

# Doug Smith: A Critical Look at Apple's Virtual Reality Headset

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep371>

Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. Recently Apple released a new model of the Apple Vision Pro headset. Although it can provide immersive experiences, are there potential downsides to furthering our connection to the digital realm? This week we have Doug Smith to discuss these views inspired by the original release of The Vision Pro. Now, here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings, and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your real 3D host, Robert J. Marks. I say that I'm your real 3D host because today we're going to be talking about virtual reality. Believe it or not, virtual reality was born in the U.S. military. So was a lot of other technology we enjoy today. This includes things like the internet, self-driving cars and GPS, and it turns out virtual reality. When I was at the University of Washington in Seattle a few decades back, I worked with the so-called grandfather of virtual reality, a guy named Dr. Tom Furness. Furness was commissioned in the Air Force, and from 1966 to 1989, he developed advanced cockpits for fighter aircraft. Fighter pilots trained in the virtual world created by Tom Furness and his colleagues. Tom Furness did a podcast with me for Mind Matters News a while back covering his role in the development. We're going to provide a link to that podcast in the notes for this show.

I also worked with a guy named Dr. Tom Caudell at Boeing when I worked in Seattle. Tom pioneered so-called augmented reality at Boeing where helpful images are, if you will, superimposed on your field of vision. Imagine at Boeing, for example, an aircraft mechanic working on an aircraft engine, augmented reality superimposes on his field of vision what should be done and how it should be done. Tom is credited with coining the term augmented reality. Historically, virtual reality has commercially had its ups and downs, it seems to me, and Mark Zuckerberg kind of bet the farm, his company on it when he changed its name from Facebook to Meta. And with a release of Vision Pro, Apple is now dipping its toe in the VR waters.

Our guest today to talk about VR and its impact is Doug Smith. Doug is interested in the psychological impact of modern media. Our addiction to screens is addressed in his award-winning book, and here's the title, [Un]Intentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires and How You Can Break Free. We'll provide a link to that in the podcast notes also. Doug works to help individuals and families break free from screen addiction so they can live out their God-given purpose. He is a senior software engineer with Covenant Eyes. He and his wife Lyneta are happy empty nesters and are blessed with four grown daughters. And you can find Doug online at his website, [thatdougsmith.com](http://thatdougsmith.com). Thatdougsmith.com. Doug, welcome.

Doug Smith:

Thank you so much, Bob. It's such an honor to be with you. I'm a huge fan of all things Mind Matters News, and so it's always awesome to join you and to be able to have this conversation.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, that's great. I think that you bring a very important perspective to the stuff we're trying to do, which is the impact of technology on today's world. One of the things you do, before we get into virtual reality, I wanted to talk about Covenant Eyes. You're a senior software engineer with Covenant Eyes,

and I'm a little bit familiar with what you do, but could you unpack what Covenant Eyes does before we talk about VR?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely, yeah. So Covenant Eyes is I think the world leader in anti-pornography, accountability and filtering software and content. So we've been around 23 plus years. We support platforms, Windows, Mac, iOS and Android, and I am the lead Android engineer for Covenant Eyes. I have been for the last five years. And so, we work to help people overcome pornography use and we have all kinds of ways that we do that that we could talk about at any level of detail you'd like.

Robert J. Marks:

How does it work? Let's say I have problems with pornography and I want to address them. How can Covenant Eyes help me?

Doug Smith:

So what we do is we know from our years of research now is that the overcoming of pornography use, one of the keys to that is accountability. And so, if you knew that someone that you care about is looking over your shoulder at everything you see on your screens, you're very unlikely to look at pornography. And so, we have software that we have embedded machine learning algorithms that are running on our platforms that watch the screens that you're using, whatever platform. And if you run across explicit material, we score that in a secure way. We then notify who we call your ally, the person you have chosen to help you overcome pornography, and they will know that you ran across explicit material for whatever reason, and you can then have that conversation. We find that people are supremely helped by the knowledge that they're not alone, that they're not doing this in secret, which is one of the ways that pornography really thrives, especially in the smartphone era.

Robert J. Marks:

It's really spooky stuff, what goes on there. You mentioned that, before we get into virtual reality, why this is the segue to virtual reality, that a lot of virtual reality pornography is happening now. When you first mentioned that, I was surprised, and then I went to the world of, well, of course pornography always makes the inroads into technology. So is virtual reality pornography a big problem these days?

Doug Smith:

Unfortunately, yeah. You're right, almost any technology we have is going to be exploited for all kinds of different nefarious purposes, but pornography is a huge, huge problem. I just read a study that says that pornography is the third most popular content on most virtual reality behind gaming and NFL.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow.

Doug Smith:

And that's just today. And really, VR isn't widely adopted yet. It's definitely going in that direction, especially with Apple dipping its toe in, as you said. But it's already huge and very disturbing.

Robert J. Marks:

So you mentioned number two was NFL, National Football League?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, that's what they said.

Robert J. Marks:

What are they doing? Can I watch games in virtual reality now?

