

Virtual reality puts telepathy to the test

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Scientists at The University of Manchester have created a virtual computer world designed to test telepathic ability. The system, which immerses an individual in what looks like a life-size computer game, has been created as part of a joint project between The University's School of Computer Science and School of Psychological Sciences.

Approximately 100 participants will take part in the experiment which aims to test whether telepathy exists between individuals using the system. The project will also look at how telepathic abilities may vary depending on the relationships which exist between participants.

The test is carried out using two volunteers who could be friends, work colleagues or family. They are placed in separate rooms on different floors of the same building to eliminate any possibility of communication.

Participants enter the virtual environment by donning a head-mounted 3D display and an electronic glove which they use to navigate their way through the computer generated world.

Once inside participants view a random selection of computer-generated objects.

These include a telephone, a football and an umbrella. The person in the first room sees one object at a time, which they are asked to concentrate on and interact with.

The person in the other room is simultaneously presented with the same object plus three decoy objects. They are then asked to select the object they believe the other participant is trying to transmit to them.

The system was designed by Dr Craig Murray of the School of Psychological Sciences, and implemented by Toby Howard and Dr Fabrice Caillette, from the School of Computer Science.

Dr Toby Howard said: "This system has been designed to overcome the many pitfalls evident in previous studies which could easily be manipulated by participants to produce an effect which looks like telepathy but is not.

"By creating a virtual environment we are creating a completely objective environment which makes it impossible for participants to leave signals or even unconscious clues as to which object they have chosen."

The system has been designed to make the task as realistic as possible. In addition to selecting objects and hearing the sounds they make, participants are able to hold and move them within the virtual environment.

Project researcher David Wilde, of the School of Psychological Sciences, said:

"By using this technology we aim to provide the most objective study of telepathy to date. Our aim is not to prove or disprove its existence but to create an experimental method which stands up to scientific scrutiny."

Source: University of Manchester

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