

AI + VR = The Next Plague?

by [Shaun Johnston](#) (July 2023)



Progress in virtual reality and artificial intelligence threatens to end civilization, pundits warn us. But how exactly? By these tools falling into the wrong hands? Or will we do it to ourselves?

Do it to ourselves? How might that happen?

Come with me a few decades into the future. We'll attend my old high school to see a now-traditional graduation performance. Graduating students have to show they understand the crisis they face: rebuilding civilization following the collapse of the modern world, the world of 2023.

So here I am, here we are, seated along with parents of graduating students, facing the stage, waiting for the show to begin. Will these students do as well as I and my fellow students did, at the end of our graduation year a decade or so ago? I doubt it, we were stellar!

Scene 1. The stage lights come up. Spot lit at the back is a large poster showing a youth smiling, enthralled, with a songbird on each shoulder, each holding a semitransparent wing over one of the young man's eyes while it whispers in his ear.

This was an image used to promote one of the original virtual reality headsets.

A student dances onstage dressed like the figure in the poster. Transparent plastic wrap wound around his head and over a pair of goggles stands in for the original headset. He continues to dance around the stage, humming as if listening to music. He reaches out in front of him, dances with invisible partners, as if entranced.

The lights go down. End of scene 1.

The original headset was a bulky helmet that could pick up signals from satellites to deliver an appealing mix of stereophonic sound and 3D moving pictures. Because the visor was semitransparent the viewer could see through it to carry on his real life while at the same time experiencing engrossing drama.

This technological marvel was a product of a long series of

dazzling innovations: the internet, satellites, virtual reality hardware and software. Most of this still exists. But we've become more wary of innovations yet to come:

Scene 2. The stage relights. Upstage are students in three tableaux, each one acting out a different modern-world dramatic tradition: melodramatic accusation eliciting an appeal for mercy; a cowboy shootout; a be-wigged judge delivering a sentence. Actors in one tableau wear robes colored green, actors in the others wear robes colored yellow and blue. In front of each tableau is a tub holding wooden spills, tokens, of that tableau's color.

Pouring on stage left and right come other students, all wearing headsets. Each visits the tableaux and selects a token, attaching it to his or her headband like a feather in a cap, like an antenna. They then dance around, entranced, like the earlier solitary dancer. More dancers enter until the stage is crowded.

Every so often each dancer discards his colored token in a tub to one side of the stage and returns to the tableaux to select another. But soon there's a problem—the tubs of tokens are empty, the dancers, disappointed, walk offstage. The lights go down.

So far, OK. We've been shown virtual reality helmets making drama continuously available to more and more people. But there were only so many dramas available, so many actors. For the plague to spread you needed another innovation:

Scene 3. The lights come up again. The three tableaux remain but with the actors frozen in mid-movement. Facing

us mid-stage stands a student with a sort of hurdy gurdy device. He turns a handle on one side of it. As he does so, tokens of the same three tableau colors come tumbling out of it and collect in a tub at his feet.

OK, that's pretty neat, making a hurdy gurdy stand in for all the ways AI automated the creation of drama. First came Chat-AI, that could "write" computer-generated scripts for actors to perform. Then came "Thespia," able to generate synthetic actors to perform these scripts, along with computer-generated props and backgrounds.

On stage, behind our Mr. Hurdy Gurdy, the tableaux slowly come back to life, but now moving jerkily, mimicking what the early computer-generated dramas looked like. The actors then start moving with increasing smoothness as the software improved, until they've moving as fluidly as they did before. But now of course actors are no longer needed and one by one the students abandon their tableaux and walk offstage, until there's only the solitary student on stage, with his magical device, turning out dramas all by himself. Drama without end, at almost no cost.

Students come running in and grab colored tokens from the trough at his feet, adopting them as before, and dance delighted around the stage. Every so often they toss their tokens into the discard trough and select another from the trough at the man's feet. This time when the lights fade the supply of spills is still not exhausted.

Inexpensive headsets, an endless supply of drama, computer translation of it into more and more languages, all this has the number of headsets soaring into the billions. But enabling

the plague would take yet a further contribution from AI.

