

INTERVIEW

REENTER THE MATRIX

PROVOCATIONS OF A VIRTUAL REALITY JUGGERNAUT

BY PETER RUBIN



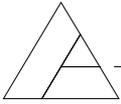
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JARON LANIER may not have sired the term *virtual reality*—that honor generally goes to French playwright Antonin Artaud in 1938—but he’s one hell of a father figure. As the founder of legendary VR company VPL Research, he both popularized the term and helped create most of the enduring icons of early VR, from *The Lawnmower Man*’s snazzy headset and gear to the ill-fated Nintendo Power Glove. Now, 25 years after stepping away from the VR field, Lanier has reentered the alternate universe he so famously evangelized. His new book, *Dawn of the New Everything*, is part coming-of-age chronicle (he lived with his father in a DIY geodesic dome), part swinging Silicon Valley memoir (rich anecdotes from his time at VPL), and it’s stuffed with enough fantastical soothing to fill a Holodeck. Or at least an expansive, occasionally vaporous conversation in avatar-free meatspace. 



GROOMING BY BRYNN DOERING/AUBRI BALK



WIRED: You thread the book with more than 50 definitions of virtual reality: “magic tricks, as applied to digital devices,” “a training simulator for Information Age warfare.” Which is your favorite?

LANIER: It’s this notion—and this is very hard to express in words and I don’t claim that I’ve ever succeeded in capturing it—that virtual reality is a future trajectory where people get better and better at communicating more and more things in more fantastic and aesthetic ways that becomes this infinite adventure without end that’s more interesting than seeking power and destroying everything. [Laughs.]

Seems easy enough! Are the kinds of VR experiences being created today enough to unlock that potential?

If you want to look for hope, it’s with the independent artists. Chris Milk, the founder of VR studio Within, has a piece called *Life of Us*, where your body becomes different creatures in the history of life and evolution. It involves so much self-exploration.

Reminds me of a line from your book: “The visceral realness of human presence within an avatar is the most dramatic sensation I’ve felt in VR.”

The canvas of VR cannot be the external world—it has to be your body. An example of this is when you create out-of-body sensations of touch and feel. When you’re really changing yourself, that’s so much more interesting than watching something in the external world—and it really improves your sensation of reality.

Now you work at Microsoft, which is invested in mixed

reality experiences like HoloLens. Do you see virtual reality and augmented reality as separate?

I think the relationship between them is similar to the relationship between film and television: They come through the same streams to the same devices, yet they’re still distinct. They have distinct cultures, they’re made in different ways, we have different expectations of them.

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How so?

Classical VR is ultimately more about you, it’s more about the human body, human identity, human interaction. Mixed reality is about exploring the world. What was interesting about *Pokémon Go* was people were going out to places. Which maybe got a little out of hand and silly, but they were still appreciating the world. That’s why HoloLens had to be wireless. To this day the coolest thing to do with the HoloLens for me is to take it into the wilderness. Some people might be horrified—*Oh my God, how could you take a HoloLens into wilderness?*—but if you augment a forest and then take off the display, you actually see the forest better. It pops into reality. It’s an amazing palate cleanser.

Does the potential for ethical misuse of VR worry you?

Hell yeah. We’re historically for-

tunate that we’re experiencing things like fake news on social media *now*, instead of in fully realized VR or mixed reality. We’re getting to know these problems in a way that’s hopefully going to force us to deal with them before they become heavy-duty versions.

What innovations should we be focusing on now?

The single most important technology that doesn’t exist yet is a way to improvise while you’re in VR. Almost like a musical instrument, but you’re playing *reality*—that would be the most important thing for the future of expression. It’s a hard thing to do. It might turn out that it’s never done. But I think people will figure it out.

And if they don’t?

We can definitely make better interaction devices than we have. And there are lots of displays and sensors yet to be built. There’s so much to improve. But I love that.

So you’re feeling optimistic?

We don’t have any guarantees here. I think we might all die. [Laughs.] We’re in a perilous time. But I really believe in the human capacity for increased creativity and intelligence and wisdom, and I think if we present the tech in such a way that people have an ability to really see it and master it, they’ll rise to the occasion.

What’s a definition of virtual reality that you hope we ultimately end up with?

[Long pause] A cross between music and perception.



Platforms editor **Peter Rubin** (@provself) writes frequently about virtual reality for WIRED. His own book about VR, *Future Presence*, will be released next year.

