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# Crossing the Valley

by [Walter Kirn](#)

Like campaigning politicians, pornographers — who are also in the business of galvanizing tired nervous systems — face one problem that never goes away: cutting through the numbness caused by prolonged exposure to their products. With sexual imagery in every imaginable configuration available instantly on any phone or screen, the audience these days quickly builds up resistance. But here at the Adult Entertainment Expo, the industry's annual trade show and convention in Las Vegas, Holodexxx, a small Canadian company, thinks it may have the ultimate tool for rousing jaded libidos on demand: walk-around, life-size virtual reality.

I strap on a pair of V.R. goggles, and the area where I'm standing is flooded by invisible laser beams that register my movements and feed the data back to a computer. Sensors in the goggles track my shifting gaze. I will not be easy to impress; moments earlier, at another booth, I sampled a less advanced, more passive form of V.R. porn and found it underwhelming. It resembled an ordinary movie projected on a curved, distended screen that stretched beyond the corners of my vision. Though the naked actors appeared gigantic and there was a strong illusion of perspective, I felt disengaged, a witness rather than a participant. Morgan Young, a cofounder of Holodexxx who came up through the gaming industry, assures me that he can provide a fuller experience.

When the goggles switch on, I find myself in the middle of a simulated theater. Just inches away from me, close enough to touch with a glowing pair of virtual hands created by two game controllers I'm holding, a woman appears — the 3-D likeness of the actor Lexi Belle. Her body has been scanned by special cameras and mapped onto a moving human figure such that I can view her image, her avatar, from any angle, depending on where I stand. I can walk behind her and see her backside, and if I crouch down, she seems to loom. When I go up on tiptoe, I look down at her scalp; I even glimpse her bottom molars glinting inside her open mouth. Virtual Lexi, a lifelike ghost, is dancing in place and trying to seduce me. She rolls her hips and sways her fleshy torso, but because she has no will, no inner life, she seems like a sort of metaphysical slave — imprisoned in an inferior dimension, which I can see into but she can't see out of, let alone escape. It's disconcerting. Along with a keen sensation of male dominance, I feel a sense of existential dominance. It gives me little pleasure. I wish it gave me more.

Lexi dances for me, my digital harem girl, soliciting a response I can't quite summon, in part because I refuse. When her human analogue was scanned, she gave permission, I suppose, for people to virtually grope her (my luminous hands pass right through her when I touch her), but the polite Midwesterner in me can't overcome the notion that, as my captive, she deserves my mercy.

Such scruples conflict with the spirit of the expo, whose unofficial theme is dictatorial control. Dirty movies, those canned displays, are out, and interactive cam girls are all the rage. The sharing economy rolls on. Like Uber drivers, the women are independent contractors who set their own hours. They can be hailed at will by clients who give them orders over the Internet. Turn around. Remove your stockings. Touch yourself. America's public preoccupation with the fine points of sexual consent, with properly negotiated encounters, is apparently a daytime matter; in the shrouded nighttown of the Web the fantasies are of mastery, omnipotence.

I take a bolder tack with virtual Lexi: I fix her with a stare. It changes everything. As I look into her eyes, the computer aligns and matches our gazes until she looks into mine. When I shift my focus, she or it shifts hers. Contact. Convergence. My wife would not be pleased. My intellect, which suddenly feels weak and distant, reminds me that I'm communing with a nonentity, but my lizard brain sounds the intimacy alarm.

The weird psychological space I've happened into has a name: the uncanny valley. First articulated in 1970 by Masahiro Mori, a Japanese roboticist, the term refers to a specific range on the spectrum of human responses to humanoid objects. As the simulacra become more lifelike, they elicit greater identification and empathy. But there is a point on the path toward perfect similitude at which objects trigger revulsion instead. Wax-museum figures have this effect on me, as do cadavers posed in open caskets and certain animated-movie characters. Synthesized voices spook me in the same way. Once, driving with my teenage son, I heard a faint voice from inside my glove compartment. The hairs on my neck stood up. "What's that?" I said. My son, more accustomed to sharing his existence with artificial creatures, reassured me: "It's Siri. It's your phone." He spoke her name casually, almost warmly.

When I take off the goggles and look around the trade show, I find myself in a new uncanny valley. It's the people who seem spookily unreal now. My confidence in my discernment has been shaken. A few booths down, a nearly naked cam girl is signing photos for male fans. Heavy makeup. Forced smile. Augmented breasts. To me she seems cartoonish, but her admirers are truly smitten. It is not for me to judge them; a moment ago, with my defenses in place, I nearly swooned over a hologram.

**W**hen I was eleven years old I found a note from President Nixon in my father's den. It was lying on his desk under a dictionary, as though he intended to press it flat for framing. It was typed on White House stationery and signed, impressively, in dark-blue ink. In simple, formal language it thanked my father for writing a recent letter of support. The Watergate hearings were on TV that summer, so the president's gratitude (or that of whoever spoke for him; surely he didn't answer his own mail) may have been genuine, even if his signature was not. It didn't matter — the note beguiled me. Its presence in the house testified to a chain of human custody linking our little town in Minnesota to the heart of Washington, D.C.

More than forty years later, our political leaders still dispatch such paper letters, but far more often they send emails. They send them at all hours, incessantly, sometimes under their own names and sometimes in the names of surrogates, family members, or colleagues. The senders take a familiar tone with me, as though we know each other, which we don't. Sometimes their phony overtures feel creepy. Sometimes they feel threatening and jarring:

We're confused.

President Obama emailed you. The response? Nothing.

Then President Obama emailed you AGAIN. Still no response.

Then Nancy Pelosi emailed you. STILL nothing.