Doug Smith:

Apparently so. They're doing, with some of the things that I've seen in terms of the 3D and the perspective of the cameras that they're able to shoot, it gives you this perspective of being right there on the field. So you're almost in the position of a coach, or even in some cases, they have those flying cameras. I'm not really a sports fan, but I've seen the demos and it's pretty impressive what they can do.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, my goodness. Well, that's an experience I have yet to experience. You are interested in the impact of screens on our lives. My parents' screens were at the movie theater, and when I was a kid, my screen was the television set, and I'm old enough to say that my screen as a kid was a black and white television set. Along comes computers and now we are just showered with videos and images and advertisements. They're everywhere. I go to a gas station and I pump my gas, and there's this little screen that comes on and it tries to sell me stuff while I'm pumping my gas. I'd like to pump my gas in quiet, but man, everybody is trying to grab my attention and sell me something. So VR looks to be the next step in this screen evolution. You've been looking at Apple's new product. It's called Vision Pro. Before we get into questions about it, could you just tell me what Vision Pro is?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, absolutely. But I'm right with you there, Bob, in terms of screens. Things have evolved very quickly and there's a huge percentage of the people who might be listening and millennials and Gen Z who don't know a world without the internet in your pocket and with especially persuasive design technologies that are really intentionally addictive, especially on the smartphone that's just pervasive. It's ubiquitous, it's everywhere. But Apple Vision Pro builds on that. So Apple describes this as spatial computing. In fact, they say the era of spatial computing is here. They're really banking on the era-defining powers they had with the release of the iPhone in 2007. They announced this in June of 2023, and it started shipping in early 2024. If you haven't seen, it looks a little bit like ski goggles, but it's made to be very comfortable. It's made to be worn all the time.

As an engineer myself, from a technology perspective, it's super impressive, incredible processors, two 4K micro displays, 12 cameras. It's got 3D photo and video capture, spatial audio, 3D audio that allows them to you experience sounds in the visual perspective that you're experiencing it. So it's an amazing technology as you would expect from Apple. Like I say, it's designed to wear all the time, work, home. Their demos show watching movies, doing video calls. They even have people doing spiritual practices and meditation, which we can get into all, the things. So it's compelling on the surface, but obviously we wouldn't be talking about it if there weren't other things to consider.

Robert J. Marks:

One of the big things that's kept VR from really developing is the big headsets that you have to wear. I'm familiar with the Oculus. I have not seen the Apple product yet, but with the Oculus, you got to put on these big clumsy headsets, and it's a hassle. And I think that VR is going to have to get rid of those clumsy headsets before it develops and is accepted worldwide. What is the Apple situation? Is it a big clumsy headset in a sense?

Doug Smith:

It is. It's interesting because Apple has been well known for working really hard to have very good ergonomic user experiences. So I went and did the demo, which we can talk about in detail if you'd like to. So in wearing it, there's a lot of adjustments to it to make, and it's still pretty heavy. I imagine smaller people might find it hard on their neck after a little while, but it's got a lot of adjustments to it. It was actually relatively easy for them to configure my glasses prescription, so that that just worked. So I don't exactly know all the ways that even happened, but they scanned my glasses and then were able to just put that in there and it worked well. So it is a big headset.

It's interesting. One of the things that I talk about in my article is that the way they're marketing it, it's very, I use the term propaganda. And again, we can talk about that too, but basically because the way they market it, they've these young and beautiful smart people wearing this all the time.

Robert J. Marks:

Of course.

Doug Smith:

It's like wearing ski goggles all the time. It's like, "I want to be cool like them." And so, among the things they've done, because it's a pass-through video headset, so you don't actually see with your own eyes the real world anymore, everything comes through their cameras, but they project your eyes on the front of the device. So as you're looking at people who aren't wearing it, they can actually... It almost, they're trying to give it the idea that you really are wearing ski goggles or glasses so that ultimately they're trying to normalize it and accept that, "Okay, we probably are going to need big devices like this, but if we make it cool and acceptable and give you enough propaganda, you're going to accept it and want it."

Robert J. Marks:

So they're trying to make it a part of our culture in a way.

Doug Smith:

That, right.

Robert J. Marks:

I mentioned Tom Furness is so-called godfather of VR. One of the things that he investigated, and I don't think it came into practice, was the idea of wearing glasses with little lasers that actually shined on your eyeballs.

Doug Smith:

Ooh.

Robert J. Marks:

It sounds kind of spooky, and I don't know if I would want to wear glasses that shone little lasers on my eyeballs, but it was their idea to do virtual reality through this technology. So maybe that's in the future of where virtual reality is going is shining little lasers on your eyeballs. We'll have to see what happens. Because they got to get rid of these headsets.

Doug Smith:

They do.

Robert J. Marks:

They got to do. So Doug, why do you care so much about this VR, this Apple Vision Pro? You care so much, you're writing articles about it. Here we are talking on podcasts. What's the deal? Why are you so excited about it?

Doug Smith:

Thanks for asking. I think the main thing here is that anything Apple does is significant. The way they're positioning it, they want to define an era, and if they do that and we don't ask the deeper questions and allow them to define an era, it could be... From my research, there's a lot of negative effects that people might not understand. There's this whole idea, this cultural myth of progress. Anything that's new must be good just because it's new. And when you look at it on the surface, again, technology wise, it's like, "Wow, I could wear a theme park ride all the time. What's wrong with that?" But most people don't ask the deeper questions. And so, what I'm trying to do is help people ask those deeper questions and not ask just can we, but should we?

Robert J. Marks:

I'm not familiar with Apple Vision Pro and I don't think I will in the near future. I looked it up online and the retail cost is \$3,500.

Doug Smith:

Right.

