

The 'reality' of virtual reality pornography

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Credit: Newcastle University

Experts at Newcastle University, UK, are investigating how virtual reality is changing the experience of pornography.

Through headsets such as the Facebook owned Oculus Rift and Playstation VR, the technology allows the user to become an active part

of these 'new' sexual experiences.

Presenting their research at the CHI 2017 conference, the Newcastle team say the growing popularity of VR technologies that put users into experiences where previously they were an onlooker, could mean the extreme, degrading or even abusive imagery in [pornography](#) becoming all the more 'real'.

Now the team, based in Open Lab, part of Newcastle University's School of Computing Science, are calling on the digital community to take responsibility for this emerging technology and to help inform the development of this "very prominent, but not often talked about, 'human-computer' interaction".

Dr Madeline Balaam, co-author of the research, explains:

"As a society we are always looking for new and novel experiences but the porn industry brings with it an added risk because of its sexist stance and exploitation of women.

"We are already obsessed with body image and the digital industry is no different, creating the perfect virtual woman from Lara Croft to sex-robots. VR porn has the potential to escalate this.

"Our research highlighted not only a drive for perfection, but also a crossover between [reality](#) and fantasy. Some of our findings highlighted the potential for creating 3D models of real life people, raising questions over what consent means in VR experiences. If a user created a VR version of their real life girlfriend, for example, would they do things to her that they knew she would refuse in the real world?"

"In the past, pornography has been driven by the industry but if the future of pornography is virtual reality then perhaps it's time for us to

take greater responsibility for how we allow this to develop."

Research lead and PhD student Matthew Wood, adds:

"Pornography has played a key role in the development of new and emerging technologies - from the stereoscope in the 1800s through home video and now virtual reality.

"But what VR offers for the first time is the opportunity to move from being simply an observer to being a participant and this changes the experience massively.

"One of our findings suggested VR pornography could be something more like cheating on a partner because of the increasing 'reality' of the VR experience.

"We found that for most people the potential of a VR porn experience opened the doors to an apparently 'perfect' sexual experience - a scenario which in the real world no-one could live up to. For others it meant pushing the boundaries, often with highly explicit and violent imagery, and we know from current research into pornography that exposure to this content has the potential to become addictive and more extreme over time."

The future of pornography

Prior to the 19th century, pornography was limited to books and art and it was only in the late 1800s that pornographic content became available through new technologies such as the stereoscope.

However, it was the postcard which introduced pornography to the masses and quickly became a site of controversy.

The push to [internet pornography](#) has largely been associated with more explicit and perverse sexual content and particularly with increased levels of violence. Typically, it is women who continue to be the object of desire.

Virtual reality is only just starting to emerge, with the launch of several headsets by the likes of Facebook, Playstation and Google at the end of 2016. Designed to improve the gaming experience, but also other interactions with digital content, Wood says "VR pornography is just around the corner."

Following forty five participants through their first virtual reality porn experience as fictional character 'Jack', the Newcastle team asked each volunteer to complete Jack's story.

"We grouped the stories into two," says Wood. "The first group was what we called the 'perfect' scenario - some were lavish and fantastical, others were quite close to reality, but all of them were the perfect sexual experience, described by our participants as 'better than the real thing'.

"The second was the 'precarious' experience, and these stories often went beyond what would be acceptable in real life with sometimes violent imagery, featuring men performing degrading sexual acts on women or forcing themselves upon them."

Revenge porn and social media

Exposure to sexually explicit material is happening at an increasingly younger age through content on the internet. This includes peer to peer sharing through platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram and revenge porn is a growing phenomenon where sexually explicit content of others are shared online without consent.

Together with the availability of 3D imaging tools and the rise in DIY porn, the team say it is not unforeseeable for scenarios such as the ones described in this research could become a reality, and models based on real people are used in VR pornographic settings could become the future form of [revenge porn](#).

"Pornography has been with us forever and is not going to go away," says Balaam. "But maybe [virtual reality](#) gives us the opportunity to influence pornography and introduce some new rules. Imagine a scenario, for example where a male participant is made to assume the female role in the virtual game."

Wood adds: "The future for VR pornography could be more positive, if designed in a certain way.

"In our research we also saw suggestions that VR could deliver more embodied sensory experiences, with more emphasis on subtlety and the relational aspects of sexual [experiences](#)."

Provided by Newcastle University

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