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Avatars in the Workplace

How Businesses Are Adapting to the Virtual World

Walk the halls of any large business over the last decade or two and you will have seen most of the workers "living on the screen," joining in the vast and intricate world of modern commerce made possible by the Internet. Look over their shoulders and you will see that some of these workers are not just living *on* the screen but, in a sense, *in* the screen. They are immersed in elaborate virtual worlds as avatars, on-screen identities that can be controlled to produce some sort of movement, gesture, and speech.

The idea of the computer avatar—a Sanskrit word for the incarnation of a god—was until recently best known for its appearances in science fiction (like Neal Stephenson's 1992 cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*). Eventually avatars made their way into the real world (so to speak) in the form of characters in primitive computer games. Great strides in graphics technology in the last several years have allowed the design of far more sophisticated avatars in far more complex virtual environments. Outside the office, online role-playing games already count tens of millions of "inhabitants" of persistent virtual worlds. For example, Linden Labs, the developer of the popular game Second Life, reports over a billion user-hours spent so far in its system.

For human participants in these worlds, the boundaries between invented and real are permeable. In multiplayer adventure games such as World of Warcraft, for instance, teams often share information both within and without the virtual world. Wikis, other websites, and face-to-face meetings blend together with avatar interactions to form a continuum of physical, digital, and virtual communication. In Second Life and other online multiplayer games, simulated commercial exchanges even spill over into the ordinary digital marketplace, as users can buy and sell virtual properties and accoutrements for real money—with real-world expenditures on virtual assets for these environments now totaling over a billion dollars.

Although they still appear to a large degree as animated cartoons, avatars are sufficiently engaging for some of the social interactions upon which organizational life depends. Office workers who may be widely separated in physical space can meet up in simulated offices, houses, islands, shops, and parks, typically in Second Life. In these virtual spaces, their avatars can simulate visual and bodily interaction, seemingly allowing for a richer form of communication than that provided by more traditional digital means.

Businesses—especially high-tech companies—have been exploring ways to put these virtual spaces to use. Cisco, for example, has employees who use Second Life both for internal communication and for customer education and training. In recent years, the company has held its annual Cisco Live meeting not only at physical conference venues, but with sessions broadcast or held simultaneously in Second Life. Similarly, IBM recently assembled 150,000 employees and stakeholders in an electronic "town hall" meeting that included an island in Second Life. These early corporate explorations of virtuality continue the abstraction of work that has already put so many of us at the verge between two worlds: the solid and substantial realms of products and offline services, and the digital workspace, which places its own demands on workers and imparts its own discipline on work.

We know, of course, that technology never grants its bounty freely. In order for businesses to exploit the power of the groaning new machines of the Industrial Revolution, workers had to become parts of a greater machine and bend their labor to its discipline. The creation of the factory required the forging of the factory worker. So what of us? How will the demands of virtuality reshape the workplace and change the workers?

Imagination has always allowed us to speculate about what others are thinking and feeling, and even to create entirely fictive lives; and we have long proved eager to recruit technology to its service. We have used art, music, books, movies, television, and now the Internet to thrust ourselves imaginatively into the places and lives of others. And the rise of social networking has only deepened our inventive capabilities by allowing us to cast snippets of our own lives—painful, sorrowful, lonely, exuberant, ordinary—into the tumult, inviting others into our place as we are invited into theirs. Avatars seem to be the logical next step, taking the narrative imagination of fiction, the aesthetic imagination of cinema, and the self-styling power of social networks, and combining them into virtual worlds that seek to mimic real-world interaction.

As is so often the case with new digital technologies, young people seem to be at the fore of the move to virtuality. Companies seeking technically literate and creative workers will increasingly encounter young minds that are accustomed to virtual spaces—or, soon enough, minds that have always known them. By contrast, corporate managers tend to be more senior and less tech-savvy; they may encounter new difficulties in managing behavior that emerges from the shifting demands of the same virtual environments into which they are attempting to expand.

Among the changes in work life that virtuality might bring about is the furthering of a trend begun by high-technology companies, in which employees working long hours in stressful environments are encouraged to intermingle work and leisure—both by continuing their work outside the office and by engaging in so-called "serious play" within. Companies might then create virtual environments that encompass not only analogues to conventional office settings, but a host of diversions as well. Workers tasked with conducting serious internal business or customer outreach in Second Life may unwind by playing in cyberspace too. This blurring of the boundary between work and leisure may be good for productivity—but it may also blur the psychological boundary between the two, creating challenges for companies when the stresses of professional life increasingly bleed into employees' personal lives, and the behavioral norms of personal life bleed into the professional.

One potential problem caused by these blurring boundaries involves the avatars' looks and behavior. In virtual games, the design of an avatar has become a way to say something about oneself—often to attract attention and show off. Given the freedom to invent, many users create avatars quite different from themselves: short people have tall avatars; self-effacing people, flamboyant ones. Some people change genders, or even species. An avatar gives its owner a chance to appear different—to escape the social, psychological, and even genetic constrictions of everyday life. It is not surprising that despite the range of "personal" characteristics available, most of the avatars in Second Life are slim and seemingly athletic.

Surely that full range of self-expression would be unwelcome in a business setting. Companies are likely to have their own expectations for the appearance and behavior of employees' avatars: A firm might require that they look like the models in its advertising, or perhaps like the kind of ideally diverse workforce you might see in a company pamphlet. While companies will surely want to preserve some degree of personal freedom for their employees—at any rate, the corporate trend toward encouraging employee self-expression and "serious play" points in that direction—practical and public matters of propriety, reputation, and image lean toward limitations on employees' avatars. In 2007, IBM reportedly became the first major corporation to experiment with guidelines for the appearance of employees' avatars; it is not too difficult to imagine the company someday reviving for cyberspace the kind of dress code its employees once followed in real life.

Businesses have good reason to handle these matters delicately, however. Employees might well resist restrictive avatar appearance codes, which after all will touch on more than mere ornamentation. Extensions of employment law that prohibit discrimination based on certain personal characteristics could provide an argument against limits on avatar design. Can an overweight worker be required to look thinner; an older worker, younger?

And there is another thorny concern. Virtual interaction might provide new creative outlets for workers who do not flourish in the corporate workplace for reasons relating to personality, social skills, or even appearance. Avatars might help reveal such employees' hidden talents and strengths, but excessive restrictions could prematurely quash the possibility.

These issues represent just a peek into the uncharted territory of virtuality that companies are beginning to explore. Current management practice arose largely from settings in which workers dealt physically with one another and the tasks at hand. With the increasing abstraction of work—from physical to digital to virtual—the world these practices assume is in many respects fading away. Companies will have to learn how to manage not just people, but their representations as well.

Avatars may well enrich our opportunities for play, escape, and fantasy. And as they inevitably appear in the business world, they will alter the nature of work itself, moving it further into the realm of image and abstraction. Enthusiasts may claim that avatars will restore the richness of human communication that has recently been attenuated by our life on the screen. But we should guard against a celebratory, even utopian sentiment regarding these digital incarnations, for they alone cannot satisfy our innate need for truly human relations: interactions among virtual simulacra do not encompass the fullness of face-to-face encounters. Among the many important challenges confronting businesses and workers as they adapt to the virtual workplace will be continuing to foster fully human relations in a world increasingly dependent upon artifice and illusion.

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