Cyberwork

Avatars

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We tend to associate avatars and their increasingly sophisticated and realistic graphics with computer games – but they are frequently discussed in relation to online therapy.

The Oxford Dictionary defines an avatar as 'an incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea'; which I find links well to the therapeutic process.

Taking this idea further, we can see the avatar as a modern, technological extension of narrative approaches to therapy, using imagery or analogies to substantiate a concept or make tangible an image or experience that the client is struggling to convey, or to understand through words alone. We will work creatively in this way, encouraging a client to be creative in drawing or depicting their feelings and experiences; and then interacting with, altering, destroying or taking these drawings away.

You may not realise that you are already using avatars as part of your everyday communication; for example, an image to represent yourself on social media or to convey a characteristic on an online forum. Many of us will have seen a cartoon character as someone's profile picture on Facebook or chosen to change our profile picture to an image that expresses our solidarity with world events, or a campaign.[1] Yet we probably do not think of these as avatars.

We may feel a degree of comfort with these more familiar inactive images on social media, websites and in apps, making those media more approachable, friendly, and interesting to engage with. Designing our websites, we recognise the importance of aesthetics in how we connect with our audience. An increasingly common use of avatars is 'chatbots' on websites, which 'pop up', asking if we want help. Companies as diverse as Starbucks, Mastercard, Spotify and many more are all using these to interact with their customers.[2]

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What may feel less familiar is the use of animated avatars in therapy. It can feel scary or unnecessary, or perhaps a trendy way to work, unrelated to 'real-life' therapy.

There are two well-known virtual worlds used for therapy: Second Life[3] and ProReal.[4] Second Life was originally designed as a form of online social interaction, whereas ProReal was designed specifically for therapeutic uses. A key draw of these worlds is online disinhibition. The use of avatars creates an almost 'real' way for clients and therapists to relate, explore emotions and different aspects or 'configurations of self.'[5]

In Second Life, a client may inventively choose how they are represented: whether they depict their gender and race as they are in real life, a 'human' representation, or something more abstract. They can also decide what the therapist looks like and the environment in which they meet, giving them control over the interaction in a way that real life does not allow.

In contrast, ProReal, designed specifically for therapy, made a conscious decision for the avatars to be neutral. That is, they have no gender or face, while the owner can choose the colour. This keeps the focus on the feelings and interactions, without distraction of potential bias, prejudice or simple interest in the gender, race and physical appearance of any of the people brought into the world.

These virtual worlds allow the client to express aspects of themselves that they feel uncomfortable, unsure or ashamed to express in the real world, in an environment that feels safe. Avatars can be used to express complex situations and feelings, enabling creative exploration of relationships and situations, whether past or present. The client can put themselves into another's worldview, bringing Gestalt empty chair work to life.[6] They can safely bring to the fore, and examine, configurations of self that they have kept out of sight, before doing so in real life.

Avatars can literally and figuratively bring whole new meanings and perspectives to therapy, which is exciting and thought provoking. The doors of perception are open. ●

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