

Pod People

By Jeff Graubart

For most of mankind's tenure on this planet, families entertained each other with song, dance and ritual. With knowledge and literacy came more solitary pursuits like reading and writing. Still the need to socialize continued. As the industrial age progressed and employment kept us increasingly isolated, social outlets like balls, parties and sporting events, only increased in their importance.

A profound transformation began with the introduction of television. Although a few loners had previously lived vicariously through the characters in novels, children everywhere were beginning to live their lives through the characters on TV. As people would sit for hours, transfixed on the tube, it became known as "the idiot box."

The internet, mobile phones and social networking further revolutionized socialization through a screen and keyboard. While the television is passive, social networking is interactive, so most consider it an improvement. But there is one technology that has teased us for decades that takes social networking one step further.

I'm speaking of full blown virtual reality. The kind where you are suspended in a pod and experience a world every bit as real as the one dramatized in the movie, The Matrix. This is not technology that is 500 years in the future, but less than 50 years away. Frequent advances in engineering and gaming bring us ever closer to the day when the pod is technologically and financially feasible. Even if the realism of the Matrix is not matched for decades, the merging of technologies will create increasingly realistic virtual reality environments in a few short years.

Virtual reality will be very seductive. Consider that the only thing that remains "you" in VR is your personality. Your avatar (your virtual persona) can take on any appearance, including mythical or imagined man-beast combinations. You can change the sound of your voice. You can become as sexually desirable as you wish, seek out other sexually desirable avatars and engage in hot sex, known in the lexicon as teledildonics.

You can attend dances with your friends from around the world, and actually dance, yet none of you will leave your pod. You can sit next to a friend from another continent and watch a movie together in what appears to be a crowded theater. If the system is advanced enough, you could even share popcorn.

Given an advanced pod that can dispense food and drink, your virtual friend could literally buy you a drink. The virtual act of handing money to the bartender and saying "a drink for my friend" could cause much of the money to be transferred to your account, activate the robotics in your pod to pour the drink and hand the glass to you. Your mind will be convinced, save intense reflection that you are actually in a bar with your beautiful friend having a drink. Grab their hand, it feels warm. Stroke their body. They might stroke you back.

Of course some of the avatars you meet will be bots not people. These bots have probably been set loose in cyberspace to separate you from your money, one way or another. A good rule might be "Turing test on the first date." Of course, people are far more effective at getting into your wallet than a bot would be, but one cannot send out a thousand instances of a real person in hopes of catching a sucker.

There is a Disneyland of virtual businesses that can exist in VR. Drive in the Indy 500, travel around the galaxy with your honey, or attend a celebrity ball. People will spend a fortune to be tricked into believing that they are not an out-of-shape loser suspended in a pod.

The VR revolution will dramatically affect our culture and much of it sounds like a sci-fi nightmare. However, for every application that further isolates people in a fantasy world, there are benefits that can vastly improve productivity in the real world. Business meetings and conventions could be done in virtual reality for a fraction of the cost, assuming pods were standard appliances in the home or at the office. Even after-business parties could be hosted. One-on-one collaboration with a 3D model that is passed back and forth could take place across continents. Reunions with the elderly confined to nursing home beds will come to life like an episode of the Twilight Zone, especially after great-grandma dances the Twist to the amusement of her grandkids. With proper security, documents in distant lands could actually be signed. How about attending a virtual reading by an author and have him or her really sign your book?

Both the positive and negative potential of VR are enormous. How does AFFEERCE change the equation?

The VIP is the ultimate protection from cybercrime. A VIP application can assure two parties that they are each at that very moment using a VIP reader, invoking the application and entering a passcode unique to the financial communication. Thus, the VIP proves identity and creates secure channels, even in cyberspace. If there were outstanding warrants, a VIP could not be used without alerting law enforcement. Unless your cyber partner planned on stealing your money and then quickly disappearing to a VIP-less country for the rest of their days, you should be okay.

AFFEERCE entitlement probably causes the most concern vis-à-vis virtual reality. Although pods might cost significant money, once a pod is obtained, the entitlements allow a person to spend virtually their entire life inside the pod. It might seem that AFFEERCE is facilitating a nightmare. There are a number of reasons why this is not the case.

First, for those susceptible to the addiction, the need to be in the pod will be far too strong to be stopped by the lack of entitlement. In order to support the pod lifestyle in a non AFFEERCE society, participants might engage in cybercrime, unstopped by the VIP. They might steal from parents and siblings in order to support their lifestyle. They might commit street crime and retreat back to the pod.

With the entitlements, they can move out of the home of their parents, and no longer be a burden on society. An entrepreneur could start VR isolation centers. For the \$370 housing entitlement, the \$220 food entitlement and the \$300 penitentiary entitlement, clients would get their own pod with water for bathing by jumping in the lake, heat for visiting the tropics, cold for an Antarctic expedition, food and

beverages for a robotic dispensary that simulates buffets and restaurants, optional alcohol or drugs could be dispensed using the \$35 cash entitlement. Real physical possessions will be kept in storage lockers, should they ever wish to be rehabilitated and escape the virtual world.

A waste of a life? Not necessarily. Those ballrooms and galaxies and virtual cities have to come from somewhere. The easiest way to build them is with virtual parts in VR. Like super-Legos, where each brick has magical properties. Once an object is built, it can be reproduced ad infinitum. It might take several weeks to build a replica of Michelangelo's David, but once the object is complete, a million copies could be instantly cloned. The way you impress friends in VR is to build the grandest of environments. When you host a ball, you want the "beautiful people" to attend, so you and your VR buddies might spend weeks building a world that will garner oohs and ahs. But these artifacts, once built can be purchased by business for practical usage, such as a space-flight company hosting a convention on the planet mars. These individuals who appear to be wasting their lives are creating the tools for business and the creation of new business in the real world.

In AFFEERCE, there is no worry that the pod people will reproduce. To the extent that the propensity for such an addiction is genetic, it will die out as a trait. To the extent addiction to the pod is environmental, children will be born to industrious parents who understand the dangers of pod abuse. Without AFFEERCE, there is the real possibility of the creation of a dual species in the tradition of H.G. Wells; Eloys who spend their idle lives in the pod, and industrious Morlocks who eat them.