Chapter 27
Adonis or Atrocious:
Spokesavatars and Source Effects in Immersive Digital Environments

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ABSTRACT

A virtual world is an online representation of real world people, products, and brands in a computer-mediated environment (CME). Within the next few years CMEs are likely to emerge as the dominant internet interface. In addition to corporate websites, companies will operate virtual stores where customers can browse and interact with assistants. However, due to the newness of the medium advertisers still struggle to figure out the best way to talk to consumers in these environments–or to decide if they should enter them at all. In this chapter, the authors look at the role of avatars (digital spokes characters) as sources of in-world marketing communications. The authors discuss conceptual issues such as how an avatar's appearance and the ability of the visitor to customize this appearance may influence consumer attitudes and behavior and how conversations with other avatars can serve as a potentially valuable starting point for buzz-building and word of-mouth marketing campaigns. They conclude with some specific suggestions based upon "lessons learned" regarding issues advertisers need to consider when choosing a spokesavatar to communicate with residents of virtual worlds.

WELCOME TO THE METAVERSE

From *Second Life* to *World of Warcraft*, to MTV's *Virtual Pimp My Ride*, millions of consumers live a parallel life in a digital reality. A *virtual world* is an online representation of real world people, products, and brands in a computer-mediated envi-

ronment (CME). To many mainstream consumers and advertisers, this is largely an unknown or underground phenomenon–but it has real marketing consequences.

In mid-2007, Charles River Ventures proclaimed that the virtual goods market was worth approximately $1.5 billion and growing rapidly. With more than 150 of these immersive 3D environments now live or currently in development,

the number of consumers who come into contact with virtual goods as they navigate these worlds is projected to rise rapidly ("150+ Youth-Oriented" 2008). Indeed, according to one estimate by 2012, 53 percent of kids and 80 percent of active internet users will be members of at least one virtual world ("Kids" 2007, "Virtual Great Enters" 2008).

Clearly virtual environments will be pivotal in fueling new consumer trends over the next decade. McKinsey predicts that "Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* will become an indispensible business tool and vital to the strategy of any company intent on reaching out to the video-game generation" (Richards 2008). *Harvard Business Review* predicts that within the next five years virtual environments are likely to emerge as the dominant internet interface. In addition to corporate websites, companies will operate virtual stores where customers can browse and interact with assistants (Sarvary 2008). To date numerous companies including IBM, GE and Toyota have created CME's for internal and external applications. Eventually, these CME forums may rival traditional, marketer-sponsored e-commerce sites in terms of their influence on consumer decision making and product adoption.

However, due to the newness of the medium advertisers still struggle to figure out the best way to talk to consumers in these environments–or to decide if they should enter them at all. Ironically, this challenge is compounded by the unparalleled latitude both advertisers and consumers possess in these environments to assume virtually (pun intended) any physical form they wish. How will our understanding of *source effects* apply to advertising contexts where a company spokesperson whose *avatar* (or digital representation) is a fiery dragon, a sultry siren, or both at once? How does that company relate to a consumer whose avatar resembles George Bush, a furry creature, or a superhero? Welcome to the wild and wooly world of advertising in virtual worlds.

The influential cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* by author Neal Stephenson envisioned a virtual world as a successor to the Internet called the *Metaverse*, where everyday people take on glamorous identities in a 3D immersive digital world. The book's main character delivers pizza in RL (real life), but in the Metaverse he is a warrior prince and champion sword fighter (Stephenson 1992). The hugely popular *Matrix* movie trilogy paints a similar (though more sinister) picture of a world that blurs the lines between physical and digital reality.

Today these fictional depictions are coming to life as we witness the tremendous growth of real-time, interactive virtual worlds that allow people to assume **virtual identities** in cyberspace. On these sites, people assume visual identities or avatars ranging from realistic versions of themselves to tricked-out versions with "exaggerated" physical characteristics, or from winged dragons to superheroes. Researchers are just starting to investigate how these online selves will influence consumer behavior and how the identities we choose in CMEs relate to our RL (or "meat world") identities.

