

Oculus proclaims dawn of 'virtual reality era'

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Gamers test the new Virtual Reality game headset at the Oculus display during E3 in Los Angeles, California on June 17, 2015

Facebook-owned Oculus VR wooed software makers on Thursday with the promise of a budding "virtual reality era" and an alliance with streaming television powerhouse Netflix.

Some 1,500 people already intrigued by the potential of virtual reality

packed the Dolby Theater in Los Angeles for keynote presentations at a second annual Oculus Connect developers conference.

"We believe the more power people have to share and experience all kinds of different things in the world, the better the world will be," Facebook co-founder and chief Mark Zuckerberg told the audience during a brief appearance on stage.

"After video, the next logical step is fully immersive virtual reality."

Facebook bought Oculus VR last year in a deal valued at \$2 billion, heralding virtual reality as the next generation computing platform and one that will let people instantly "travel" to new places.

"It was like teleporting to some other place just by putting on a headset," Zuckerberg said while recounting the first time he tried a Rift prototype at Oculus offices.

"It was so good, I didn't want to really leave. I was seeing the next great technology platform."

The first Rift virtual reality headset is on track for release in the first quarter of next year, followed shortly thereafter by the debut of Touch controllers designed to let people reach in and interact with faux worlds.

Asus, Dell and Alienware will release personal computers with processing and graphics power configured for Rift virtual reality, and bearing a logo to show they are "Oculus Ready," according to vice president of product Nate Mitchell.

Oculus has yet to disclose what it will charge for Rift headsets, but said that Oculus Ready computers coming to market will have prices less than \$1,000.

"This is a once-in-a-generation moment where we can create something that inspires millions of people... something that will change their lives forever," Oculus chief executive Brendan Iribe told the audience.



A visitor tests a Samsung Gear VR during the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona on March 2, 2015

"This is the dawn of the virtual reality era."

VR priced for mainstream

Samsung Gear VR headgear powered by Oculus software is already on the market.

An improved version will debut in the United States in November at a price of \$99, according to Peter Koo, a senior vice president in the mobile communications division of the South Korean consumer electronics titan.

"It is really virtual reality on the go," Oculus chief executive Brian Iribe said of Gear VR.

Koo said the price was intended to be affordable enough to make virtual reality "mainstream."

People are already sharing 360-degree video and playing immersive games using Gear VR headsets, which let the company's smartphones serve as display screens.

The new Gear VR model is 22 percent lighter than its predecessor, more comfortable to wear and has improved controls, according to Koo. The hardware works with the current year's line-up of Galaxy smartphones.

Targeting gamers

Oculus has taken direct aim at video game lovers, working with major studios and gaming engine makers to immerse players in virtual worlds.

An Oculus Arcade unveiled on Thursday boasted partners including Sega and Warner Brothers and games including Pac-Man and Sonic the Hedgehog.

Popular online building game Minecraft made by Swedish studio Mojang is diving into virtual reality with the launch next year of Rift, according to Oculus founder Palmer Luckey.

Oculus Cinema capabilities and offerings were broadened and virtual

reality gear users will be able to immerse themselves in game play streamed by Amazon-owned Twitch.

Oculus also announced an alliance with Netflix to stream 360-degree video that will let viewers change perspective as if they were in the middle of on-screen action, with new Netflix content set to be released.

A Netflix application tailored for Samsung Gear VR lets members of the subscription video streaming service "get the Netflix experience from the comfort of a virtual couch" where ever they happen to be with the headset, Netflix engineering vice president Anthony Park said in a blog post.

The app features a Netflix Living Room where people can watch shows tailored for immersive viewing, according to Park.

"Despite all the talk of hardcore gamers and abstract metaverses, a lot of people want to watch movies and shows in virtual reality," Oculus chief technology officer John Carmack said in the post.

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