

Chapter 14

Avatars: Portraying, Exploring, and Changing Online and Offline Identities

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ABSTRACT

Avatars are defined as virtual representations that are controlled by a human user. Commonly, we observe avatars in video and online games, social networking sites, and virtual worlds. This chapter explores the use of avatars in the expression, exploration, and evolution of users' identities, both online and offline. Theoretical explanations for the creation, manipulation, use, and effects of avatars are offered, including identification, transformed social interaction, and the Proteus effect. The adoption of avatars for identity expression, exploration, and change is discussed, including Turkle's notion of fragmented selves and Nakamura's concept of identity tourism. Research that has investigated the effects of avatars on self-perceptions and identity in various domains (such as health, marketing, finance, and environmental behaviors) is addressed. Implications and future directions for research in this area are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The word *avatar* is adapted from the Sanskrit for “descent,” used to describe a Hindu god emerging from the heavens and bodily manifesting itself in order to intervene in human affairs. Generically, the term *avatar* can refer to any representation of

a person. Names, online profiles, and dolls can all be considered types of *avatars* by this broad definition (Bailenson & Blascovich, 2004). *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson's (1992) science fiction novel, popularized the use of the word as it is commonly understood today, to describe a digital representation in a virtual environment.

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Avatars and the virtual spaces they inhabit have transformed our ability to express and explore identity, yielding effects both on- and offline. *Avatars* enable users to “intersect with a technological object and embody themselves, making the virtual environment and the variety of phenomena it fosters real” (Taylor, 2002, p. 41). Embodying an *avatar* is a recursive identity process; each time users enter the virtual world, they are testing the affordances of their online selves. The fluidity of virtual representations and virtual environments has encouraged new interpretations of identity. Indeed, Turkle (1995) noted that: “Traditional ideas about identity have been tied to a notion of authenticity that such virtual experiences actively subvert” (p. 185). *Avatars* offer a unique way for users to portray facets of their identities, explore their wishful identities, and change aspects of their identities both offline and online. This chapter seeks to explore these processes as well as the theoretical processes that drive these experiences.

AVATAR AS SELF-REPRESENTATION

Virtual spaces give us the opportunity to selectively portray the self. Whether on a social networking site or an online gaming platform, we use *avatars* to represent ourselves. Nakamura (2002) argued that the use of graphical, visual *avatars* in place of text-based names and description creates a new domain and social experience online. Even with the freedom to represent ourselves as we choose, *avatars* require us to make selections on what features we portray and gives others visual substance through which they can make quick judgments (Kolko, 1998). Thus, our *avatars* are evaluated by the same appearance-based criteria we are first judged upon in offline settings (Weibel, Stricker, Wissmath, & Mast, 2010). Users may choose how they appear to others in a virtual environment. Sometimes users are limited to an assortment of characters; in other environments, *avatars* may be customized from head to toe (or

horn to claw, depending on the body they select; Nowak & Rauh, 2006). The mere process of customization empowers the user to make specific decisions on how they wish to appear to others (Boellstorff, 2008; Taylor, 2002). The ability to design and customize an *avatar*, combined with the time spent using the *avatar*, leads users to often develop a strong affinity for an *avatar* (Lim & Reeves, 2009; Yee, 2006).

Commonly, *avatars* are used to represent people in Internet chat (Kang & Yang, 2006), video games (Smith, 2006), social virtual worlds (Castronova, 2005), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs; Yee, 2006), virtual reality (Lanier, 2001), and other mediated contexts. With such broad applications, *avatars* serve many purposes and are often multifunctional within a given context. Taylor (1999) summed their utility, stating that *avatars* “facilitate interaction, shape and solidify identity, as well as more generally mediate users’ engagement in the world” (p. 438). An *avatar* is more than just a digital image: we use this representation as a conduit for our actions and communication with others in virtual environments (Fox, Arena, & Bailenson, 2009). Thus, as Taylor (1999) claimed, “The bodies users create and use in virtual spaces become inextricably linked to their performance of self and engagement in the community” (p. 438). *Avatars* provide a functional representation to facilitate sensemaking. For example, the nature of immersive virtual environments necessitates the use of *avatars* as points of reference in the virtual space (Lanier, 2001). *Avatars* provide an essential, functional representation with which the user can enact virtual behaviors such as navigating virtual space or engaging virtual objects or other *avatars*. *Avatars* may also be adopted as a conduit for identity expression. When selecting an *avatar* for a virtual world, the user might demonstrate group affiliation, social identity, interests, or personality traits through their choice of representation (Martey & Consalvo, 2011; Taylor, 2002). For example, an alumnus might dress his *avatar* in

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