Virtual reality could be mainstream in just five years if it overcomes barriers of trial, behavior and content. Experiences beyond our current comprehension – a visit to the moon or a trip to the bottom of the sea – may be just a set of goggles away.

The tech business loves VR, and a wide range of companies are about to lovebomb consumers with some fancy new toys. Samsung and Oculus will be first with Gear VR, a $99 product designed to transform compatible Samsung phones into a VR headset. Then there will be the Oculus Rift, Vive, an HTC/Valve product designed to work with PCs and Sony’s recently renamed PlayStation VR. That’s all well and good, but what will stop VR from becoming the next 3D TV: a big band in the tech sector that was ultimately shunned by
consumers? Until recently, VR has been a fringe obsession for the hacker/maker crowd, and – for the experiential/stunt crew – it’s become a parlor trick whipped out to surprise and delight. The presence of Sony PlayStation in the mix creates a general assumption that VR is for gaming, but Oculus (and owner Facebook) are keen to promote non-gaming applications such as commerce, entertainment content and social functionality. While their ambition is to create a new way of consuming content that feels as natural and organic as watching TV, VR has a long way to go before this happens. Like many new technologies, VR is battling through the classic hype cycle of consumer acceptance: VR may have survived the “trough of disillusionment” but the “plateau of productivity” is still on the horizon. Our research indicates three key areas that VR manufacturers must address if they want VR to become a true media channel: trial, behavior and content.

The Trial Barrier

We surveyed 2,500 self-professed gamers, the group most likely to be early adopters of VR. Just 54% expressed any interest in VR, while 22% plan to buy a virtual reality head-mounted display (VR HMD). Beyond the cost issue – our survey showed over 50% of the people think the rumoured cost of $400 is just too high – gamers have been burnt by early forms of VR, and those early experiences have left many highly skeptical. The challenge is that VR can only really be understood once it has been experienced, and the number of people who have actually tried VR compared to those who have heard about it is very small. Trial is the obvious solution, but opportunities are limited. To reach the elusive tipping point, the major VR players will have to sidestep the barrier of personal trial and rely on the volume of discussion generated by those who have experienced it. In a gaming context, manufacturers should focus on a key segment: YouTubers, who can act as a proxy for their legions of fans. Early adopters of the technology need to become evangelists for the hardware.

The Behavior Barrier

There are two areas that VR will have to overcome with regard to behavior. The first is pretty basic: VR headsets look weird and entering an alternative reality is a fundamentally odd thing to do. It’s important to remember, however, that TV was once viewed in much the
same way. Fortunately for VR, ideas spread more quickly than ever, thanks to the
accelerating power of the internet and a huge global appetite for the new. The other
behavior barrier is one that millennials, in particular, might find challenging. VR is designed
to immerse someone in a single experience: no multi-tasking, no texting on the side. Will
Gen Y accept a content platform that requires them to lock out all the other screens in their
lives?

The Content Barrier

As with any emerging technology, content that works is the real silver bullet for
mainstreaming VR. The first people who got you to look at their iPhones weren’t talking
about the technical specs of hardware; they were showing you a clever new app that used
the gyro sensor. In the same way, the most crucial factor in the uptake of VR is the
software experiences it enables. And beware the potentially exponential effects of bad
content. Unlike other mediums, VR is uniquely capable of producing a, uh, visceral
response. When done well, a user has an experience that literally transports her to another
world. Done poorly, effects ranging from nausea, dizziness and vertigo will keep trial from
becoming habit.

So What Chance Does VR Have?

My own experiences show that VR will launch with some incredibly powerful content. “Alien:
Isolation” on Oculus is a horror game scarier than the most well-crafted movie. “Under the
Sea,” a demo from HTC/Valve, gives you a sense of awe that rivals SeaWorld and “The
Getaway” (a small segment of “The London Heist” game) from Sony puts you in a virtual
car chase shoot-out that’s much more fun than non-virtual gaming. These are experiences
that impress a nerdy guy who was excited about VR long before he got his hands on an
Oculus DK1. But are they truly mass? If my dad’s polite but uninterested reaction to his first
virtual roller coaster ride was any indication, I’d say not quite. But it’s probably unfair to
judge the medium on today’s early proof of concept software; it’s the experiences of the
next year that will need to take the experience beyond a tech demo to attract large
audiences. Ultimately, it’s all about experiences as genuinely social as those Mark
Zuckerberg first talked about when he announced the purchase of Oculus:

“After games, we’re going to make Oculus a platform for many other experiences. Imagine enjoying a courtside seat at a game, studying in a classroom of students and teachers all over the world or consulting with a doctor face-to-face, just by putting on goggles in your home.” These types of experiences will overcome the trilogy of barriers. And we won’t have to wait long for the great content that will be the catalyst for VR to emerge as a media channel for the masses.