# Virtual reality is getting real

By Glenn Gillis

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You might have already seen the photo on social media of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg walking triumphantly around a hall full of people, all of whom are sporting newfangled devices wrapped around their eyes.

> *Mark Zuckerberg about virtual reality at the Samsung S7 launch https://t.co/yylwf0qbQB https://t.co/Pj6Ug7nmyG pic.twitter.com/yflu1WuASx— VRmaster (@VRmaster) March 24, 2016*

The image might have conjured, in the minds of tech-pessimists, fears of The Matrix-style machine domination. But the device in question, a virtual-reality (VR) headset and hand controller combo launched at the end of March by Facebook subsidiary Oculus, heralds the next evolution of human-machine interfaces.

## New era of devices

Unlike the VR devices of old, which were clunky, slow and expensive, the Rift looks set to cost no more than a high-end smartphone. It's also said to offer a more realistically immersive experience, whether you're playing a game, watching a movie or using it to hang out with friends thousands of kilometres away. The drawback, however, is that it requires an expensive Rift-compatible computer to work. Not to worry. Rift is only one of many devices flooding the market.

Google's Cardboard (it's literally that, a cardboard headset you slip your smartphone into) has been entertaining audiences for a couple of years now. There's also HTC's Vive, a direct competitor to the Rift. It's a little more expensive, but unlike the Rift, Vive lets users walk around a room, and its hand controls supposedly allow you to interact with the virtual world as you would the real world. Sony, not to be left behind, also has PlayStation VR, which is compatible with the Playstation 4 console.



## Wow-worthy applications

So, the hardware issues are mostly conquered by many of these latest-generation devices, and the ball is now in the court of developers to come up with applications that will wow us.

Beyond the obvious, like virtual games, virtual meetings or virtual shopping, developers are looking to create apps in sectors like healthcare and space exploration. NASA, for example, is experimenting with pairing VR devices and their exploration rovers in real time. They hope to one day use the pairing to allow astronauts to explore the surfaces of planetary bodies without risking human life or spending huge amounts of money. In the meantime, NASA has already used VR technology to simulate a spacewalk on Mars.

There are also mainstream possibilities for some of this technology, including allowing realistic space exploration to become something everyone can do from the safety of their home or school science lab.

VR is also set to revolutionise the world of design and storytelling. Imagine having a walk around your dream home before it's built? Or, if you're a writer, creating a fiction story that casts readers as the main character in VR? The most promising use of VR, however, is in allowing specialist doctors to treat patients far away, making quality healthcare available to more people. The technology is also being used to develop therapies for patients, including meditation and rehabilitation.

Because it's all so new, the possibilities seem endless right now. It's fast becoming a case of 'if you can do it in real life, you'll probably be able to do it soon in VR', making any distinction between the two obsolete, so to speak.

## ABOUT GLENN GILLIS

Glenn Gillis is the managing director of Sea Monster Entertainment, one of South Africa's pre-eminent animation, gaming and augmented reality companies. He has a Business Science degree from UCT and has been an entrepreneur, hired gun, and consultant with growing, knowledge-intensive businesses around the world for over 25 years.
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