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The Reality of The Virtual

Which is dumber—buying "The Knot," a beautiful Bottega Veneta handbag made of woven satin and trimmed in python, or buying a tractor in the online game "FarmVille"? The first is real and costs $1,380. The second is virtual, priced under $20. I know which I'd choose. But then, I like python.

It's a trick question of course. They're equally dumb. Neither the bag nor the tractor costs anything near its purchase price to make and distribute. The value of most things—perfume, cars, houses, handbags—is, in fact, largely virtual. Always has been. And don't you, in the $260 jeans, try to argue.

So today, why do we continue to label things "virtual" and "real"? It is pointlessly pompous. We're drawing a vanishing line. Researchers are now showing there's no division. Spillover between virtual and actual experience is happening all the time. So we should stop turning up our noses and start learning from it.

At the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford, they study how physical behaviors in virtual reality flow into the actual world. The lab is kitted out with surround sound, eight cameras for optical tracking down to the quarter-inch and, under the carpet, a haptic floor (producing vibrations) loaded with 16 subwoofers. When you put on the head-mounted display and chop down a virtual redwood, you feel the forest shudder under foot.

What's interesting is what happens just after you've exorcised your inner lumberjack and taken off the head gear. Experiments show that, thanks to your "virtual" tree-chopping, you actually use fewer paper towels to pick up a water spill. And 24 hours later, you show greater intent to recycle.

Vanity, as well as conscience, carries over. In another Stanford study, participants were given a digital avatar more attractive than themselves. Afterward they were directed to a "real world" study, ostensibly about online dating. Asked to choose photos of the people they'd like to meet, participants picked more attractive potential partners: men and women who were, let's be honest, out of their actual league.

I asked Philip Rosedale about this. He's the founder of Second Life, the online virtual world launched in 2003 that now logs $660 million in transactions and more than $75 million in revenue a year. He wasn't surprised. Perceptions online and off are porous: Users who find someone's avatar physically attractive, he told me, tend to hew to that view when they meet the real person. "You just can't shake the fact that they're so darn hot," he says.

In Second Life, almost everyone is hot. "They're all impossibly beautiful. And still, somewhat less homogenous," says Mr. Rosedale. "We struggle to make ourselves quirkier in the real world." Virtual experience helps to free us, the way any new sexual, social or artistic experience might, and not just from conventionality. It's increasingly used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism and phobias. It has also been shown to help autistic people socialize.

The number of users registered on virtual world websites passed one billion last year, about half of them under 15. The possibilities seem limitless. They're not, of course. Vitriol and violence can't be quelled online just as they can't be offline. "Trying to calm the reptilian brain—I don't think you can virtually do that," says Mr. Rosedale.

Alex Shakar, in his new novel "Luminarium," coins the word "holomelancholia" for "the inevitable disappointment of virtual worlds." The thing is, virtual worlds are disappointing for precisely the same reason that the real world is: People can be awful there.

Just as often, though, they can be ingenious. "Augmented reality" is the latest twist on this theme. You're about to hear a lot about applications that "augment" the world, mixing the physical and digital: mobile devices, for example, that use cameras and GPS to capture your surroundings and then instantly overlay useful nuggets of information on screen.

Download the new app "110 Stories" and you'll see. From anywhere in New York City, point your smartphone in the direction of downtown and the app will make the missing silhouettes of the Twin Towers reappear in a picture. Call it virtual. Call it augmented. Call it whatever you want. But, somehow, it feels more real than the buildings not being there.

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