Why should advertisers care about a bunch of digital die-hards? Why shouldn't they? After all, they often obsess over the precise appearance of a spokesperson–whether a celebrity, fashion model or "(wo)man-on-the street" because they understand the potency of source effects: Often who says it is just as important as what they say. Indeed a vast corpus of literature dating back at least 50 years attests to the importance of this communications variable (for a detailed review see Joseph 1982).

However, we see little evidence that anything approaching this level of care operates in virtual world environments–even though many advertisers are starting to recognize the potential promotional power of these emerging media formats. So far, anything goes–the virtual platform is so new and the permutations of appearance so vast–that most marketers are still at the early stage of debating just what they should say or do. Worrying about the proper vehicles to deliver this content

has yet to appear on the strategic radar. In this chapter, we try to put the question on this radar where it belongs: We look specifically at the role of avatars as sources of in-world marketing communications. We begin with a general discussion of the characteristics of virtual environments and of the avatars that inhabit them. From there we discuss conceptual issues such as how an avatar's appearance and the ability of the visitor to customize this appearance may influence consumer attitudes and behavior and how conversations with other avatars can serve as a potentially valuable starting point for buzz-building and word of-mouth marketing campaigns. We conclude with some specific suggestions based upon "lessons learned" regarding issues advertisers need to consider when they choose a spokesavatar to communicate with residents of virtual worlds.

A New Media Platform

Today's consumers–both young and old–are part and parcel of the new age of advertising that heralds a shift of power from producer to consumer of commercial messages; they are energetic progenitors of consumer-generated content and interact extensively with the brands and organizations that successfully capture their attention. They are equally aloof or even vindictive to those brands that don't. Whereas social networking sites (e.g. MySpace and Facebook) currently receive the majority of attention, some analysts predict that virtual worlds eventually will replace or subsume these platforms (Nowak 2008).

Within the first 6 months of 2008, investors poured $345 million into the virtual worlds space ("$345 Mill" 2008) and within the next 10 years analysts project that 22% of global broadband users will register with at least one virtual world (Gilbert 2008). Eager to join (and market to) the flood of consumers creating virtual lives, many companies have staked their claim in one or more CMEs. A few intrepid advertisers first dipped a toe into this water when they placed their brands in

video games and the *advergaming* platform began to form. Game developers driven by a desire to leverage additional revenue joined forces with marketers equally eager to explore new territories in a cluttered media landscape as they incorporated branded products both as props and as part of a game's storyline. The reaction from players has been generally positive; gamers are usually receptive to brand placement because they feel that it adds realism to the game (Nelson 2002). Some mainstream advertisers such as Burger King now take advergaming to the next level as they create *purpose-built advergames*. These use the advertiser's branded mascots, themes, and venues to make the brand a key element of the game (Hyman 2007).

Buoyed by the initial success of advergaming, numerous companies turned their attention to the nascent virtual worlds industry. Unfortunately, many of these efforts failed to live up to expectations and we've been subjected to a slew of negative press. Virtual worlds are a fad, these naysayers claim. Gartner estimates that upwards of 90% of virtual worlds that businesses launch will fail, most within the first 18 months. Yet their analysts also predict that 70 percent of organizations will establish their own private virtual worlds by 2012 (Cavall 2008), which suggests that the *Metaverse* still holds great potential. Despite the number of failures, there are many examples of success including campaigns by Cosmo Girl and Toyota Scion in *There.com* and Nike and Colgate in *Second Life*.

Avatars are Different

The majority of CMEs are 3-D and employ sophisticated computer graphics to produce photorealistic images. Furthermore, unlike many other web environments such as social networking sites individuals enter the world in the form of a a digital persona that they create themselves. These avatars have the ability to walk, fly, teleport, try on clothes, try out products, attend in-world

events (educational classes, concerts, political speeches, etc.) and they interact in real time (via textchat, IM and VoIP) with other avatars around the world. This unprecedented level of interactivity facilities consumers' engagement and often creates a *flow state* - a mental state in which the user becomes so immersed and involved in what he is doing that he loses all sense of time and space (Csikszentmihalyi 1991).

