

TED crowd gets taste of virtual reality future

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"Rapture", a head-mounted display with a wide field of vision developed by The Void, is pictured at the TED Conference on February 17, 2016 in Vancouver

Clad in virtual reality headgear and computerized vests, intrepid explorers at the annual TED event headed Wednesday into a temple adventure reminiscent of a scene from "Indiana Jones"—and billed as a major entertainment breakthrough.

Attendees at the conference in Vancouver were among the first to sample a pulse-raising new breed of immersive virtual reality, pioneered

by a startup from Utah called The Void.

"Think of it as a futuristic movie theater," said Ken Bretschneider, the firm's founder and chief executive.

"When you go to a movie, you go into a screening room; in our case, you go into a virtual stage and you live the movie."

Intrepid "tedsters" entered a room in the convention center—transformed into the "Serpent's Eye"—wearing virtual reality headsets and "haptic" vests that use sound and vibration to ramp up the sense of realism for explorers.

A demonstration showed that wearers imagined themselves transported to the entrance of an ancient temple, explored by solving puzzles, taking fire from a god, and even facing off with a giant serpent.

The plot once inside was carefully choreographed to play out in the room, with actual walls, chairs, torches or other touchpoints in place to match the fantasy.

In a publicity coup for the startup, a photo posted online at website roadtoVR.com showed a smiling Harrison Ford, of "Indiana Jones" fame, heading into the virtual temple adventure at TED.



Ken Bretschneider, founder and chief executive of the US startup The Void, is pictured during the TED Conference on February 17, 2016 in Vancouver

Theme parks

The Void has relationships with developers and theme park operators and envisions building "experience centers" around the world, according to the chief executive.

"We can take you to a Jurassic world; to a fantasy world, to an educational experience where you go back in time and visit the Great Wall of China," Bretschneider told AFP.

The demonstration that proved a hit at TED was an early prototype.

The startup has developed a "Rapture" head-mounted display with a

wide field of vision, along with the vest, tracking system, and software.

The Serpent's Eye gear also incorporated finger-tracking from San Francisco-based Leap Motion, but the Utah company was also working on a glove for that purpose.

Leap Motion specializes in using computer tracking of hands and fingers to let people manipulate objects in virtual environments with the kind of dexterity they have in the real world.

"I'm not just being shown a digital space, I am actually in a digital space," Leap Motion co-founder David Holz said last week during a demonstration of its "Orion" product, a hardware-software combination for people to interact with virtual environments using their hands.

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

Hot tech trend

Virtual reality is among the top technology trends of the moment, 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.

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.

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

"You need your avatar to interact with people and objects in the world," Bretschneider said.

"The technology, we feel, has reached a state that we can do this now."

A video posted on YouTube by The Void had logged more than 3.7 million views by mid-day Wednesday.

"The Void is pioneering a new form of cinematic virtual reality," said TED's Katherine McCartney.

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