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Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Sword of Damocles?

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In 1968 something happened that offered a remarkable insight to the future of the human race. In that year, Ivan Sutherland and Bob Sproull created the world's first virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) head mounted display. They named it the Sword of Damocles.

In today's world Oculus Rift, Facebook's VR headset, has begun to ship. I've tried it and it was beyond imagination. Put simply, virtual reality creates a complete, immersive environment, real or imagined. Augmented reality gives an enhanced or altered view of surroundings, providing data, sound and visuals on top of the real world which the user can interact with and manipulate. So Oculus Rift is VR, Microsoft Hololens and the officially still alive Google Glass are AR.

So it's time to wonder how VR and AR will change the world, and will it destroy human experience as we know it?

1. Sex and Love

Firstly, if we want to be lonely, VR will help us do that very nicely (no need to fill in the gaps here). However, that choice is one we'd make with or without technology.

Don't want to go out into the rain to meet that blind date in a crowded restaurant? Meet them as a hologram. Don't like the way your partner snores? Sleep next to a virtual them. In the future, you may even be able to touch the spectre.

The effect of virtual reality on romance goes to the core of my belief about technology as a whole. It can change our experience, but it can't change human nature.

In 1957, Robert Sheckley wrote a short story called "Gray Flannel Armor".

In Sheckley's story, a lonely young man is seeking romance. He finds it a trying task. But, one day, he meets a salesman who pitches a novel product to him. His company would arrange romantic encounters for the lonely young man through scientific research allowing him to find the perfect love of his life. He signs up.

The story ends with the protagonist realising that seeking perfection is an endless process that becomes a goal in itself, and feeling betrayed by technology - especially when his free trial period expires, he opts instead for an introduction made by his eccentric aunt. He ends up married.

Sixty years later and Sheckley's words are truer than ever. Technology will always sell itself as a tool to solve our problems. But, in chasing the dream of having our problems solved, we mustn't forget that the process of seeking solutions is an integral part of the solution itself.

2. Education

Information won't change, just its presentation.

With VR, school children will soon be able to take a tour of the solar system, viewing in detail the different planets, one minute on Mars, the next on Venus, accessing information seamlessly and all without leaving the classroom.

It seems we're always complaining about poor teachers, so how about virtual teachers programmed with more information?

3. Work

The same will be seen in the world of work. Today across multiple industries people video-conferencing is widely used. This has made work faster and more accessible, allowing quicker access to information.

Very soon this technology will be made redundant by AR and VR. Rather than speaking to people on a screen you will be seeing them as a hologram, hastening the demise of the age of suit jacket on top, pyjamas below.

Then there is the debate about jobs.

Over 100 years ago when Henry Ford pioneered the conveyor belt people claimed it would be the end of employment. Instead, it helped create new, better jobs, raising living standards and fostering a new economy.

Yes, some jobs will go. But we will create better ones.

4. Family life

When the wireless was first brought to market it was claimed it would end human interaction and family life, as people would be stuck listening to this new fangled device. Yet, somehow, people continued to speak to each other and enjoy the company of others.

Virtual and augmented reality is no different.

5. Medicine, Health and Safety

This is where VR/AR really comes into its own. Who wouldn't want their rare and difficult surgery to be carried out by someone who'd practiced multiple times on their own VR doppelganger?

Who wouldn't want their ill child to be examined by world leading experts, even if they lived on the other side of the world?

Virtual reality is just the next step in raising up human endeavour. With any new technology there is always an impulse to claim that it will make our lives worse. But the reality is that

VR will ultimately improve the world and the sword will fall only on the mundane, the inadequate, and the redundant parts of our world.

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