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Virtual reality's early adopters worry what mainstream usage will look like in the Facebook era

BY SIMONE PATHE March 26, 2014 at 5:36 PM EDT



Facebook has bought Oculus VR, the maker of the virtual reality headset, for \$2 billion. Photo by Flickr user [Sergey Galyonkin](#).

Oculus VR, the virtual reality company Facebook [purchased for \\$2 billion Tuesday](#), has sold about [75,000 of its headsets](#) to game developers, but none to the public. Facebook, on the other hand, has about 1.2

billion users. Depending on how Facebook incorporates Oculus' technology into their social networking, they could make mainstream an experience that until now has been mostly limited to gaming.

Working out of his parents' garage, the 20-year-old Palmer Luckey [built the Oculus Rift headset](#) out of ski goggles and smartphone and tablet parts, then posted his invention on Kickstarter to raise money for the prototype that he thought would forever change gaming.

[“The Holy Grail of gaming,”](#) as Making Sen\$e called it last year, the Rift allows users to exist within the game. That same technology tricks the brain into experiencing seemingly real-life scenarios — whether that's [the terrors of Poe's pit or the joys of Michelangelo's David](#) — by tracking movements. In Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, for example, sensors track hand positions to an accuracy of one-quarter-of-one-millimeter, 200 times a second, according to director Jeremy Bailenson.

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In his lab, Bailenson is exploring ways to harness

virtual reality for positive effects. Exposing college students to avatars of their older selves, for example, has been demonstrated to make young people more willing to save for retirement. They bond with their “senior selves,” inspiring in them deeper empathy for their future financial struggles. Bailenson believes that when people experience life as a cow through virtual reality, they will be less tolerant of slaughtering, in the same way that shoppers who cut down a tree in a virtual world are less inclined to buy non-recycled toilet paper.

But as excited as he is about the possibilities to engineer behavioral and social improvements with virtual reality, Bailenson is leery of virtual reality in a commercial market. “I think of virtual reality like uranium. It can heat homes and it can destroy nations,” he told the NewsHour.

The big question now is how Facebook will use that technology. Bailenson met with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at this Stanford lab, and they discussed using virtual reality for educational, environmental and health applications, he told the NewsHour Wednesday. With virtual reality, your friends won’t just be

messaging each other, Bailenson said; “it’ll be as if they are in the room with you.”

But Bailenson himself is not a Facebook user, having told Paul Solman last year that Internet users should **remove high-resolution photos** of themselves from the web to prevent companies from developing fake avatars that could be made to do any number of things in a virtual world.

Advertisers, for example, will be able to exploit virtual reality’s psychological effects, even to the point of influencing voting behavior.



Morphed photos of Paul Solman with Mitt Romney and President Obama are courtesy of Cody Karutz at the Stanford University Virtual Human Interaction Lab.

Seeing your **image morphed with the face of a political candidate**, for instance, can make you more sympathetic to that candidate.

Another of virtual reality’s early developers, Jaron Lanier, told Making Sen\$e he used to think “**VR**” **tilted more toward the positive**, “approximately because virtual bullets aren’t bullets, but virtual art is still art.” But he too is wary of its use in Silicon Valley, where technology, he said last year, has created a “giant sort of spying system, where we collect data on people, to try to sell them things and try to influence them.”