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| Annotations: As you read make notes on the text by doing the following:* **Circle** any words you do not know- write the definition in the margin
* **Underline** any section which might be pertinent (applicable) to your research paper- write yourself a reminder note in the margins so you do not lose that brilliant thought!
* **Box** sections in which you see a clear connection with the text- write a short explanatory note in the margins
 | Points:Annotations: \_\_\_/5Response: \_\_\_/5 |

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The Good and the Bad of Escaping to Virtual Reality

Researchers believe new immersive technology could lead to isolation, but maybe when social needs are met online, people won't need in-person interaction as much.

MONICA KIM FEB 18 2015, 7:42 AM ET

In Silicon Valley, in 1985, a ragtag band of programmers began exploring the concept of virtual reality from a tiny cottage in Palo Alto. Spearheaded by the 24-year-old Jaron Lanier, VPL Research helped make VR a buzzword in the mid-to-late 80s and earned substantial investment, before filing for bankruptcy at the decade’s end. Despite mass media interest from publications like Scientific American and Wired, the technology wasn’t there—or it was too expensive—and the audience was a tad too niche. Save for some fruits of its early research, purchased in sum by Sun Microsystems, VPL’s sole legacy has been its popularization of the term “virtual reality.”

Thirty years have passed since then, and the landscape has finally shifted in virtual reality’s favor. Last month, Microsoft revealed Project HoloLens, a headset that creates high-definition holograms, which has been secretly under development since around 2010, according to Wired. Its thick, black lenses use an advanced depth camera, sensors, and several processing units to process thousands of bouncing light particles, in order to project holographic models on the kitchen counter, or take the wearer on a hyperrealistic trip to Mars. Google has invested $542 million in the augmented-reality startup Magic Leap, while Sony and Samsung are both developing virtual-reality headsets, according to The Verge. Much was made of Facebook's $2 billion purchase of VR Kickstarter darling Oculus Rift last March, as Mark Zuckerberg made it clear that the company was playing the long game: “One day, we believe this kind of immersive, augmented reality will become a part of daily life for billions of people.”

All signs point to a future filled with virtual reality, and according to Zuckerberg et al, the potential applications are beyond count: One could have breakfast at the Louvre beside the Winged Victory of Samothrace, followed by a lunchtime spelunk through Thailand’s water caves. Of course there are deeply immersive video games–the linchpin of the modern VR movement—and various movies in production for these devices, while Barcelona's BeAnotherLab has created an empathy application for the Oculus Rift that allows users to swap genders. (Inevitably, a sex toy company is also developing a way to have virtual robot sex, according to Motherboard.)

If virtual reality becomes a part of people’s day-to-day lives, more and more people may prefer to spend a majority of their time in virtual spaces. As the futurist Ray Kurzweil predicted, somewhat hyperbolically, in 2003, “By the 2030s, virtual reality will be totally realistic and compelling and we will spend most of our time in virtual environments ... We will all become virtual humans.” In theory, such escapism is nothing new—as critics of increased TV, Internet, and smartphone usage will tell you—but as VR technology continues to blossom, the worlds that they generate will become increasingly realistic, as Kurzweil explained, creating a greater potential for overuse. This technological paradigm shift brings a level of immersion unlike any that has come before it, and the handwringing has already begun. Early doomsday predictions aside, can virtual escapism can ever be used for good?

The oldest documented research on escapism reportedly dates back to the 40s and 50s, when researchers first began examining the connection between media consumption and life satisfaction. In 1996, Peter Vorderer, a professor at the University of Mannheim, attempted to define the term. “In its core,” he wrote, “escapism means that most people have, due to unsatisfying life circumstances, again and again cause to ‘leave’ the reality in which they live in a cognitive and emotional way.”

While discussing this concept in her book Choice and Preference in Media Use, Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick noted that “as people cannot truly ‘leave’ reality, the concept of escapism appears to lack precision.” By that definition, virtual reality is a game changer. With VR, it is possible that instead of simply escaping reality by focusing on a TV show, for example, people may choose to replace an unhappy reality with a better, virtual one.

The idea of a life lived online, or outside of regular society, is largely seen as dangerous and unhealthy. There have been some reports of self-imposed social isolation that illustrate the negative side of withdrawal. Since the 1990s, the term hikikomori has been used to describe the estimated 500,000 to one million Japanese citizens who refuse to leave their homes. According to Dr. Takahiro Kato, a psychiatrist working at a hikikomori support center in Fukuoka, Japan, many hikikomori display depressive and obsessive-compulsive tendencies, while a minority “appear addicted to the Internet.” Then there are the infamous World of Warcraft players who lose themselves in their massive online universe. In 2004, Zhang Xiaoyi, a 13-year-old from China, reportedly committed suicide after playing WoW for 36 consecutive hours, in order to “join the heroes of the game he worshipped.” In 2009, a three-year-old girl from New Mexico tragically passed away from malnutrition and dehydration; on the day of her death, her mother was said to have spent 15 hours playing the game. Former Warcraft player Ryan van Cleave explained to The Guardian in 2011 that “living inside World of Warcraft seemed preferable to the drudgery of everyday life” when he had played 60 hours a week. Groups like WOWaholics Anonymous have been created to help former players like van Cleave who became too invested in the game.

