Leap Motion opens door to reach into virtual worlds

February 17 2016, by Glenn Chapman

Leap Motion co-founder David Holz, at the San Francisco startup's headquarters, demonstrates finger tracking technology that lets people use natural hand movements to interact with virtual worlds on February 9, 2016

California virtual reality startup Leap Motion on Wednesday opened a door for makers of games or other applications to literally touch virtual worlds.

The San Francisco firm is using its expertise in computer tracking of hands and fingers to let people manipulate things in virtual reality with the kind of dexterity that they do in the real world.

Leap Motion released "Orion," a combination of hardware and software that lets people use their hands to interact naturally with virtual environments instead of merely watching or needing to use controllers.

"I'm not just being shown a digital space, I am actually in a digital space," Leap Motion co-founder David Holz told AFP while providing a demonstration of Orion.

"It is a seminal point where technology is just another material in there world; there are atoms and electrons and then bits and bytes all just one thing, and that is pretty awesome."

Virtual reality is among current hot technology trends, with Facebook-owned Oculus taking pre-orders for eagerly-awaited Rift headgear and Sony poised to field a rival device that works with PlayStation video game consoles.

Eyewear designed to hold smartphones that act as screens for virtual reality experiences is already offered by an array of companies including Google and South Korean consumer technology colossus Samsung.

Even Apple is reported to have a team secretly working on virtual and augmented reality gear in a budding challenge to Oculus Rift and Microsoft HoloLens.

Microsoft is expected to release a developers version of HoloLens augmented reality visors this year.

'Critical' to winning fans

Unlike virtual reality which immerses people in fictional worlds, augmented reality makes information appear to float in the real world.

California-based Apple has not commented on reports it is exploring virtual reality, but chief executive Tim Cook voiced interest during a quarterly earnings call last month.

While video game players have been natural early targets for virtual reality, the technology is being put to use for education, medicine, sports, pornography and more.

"Having hands is critical for virtual reality to go mainstream," Leap Motion co-founder and chief executive Michael Buckwald told AFP.

"Many thousands of years of evolution have given us the ability to use our hands to do incredibly complicated things in a way that, to us, seems automatic."

Orion software will work with Leap Motion hand-tracking sensors already on the market, and the company is collaborating with gadget makers to build Orion into consumer devices, according to the co-founders.

"The general notion of virtual reality is that it should be as much like reality as possible," Holz said.

"Having your hands is a natural thing."

Most virtual reality gear demonstrated thus far have immersed people in faux worlds as spectators or used hand-held controllers for interacting with fantasy environments.

Orion was built from the ground up specifically for virtual reality.

"It's radically smoother, faster, more reliable, and far more capable than even the best of what's existed before," Holz said.

Developers can download Orion software free online at leapmotion.com/developers if they want to try it out on devices that use the company's sensors.

"The holy grail of virtual reality is a sense of total immersion and presence," Buckwald said.

"We're enabling developers and (equipment makers) to create that type of experience."

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