Robert J. Marks:

My goodness. So that's the reason you went to the demo instead of purchasing it and trying it out. That's really expensive. I haven't tried that, but I have tried the Oculus, and it is astonishing. Going on roller coaster rides, for example, you can be on a roller coaster ride, and I literally have to be sitting down in order to go on a roller coaster ride in virtual reality because I would lose my balance. There are other cases where I'm walking on a little ledge and I look down and it's 50,000 feet down in the Grand Canyon, and it's scary and it's incredibly self-absorptive and you can tell, you know that you're experiencing that. So in your recent attending of the Vision Pro demo, what did you think?

Doug Smith:

I'm with you. It was surprising how well it worked. In their environment, it's an augmented reality experience and, again, as they call it spatial computing, so it's designed to work within your environment and kind of project things on top of it. And they want to make it familiar as well, so one of the early parts of the demo is you place a browser off to your left or your right, and it positions on the certain

place in the wall. So as you look, you might look to your left and see your browser. You might look to your right and see a Word document you're typing. In the middle, you might have your photo app and be... So it's made to work in that way, but you're placing these windows in those positions.

And the user interface that was really quick and easy to learn involves using your eyes basically as the mouse. So you're looking around at it, and as you move around and look at something, it becomes active. And then your hands are the clicking and dragging. So there's pinching gestures, there's dragging and moving gestures, almost like Minority Report or Iron Man type of things. You're literally feeling like you're moving things around in space and projecting it. And so, especially from the demo standpoint, it was very well this concierge experience of walking you through the high points. I didn't go off the rails because they didn't let me go anywhere. They, "Oops, that part, that's a little rough edge." I'm sure, because it's a 1.0 product, so there will be rough edges, but it was very impressive.

Robert J. Marks:

So I guess the first augmented reality thing that really made inroads was the Pokémon. Do you remember that?

Doug Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Robert J. Marks:

Where you run around your camera and you look for little Pokémon all over the place. I got to ask you, in this virtual world where there are virtual keyboards, I think that would be really cool if I had a virtual keyboard and I didn't have to use a physical keyboard, it just tracked my fingers on an augmented reality keyboard.

Doug Smith:

That would be cool.

Robert J. Marks:

I suspect they didn't have that.

Doug Smith:

They did not have that. At least it was not in the demo. It is designed to be really easy to hook up with a Mac, as you might expect being Apple to be able to be an extended monitor, an additional monitor of basically any size. It might feel like a 100-foot wide monitor, so it's designed to use with a Mac keyboard. I'm with you, I think they probably will work on that, but that's a really tough problem to solve.

Robert J. Marks:

I remember on the Oculus, when I went to it, you could log into Netflix and you had the virtual reality experience of being at a movie theater.

Doug Smith:

Exactly. It's that way on Vision Pro too.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, the screen was enormous. It was still a 2D image, but you felt like you were in a movie theater. And I suspect that in the future, they're going to have these more of a 3D virtual reality movies, but I don't know if that's going to come out. That seems to be a big step in technology to come out with virtual reality movies like Iron Man or something. 3D is one thing, but to actually put it in a virtual reality world would be something else where you could walk around and look at a scene from different sides. So maybe that's in the future. One of the things that you had issue with was Apple's marketing and all marketing is propaganda, but you especially had issues with Apple's marketing of Vision Pro. Could you address that a little bit?

Doug Smith:

Yeah. Thank you. I do use that word propaganda just to many people that's a really strong term because it brings to mind oppressive tyrannical regimes and controlling their population and by controlling their information, that kind of a thing. But in my book, I talk about Edward Bernays, who was the nephew of Sigmund Freud, and he calls himself the father of public relations, but he published a book called Propaganda in the early 20th century where he lays out, in no uncertain terms, the process of getting people to do what you want them to do, basically shaping their desires. And one of his hallmark ways of doing it, just by way of background, was he's famous for being hired by the American Tobacco Company to expand their market by reducing the stigma associated with women smoking. Because back in the '20s, men would smoke, but women just didn't.

So what he did was he hired fashion models to march in the 1929 Easter Parade in New York City, and he renamed them, basically rebranded cigarettes as torches of freedom. And so, he's got these fashion models marching in there and made it a news event, basically made it so it's this normalization. So at the certain point when he knew the news media was going to see this amazing thing, these fashion models marching in the parade light up their cigarettes, torches of freedom, and unfortunately for the world, it worked really well. And women, almost everybody was smoking before up until up into the '70s and after the Surgeon General started saying, "Hey, maybe you might consider not doing that."

So anyway, he kind of pioneered the idea of normalizing things to make them acceptable. And so, Apple is really singing from his hymn book in their marketing. As I mentioned earlier, they show people in real life scenarios sitting on their couch, smiling, wearing the headset. They're at a birthday party. It's, "Oh, my kids are so cute. Now you can see them. It's just like if you were there." They're working. They're doing face... So FaceTime is new in Vision Pro in that... So you're wearing the headset, but in FaceTime, they do this AI adjusted vision of yourself, of your face without the headset projected into FaceTime for your viewers, for people you're having a conversation with inside the VR space. So they show that.

And then they show this scene of this woman meditating, a lotus position with this special app that has this really interesting 3D environment of trying to make you feel calm or whatever. So all those kinds of things, the normalization of the use of this product without regard for the claims they're making. I bring in four points of falseness that I point to in my articles, the idea of false vision, false connection, false control and even false spirituality. But all of that, again, is normalized in their advertising. So that's why I really called it out as propaganda because, if we just nod along with it and go, "Wow, I could probably figure out how to get \$3,500 for that."

