

Now is the perfect time to bring back phone VR

Commentary: Google Cardboard, Gear VR and Daydream died too soon. No better time to resurrect them than when we're stuck inside, longing for new experiences.

Once upon a time, everyone wanted us to use our phones as VR headsets. Do you remember this? There was the folding, giveaway Google Cardboard, that ended up in magazines and promo giveaways. There was Samsung's Gear VR, sold alongside every Samsung phone. There was Google Daydream View.



I wrote a eulogy for phone VR last year, because for the most part it had basically died. Gear VR and Daydream are no longer offered for sale. Many current phones don't even work with those old viewers and headsets anymore. New apps aren't being made.

Virtual reality is very much here, but it's taken the form of goggles you connect to your PC, game console, or use as a fully stand-alone system, like Oculus Quest. There are amazing games and apps to get lost in.

I'm home now. I've been home for a month. I sit in my home office, I walk up and down my home stairs, I look through my home things. I peek in drawers at old stuff. I found a couple of pairs of Google Cardboard.



I put my phone into one, and loaded up YouTube, played a video in 360 degrees. I peeked through, and saw my fuzzy but totally working little picture window to a roller coaster I wouldn't be riding anytime soon.

The problem with VR headsets now isn't that they aren't compelling -- it's that they're expensive and hard to find. Many VR headsets are sold out or having production delays due to COVID-19. The top ones can cost \$1,000 for a headset, controllers and sensors. And even if they were in strong supply, we've entered a period where lots of people are cash-strapped and even out of jobs.

That's why phone-based AR apps, while kind of silly and gimmicky, are now so popular. AR animals in your home? People care about that. Anything to keep the kids entertained...and yourself, too.

VR used to be a lot easier to access. This is the time to bring phone VR back.

In a sense, it's still here. Google Cardboard is still sold, and so are a lot of other little viewers. One that I always liked looks like a plastic clip-on pair of glasses for your phone, and makes it even easier to attach to a variety of phone sizes and shapes. It works like a little stereoscopic viewer, and does just well enough to work with a lot of YouTube videos.

YouTube is the killer phone VR app right now. Google still has Cardboard VR support in its app, and tapping on a goggle-shaped icon in the lower-right corner brings up the split-view mode you'd need. Plenty of 360-degree and 180-degree 3D videos are around, if you hunt. There's also a whole YouTube VR channel.

The plastic clip-on viewer I have here exists via third-party sellers on Amazon for around \$8. I haven't ordered and tried them all, but they're out there -- and so are plenty of cardboard and plastic goggle options. You know, the sort of junk that filled stores for years and lowered the quality level for what VR should have been.

But how quickly my opinion has changed. Any port in a storm can be helpful, and even a basic pair of goggles could offer a moment of discovery or escape.



Google Daydream and Samsung Gear VR were even better. In lots of ways, the games and apps those could play were pretty close to what even Oculus Quest offers, minus the full-room movement. I haven't played on Gear VR or Daydream in years, but the little one-hand remote and sit-and-look-around style of those headsets was easy to use and easy to introduce to kids or grandparents. Those goggles cost \$100 or less. Sometimes they'd be given away with a new phone purchase. Why not adapt those now to fit newer phones, and lead an initiative to drop more videos and experiences into those headsets? Or, at least, find content that already exists out there and bring it into those platforms?

Oculus Go, the VR headset before Quest, was a standalone version of that same idea: You don't move around, you just turn your head and point your magic wand controller. The Go, it turns out, is still pretty great too. I tried a handful of games recently, and the kids loved diving in for a bit. For 360-degree videos like Tribeca's virtual film festival, it can be an excellent portable immersive movie theater. The resolution isn't as crisp as your own big-screen TV, but it's not bad.

The very best VR is still in headsets like Oculus Quest, which feel like a portable game console and can even be used for fitness. But at \$400 (if you can even find it), it's not something most people can consider. I recognize that, even as I recommend the best VR games right now, and the best VR headsets.

But if there's a bit of fun for \$10, one that can open a door to new worlds, there's no better time to steer VR back a bit to that spirit -- at least for now. Cheaper headsets that plug right into phones may be on the horizon eventually, but they're not here yet. In the meantime, we have to make do with what we have. And when it comes to VR, most people don't have very much at all.

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