

Between My Face and your face

By [David Williams](#)

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I'd stopped at the big box electronics emporium for a gift, and as I browsed, something caught my eye.

It was a demo headset, a virtual reality jobbie, one designed to take one of the giant Android slab-phones and turn it into an immersive 3D experience. Virtual reality, right there on a table to be sampled. I'd never experienced VR, and so on it went.

It wasn't much at first. Just floating menus, and a couple of simulation programs that failed to run each time I fired them up. One after another, they crashed. It felt very beta, a rush-to-market job.

But then one of the demos actually worked.

It was a Cirque De Soleil tie-in, because heck, is there anything they won't do for money? The idea was a simple vignette: you're standing on a stage, surrounded by dancers and gymnasts and acrobats and Vegas-clowns. They are behind you and above you, reaching towards you, pointing, almost touching.

It wasn't perfect. It was a little pixelated, the best image possible with the kludged-together phone-based system. You couldn't move around in the space, other than rotating on the spot.

That didn't matter. The illusion was surprisingly effective. Not real, not yet, but close. There was a disorienting sense of place and presence, the visual and audio cues coming close to creating an Uncanny Valley experience spatially. As you moved and shifted, so did the "space" around you, in ways that felt almost...almost...right.

I felt faintly dizzy afterwards, both physically and existentially.

Because this is the future, not the distant future, but the very near future. With the Oculus Rift headset releasing this year for Windows, and the PlayStation VR headset coming from Sony, the human experience of media is about to take a very significant leap. It's a leap I intend on taking. There's some [astoundingly creative](#)

[stuff](#) in the works for this new medium. Not to mention some [mindbogglingly fun games](#), the kinds of games I would dream of as an Atari 2600 playing kid.

But as I do so, I do so with caution. Sure I'm leaping. But into what? Here, a medium that is a sea change, as much a shift as those first films by the Lumiere brothers, as marvelous and fearsome as that train rushing towards the station. It's a medium that can connect, but that also can place us at a remove from the real. It can inform and delight, but it can also be used to obscure and distract. [I've mused on this before, a couple of years back.](#)

Now, having experienced a first taste of it, I find myself reminded of one of my Hebrew classes in seminary. We were translating the [Ten Commandments](#), and the professor offered up an interesting spin on the First Commandment.

"You shall have no other gods before me," is how we usually pitch it, as the I Am That I Am lays down the law.

But, she suggested, [the Hebrew](#) could be legitimately interpreted to mean, "Place no gods between My Face and your face."

Let our relationship be unmediated, unfiltered, without the falseness of idols and fabrications.

And as we pull our headsets over our eyes, and plug our ears with the sounds of our own songs, I wonder at how that will shape our souls.

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