

Virtual reality, goggles and all, attempts comeback at Game Developers Conference

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FRANCISCO (AP) -- It's back.

The virtual reality headset, the gizmo that was supposed to seamlessly transport wearers to three-dimensional virtual worlds, has made a remarkable return at this year's Game Developers Conference, an annual gathering of video game makers in San Francisco.

After drumming up hype over the past year and banking \$2.4 million from crowdfunding, the Irvine, Calif.-based company Oculus VR captured the conference's attention this week with the Oculus Rift, its VR headset that's more like a pair of ski goggles than those bulky gaming helmets of the 1990s that usually left users with headaches.

"Developers who start working on VR games now are going to be able to do cool things," said Oculus VR founder Palmer Luckey. "This is the first time when the technology, software, community and rendering power is all really there."

While VR technology has successfully been employed in recent years for military and medical training purposes, it's been too expensive, clunky or just plain bad for most at-home gamers. Oculus VR's headset is armed with stereoscopic 3-D, low-latency head tracking and a 110-degree field of view, and the company expects it to cost just a few hundred bucks.

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A line at the conference snaked around the expo floor with attendees waiting for a chance to plop the glasses on their head and play a few minutes of "Hawken," an upcoming first-person shooter that puts players inside levitating war machines.

Attendance was also at capacity for a Thursday talk called "Virtual Reality: The Holy Grail of Gaming" led by Luckey. When he asked the crowd who'd ordered development prototypes of the technology, dozens of hands shot into the air.

"There's been a lot of promise over several decades with the VR helmet idea, but I think a lot of us feel like Oculus and other devices like it are starting to get it right," said Simon Carless, executive vice president at UBM Tech Game Network, which organizes the Game Developers Conference. "We may have a competitive and interesting-to-use device, which you could strap to your head and have really immersive gaming as a result."

Sony Corp. and Microsoft Corp. are reportedly working on similar peripherals, as are other companies. Luckey contends that the innovations Nintendo Co. made with its Wii U, Sony is planning with its upcoming PlayStation 4, and Microsoft is likely tinkering with for its successor to the Xbox 360 don't seem like enough.

"We're seeing better graphics and social networks, but those aren't things that are going to fundamentally change the kind of experiences that gamers can have," said Luckey.

A growing list of high-profile game makers have sung the device's praises, including Atari founder Nolan Bushnell, "Minecraft" mastermind Markus Persson, id Software's John Carmack, "Gears of War" chief Cliff Bleszinski and Valve boss Gabe Newell.

Valve is planning to release a VR version of its first-person shooter "Team Fortress 2" for the Rift, but Luckey is hoping that designers in attendance at this week's conference begin creating games especially for the doodad.

"The doors are already open," noted Luckey. "People are already telling us things they want to do with the Rift that they can't do with traditional games."

Luckey said prototype versions of the technology are being distributed to developers now, and he anticipates releasing a version for consumers by next year.

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