Virtual Reality Check: Reporter spends week with VR system

April 15 2016, by By Derrik J. Lang

This image released by HTC Vive shows the Owlchemy Labs game "Job Simulator," where players assume such roles as line cook and store clerk. (HTC Vive via AP)

I'm no stranger to virtual reality.

For the past three years, I've been reporting on and experiencing the evolution of modern VR at various trade shows, entertainment studios and industry events. It wasn't until I set up the most immersive VR system on the market in my own home that I understood just how

amazing—and frustrating—the interactive 360-degree medium can be.

After testing Oculus Rift, HTC Vive and PlayStation VR prototypes for 10 to 30 minutes at a time over the years, I finally spent an entire week with the consumer edition of the Vive, an $800 room-scale VR system released this month by smartphone maker HTC and game pioneer Valve. It uses a pair of wand-shaped controllers to mimic hands in virtual worlds displayed within goggles.
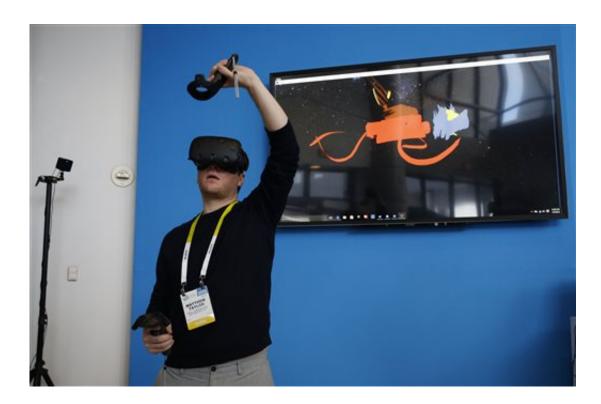
My personal account follows.

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DAY ONE

It's here!

The system arrives on my doorstep in a hefty box. The headset, controllers, sensors, some earbuds and many, many, many cables are sleekly packaged in a padded case. I quickly pluck out the components until they resemble an octopus-like creature crawling across the floor of my home office, which will serve as my makeshift VR cave for the next week.

In this Jan. 6, 2016 file photo, Matthew Taylor paints in 3D virtual reality at the Intel booth using HTC Vive virtual reality goggles at CES International in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)

An on-screen guide says it'll take under a half-hour to get the Vive up and running with the high-powered PC I've borrowed. It's easy at first. I follow along, matching up the plugs and slots. Suddenly, I'm at an impasse. My graphics card needs a cable that didn't come with the Vive, requiring a trip to my local electronics store.

Bummer.

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DAY TWO

With the correct cables in hand, I attempt to finish installing the system. The most cumbersome part of setting up the Vive is positioning the sensors to detect the headset and controllers in the room. The manufacturer suggests they be mounted on opposite walls, higher than six feet above the floor. I opt to temporarily tether them to curtain rods without issue.

I'm almost in VR, right?

This image released by HTC Vive shows a scene from, "Fantastic Contraption," where players can build wacky virtual inventions and the goal is to navigate a glowing pink blob across increasingly difficult levels. (HTC Vive via AP)

Wrong. Despite green lights on all the gizmos and software, the room setup software keeps crashing. I reach out to HTC tech support. I spend the next several hours reinstalling software, updating drivers and messing around with settings. Eventually, HTC tech support deems the only

solution is to uninstall my operating system, which I can't do.

I give up.

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DAY THREE

Can I finally make the Vive come alive?

I receive an email from HTC tech support. It turns out my top-of-the-line $3,000 graphics card won't play nice with the Vive. I swap it out with a $300 one certified for VR. It works flawlessly. The goggles begin broadcasting imagery, and I'm transported inside Aperture Laboratories, the mind-bending setting of the "Portal" game series.

This image released by Oculus shows the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset. (Oculus via AP)

It's like Christmas morning. I want to experience everything all at once. I bounce around over 30 VR titles. One minute, I'm on a cartoony beach. The next, I'm seemingly standing atop a mountain with a robotic dog. I spend the next 10 hours in and out of different VR creations.

It's maddeningly fun but not quite as compelling as I anticipated.

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DAY FOUR

Ugh.

My body feels as if I spent an entire weekend at an amusement park eating cotton candy and riding roller coasters. I'm not prone to motion sickness, yet a whole day in VR has me feeling like I've been punched in the face.

This image released by Oculus Rift shows a scene from "Elite: Dangerous."