Individuals fully immersed in these environments feel a greater sense of social presence than do individuals who visit as casual tourists (Blascovich et al 2002; Schroeder 2002; Slater, Sadagic, Usoh & Schroeder 2000; Short, Williams & Christie 1976). An important part of the in-world experience that facilitates immersion is the avatar the user creates to navigate the space and interact with others. Understanding how to use this space as a marketing and advertising tool first requires an understanding of the role and influence of avatars.

Avatars: Digital Personas

Research on the use of avatars in e-tailing settings tells us that these digital characters vary in function (decorative or proactive), action (animated or motionless), representation (photograph or illustration) and classification (an image of the actual user, a typical person or an idealized image of a model or celebrity) (Wood, Solomon & Englis 2005).

Researchers agree that interacting with avatars may deliver positive benefits to online shoppers (Wood, Solomon & Englis 2005, 2008; Holzwarth, Janiszewski & Neumann 2006; Keeling, Beatty, McGoldrick and Macaulay 2004; Keeling, McGoldrick & Beatty 2006) and that the "right" avatar can help to build trust in the e-tailer (McGoldrick, Keeling & Beatty 2008) and lead to greater levels of satisfaction, confidence and intention to purchase as well as a more positive evaluation of the site's information and entertainment value (Wood et al 2008; Holzwarth et al 2006). Nevertheless,

this facilitation is selective; just as is the case with spokespeople in other advertising contexts, an inappropriate avatar can alienate customers (Keeling et al 2004; McBreen et al 2000). This assertion begs the question: Just what makes an avatar effective or appropriate?

Wood, Solomon and Englis (2005) contend that preference for avatar type varies by product category. They found that when respondents shop for appearance-related products (apparel and accessories) they prefer to interact with avatars that depict photographic, idealized images of everyday people and especially celebrities. Malter, Rosa and Garbarino (2008) reported that when users have the ability to try products (e.g. clothing) on an avatar they personally create they express greater confidence in their product evaluations. A user's ability to create an avatar in her own image (whether real or ideal) is one of the unique features of virtual worlds. This feature creates both opportunities and challenges for marketers.

In an effort to understand how avatar appearance influences consumer behavior, Yee (2007) undertook a series of studies in which he manipulated avatar appearance and measured the impact it had on subjects' behavior both in the virtual and the real world. Findings revealed that an individual's virtual appearance (avatar) can have a significant impact in both realms. More specifically, he found that those individuals assigned an attractive avatar are friendlier to virtual strangers than those who were given an unattractive avatar. Individuals assigned taller avatars are more confident and aggressive in virtual world negotiations that those with shorter avatars. Furthermore these changes in behavior are not only observed during the virtual interaction but also outside of the virtual enivonment. In ther words, the physical appearance of the avatar that an individual utilizes to interact with others can impact behavior in the virtual and the real world (Yee 2007). As a result advertisers needs to think carefully about the consumers' avatar with which they interact with in the virtual world as well as

the appearance of the avatar/s they employ to communicate with potential customers. The following section addresses these issues.

WHO IS "THERE" IN A VIRTUAL WORLD?

The Avatar as "Self" or "Other"

In the real world, an advertiser can be reasonably sure about just who is the recipient of a persuasive communication[1]. But in virtual worlds individuals are free to experiment with different identities and it is not uncommon for them to have more than one avatar. For example, some people have one avatar that they use for work-related activites and another they use to cruise nightclubs. They can alter their appearance, age, gender or even choose to take on a nonhuman form. They may experiment with personas that are far from their real self, so it can be problematic to infer the true identity of an avatar using traditional visual cues. We may think that we are speaking to a 35-year-old male engineer from Manchester, UK when in reality we are really speaking with a 52-year-old female hair stylist from Manitoba. Advertisers are often left to ponder a Zen-like question: "To whom do we market–the avatar or the "real" person?"

