

Do Avatars Have Stages of Development?

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I. Human Development

In Real Life (RL), human beings go through a sequence of developmental stages as they move from birth to death. While there is some disagreement regarding the exact number and timing of these stages, the most common view among developmental theorists is that there are 10 stages of the human lifespan:

Stage of Development	Time Frame
Pre-natal Development	Conception to Birth
Infancy and Toddlerhood	Birth to 2.5 years
Early Childhood	2.5 to 5
Middle Childhood	6 to 12
Adolescence	13-19
Early Adulthood	20-39
Middle Adulthood	40-59
Late Adulthood	60-79
Late-Late Adulthood	80 and beyond
Death and Dying	The Last 12 months of Life

Some individuals do not go through this progression in their lives. They may die at an early age due to an illness or tragedy and never experience the later stages of development. They may also die suddenly in old age and thus not go through a year-long process of facing death. Nevertheless, the framework outlined above reflects the expected experience of most people.

II. Human Development vs. Avatar Development

In RL, development is measured in time and propelled forward by the relentless unfolding of a biological blueprint. However, time and biology are constructs that do not apply to avatars in virtual worlds. Space can be virtualized, but not time. Nor is there an underlying biological progress that unfolds in a virtual environment.

Is it possible then to apply a developmental perspective to the lives of avatars? Perhaps. However, to construct a model of avatar development, we have to think in terms of a different force that propels the process forward. While the life of a human being is set in motion and driven forward by forces of time and biology, the life of an avatar is set in motion by curiosity and advanced by the desire to expand capacity. From this conceptual foundation, it may be possible to build a model of avatar development.

III. A Preliminary Model of Avatar Development

As a starting point, I propose that there are 6 potential stages in the life of an avatar. I say “potential” stages because not every avatar will progress through all of the stages. Their advancement will depend on changes in consciousness and expanded capacities that are a function of choice and will rather than uncontrollable forces of time and biology.

1. Pre-Digital Development
2. Newbie
3. Midbie
4. Oldbie
5. Elder
6. Death

Pre-Digital Development begins when a human driver considers or “conceives” of the possibility of entering a virtual world and creating an avatar. This idea then “gestates” within the human driver and culminates in the construction of an avatar with an official, digital date of birth.

When an avatar is born, it is considered a “Newbie” – an actual term and status in virtual worlds. To go from being a newbie to the more advanced stages of “midbie,” “oldbie,” or “elder” is based upon the acquisition of various capacities that are described below:

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	SAMPLE SKILLS
I. BASIC CAPACITIES	A. TO MODIFY APPEARANCE	Hair, eyes, skin
	B. TO MOVE	Movement controls Camera controls Keyboard keys Teleport Animations
	C. TO COMMUNICATE	Local text, IM Local voice, Personal voice
II. RESOURCES	A. INVENTORY	
	B. LAND/HOME	
	C.. FRIENDS AND GROUPS	
	D. KNOWLEDGE/PLACES	
III. CREATION SKILLS	A. BUILDING	
	B. SCRIPTING	
	C. ORGANIZATION/BUSINESS	
	D. INFLUENCE/REPUTATION	

In considering this model, it is important to keep in mind that development is measured only in the expansion of capacity. Time is irrelevant to the model, with the exception of the digital birthdate and death (see below). Thus, it is possible for avatars, with hard work, to achieve more advanced levels of development in a relatively short time (certainly relative to RL). It is also possible that avatars may stagnate at a particular level of development and not advance any further.

IV. What Next?

In advancing this model of avatar development, the tasks going forward are:

1. Conduct pilot interviews with avatars to discuss the proposed **categories and subcategories of capacities** that indicate an avatar's level of development.
2. Assuming the categories and subcategories reflect the experience of avatars, seek to identify the **specific skills within each category and sub-category** of avatar capacity.
3. Determine which capacities and skills distinguish a newbie from a midbie, or a midbie from an oldbie, etc. That is, **which capacities and skills mark the transitions between avatar stages of development.**

4. Construct an **Avatar Development Questionnaire** that can be completed by large numbers of avatars.

If these steps are completed, we will then have the ability to assess the development of avatars, to assign them to a developmental stage, and even to graphically depict their level of development with respect to each of the categories and sub-categories of capacity. We will also be able to study what factors drove the avatar forward in their virtual development (i.e., personality factors of their human driver or motives such as money of social interaction within the virtual world.) In addition, we will be able to investigate how the developmental stage of an avatar influences his/her/it's responses in other research studies (e.g., on identity, relationships, etc.)

V. The Issue of Death

What does Death mean in a virtual world? Is it simply when the human driver cancels his or her account and the avatar ceases to exist? Or is it when the human driver dies? But what if the human driver wills his or her avatar to someone else? In this case, the history of the avatar lives on past the existence of the human driver. This is a complex issue that needs to be discussed with experienced avatars – perhaps in individual meetings or as part of focus groups conducted in the virtual world.