

For a new personality, click here

by Celeste Biever

Are you a confident, square-jawed warrior or a height-conscious little goblin? If you ever take on a virtual computer persona, the look you opt for may have a profound effect on your behaviour.

Online, in virtual worlds and chat rooms where people create cartoons of themselves known as avatars, changing your image is as simple as making a few clicks of a mouse. As people alter the appearance of their avatars, does their behaviour unwittingly change too?

To answer this question, Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, assigned two groups of students an avatar each, using a virtual reality headset. They were given less than a minute to examine their new selves in a "mirror" before being asked to step into a virtual room with another avatar controlled by an independent helper.

Irrespective of their real-life height, some in the first group were assigned avatars that were taller than the other character in the room, and others were given avatars that were shorter. In the second group, half the avatars were given a more attractive face than their counterpart, and half a less attractive one.

Those in the first group were told to negotiate with the other avatar in the room to split a pile of money between them. The researchers found that people given a taller virtual persona were more aggressive negotiators, while those assigned shorter characters were more likely to acquiesce to a deal that was not in their interest. They also found that people with less attractive avatars stood, on average, 1 metre further away while talking to the other character than those assigned attractive ones.

Yee thinks people's tendency to adapt their behaviour to suit the appearance of their avatar helps explain why tens of millions of online gamers become so immersed in virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*. "These games literally make ordinary people into heroes," he says. The effect could also play a role in any digital interaction where true appearance is masked, such as instant messaging when people choose an avatar to represent them as they chat.

Jeff Hancock, a psychologist at Cornell University in New York, says it is surprising how quickly those involved in the experiment modified their behaviour. "We do take these cues about how we look and use them to guide how we behave. This shows how easily we are able to adapt and apply the rules to a new look."

Yee and Bailenson are now examining the effect of an avatar's age on a person's virtual behaviour.

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