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Virtual World First Impressions: Can Individuals Make Accurate Personality Judgments of Others Based on Others' Avatars?

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ABSTRACT

Despite reports suggesting that participation in Second Life - for both social and economic activities - has been declining, there have also been several recent reports suggesting that while the hype over Second Life such as popular press accounts and appearances on CSI New York has declined, economic activity is continuing to grow (Rosenwald, 2010), and more and more companies are choosing Second Life as a meeting and collaboration platform (Hu 2010). Considering the usefulness of Second Life as a platform to conduct meetings, training, and even education, several HCI-related questions become relevant, especially in the more social aspects of virtual world activity.

Companies such as IBM, Cisco (Pattison, 2008), and law firms such as Jones Walker (Hu, 2010) have been using Second Life as an online meeting platform. It may be that the people participating in the meetings know each other in real life; however, meeting participants are likely to be interacting with others that they don't know. In such a situation, what is the process by which an individual makes judgments about the others in the meeting that they don't know? In real life, people make judgments of others' personalities that they come in contact with surprising speed. Absent any other information, first impressions can be made in as few as 100 milliseconds (Willis & Todorov, 2006). While more time observing, more interaction with, and more experience with the target individual can improve the judges' accuracy regarding the qualities of the target individual, the question that drives this research remains, especially in a virtual world context where social presence is lower than in real life: Can individuals make accurate personality judgments of others in a "first impression" encounter in Second Life? Another compelling question arises if, in fact, people are not able to make accurate personality judgments from such a first impression. That is, if individuals are unable to make accurate judgments, do the avatars that individuals use in Second Life provide a consistent "message" to others in world? In other words, do judges make consistent judgments of an avatars personality, regardless of the judgments' accuracy?

This research begins to examine how individuals make judgments of others' personalities when presented with the other's avatar in Second Life. This poster presents the preliminary work in this research program. The full study will be composed of three stages, involving collecting target individuals' Big 5 personality profiles, their avatars from Second Life, and recruiting a sample of judges to make judgments of the target individuals' avatars.

Potential contributions include understanding the mechanism(s) that influence how people make personality judgments of others in immersive virtual world settings to provide a valuable theoretical foundation for examining how people make judgments in other online settings. A potential contribution to practice is that understanding how judges perceive the personalities of others in virtual worlds can provide guidance for virtual team members, managers, and others who wish to project a particular profile in a virtual world setting. Furthermore, understanding how judges inaccurately perceive others' personalities in virtual world will help judges to adjust their initial judgments of others based on the others' avatars.

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