

What happens when virtual reality affairs get real?

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July 2015 might well be known as the month online infidelity went public. This date coincided with one of the biggest and most revealing hacks in history when the [Ashley Madison](#) database was compromised

and made available online.

Ashley Madison, a dating website targeted at people already married or in relationships, had more than [36 million subscribers](#), 86% of whom were men.

Just over one year later, and immersive technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are on course to become mainstream. But what happens when online infidelity and virtual reality collide?

Online liaisons

Internet infidelity is not new in itself, with Second Life being one example where it was rife. There is even a BBC documentary about it, [Wonderland: Virtual Adultery and Cyberspace Love](#), and online adulterers have appeared on The Jeremy Kyle Show.

Immersive technology and pornography are also having an impact. But beyond this could lie a minefield of explosive consequences.

One reason is that immersive technology itself relies on the idea of "presence", which could best be described as feeling as if you are really in the virtual world and forgetting that you are actually in the physical world.

Research shows that not only is the [virtual reality](#) experience much more intense than screen-based ones, but the effects of [immersive interaction last long after](#) the person has removed their headset.

What happens in cyberspace does not necessarily stay in cyberspace. The emotions and feelings of intimate contact felt in VR will be carried over into the real world. So if a partner is being "unfaithful" online, the emotional consequences and impact on their existing relationship are

clear.

Add to this the prospect for physical contact in immersive VR via sensory devices such as teledildonics – sexual aids that can be controlled remotely by another person – and you have potential relationship dynamite.

Yet another twist in the VR sexual plot is whether the sexual partner is an avatar or an agent (a computer-generated simulation). In their book, [Infinite Reality](#), authors Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson note that people will react equally to avatars or agents based upon their belief that they represent a real person.

However, once it's known to be only a simulation, they may treat it somewhat differently, almost as if it's part of the furniture. This might be equated to having an affair with a real person in VR or merely viewing the encounter almost as if one is using an animated sex toy.

Pandora's box

Research shows that emotion and feelings [within a virtual environment are all too real](#). Add to this the ability to achieve virtual physical perfection in terms of their avatar, and fantasy can quickly become reality.

Working late at the office might no longer be a euphemism for ducking off for an illicit liaison, because with VR one can be physically at the office or at home and still be somewhere else at the same time.

The 2015 movie [Creative Control](#) gives an insight into what the future of VR could look like and how it might affect relationships. The main character has a virtual affair which spills over into the real world with predictable consequences.

Whether this is a visionary piece or simply science fiction is yet to be determined. However, the opportunities for VR sexual liaisons are already being exploited.

Ostensibly a pornography-based website, the recently launched [VR3000](#) bills itself as the "safe" way to have an affair by simply doing it in cyberspace (VR3000 site [NSFW](#)).

Are we about to redefine the rules of fidelity itself? What counts as cheating for one person [may not be for another](#). However, [studies](#) show that the impact of online infidelity is likely to be the same as that of physical affairs.

With the increasing ease of access using VR equipment, the ways to cheat on a partner are also likely to proliferate. With that must go a note of caution.

The first issue is the impact on the relationship itself. The second is the opportunity for deception and manipulation that online encounters will provide in virtual space.

After all, what you see in VR is not always what you get, and nothing could be more true in the world of sex.

Everything that takes place in VR can be monitored and recorded. It can also be altered and manipulated. You have no certain way of knowing either who is at the other end of the VR encounter, or how many other people might be in on it.

While it may appear to be fun and exciting, a VR affair may also be a Pandora's box. Once opened, our relationships may never be the same again.

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