Immersive Wearables: Their Political and Social Effects and What Both Mean for Western Liberal Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how some of the social and political implications to immersive wearables, particularly in their capacity as surveillance technology, threaten to transform if not undermine the fundamental values behind the western liberal democracy. Precisely because immersive wearables will, in many cases, prove invaluable easy will it probably be for their associated social and political risks to be lost among the excitement, at least early on. Before, that is, such risks become hard realities and woven into the fabric of civilization. For this reason, this article looks to serve as a modest premortem on the social and political implications to immersive wearables, whereby encouraging the practice of anticipating and proactively interrogating what it means to essentially transform the bodily act of apprehending both the physical world and the digital one—heretofore mostly disjointed experiences, united only by the faculties used—into one primarily mediated by networked computer interfaces based on immersion.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Immersive, Political, Social, Surveillance

INTRODUCTION

As immersive wearables continue to miniaturize and make their slow transition over time to becoming “invisibles,” their affordances will grow more powerful and irresistible. From enterprise solutions such as providing detailed checklists on HMDs (head mounted displays) for auto mechanics to follow when fixing automobiles, to giving people in virtual worlds via their avatars the ability to choose their gender as they might their hairstyle, the power behind immersive wearables will prove too useful and even glorious to not make the products and services based on the technology an eventual global success. Although VR and AR headsets have already appeared over the years, they have been relatively immature, and yet it remains true that it is only a matter of time before the requisite underlying technology reaches sufficient maturity and fulfills its decades-promised potential, which, according to the latest estimates, should happen probably sometime over the next two years for the first such entries to appear in the consumer space in the form of dedicated headsets (Conditt, 2017).

However, as with any technology, perhaps especially surveillance technology—which is essentially what immersive wearables represents—there are ethical and political concerns worth illuminating along with the benefits, which, in addition to being attempted in this writing, is done effectively as well in this special issue by both Nora Smith, in her article, “Technology and Ethical Behavior in Running Sports: An Actor-Network Theory Perspective,” and Sara Young, in her article, “Identity and Our Digital Alter Egos: Exploring the Agency of Surveillance Data,” respectively, in

DOI: 10.4018/IJSKD.2018070104
each case with the writer tackling specific ethical or political concerns in different but complementary ways to the other, rounding out such an examination.

Likewise, immersive wearables, especially once networked, in addition to their ethical and political implications, entail potential changes to interpersonal relationships that are worth examining, as Ella Browning does in this special issue in context of health attainment and management in her article, “Technologized Talk: Wearable Technologies, Patient Agency, and Medical Communication in Healthcare Settings,” and as is attempted in the present writing as well, but at once more broadly compared to Browning and more from a political perspective of such potential changes.

To illustrate how immersive wearables might hold potential transformative power, consider the following questions: what new humanistic dimensions to information gathering practices must be considered when search-related algorithms—as part of the software of immersive wearable hardware—essentially crawl the a person’s everyday physical environment (via sensors and other surveillance technology) for information and not just do so ostensibly in the digital environment, such as when performing a search on the web? And in doing so, to boot, make the information thereby acquired by the user during the search of the physical environment immersive and uniquely personalized? And further still, what does it mean epistemologically to know the truth value of a proposition when the process of acquiring the necessary information about the proposition in question is richly experienced in an immersive and visceral way such that the process has little in common subjectively with the ways of knowing associated with the use of alternative mediums of communication such as alphabetic texts (newspapers, 2D video) and other conventional media—and more so with direct experience? And, lastly, given the well-studied cognitive biases that are inextricable to direct experience, and that immersive wearables to be effective must exploit, how much would the information seeking in our behaviors whilst using immersive wearables be in conflict with the manipulation of one’s cognitive biases for purposes of deep immersion? Such questions are only beginning to be asked in advance of the social and political changes to societies that immersive wearables over the coming years are expected to generate.

If ever there were a proof of concept needed for the seriousness of seemingly wrenching an hole in the fabric of reality, the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 should have proved persuasive enough, in that the elections helped crystalize the political divide between the nation’s cultural elites and its white working class voters who voted Republican, and did so primarily because of the evolutionary “software” running in our heads as primates. This software’s inherent flexibility reacts against varying environmental factors and thus can lead to dramatically different and contrasting values, beliefs, and biases among different groups of individuals, depending on such mundane factors as a group’s geography, education levels and average income.

Despite the frustration of such a reality when it comes to historical attempts at achieving social and political stability among enormous populations of people, say, in a nation, (as many revolutionaries—think Marx—over the last two hundred years especially have complained indirectly about in one way or another), from an evolutionary perspective, that is to say, a modern perspective, such flexibility in the human mind constitutes a feature, not a bug—to continue the computing metaphor—as the feature once held survival or reproductive value or both, and as such should probably not without deep reflection be so quickly denigrated or even wished for as something one day to be medically “patched” in our mind’s software, as it were, as if inspired from some misguided and fanciful Sci-Fi future; one is reminded of John F. Kennedy’s famous words from a personal notebook, probably a paraphrase of G.K. Chesterton from The Thing: “Don’t ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up” (Kennedy, 1945). To this point, one reason to value the mind’s evolutionary psychology in this way—perhaps the primary reason—is that it permits a person’s understanding to in principle be corrected by facts and reason, and not remain fixed erroneously in some direction, whether philosophically, epistemologically, etc.

To be clear, during the U.S. 2016 election, despite claims of one political party at the time (and since?) “living in a parallel universe” to the other (Walsh, 2016), as was often claimed by pundits
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