There was also the message my wife got recently, ostensibly from the president himself, whose agents, I'd learned, take notice when you ignore him and feel licensed to hector you on his behalf. The subject line read, "So, Amanda." This greeting was presumptuous, I thought, not to mention insultingly manipulative — a computer was trying to provoke a human being's instinctive sociability. The come-on evoked a salesman at a dark bar and implied that the president and my wife liked to chat now and then, to shoot the breeze. After asking for money, he signed off this way: "Thanks for always being with me." It was one of those passive-aggressive expressions of gratitude that feel like a disguised command. ("Thank you for turning off your cell phone.") That it came from a robot, a machine, emphasized its weird coerciveness. Power rarely feels so overbearing as when it gets all cozy with its subjects — just watch a taped police interrogation — but when the coziness is programmed, the effect is especially intense.

The notes to my family from virtual Barack arrived at a strained moment in our relationship with him. For the second time since Obamacare began, my wife's health insurance had been canceled. She was saddled with a new policy that didn't cover the doctors she preferred or help with the rocketing costs of her prescriptions. Meanwhile, the premium for my own policy, which I'd purchased only three months earlier, had jumped roughly 25 percent. Worse, a procedure to remove a kidney stone had set me back \$6,000 — the amount of my distressingly high deductible. As for the promise that the Affordable Care Act would somehow rein in medical costs, I noticed on one bill that a single CAT scan was priced at \$7,000, three times as much as I'd ever paid before.

Then an email arrived from Joe Biden: “Barack emailed you already. I’m following up because this is urgent – Last month, the Republicans voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act.” Well, let’s discuss that, I thought. Except we couldn’t. In the usual manner of such communications, the Joe-bot didn’t allow me to reply, only to click a link to donate money that I didn’t have right then, thanks in part to the legislation in question.

The strategies of address in such emails are common to spammers of all kinds. Use first names. Be teasing, chummy, abrupt. They stimulate your narcissism by treating you as a friend or intimate, albeit sometimes a disloyal one. But the spammers in these cases aren’t anonymous companies offering diet pills or impotence cures. They are public figures, figures of authority, whose faces and voices live inside our heads. That’s the source of the uncanny jolt that causes me to shrink away: The sensation of being accosted by an automaton with vividly familiar features. And this sense of depersonalization runs both ways. When faux Joe Biden’s virtual hands reached out to clap me on the shoulder, they passed right through me, as though I didn’t exist, as though I were an avatar myself. I felt a little like I imagine Lexi Belle’s hologram would feel, if it could feel: a captive target of lustful egotists.

“Kiss all hope goodbye,” read the subject line of a new note. “I emailed you yesterday. And now I’m emailing you today.” It came from Nancy Pelosi, and it was addressed to me, or to the virtual me, a ghostly personage composed of data that was collected, perhaps, by one of the consultancies that build models of individual voters with the intention of guiding those voters’ behavior. For me, now, these nudges seem clumsy – I feel molested, crudely pawed at – but someday their touch may feel more natural. This may happen when the technology improves, or when I forget, at last, what natural feels like.

**M**organ Young from Holodexxx hands the magic goggles to a cam girl who is wearing a skimpy two-piece and high heels. She is about to meet her competition. She is about to preview the high-tech genie that may, not too long from now, make her obsolete. Workers in other professions should be so lucky. From everything I read, a vast wave of job-destroying automation is set to start breaking at any time, and many occupations will be affected. (Recently I read about an effort to automate political speechwriting using artificial intelligence. The short sample speech the algorithm generated from a recitation of certain facts about consumer-bankruptcy laws seemed no more wooden than most such speeches, and it suggested that, in politics, the shift to machine-made discourse could soon accelerate. In a field where reality testing is difficult under the best of circumstances, where inauthenticity can be assumed, an AI takeover may prove undetectable.)

As the cam girl finds her bearings inside the game world, swaying on her tippy heels and waving the controllers in a way that indicates an earnest effort to fondle virtual Lexi, I’m struck by how seriously people take the duty of greeting our technological future. Despite the disruptions it may bring, we want it to work. We want it to deliver. We want to do our part in the transition. We sense, perhaps, that the present is the sum of our bets about the future; that stability now is a function of momentum. But what, exactly, is the goal? To create a second universe more open to conscious manipulation (and more profitable for its proprietors) than this one is and then to shuck off our bodies and move inside? Young tells me about advances in haptic technology that will allow us to don suits equipped with sensors and vibrators and such, so that our interactions with virtual beings will have a compelling tactile element.

He has high hopes for life in the new realm. Once the uncanny valley has been crossed, or once we resign ourselves to dwelling within it, people will be freer than they are now, he says. Imagine you’re curious about gay sex but are reluctant to experiment; inside the holo-world, shielded from real-world repercussions, such as social censure by bigots, you’ll be free to try it. Through modifications of your avatar, you will even be able to change gender. He predicts that all this will broaden our humanity, not diminish it. I wonder. Committed to a dreamscape of disembodied isolation and protected from pushback by exterior forces, unorthodox acts may have the thrill of novelty, but will they represent true growth?

I leave the expo to walk home. I’ve lived in Las Vegas for a few months, the guest of a local literary institute, and the city is harsher than I expected. Beyond the phantasmagoric Strip and away from the great hotel-casinos that have hosted, since I’ve been here, two presidential primary debates, the streets are unusually full of painful scenes. People push shopping carts barefoot down searing sidewalks and sleep sitting up against dumpsters and parked cars. An emergency medical technician I met tells me there’s a new drug in town, black ice, whose users she’s been transporting to ERs. On Flamingo Road, near my apartment, I see a nightly stream of tortured souls dragging roller bags down the street to heaven knows where. When the virtual rapture comes, they will stay behind, stragglers in an old, worn-out dimension. The elect will move on with new bodies and new eyes.