

Human & Avatar: Blurred Lines

As technology furthers, it is getting increasingly harder to tell the difference between who we really are and the versions of ourselves we show other people. It's not just gamers that use avatars anymore but everybody. Avatars are everywhere; people use them in video games and social media and even online shopping. When people customize their cars, it can also be like creating an avatar in real life. It's weird to think about, but avatars do affect how we think, feel, and act every day, even if we don't know it.

Since the beginning of this class, I started to notice more of this in my life. When I create avatars now, I don't think of them as just characters in a video game; I think of them more as who I am and what I am trying to be. You think that something as simple as a car could be considered an avatar just based on the customizable features of it. It shows other people who you are before you even open your mouth. When you have control over how something looks or moves, people are going to react to it and that reaction changes how you act.

To truly understand how avatars are affecting us, you have to understand what the self even is. Antonio Damasio and other scientists say there are three parts of the self: the first is a proto self or the body; then there's the emotional part, which he calls the core self; and lastly, there is the story part, which is our extended self. Psychologists also talk about things like the possible selves we dream about being in the future and the true selves that we hide sometimes from other people. Our avatars connect all those selves and truly express who we are and who we want to be.

An idea that really connects this is called self-discrepancy theory. The self-discrepancy theory is the gap between who we really are and who we wish we were and who we think we should be in certain situations. When that gap gets too big, we start to feel bad about ourselves, but avatars can help us close that gap. We can use avatars to show a version of ourselves that we want people to see or that we even want ourselves to see. One example of this is when people make digital twins of themselves to online

shop. They usually make these avatars a little bit better looking or more confident, but this isn't lying. This is just trying to show the best parts of ourselves. It can, however, be dangerous because if your avatar feels too different from the real you, then you might just start to feel fake or worry that people won't like who you really are.

The self-discrepancy theory isn't just an idea; it's something that happens in real life. We can see it on dating apps; for example, people use pictures of themselves to look their best or they use filters to hide maybe what they don't like. This isn't about tricking anybody; it's more about how I want to be seen. If that version is too far from reality, it can still make you feel insecure.

There is another idea that is called the proteus effect. The proteus effect is about how we start acting like our avatars. For example, if your avatar looks more confident or powerful, you as a human might actually start to feel the same way. I've even noticed personally that when I play as a character who is bigger or stronger, I feel that I'm able to take more risks in the game and sometimes that confidence can even stick with me after I'm done playing.

In this class we have learned that not all avatars are the same and that some people make their avatars look exactly like them while others make them look completely different. Many people, however, are in between; they make avatars that are slightly better versions of themselves, not too fake but not too plain either and I think that's where I am at when I create avatars. It is natural to want to look or act a little better online than you do in person.

There are other reasons people make different avatars too; sometimes it's about staying anonymous, such as in support groups where people don't want to share their real identity. It can sometimes be about safety, such as when women use male avatars in video games to keep other men from bothering them. Sometimes we must confront parts of ourselves that we can't discuss in person, like our ethnic identity or gender fluidity. Someone who has been held back by social norms is able to experiment

with avatars of their choosing. Trying these new looks for your avatars can be both fun and helpful for you as a human. Sometimes exploring things in the digital world can lead to personal growth in real life.

One big impact on how people see and use avatars is their gender. People still react to avatars based on the gender stereotypes that we see today, even if the person is using an avatar of the opposite gender. For example, people who use male avatars tend to do better on math tests than those that used female avatars prior to the math test. On the other hand, people who use female avatars are more likely to get unwanted attention in online games than people who use male avatars are. These patterns show how real-world biases appear in virtual spaces. Hypersexualized avatars, such as female avatars, can be harmful because they can cause people to objectify themselves or others, which lowers their self-esteem and can even cause people to believe false ideas. There are some people, however, that think that attractive avatars can be empowering but research suggests that we should be careful.

You should often think about how you treat yourself and how others treat you in real life and online. If you use an avatar that is much more attractive or confident than you are in real life, it could lift your mood slightly, but after a while it could make you feel worse about yourself that's why a good balance matters. Avatars that are a bit more idealized can be motivating to people, while very unrealistic avatars can make you feel even more different from who you actually are.

Researchers divide these into three different categories: embodiment, wishfulness, and similarity. embodiment is how much you feel like you are inside the avatar, wishfulness is how much you want to be like it, and similarity is how much the avatar looks or feels like you. When people have more control over their avatars, like changing hair, clothes, or personality, they tend to feel more connected to their avatar. That connection can make playing the games more fun, it can improve performance, and it can even help learning. Controlling an avatar that you can customize gives a more powerful experience than just watching or using an avatar that you are unable to customize.

Studies show that students who use personalized avatars and learning games are more motivated and remember more information. Avatars act like a learning partner to show their goals and keep them focused on the task. Avatars can also help people make healthier choices. When playing as healthier avatars, players often decide to eat better or exercise more so they can look like that avatar.

Avatars don't always have to be digital, though. One thing in the real world that I would consider an avatar is a car. The idea of cars being avatars is called avacars. I tend to agree that cars can be an avatar based on the fact that an avatar is an extension of oneself. People tend to show who they are through their cars. This can be from the color of the paint to the stickers on the back of their car and the steering wheel cover on the inside. Research has shown that people tend to drive more aggressively when the top of their car is up because they feel less identifiable to the others on the road. This is similar to how people act online when they are anonymous.

After learning all of this from class, I have seen how powerful avatars can really be for a person. They are able to help us express ourselves and can even change how we act in real life. They do also have risks, however. They can cause doubt in ourselves or spread harmful stereotypes online. It's important to be careful about how we use our avatars and how they affect us and others around us. Whether it might be a bitmoji, a video game character, or even your car, you're creating a version of yourself that people are going to interact with. That version of you can make you stronger and more confident but can also change how you see yourself in ways you don't expect. The more we understand how avatars influence us, the better we are able to use them to grow and connect as people. Avatars are like mirrors; sometimes they show who we are and sometimes they show who we want to be. If we pay attention, they can help us discover who we can become.