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Down the Rabbit Hole: Feeling Present in Virtual Reality

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Abstract

Representations of Virtual Reality Technology (VR) in science fiction often treat the experience as the separation of consciousness from the body and the transportation of that consciousness to a surrogate within a virtual environment. Meanwhile, the user's physical body remains behind, hooked up to the simulation via neural implants. An occasional twitch or a flicker under the eyelids is the only indication that the person is still alive. The person is, for all intents and purposes, in another world.

In recent years VR has once again entered the public consciousness, although this time it appears as though technology might finally be able to facilitate the profound virtual experiences so often depicted in science fiction. This paper presents an examination of the concept of 'presence' and questions whether it is possible to induce a sense of 'being there' through the use of immersive virtual reality technology. This question is addressed through a qualitative analysis of contemporary presence theory as well as an investigation of potential sensory stimulation through VR. Lastly, the role of content in virtual environments and the relationship between users and virtual avatars will be scrutinised as a means of fostering a sense of presence in the experience of virtual environments.