"Reality is the Only Thing that's Real" Or is it?
By
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Earnest Cline's 2011 novel about a virtual world called the OASIS ends by reminding us that this worldwide phenomenon, more popular and widely used than Facebook is today, and in which most people spend most of their time, isn't really real. While its fictional programmer and creator, James Halliday, understands its value, he admits he built the OASIS based upon his own messed-up understanding of the world. "Something I didn't figure out for myself until it was already too late," the dead hacker's virtual avatar tells Wayne Watts, the game's greatest player ever:

> I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real. Do you understand?

In the 2018 movie adaptation directed by Steven Spielberg, this same sentiment is more succinctly stated as, "Reality is the only thing that's real."

Yet, as a huge fan of both the book and the film, I did not find this "moral to the story," which turns it into just another a cautionary tale, satisfying of convincing. From my perspective, it comes out of left field and is not consistent with the rest of the story. If anything, the billions of people living, and playing, and working, and developing relationships, and so many of the other things people do, proves the opposite, that, practically speaking, the OASIS is just a real, or just a meaningful, if you prefer, as the nonvirtual world.

I didn't complete the book or the movie, which I've watched five times already, thinking, Halliday is right, virtual reality is a dangerous and delusional coping mechanism that prevents us from facing reality and dealing with the real challenges before us. My fascination with this story, is the opposite. I like it because it excites me about all the potential this exponentially advancing technology has for enhancing our lives and expanding our understanding about what reality is and isn't.

Like many of us, I first became aware of virtual reality technology around 2015, when I started seeing a few commercials in which first-time users seemed astonished by what they were seeing beneath a small headset. I was skeptical, as I am about most commercials, and couldn't imagine anything viewed within such a small device being worth my time. Then one day in late 2017, I happened to be passing a kiosk at a mall that offered me a look inside a virtual reality headset for just a few bucks. Out of curiosity, I decided to try it. After selecting the space option, I sat down in a mechanical chair that moved in sync with the visuals, then covered my eyes with the headset. Inside, I found myself moving through space toward a three-dimensional image of star nebula. Although I enjoyed it, I didn't find it more impressive than any other 3D movies I've seen. But then I noticed a planet moving

toward my right periphery and was surprised to see that it wasn't disappearing off the edge of a screen. I turned my head to follow it and, for the first time, realized the image was all around me, in 360 degrees. It was as if I was moving through outer space. That was the moment I was hooked. I took off the headset after the brief three-minute experience and said to myself, "I've got to get one of these."

A week later, after a bit of research, I'd purchased my first virtual reality system, a technology that had only been around, at least at the consumer grade, for less than two years. In addition to its headset, the Oculus Rift I bought came with two hand controllers, two external sensors for tracking the motion of the headset and controllers, and a long cable for tethering it to a fast-processing computer. I added an additional sensor so my movements could be tracked from every direction. Less than two years later, the technology advanced enough to lose the external sensors altogether. The headset itself tracked everything. Then, within a few months, the Oculus Quest II was released, without any need for external sensors or connecting to a separate computer. It is completely self-contained, although it does still come with hand controllers. The hand controllers, however, will soon be unnecessary. The Quest II already contains software that recognizes the movement of your hands and can transport them into the virtual world with you. In other words, even with the headset on and no hand controllers, you can see your hands and use them inside a virtual environment.

The very first night I used my headset, I tried out a virtual social place called Altspace, in which participants can walk around a virtual campground, meet, and talk with others. I was amazed that even though I was standing still in my basement, I found the voices of others becoming louder or quieter as I moved toward or away from them in virtual reality, knowing that they were really standing still someplace else, too. We appeared to each other as cartoonish avatars, which was more than enough to provide us a sense of real presence. I stuck up a conversation with a fellow from Nashville, Tennessee who happened to also be a Unitarian. We talked for a few hours before calling it a night. This was another astonishing experience for me because, in my mind, it was a real experience involving a real conversation with a real person while both of us were together in a real virtual place. I'll say more about what I mean by "real virtual" later.

For now, I have heard some criticize virtual reality as not being the "same" as being with someone in person. Some have even expressed fear the technology might further distance us from having real human connections. Of course, nothing is the same as something else (otherwise it would not be something else). Watching a game on television is not the same as watching it from a stadium. Listening to recorded music is not the same as going to a live concert. Reading a digital book on Kindle is not the same as reading a hard copy. Yet not being the same as something else doesn't necessarily negate its value. Nor does the existence of one thing necessarily threaten the existence of the other. Just as it is possible to watch a game on TV or at a stadium, or to listen to recorded music or at a live concert, or

read a digital book or a hard copy, it is possible to visit with people in person and in virtual reality.

