Is ‘Ready Player One’ Showing Us Our Virtual Reality Future?



This expert predicts the winner of the battle between VR and AR.

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Steven Spielberg’s new film *Ready Player One* envisions the world of 2044, when the poor live in vertically stacked trailer parks and everyone plugs into a Second Life-like virtual world called Oasis.

While I’m not qualified to speak on the likelihood of vertical trailer parks, I can say that this conception of VR as a mainstream technology is about as likely as the Jetson’s car

that folded up into a suitcase.

VR has a bright future, to be sure, but if there's one thing that we've learned from the last five years of VR being "The Next Big Thing" each year, it's that VR's handicaps make fuller adoption limited and leave the door open for a much less invasive technology with a much brighter future: augmented reality, or AR. AR is positioned to be a genuinely transformative and mainstream technology.

Why VR faces challenges.

VR has incredible potential, to be sure – but its fate is to be among the best video game consoles, not as an everyday, household item. A combination of price, quality and intrusiveness stand in its way. Peruse the product reviews and message boards for VR headsets and you're likely to see a variation of this comment: "This thing is ripping through my forehead and when I try to adjust it, it rides on my nose, cutting my air off. I swear I'm ready to toss it in the trash."

So reads a message on a forum for Oculus. While some respondents insisted that the writer's head was too large, others admitted that they too find the headset uncomfortable. If that's not enough, VR headsets have also been known to cause nausea and headaches. But red lines around your eyes and headaches aside, VR just suffers from the fact that people don't like putting on equipment. It should fit into their lives, not make them fit into it.

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The fact that VR headsets are uncomfortable is just one reason that it's hard to see VR in every home or with everyday use. The devices are also expensive add-ons on top of phones, Apple Watches and cars. The Oculus Rift retails for $399. That might seem reasonable until you consider that the median wage in the

U.S. is $44,564 and the product seems more like a luxury toy.

AR: The Winner’s Circle is already here.

AR and VR are often lumped together, but the former is Simon to VR’s Garfunkel or, if you prefer, Hall to VR’s Oates. Digi-Capital predicts that AR could reach $85 billion to $90 billion in revenue by 2022 while VR will likely grab $10 billion to $15 billion.

AR’s growth isn’t just the story of the future, it’s the story of now. The Pokémon Go craze in 2016 got everyone’s attention but since then, AR has started to pervade our everyday life even when users don’t realize it’s AR. Stickers on Snapchat and Instagram are the perfect example: users don’t even realize these items are the leading edge of a trend that will start to crest in 2018.

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The story of AR isn’t just about entertainment. Because the infrastructure is already built into every phone, AR can be everywhere without being invasive. While VR requires standalone interaction, AR can be used for games (Pokémon Go) and photos (Instagram) but so much more. Exclusive content can play tied to a simple trigger, video can overlay reality, and you can turn your entire physical world into an interactive experience with brands and locations. Imagine, for instance, entering a store and having your phone’s AR app point out the items you’re looking for or ones that are on sale. Or maybe you could hold your phone up to a restaurant to see the reviews. These applications aren’t a giant leap – they’re either here or coming soon.

Forever virtual, never real.

The tech industry has been through game changers and near-game-changers before. The question is always which side of the equation innovation is on. Second Life, Google Glass and Bitcoin are all part of the could-have-beens. And while the jury is still out on whether VR joins them, AR is already a massive success and poised to join mobile phones, geolocation and electronic vehicles as innovation that changes the way we live our lives every day.

So maybe the sequel to *Ready Player One* can be a bit more realistic and add a few Instagram stickers, AR scavenger hunts and “Easter Eggs” tucked in a local McDonald’s — and then we’d really be looking at the future.

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