Robert J. Marks:

The same way kids will pay big bucks for tennis shoes these days.

Doug Smith:

Totally.

Robert J. Marks:

It's just an image thing. I'm old enough to remember when cigarettes were advertised on television, and building on what you said, there was a type of cigarette called Virginia Slims. And Virginia Slims used to come out and they were marketing their cigarettes to women, and they would have their slogan as being, "You've come a long way, baby." And they would have this cool-looking modern woman smoking a cigarette. It had nothing to do with the product itself. One of the things I do is I listen to old radio plays, and it's fun to listen to the old commercials. The old commercials, like for automobiles, used to laud the improvements in the technology. There's a Groucho Marx You Bet Your Life program. Maybe some people are old enough to remember that, but they advertised DeSoto automobiles. And their big thing was, "Oh, it's the new power steering. You can actually steer and turn your car with your finger." And it was a big deal.

But now it has nothing to do with the technological advances. Automobile advertisements today are just cool people driving around in automobiles, and if you're cool, you're going to ride around in automobiles. And I think this touches on something that you talk about, and that's the idea that the media says, "You have to try this product or do it this way if you're going to be cool." And the media tells kids especially that everybody is having a good time because they're using their product, and if you don't use their product, you're a loser. You have this fear of missing out, if you will. So it is interesting to watch the evolution of commercials. Now, you mentioned these different values, the vision, connection, control, convenience, and even spirituality. Could you dig down on those a little bit more?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely. So I really wanted to help us understand that the promises that they're making are false. They're saying certain things in their advertisements. And so I wrote the first article before it had come out when it was announced, just based on their advertising and my knowledge of the industry and what they had done in the past. But then I wrote the followup after demoing it and really felt confirmed in each one of these points. So for example, the false vision, so this idea that the original ad says this idea of you see your world and everything in it. You see your world and everything in it, but it's not. You don't actually see your world because everything is projected through their cameras onto these amazing displays. And the problem with that is that by becoming comfortable with that, again, it's designed to wear all the time, the enhancement of what you're seeing and the expectation that you're seeing things that you can correct, the color correction even, just even that much could be changed, but you can also change the background of the world you're seeing.

It's not the world. It's not the real world. So it's this false vision that you then get used to so that when you take the headset off, my concerns, the questions I start asking are, is your house not nice enough? Now? Are the people not attractive enough? If you color corrected, and we have filters in Zoom and all that kind of stuff. So you can imagine with this kind of displays, the filtering and the who knows what, you don't like the outfit that person's wearing, you just change it, all that kind of stuff, when you take it off, it really can poison your view. And so that's why I call it false vision.

Robert J. Marks:

So in some sense, it's almost like a drug.

Doug Smith:

I really look at it like that, and truly because it is because of the addictive nature, we've talked at length and people are studying the effects of dopamine and how the dopamine cycle, our pleasure cycles in our brain are exploited already by big technology companies who hire the best neuroscientists and

behavioral psychologists and make their products do all the things that they know will keep us hooked. Vision Pro takes it up a level by this immersive experience. And so everything you see around you is enhanced and false to the point where the real world doesn't really do it for you anymore.

Robert J. Marks:

Isn't that interesting?

Doug Smith:

Yeah. So that's the first point. The second point I talk about is false connection. And so, this is the idea that... Well, the quote from the film says, "Foundational to Vision Pro is that you're not isolated from other people." Isn't that great?

Robert J. Marks:

That's right. Put on some goggles and everybody around you goes away, but now you're connected.

Doug Smith:

Isn't that amazing? I know. So again, it's just that kind of a statement, but you say it long enough, you're Apple with billions and trillions of dollars to spend on, again, these actors and actresses who are wearing this product and smiling and they look connected, right? Oh, wow. But they're not, because yeah, you're right. You have to get used to people wearing this. And if everyone's not wearing it, again, one of the ones that it's this really moving video of this sweet little girl and her birthday party, but dad is wearing the Vision Pro videoing her birthday party, and, "It's just like being there."

But the problem is that, yeah, it's just like being there because when you were there, you were wearing the Vision Pro, and she's looking at her dad with these googly little eyes in front of his ski mask thing. Because again, the other thing that happens there is just what happens when you see someone who's on their phone. "Oh, I'm listening." Really? Because you could have anything up in front of whatever you're looking at. But we know that, we feel that disconnection with people. So again, it's this false connection because they're watching you, but they also have five other tabs open on their browser. They're thinking about the game, they're doing whatever they're doing. Whatever it is, they're not present. And so, everything becomes virtual. It's almost like the Matrix, right? It's this idea of the matrix is, you're connected, but only with other people who are in the Matrix and the people who are not in the Matrix, you're not really connecting with them. So it's a sense of false connection.

Robert J. Marks:

What about control?

Doug Smith:

So this one is huge, and I really experienced this after the demo. So the propa film, I call it the propaganda film, their commercial talks about things like, "You can make the screen as big as you want. You can create the perfect workspace no matter where you are." And this one, this big one, "You control how immersed you want to be. So you're in control, especially how immersed you are." And a synonym for immersed is baptized, how deep you wanted to go under. So you can go there. So this control, so you're looking around, you're waving your arms, Iron Man-like, Jedi-like or whatever, and everything responds in your entire world. And again, the blending through the video of the real and the virtual elements of the world, it's well done.