The answer depends largely on the virtual world in question. Reports indicate that in some youth oriented virtual worlds such as *WeeWorld* at least 50 percent of users chat with their real-life friends as their real selves. In contrast, residents in adult-based worlds such as *Second Life* are more likely to use alternative personas (Broitman & Tatar 2008). Whereas for some advertisers this may present a quandary–"how do I determine who is the person behind the persona so I can develop the appropriate messaging?"–some analysts respond that it really does not matter. Regardless of their otherworldly appearance, virtual world residents are often more "virtually" honest than they are in the real world so social desirability biases may in

fact diminish (Broitman & Tatar 2008). Residents can express their aspirational selves in a relatively risk-free and anonymous environment, so they may be provide advertisers with a unique insight into their "true" desires.

Spokesavatars

The selection of an appropriate source is central to the marketing communication process, but the choice is a complex one. Advertisers face the challenge to select a source that not only is credible and attractive, but also someone with whom the target audience can identify. *Source credibility*- the extent to which the communicator/source possesses positive characteristics influencing the degree to which the receiver will accept the message, has long been deemed a crucial variable in source selection (Ohanian 1990; Dholakia & Sternthal 1977; Hovland & Weiss 1951).

An abundance of prior research reports that physical attractiveness is a vital cue in this important process of person perception (Kahle & Homer 1985; Baker & Churchill 1977). In traditional advertising, a number of studies conclude that attractive sources are more likely to have a positive impact on the products they advocate and that an increase in the level of perceived attractiveness facilitates positive attitude change (Ohanian 1990; Kahle & Homer 1985; Joseph 1982).

Identification with the source is another mediating variable. The more in common the receiver has with the source the greater the persuasiveness of the message. Identification in this case includes factors such as attitudes, opinions, activities, background, and lifestyle (O'Mahony & Meenaghan 1998). This raises two questions: 1. "Can an avatar be credible, attractive and be represented in a way in which a consumer can identify with it? And, 2. "Can an avatar be persuasive enough to change attitudes and influence decision making?"

As an example, consider the avatars in Figure 1: Are they all equally persuasive? Can a nonhuman or character based avatar be just a persuasive as a realistic human one?\

Figure 1. Sample avatars

Spokescharacters (whether humans, drawings or animations) have been successfully used in advertising since the late 1800's. Traditionally, they were associated with low involvement products such as food items (e.g. Pillsbury Doughboy) and cleaning supplies (e.g. Mr. Clean) but today advertisers employ them to pitch high-involvement purchases such as insurance as well (e.g. The Geico Gecko). The effectiveness of characters is well documented (e.g. Shimp 2003; Fournier 1998) many researchers believe that characters improve brand recognition but also play a significant role to create a strong brand personality (Phillips 1996; Mizerski 1995).

The Disney Corporation in particular exhibits an uncanny knack for creating animated personas that are physical attractive and even (dare we say it?) sexy. Its cast of comely characters includes Jessica Rabbit (Who Framed Roger Rabbit?), Jane (Tarzan), Jasmine (Aladdin), and Ariel (The Little Mermaid). As animation technology has advanced characters have become more human in appearance to the extent that today it is sometimes difficult to determine if the character we are viewing is real or fake. Some of these animated characters are arguably more beautiful than real models. For instance, in 2001 a computer-generated character named Aki Ross from the movie *Final Fantasy* edged out dozens of real life models for the coveted position of cover girl in *Maxim*'s ''Hot 100'' supplement. More recently, an art show of portraits of the thirteen most beautiful avatars toured both the real and the virtual world. As our exposure to animated characters in a variety of settings (e.g.

entertainment, advertising, product packaging, communications etc) increases so too may our willingness to view them as appropriate sources of information.

