British Airways testing VR headsets for first-class passengers this year

Enlarge / Ars editor Sam Machkovech donning an Oculus Go headset. This isn’t the headset British Airways will use, but it serves a similar function.

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Plane travel can be a hassle at best and a panic-inducing experience at worst. But passengers who get anxious around takeoff may have a new option to calm those nerves. British Airways announced that it is testing out virtual reality headsets for the rest of this year on flights between London’s Heathrow and New York City’s John F. Kennedy airport.

The airline is tapping SkyLights for the VR eyewear headsets that will be available for its first-class passengers. The AlloSky hardware can present 3D views even when the viewer is lying flat.

As far as programming, British Airways will have options. The VR headsets will offer visual entertainment in 2D, 3D, or 360° formats. The airline will also provide more therapeutic programs to help people who have a fear of flying. These VR experiences include guided meditation and sound therapy.

This marks the first time British Airways is bringing virtual reality onto its aircrafts. The company also used SkyLights’

hardware at its ticket counters in Heathrow to show passengers the experience of its first-class travel in an effort to encourage upgrades.

A few other airlines have tried offering VR for passengers. Last year, Alaska Airlines also began a partnership with SkyLights to offer in-flight headsets. Air France, Lufthana, and Quantas have all tried out virtual reality programs.

Much of the conversation about virtual reality has stayed centered on gaming, but the extent of these tests shows just how many industries could find ways to leverage the technology. Film is a natural extension of the immersive visuals in VR; SXSW this spring had multiple excellent examples of the tech. And the therapeutic angle British Airways has taken is one that barely scratches the surface of how VR can be applied: not just for anxious flyers, but for anxious patients. Stanford Children’s Health and Children’s Hospital Los Angeles are just two health care providers working on programs with virtual reality.

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