And because it's so well done, you get this sense that you are in control, and maybe I should be. There's even this, they call it the digital crown, which is this little dial on the top. They already have it on Apple watches and things where for one minute you might be looking at the environment around you with maybe your browser or your work or your video on top of it, but you can twist that dial and all of a sudden the background is a beautiful landscape. And then maybe the next turn of it is you're on the surface of the moon, and the entire 3D world around you changes to have that.

So again, it's this idea of control in the sense that, "Oh, you don't like what you're looking at, you don't like the way your world is right now, just turn this dial." And it immediately goes away in an immersive sense. And so, when this happens over and over again, you become used to having the ability to dismiss things you don't like, to make the world exactly the way you want it, and then the real world is a lot harder to deal with. And so again, it gives you this false sense of control that is really, really troubling when you look at it from that perspective.

Robert J. Marks:

Doug, this reminds me of the escape that we get from different things. I started to watch a movie the other day, *Once Upon a Time in America*. I don't recommend, it's a terrible movie. But Robert De Niro goes to an opium den, and the reason he goes to this opium den is that he wants to escape reality, and he just sits there and he zones out. It's the same thing with drugs, same thing with alcoholism. It takes you away from reality and the discomforts that you suffer in life and you just don't like these discomforts, you got to get away from them. It seems that this virtual reality is doing the same sort of thing, or screens in general are doing the same sort of things, letting you escape from reality. And I guess for small doses, that's okay, but it can be overdone.

Doug Smith:

That's exactly right, Bob. We are already seeing that with the screens. When the average person spends eight plus hours a day consuming digital media, whether that's on their smartphone, through social media, video games, streaming video, those are forms of escape. And then added to that, again, the persuasive design, the elements that cause us to want to so that we can't even be bored anymore, so we can't be five seconds standing in line without thinking, "Oh, what's on Twitter?" But Twitter designed it to do that. They want to be top of mind. They built in these habit-forming hooks and loops and triggers to want to do that to us so that we're doing that. That's why I called my book [Un]Intentional. Most of us don't mean to spend eight hours a day, the equivalent of over a full-time job consuming these products. So Apple takes it up a notch with the Vision Pro and VR does in general. But Apple has made it slick and consumable and do it all the time to the point where we will live in this escaped reality.

And one thing I didn't mention in terms of control, the \$3,500 price tag, as you mentioned, it's not affordable for most people. So who's going to buy it? It's going to be elite people who can afford it. So then you start having this situation where an elite group of people think that... They already have a lot of control because they already have a lot of money, so then they've got this false sense of control by wearing this device. And you've got this even more of a division of people who are in this certain bracket or whatever, the certain socioeconomic expectation that are controlling their virtual world. And so, that is their world. And so, then when they engage the real world with the rest of us, who are almost... There was a study that I quoted in the later article that where there's this uncanny valley where other people are almost unhuman when they take the device off. So this division that it's creating or will create as it becomes more adopted is a significant concern to me.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow, interesting. We were talking last time about the propaganda, your words, of Apple Vision Pro's marketing, and we went over the ideas that it promoted a vision, it promoted connection, it promoted control, convenience. And one of the things we didn't talk about was its promotion of spirituality. So how does the Apple Vision Pro promote spirituality in their marketing?

Doug Smith:

It's really fascinating the way that they do that. It's even, as I mentioned in the last podcast, this idea that Apple, through Vision Pro, wants us to be immersed. They want us to be all in. They want us to be... And I provocatively said that's a synonym for baptized. They want us to be baptized into accepting their worldview. And if you start digging into the worldview of a lot of big tech companies, they are coming from a more materialistic point of view, a very techno utopian kind of vision for the future. As you've talked about many times in the past of things like people who believe we could upload our consciousness into computers someday, and how they really seem to believe that.

And so, these products kind of have that sense to them because they don't believe in the actual spirituality of what's real and true in our world, the real and true creator of all and those kinds of things. So they're fabricating it, and they're doing a really good job of making a fake spiritual world. But there's one particular scene in the film and an app that they created called the Mindfulness app. And so, the voice on there with this woman shown meditating, there's these colorful 3D objects floating around her, and the voice says, "Experiences on Vision Pro can also expand in three dimensions, filling the entirety of your space, like in the mindfulness app where you can create a moment of calm."

Robert J. Marks:

Holy Toledo. Wow. That's spooky.

Doug Smith:

It is spooky. When I saw it, it took my breath away, because it almost promotes this out of body experience in a way, these beautiful environments that let you extend beyond the dimensions of your room. That's another phrase from the commercial. So you're in being baptized, there's this implied trust, "I'm becoming a disciple of this." Whatever it is. And if you're trusting this Mindfulness app, you're trusting this 3D space to give you this moment of calm. It's this manufactured spirituality now, one manufactured in their matrix or whatever. We feel because it makes you feel things. Like you said even earlier, when you put on the Oculus, you felt dizzy. If they put you over a 50-foot precipice, you're going to go, "Whoa." Because it works, right? So if they make you feel spiritual feelings, at least what they would call spiritual feelings, manufactured spiritual feelings, that's a really significant concern for those of us who are all-in, truly spiritual believers in Judeo-Christian traditions or whatever. We believe in the reality of the real spiritual world. And so, the manufactured spiritual world ends up becoming what I would claim would be idolatrous.

And so, that's a significant concern. One that I think, because it has the label of mindfulness, so there's the psychological aspect to it, people might think, "Oh, well, it's not that big of a deal." But the keywords around it that I already mentioned around immersion, giving you calm, is that the peace that passes understanding? Like, "What?" That kind of a thing. Are you going to be able to hear a still, small voice? If the real spiritual world were to try to connect with you, but you're only attuned to the false spirituality now, what impact does that have on us? And I think that's a really significant concern.

