

PlayStation VR roundup: 'Stardust Odyssey,' 'Audica' highlight holiday offerings

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The PlayStation VR, an official virtual reality head-mounted display for the Sony PlayStation 4 video game console. This is a first-generation model, which had a slightly different design that incorporated the headphone plug on the power/AV cable. CC0 Public Domain

PlayStation VR is still going strong going in its fourth year. The peripheral has seen a fair amount of great games since then developers get a grasp of the maturing medium and create higher-quality experiences.

For the 2019 [holiday season](#), Sony is publishing a diverse collection of VR titles that's highlighted by "Stardust Odyssey" and "Audica." Both are full-fledged games that are built with the specification of the headset in mind. Along with that, Sony is releasing more experimental projects such as "Paper Beasts," which is best described as interactive nature walk. Meanwhile, "Bonfire" is a humorous short that stars Ali Wong.

I had a chance to play each of these titles at a recent event at PlayStation headquarters. Here is an overview of each one:

"Stardust Odyssey"

Agharta Studio had two goals when creating a virtual reality project. The most important of all was player comfort. They didn't want to make anyone sick while playing their [game](#). The second was the format. They imagined their audience playing the game sitting down using two PlayStation Move controllers.

These limitations spurred the team's creativity, and they came up with "Stardust Odyssey," a game that's inspired by the Silk Road. The project takes place in a fantasy world where flying caravans venture through terrain. As a smuggler, players have to steal the cargo and find relics among the voyagers. To do this, they travel aboard a magic-powered ethercraft. Players pilot the smooth- and slow-moving vehicle down linear, tunnel-like levels. Along the way, they steal items from the ships and search for treasures such as ether cages that hold resources that upgrade the player's ship.

"Stardust Odyssey" is easy to play and leverages the feeling of flight without bottoming out a player's stomach. Although it looks simple, the game has plenty of depth as players pilot the ship so that it hides from Guardians protecting caravans. If they're spotted, players engage in combat by using the spells on board. In the beginning, players have two orbs of magic, and they'll be limited to a few rune upgrades, but the cargo they collect and treasure they find over the course of the 10-hour campaign opens a progression path to make the ethercraft more powerful. They can purchase power-ups using the cargo they find and that lets them handle the harder challenges ahead.

Expect "Stardust Odyssey" to be released Dec. 3 and sell for \$24.99. The game also includes online mode where a second player acts as a copilot.

"Audica"

Whenever someone brings up virtual reality, "Beat Saber" eventually comes up. The rhythm game has had a tremendous impact in the popularity of the medium and how games are developed. Seeing the success of the game, it's no surprise that Harmonix introduced its own take on the genre, but instead of having laser swords, players arm themselves with guns. They have to shoot at targets in rhythm with the music while also accurately doing it. That's the core element of the game.

Harmonix adds other flourishes as well. In some cases, targets will fly at players and they'll have to melee them with the controller. In other instances, they'll have to hold on to the trigger for a sustained note in a song. Another technique has players shooting sideways.

Played well, "Audica" can make players feel like John Wick as they nail targets with the right timing. Like its Harmonix's previous titles, "Audica" features a leaderboard and several difficulty modes. On the

hardest mode, players have to get into a subconscious flow state as they hit targets and shift their body and line of sight to pick up on shootable objects. In addition to playing a total of 33 songs on the mostly electronic soundtrack, players have the opportunity to create their own levels for each song.

"Audica" is a blast to play, but whether fans will embrace it like "Beat Saber" remains to be seen. They can check it out for themselves now. "Audica" sells for \$29.99.

"Paper Beasts"

This is an odd game that's more like being in the middle of a nature show. Players don't receive much direction as they're thrown into a surreal world inhabited by paper creatures. As an explorer in this bizarre world, players move by pointing to a direction using the Move controllers and teleporting there. They can look around and interact with the paper beasts that wander through the world. They'll see them drink at watering holes or skitter around sand dunes. While wandering, I saw a wolflike predator attacking a gazelle-type creature. I stopped it, freed the animal and threw it in another direction, where it scampered off.

I mostly followed a giant deer-type creature and it led me through more environments. I played around with a strange plant that grew seeds quickly and those legumes fed animals around the area. "Paper Beasts" has a sandbox-type quality as players just mess around with the flora and fauna. Despite the seemingly open-ended nature, there is a kind of story to the experience. As players wander through, a black hole-type phenomenon opens up beneath players feet and they have to flee with the other animals. Eventually, the giant deer protect the user by blocking the entrance of a cave while the world falls apart around them.

"Paper Beasts" is a peculiar game that could interest players looking for

an unconventional experience. It's scheduled for release later this year.

"Bonfire"

This VR short puts players in the role of Space Scout 817. Because humans destroyed earth, players are sent across space looking for inhabitable planets. Because of some shoddy manufacturing, their pod breaks apart and they crash land on a strange planet with robot sidekick named Debbie (voiced by Ali Wong). Players survive in the alien landscape and have to make an important decision at the end.

The experience is a fun aside that doesn't last longer than 15 minutes. It has some surprisingly interactive elements as players try to survive with the robot and fend off the alien wildlife. It's not the most advance piece of AR, but it's entertaining and has heart.

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