

Bridging the Danger Gaps between Virtual and Vital Reality or Don't Become a Zoombie!

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Received: December 25, 2021; **Published:** January 27, 2022

This essay examines the potential danger of not recognizing an important social-psychological truth: the virtual map is not real-life territory! And it provides a take home moral and basic strategies for bridging the virtual-vital gap while defusing questionable fantasy and strengthening meaningful connection.

Many recall the old saw: "Practice Makes Perfect". Or, if not perfect, more knowledgeable and skillful, perhaps leading to greater self-confidence. But when may practice and comfort actually become an obstacle to self-awareness and engagement, confidence and performance? How about if practice in one context creates the illusion of breadth and depth of understanding or familiarity in another. What might be an example of a contextual shift having this disorienting effect? Consider when the practice arena or practice medium changes, e.g., going from Zoom-screen interaction to live, able to reach out and physically touch the person involvement? It's what I call changing psycho-communicational contexts - from "virtual" (remote/electronic) to "vital" (as in, "I can literally touch you and take your vital signs").

And this question becomes increasingly relevant with so many of us on the verge of becoming technological Zoombies, whether in the work world or in the universe of online dating! Let me paint a real-life picture. I discovered this "practice evokes self-deception" phenomenon getting to know a woman from a dating site. We live 200+ miles apart. The first time we met, I recall we had only Zoomed once, maybe twice. I was a bit nervous but, overall, we had a good, mostly comfortable time, including a trip to the Bronx Zoo. (On our first date, I even asked to hold hands as we did a farewell walk to the subway. My request asked a basic question: Would this woman also be willing to explore another level of reality to our encounter? She agreed; it was a truly touching moment).

However, by the second vital/in-person trip, we had logged a considerable number of Zoom and phone hours. The electronic interaction was invariably lively, thoughtful, and fun. (We both commented on how Zoom time flies by.) We were gradually yet steadily sharing our stories, even at times acknowledging flaws and foibles. There seemed to be a genuine if not a somewhat intimate connection. I definitely looked forward to being Zoomed-up, but especially anticipated our next live meet-up!

Beware: Reality ahead!

Alas, in this second in-person encounter, to my confusion and consternation, we didn't (or at least I didn't) pick up where we had Zoomed off. Instead of the ease and comfort shared with a fellow Zoomie there was self-consciousness; I was feeling awkward. For example, when walking in a park, my friend noticed a stiffness when she took my arm. Is she seeing/feeling through me? What's going on here?

One thing that's going on here is that by holding my arm my friend was obtaining "vital sign" data about my state of ease vs. dis-ease. Clearly, she could not obtain this data through a Zoom screen. In fact, many cognitive theorists posit that unconscious, bodily-sensory processing is the first line of information gathering. Which is why if we are just in our head, not using our heart, gut, and other sense organs, we may be missing out on critical-vital evidence or deep source material.

Naturally, there was some normal "getting to know you" angst, along with some shyness and "can she really be attracted to me?" echoes. However, another disorienting source was the disconnect between "we really know each other pretty well already" (that is, the

budding if not fantasy flourishing virtual experience) and the back to reality epiphany that “we are just scratching the vital surface.” The ego-if-not-earth-shaking bottom line puzzle: Who was this looming figure in front of me? Was I interacting with a virtual relationship-image that had been evolving over time and/or was I in the presence of (and could I be authentically present in the moment with) a vital woman, in all senses of the word, albeit, one encountered in the flesh on but two afternoon dates?

(By the way, even word choice shows the “get real,” “slow down,” “down to earth” power of bodily or nature/natural consciousness. For example, “scratching the surface” reality, or the difference between being “touched” emotionally by words through a screen and experiencing actual skin to skin encounter. And a bud usually takes some time to flower).

The belated realization: there was a psychological-communicational gap between the virtual and the vital. I was also on that slippery slope - somewhere between start-up anxiety and racing ahead “romantasy”. And it would take real time/life engagement to slow the slide and close the gap. I could not fully or genuinely transfer virtual knowledge and experience into the vital-interpersonal arena. Hence my feeling of confusion and uncertainty. We weren't as far along as my mind-body had hoped. (Another vexing variable for consideration: On a weekly basis, I run and participate in multiple Zoom therapy and support groups. Perhaps I am more Zoombie than I realize, acting as if Zoom relating-awareness is my/the new normal).

Take Home Moral: Because the Zoom experience opens our senses to both the verbal and the non-verbal/visual (clothes, room furnishings, books, paintings, etc.) one can overestimate or be confounded by the authenticity and totality of the virtual engagement. (Audio phone calls typically present less imagery/fantasy building material than Zooming or Face Timing). Of course, the importance of the other person and the significance of the relationship to our sense of attachment security, ego-identity, and goal achievement also impact one's mind-body-emotional-communicational state. And as previously noted, another critical dynamic is the imbalance between time and energy shared in the virtual world compared to the vital, literal “reach out and touch someone” experience. The wider the virtual-vital gap, the less one has opportunity for grounded, bodily sources of data, the more likely one may be misinformed, if not seduced by, screen imagery and inner fantasy. Also, this occurrence has more possibility if one is feeling stressed, hungry, or lonely and/or impatient for relationship definition and closure. (Like, tell me now that you love me or, at least, think I'm wonderful!) So, beware of making assumptions: what you have experienced in the virtual may not be up-to-date, “down to earth” working knowledge in the vital!

Which leads to a final take home: “Seven Strategic Steps for Bridging Smartly the Virtual and Vital Realms of Work and Love”:

1. Recognize and discuss the potential psychological-communicational imbalance between the virtual and vital worlds; (my friend and I have had some courageous conversations about gap perception)
2. Consider starting this discussion with your fellow Zoomie and/or with a “stress buddy” before the actual vital encounter
3. Experiment with some time limits on early stage Zooming to manage the virtual-vital divide
4. To lessen assumptions and fantasies, try not to build a lengthy time gap between Zooming and your vital, face-to-face meet-up
5. When you do meet, have a virtual-vital check-in, acknowledging any perceived confusion while defusing any overt or covert high-flying assumptions; use conscious touch (or not wanting to be touched; i.e., trust your gut) for assessing comfort levels and decision-making
6. Try to bring a little more real/vital awareness into subsequent virtual communication; talk about/reflect upon previous vital encounters or discussions; stay cognizant of the reality-fantasy divide
7. Consider my Virtual-Vital Bridge Building Mantra: “Go Slow to Really Know, Be Sane... Face that Uncertain Pain!”

Oh, and have FUN! As Psychoanalyst, author, and student of humor, Dr. Ernst Kris, observed: What was once feared and is now mastered is laughed at!

And as the Stress Doc inverted: What was once feared and is now laughed at, is no longer a master!

Of course, not content to leave well enough alone: What was once feared and is now laughed with... likely becomes a mistress or lover! Just remember... Practice Safe Stress!

Volume 11 Issue 2 February 2022

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