Robert J. Marks:

And here's the thing, Doug, I think it's above and beyond simple marketing. I think that there is a movement towards AI spirituality. I just wrote an article for Newsmax where I talked about the idea that inside of every person, there's a God shaped vacuum, and you got to fill it with something. And you and I are both followers of Christ, so we fill it with Christianity and the truth of Christ. On the AI side, they believe of the coming of the singularity when AI begins to take over. We believe in the second coming of Christ. So they're believing in some sort of coming also. They're also seeking immortality through uploading themselves. The entire idea of transhumanism is to use technology in order to extend your life. There is literally an AI church in California which promotes AI as God.

Doug Smith:

Wow.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, gosh. Ray Kurzweil was asked, for example, what about God? Does God exist? And his response was, "No, not yet." In other words, he believes that AI will come about and eventually become that God, Anthony Levandowski has founded this church and they literally have a bible. And guess what their bible was written by, guess who wrote it. ChatGPT. And they have followers, and they have applied to the IRS for tax exemption and all of this other stuff. So it's one thing to say that they're using this as a marketing tool, but I believe that there's a deeper ideological push behind what they're doing. They're trying to push this idea of a technical utopia around AI and a religion based around AI. It's really troubling, but they're trying to fill their God-shaped vacuum with, with their AI church. Really strange. I'll put a link to that article in the podcast notes if anybody is interested in looking at it.

One of the things that you mentioned in your work is that there's a lot of people in history, you call them dead authors, that have... I guess I can use the word prophesied... Prophesied about the latest VR technology like Vision Pro. Could you touch on those? The one I'm familiar with is Marshall McLuhan. I haven't read a lot of his stuff, but I'm familiar with his phrase, "The medium is the message." I don't even know what that means. So could you go through some of these older authors and say how they prophesied what was going to be coming with this VR technology?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely. I'm a huge fan of Marshall McLuhan as well. I was introduced to him through another dead author, just Neil Postman, who he just passed away in 2003, but he wrote about the impact of television on us in the 1980s in his amazing book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. If you haven't read that, it's short, it's punchy, but it really shows where we're at today, and he introduced McLuhan to me through that. And so then I read McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, which he wrote in 1964, where he did, I'll talk about that, "The medium is the message." The other one I'll mention just off the top of my head as well, is our friend and a senior fellow of Discovery Institute, Andrew McDiarmid, who is often hosting this podcast too. He's such a great guy.

Robert J. Marks:

Great guy. Yeah.

Doug Smith:

I love him. He's a big fan of Jacques Ellul who also wrote about technology. He passed away in 1994, but he wrote this idea of technique called the *Technological Society* in 1954. So he'd also talked about propaganda. So all these voices, none of these things were a surprise to people who were paying

attention in those days. So I find that really grounding to be able to go, "We're not completely unmoored from any wisdom from people who could explain to us what was happening." And they called it out. I'm going to share some quotes from McLuhan here in a minute. So the idea of the medium is the message-

Robert J. Marks:

What does that mean? Unpack that for us.

Doug Smith:

It's the idea is that... And it does get kind of complex because of the way that McLuhan communicates that it's hard to do it. So Neil Postman, though, has this really great example of explaining it. And the idea is the medium or the way you're communicating actually it so shapes and forms the possible messages in so many ways we don't realize. So what he said, this is Neil Postman explaining the medium as the message, he says, "Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence. And even if they were not, the Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom-

Robert J. Marks:

That's great.

Doug Smith:

"You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content." So that's a really good example of the medium is the message. There are things you can communicate through smoke signals that you can't communicate in other ways, but in writing you can say a lot more than you can say in smoke signals, right? But the medium ends up framing and constraining or even making possible what can be said to the extent that McLuhan himself would say that the content is irrelevant. It's the medium that actually forms our relationships and our associations with each other. And so, I think about, even a photograph, there are things you can communicate. They say a picture's worth a thousand words, but when you think about a thousand words, a certain thousand words, you can say things in a thousand words that you can't say in a photo. We try to in our memes today, but our memes are saying things in the way that they communicate that cannot be said, or that writing says in different ways.

So the medium is the message is a really powerful way to say that. I'm going to share this quote from McLuhan as he talks about it how I found this related directly to Vision Pro now. When McLuhan talks about the medium as the message, he talks about this idea, it's the medium or the way it's communicated, that shapes and controls how we relate to one another. This is his quote. "The content, or the uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it's only too typical that the content of the medium blinds us to the character of the medium. And so, we become blind as we adopt technologies. A medium like Vision Pro, which is literally mediating, it mediates what we see through its cameras and its screens and changes our perception of everything. So regardless of the content, we're actually being shaped as people in our relationships and in our ways of relating and in even our identities by adopting these technologies. So it's super powerful concept.

Robert J. Marks:

With the addiction that we have from media. Has anybody ever thought about a 12-step program in order to overcome it? You get addicted to alcohol and you go through through Alcoholic Anonymous'

12-step program. They have the same thing for narcotics. I think there are recovery groups from pornography, for example-

Doug Smith:

Certainly.

Robert J. Marks:

And a number of other addictions. What about media addiction? Anybody thought about doing something like that?

