



THE ULTIMATE ESCAPE

Is Virtual Reality Finally Ready to Get Real?

By Sky Thomas Gidge

Virtual reality's introduction to the world was an amazing failure. The Sensorama used a 3-D film to simulate a motorcycle ride through Brooklyn, complete with blowing wind and a seat that rumbled with the motion of a mock engine. The year was 1962.

Designed for arcade-like use, it was an impressive invention, but producing the Sensorama was deemed too expensive and complicated to be commercially viable. American cinematographer Morton Heilig would never sell his visionary machine.

The same can't be said for Emax project manager Fuli Cheng, 31, one of the many people riding the resurgence of VR (virtual reality) technology. Sitting outside a VR cafe in Shenzhen wearing a plaid shirt and khaki pants, Fu looks like a white-collar worker enjoying his weekend.

"It's only been two years, in that time we've developed about 300 experience shops on the Chinese mainland," Fu says before taking a sip of his coffee. "It's crazy."

Just as the Sensorama would have done, experience shops have given the curious a chance to try VR. For about RMB50, customers can sit in devices like Emax's Eggmax,

which moves a pair of seats in sync with images displayed in VR headsets. There is even a vent blowing wind.

Emax hardware is used in about 300 experience shops in China and 60 in South Korea, says Fu, who told a Belgian delegation in October that Emax makes a monthly revenue of about RMB30 million by targeting upscale malls.

"In Japan we don't really have VR things. But in Shenzhen it's all over the place," said Forbes Japan reporter Yuji Ueda walking through a Shenzhen shopping center. "There's nothing like this."

Outside of China, the pay-to-play concept may not be as widespread, but it has been applied on a grander scale, with VR attractions opening in Utah and New York's Times Square last year. Called The Void, visitors strapped a computer to their backs, allowing untethered movement through a virtual world supplemented by very real walls, mist machines and heat lamps.

And while the technology made its presence felt globally in 2016, there is little doubt the high-water mark was reached on the Chinese mainland, with up to 4,000 experience shops running as of last April, accord-

ing to the China Electronics Standardization Institute.

Yet, a five-minute ride in a shopping mall falls short of the VR we were promised during the technology's rebirth in the 90s, when it was touted as something you would use at home. By the mid 90s – and with the 1996 failure of Nintendo's Virtual Boy system – it became apparent the technology simply wasn't ready.

This was supposed to change in 2016, when VR headsets were released by Sony, Facebook-backed Oculus and HTC.

Dutchman Patrick Weermanam bought into what he views as the future.

"I put [the HTV Vive] on and after that I was sold. It brought me back to being a little kid 20 years ago," said Weermanam, who lives in Dongguan and is developing a Tetris-like VR game. "You get your first mobile phone, you get your first computer. It's that kind of feeling."

China hopes to be front and center in the development of VR, with the government having already created various funding schemes to have the technology developed domestically.

In November, the Shenzhen government

and Taiwan-based electronics company HTC signed a two pronged agreement, with HTC receiving government support to create a China VR Research Institute. The agreement will also see HTC get help establishing a RMB10 billion VR research fund, according to a press release.

The deal remains grand and vague, however, with Fu uncertain when “the money will come down.”

Money or not, the technology is spreading at a grass-roots level, but not always in ways industry insiders believe is healthy for the technology.

Experience shops rankle the sensibilities of purists like Martin Meissner, who calls the simulated rides “a bit of a cash grab.” Meissner’s efforts to bring VR to the public – while creating a content management system – took the form of the brick and mortar VR Lounge in Shenzhen’s Bao’an.

After months of construction, it opened to word-of-mouth fanfare, pitting teams of players against each other.

“If we weren’t the first one doing this, we were one of the first ones,” said Meissner.

Now a search on Dianping in China’s major cities turns up hundreds of lounges allowing you to pay for a VR experience, some of

the businesses being little more than a rented office and a VR headset.

Despite becoming more commonplace, VR still isn’t ready for a place in the living room between the television and computer.

