

Keynote Speaker

Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of the Virtual Revolution

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ABSTRACT

Cyberspace technology often grants us (or others) control over our self-representations. At the click of a button, one can alter our avatars' appearance and behavior. Indeed, in virtual reality we can often appear to others as ideal in stature and weight, what ever we want in terms of age and gender, and exhibit perfect form while surfing a forty foot wave. Centuries of philosophical discussion and decades of social science research has explored the concept of "the self", but in the digital age we are encountering identity-bending only imagined by science fiction authors. In this talk, I explore a research program that explores what William Gibson referred to as "the infinite plasticity" of digital identity. In particular, I address two research areas. The first, called The Proteus Effect, explores the consequences of choosing avatars whose /appearance/ differs from our own. Over forty years ago, social psychologists demonstrated self perception effects, for example wearing a black uniform causes more aggressive behavior. Similarly, as we choose our avatars online, do our avatars change us in turn? A series of studies explore how putting people in avatars of different attractiveness, height, and age alter not only behavior online but also subsequent actions in the physical world. The second area examines the consequences of choosing avatars whose /behavior/ differs from our own, specifically the phenomenon of seeing oneself in the third person performing an action one has never physically performed. Once a three-dimensional model resembling a specific person has been constructed, that model can be animated to perform any action fathomable to programmers. A series of studies examine how watching one's own self behave in novel manners affects memory, health behavior, and persuasion. I discuss related communication and psychological theories, as well as implications for citizens living in the digital age.

BIO

Jeremy Bailenson is founding director of Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab and an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Stanford. He earned a B.A. cum laude from the University of Michigan in 1994 and a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from Northwestern University in 1999. After receiving his doctorate, he spent four years at the Research Center for Virtual Environments and Behavior at the University of California, Santa Barbara as a Post-Doctoral Fellow and then an Assistant Research Professor.

Bailenson's main area of interest is the phenomenon of digital human representation, especially in the context of immersive virtual reality. He explores the manner in which people are able to represent themselves when the physical constraints of body and veridically-rendered behaviors are removed. Furthermore, he designs and studies collaborative virtual reality systems that allow physically remote individuals to meet in virtual space, and explores the manner in which these systems change the nature of verbal and nonverbal interaction.

His findings have been published in over 70 academic papers in the fields of communication, computer science, education, law, political science, and psychology. His work has been consistently funded by the National Science Foundation for over a decade, and he also receives grants from various Silicon Valley and international corporations. Bailenson consults regularly for government agencies including the US Army and Air Force, the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the National Research Council, and the National Institute of Health on policy issues surrounding virtual reality.

His book *Infinite Reality*, coauthored with Jim Blascovich, was recently quoted by the Supreme Court outlining the effects of immersive media.