A game studio with zero hardware experience is building a VR-ready console



Enlarge / Slightly Mad Studios likes to promote the VR modes of its Project Cars games. Now its CEO wants to build a living-room gaming box built for high-end VR gaming.

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Are you ready for another video game console, complete with promises of high-speed performance for 4K TVs and wireless VR headsets? Are you ready to believe that such a system can be delivered by a game-development studio with zero hardware launches in its history?

Wednesday's announcement of a new console, dubbed the Mad Box, comes courtesy of Ian Bell, CEO and founder of Slightly Mad Studios. And Bell clarified to Ars Technica that he expects the console to launch in "three-plus years" at a "standard

plus next-gen price.”

The London-based studio is best known for the Project Cars racing-game series on PCs and consoles, which includes its own impressive VR implementation on PCs. But Slightly Mad has no history with hardware production.

Bell’s out-of-nowhere Wednesday announcement, on his otherwise empty Twitter account, wasn’t helped by its confusing language:

> *What is the Mad Box? It’s the most powerful console ever built…*
>
> *It’s literally ‘Mad’… You want 4K, you want VR at 60fps? You want a full engine for free to develop your games on it? You have it.*

When pressed by followers, Bell offered the repeated claim that this “60fps” rate is “per eye” in a VR headset and that the competition is somehow slower than this rate. “No one is running at 180fps,” Bell wrote in a reply to a Twitter comment (which he later deleted), but that is inaccurate. Both the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift max out at a 90Hz refresh rate per eye, leading to what technically counts as a 180fps workload (since VR systems produce stereoscopic visuals that are distinct for each eye).

In an email interview with Ars Technica, Bell clarified what he wanted to convey with his since-deleted tweets: that no existing console can render 180fps content for VR headsets “with any sort of next-generation detail” but that the Mad Box will.

At scale?

When pressed about Slightly Mad’s lack of hardware production experience, Bell pointed to his first job “28 years ago”

building PCs. Bell does not list that work experience on his LinkedIn page, nor did he clarify how that experience in a PC-building shop might apply to our question about “producing a computer system at scale.”

Bell also clarified that the Mad Box would be produced by “a totally new business” as opposed to Slightly Mad Studios and that “we’re in talks with about 20 [hardware production] groups right now, but it’s all under NDA.”

Bell offered a surprise answer to Ars’ question about the system’s range of ports, since some PC vendors have begun pushing a USB Type-C standard for future VR headsets. After stating that the Mad Box will include “the latest in connectivity,” Bell went so far as to add the following: “We’re in talks with some vendors around unconnected [wireless] VR right now. Just talk, but plans…”

That hint may or may not line up neatly with VR standards in coming years, as wireless VR adapters have begun entering the marketplace over the past year. They deliver decent results (but at a prohibitively high price).

“We expect all good developers to fully embrace the power and cost-effective agreements we plan for the Mad Box,” Bell told Ars, thus re-emphasizing the “full engine for free” aspect of the Mad Box’s pitch. “The industry needs some competition.”

We’ll have to wait for more clarification on exactly how the Mad Box will be positioned in the living-room hardware space—including whether the system will use an open-source OS like Linux, a locked OS like Windows, or a proprietary, console-like walled garden. The last major attempt to shake up higher-end console gaming came in the form of Valve Software’s Steam Machines; that late-2015 initiative never reached a second generation after a quiet debut and even quieter run to the pasture.https://arstechnica.com/?p=1435105