

icture, if you will, a dank, craggy, smoking world—a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Upon a nearby ridge stands a child of indeterminate age and race. In the ravine below sits a small tripod, topped by a bright red head. The head turns its blazing eyes upon the boy. With a mix of terror and fascination, the boy tries to flee, but the mechanical beast unleashes a long electrical cord with a small device at the end. It wraps around the boy, smacking the device into his hands and yanking him face-to-face with the monster's head.

If you think this sounds like an alien in a bad sci-fi flick, you're wrong; it's the Nintendo Virtual Boy and this is its ad campaign. Appealing image, no? This little glimpse into techno hell may be the most inadvertently telling vision of the future of Virtual Reality ever to flash across the modern radar screen. Thus far, though, no one seems to be shocked by this image. Well I am; after all it's my job!

There has always been a whiff of sulphur in the potential of Virtuality, but I, along with most of the modern world, have been fascinated by it nevertheless. Its promise to change the very fabric of human perception may turn out to be either the greatest technological advancement in human history, or it may be slimy tentacle that finally drags us willing and lobotomized to our own extinction. Do I exaggerate? Perhaps—it's my nature—but Virtuality bears some troubling implications that deserve a thorough airing out.

Virtuality allows us to experience events, sensations, and activities without physically participating in them. Theoretically, we can go anywhere, do anything, feel anything, be anything. Not too hard to find the appeal of this, huh? In one sense this has been the purpose of entertainment throughout history; to transport us beyond our everyday life to witness something extraordinary. In a broader view, however, Virtuality promises much more than this; we can move beyond being mere witnesses to becoming participants. There is no way to overstate the immensity of this.

For thousands of years, people have been limited to experiences in which they can physically participate. If your ancestor lived deep inland and couldn't afford to travel, there was little chance she would ever experience an ocean. This began to change with the advent of photographic and phonographic technology. For the first time, people could actually use their senses to see and hear things they could not physically witness—the landlocked peasant could now at least experience the image of the ocean.

Though it is undeniable how dramatically this technological breakthrough changed the lives of millions, photos and records can still only be a pale substitute for the real thing. Their greatest limitation is that they are one-dimensional; a photograph or a recording can only

engage one of your senses.

The promise of Virtuality says a simulation can be as good as the real thing by engaging all senses at once. A Virtual Reality ocean experience would show us the water stretching over the horizon, treat our noses to the smells of salt and cocoa butter, pipe the crash of the surf to our ears. It could trick our skin into feeling the cold and wet of the water, and perhaps even simulate the taste of brine at the back of our throats. Reality as good as reality.

At least that's how it looks. Yet it still seems hollow, because experience should be more than just the sum of sensory perception. The new technology of Virtuality has forced us to make even finer and more abstract distinctions to define what "experience" entails and why the "real thing" is still significantly different from the synthetic.

Physical experience often demands a certain level of work, commitment, and risk. In the real world, real people spend years working, training, and sacrificing to excel at various skills such as sports. Few of us will ever reach a high level of achievement, but when sports are Virtualized, they become accessible to all people regardless of training, age, gender, or talent. This is generally a positive thing: it serves as healthy fantasy fulfillment and can teach many things that might otherwise be difficult to learn. On the other side, though, by allowing us to pretend we are accomplished athletes, the simulation can become an end in itself. If I can be Michael Jordan, why would I actually want to play basketball and remind myself that I am just some schmo who can barely hit the rim? When the fantasy becomes more appealing than the reality, people tend to let go of the reality. How many children, deterred by the initial difficulty of learning a sport, will nevertheless spend hours of inactive time sitting in front of a screen virtually playing it?

In some small way, this devalues the hard work and dedication required to become good at something. What's more, there are elements of the thrill of physical experience which cannot be simulated. No matter how realistic a flight simulator is, for example, somewhere not all that deep down you know you won't die if you crash. This insulation from danger is often touted and one of the benefits of Virtuality, but it is also one of its great weaknesses.

The same can be said of the moral insulation Virtuality provides. Ask yourself what is really behind the fascination with first person shoot-'em-up games. It's not hard to see that they are being devoured as a socially "acceptable" way to experience what it's like to kill. I am not entirely convinced that this is a bad thing; it is appealing to think of them as safety valves for negative emotions. While I have powerful doubts that these games make anyone more or less likely to take another life, I do believe that they seriously up the ante of desensitization. For decades, critics have been misguidedly accusing TV and movies of "desensitizing" us to violence, and making us dangerously less horrified by it than we should be. Virtuality actually represents this threat. In this area, even more than others, our transformation from witness to participant makes the world of difference.

What makes Virtuality so chilling is its potential addictiveness, its ability to draw us close and wrap us in a deadly embrace until we proclaim it superior to the flawed corporeal world around us. Tired of your limited, untidy existence? Plug into this! Why learn to ski when you can do it right here without all the messiness of cold, snow, traffic, and the suicidal pole-less children—and without all that blasted practice? In this increasingly busy world, these toys promise all the leisure in half the time. What's not to like?

That is until we begin to eschew the real world in favor of the Virtual. Spend a few nights in "Chat Rooms", especially ones with sexual overtones, and this won't seem like such a far fetched fear. There are folks who spend night after night, week after week with this as their primary social life. The advice columns are full of stories of people who ignore their own

flesh and blood spouses to type what they want to do to some stranger into a keyboard. Pornography has always been a way for people to expend excess sexual energy; but virtual pornography actually gives the illusion of interactivity and, worse, intimacy. Like a blow-up doll that says your name, virtual sex is the coldest, emptiest simulation there is.

And it's not even just sex any more. Simulations of actual intimacy are becoming more and more prevalent. In Japan, one of the hottest selling software titles is the "Virtual Girlfriend". Sure there's sex, but there's also discussion, negotiation, fights, celebrations and even all the mundane stuff that makes real relationships, well, real. There are apparently scores of lonely middle-class businessmen in Japan who see this as a training program for "real" relationships. Once they get it right with the computer, they think they can begin to search for love in the real world. A recent story in Canada's Globe and Mail described a middle-class man in his thirties who chose his Virtual Girlfriend over his real one. Yet he still saw the program as just a practice kit to make him more capable of love.

The self-delusion of this phenomenon is staggering. What people are afraid to realize, let alone admit, is that they have become convinced life can be reduced to lines of code, stripped of the complexity and sweat of reality, and still be just as satisfying as the real thing.

The real danger in Virtuality lies in taking it for what it claims to be. When we stare gape jawed, wide-eyed, and worse, unquestioning at technology, we absorb it without considering that we might someday wake up less free, less alive, and less human than we were before. The creative and perceptual possibilities of Virtuality seem limitless, but when plastered up against mind-bendingly complex social, moral and intellectual issues, it becomes clear that the enslaving red-eyed monster isn't meant for us to play with; we're here so it can play with us.

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