

Identity, Presence and the “Ageless Avatar Effect” in Social Virtual Worlds

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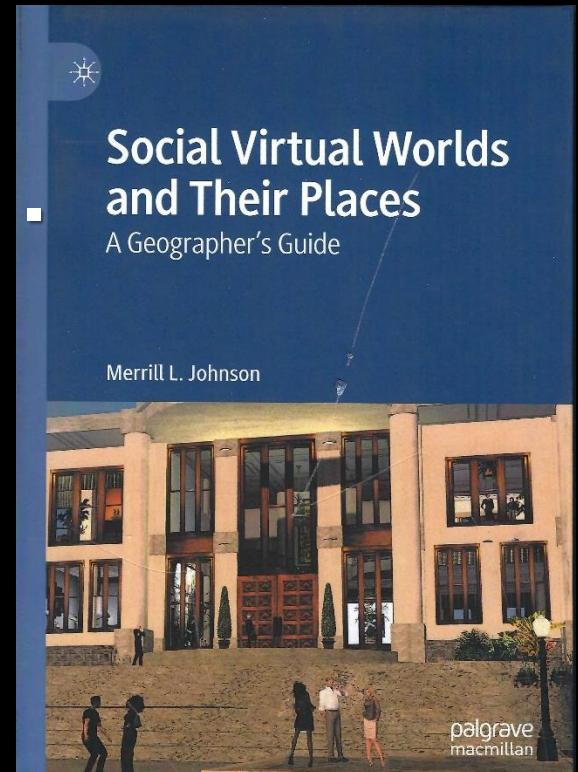
Introduction: Purpose and Organization

Purpose of presentation:

- The purpose of this talk is not to focus on the age-defying avatar, as such; but to use the “ageless avatar effect” as a shorthand expression to help us understand why we enhance and otherwise manage our avatars in ways that often reflect differences with our physical beings.
- We will look at the motivation for entering a social virtual world, how a “look” is selected and an identity created, and the role of social presence or the avatar ecosystem in the identity-development process—all of which contain elements that help to inform the “ageless avatar effect.”

Based on recent book . . .

This talk is based on a recent book . . . conceptual and literature review for geographers . . . mixed methods survey in SL . . .



Setting the Stage: Survey Demographics

General characteristics:

- 59% of users were female in RL, whereas 66% of avatars presented as female in SL; about 70% were located in the U.S., with 19% from Europe, and the remainder from elsewhere; approximately 10% presented in SL as a race or ethnic group different from their users; about 86% had been in SL for six or more years; and over 67% had 1-5 “alts.”

We are growing old:

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Average User's Age	Percentage (n=73, unless otherwise noted)
Up to 30 years of age	5.5
31-40 years old	11.0
41-50 years old	13.7
Over 50 years old	69.9

Origin Stories: Motivations for Entering Virtual Worlds

Literature-based summary of motivations

- Curiosity . . .
- Immersion . . . role playing . . .
- Personal interaction . . .
- Business/improvement . . .
- Creativity . . .
- Therapy/well-being . . . ?

(More on motivations)

- **A Jungian twist . . .**
- **The role of gender . . .**
- **The roles of age and education . . .**

What the surveys said . . .

Table 2. The most important reason for entering and remaining in *Second Life* (percentage of respondents)

	Enter	Remain
Curiosity about what Second Life is all about.	23.6	0
Desire to explore some part of the user's personality not expressed in the actual world.	15.3	11.0
Desire to create/strengthen friendships.	11.1	31.5
Wish to express personal creativity.	20.8	30.1
Need or desire to "get away from it all" in the actual world.	4.2	8.2
Desire to use Second Life as form of therapy.	4.2	4.1
Desire to find and/or pursue business opportunities.	1.4	1.4
Desire to engage in educational or research activities.	19.4	13.7

Who Shows Up in Virtual Worlds? How do we “look”?

Why we look as we do . . .

- **Self-verification** (be like me) . . . or **self-enhancement** (be better than me) . . .
- **Idealized look** or **standing out look** or **following a trend look** .



The “Proteus Effect” . . .

- You act how you are supposed to act, given the look . . .
- And the avatar that is a fire-breathing dragon???