As a facilitator of persuasion, avatar attractiveness is what Petty and Cacioppo (1986) classify as a peripheral cue in their Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM contends that those factors that facilitate persuasion vary under different levels of involvement (high versus low). In their research, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) characterize involvement as the extent to which an individual is motivated and able to process all of the details linked with making a decision or gathering information to make decision-making easier. If involvement is high, the consumer will listen carefully to and evaluate the information presented to research a decision (central route). On the other hand, if the involvement is low and he has neither the motivation nor the ability to engage in a detailed evaluation, persuasion emanates from the peripheral route. In this case, non-informational factors such as source attractiveness mediate source persuasion. Prior research provides evidence of spokescharacters' effectiveness when there is a logical fit with the advertised product (cf. Garretson & Burton 2005; Sengupta, Goodstein & Boninger 1997; Miniard et al 1991).

Avatar Match-Up and Brand Personality

Ads transmitted on broadcast media present the same image to an entire audience. In contrast, an

advertiser can modify direct or interactive messages for different purchasing contexts or even individual users. Virtual worlds have the potential to take message customization even farther because (at least in theory) they actually allow the recipient to design the source. Wood et al (2005, p.148) pose the question "Is it possible to have a match-up between source and the consumer that will yield similar or even better results than a match-up between the source and the product?" Their research revealed that in online shopping scenarios people do not always respond in a similar fashion to the same avatar. So, what if we instead match the communication source to each user's preferences?

As with other types of consumer-generated media, one of the downsides of handing the asylum over to the inmates (i.e. giving consumers control over a brand's imagery) is that the sources consumers choose may not be consistent with the brand personality a sponsor hopes to communicate. What if the user decides a message source for (say) a financial services ad should take the form of a fire-breathing gremlin wielding a bayonet? What if the female avatar who urges you to try a new fragrance looks like a cross between Carmen Electra and Paris Hilton? How do these images impact consumers' perceptions of the brand's personality that companies have potentially spend millions of dollars to create?

Aaker defines *brand personality* as "…the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (1997, p.347). In virtual worlds an avatar is the virtual DNA of a brand; "…an icon that can move, morph or otherwise operate freely as the brand's alter ego" (Neumeier 2003). Whereas numerous researchers have examined the dynamics of brand personality in offline communications platforms such as print advertisements (cf. Aitken, Leathar, O'Hagan & Squair 1987; Ang & Lim 2006), virtually no research informs us as to how and if these findings apply in the virtual world. A recent study by Wood and Solomon (2008) extended the match-up hypothesis to the realm of avatar endorsers. This perspective predicts that a source's effectiveness is mediated by the congruence between its' perceived attributes and those of the advertised product (Kamins 1990; Solomon, Ashmore & Longo 1992). This study examined how avatar-based advertising influences consumers' perception, attitude and behavior toward the brand in online promotional contexts. They found scattered support for the match-up hypothesis; this effect appears overall to be more robust for new brands that have yet to establish a firm brand personality as opposed to established brands where the existing image swamps the effect.

Avatar and Group Dynamics

For many virtual world users the primary motivation to spend time in-world is to interact with other people. Many virtual world relationships and interactions mimic those we find in the physical world. Avatars form friendships with other avatars, they discuss real life problems, they argue, they go on virtual dates; some even get married (and divorced), purchase virtual real estate and mourn the death of another without ever meeting in the real world. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that not unlike what we experience in the real world, the dynamics of social influence that are so well-documented in physical contexts–especially those related to conformity and social contagion -- transfer to virtual group relationships as well. Furthermore, just as in the real world the ability to interact with others may lead to an increase in risk-taking behavior in virtual worlds. Individuals may feel more confident to try out new experiences, engage with different products, and experiment more freely when they are in others' company.

