

Fear of public speaking could be solved with virtual audience

March 16 2018, by Rheagan Rizio



A virtual audience could help a public speaker prepare for the real thing. Credit: Kian McKellar

Public speaking can heighten anyone's anxiety. Cicero, a program named after the famed Roman orator, aims to help people overcome that

fear—with the help of a virtual audience.

"Public speaking is threatening to many people," said Stefan Scherer, who designed the project with Mathieu Chollet at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies. "We wanted to see if we could use virtual humans to create a less threatening, more safe environment."

Cicero participants use glasses that have the effect of immersing them in the virtual world, making it as real as possible. In that world, animated avatars that look like real people are coded to react to the speaker. Feedback depends on the speaker's aptitude. If the speaker is interesting, the audience will lean forward, display facial expressions that convey engagement, nod heads, etc. If the speaker fails to engage the assembly, the audience will convey dissatisfaction by leaning back, looking disinterested, shaking their heads, etc.

Scherer, a research assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, was drawn to public speaking because of its relevance and one-sided nature.

"The [audience](#) doesn't generally speak to you so you don't have to author responses or a conversation itself," Scherer said.

Supported by funding from the National Science Foundation, the ICT team's research on Cicero began in 2013. The team has created several avatars, coded by Chollet, that have about 1,000 different reactions. The plan was to code the avatars to react to nonverbal cues, such as the presenter's facial expression, their volume or body language. Ultimately, it could be a tool that transforms a user's fear of public speaking into a non-threatening, virtual game of self-improvement.

More than a virtual reality tool

Cicero isn't quite ready for commercial purposes on the open market, but Scherer and his team anticipate a wide range of uses. Their research now has broader implications, specifically for those suffering from schizophrenia.

The project could give schizophrenics a tool that enables them to improve their social interaction: an interactive [avatar](#). The avatar allows them to practice communication and recognize social cues in real time. It is currently used in a small trial at the San Francisco VA clinic.

"The ability to communicate in social environments often greatly influences a person's career development," Scherer said. "Cicero could help individuals thrive by providing continuous, personalized training to meet the ever-changing needs of a diverse workforce."

Provided by University of Southern California

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