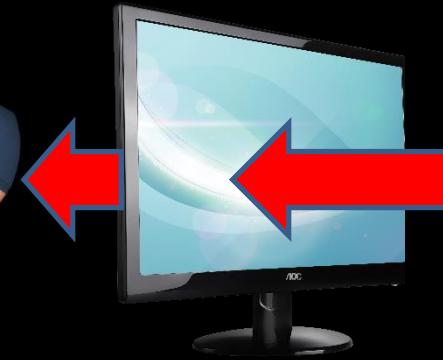
What Is the Relationship between Avatars and Their Users?

What the literature indicates . . .

- Early thinking: immersion vs. augmentation . . .



Immersion: Walled off from the actual world.



Augmentation:
Extension of
actual world.



- Veerapen's (2011) categories . . .
 - **Avatar as object**—the avatar is the property of the user . . . *“I am me and the avatar is mine.”*
 - **Avatar as prosthesis**—*“the avatar extends the me.”* The blind man's stick . . .
 - **Avatar as phantom limb**—sensory quasi-extension of the physical . . . *“I think my avatar is changing me.”* . . . Avatar can “smell” the roses.
 - **Avatar as equal**—avatar body is brought together with the physical body to create phenomenal body. *“The phenomenal I.”*

- Wardle's (2018) modalities . . .
 - **Symbolic** avatar—proxy or extension of the user to allow access to the virtual world . . .
 - **Imaginary** avatar—idealized representation of the user's actual world self, expression of the user's self-perceived identity, the way the user imagines her/himself to be . . .
 - **Real** avatar—autonomous symbiotic unit that inhabits-informs-compensates-transcends both sides of the screen, spontaneous and independent expression of the self by the avatar within the confines of the virtual environment . . .
- The “cyborgian” (Six-Million-Dollar-Man) extension . . . human senses are extended by technology . . .

What the surveys say about the “look” and the avatar/user relationship . . .

- My avatar is “**just me**” . . .
- My avatar is “**idealized me**”—i.e., “**just me**” . . . except for all the ways that I changed “**just me**” when I created my avatar.
- My avatar is the “**real me**” . . . different masks.



Hey bro! The
REAL me!!



Maybe more hair?
A straighter nose
would be ideal.



Just little
old me.

- My avatar is “**more than me**” . . . extension, prosthesis . . .
- My avatar is “**other than me**” . . . immersion, role play . . .



Social Presence and Identity: As I Appear to Others, So I Am

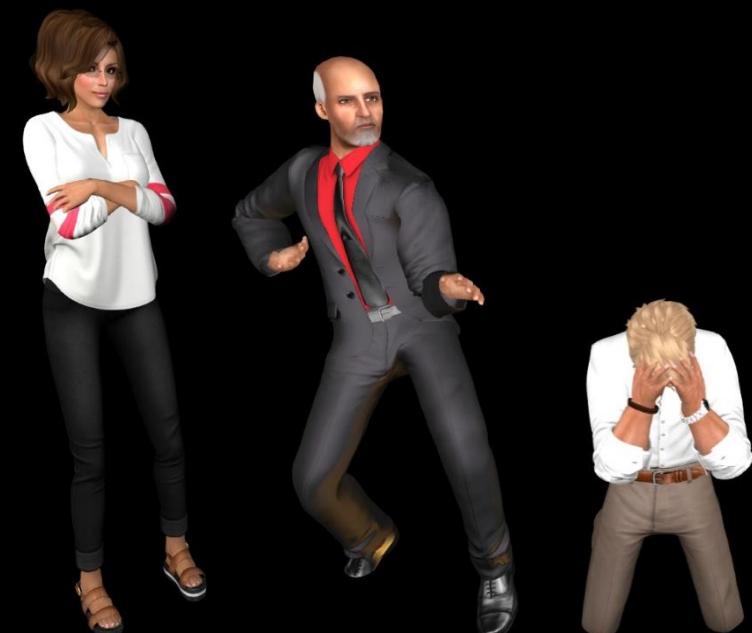
What is “social” presence?

- Performance of embodiment in the presence of, and interaction with, other avatars . . .



“Social” presence meets the “Proteus effect” . . .

- Context counts . . .



You appear as a fire-breathing dragon,
so you are a fire-breathing dragon.



Conclusion

- **What does the “ageless avatar effect” tell us?**
- **How does a human geographer like me deal with the “ageless avatar effect” in understanding the geography of a social virtual world like SL?**

Each “is” as they present themselves to each other.



Thank You!

