

For virtual reality makers, a new version of an old struggle

May 5 2016, by By Derrik J. Lang



In this Jan. 29, 2016 file photo, a video game enthusiast experiences the Playstation VR virtual reality headset with the game "The London Heist" at the Taipei Game Show 2016 in Taipei, Taiwan. After delaying orders because of component shortages and angering wannabe early adopters, VR company Oculus is confronting another headache as it seeks to technologically and culturally establish the immersive medium. It's now possible to play titles that were intended to only be used with the Oculus Rift system on an entirely different VR headset. (AP Photo/Wally Santana, File)

When it comes to virtual reality, how exclusive is exclusive?

After delaying orders because of component shortages and angering wannabe early adopters, VR company Oculus is confronting another headache as it seeks to technologically and culturally establish the immersive medium. It's now possible to play titles that were intended to only be used with the Oculus Rift system on an entirely different VR headset.

In less than four weeks after the March 28 launch of the \$600 system, cunning amateur coders figured out how to unlock the cartoony platforming game "Lucky's Tale" and VR vignette collection "Oculus Dreamdeck" for the HTC Vive, an \$800 competing VR system released April 5 by smartphone maker HTC and gaming company Valve, which operates online marketplace Steam.

And in recent weeks, additional "only on Oculus" content has been cracked.

For now, the reverse isn't an issue for HTC and Valve, whose online hub is headset agnostic, meaning content purchased from Steam can be used for the Vive or Rift. However, titles from the Oculus Home online store are meant to only work with the Rift system, although neither Oculus nor HTC restrict developers from selling content elsewhere.

It's another blow to Oculus, the Facebook-backed VR pioneer that's struggled to fulfill the promise of high-fidelity VR in consumers' homes and faced questions over its privacy policies. While most VR developers are designing for as many systems as possible, several are initially releasing titles for either the Rift or Vive, which currently have different control schemes.



In this Jan. 6, 2016 file photo, Alison Weber, left, instructs Peijun Guo on using the Oculus Rift VR headset at the Oculus booth at CES International in Las Vegas. After delaying orders because of component shortages and angering wannabe early adopters, VR company Oculus is confronting another headache as it seeks to technologically and culturally establish the immersive medium. It's now possible to play titles that were intended to only be used with the Oculus Rift system on an entirely different VR headset. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)

"We're focused on the Vive right now because of the ability to create room-scale experiences, but we're planning to release on every platform available," said Kjartan Pierre Emilsson, co-founder and CEO at Solfar Studios, which crafted the "Everest VR" simulator. "In these early days, we think it's important for 'Everest VR' to be experienced by as many people as possible."

For decades, video game exclusivity has mostly been restricted to consoles, which are more difficult to crack than PCs. For instance,

gamers can only hop into a "Super Mario Bros." installment on systems created by Nintendo, while the "Uncharted" series is exclusively on PlayStation machines. For gamers with an Xbox, they have the "Halo" franchise to themselves.

It's an on-going conflict known as "the console wars."

Despite the Rift and Vive both requiring high-powered PCs to operate and providing similar windows into 360-degree virtual worlds, they currently have different approaches to VR. The Vive's sensors and wand-shaped controllers offer VR across a room, while the Rift only works seated with a traditional gamepad, until Oculus releases its Touch controllers later this year.

Sony will enter the marketplace in October with the comparable PlayStation VR system. The difference? Unlike the Rift and Vive, PS VR will cost \$400 and only work in tandem with a PlayStation 4 console. It'll also arrive with many more exclusive titles, including the robot battle game "RIGS: Mechanized Combat League" and a VR rendition of "Star Wars: Battlefront."

"We think content is king," said Shawn Layden, president of Sony Interactive Entertainment America. "We have six months not only to educate consumers about VR but also make sure we have a robust line-up when we launch in October. I think we'll have a nice, healthy line-up when we bring PS VR to market. It's so important to have all the software there."

By the end of 2016, all three major VR systems are slated to essentially feature the same functionality: a headset and a pair of controllers capable of mimicking hands in virtual world. With each operating their own marketplace for VR experiences, it is possible that consumers could see the dawn of "the VR wars," depending on how Sony, Oculus and

HTC tackle content exclusivity.

"Are they selling razors or razorblades?" said Chris Curran, chief technologist at PricewaterhouseCoopers. "I think moving forward this is going to be much more about the platform and the marketplace for content than it is about the headset. It's not unlike smartphone market. At first, that was about the hardware. Now, it's more about the overall experience."

As with Nintendo's motion-detecting Wii controllers or touchscreen Wii U Gamepad, it's possible the next iteration of VR systems could mean that developers will have to specifically build content for those input devices. From VR treadmills to VR gloves, many peripheral aficionados have already constructed prototypes that could make the medium feel more, well, real.

"There are so many opportunities to layer onto the headset and hand-tracked controllers," said Jason Rubin, head of worldwide studios at Oculus. "This is the most likely point for us to be close together. It might be beyond any question that everything is exclusive going forward because developers may be building for devices that aren't even mirrored by other platforms."

For now, they're just trying to get goggles onto customers' faces.

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: For virtual reality makers, a new version of an old struggle (2016, May 5) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-virtual-reality-makers-version-struggle.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.