These effects may also extend to in-world purchasing. For instance, the retailer Lands' End introduced a "Shop with a Friend" a feature that enables people in different geographic locations to shop together online (Leavitt 2004). This innovative (but woefully understudied) application highlights the potential of immersive technology
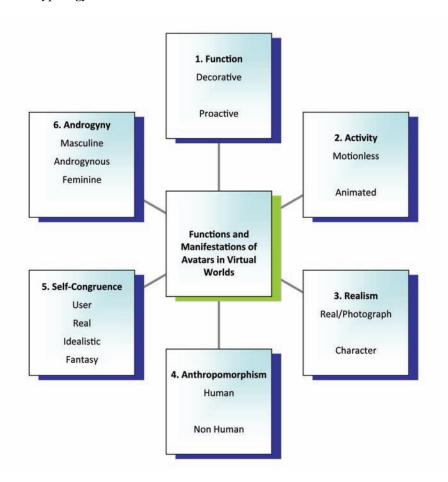
to impact on both the type and volume of purchases. If individuals have the ability to not only shop together in virtual worlds but also to try items on their avatars to see how they look, there is real potential to spur sales of not only virtual but also real life items such as apparel, fashion accessories, cosmetics, and home furnishings. Today for example, people who play The Sims can import actual pieces of furniture from IKEA into their virtual homes; the use of this sort of platform to accelerate purchases for real homes is unplowed ground.

STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF SPOKESAVATAR SELECTION

In Figure 2, we adapt Wood et al's (2005) typology of avatars for e-tailing to incorporate additional elements applicable to virtual worlds. The model highlights the choices advertisers have available when they select a virtual spokescharacter. The Figure indicates that there are six questions the advertiser should answer during this process:

1. *Function*: Is the avatar going to be merely a prop to display a product such as in traditional advertising or is it going to be proactive and interact with consumers as would a sales or customer service representative?

Figure 2. An avatar typology

2. *Activity*: How animated does the avatar need to be? While motionless avatars may be acceptable in displays and static advertisements (such as billboards), they may not be as successful in customer interactions. In addition, movement may be desirable to attract attention in a cluttered media environment or perhaps even as a way to demonstrate a product in use.

3. *Realism*: Should the avatar appear realistic (e.g. Aki Ross–*Final Fantasy*) more like a character (e.g. Betty Boop) or somewhere in between (e.g. Princess Fiona–*Shrek*). The choice of avatar may be a function of a number of factors including target market and product category. For instance, younger consumers may respond more favorably to a character whereas adults may be drawn to a more realistic avatar. Realistic avatars may also be more appropriate for apparel and cosmetics whereas characters or hybrid avatars may be more suited for toys and other forms of entertainment.

4. *Anthropomorphism*: Should the avatar resemble a human form or something else? In deciding this, advertisers need to consider the probability that consumers will be able to identify with, and respond favorably to the image presented. Similar to the previous decision the choice here is likely a function of target audience and product category, but also the virtual world in question; non-human avatars are extremely popular and common in worlds such as *Second Life*, but are nonexistent in others (e.g. There.com, *Gaia Online*).

5. *Self-congruence*: Should the avatar mirror the user's own appearance, should it depict another real/typical person, or should it take the form of an idealized image or a fantasy figure? For instance, when shopping for apparel in a virtual environment with the intention of purchasing the item for the real world an avatar created in the user's own image will provide a better indication of product fit and suitability.

6. *Androgyny*: Should the avatar resemble a stereotypical male or female image or be more androgynous? Here consideration needs to be given the brand's image and what avatar will complement it. Is the image more masculine or feminine or perhaps somewhere in between?

In their research on the use of avatar/icon buddies in instant messaging Nowak and Rauh (2008) found people use all information available including characteristics of the avatar and their screen names to reduce uncertainty and make interpersonal judgments. They found that the visual characteristics of the avatar including anthropomorphism, credibility, and androgyny traits influenced perceptions of the individual the figure represented. The authors concluded that the "…wrong avatar can make you, literally, look bad, while using a more credible, more anthropomorphic, less androgynous avatar (whether very masculine or very feminine), will make you appear more credible." (Nowak & Rauh 2008, p. 1490). Dehn & van Mulken (2000) also explored avatar anthropomorphism and caution developers on the desire to create truly anthromorphic characters. They claim that the more "human-like" the avatar characteristics, the greater the risk of failing to match customers' interaction expectations. In terms of gender Guadagno, Blascovich, Bailenson & McCall (2007) found that individuals are more persuaded when the virtual human is the same gender as they are.

