

Hollywood dipping toes into virtual reality worlds

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In this March 26, 2015 photo, a woman demonstrates the Oculus virtual reality headset at the Facebook F8 Developers Conference in San Francisco. Once seen as mainly a tool for alien-blasting video gamers, now major movie studios, television producers and even budding artists are adopting the technology that has users donning bulky goggles, entering house-sized domes, even rigging their smartphones to immerse themselves in faraway realms. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

Virtual reality is creeping into our world.

Once seen as a tool for alien-blasting gamers, movie studios, television producers and artists are now adopting the technology, which immerses people in faraway realms using bulky goggles, house-sized domes, and smartphones.

Entering a virtual world means that users who look left, right, up or behind experience an alternate environment, even when they're sitting in a theater or on a couch.

It means a horror movie can be promoted with a haunted house tour featuring a mass murderer who can spring from anywhere. Or a shark documentary enhanced by the sensation that you're being circled by predators.

"What's better for jump scares than, like, turning your head and it's right in your face?" says Matt Lipson, senior vice president of digital marketing at Focus Features.

Virtual reality may not appear at your local multiplex soon, but it's being used to lure you there.

Universal's Focus Features recently launched its first virtual-reality experience for movies, promoting the upcoming release of its "Insidious: Chapter 3" horror flick. It's driving a truck around the country, inviting fans to wear virtual-reality goggles. It's also sent out thousands of movie-branded Google Cardboard kits, which fold around smartphones to turn them into primitive VR viewers. Fans can download the app from Google Play, or the App Store, to make it work.

In the "Insidious" VR experience, viewers sit in a haunted house across from a psychic. Various scares appear from the right and left and, in the end, there is a close-up encounter with an undead serial killer known as the Bride in Black.

Lionsgate used a similar approach for its "Insurgent" movie. It applied VR to try to widen the film's fan base beyond young women, to male fans of action movies. Using VR was one way to appeal to gamers, who are mostly men and are expected to be the first buyers of VR headsets.

VR remains the realm of promotion. But content created now or for future films could also build value for home video products as more VR headsets are sold, Lipson says.



In this Tuesday, April 21, 2015 photo, musician Julian Beutel, left, and Cal Arts student Jack Turpin watch a student project at the Vortex Dome in Los Angeles. Once seen as mainly a tool for alien-blasting video gamers, now major movie studios, television producers and even budding artists are adopting the technology that has users donning bulky goggles, entering house-sized domes, even rigging their smartphones to immerse themselves in faraway realms. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

And the number of outlets for virtual reality is increasing.

Oculus VR, the company Facebook bought for \$2 billion and a leader in the VR headset market, is expected to start shipping a consumer version early next year. It's already sold 150,000 goggles as test units for content developers. Samsung, meanwhile, is selling Gear VR, which works with Galaxy S6 smartphones. Sony will release a consumer version of its Project Morpheus, which connects to its PlayStation 4, in the first half of next year.

Oculus's goal is to get headsets into as many hands as possible, says co-founder and head of product Nate Mitchell. The company set up a division of experimental filmmakers called Oculus Story Studio to help other filmmakers learn how to create VR video.

"Our goal is making the Rift (headset) and virtual reality affordable," says Mitchell, adding that he hopes it "becomes a technology that truly changes the world."

Facebook is testing what CEO Mark Zuckerberg calls "spherical video," or a flat representation of immersive content that could be navigable by mouse on its website. Google's YouTube launched support for "360-degree video" on Chrome browsers and Android phones in March and is providing VR camera rigs for its partners at its six studios. Fold-up Google Cardboard units can be bought online for as little as \$2.46.

Discovery Communications is also planning to launch VR content under the Discovery Virtual brand in August.

Teams are already shooting off the Bahamas in preparation for "Shark Week" in July, says Conal Byrne, Discovery's senior vice president of digital media. Fans of the series are used to watching the circling predators from inside a protective cage. But virtual reality would

heighten the fear factor, as sharks could cruise by while your head is turned elsewhere.

"This feels like the perfect opportunity for virtual reality to say, 'Now let's really put you inside this world,'" Byrne says.



In this Tuesday, April 21, 2015 photo, Cal Arts students Shaoyu Su, left, Alexander Hager lie on the floor while watching a student project at the Vortex Dome in Los Angeles. Once seen as mainly a tool for alien-blasting video gamers, now major movie studios, television producers and even budding artists are adopting the technology that has users donning bulky goggles, entering house-sized domes, even rigging their smartphones to immerse themselves in faraway realms. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Part of the experiment is seeing what works creatively, including not making people sick. The other part is trying to determine how to make

virtual reality a business, Byrne says. That could include advertising, putting commercial products inside virtual worlds, and giving fans another reason to watch TV shows.

"The pressure for revenue comes second," Byrne says. "The first goal is, 'Is there a meaningful content experience here for fans?'"

Another virtual frontier to cross is creating environments for groups, not just individuals, in the same way that theaters provide a community experience.

That possibility was tested out on a recent evening, when eight art school students gathered under a dome in downtown Los Angeles. They were preparing an immersive show projected on a 19-foot-high hemisphere.



This Tuesday, April 21, 2015 photo shows the Vortex Dome in downtown Los Angeles. Once seen as mainly a tool for alien-blasting video gamers, now major

movie studios, television producers and even budding artists are adopting the technology that has users donning bulky goggles, entering house-sized domes, even rigging their smartphones to immerse themselves in faraway realms. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Student Jack Turpin used video game software to create a psychedelic world of rolling mountains, beaches and palm trees. Using a controller, he transported students through the environment as if they were riding in a tour bus with a bubble glass roof. Student Jackie Tan spelled out words, forcing viewers to glance around the dome, then gave them a bug's eye-view of ice cream melting over the top of them.

It's all part of creating a new cinematic language that doesn't just play out on the screen in front of you, but is interactive and immersive, said Prof. Hillary Kapan, who put on the class for the California Institute of the Arts.

"What kind of elements do you use instead of an icon on a computer? How do you interact with that world?" he says. "We're just in the beginning stages of understanding."



In this Tuesday, April 21, 2015 photo, Cal Arts student Alexander Hager watches a student project at the Vortex Dome in Los Angeles. Once seen as mainly a tool for alien-blasting video gamers, now major movie studios, television producers and even budding artists are adopting the technology that has users donning bulky goggles, entering house-sized domes, even rigging their smartphones to immerse themselves in faraway realms. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

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