

Objective of the project

Contemporary computer games' research in psychology focuses mainly on negative consequences of frequent stereotypes presence in game characters. Outgroup contact (i.e. the players' contact with non-playable characters representing outgroups) is described mostly in this perspective. In contrast, theory of social psychology addresses mainly the positive consequences of outgroup contact. *Contact hypothesis* in particular states that outgroup contact results mainly in positive attitude changes towards that group. It also accentuates the complexity of the topic and specifies multiple factors that affect psychological consequences of outgroup contact.

The main goal of this project is to expand the scope of contact hypothesis onto interactions in virtual environments and thus pinpointing factors that influence the effects of outgroup contact on attitudes.

Research to be carried out in the project

Research proposed in this project is designed to verify the findings of contact hypothesis in a virtual environment. The first experiment will test if outgroup contact with game characters can positively influence attitudes toward that group, mirroring the findings about real world, face-to-face contact.

The second experiment will verify two factors' influence on the relationship between contact and attitude change: group salience (found to promote contact's positive influence on attitudes in real world interactions) and stereotypicality (found to negatively impact the relationship between contact and attitudes in computer games' research). The next four studies will each verify in turn the four situational factors contributing to optimal contact conditions, as described by the contact hypothesis. These factors are: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and contact support by authorities and norms.

All studies conducted in this project have the form of an experiment. Participants will play a computer game, created specifically to fulfil the project's needs. Experimental manipulation will be done via precise manipulation of in-game situational conditions in which contact with the game character occurs to enable pin-pointing the relationships between the variables in question.

Reasons for the choice of the research topic

Relatively few psychological aspects of outgroup contact with game characters has been researched on the basis of psychological theory. The research up to date confirms the influence such contact has on real-world attitudes, yet a systematic verification of factors contributing to the influence is lacking. This project contributes to reducing this knowledge gap by attempting to expand the scope of contact hypothesis onto virtual worlds. The results will help us better understand the relationship between the virtual worlds' content and real-world attitudes. They will contribute to our awareness of the influence commercial computer games in particular, and virtual worlds in general, exert on stereotypes and outgroup attitudes prevalent in our society.