education and training. A medical student can get a much better understanding of an intricate surgery via VR video, and fifth-graders in a Canadian classroom can experience what it's like to be on Mount Everest. Textbook, shmextbook.

So what's the play for VR in agriculture? Drones with 360-degree cameras flying close to the crop canopy can capture video while scouting fields. If a problem area is detected, the agronomist or farmer can potentially use VR to go to



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the exact location and see if they can diagnose the problem. In fact, drone-generated 360-video would allow you to virtually walk every acre the drone covered, from any location at any time.

I expect we'll soon see VR as part of sales pitches, operator manuals and maintenance routines for more sophisticated farm equipment. A virtual walk around a new combine or seeder would help prospective buyers see and understand features. It could also help with operator training and equipment maintenance. In the U.K., John Deere created a six-screen, fully immersive

combine simulator to give first-time operators an idea of what's involved before they head to the field.

There's another huge opportunity for VR in agriculture: it lets city folk experience what it's like to be on a farm. Farm and Food Care Canada has a number of virtual farm tours for various farm types and food processors posted on a special website (www.farmfood360.ca) that also provides help on how to best access and view the virtual tours.

It's a great place to start if you're new to VR. ■