

Welcome To Hyperreality: Where The Physical And Virtual Worlds Converge

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For more than 200,000 years, we humans only had access to the physical world, full of objects we could touch, taste, hear, smell and see. In the 1980s the internet gave birth to cyberspace: a virtual computer world designed to facilitate online

communication. Then in 1991, the Web became publicly available; a new technology that would fundamentally change human behavior.

For kids growing up today, it's hard to imagine a time without computers, smartphones, Google, Netflix or Instagram. A time when boredom existed, where we needed to memorize phone numbers and ask complete strangers for directions. Today, the ubiquitous use of social media and digital devices has made the web look and feel like the real world. The division between reality and imagery has collapsed.

We now live in hyperreality, a world where simulations of reality seem more real than reality itself. The concept of hyperreality was first coined by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard defined Hyperreality as, "the generation by models of a real without origin." When Baudrillard first posited the theory of hyperreality in 1981, it was seen as a highly provocative and controversial idea. Today, hyperreality is a permanent fixture of modern life.

The pandemic has expanded the online world

In many ways, the current lockdown is the largest social and psychological experiment ever conducted. At the height of the pandemic, more than half of the world's population—**4.2 billion** people—were subject to a partial or complete lockdown. Our way of life has been upended. Human interaction has been replaced by digital pixels beamed across the internet each day. Predictably, people have been spending a record amount of time online. Zoom now has **300 million** daily participants, compared to just 10 million in December 2019. Twitch has seen viewership increase by **56%** per quarter. And Amazon's profits have **tripled** as the pandemic accelerates the shift to e-commerce.

Perhaps more importantly, digital platforms like Zoom, Twitch and Amazon have been around for years. The technology hasn't changed, but rather our relationship with technology. Clearly, the global lockdown has been a catalyst for the mass adoption of e-commerce, online payments and video conferencing. For the first time in history, we have managed to move society or at least a large chunk online. Many people have established new-found habits built around the digital world. Under these conditions, the virtual world begins to compete with the physical world for time, resources and attention.

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Most of our time online is spent on devices, while remaining in the physical world. The next level is the virtual world, a fully immersive computer-simulated environment where people are represented by digital avatars. Currently, the virtual world is most visible in the gaming industry. Already, games like Fortnite, Minecraft and Roblox have built complex worlds, where people can create new identities, explore new possibilities and spend time with friends. The explosive growth of gaming is powering major developments in the virtual world.

The virtual world even has its own economy, with [2.5 billion](#) people spending \$100 billion on virtual goods. Contrary to popular opinion, gaming is not a form of escapism, but a chance for people to connect with friends and strangers on a deeper level. From a commercial perspective, global brands are scrambling to enter the virtual world. Recent attempts include Nike's [League of Legends](#) partnership, Gucci's [\\$10,000](#) virtual dress and Balenciaga's [runway show](#) in a video game. For corporations with global reach and physical distribution—the virtual world represents an untapped opportunity to 10x revenue—without having to manufacture physical products. The brands that build compelling virtual propositions—not digital ads—will undoubtedly shape society in the 21st century.

Welcome to the hyperreal

At the final level, we enter hyperreality, a state where the physical and virtual worlds converge. Where we can no longer distinguish between the two realities. But more importantly, the distinction wouldn't matter because people derive equal meaning and value from the simulated world. Early examples include virtual influencer [Lil Miquela](#) who has 2.9 million followers on Instagram. AI-powered Soundcloud rapper [Fnmeke](#) with 8 million followers on TikTok. And [Genies](#), an avatar company that believes every human will need an avatar to represent themselves.

In a different realm, pornography has long been at the frontline of technological innovation. Unsurprisingly, porn is one of the only industries where virtual reality (VR) has reached widespread adoption. An estimated [60%](#) of the top virtual reality websites are porn sites. Psychologists warn that VR porn can disconnect people from reality. Hyperreality allows individuals to avoid the hardship of life, replacing it with a world perfectly calibrated to their own tastes. Similarly, we are beginning to see the emergence of [sex doll brothels](#) around the world. Despite sounding like an excerpt from a cyberpunk novel, sex dolls are threatening the future of sex workers. In many instances' customers choose dolls over humans to satisfy their fantasies. A recent [study from Finland](#) suggests that people view sex with a robot more kindly than they view with a human sex worker.

The global pandemic has further blurred the lines between the physical and digital world. We are now seeing the virtual world compete with the physical for resources. In the next decade, the two worlds will converge, creating a state of hyperreality: a simulation of reality without origin. Although it can be easy to dismiss hyperreality as some kind of sci-fi fantasy. We only have to look at the radical changes in human behavior and technological adoption during the current lockdown. In truth, elements of the hyperreal have already entered mainstream culture. This point takes on extra significance considering the leaders of the new world—Gen-Z—are equally, if not more comfortable living online. To quote Marshall McLuhan, “We shape our tools and then our tools shape us.”

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