

VR arrives at Tokyo Game Show, counted on to revive industry

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A visitor tries out a PlayStation VR headgear device at the Tokyo Game Show in Makuhari, near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 15, 2016. Virtual reality has arrived for real at the Tokyo Game Show, one of the world's biggest exhibitions for the latest in fun and games. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

Virtual reality has arrived for real at the Tokyo Game Show, one of the world's biggest exhibitions for the latest in fun and games.

That's evident everywhere. Players at the booths are donning chunky

headgear covering their eyes and ears, immersed in their own worlds, shooting imaginary monsters or dancing with virtual partners, at Makuhari Messe hall in the Tokyo suburb of Chiba.

The show, which gave a preview to reporters Thursday ahead of its opening to the public over the weekend, features 614 companies demonstrating more than 1,500 [game](#) software titles.

It's still anyone's guess how VR will play out as a business in years ahead. But most everyone agrees that's the way of the future. And Yasuo Takahashi, director at Sony Interactive Entertainment, the game division of Japanese electronics and entertainment giant Sony Corp., believes 2016 will mark VR's debut year, helping revive an industry that has languished with the advent of smart phones.

"Up to now games were played on a TV set. With VR, players can enter the worlds portrayed in games. It's a totally new experience," he said at Sony's booth at the show, stressing that VR can't really be played on a cell phone. That also meant VR's impact will be widespread, in genres such as movies and virtual travel, he added.

One reason for Sony's high hopes for VR: Tokyo-based Sony's PlayStation VR headgear device, going on sale next month for about \$400, is the first that might put VR within reach for many regular homes, according to some analysts. Rival VR headsets cost more: Oculus Rift goes for about \$600, and HTC Vive \$800.



Visitors gather at Sony's PlayStation booth at the Tokyo Game Show in Makuhari, near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 15, 2016. Virtual reality has arrived for real at the Tokyo Game Show, one of the world's biggest exhibitions for the latest in fun and games. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

Although VR's applications vary from job training and real-estate previews to news reporting and education, it's expected to take off in games first.

A recent survey of 635 industry experts including startup executives and investors, carried out jointly by legal company Perkins Cole and Upload, cited "lack of compelling content" as the biggest challenge for VR's future.

Respondents were most focused on games. They also cited obstacles to VR's popularity, such as cost, bulky hardware and technical glitches. But

most respondents were planning to invest in VR, if cautiously at first.

Tetsuya Mizuguchi, founder and president of the game software maker Enhance, believes VR is exactly the kind of technology his game "Rez Infinite" has been waiting for. The game's original version went on sale in 2001 for an earlier console called Sega Dreamcast.

The new VR version of the game, one of the highlights of the Tokyo Game Show, delivers an immersive, dreamlike experience.

Once players put on the headgear and earphones, they find themselves virtually flying through an abyss-like universe resembling outer space or the bottom of the ocean, a black that seems to spread in all directions.



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Then colorful geometric designs pop up, bursting in flashes of light with the aim of the cursor or a shift of a VR player's vision. Electronic music, synchronized to the player's moves and virtual explosions, adds to the thrill.

"This is about a new way of storytelling. It's a new journey. And so this is not confined to just realism, but it can provoke the creative imagination," Mizuguchi told The Associated Press this week at his Tokyo office.

"I want to move people in new ways. As a concept, it's about appealing to the senses. But it's actually also very emotional. VR can liberate one's experience from the film frame, which has existed over the 130 years of movies."

The visual abstractness and musical focus of Mizuguchi's game contrast with other VR games that seek to more literally approximate reality, using VR's ability to convey an illusion of 3-D depth and 360-degree surroundings.

Mizuguchi stressed that his designers, and Sony, were careful to make sure VR didn't make players nauseous.

"If someone's first experience with VR turns out to be negative, there might never be a second experience," he said.



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Hisakazu Hirabayashi, game analyst and president of game industry consulting firm Interact, says VR is so powerful that creators are still choosing to tone it down to minimize potential risks, including venturing into untested territory such as VR pornography.

"VR is a fabulous technology, but it can be even used for torture," he said. "So game creators are still trying to play it safe."

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