Besides wooziness, a phantom wall is surrounding me in the real world. See, Vive's software employs what it calls a "chaperone," a gridded barrier that pops up when a user moves too close to the edge of their real-life play space. After seeing it so much yesterday, I'm now imagining it everywhere I go.

I decide to forgo venturing into VR altogether today.

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DAY FIVE

After recovering from my VR binge, I'm feeling like myself again and can't wait to jump back into "Hover Junkers," a quirky sci-fi Western-themed game that pits online players against each other in hovercraft shootouts. It's a full-body experience because the controllers serve as virtual guns and steering wheels, while participants must duck in real life to avoid being shot.

I learn the "chaperone" setting can be changed to be less obtrusive. I also discover a neat feature that uses the headset's front-facing camera to provide a glimpse into the real world when navigating the Vive's menus. I see now that my real dog has been staring at me this entire time. I can't imagine what he's thinking.

This image released by Oculus Rift shows a scene from "Eve: Valkyrie." This sci-fi dogfighter pits online players against each other in intergalactic shootouts. (CCP Games/Oculus Rift via AP)

I'm just glad I haven't stepped on him.

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DAY SIX

Ouch.

While valiantly attempting to return a serve in "SelfieTennis," a tennis game where users play against—you guessed it—themselves, I trip over the bulky cord that protrudes from the top of the 1.2-pound headset. I catch myself before completely falling on my face, although in the process, I break a picture frame sitting on a nearby mantle with one of the controllers.

Perhaps my knees were too weak from taking cover in "Hover Junkers" so much?

This image released by Oculus Rift shows a scene from "Adr1ft." The weightless saga casts players as an astronaut struggling to survive while exploring a destroyed space station. (505 Games/Oculus Rift via AP)

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DAY SEVEN

I'm beginning to believe VR is affecting my subconscious. It could simply be a coincidence, but I've been experiencing the most vivid dreams this week. I'm talking crazy, metaphysical fantasies where I'm flying over castles and teleporting across space and time. When I'm not in VR, it's practically all I can think about.

However, I'm not fulfilled.

I've been enthusiastic about VR in the years leading up to this week. I've longed to feel the same sensation I had when playing, say, a "Super Mario Bros." game for the first time. There's only been fleeting moments of awe, like being surrounded by a swarm of glowing jellyfish in "theBlu."

One thing is certain. I need to lie down. My head hurts again.

Virtual Reality Check: A look at the 10 best VR experiences

After spending time with the recently released consumer editions of the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive virtual reality systems, here are the 10 best VR titles out now:

— "Adr1ft": If the film "Gravity" was a video game, it would be "Adr1ft." The weightless saga for Oculus casts players as an astronaut struggling to survive while exploring a shattered space station.

— "Elite: Dangerous": While the open-world space simulator "Elite: Dangerous" has been out for two years, a VR edition adds another level of immersion by placing players in the cockpit of their spaceship.

— "EVE: Valkyrie": This sci-fi dogfighter—one of the first full-fledged games to be created for modern-day VR—convincingly pits online gamers against each other in out-of-this-world locales.

— "Fantastic Contraption": In this physics-based puzzler, there's a wacky frenzy as players are tasked with constructing virtual inventions to navigate a glowing pink blob across increasingly more complex levels.

— "Hover Junkers": Duck! The controllers for the Vive are transformed into a gun and a hovercraft's throttle, in this addictive multiplayer shooter that implores players to use their whole body.

— "Job Simulator": This could be the first-ever VR sitcom. "Futurama" meets "Portal" in Owlchemy Labs' quirky game where players take orders from robots in such roles as line cook and store clerk.

— "Space Pirate Trainer": For those gamers who've ever wanted to dodge bullets with their whole body like Keanu Reeves in "The Matrix," this arcade-like game will have them muttering, "Whoa."

— "The Lab": Valve didn't release a new "Half-Life" game alongside the Vive, but they did create a dynamic "Portal"-theme mini-game collection boasting high-fidelity archery and realistic VR vistas.

— "Tilt Brush": One of the most impressive VR experiences isn't a game at all. Google basically designed a 360-degree version of Photoshop where users can craft sculptures with everything from paint to rainbows.

— "Vanishing Realms": In this clunky but captivating fantasy game, players are cast adventurers who must wield swords, shields, bows and magical wands as they navigate dungeons and fight skeletons.

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