

# Deep in the virtual world: A newbie's first brush with VR

April 14 2016, by By Mae Anderson

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In this Wednesday April 6, 2016, photo, Associated Press reporter Mae Anderson experiences playing the virtual reality horror game set "Until Dawn: Rush of Blood," using Sony's PlayStation VR headset, in New York. VR is clearly a medium in its infancy and creators are still devising new storytelling techniques that can exploit the technology's power. But it's impossible to deny the technology's underlying potential. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

My descent from the boat, gliding through schools of fish and clouds of phosphorescent jellyfish, seemed to be going pretty smoothly. At least

until the shark emerged from the deeper gloom and tried to tear its way into my protective cage.

Of course, it wasn't really a shark. And I wasn't really in a cage—or underwater or even anywhere near the ocean. But it sure felt like I was.

At its best, this is exactly what you can expect from the much-hyped technology of virtual reality. All you have to do is put on a headset that blocks out the surrounding world and replaces it with one that's fake—but often utterly realistic. Suddenly it's like you've stepped out of your life and into someone else's.

With the debut of new VR headsets from Facebook's Oculus unit, Samsung and Sony over the past few months, virtual reality hype has been off the charts. To its proponents, it's the Next Great Thing, a whole new way of "immersing" (a word you'll be hearing a lot) yourself in games, movies, even live music or sports.

Until a few weeks ago, though, the prospect left me cold. The first wave of VR entertainment consists largely of video games, which have never much interested me. Reports that VR can make you nauseous also put me off. Eventually, though, I had to try it, and my first brush with the technology was intriguing enough to keep me exploring.



In this Monday, Feb 22, 2016, file photo, a Samsung Gear VR oculus is demonstrated during a preview of Samsung's flagship store, Samsung 837, in New York's Meatpacking District. VR is clearly a medium in its infancy and creators are still devising new storytelling techniques that can exploit the technology's power. But it's impossible to deny the technology's underlying potential. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Just not enough to plunk down more than a thousand dollars for a full-fledged VR system anytime soon. Current VR offerings have a lot of room for improvement; many of them get old quickly once the initial "wow" factor wears off. It's also hard not to feel self-conscious wearing goofy-looking headgear, especially when surrounded by strangers you can't see.

The experience, though, had its moments. Zombies and sharks pushed me uncomfortably close to real terror; a few contemplative moments lost in a blind man's virtual diary, by contrast, proved unexpectedly affecting.

And there was another big plus: no queasiness. (For me, at least. Your experience may differ.)

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## ROLLIN' ROLLIN' ROLLIN'

My first plunge into VR involved a virtual roller coaster. Which is funny only because the real things scare me to death. If I ride them at all, I get on somewhere near the back and keep my eyes shut tight.

This Samsung demo, featuring the company's Gear VR system, got extra points for realism. Its VR video, shot at a Six Flags park, was synced to mechanical chairs that jerked around in time with the coaster's virtual movements. And of course, the video put me right in the first car.

For all that, the virtual ride proved sort of tame, at least for a coasterphobe like me. For once, I could keep my eyes open and enjoy gawking at fellow passengers or the trees below me. It may not have matched the adrenaline rush of the real thing, but that was just fine.

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## GOING DEEP INTO ZOMBIELAND

A demo of Sony's PlayStation VR headset, due out in October, was mostly devoted to games ranging from space shoot-em-ups to family puzzle games. A lot of them were enjoyable, but few were as dramatic as "The Deep," which had me shaking alone in a dimly lit shark cage while what felt like the real thing circled outside.

I had a similar moment playing "Until Dawn: Rush of Blood," a horror game set in a zombie-infested amusement park. (Yes, it was a lot like the

finale to "Zombieland," just like "The Deep" bore more than a passing resemblance to an up-close-and-personal version of "Jaws.") I knew the zombies weren't really rushing at me through the darkness, but I couldn't help ducking anyway.

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## A VIRTUAL FILM FESTIVAL

Film festivals are starting to showcase VR films as directors explore the new medium. At New York's Tribeca Film Festival, which opened Wednesday, I watched "Allumette," a dreamy short based on the fairy tale "The Little Match Girl."

For 20 minutes, the story took me around a dollhouse-like town built in the clouds. It was charming to crane my neck to look at houses from different angles; at one point, I even stuck my head into a flying boat to see what was going on.

"Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness," meanwhile, translates the audio diary of man who'd gone blind into a virtual representation of his world. I found myself in a minimalist landscape in which sounds from a park formed ephemeral images—laughing children, barking dogs—that dissipated as their echoes faded.

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## VIRTUAL CONCLUSION

Bottom line: My VR experiences to date have mostly been interesting, but still not entirely compelling. It's clearly a medium in its infancy, and creators are still devising new storytelling techniques that can exploit the technology's power. But it's impossible to deny the technology's

underlying potential.

Maybe it'll even help me lose my fear of roller coasters one day.

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