

Face Reality With Age-Morphed Photos

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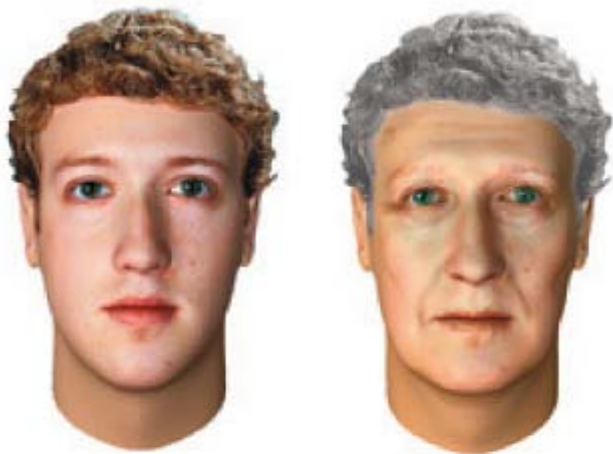


Illustration: Chinthaka Herath

It seems that we take our avatars to heart. If we see a virtual self gaining weight, we're more likely to hit the gym. See it cutting down a tree and we're less likely to waste paper. At least that's what a team of researchers studying the phenomenon—dubbed the Proteus effect—have found. “Real-world behaviors can be altered by a virtual experience,” says Jeremy Bailenson, head of Stanford's virtual reality lab and coauthor of the book *Infinite Reality*. Among the most surprising things our avatars can get us to do, according to Bailenson, is save for our retirement.

Most people view their future selves as complete strangers, which makes them reluctant to put away money for a later date. But Bailenson and his team discovered that if people view a virtual version of

themselves digitally aged by several decades, that hesitation disappears instantly. In one study, contributions to hypothetical retirement accounts went up by 30 percent.

Bailenson's work has already had real-world consequences: The asset-management company Allianz plans to start offering age-morphed photos for 401(k) enrollees by year's end, effectively introducing customers to their future selves. Charmed, we're sure.