Review: Dawn of VR era upon us

January 21 2016, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News

A new era is dawning for virtual reality. New systems that will hit store shelves in coming months are going to offer amazing and immersive experiences that will blow you away.

But these new VR systems are the epitome of first-generation technology products. They'll be expensive. They'll have annoying design features and limitations. And the early adopters will essentially be guinea pigs as content producers try to figure out what kinds of experiences work in VR and which don't.

"It's an exciting area," said John Curran, a managing director at Accenture, a consulting firm that works with tech companies.

At the same time, counters Patrick Moorhead, principal analyst at Moor Insights & Strategy, VR is "definitely ... having some growing pains."

At the CES show in Las Vegas earlier this month, I got to see up close both VR's promise and some of its problems.

I tested out two of the three major VR systems due out this year - Oculus Rift and HTC's Vive.

While using the Rift, I piloted a starfighter and got into dogfights with enemy ships in deep space. Later, using the system's Touch hand controllers, I sculpted and painted a floating foam ball into a grotesque face with bulbous eyes and strange growths coming out of its forehead.

While wearing the Vive, I stood on the bow of a wrecked ship at the bottom of the ocean and watched the eye of a blue whale blink as the massive cetacean swam right past me. In another experience, I drank virtual coffee, ate virtual doughnuts and shredded virtual papers while working in an office for a robotic boss that bore more than a passing resemblance to the infamous Bill Lumbergh from the movie "Office Space." Mmm. Yeah.

The experiences were engrossing and fun, and the images were sharp enough to appear real.

Even though I'd seen the whale demonstration before, its was just as mouth-droppingly awesome as it was the first time. The whale felt big and imposing and almost dangerous as it loomed near me.

While flying the starfighter, it actually felt like I was in a cockpit. When

I leaned forward, I could see my (virtual) chest and legs and the instruments all around me. When I turned to the side or looked up, I could peer through the glass of my cockpit and see spaceships zooming by and a battle unfolding around me.

But as incredible as these devices are, they have significant shortcomings and problems that are likely to annoy and frustrate consumers.

For one thing, they're going to be expensive. Oculus is charging $600 for a basic Rift kit. But in order to use the system, you'll need to have a high-end PC that costs in the neighborhood of $1,000. And you'll have to pay extra for the Touch controllers when they become available.

HTC doesn't plans to reveal the cost of the Vive until next month, but don't be surprised if it costs as much or more than the Rift.

Another annoyance: Both systems rely on wires to connect their headsets with a PC. Those wires can limit your movement and, if you're walking around, could even prove dangerous. While I was testing them, Oculus and HTC representatives helped guide the wires so I didn't stumble over them, something users may not be able to count on at home.

But the biggest problem could actually be the content. Virtual reality is a new medium that many content developers are experimenting with for the first time. It took years for movie makers and TV producers to figure out how to tell stories in those media. You can expect a similar learning curve - and similar missteps - with VR.

"This is really the Wild West," said Eric Nofsinger, chief creative officer of High Voltage, which is developing games for the Rift. "We're still figuring this stuff out."

Virtual reality may prove to be an even bigger challenge to content

developers than television or film, because the VR systems pose physical challenges that didn't affect either TV watchers or moviegoers. Even as light as they are, the headsets can be uncomfortable to wear for long periods. Having a screen right in front of your face can cause eye strain after a while. And the immersive nature of the systems can produce nausea or discomfort when a user's virtual movements are out of sync with their real-world motions.

Because of such limitations, the rule of thumb of VR experts has been that the experiences should be kept relatively short. Despite that, the main area of development in VR right now is in games, many of which could have levels that could last an hour or more. We'll soon see how that suits users.

So, be prepared to be amazed by the new VR systems. But be ready to be annoyed too. The VR era is just getting started.

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VR comes to the real world

In coming months, three major VR systems will hit store shelves.

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Oculus Rift

Release date: First shipments start March 28.

Price: $600, but requires a high-end, approximately $1,000 PC. Touch controllers will ship later in the year as add-on accessories.

Notes: The most hyped and anticipated of the coming VR systems.

Largely being promoted as a gaming device. Company owned by Facebook.

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HTC Vive

Release date: April

Price: Not yet announced.

Notes: Designed from the start as a system to be used while standing. Laser sensors can precisely detect body movements, but will likely be more difficult to set up and install. Co-developed with Valve, a prominent independent game developer and distributor. Like Rift, Vive will require and be tethered to a high-end PC.

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Sony PlayStation VR

Release date: First half of year.

Price: Not yet announced.

Notes: Will require a PlayStation 4 game console.

-Source: Mercury News research

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