

we write about the things we build and the things we consume

 written by Emils Solmanis on 10 May 2016 in review

vive la réalité virtuelle

It's hardly a secret that I'm a **gamer**. I'd like to think I'm a pretty casual Sunday gamer, but considering I have a **Razer** mouse, a **Corsair keyboard that lights up**, a **dedicated SteelSeries controller** just to make the **Dark Souls** series more enjoyable, and my gaming rig cost me more than a sane person would even consider spending on something they'll use mostly for entertainment, I've accepted the fact that I'm probably much closer to the *hard-core gamer* label than the casual Sunday one.

once upon a time

Some four years ago, one of the very few **developers** I've really looked up to since I consciously remember myself programming got on board what seemed like an insane idea, **Virtual Reality**. But I believed that if anyone at all could pull off turning it into reality, John Carmack was the guy. One amazing **Kickstarter campaign**, a **\$2 billion acquisition** by Facebook and some 4 years later, the headsets actually shipped this spring. Somewhere along the way, Valve got hooked on the idea, **teamed up with HTC** and made their own version. Their headsets shipped within a week of Oculus'. The rest is history, virtual reality is reality.

all aboard the hardware train

I'd had a go at both of Oculus' dev kits before. The DK1 was quite ridiculous, not much more than just a proof of concept. The DK2 blew my socks off. Having followed the tech for the last 4-5 years, I knew I was getting myself a set. I opted for the Vive, for various boring reasons. It arrived last week.

This is not a review, **there are plenty to go** around by professional journalists. However, having had the opportunity to try the early editions of this and now having a final consumer version at home, I feel the need to share my impressions.

First of all, it really blows my mind that we've gone from a nauseating, pixelated proof of concept to this in 4 years. The difference is like discovering fire and going to the Moon in a rocket and coming back. The consumer version has decent resolution, excellent tracking, and at 90 fps, no blur and nausea to speak of. The experience is absolutely 100% immersive, the headset doesn't feel particularly clunky once you get it on, and the tracking of both the headset and the controllers is instant and perfect. The amount of engineering that's gone into this is crazy. Having fiddled with hardware and being a software engineer, I can't help but be amazed at how they've achieved full room tracking with latency under 3 ms with just 2 sensors and a bunch of IR LEDs.

Secondly, I love how **well thought out** the UX is for a first gen product. Actual

games aside, the Steam interface has been very nicely adapted to the inputs, and the failsafes like Chaperone work incredibly well, to the point where I'm not freaked out about not being able to see anything, which was everyone's main concern with room scale VR. Alleviating these concerns is a **major** step towards wide scale adoption.

And thirdly, I'd like to make a prediction and say that this is going to go big. Like [Chris](#), I've gotten to the point where I **don't make those sorts of statements lightly**, but here's why I think VR is going to get huge.

For one, a lot of people smarter than me have invested **huge** amounts of money into this. \$2 billion by Facebook, who knows how much cash Valve and HTC burned on R&D for their's. Sony probably sunk even more into their PSVR. Of course this alone doesn't mean the tech can't fail, but continued massive investment into the area is definitely a good signal.

More importantly, every single time I've seen anyone try it, without fail, people convert instantly. I've seen this quite a few times now, though with the Oculus DK2. The last time was just a week ago. My partner was a skeptic and "didn't get it". I'm not exaggerating, it literally took 10 minutes to go from that to "OH. MY. GOD! This is incredible!".

There are obvious obstacles the tech needs to overcome, but they're all doable. To give you a couple of quick examples,

- price. This needs to go from £1500 to £300 to reach the masses, but the [PlayStation VR](#) is a good first step in that direction. Also the newly announced [NVidia Pascal](#) cards allegedly run circles around the latest Maxwell models (which are required for VR), so I expect a significant price drop on those.
- wires. Being tethered to your GPU is suboptimal, but transmitting high-resolution video at 90 fps over wifi isn't quite there yet either. Adding batteries to make the headset wireless would also add weight, which is another obstacle. None of these are fundamentally unsolvable.
- design. Both of the top headsets out now weigh about 500 grams, which isn't much for regular use, but the laws of physics still apply and inertia is a thing. In some faster paced games swinging around a pound of expensive stuff strapped to your head gets a bit scary.
- apps. Over the week I've realised that simply recompiling games with a newer engine version that supports VR doesn't work. This is a fundamentally different paradigm of game design. The whole scene is just starting out, and so far my favourite in terms of gameplay and general feel is probably [Audioshield](#).

What we have now feels like an early adopter device, that, while it does what it says on the tin, is also obviously a first gen product. It has the feel of an iPhone 1, something that gets many, many things spot on, but is a bit rough around the edges. Yet if we've come from zero to hero in 4 years, I can but imagine how far this will go in another 4.

How about you? What do you think about the new Virtual Reality craze? Have you tried it yet? Let us know in the comments!

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