Looking into their computer-generated eyes—dating in virtual reality

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Online dating has been around for more than 20 years, but for the most part, the goal has been to eventually meet your new paramour face to face. Virtual reality (VR) could change that.

From Match.com, which launched in 1995, the idea of meeting and

chatting with someone in a digital space has spread to Facebook, Second Life and apps like Tinder.

With VR coming of age, we're about to discover what happens when you combine the two. This is dating where a version of you can spend time in the same virtual space as your love interest, but without physically being there at all.

Unlike chatting with someone on Tinder but never meeting up, it could feel very, very real.

The beginning of VR immersive dating

The entertainment industry is already trying to capitalise on the idea of VR and romance. There is a range of shows and apps that indicate how this technology is creating new ideas around dating.

Facebook has launched a show called Virtually Dating, a version of a blind date using HTC Vive VR technology.

It's a strange mix, because the people are physically in the same space but can only see each other and interact in VR. The body scanning also has glitches that mean the limbs of their avatar can do strange things, like arms going right through bodies.

Then, for those who are struggling with dating altogether, an app for HTC Vive offers immersive dating lessons. Dating Lessons tries to coach you on things such as body language and what to say on a date, although the game has been criticised as sexist.

Even further from reality, a Japanese gaming company reportedly offers men the chance to marry their favourite anime character in a real chapel where physical sensations such as kissing are mimicked using props

while the groom carries out the actions in VR.

Where does this all lead?

The effect VR dating could have on our social structure is still unknown, but research into online dating offers a hint of its possible impact.

A recent study by researchers at West Virginia University and the University of Illinois looked at first physical date success after initial contact through online dating. In many cases, a decline in attraction occurred after the first face to face date, in spite of previously favourable online interactions.
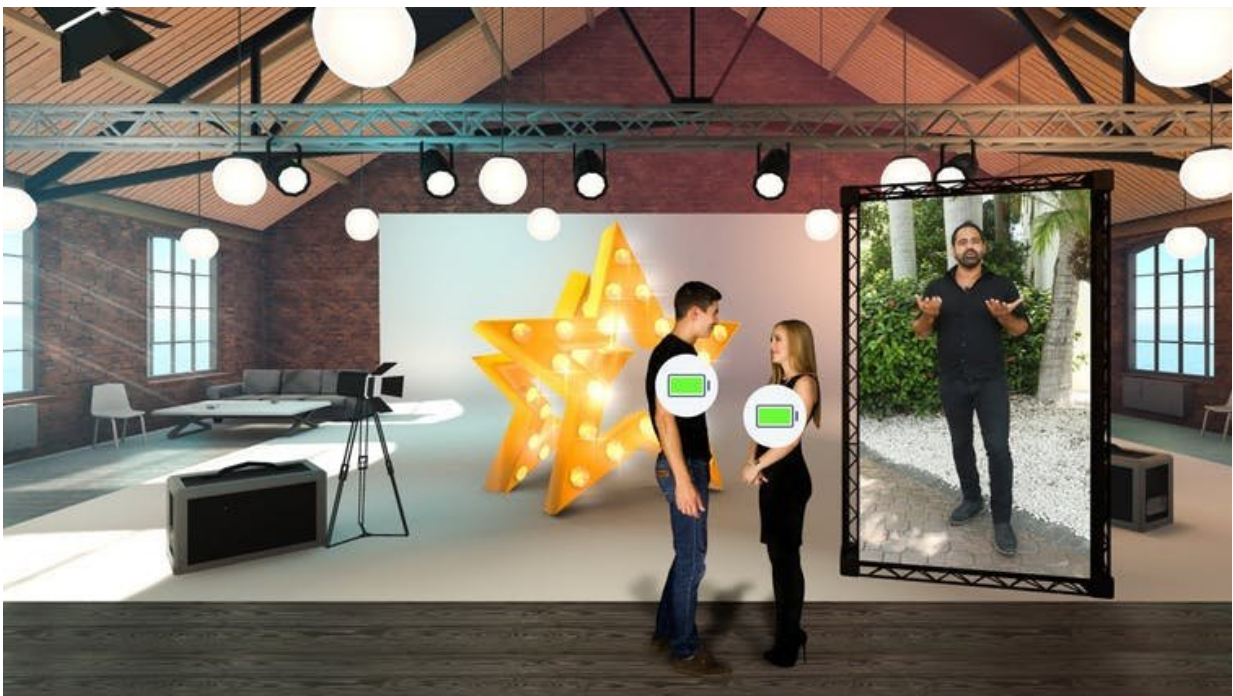
An image from Dating Lessons, developed by Cerevrum Inc. Credit: Cerevrum Inc

However, this was "tempered" by the amount of online communication before meeting, indicating that the higher this was, the lower the disillusionment on actual contact.

Could VR and the immersive presence it offers make this process even more successful? It's possible. A VR date might be a more intense and personal experience. Moving from screen to VR invokes "presence" – the feeling of actually being in the virtual space itself.

After all, advances in sex-related technology already offer the potential for a couple in VR to engage in a physical-sexual experience.

It isn't hard to imagine scenarios where this might replace the entirety of physical contact, fulfilling the fictional predictions of novelists such as Ernest Cline who wrote Ready Player One and invented a world that has become subsumed by virtual experience.

It's also possible that in the future, the "other person" may not be real but simply a computer-generated avatar.

Either way, two things are certain: VR dating is here to stay, and it will change the way we date.

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