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Mattel's View-Master gets a Google VR makeover

The stereoscopic toy leaps into the 21st century as Google scopes out uses for its Cardboard virtual-reality tech.



Ben Fox Rubin

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The new View-Master enables viewers to explore detailed images of the moon, Alcatraz, or even a land of dinosaurs.

Ben Fox Rubin/CNET

NEW YORK CITY -- It's been decades since Mattel's View-Master was a must-have item for every kids' toy box.

But Mattel is hoping to reintroduce the toy stereoscope -- first unveiled 75 years ago at the New York World's Fair -- to a new generation of youths as an affordable headset for virtual reality, using Google's Cardboard VR technology to help power the device. It's just the latest to hop on the virtual-reality bandwagon, a fast-growing -- if still experimental -- area that has attracted heavy hitters like Facebook and Samsung.

> See CNET editor Scott Stein's hands-on review of the new View-Master here.

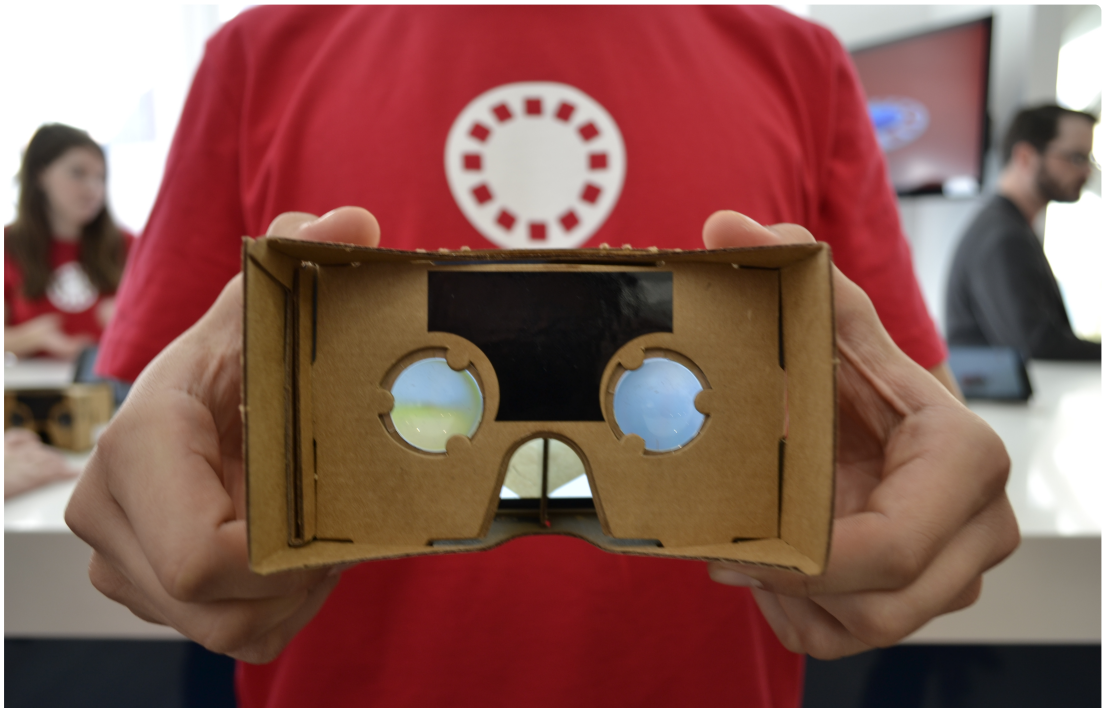
The toymaker and Internet search giant revealed the new View-Master at an event Friday here, just in time for the city's annual North American

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International Toy Fair. The plastic product -- set to launch in October, right before the holidays -- costs $30, but only works with a smartphone placed inside it, to be used as the display. Mattel says that it intends to make it work with both iPhones and Android smartphones.

"We view this as just the beginning," said Doug Wadleigh, a Mattel executive. "Obviously, we're getting in this space pretty early. We believe we have the right partnership in place and we're going to be testing and learning as we go. The goal is to create the View-Master brand for the next 75 years."

