Character Studies:
Bringing Presentations to Life with Avatars
By Tom Atkins

Let's face it: long presentations can be boring, and you can lose your audience in less time than it takes to click to the next slide. Corporate trainers and salespeople are now discovering that they can sustain attention --- and ensure that no one falls asleep --- by using animated characters called avatars that talk, sing, dance, gesture, tell jokes and generally liven up the proceedings.

Avatars can introduce the presenter, advance slides, demonstrate products, have interactive "conversations" with the audience, and even exhibit a personality. A character can behave in a skeptical manner, for example, raising questions about what the presenter is saying while simultaneously serving as a foil allowing the presenter to counter issues in Mutt-and-Jeff fashion.

Research is proving the value of these strategies. Studies show that avatar technology not only draws people in, but also increases their ability to retain the information included in the presentation. People seem to have confidence in these human simulacra because they can provide familiar conversational signals and feedback.

For the same reason, many companies are finding that avatars provide viewers with new ways to identify with products --- something that advertisers learned long ago when they began employing cartoon characters on TV commercials.

"Automated characters take advantage of social responses that are natural reactions to interactive media," writes Byron Reeves of Stanford University's Center for the Study of Language and Information. "They can be perceived as realistic and well-liked social partners in conversations that simulate real-world interactions."

Avatars have also proven useful in academic lectures, according to a study conducted by Clive Chandler of Staffordshire University. "Students found the lecture more enjoyable than a 'normal' lecture and felt that they were less 'talked at' and more 'involved' than in other lecturing styles," Dr. Chandler notes.

VIP Adopters
Most people were first exposed to avatars through Clippy, the animated paper clip character who used to appear automatically in Microsoft® Office® as soon as users began composing a fax or a letter or asked for help. While Clippy eventually became so annoying that Microsoft put him out to pasture, that character and others like Einstein paved the way for development of today's avatar technology.

As a result, avatars are now showing up in settings ranging from presentations and educational seminars to training sessions and sales demonstrations. Some are pricey inventions created by custom developers, while others are more affordable stock or custom characters available as add-ons to Microsoft PowerPoint® presentations.

SBC Communications recently gained attention in the *Wall Street Journal* for training its staff with avatar technology from Pulse Entertainment Inc., while computer products merchant CDW is conducting sales training using avatars developed by Accenture. Companies like McDonalds and Coca-Cola are using avatars created by Oddcast, Inc., mainly in online advertising campaigns. All of these virtual characters have been custom-built.

At United Airlines, on the other hand, the training coordinator of the Hazardous Materials Transportation Safety Unit is using a friendly-looking car salesman-type character named Chuck who comes straight from a Microsoft PowerPoint add-on called Vox Proxy® developed by Right Seat Software. Chuck and other Vox Proxy characters, ranging from other "people" to more fanciful beings like ancient-looking Noah and Waxy the Crayon, can be scripted with the help of simple wizards, perform dozens of animations, interact with the presentation, and either use automated text-to-speech or "speak" in recorded voices.

Wide Range of Uses
Avatars are infinitely adaptable, and that is another reason for their growing popularity. Consider, for example, the potential applications for sales.

Sales representatives who cannot meet with a client personally can send an interactive CD containing the sales content, and the avatar can act as a proxy for the sales rep. At a busy trade show staffed by a single salesperson, the sales rep can run a presentation with avatars demonstrating the main features of the product. The sales rep can then concentrate on answering questions and engaging in one-on-one personal interactions with sales prospects while the avatar continues to demonstrate the product to the majority of curious booth visitors.

Training is another major use, and not just for big businesses like SBC and United. Security Finance, a financial and loan services company in Spartanburg, S.C., incorporated a Vox Proxy avatar to perk up a customer service training presentation and got rave reviews from participants. A key reason for the usefulness of avatars in training environments is that they offer a quasi-human touch that is missing from typical computer-based training and thereby restore some of the appeal of more expensive instructor-led courses. Another is that the avatar "coach" delivers a more consistent message than a human trainer while simultaneously being able to combine the collective knowledge and experience of multiple trainers.

At open house meetings of municipal government bodies, where members of the local community come to hear information about new road projects or civic construction projects, engineering companies can use avatars to help make the presentations more understandable, while the professionals are available to respond to questions.

In short, avatars open a whole new world for presenters. If you want to keep your audience awake, take a page from Disney. Animated characters will be a hit every time.

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