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TW Column by Martha Nichols

Why We Still Need the Real World



There's nothing like a thirteen-year-old to get a parent raving about the evils of technology. In other cultures and epochs, a kid the age of my son would be making fire and shooting real arrows. But in twenty-first-century America, the technology that worries me is all about virtual reality on a screen.

The irony is, I like digital media. And I remember being thirteen, too, escaping into reading and writing, conjuring worlds that existed only inside my head. Much as I love a good hike, I prefer a good book.

But lately I've felt restless in DigiLand, troubled by something more pernicious than the fact of kids glued to screens. I've tried to convince myself new technologies will help my son's generation address mega-problems like climate change. But I also question how people growing up with smart phones learn about the real world, especially when so much of what they share online is derivative.

When I first saw *Avatar*, James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film, I was awed by that imaginary landscape of blue humanoids. Yet, the story is banal, degenerating into Military Baddies exterminating Noble Savages. I ended up resenting *Avatar's* virtual reality—the feeling of actually sitting in the jungle, as if I could reach out and touch a creeping vine—because all the details had been imagined for me. What should have felt rich and strange was anything but transformative.

The gorgeous computer graphics that fuel so many virtual landscapes often disguise the same old attitudes about machines and nature. Worse, they trap us in the narrow worldview of those who dominate the high-tech industry: young white guys. Digital technology has enabled the human mind to fly free, but not freely enough—not in the wild, unplanned ways that might free a few actual human beings.

The razzle-dazzle of screen life is entertaining, of course, but that's not the only hook. Part of the allure is the promise that technology can solve everything from failing schools to drought and plagues of locusts. Silly as this sounds, fantasies about how to perfect humanity keep surfacing with each crop of wealthy entrepreneurs.