

VIRTUAL FOCUS, REAL TALENT



Seth Woolston, 18, a Boone High School senior, discusses the airsoft gun he built using virtual reality software and a 3-D printer, at the conference this week.

MARCO SANTANA/
THE REGISTER

Virtual reality students show off projects at Altoona conference

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The confidence Seth Woolston shows should come as no surprise, as he tells other students about a replica rifle he built using virtual reality software and a 3-D printer. The 18-year-old Boone High School senior has been working with virtual reality for about six years.

But once he steps out of the spotlight, Woolston becomes more like a typical high school student, shyly answering questions and hesitating while trying to put into words the attraction virtual reality holds for him.

East Marshall High School Principal Rex Kozak said that potential connection students have made with vir-

tual reality was one reason he helped organize the Virtual Reality Education Pathfinders program, which held its fourth annual conference this week in Altoona.

"Through this, kids learn to believe in themselves, believe in who they are," he said. "They learn they have something to contribute. They can make a difference."

The fourth conference brought students from nearly 100 Iowa schools, and some from out of state, to show off virtual reality creations while speaking to educators and leaders of industry who covet the skills students use to create their displays.

Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds and business leaders including Vermeer President and CEO Mary Andringa spoke to the

students, a sign that building the state's technology workforce pipeline continues to be a priority.

"Kids get to hear from people in these industries talk about the importance of using this technology they are getting a handle on," said Jack Harris of the Iowa Innovation Corp., a non-profit group. "If industry leaders can continue to expose students to the opportunities of using this technology, they will start looking at Vermeer, at John Deere and other small tech companies and stay in Iowa."

Iowa Business Council Executive Director Elliott Smith said programs like the virtual reality one can help companies eventually find the work-

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ers they need.

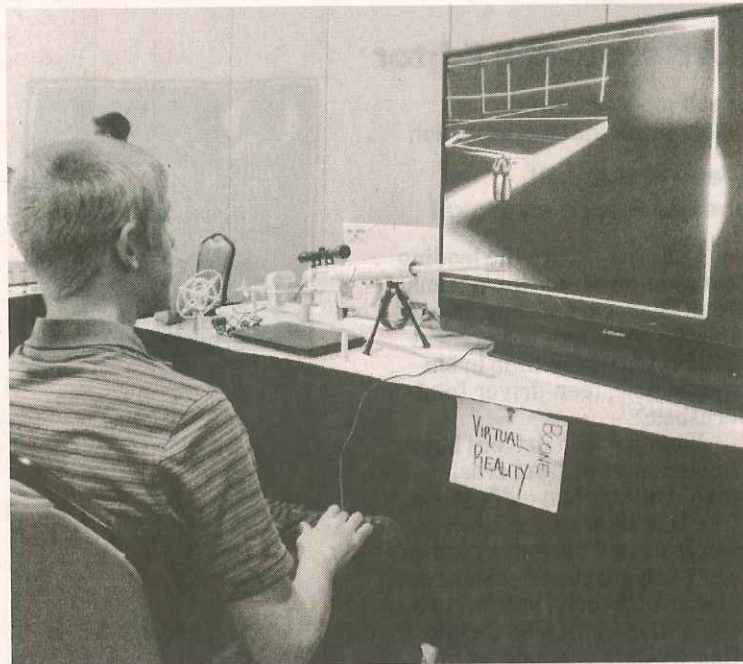
"It produces a new pool of talent for them to focus on and, hopefully, it keeps them in the state," he said.

Students showed off their projects, which included things like a Tron-like virtual reality game and Woolston's rifle. Representatives from different university programs, such as Iowa State University's Virtual Reality Applications Center, were also there to talk to students about their programs.

When the conference was being dreamed up about six years ago, Smith said, advanced manufacturing and other industries were seeing the benefits of virtual reality for their businesses.

In addition, he said, students who had not found their niche have found a place to flourish. That includes students like Woolston, who plans to study mechanical engineering at ISU.

Woolston built his replica rifle using a photo he found and then entering dimensions on a virtual reality program. These specifications were then fed into a program attached to a 3-D



Russell Manternach, 15, of Starmont High School plays a TRON-like virtual reality game built by a Boone High School student, at the Virtual Reality Education Pathfinders conference in Altoona on Tuesday. MARCO SANTANA/THE REGISTER

printer, which created several hard plastic pieces Woolston assembled to build his final product.

But while Woolston said virtual reality has been a hobby for several years, he said talking to other students about the pro-

cess was encouraging.

"It was nice to seek out other people interested in making things," he said. "But this is not only a way to make things. There are engineers out there now using this to solve problems in the world."