Doug Smith:

Oh, very much so. There are definitely psychologists that have programs for handling internet addiction. There's even special programs for younger people who... Unfortunately the numbers are off the chart. If the average consumption is eight hours a day, teens are often 10 plus hours a day, and their addictions are really harming them and so dramatically that they often become violent when their devices are reduced or whatever. So there's even programs in technology isolating environments and wildernesses that, almost like inpatient addiction recovery programs where people are helped through their addiction because it is so powerful and so immersive that they have to be completely disconnected and isolated from it. So absolutely, there are many programs. There are not enough. It's a new area, but it is a burgeoning field unfortunately.

Robert J. Marks:

It strikes me that in order to recover from addiction, you either have to do abstinence or moderation, and the abstinence is easy in the sense that it's just a yes or no question. If I'm an alcoholic and I decide to quit drinking, it's no to alcohol. If I want to quit drugs, it's no to drugs. If I want to go on a diet, it is not no to food. I have to go at it in terms of a moderation. I tried a technical fast and I realized I couldn't do it. There are certain media interactions that I require for my day job, for communication with my family, et cetera. So it seems to me that the recovery is going to be different than abstinence. It's a matter of moderation. And moderation is always much more difficult as those of us that have gone on diets know about. So the 12-step program would have to address that. I guess they probably have this covered in Overeaters Anonymous where they go through the 12-step program.

Doug Smith:

Right. Right. It is really difficult. You're right, because technology is such a huge part of our lives, and especially those of us that work in technology and everybody, virtually every job uses some technology. I think the challenge is, in terms of where abstinence can fall, would be abstaining from intentionally addictive types of activities. So social media, video games, even streaming video for some people that get addicted to YouTube or TikTok and that kind of a thing. So there can be boundary abstinence. Certainly we need to abstain from pornography, but that comes through our devices as well. So there are segmented abstinences among that, so we wouldn't moderate, we wouldn't want to say moderate pornography. So we'd want to abstain from that within the context of whatever else you needed to do. I often tell people that... So the problem with even the idea of moderation or balance is that, in our own estimation, we're the most moderate or balanced person that exists. "I'm the most balanced person. It's all y'all that are." Right?

So in that perspective, we can let ourselves get away from a lot. But again, as a follower of Christ, and the way I talk about it in my book is that we need to start from a posture of surrender with a willingness

to surrender to Christ, whatever it is that's holding us back. And I tell people when I speak, I'm an Android developer, but if Android devices became a problem for me, I'd have to get a different job and out of surrender to Christ. If I literally couldn't handle being around an Android device because I got into bad stuff, I'd have to change my job. And I would, because I want to surrender, I want to live out of surrender. And so, I encourage people to look at it from that perspective, because there are some people, like an alcoholic that can't have any alcohol in the house, you might need to do that to overcome an addiction and to get your life back.

Robert J. Marks:

By the way, Doug, I think you just coined a new term, segmented abstinence.

Doug Smith:

Oh.

Robert J. Marks:

I like that. That's very nice. That's a type of moderation, but it's a segmented abstinence. Very good. So getting back Vision Pro, and this dovetails on what you've been talking about, who should use devices like Vision Pro?

Doug Smith:

That's a great question, isn't it? Should we use it? Should we use it at all? Well, Apple would have us not ask any questions around the "should we?" They only want to ask, "Can we? Can you afford it?" That's the only question, ultimately. There's no reason not to use it in Apple's worldview. But what I would encourage everyone to consider is, should you? And to answer the should you question, you have to have a worldview of, a view of who you are and what you're here to do. And when you know who you are and what you're here to do, then you choose tools and technologies that fit within that. We don't let our technologies decide what we're here to do or who we are, although the big tech companies would love it if we did that and follow them into their utopian view.

So I would encourage everybody to ask the should I question very deeply. Considering the things we've talked about, I'm not going to say a categorical no, but I would definitely say there's a lot to watch out for here, a lot to be concerned about. And probably for most people, there's probably a pretty strong no, or very rarely, extremely rarely, maybe an occasional theme park ride of 30 minutes a year or something. I don't know. But it's a good question. In answering that, I always, again, pushing back to that should I, with the context of what I'm here to do, who I am and why I'm here, then keep that question in the forefront, and you'll know whether you should adopt any technology, including Vision Pro.

Robert J. Marks:

Interesting. There's a church which is close to us here in Waco called Homestead Heritage. They have a number of people that live there voluntarily in kind of a minimalist society. They mostly do things like agrarian and craft-based activities. And if you go to one of their services, you are surprised at the closeness of the family, the respect that the kids have for their parents, the wonderful relationship and love that you can feel in the families. And I think a lot of that is because they have abstained from immersing themselves in technology. Now, they're not Amish in the sense that they've totally isolated themselves from technology, but they've certainly minimized their interaction with it. And from my brief

experience of going to their services, they are better off from having done that. And I think this is what you're preaching right now, right?

Doug Smith:

That's exactly right. I love that. It's the intentional life. It's a return to who we are and what we're made for. So much of what comes through our technology does create the negative effects, as we've seen in recent headlines about catastrophic mental health problems. The suicidality, I just read a study of over a third of teen girls have considered suicide, and more than 50% describe themselves in persistent state of sadness. This is caused by Instagram. This is caused by TikTok. This is not even the Surgeon General is saying that. So those of us who would be willing to create alternative communities, really like the church you described, that's a wonderful remedy to what we're seeing that's really destroying us, destroying our youth in their souls in such tragic ways, so that, wouldn't it be worth it? Wouldn't it be worth it to take those steps like that?