I cannot, for instance, be with my son in person very often because he lives too far away. Yet we can easily put on our headsets and hang out with each other while fishing at a virtual lake in South Korea, or sitting around a campfire at Yosemite, or while surviving the zombie apocalypse in the Arizona sunshine. Sometimes he calls me on the phone to catch up. And often, on Sunday afternoons, he and his fiancé facetime with both Peggy and I while they're preparing dinner together. None of these experiences are the same, but they are all good ways of being together, even if we can only seldom be together in person.

The fear of virtual reality leading to people being even more disconnected is equally as illogical, although it is, on the surface, understandable. After all, look at what social media has done to our society. Go just about anywhere and people are looking at their devices rather than engaging with each other. Social media easily exposes us to what we want to hear (whether it is true or not), fashions echo chambers in which we hear only what we agree with, drives us toward extreme thinking, misinformation, and disinformation, and lots of other dysfunctional ways of relating to each other.

Yet, I see the advancement of virtual reality as being a fix for these problems because it puts us back in each other's presence, albeit a virtual presence. People will say things to or about others on social media they would never say in person. It's as if social media utilizes the most primal region of our brains, the, so-called, reptilian brain, responsible for fight and flight. Twitter's short quips foster stream of consciousness expression, not thoughtful conversation. Yet humans develop empathy, compassion, and openness, by seeing each other's faces, which we need to learn in order to establish healthy relationships and to fully develop as individuals.

Empathy stems from the mirror neuron located in the *supramarginal gyrus*, which is part of our neocortex. Mirror neurons are among the first neural structures to develop in infants, which is why babies learn to smile before almost any other kind of social interaction (mirroring the faces of those who smile at them). In *Healing the Angry Brain,* psychologist Ronald Potter-Efron says mirror neurons "initiate processes that allow you to get a feel for another person's actions and intentions. This creates a bridge between you and the people around you."[1] Yet, as with mirrors, in order to develop our empathic mirror neurons, it helps a lot to see the faces of others, not their tweets, not even their simple likes and dislikes on Facebook.

So, my hope is that virtual reality, which Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has called the next social platform, will replace social media as we now know it. And I'm glad to know that Zuckerberg has already invested billions in Oculus technology and recently renamed his

company, *Meta*, with the intention of replacing his current social platform with a virtual metaverse not unlike the fictional OASIS in *Ready Player One*. Imagine, in the near future, instead of tweeting our thoughts to and about others, we are socializing in virtual spaces and our mirror neurons, located in the frontal cortex, not the primal brain, become activated. So, I have high hopes that virtual reality will be a course correction for what has become the inhuman and antisocial impacts of today's social media technology.

I also imagine similar arguments were made when the telephone first came about. "I want to look someone in the eye when I'm speaking to them." "It's not the same as speaking to them in person." "The telephone will prevent us from having real human connections." What we do know is that Elisha Gray, a telegraph man, almost beat Alexander Grahm Bell in being the first to invent the telephone. Even so, Gray didn't believe much would ever come of the device, telling his patent lawyer in 1875 it was hardly with the bother since "it has no commercial value at present, for they can do much more business over a line by methods already in use."[2] And, in 1878, when Theodore Vail quit his job at the U.S. Post Office to become the first General Manager of a new upstart called Bell Telephone Company, his former boss angrily complained, "I can scarce believe that a man of your sound judgment should throw it up for a damned old Yankee notion called a telephone!"[3]

Dismissive comments like these reveal an uneasiness, even disdain, for this new technology, and a huge miscalculation about both the disruption and advantages it would bring. In 1889, the English Post Office's chief engineer told Parliament, "I fancy the descriptions we get of its use in America are a little exaggerated, though there are conditions in America which necessitate the use of such instruments more than here. Here we have a superabundance of messengers, errand boys and things of that kind … I have one in my office, but more for show. If I want to send a message—I use a sounder or employ a boy to take it."[4] Still there were some, like Bell and Vail who believed enough in the new technology to risk everything they had on it. As one historian wrote in 1910, "The telephone remains the acme of electrical marvels. No other thing does so much with so little energy. No other thing is more enswathed in the unknown."[5]

The same things are being said about virtual reality today. Some dread it and some are enthusiastic about it. Some consider it a fad and others a gateway into the unknown and unfamiliar. Whichever opinion is correct, VR is here to stay and is likely to be more disruptive to many current technologies and businesses than anything in human history, including the internet and the personal computer. As Stanford University professor, Jeremy Bailenson says in his recent book about virtual reality, *Experience on Demand*, "This is a unique moment in history, as the potent and relatively young technology of VR migrates from industrial and research laboratories to living rooms across the world."[6]

As a liberal, I'm excited about this technology because of all the good it can do in the world. And, as a philosopher, I'm also interested in its deeper philosophical implications regarding the nature of reality. Virtual reality is something the military and other researchers have been developing and experimenting with for decades, but it was only recently, in 2015, some of its performance problems were resolved by teenager Palmer Lucky while working on his own headset design when living in an old RV parked on his parent's driveway at age 19. Just three years later the company he started, Oculus VR, was purchased by Facebook for 2-billion-dollars. Since then, the technology has been advancing exponentially. And I predict by the end of this decade things will begin to look a lot different for us than they do today because of it.

