

Why virtual reality cannot match the real thing

March 14 2018, by Janna Thompson

Suppose you were offered the opportunity to hook yourself up to a machine that would give you all the experiences you desire. Using this technology you could have the sensations of climbing Mt Everest, enjoying great sex with a good looking partner or visiting the Taj Mahal.

The [philosopher Robert Nozick](#) used the idea of an "experience machine" to refute the view that good experiences are all we want from life. He thought that most of us would choose not to hook ourselves up to the machine. He assumed that we prefer reality. "But why?" he encouraged us to ask. Nozick's experience machine existed only in his imagination. There was no such thing as [virtual reality](#) in 1974 when he was writing. But we are now able to give ourselves computer generated experiences that are like the real thing.

Researchers at Monash University can give you the sensation of [standing in the midst of Angkor Wat](#) as it was in the late 12th century when the Khmer kings ruled. You can look around you and see people fishing, tending gardens and looking after their rulers. Soon there will be technology that enables you to smell the cooking fires of the inhabitants and to feel temple stones by reaching out your hands.

Through virtual reality you can not only visit famous tourist sites like Angkor Wat, Niagara Falls and the Taj Mahal. You [can also](#) explore a sunken ship, go to the concerts of your favourite group, suspend weightless in space, put yourself in the shoes of an immigrant crossing the Mexican/US border, become Batman or land on Mars.

The question posed by Nozick has become a real issue. Why should you prefer the trouble and expense of actually visiting Angkor Wat or Niagara Falls when you can get all the experiences of being there by putting on goggles and a body suit?

We want the experience of travel and not merely what we see on arrival. But there is no reason why virtual reality cannot eventually give us these experiences. We want to interact with our environment. But computer programming allows this to happen and it is bound to increase in sophistication. To answer Nozick's question we need reasons for preferring reality no matter how good the technology gets.

It's true that you can achieve something only in real life. Your virtual reality climb of Mt Everest may be realistic, but you cannot get the satisfaction (or the bragging rights) that you would get from the actual climb. Still, achievement is not always so important. Perhaps all you want to do is to see Angkor Wat or Niagara Falls. So why is the real experience better?

Cheap emotions

One answer is that the emotions you feel when you have a virtual experience are not as valuable. When you actually see Niagara Falls, especially if you get up close, you feel awe and even fear in the face of an overpowering force of nature. Being in the presence of something that causes you these feelings is part of the pleasure. Romantics called this [the experience of the sublime](#) and thought it was aesthetically valuable.

Visiting a virtual Niagara Falls may also cause you feelings of awe and fear but they are subverted and cheapened by your knowledge that the danger is not real and that your mind is being tricked into thinking that it is.

Reality also holds a potential for making discoveries that virtual reality lacks. Those who visit Angkor Wat hope to see more than they anticipated from tourist information, perhaps even discover something about the place that others have missed. If they are archaeological experts then there is no substitute for an actual visit. Computer simulations, however good, contain only what photography, laser technology and pre-existing expertise put into them.

There is a further reason for preferring a real experience to virtual reality. Real [experiences](#) connect us to the deeds of past people and place us in contexts where history was made. Viewing an actual painting by Rembrandt is a more valuable experience than viewing a copy, however good. The genuine painting was the work of the man himself. We see his brush strokes on the canvas. We are [in the presence of genius](#).

For the same reason we find value in being in the very place where Khmer kings walked. Our experience is enhanced by being physically present in places where ancient people lived or where history was made. Virtual reality lacks this aspect of experience.

Virtual reality can take us to places we can never go. It can teach us by putting us in the place of others. It can be exciting, amusing and a good way of spending leisure time. But it will never be a substitute for encounters with the real thing.

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