

People conform to the norm—even if the norm is a computer

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Often enough it is human nature to conform. This tendency makes us follow the lead of computers, even if the machines give us the wrong advice. This is the finding of a study in *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* that investigates how people make judgment calls after playing role-playing video games. The research was led by Ulrich Weger of the University of Witten/Herdecke in Germany.

Real-life encounters and face-to-face contact with other people are on the decline in a world that is becoming increasingly computerized. Many routine tasks are delegated to virtual characters. People spend hours role-playing through [virtual-reality](#) video games by taking on the persona of a virtual character or avatar.

Such video games can even lead people to acquire and practice real-life skills and new viewpoints. Weger and his fellow researchers therefore explored how role-playing [video gaming](#) influences social behavior and decision-making. Participants in their study first played an immersive game for seven minutes as an avatar. Afterwards, they completed a job selection task in which they had the option of overriding incorrect choices made by a [computer](#).

It was found that role-playing as the avatar in an immersive video game, compared to merely watching others play, makes people identify with a computer. They do so to such an extent that they actually start to conform to its decisions and follow its judgment - sometimes even if it is downright wrong. This shows that people conform, even when opinions

are voiced by nonhuman agents. This is especially prevalent in ambiguous cases.

The reason for such behavior might be found in people's [tendency](#) to strive for accuracy. It leads to so-called information conformity, wherein people lose faith in their own skills and competence. They align themselves with others who are deemed to make accurate judgement calls on a matter - even if in the current case they make less accurate judgments.

The researchers believe there is a need to systematically reflect on gaming practices and on the consequences of what happens when people enter the artificiality of a [virtual world](#). This is especially important in light of the fact that video gaming is becoming more widespread, especially among young males.

"Parents, educators, and players will need to take these consequences into consideration and take appropriate countermeasures," says Weger. "For instance, at the very least it would be appropriate to reflect on what it really means to be human. We need to examine how this humanness can be educated and strengthened when it is shifted towards a more robot-like nature during virtual journeys as an avatar. The long-term consequences of such virtual reality gaming is also difficult to estimate - for instance in terms of a potential alienation from real-life encounters. By the time we know for sure what the consequences really are, it is likely going to be more difficult, perhaps impossible, to take appropriate countermeasures."

More information: Weger, U.W. et al (2014). Virtually compliant: Immersive video gaming increases conformity to false computer judgments, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, [DOI: 10.3758/s13423-014-0778-z](#)

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