Reality Through Virtuality

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Will the allure of a dynamic and consistently enthralling reality combined with perfected bodies help or hinder the human experience? This is the question that is before us in the physical reality when considering the use of and advancements in virtual reality (VR) technology, especially those developed by Playstation and Oculus VR, among others. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain makes the point that "artistic creation does not copy God's creation, it continues it" (Klein, 2010, p. 23). Klein elaborates that good art assists in our understanding of truth and beauty in the world. Good art works as both reflection and enlightenment: just as the imperfect and curious world in which we live in is mirrored in art, so too often is the answers to its problems and questions. If we are to consider, then, that virtual reality is in some way perhaps a continuation, extension, or a new avenue of this physical reality creation in which we naturally partake in, and not an advancement on it, to what extent can we draw truth and beauty by way of it? Any good art form, such as painting and writing, should, at least traditionally, afford its consumer something beneficial and a way of seeing the world. But unlike these forms, VR gaming is a truly immersive experience that could very well convince players to spend less time in the real, physical world—which can then seem unsatisfying in comparison to VR—to occupy this new fantastical realm that places them at the centre of all experiences. VR thrives on delivering and positioning artificial experiences as real, arguably most convincingly achieved through generating feelings and reactions from players by way of fantasy sounds, sights, and scenes. There is safety in danger and no effect from cause. Perhaps the greatest threat of VR gaming lies in its promise: step out of the real world and into a controlled one—a departure that is fruitless unless one returns with the will to enact good in our physical reality.

It should be first noted the by and large purpose of VR gaming is, like any gaming console or product, to entertain. Entertainment that is both good and pure is in itself harmless and beneficial for the soul. McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks assert that "people are drawn to the arts not for their instrumental effects, but because the arts can provide them with meaning and with a distinctive type of pleasure and emotional stimulation" (2004, p. xv) For audience members, there exists an experience of comfort and reassurance when consuming art; entertainment provides people with escapism, hope, happiness, and knowledge, and these experiences and values are that which consumers can then apply to their own lives in some capacity. Gaming as an art form, then, is not strictly bad, for it tends to provide people with much of the same goodness that comes by way of a painting or a novel: the experiences and values of escapism, hope, happiness, and knowledge, among others, that audiences have the opportunity to experience and consume when interacting with the art are found across mediums old and mediums new. However, with the advent of VR, there bodes the unique and distinct possibility of gamers not only devoting more and more of their time to playing VR games and exploring the headset's features and abilities, but of them becoming increasingly unsatisfied and at odds with the real world.

VR invites people to step into worlds once forgotten and lost and worlds both familiar and original. Gone are the days when gamers had to watch their television screen with the lounge room in their peripheral vision. What was once simply reality and but a fact of traditional controller and console gaming has now become a distraction and an inferior element. VR occupies the gamer's peripheral vision with scenes, colour, and action, and the world envelops players like never before. What was once a dream, a fantasy, for gamers is now a reality. That which they see is all the game: there is nothing reminiscent of the physical world remaining when they are playing.

Combine this new and dynamic frontier of gaming with the perfected bodies that players assume when in the virtual reality game world and the physical world can suddenly become quite less interesting, engaging, and colourful. Take, for example, Rocksteady Studios' 2016 VR game *Batman: Arkham VR*, in which players take on the mantle of the title hero, a role that sees them in a position that affords them the opportunity to do all the awe-inspiring and fantastical things Batman does on a common basis: visit the Batcave, talk to Alfred, use his gadgets, patrol Gotham City, and come face to face with supervillains the Penguin and the Joker. Players see all these events through first-person perspective, thus putting them directly under Batman's mask.

This development capitalises on audiences' wish fulfillments; where one could previously only imagine being Batman, now they can simply wear a headset and become him. They are living out their dreams and fantasies with striking realism, and there is nothing totally wrong with this nor the game itself. But there lies within this development, and others like it, the potential for the VR player to get lost in this constructed, romanticised, and fantastical reality in which there is safety in danger and no effect from cause (it should be noted here that *Arkham VR* does not outright commit this, but is just being used here for the purposes of this report as an example of a potential threat of VR gaming). In this make-believe environment, players can live out the impossible and their fantasies without the consequences of the physical world. If they fail to reach a goal or complete a mission in time or successfully, then they can likely restart and try it over and over again until they succeed—unlike the real world, which, by comparison to the perfected and idealised virtual reality, now has the potential to be seen as distant, and, thus, inferior. This distance comes through the VR gaming system's immediate capacity to situate the player at the heart of all that is happening: every action, scene, and decision revolves around the player, who, perhaps for the first time,