Although these are extreme examples, they share a common root with lesser forms of negative escapism, according to psychologist Andrew Evans. “Another definition of unhealthy escapism—escapism gone too far—is the effects it has on the essential fabric of living,” he wrote in This Virtual Life, “the individual in the context of family, friends, and social commitments.” Evans connects his definition to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which ranks love and a sense of belonging just after basic physiological and safety needs. Critics like Sherry Turkle often point to how screen-saturation has negatively affected the way we fulfill those needs, while others like David Carr have explored how virtual reality might only exacerbate the problem. Ignoring the fact that VR’s future applications also include the potential to connect with real human beings around the world—“this is really a new communication platform,” Zuckerberg noted—it is not impossible to find love and belonging online, let alone on an immersive 3-D platform. According to Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailensen, “The Internet and virtual realities easily satisfy such social needs and drives—sometimes [they are] so satisfying that addicted users will withdraw physically from society.”

Blascovich, a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Bailensen, of Stanford University’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab, examined the consequences of a VR-centric future in their 2011 book Infinite Reality, noting that as virtual-reality platforms become mainstream and affordable, the pull of spending more time in virtual reality may prove hard to resist. “We did predict this might happen,” Blascovich says. “The proliferation of affordable [VR] will dramatically increase the size of the population for whom more highly immersive perceptual and psychological experiences are available.” Blascovich is careful to note, however, that these immersive escapes are not necessarily a bad thing. “A virtual second life can replace the ‘real life’ of some individuals, but this can be good or bad,” he says. “Who is to say that a virtual life that is better than one’s physical life is a bad thing?” If someone is able to fulfill their basic human needs in an immersive virtual world, who is to say that they shouldn’t?

According to Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, a Stanford psychiatrist and author of Virtually You, The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality, immersive 3-D will only be the latest manifestation of technology’s heavy role in our social lives and well-being. “To some degree, this has already happened with the Internet and social media,” Aboujaoude says, “where we can have a ‘full life’ [online] that can be quite removed from our own.” It is possible, however, that virtual reality may drastically change a person’s social and emotional needs over time. “We may stop ‘needing’ or craving real social interactions because they may become foreign to us,” Aboujaoude explains. “It doesn’t mean that they can’t make our lives better; it means that we, as a culture, are no longer aware of them and of their positive effects on our lives, because we are so immersed in virtual life and have been for some time.” He compares this change to the one experienced by digital natives, whose perception of a healthy social life has been shaped by platforms like Facebook and Gchat.

VR’s advanced, immersive capabilities might bring more severe cases of social isolation to the public’s attention. Aboujaoude notes that people who report much more fulfillment from virtual scenarios often have underlying conditions, such as untreated social anxiety, and those cases should not be taken lightly. It is not, however, the reason why all people choose to immerse themselves in other worlds—whether it’s through a book, a TV show, or a 3-D video game.

In Escapism, Yi-Fu Tuan writes about society’s feelings on the titular subject: “Escapism has a somewhat negative meaning in our society and perhaps in all societies. It suggests an inability to face facts—the real world.” Nevertheless, all people do it. As Evans noted, “As escapism appears to be a natural mechanism, the mind must have need for it.” Those dissatisfied with the banality of their day-to-day life may find pleasure in the immersion of a fantasy world; others unable to find fulfilling relationships may seek solace in Japan’s otome games, first-person visual novels that simulate romantic relationships. The more life-like virtual environments become, Aboujaoude says, the more attractive they will be. “The appeal of these environments is not so much that they help us totally escape reality. Rather, it is that they make us believe that we can recreate and change our own.” In that way, rather than forcing a mass rejection of society, virtual worlds may open new ways of examining our own.

As with all things, virtual reality can be taken to unhealthy extremes, and the idea of such a drastic shift—one that may entirely redefine social needs—may cause unease. But amid all the warnings, for many bored and lonely souls, the promise of a virtual escape is not unsettling, but exciting. For any who have longed to spend any amount of time in their favorite fantastical world—from Middle Earth to Westeros, Hyrule to Kanto—VR offers the opportunity. “VR is a rapidly developing technology,” Evans concludes, “both functional and escapist, and potentially offers a wondrous parallel universe of unlimited possibilities.”

Response: *Soma*, a hallucinogen used by those in power to subdue the citizens in *Brave New World*'s futuristic, totalitarian setting. It is described as "the perfect drug," with all the benefits (calming, surrealistic, ten-hour long highs) with none of the drawbacks (no guilt, no hangovers). The citizens of the "World State" have been conditioned to love the drug, and they use it to escape any momentary bouts of dissatisfaction. The problem, as one character identifies, is that the citizens are essentially enslaved by the drug and turned into mindless drones. In our society today this listlessness without a hangover can be achieved through the simple means of television and technology. Escapism through several means; recreation, sex, drugs, and “feelies”, are a few examples; rules the minds of the upper class citizens in Brave New World. Do you believe the middle and upper classes of our society strive to achieve the same listlessness of escapism through similar means? Which ones? Why or why not?

To answer the question make a connection between this article and the chapters read thus far in clear and concise 3-5 sentence answer

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