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Hey, is that avatar lying to me?

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Consider this scenario, which a researcher at Stanford's [Virtual-Human Interaction Lab](#) proposed to me this week:

You're a college student. You have a class in a big lecture hall. And, 90 percent of the time, your professor looks right at you - gazes straight into your eyes.

How would you feel? Engaged? Creeped out? Like you had to pay attention because you weren't just part of the masses anymore?

Then, what if you also knew that the professor [wasn't just looking at you](#) – that, because you're in virtual reality, your avatar professor can look at every student at the same time?

Would you care that this spider-eye capability means your professor's attention towards you isn't truly genuine?

Maybe not, says [Kathryn Segovia](#), lab manager at this futuristic research office.

"If you're in a one-on-one context, it's harder to fade into the crowd," she said.

This scenario underscores what Segovia says is a big debate in virtual-reality research: Is it OK for avatars (digital representations of people) to be deceptive?

Consider some more examples.

On a tour of her cramped lab at Stanford on Monday, Segovia showed me a face-recognition program that turns you into someone else in the digital world.

I'm a white guy, but with a few clicks, a 3-D version of my face became a white woman, and then a black man.

And it's easy to take virtual-reality deception further than gender and race.

Segovia also demoed a feature that put the virtual version of me on auto-pilot, based on my past movements. So, say I was in a virtual meeting and wanted a cup of coffee. The digital me could act as a moving, note-taking placeholder while I went away.

But tying avatars to our real-world movement may make them less deceptive.

Will Steptoe at University College London [conducted a study](#) that showed avatars with human-like eye movements - which were tied to a real person's eye movements with eye-tracking technology - were easier to catch in a lie.

Those with stationary, mannequin eyes could lie to people more easily.

(Check out this [New Scientist video on the subject](#)).

But there's still plenty of room for deception.

"It's very hard to tell when someone is portraying a genuine version of themselves [in a virtual world]," Segovia said.

The question is: Does that matter? Is it OK, or even powerful, to become another person online? Or is all this mask-wearing bad for us in the long run?

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