Further research suggests that avatar characteristics including anthropomorphism (the degree to which the avatar looks human) and androgyny (the extent to which the avatar possesses both male and female traits) have the ability to influence social liking and perceived credibility–but the directionality of these effects is as yet unclear (Nowak 2004; Nass, Steuer, Tauber, & Reeder 1993). Whereas some researchers have found

that more anthropomorphic avatars lead to more positive attributions of credibility than those that are less anthropomorphic (Wexelblat 1998; Koda & Maes 1996), others have found the opposite (Nowak 2004; Nowak & Biocca 2003). Conflicting results can perhaps be explained by the context of the interactions explored and the specific avatars employed (Nowak & Rauh 2008).

In summary, the limited pool of empirical results to date suggests these general guidelines:

1. When selecting avatars as spokescharacters the advertiser should also consider if the brand has a strong personality in the real world. If so the available evidence suggests that the avatar should mimic this personality to the extent possible. For instance, Apple Computers has successfully developed a strong personality for their brand. With actor Justin Long as their spokesperson the brand is presented as innovative, young, and fun. To select a virtual spokescharacter polar opposite to their real world one may result in a rejection of the virtual character as it does not match the personality they associate with the brand.
2. Whereas a more anthropomorphic avatar is recommended, care should be taken not to make it too human in the event that it fails to live up to the expectations of residents. When an avatar appears truly human people expect it to mimic the behaviors and respond as a real person would.
3. Rather than just choosing an androgynous avatar it is preferable to have one that matches the gender of the resident.
4. For customer service interactions it is advisable to let residents choose the avatar with which they want to interact from a preselected group.

THE PATH FORWARD

Analysts' project that by 2015 companies will spend more money on sales and marketing online than offline (Broitman & Tatar 2008). Advertisers today are focused on how to successfully incorporate social networking into their media mix. But given that that virtual worlds are predicted to eventually replace social networking sites it is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of future advertising expenditures will be directed to these environments (Nowak & Rauh 2008) and therefore this is where advertisers should be focusing their attention.

As digital spokeschartacters continue to infiltrate virtual worlds they raise a host of very real questions that need to be answered. For instance, advertisers are often criticized for their use of spokespersons that represent idealized images of beauty. Citrics contend that such images have the potential to negatively impact consumers' self evaluations (cf. Stevens, Hill & Hanson 1994). Will the same results be found in virutal environments? Will interactions with highly attractive spokesavatars in virtual worlds negatively impact a consumer's (real world) self concept and body image? Or perhaps the opposite will be true. In a virtual environment the consumer can choose to create her avatar to reflect her real or her ideal self. In situations where the avatar reflects the ideal self perhaps interactions with highly attractive spokesavatars may have no effect on real world evaluations, or perhaps the effect will be a positive one. Furthermore, technology has evolved to where it is now possible to create virtual clones of real people. Software such as *iClone* uses a simple photograph of a person to create a 3D highly realistic avatar for virtual world use. Will consumers respond to a brand's spokesavatar the same way they respond to him on television or in a magazine? What are the legal implications of cloning a real world famous face? And how do you legally protect virtual world users from cloning your spokesavatar? Finally,

in the real world advertisers rely on *Q Scores* to determine the appeal (and potential success) of personalities and characters, but to date no such tool exists for spokesavatars. Do we need a *Q Score* for spokesavatars or will the *Q Score* for a real world celebrity be a valid indicator of their virtual success?

In the 2002 motion picture *Simone,* a disillusioned movie producer digitally creates a synethic actress, who everyone believes to be a real person. What once may have been considered fantasy or science fiction is fast become reality. In the not too distant future the face of your brand may be a virtual one.

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ENDNOTE

[1]   With the caveat that there is always some uncertainty about a receiver's identity, even in direct marketing or online campaigns when we make a leap of faith to assume that the person at the computer is actually the person the advertiser intends to target.