With the old View-Master -- a binocular-shaped object often painted fire-engine red -- kids would load in circular reels of 3D-like images of landmarks or scenery and use a lever on the side to flip to the next picture. The new View-Master keeps some of the flavor of the old toy, but instead provides an immersive 360-degree digital experience, in which users can explore detailed images of the Golden Gate Bridge, the moon or a land filled with dinosaurs, and read pop-up boxes that offer facts and figures about what the viewer is seeing.



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A Google Cardboard headset used Friday as a prototype for early demonstrations of what the new View-Master will do.

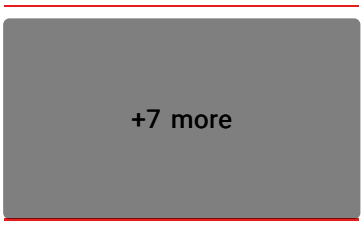
Ben Fox Rubin/CNET

The product is just one part of a growing list of virtual-reality and augmented-reality products being created -- including devices from Facebook's Oculus, Samsung, Sony and Microsoft -- as tech firms work to add new technologies into those previously unrealized markets. The intent of virtual reality is to provide an immersive experience for gaming or other applications, while augmented reality offers an overlay of the real world to provide extra information for the user.

It's also another effort by toymakers to try infusing more technologies into their physical toys to make them more relevant for the digital age.

Google has been a major player in augmented reality and virtual reality lately, last year unveiling the cheap, do-it-yourself virtual-reality kit called Cardboard, which it has continued to develop with additional features and apps. Earlier this week, South Korean electronics maker LG unveiled a new promotion that offers a plastic virtual-reality headset based on Cardboard -- the VR for G3 -- for free to new buyers of its G3 flagship smartphone.

Up close with Mattel's new VR-infused View-Master (pictures)



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Google's goal for now is to widely expand Cardboard's use in the early days of virtual reality, said Mike Jazayeri, product director for Google Cardboard, in hopes it catches on and develops a critical mass. The Mattel collaboration, which doesn't include any licensing agreement or revenue sharing with Google, is just another way of spreading the use of Cardboard. While more than 500,000 Cardboard products have shipped, they are almost all items created by third parties; Google makes the technology free for developers to use and doesn't directly sell Cardboard.

For Mattel, the partnership could be an important way for the struggling maker of Barbie and Fisher-Price toys to get a much needed boost. The company has been posting softer revenue in recent quarters, even as rivals Hasbro and Lego have been able to grow their revenue despite more kids using smartphones and tablets for games. Amid the difficulty, Mattel's CEO stepped down last month.

Mattel and other toy companies have been trying for years to marry their physical toys and board games with smartphones and tablets, sometimes with little success. For example, Mattel in 2013 started selling the Barbie Digital Makeover Mirror, which was essentially a tablet app that included a superfluous plastic vanity-mirror frame for the device. The product didn't sell well.

Mattel's Wadleigh said his company has learned from its missteps and sees the new View-Master as a much more in-demand item for kids. He said the concept could expand in many new directions as Mattel adds more 3D reels to the new View-Master, such as a high-speed immersive video from inside a Hot Wheels car or an undersea adventure.



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A handful of the new reels for the View-Master, which will transport users to all sorts of new places.
Ben Fox Rubin/CNET

The picture reels for the old toy have been replaced with circular slides that offer access to 360-degree pictures. The physical reels aren't actually necessary -- the pictures could simply be downloaded onto a phone -- but Wadleigh said Mattel found that people like collecting the reels. The feature is also a helpful nod to the View-Master's long history. One reel is included as part of the $30 cost of a new View-Master. Four additional reels can be purchased for $15.

At Friday's event, the prototypes used for demonstrations were Google Cardboard headsets -- which are made of cardboard -- using Nexus 5 phones as the display. A version of the new View-Master was shown, but it wasn't a working prototype.

When looking at a reel for San Francisco through a Cardboard headset Friday, a viewer could choose from augmented-reality 3D images showing the Golden Gate Bridge or Alcatraz. Training a white dot on Alcatraz, the user is suddenly transported to the island, where he can look around outside, jump into a cell, and read text boxes about the former prison.

Whether the new toy becomes Mattel's next big toy, though, remains to be

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