I love that. That'd be another soapbox, but too many churches are quick to say, "Well, all the kids are on Instagram, so we probably ought to run our church on Instagram and talk to them because that's where the kids are." And why not draw them out of Instagram? Why not draw them out to a better way? People aren't asking that question yet, but I think in 20 years, people will wonder why we didn't do that in this era, "Why did you let us all adopt all these technologies without question when you knew what it was doing to us?" And I hope to be a part of that, one of those voices that's calling out and asking people to do that.

Robert J. Marks:

Doug, you mentioned this idea of the alienation of the youth because of the media. And I actually think this is one of the reasons that we're seeing Christian revivals across the United States. You have Asbury, you had one at Auburn. I guess at Pirate's Cove where they started the Jesus Revolution, they had over 1,000 baptisms a few months ago. And I think a lot of it is this escape from the idea that you are a loser. Like you mentioned, all of these kids are involved in media, and because they're involved in media, they think the whole world is having a great time, everybody is perfect except for them, and that they are a loser. And this is the reason that... Gosh, what was the statistic? I think it was 70% of girls that are on social media have body image problems. The suicide rate of teens has jumped up. And a lot of this is a consequence of the media, just like you're talking about.

But I think that the message of Christianity, which is that you are not a loser, that you can come into the family of God, that you can be a son or a daughter of God and be accepted just the way you are is incredibly compelling to young people today. In our church, between services, we had 22 baptisms of people in junior high and high school. So I hope that this is the pushback that we see from this addiction to the media and the terrible effects that it's having on our kids today. Really interesting stuff.

And the other thing I would mention is, in terms of this disciplined life, Jordan Peterson says it very well, and I'm paraphrasing what he said. He's a psychologist. He's really famous for his work and his political stance in Canada and his martyrdom on the altar of wokeism. And Peterson said, "When you live a disciplined life, when you do what you should do as opposed to do what you want to do, you are more fulfilled." Happiness has the same root as the word happening. And when you look at happenings all the time, you get happiness. But that's temporary, and that's very, very different from the joy that you were talking about, the joy that surpasses all understanding. And you get a sense of joy in your life when you lead a disciplined life away from all of this stuff. And I think that that's what happens at the Homestead Heritage. And I think that that's the crux of what your mission is.

Doug Smith:

That's exactly right, Bob. Thank you. I love those stories. Both of those points are really important. I think you're right. I think what's wonderful about the message of Christianity is, it is timeless, it's real, and it is an answer to the harms and the pain that especially our youth are feeling as a result of living in these online worlds that are hurting them so much. Come to the real, come to what's real, and you will be accepted and loved. That's beautiful. And I love seeing that.

And Peterson is exactly right. We often think freedom means unrestricted, unbounded... It's kind of our culture's definition of freedom. Do whatever you want without consequences. But everybody knows you can't jump off your roof and expect to fly. You fall on the ground and the consequence is gravity. And so the disciplined life ends up creating boundaries for a freedom that most people don't recognize. And we're missing that. One of the great metaphors that I've heard in the past is everybody is free to play all the keys on a piano that they can play. Anybody can play all the keys on the piano that they want to, you're free to play them, but only some people are free to play Mozart or Chopin. They're free because of years of disciplined practice. But now they can play whatever they want whenever they want in true freedom. But that freedom came at the cost of discipline. And all areas of our lives that are worth living and growing into require that level, including our spirituality.

Robert J. Marks:

Right. Right. I think this idea of doing what you want to do is captured in the book that you mentioned by Postman titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Doug Smith:

That's right.

Robert J. Marks:

That's exactly what we're doing, so that's really important. So could you give a summary of what we've talked about? Are you able to do that and capture, I guess, a basic overview of your feelings about Apple Vision Pro, the VR set and screens in general?

Doug Smith:

Sure. Absolutely. What I would say is that the Vision Pro is another example of big technology companies who do not care for what is actually good for us. They only care really ultimately what's good for their bottom line. They're totally willing to make profit at our expense. They're totally happy for us to be addicted to their products because they don't lose either way. They win, even with all the critiques. So what I would just encourage people to take away would be that they need to be more intentional with their lives than the companies who are spending billions of dollars and millions of hours to get them to be unintentional. We need to take our lives back from these intentionally addictive technologies and live the life that God has called us to live. And when we do that, we are going to experience real vision, real connection, real control, real spirituality, not the false versions that Apple is selling with Vision Pro.

Robert J. Marks:

Excellent. Excellent. Thank you, Doug. This has been a lot of fun and very enlightening. Look, everybody, we've been talking to Doug Smith about the new Apple Vision Pro VR set and its impact on us. And as you've heard in this podcast, Doug is a passionate voice in the epic battle against screen addiction. You

got to check out his book, [Un]Intentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires and How You Can Be Free, and you can go to [unintentionalbook.com](http://unintentionalbook.com) and find out more about his book. And if you want to follow Doug, go to his website, [thatdougsmith.com](http://thatdougsmith.com). Doug, I guess "This Doug Smith" was taken already, right?

Doug Smith:

It was. And [Dougsmith.com](http://Dougsmith.com) costs \$32,000 to license, so I was like, "I don't have that. I'll just go with That Doug Smith."

Robert J. Marks:

That's great. Thank you, Doug. Until next time on Mind Matters News, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host Robert J. Marks. Explore more at [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). That's [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural & Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.