

1. Virtual and augmented reality

Video games involving virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) components are advancing both in terms of the supporting technology and in popularity.¹² VR involves a fully immersive experience, wherein the user puts on a headset and may look and move around in the fully virtual world. Meanwhile, AR involves the projection of virtual elements onto non-virtual images or videos, allowing for an “enhanced” experience of these images or videos. While we are at the beginning stages of these technologies, it is not difficult to see where they may lead. VR and AR will only become more sophisticated, more immersive, and more common. People will be able to use them to play games, travel, visit family, walk through museums, read translated signs, and engage in a number of other activities that used to require much more time, energy, and money in the real world. These new technologies raise a question: What is the value of “real” experience?

On one hand, we might worry that replacing real experiences with virtual or augmented experiences involves a loss of value. There is something meaningful and important about engaging with the world as it is, for better or worse, that we miss out on when we engage in virtual or augmented environments instead. We might even worry that a life lived in a video game is no life at all. No matter how convincing the simulation, experiences generated by programming are no more than illusions.

On the other hand, the feelings of excitement, entertainment, and togetherness that virtual or augmented experiences can create are as real as any other emotion. One might compare the virtual world of a video game to the imagined world of a novel or the constructed world of a film. The feelings evoked therein are intense, and valuable. Through fictional constructions, people might experience things they never otherwise would, like climbing Mt. Everest or flying through the air like a superhero. The happiness generated by such experiences surely outweighs any loss in authenticity.

Study Questions

1. Does a real experience have more value than a virtual or augmented experience if they feel the same? Why or why not?
2. Are there any other benefits that come along with navigating the real world that might not apply to navigating virtual or augmented environments, and vice versa?
3. Is there a morally relevant difference between virtual and augmented experience? Why or why not?

1. <http://www.theverge.com/2016/3/14/11206552/vr-oculus-rift-htv-vive-valve-sony-psvr-GDC>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/26/apple-earnings-pokemon-go-augmented-reality-steve-cook>