Scene 4. Lights come up. Mr. Hurdy Gurdy mid-stage is again turning out colored tokens that accumulate in a tub at his feet.

Another student walks in, with a chair in one hand and a hurdy gurdy in the other. He sits next to the first student and begins spilling his own tokens into the tub. Then in comes another, and another, until the tub, surrounded, is overflowing with green, blue and yellow tokens. One by one these students begin challenging each other, they begin brawling.

Except for one, who draws to one side and, chin in hand, acts out "The Thinker." Then, "Aha!" He walks offstage and returns with a much larger hurdy gurdy. When he turns its handle out come tokens of every imaginable size and color and shape. He summons headset viewers onstage and invites them to take tokens from the pile in front of him. When they do, though, they act puzzled. These tokens aren't delivering forms of drama they're used to. Most viewers toss their tokens in the discard tub, try others, discard them, try others, and so on. Only a few viewers show appreciation for the dramas their tokens deliver.

Our students are really dragging out this scene. I had to stage-manage it for my year so I can summarize it for you. To avoid competing with the other broadcasters, our Mr. Hurdy Gurdy is looking for new forms of dramatic action. The modern world had more than just three forms of dramatic action of course but the number was still limited. Why? Couldn't other kinds of human behaviors be made into drama?

What we've just seen is our Mr. Hurdy Gurdy using AI to

generate scripts for human behaviors at random, corresponding to tokens of various shapes, sizes and colors. Next he'll apply AI to study why particular viewers enjoy particular tokens. Out of it will come a principle for generating new kinds of drama people will find entertaining.

The new principle is, people get most dramatic excitement from their assumptions being violated, each being split back into its components, these components in turn being violated and one by one in turn reduced to their components. By becoming widely adopted, this principle first comes to dominate media for the remainder of the Modern World, then leads to its collapse.

At first, you'd see no cause for alarm. The easiest assumptions to identify are those concerning politics, and who could complain about those being violated! But these are soon exhausted, so broadcasters turn to cultural traditions promising to provide more material, such as a particular population's sexual taboos and what it regards as heroic. But as viewers become habituated to the thrill of their assumptions being violated they demand a greater speed of unravelling, and the broadcasters have to turn to themes ever more central to the core of culture. Soon we see supports for civil society, such as "responsibility," "patriotism" and "pity," being consumed in the frantic search for entertainment. Eventually, despite all remnants of authority and altruism being exhausted, our broadcasters remain desperate for new material. One by one they conclude they have no option but to poke and prod the self itself, to probe its compartments and its qualities, and set themselves to unravel them.

Whoa, wait a minute! Tradition-unraveling may be OK, just one more legitimate extension of entertainment. But a serious attempt to dismantle the self is a more serious matter. For a while it seems the objectors will win. But the broadcast industry had become the world's biggest and the public's

appetite for new drama has become too strong. The broadcasters prevail. Grimly they set themselves to grind away the remaining supports of the self.

OK, end of summary. Final scene:

Lights up. The stage is full of students wearing headsets. In celebration of the delight brought them by shocking violations of their selves the students begin climbing on one another's shoulders in a shared wall of joy. All are smiling, laughing. But as the last performer takes her position the whole wall of helmeted performers begins to sway, to sway. Be careful, we want to cry. But seemingly unaware of their danger, the acrobats gaze joyfully ahead, rapt in attention to their helmets. The swaying increases, and increases, until with a crash the whole wall collapses, the performers all separately tumble to the ground, and lie still.

The Modern World is over.

What should our graduates do? Should they rebuild the self of the modern world, that proved so fragile? Or build a new and more robust self, more in line with current wisdom. And what would that consist of?

[Table of Contents](#)

Shaun Johnston admits to being a curmudgeon. When not warning us about AI, through "[Evolved Self](#)" publishing, he casts doubt on the modern theory of evolution, see evolvedself.com. A previous contribution of his, "Through a Gnome's Hat," appeared in NER's May 2021 issue.

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