



# Step inside the virtual retail world

A new device could be the first to make virtual reality really accessible for brands and retailers. Rebecca Thomson reports

**T**opshop's use of Oculus Rift headsets is the latest chapter in a story of a whirlwind technology success.

The Oculus Rift is a virtual reality headset that provides an immersive experience, allowing users to feel as though they are present in a virtual world. Topshop is using it to give shoppers the chance to feel what it's like to be on the front row at its Unique fashion show (see box, below), and there are myriad other opportunities for retailers.

Andy Millns, co-founder and creative director at Inition, the agency working with Topshop, says: "It is pretty much the ultimate interface for any digital content."

Oculus VR, the company behind the device, came into being after it raised \$2.4m (£1.4m) via a Kickstarter funding campaign in 2012. In December last year it raised \$75m (£45m) in venture capital funding, and the business is still working on the consumer version the Oculus Rift expected later this year.

**"WHEN YOU CAN BUILD A WORLD FROM SCRATCH THERE'S NEVER-ENDING POSSIBILITIES"**

Andy Millns, Inition

Agencies such as Inition, which is also working with Selfridges and provides 3D graphics and technologies, are working with retailers and brands on how the Rift could be used.

At present only the early version of the device is available to developers, and Oculus VR is working on the next model – which should be available to consumers. Oculus VR originally aimed the Rift at the gaming market, but the developer community has shown it has potential far beyond that.

There are potential uses in the film, retail and advertising worlds.

Millns says: "It's very new, but it offers huge possibilities." One idea is to play existing film content in the virtual space, another is to build a virtual replica of a retailer's store that people could shop in at home. "When you can build a world from scratch there's never-ending possibilities," he says.

## More than theatre

However, it's not just about retail theatre in store. "You could put people in a

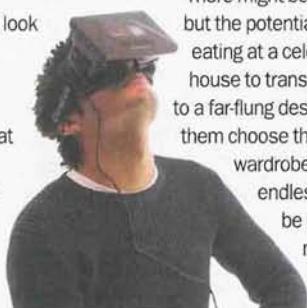


## TOPSHOP'S VIRTUAL REALITY FASHION SHOW

Topshop used virtual reality to give shoppers an immersive experience of its Topshop Unique show at London Fashion Week.

Shoppers in its Oxford Circus store on February 16, 17 and 18 were able to use the Oculus Rift headsets to enter a 3D virtual world that included a live runway feed, backstage action and VIP arrivals.

Shoppers could look at models on the runway and celebrities they were – virtually – sat next to as they watched the show, and watch what was happening backstage.



Inition, the agency that worked with Topshop, says it is the first time a 360-degree live link-up has been used in a retail environment.

While retailers have dabbled with virtual reality, this is one of the first high-profile projects of its kind and it shows how imaginative it is possible to be with virtual reality technology.

There might be usability issues, but the potential is clear. From eating at a celebrity chef's house to transporting shoppers to a far-flung destination to help them choose their holiday wardrobes, there are endless ways it could be used in marketing and merchandising.



Topshop's virtual reality experience allowed users to see celebrities on the front row





**How Asos is using  
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**Analysis, p34**

## **ANALYSIS TECHNOLOGY**



Shoppers could watch Topshop's catwalk show via Oculus headsets from the retailer's Oxford Circus store

place they could never go to, or a place with limited access," Millns says.

Joel Blackmore, senior innovations manager at mobile agency Somo, says the Rift worked well for Topshop's Unique show. He says: "It is great for these 'experiential' pieces. You can imagine these working excellently for people like automotive brands that can use it to give the full interior experience of cars that are not yet released, or they don't have in stock."

Millns says that augmented reality technology could converge with virtual reality. "You could create an entirely virtual world or it could be a mix of virtual and physical."

Devices such as the Rift could also be combined with Google Glass. While the Glass is designed to be light and mobile, the Rift is able to provide as big an image and encompassing an experience as possible. "At some point these will converge," Millns says.

Building virtual worlds isn't a new idea – as Millns points out, sites such as Second Life were early iterations of the idea. "You could do it before, viewing it on a flat screen, but it was never really that satisfying."

But as the technology becomes more affordable and advanced, the ideas will be never-ending. Millns says there are likely to be virtual reality social networks, for instance. "There's probably going to be a Facebook of virtual reality – a huge online social platform that will allow retailers to have a presence."

The Rift certainly has the technology world excited and in a few years, the word Oculus might be part of retailers' vocabulary.