Virtual reality alters real world behavior

By John Moe
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A new study has found that people exposed to a virtual reality experience carry lessons from that experience into their real lives.

Virtual reality, at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab. (vhil.stanford.edu)

Researchers at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab recently conducted a study to see how much of an impact virtual reality can have. They took 200 subjects and divided them up into groups. The members of one group were given virtual reality helmets and were guided through a scenario where they cut down a giant redwood tree. Held the chainsaw, cut right through it, watched it fall to the ground.

Group #2 was given a detailed description of a tree being cut down to read. Everyone involved in both groups said the experience made them want to use fewer paper products.

Then the subjects were seated at a table with a glass of water nearby as well as some napkins. The glass was knocked over "accidentally" and the water spilled. The virtual reality group was found to have used 20 percent fewer napkins to clean up the spill.

That might sound like an inconclusive statistic, but according to Grace Ahn, who conducted the study, and Jeremy Bailenson, who runs the lab where it took place and is co-author of Infinite Reality, it could be significant in proving the efficacy of virtual reality in other scenarios, such as health management or attitudes to behavioral changes to address climate change.