Chapter 4

In the Presence of Avatars: What Makes Virtual Teachers and Learners Seem (Un)Real?

Brock S. Allen
San Diego State University, USA

Sabine Lawless-Reljic
San Diego State University, USA

ABSTRACT

As ancient mythic forms of being, avatars represented the descent of deities from heaven. Today the term is most widely used to refer to figures (often 3D, mobile, and dynamic) that represent human computer users in virtual worlds. The core issue in the development and use of avatar technologies is, “What does it mean to be present and to be perceived as present by others?” These questions have been addressed for more than a half century by researchers on communication and on education; many of their ideas and findings provide footholds in the slippery realm of evolving media technologies. The chapter focuses on the role of immediacy behaviors in closing the psychological distance between teachers and learners in real and virtual worlds and the role of social presence in avatar-based teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

One of the classic ways that researchers and managers of distance education in the last century framed learning at a distance was to characterize it as a form of “tele-communication” between “teachers” and “students” (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag, 1995). The underlying premise—that distance education could or should be treated primarily an exchange of messages between “senders” and “receivers”—fails to address the experiential challenges and opportunities posed when teachers and learners use avatars to project their “tele-presences” in remote environments and virtual realities.

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Background and Purpose

Virtual worlds, with their complex representations of places, things, cultures, and people, invite educators to position questions about communication within a larger matrix of existential issues. For example: How do or should we facilitate a sense of “being there” and “being there with others” in ways that are authentic and broadly supportive of diverse modalities of teaching and learning?

Without some limits, a single book chapter such as this would drown in such issues, which are fundamental to major branches of philosophy, psychology, and religious studies. Nevertheless, questions about “being there” form an invisible foundation for this chapter’s purpose, which is to examine the role of avatar teaching acts and learning acts and the ways these acts might influence the degree to which avatars are perceived as “real,” “authentic,” or “empathetic.”

This chapter explores questions about the potential value of social presence projected by teachers and learners through avatars situated in virtual worlds (VW). We begin with a brief orientation to characteristics of avatars, using Second Life® (www.secondlife.com) to illustrate issues and examples. Then we examine varying conceptions of social presence and research on how it is influenced by teaching behaviors. Out of this comparison arises consideration of the way the constraints and enablers of media technology and media culture shape perceptions of the social presence and immediacy of avatar-based teaches and learners.

(Second Life® (SL) is the largest online virtual world by far and the one most populated by avatar-based educators, partly because it is an accessible, goal-free environment designed to support content creation, rather than implementation of game-based rules. However, SL’s parent company, Linden Lab, laid off 30% of its workforce in 2010 and prospects for its business model are uncertain (Clark, 2010).)

AVATARS

In contemporary 3D online communities, avatar typically refers to a dynamic, mobile three-dimensional model representing a user (or user’s alter ego) in a virtual world. Hundreds of online worlds occupying a variety niches (kZero, 2010) employ avatars as a means for humans to communicate and interact within what science fiction writer Neal Stephenson (1992) characterized as “consensual realities.”

Avatars also appear with increasing frequency in environments featuring:

- **augmented realities**, in which digital objects are superimposed over direct or indirect views of real-world environments, for example, restaurant icons superimposed on satellite photos or computer goggles that display the location of pipes beneath streets; and
- **mixed realities**, in which digital objects and real objects coexist and interact in real time, for example, a golf simulator with real golf-clubs and digital golf balls.

Avatar Attributes and Actions

Avatars appear in many forms, from diverse humanoids to tiny bumble bees and flame-breathing dragons. Second Life® avatars can do a great variety of costumes and accessories, employ a range of tools and vehicles, and inhabit fantastic, innovative (and mundane) houses and buildings.

SL “residents” (also known as “clients” or “users”) employ mouse moves to control the locomotion and ambulation of their avatars; project speech through avatars by talking into a microphone; and invoke avatar gestures such as laughing, waving, or raising hands through simple keystroke commands. (SL users can choose to see on their computer monitor views of their avatar from varying distances and angles; from just over the avatar’s shoulder; or as the avatar...