Augmented reality puts players into video game action

June 13 2014, by Glenn Chapman

A street luge rider races down a winding mountain road, zips under a truck and through a curve and into the path of an oncoming car.

The vulnerable rider whips his upper body to one side in a futile bid to evade impact.

The world goes red, then he harmlessly passes through the auto in a video game that made play visceral using Sony "Morpheus" virtual reality headgear paired with a PlayStation 4 console.

Moments earlier, the player was a knight wielding swords and maces outside a castle, before a dragon swooped down and ate him.

Putting players into game worlds using new technology such as Morpheus or Oculus headgear was a featured trend at the major E3 video game gathering that wrapped here on Thursday.

"Who doesn't want to be a knight slashing in armor and firing a cross bow?" Sony Computer Entertainment chief Andrew House asked while happily recounting his first time in the Morpheus demo taking place behind closed doors at the show.

"You are at the point where you can generate that magical sense of presence; your brain tricks you into thinking you are actually there."

Pulse-pounding potential

Next to the Sony booth on the show floor was Oculus, which caused such a sensation that leading social network Facebook announced in March that it was buying the startup in a $2 billion deal.

Facebook co-founder and chief Mark Zuckerberg said acquiring Oculus was a long-term bet that making the social network's offerings more immersive would pay off.

"People will build a model of a place far away and you will just go see it; it is just like teleporting," Zuckerberg when the takeover was announced.

"I do think gaming is a start."

Zuckerberg billed the acquisition as part of a drive to build the "next major computing platform that will come after mobile."

The pulse-pounding potential of virtual reality was found in a corner of the E3 show floor where startup Virtuix showed off an Omni circular treadmill that let players wearing Oculus Rift roam game worlds by really walking.

Rifle controller clutched tightly in hands, a user carefully explored underground concrete passageways and rooms, only to wind up blasting away at and trying to outrun creatures attacking from unexpected directions.

A brief session of play ramped up the player's heart rate, made him sweat and logged about half a mile of walking as measured by the Omni prototype.

The next big thing

Virtuix chief Jan Goetgeluk began working on Omni three years ago to create a way to physically walk around virtual worlds instead of using controllers to navigate.

His startup brought in slightly more than a million dollars in a Kickstarter crowd-financing campaign last year and recently took in $3 million from venture capitalists.

"Virtual reality is the next big thing; you see it here at E3," Goetgeluk told AFP.

The Omni's convex base is lined with sensors and treadmills come with special slick shoes that slide easily along its curved surface. Circular railing and belt harnesses keep people from falling or stepping off.

Adding walking to virtual reality could have uses beyond gaming in tourism, training, and health care. US space agency NASA has expressed interest in Morpheus, according to Sony's House.

"I have not seen in quite a few years such a groundswell of developer interest," House said of the buzz created by virtual reality gear in the video game industry.

Ubisoft co-founder and chief Yves Guillemot saw promise of virtual reality in gaming, but noted it comes with the challenge of creating play that people will want to immerse themselves in for 20 hours or more.

"There is some work to do to make sure you have the fantastic experience there that can last long enough," the head of the France-based video game titan told AFP.

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