

December 1, 2015 12:30 pm

Our virtual reality future is bigger than it appears

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I under-exaggerated last time: a video of the Wright brothers' flight was utterly lifelike



Things are happening on a scale you can't believe: the Oculus Rift headset is part of VR's new wave

An apology: in a feature I wrote on this page on April 1 — timing a sheer coincidence — I may have given the impression that virtual reality is becoming a very big deal.

I said that “after decades as a futurists’ fantasy, [consumer virtual reality](#) may really be with us”, and that it “could become as big as cinema and television”.

Eight months on, I have to report that I may have rather under-exaggerated the situation. I’ve been keeping tabs on VR and a few things have happened.

I was in Los Angeles recently and had a beer with Roy Taylor, a vice-president of the chipmaker AMD, which is making a big play in VR.

“VR is happening here on a scale and with an energy you can’t believe,” he said. “The universities are pouring millions of dollars into it. I don’t think you went far enough in your article. Seriously, this is going to change everything.”

Mr Taylor, who is British, introduced me to James Knight, a fellow Brit and an LA-based board member of Bafta who was a key member of the technology team that made the film *Avatar*. He is now working with Zypre, a VR film company.

Mr Knight told me how VR conventions that attracted a handful of people a year ago are now getting 700 attendees. He took me to Zypre’s office to meet Jonah Hirsch, the co-owner and a banker-turned- film producer.

“I’m still a business guy at heart,” Mr Hirsch told me, “but as soon as I saw VR, I thought, this is going to be very big”. As a film lover, though, he was sceptical of my contention, in my insufficiently sensationalised Financial Times article, that VR movies, where the viewer can be in among the action, are the future.

“Movies are a dating, social thing,” he said. “VR is an individual experience. We’re looking at less obvious VR applications.”

One of these is education. To which end, Mr Hirsch took me into another room to watch a two-minute educational VR video Zypre have made with the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, along with some of the Avatar team, using AMD’s technology. It depicts the Wright brothers’ 1903 flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

The film took six months to make, with computer-generated photorealistic visuals and every detail overseen by historians. I watched it on a prototype of the much-heralded [Oculus Rift VR headset](#), expected out early next year.

It was several times more startling than the VR footage I described in April. It was more than virtual reality; it was pretty much . . . reality.

It’s not enough to say that, standing in a stuffy, darkened room in LA, I truly felt I was on a beach in North Carolina in 1903.

It was way more vivid than that. I even thought I felt the sea breeze in my face, then the backdraught from the propeller of the brothers’ flying machine. I shouted out that I could feel the wind and the techies surrounding me laughed. Apparently, a lot of people say that. It seems the brain is so fooled that it extrapolates and adds effects it thinks should be there. I have to confess, my American history is so sketchy I didn’t even know the flight was on a beach.

The second new VR thing that happened was a couple of weeks ago, at a dinner given in London for 22 big league innovators by Wired, the British edition of the technology magazine.

To sing for their supper, each diner had to say what they thought would be the big innovation of 2016. Almost all nominated VR. Nobody as I recall mentioned [wearable technology](#), 3D printing, [drones](#) or robotics. VR was the only game in town. And these really are people who know.

Here’s another thing that happened. The other night I found myself in the emergency room of a Manhattan hospital. As I waited to be seen, I got chatting with a fellow patient, an orthodox Jewish man, in the hat and everything.

These guys live in almost Amish-like isolation from a lot of modern life, but he asked me, as people do, what the next big technology thing will be.

I said VR. “What’s that?” he asked. I did my best to describe it. He stroked his beard as if he was contemplating a Talmudic paradox.

“I don’t know technology but surely that changes everything?” he said eventually.

He even tipped his hat to scratch his head and ponder further.

Universities are pouring millions into it.

Seriously, this is going to change everything

- Roy Taylor, a vice-president of the chipmaker AMD