

By Eric Jakows

PHOENIX — Virtual reality has exploded in 2016, and entrepreneurs and innovators in Arizona are taking advantage of its capabilities.

Products such as the Oculus Rift and the HTC Vive have made virtual reality more accessible, but startups are already looking ahead.

Timefire, an Arizona-based company, is developing a virtual reality city called Hypatia — a place “intended to break the barriers of geographic and economic isolation,” according to John Wise, Timefire founder.

Wise first conceived the idea of a virtual city about 25 years ago when he played the first first-person shooter game, Doom.

“The only bummer was I had to kill these monsters,” Wise said. “All I wanted to do was explore the space station.”

Wise later built a supercomputer in the late 1990s and started an internet café in the early 2000s. He founded Timefire in June 2014 with a team of just four people.

Hypatia is based on major cultural cities from around the world, such as Venice, New York City, Barcelona, Kyoto and Amsterdam among others — a city “where the currency is not mayhem but creativity,” Wise said.

Hypatia will be free, but users will be able to buy a virtual apartment for \$29.95 to store their goods.

Wise predicts artists and creators will be most attracted to Hypatia. He expects that children and teenagers who live in isolated areas will be drawn to Hypatia because they might not have the economic capability to travel to a big city to experience art and culture.

“For a kid in Heber, Arizona ... It might be beyond their economic potential and certainly beyond the geographic limitations of who is going to take that curious 14-year-old the 110-mile drive down to Phoenix to see a 90-minute concert. We want to break this down.”

Timefire is aiming to launch Hypatia during the holiday season of 2016.

While Wise is harnessing the possibilities of virtual reality for gaming, Retha Hill, the executive director of the Digital Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, is working with journalism students to utilize its advantages for visual storytelling.

Hill said virtual reality immerses audiences in a way traditional video can not.

“Not only are you looking around,” Hill said “but you feel like you are walking through a particular place ... It really puts you inside of the action.”

“We are hoping [as journalists] that there will be more empathy and connectedness to the content to the point where people are immersed in it” Hill added.

Many of Hill’s students have landed jobs within the VR industry straight out of college. Stevi Rex, the marketing manager at Greenlight VR, is one of those students.

According to Rex, 2016 has been a turning point for the industry.

“While virtual reality has existed for quite some time, this is the first time that virtual reality is ready for consumers, and at a price that is somewhat practical for regular consumers to get their hands on,” Rex said. “The availability of consumer virtual reality has been the biggest advancement for virtual reality as it begins to progress toward being available to the masses.”

Despite the advances, Hill said the technology still has ways to go.

“The biggest problem is the viewing,” Hill said. “Quite frankly, the headsets are bulky — they’re big, so you can’t stick them in your back pocket like you can with your phone.”

However, Hill mentioned Figment VR designed a phone case that turns into a VR viewer, which could be available at the end of the year.

As virtual reality continues to experience growing pains, both Hill and Wise both see the potential of VR to expand beyond gaming or storytelling. They mentioned how it could change in the coming years.

“I think the big thing is going to be the holographic evolution, where you can sit in your living room, and the 360 [video] and virtual reality is all around you,” Hill said. “That way it could be a lot more social.”

Wise envisioned how it could revolutionize travel and leisure — regarding restaurants “you can put on a headset and take a look at why you should spend \$100 more to have a riverfront view than to have that back room that’s cheaper,” Wise said. “VR will change everything.”