By then, virtual reality will have advanced enough that there will be much less need for us to travel, which is going to be good for the environment. Obviously, some jobs, like hospital jobs require human presence, but you won't have to always leave home to see your doctor. You can do so from the convenience of your own living room. We may travel for recreation and vacation, but not necessarily to attend work meetings or conferences. There are already numerous virtual workspaces set in beautiful environments that include conference tables, the ability to share screens, and that even have virtual sticky notes. Those meeting in them can be from different places around the world, none of whom have to commute to attend.

Remember the first cellular phones were invented in the early 1970s, but it wasn't until around 2000 that 3G networks came about, allowing us the bandwidth necessary for them to become widespread. Prior to this, just calling others from a distance, even the next county over, was cost prohibitive. When friends or family or children moved away, we didn't hear much from them anymore because calling was too expensive. The ubiquitous use of cellphones and the internet has changed all of this in short order, allowing us to stay in touch and even work with people from all over the world. Think about the reduced emissions when most of us don't have travel to get to routine places, like work, or school, or the doctor's office.

Virtual Reality is also going to save a lot of resources. Currently, our smartphones have abilities that in the recent past would have required us to purchase multiple devices, like cameras, camcorders, film, music CDs, sound systems, calculators, not to mention telephones, and so much more. Today, for only a few hundred bucks, we get all of these technologies on one device that fits in our pockets. But in VR, even the smartphone goes away. All you need to do is look into your virtual hand and manifest a virtual smartphone, or turn on your virtual big screen television, or work on a virtual computer, or just about any other tech you can think of. In the next few years, most of the electronics we need will

become virtual objects that don't require resources or manufacturing. Nor do the virtual spaces we're in take up land or require the construction of buildings.

Nor will we need to shut the world out to enjoy these things and places. There are currently several companies, including Google and Apple, working on Augmented Reality glasses. AR places virtual objects in the real world, including cellphones, computers, and televisions, and also allows us to overlay directional guides, like virtual arrows, when getting around a strange place, or to see a virtual menu when passing a restaurant, or to look at a distant mountain and learn its name and distance and height, or to walk and talk with a friend who is virtually present while being someplace else. Apple is poised to release its AR glasses this year or next. If this product is as revolutionary as the iPhone was, imagine all the resources we'll save when so many of our gadgets—like our smartphones, computers, and televisions—are no longer necessary. So I have great hope that digitizing things and travel, saving resources and fuel in the process, is going to be great for our environment.

Finally, as a philosopher, I'm just as intrigued by the ways this technology might impact our sense of reality. Most people think they know the difference between what is real and what isn't, but philosophers don't. The nature of reality is a perennial problem that cannot be resolved. It usually boils down to just two opinions, that reality is fundamentally made of matter or that it is fundamentally made of mind. I won't go into the arguments for these now. What's important to consider here is that when we are able to interact with virtual object in virtual spaces, or sense that we are in two places at once, or can have meaningful connections and experiences with people and places far away, then our collective understanding of what reality is, is going to have to greatly expand.

Contemporary philosopher, David Chalmers, who specializes in the Philosophy of Mind and cognitive science, has recently published a new book entitled, *Reality+ / Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. In it, the technophilosopher argues that virtual reality isn't an illusion or a fiction, but its own kind of reality. Virtual places and objects are real, even if they are not the "same" as physical reality. A stuffed animal, for example, isn't a real animal, but it is a real stuffed animal. Likewise, a virtual tree isn't a real tree, but it is a real virtual tree that you can interact with in virtual reality.

All of this brings us back to what I consider the disappointing conclusion of *Ready Player One*, that "Reality is the only thing that's real." For it is foolish to think any of us understands what reality is to begin with, and that our limited definitions of it can settle the matter forever. Today, we are on a precipice of a new frontier that will require all of us to expand our collective consciousness. The world is changing faster than ever before. As futurist Ray

Kurzweil has said, "We won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century, it will be more like 20,000 years of progress." We can resist these fast changes, or we can work to guide the direction they take, but we cannot prevent them. My hope is we will use Virtual reality to reconnect with each other, to develop friendships across the planet, to lessen our demand for hard resources, and to radically reduce our carbon footprint.

Fear of change tempts us to become conservative in our thinking and behaviors. Embracing such uncertainty, on the other hand, is what makes us progressive and leads to progress. May we find the courage and wisdom to move forward together.

[1] Potter-Efron, Ronald, *Healing the Angry Brain*, MJF Books, New York, NY, 2012, p. 151.

[2] Gleick, James. The Information (p. 184). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Bailenson, Jeremy, *Experience on Demand*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, NY, 2018. p. 13