feels as though they are truly the centre of the universe. VR tailor-makes a world to entertain and sustain the player and afford them a sure sense of heroism, importance, and acknowledgement. However, it is in this realm of no consequence where consequences can occur; namely, excessive time and effort spent in this highly addictive and personalised VR experience impacts the real, physical world—where safety is not guaranteed amid any type of danger and where causes have effect. People applying themselves to playing hero in fantasy day and night deny the opportunity to do good in the real world. To this extent, the dynamics of this particular digital culture do not at all influence large-scale social change. They do, however, change the social functions of the individual caught up in its virtual reality presentations and workings.

The idealised self has arguably never been more prevalent within the digital spectrum than it is now within the workings of VR gaming. Players have controlled Batman before in other video games—namely in the *Batman: Arkham* series, which adopted a primarily third-person perspective for consoles such as PlayStation 4 and Xbox One—but now they can be him, seeing what he sees, doing what he does—and a certain level of power and freedom exists for the players in delivering justice and laying down the law to criminals without the reality of physical harm. This role fulfilment enacted and discovered within the workings of VR gaming is the exact type of liberation common to bodies, for, as Athique notes, "even as we seek to engage in transferring our sense of self out-of-body and into the space of the screen, the intensely personal nature of the individual computer terminal, and the interactivity inherent to its function, mobilises a profound sense of intimacy in human-machine relations" (2013, p.156). He suggests that user engagement with digital technologies is at once an out-of-body phenomenon that is simultaneously and closely linked to the physical actions of the human body, thus becoming more of an intimate experience, unlike earlier

media technologies, which were primarily spectatorship in nature, and, as such, involved audiences through having them watch, not touch (p. 157). VR, then, in its very form, extends this sense of liberation and personalisation, satisfying and engaging audiences in the process and in a way like never before. Heim notes that the VR keyword "immersion" is a term that defines technology as informing sensory input: "while a TV show or book can be absorbing, these media do not seize and control the perceptual field as fully as the technically immersive media—not just mentally immersive but perceptually immersive in a way that involves physical participation" (2017, p.266–267). This keen sense of interaction and response is at the core of what makes VR so liberating and personalised, and, yet, it is in this same liberation and personalisation that the threat of alienation can take hold. Because players are experiencing a perfected reality catered towards them and in which they experience no harm nor personal criticism, they might just make VR their life.

Of course, the extent to which a user spends their time in and gets something out of VR is dependent upon a myriad of factors, perhaps most of all the temperament of the individual player and their respective situation. Gackenbach, Wijeyaratnam, and Flockhart assert that "while there are many positive effects from gaming, repetitive and/or excessive use of games can cause disruption and impairment in an individual's functioning ... addiction of any kind is detrimental, and Internet usage and gaming are no different" (2017, p. 164). An addiction to gaming, especially to one as personalised and captivating as VR, denies players the opportunity to spend their time enacting social change in the real world. If a VR game is solely created for the purposes of entertainment, connection, and enthralment, then the user takes away little to apply to their own lives and the physical reality. The subsequent challenge and goal for VR game designers should therefore become one of designing a VR game that acts as a tool to inspire and inform within its players the knowledge and commitment to enact

social change and to bring about good in this physical reality. It is not sufficient for players to become Batman and do heroic things in VR—players must do as Batman does and do heroic things in the real world. They must not get continually caught up in fantasy, but be inspired by it. The role of VR, then, should become one of escapism and enlightenment, a product that is as informative as it is inspiring under the banner of pure entertainment.

So where to now for VR? Like the progression of all video games throughout history, advancements in graphics seems inevitable, as does the size of the headsets, which, judging by other technological refurbishments and updates, suggests its successors will get continually smaller. In terms of managing the development of games to acknowledge and amend potential problems outlined in this report, work can be done to add to these games a greater emphasis on and appreciation for the importance and beauty of the physical reality and what role one plays in it, thus adhering to the dynamic formula of what has been earlier defined as good art (though the player responding to this in the desired way is a variable naturally out of their control). All in all, it can be considered that virtual reality gaming, at the present time, is a technology with the promise of great prosperity as long as its games recall and admire the creation of the physical reality from which it cannot exist without.

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