The technology still causes motion sickness in some, possibly caused when images projected in the headset lag behind the movement of the head. And even if the problem is solved, the updated hardware may not make it into consumers’ hands until 2018.

“The next difficulty is finding a killer app, like a Super Mario for the NES, or Sonic for Sega,” said Meissner.

Game developer Weermanam agrees, adding that knowledge of how to properly make VR software is also a huge roadblock.

“You don’t have a teacher, no one can tell you what is good and what is wrong,” said Weermanam, who provided video of his game, but couldn’t demonstrate it because of a recent coding error. “For every problem you have, there is no answer.”

Although the answers are likely to come as major companies like Google, Facebook and Tencent invest in VR technology, there remains a much more material barrier: the price.

The HTC Vive system costs more than

RMB6,000 and requires an equally expensive computer to run it.

“These companies can’t demand such high prices and expect to be widely adopted,” said Atilla Csanyi, whose VR men’s health product raised USD144,300 on Indiegogo. Though Csanyi believes market competition will eventually push VR hardware prices down.

Back in the VR Cafe, Fu asks a person how they feel after a simulated amusement park ride in an Emax product. The answer? A bit dizzy.

“You see there are some problems with the technology,” Fu says. When asked when VR technology will be ready for the home, his answer is simple: “It’ll be about five to 10 years.”



INSIDE VR: DESCRIBING THE INDESCRIBABLE

By Matthew Bossons

Explaining virtual reality to someone who has never tried it is like trying to explain the color blue to a person suffering from lifelong vision loss – it’s difficult to find words that can accurately portray the experience.

This writer’s inaugural virtual reality journey commenced last December, when I had the opportunity to try the new HTC Vive at a VR content developing studio located near Guangzhou’s Happy Valley Mall.

What follows is my best attempt to relay the experience in detail (though extreme feelings of vertigo and claustrophobia have somewhat clouded my memory).

The mask slips over my head, covering my eyes like bulky snowboarding goggles. Everything is black, but a dark desert-like landscape slowly fades into vision. Directly in front of me are three large, bright images standing upright like paintings on invisible easels. A woman gently puts a small club-like controller in each of my hands, then guides my finger towards a trigger button.

Of the images in front of me, one catches my eye. I point my hand towards an image of a shipwreck submerged under clear Caribbean waters. As soon as I do, a red dot appears on the image and I press the trigger resting against my index finger.

The desert disappears and I suddenly find myself standing on the wooden deck of a sunken vessel. In front of me, fish swirl around with reckless abandon. I reach out to touch the colorful creatures but they zip away before I get too close.

A staff member at the VR facility tells me to look over to my left. I peer over my shoulder and see a large dark figure moving through the water. As it draws closer, I realize it is a seemingly life-size whale cruising down the port side of the boat. As the giant cetacean passes me, the simulation fades into darkness and I’m back in the desert.

“You know the Fruit Ninja game? We are going to try that next,” says a studio staff member.

The dark barren landscape fades again and now I am standing in a cartoon-like town. The controllers in my right and left hand become digital swords and fruit flies through the air in front of me. I slash frantically, like a mad ninja. Fruit bursts around me and I accidentally hit a bright purple bomb hiding amongst the produce. Naturally, it explodes.

Next up, a VR staffer tells me, is a skiing simulation. A mountain landscape opens before me, complete with trees, rocks, deer and, obviously, snow. My controllers have

turned from swords to ski poles. I start off across flat terrain, but the grade changes and soon I’m careening down a slope, dodging obstacles at breakneck speeds.

The feeling of velocity is so real that I almost lose my balance and fall backwards.

The simulation fades after I run head-on into a deer and find myself standing back in the shadowy wasteland yet again.

When I finally pull off the goggles, it takes a second for my eyes to adjust and I realize that I have been sweating profusely.

Would I recommend VR to others? Sure – but if you’re prone to motion sickness, take warning.



To watch Matt’s VR adventure as it unfolded, scan the QR code on left.

