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Fear of Fun

By Marty Kaplan

Some day not all that far in the future, a new kind of entertainment is going to be perfected that will either be the coolest video game ever, or the media equivalent of a lethal man-made super-virus.

You can predict what that entertainment might be like just by extrapolating from technology that already exists.

Start by imagining CGI on steroids, a future version of the computer-generated imaging that today enables battalions of post-production wizards working for movie-makers like James Cameron and Peter Jackson to put up on the screen real-seeming 3D renderings of anything that anyone can dream up.

Add to that the successor to the virtual reality technology now used in Google goggles, which relocates those digital fantasies from the screen into the real space all around us, but swap the goggles for contact lenses or neural implants.

Combine that with the power to convincingly simulate the feel of touching objects that don't exist, which haptic gloves can currently approximate, and extend that capacity to your whole body, whose entire anatomy will become an exquisitely sensitive, interactive input device, the nth gen of game controllers like Wii and Kinect.

Throw in superb 360-degree sound, plus a way to trigger micro-spurts of the molecules that cause the sensations of smell and taste.

Miniaturize everything down to the atomic scale, which is where computing is already going, so that the gizmos that do all this are featherweight and forgettable.

Store the content — the entertaining stories and experiences that this technology delivers — in the cloud, which is where more and more software is heading now, so that it's ubiquitous, available (for a price) to anyone in any place at any time.

And just as advances in processing power have turned laptops into animation and recording studios, imagine that this new entertainment content will be produced not only by the Comcasts and NewsCorps and Activisions, but also by scrappy startups, and kids in dorm rooms.

Think of the porn that will make possible.

And the first-person shooters.

And the trips to the rain forest, the Sistine Chapel, the moon, the gates of heaven and of hell.

It's not a question of whether the technology to confect and convey this digital dream, or nightmare, will one day exist; it's only a matter of when.

In 1975, as molecular biologists were recognizing the potential dangers of the recombinant DNA technology then becoming widespread, Paul Berg, a future Nobel Prize-winner, organized a conference at Asilomar State Beach in California, where some 140 researchers, doctors and lawyers drew up voluntary principles of self-regulation, in order to prevent labs — both at academic institutions and in industry — from unleashing untold horrors on humanity. Today, it's next to impossible to conceive of a comparable convening of itself by the entertainment industry and the innovation labs that supply them with new wonders.

It's easy to brush off the National Rifle Association's response to the Newtown massacre: Violent video games have created a culture of violence that has spawned deranged killers. It's easy because, for starters, there's no scientific evidence connecting the dots between exposure to video game violence and actual violent behavior.

But there's plenty of research supporting what we all intuit: Entertainment really does influence us. It affects what we know, how we feel and how we behave. If it didn't, there wouldn't be an advertising industry, or propaganda films or *Sesame Street*, and DJs wouldn't be pied pipers, Putin wouldn't have prosecuted Pussy Riot, Plato wouldn't have banned poets, Romans wouldn't have run circuses, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have just been a best-seller and Sheherazade couldn't have saved her life by withholding the endings of the stories she told.

There's a debate raging now about whether the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts torture as an effective way to get intelligence. Critics are passionate because the stakes seem so high — for politics, history, public opinion and public policy. We've been here before. In one of the best-known storylines on the series *24*, Jack Bauer used torture to get useful information from terrorists. The scenes were so powerful that, as Jane Mayer reported, the dean of West Point flew to Hollywood to meet with *24*'s writers and producers to explain that *real* U.S. soldiers — instead of paying attention to their teachers and their textbooks; instead of learning that torture is wrong, counterproductive, inefficient and produces false intelligence — were instead trusting the instruction about interrogation methods that they were tacitly getting from a fictional, made up TV show.

The NRA is obscenely wrong about the relation between gun regulation and gun violence. But before we dismiss its case about popular culture out of hand, we might want to take seriously the way that entertainment thrills, enthralls, enrages, instructs and inspires us, all of us, no matter how sophisticated and media-savvy we may think we are. One fine day, awesome technology will enable the pleasure industry to pretty much erase the line between simulation and reality. I wonder whether we'll arrive at that point without first having wrestled with the consequences that might follow from that fun.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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