

Excerpt of a summary I wrote for Scribd's Snapshots of the book "Future Presence: How Virtual Reality is Changing Human Connection, Intimacy, and the Limits of Ordinary Life" by Peter Rubin

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It all started with the Sword of Damocles. That was the name of the first virtual reality headset, invented in the 1960s by a Utah professor named Ivan Sutherland. To use it, you stepped up to a set of goggles hanging from the ceiling. Looking through them, you could see a cube floating in space. When you moved your head, your perspective on the cube changed.

From those humble beginnings, virtual reality evolved. Today's devices create the illusion that you are inside a three-dimensional world. The environment you are seeing is artificial, but the experience is so immersive that it feels real. Even though your rational mind knows that you are using a VR headset, on some more primitive level you feel as if you are really there. This illusion is called "presence," and presence is what gives VR its amazing power.

Say you were standing in your living room with a friend. You put on a VR headset. In the VR world that you see through the headset, you are standing right on the edge of a cliff. You can look down over the edge of the cliff and see a valley far, far below. Your friend tells you to take a step forward. You know that you are really standing in your living room looking through a VR headset and that if you step forward, you will still be on your solid living room floor.

But some part of your brain really thinks you are standing on the edge of a cliff. It looks so real! As you turn your head, you can see all around you. If you try to take a step, your lizard brain will rebel. Your survival instincts will kick in and scream at you, telling you not to step off that cliff. If you try to walk forward anyway, your body may rebel, too. Your very real stomach could start churning and your real heart start pounding.

That's presence.