



HAL
open science

A Perceptual Sensing System for Interactive Virtual Agents: towards Human-like Expressiveness and Reactiveness

Alberto Jovane, Pierre Raimbaud

► **To cite this version:**

Alberto Jovane, Pierre Raimbaud. A Perceptual Sensing System for Interactive Virtual Agents: towards Human-like Expressiveness and Reactiveness. Julien Pettré; Barbara Solenthaler; Rachel McDonnell; Christopher Peters. 16th Annual ACM SIGGRAPH Conference on Motion, Interaction and Games (ACM MIG 2023), Nov 2023, Rennes, France. ACM, Proceedings of Conference on Motion, Interaction and Games (MIG '23), 2023. hal-04418557

HAL Id: hal-04418557

<https://hal.science/hal-04418557>

Submitted on 26 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

A Perceptual Sensing System for Interactive Virtual Agents: towards Human-like Expressiveness and Reactiveness

Alberto Jovane

jovanea@tcd.ie
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin, Ireland

Pierre Raimbaud

pierre.raimbaud@ec-lyon.fr
Univ Lyon, Centrale Lyon, CNRS, INSA Lyon, UCBL,
LIRIS, UMR5205, ENISE
Saint-Etienne, France

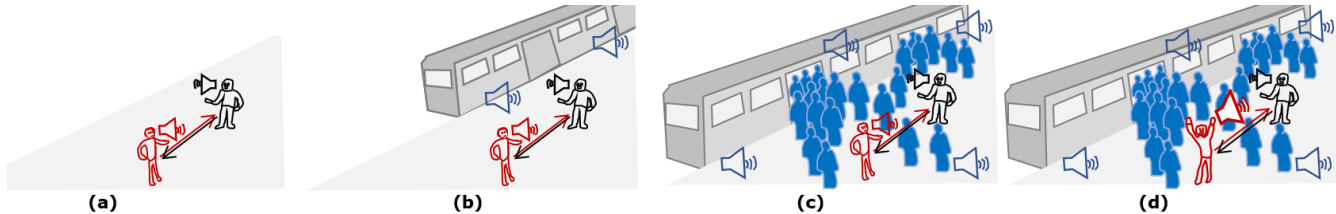


Figure 1: Representation of communication losses case study. In (a) the two agents, the red being the one controlled by our system, talk on a train platform. Then, we show the effect that the environment noises have on the communication: in (b) the noise of the moving train impacts the conversational sound perception; in (c) the presence of train passengers produce visual and sound interferences on the two agents' communication. (d) shows the result of our detection and adaption model via a visual and sound sensing capabilities system given to the controlled virtual agent: higher speech level and gesture amplitude.

ABSTRACT

Social communication interactions are paramount in human daily-life. In virtual environments, virtual agents allow for more social presence to the users, and can trigger social behaviours on them. However, the complexity of real-life situations, notably with external stimuli perturbations (noise, visual occlusions etc.) is not handled by classical interaction models. We propose here a model that includes an acoustic and visual sensing system, to compute and evaluate agent-dependent perceptions from the agents and their surroundings, before triggering expressive actions and reactions.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Computing methodologies** → **Simulation environments; Motion processing; Procedural animation.**

KEYWORDS

virtual agents, animation, perception, interaction, expressiveness

ACM Reference Format:

Alberto Jovane and Pierre Raimbaud. 2024. A Perceptual Sensing System for Interactive Virtual Agents: towards Human-like Expressiveness and Reactiveness. In *Proceedings of Conference on Motion, Interaction and Games (MIG '23)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/XXXXXXX.XXXXXX>

1 INTRODUCTION

Since several decades, computer science technologies have allowed for the creation of Virtual Environments (VE), which can be used either passively such as in 3D movies or actively such as in videogames or in Virtual Reality (VR) [15]. In both cases, VE purposes can be

very diverse, such as education, entertainment, professional training [26]. Some VEs try to replicate real world spaces and conditions, whereas others explore fantastic possibilities; either way, in most cases humans expect VEs to be populated by social beings [17, 23]. Populated VR environments usually produce a feeling of social presence to its users [11], which contributes to improve their global experience [27]. In multi-users environments, users' representations through avatars permit to achieve such "populating objective" [19]. Nonetheless, despite recent improvements of Internet and extended reality (XR) technologies [5, 28], most XR applications still focus on single-user context. The design of populated VEs remains thus highly dependent on the development of virtual human agents [21].

The design of virtual agents has significantly improved in the last years [10], which can notably be explained by the continuous enhancement of 3D models production and rendering capabilities [20]. This is easily noticeable in movies and videogames, and through the emergence of multiple artificial intelligence techniques, observable on autonomous agents, either in commercial products – e.g., voice assistants [16, 18], or state-of-the-art 3D virtual humans [3]. Virtual agent improvements are usually tagged as realism or believability enhancements: this encompasses not only the agent external appearance, but many different aspects, which must synergise to avoid context and characteristic-dependent issues like the uncanny valley effect [12]. Therefore, together with physical appearance [29], the literature showed the importance of facial expressions [9], body motions [25] or non-verbal communication cues in general [1]. Similarly, research has been conducted about the virtual agents' abilities to interact with the environment and with VR users [13, 22] through actions like posture/facial expressions changes, verbal communication, navigation, objects manipulation, physical and social behaviours, improving the virtual agents' believability [7].

Here, we focus on virtual agents designed with the aim of socially interacting between them or with VR users. In such a context, agents usually benefit from various interactions capabilities such as conversation [6] with lip synchronisation and facial expression [4, 24], gesture synthesis [2, 8], or emotion mimicry [14]. All these capability examples typically assume a two-way interaction where interactants face each other in a social context free of any disturbance for their exchange. To ensure this, videogames commonly focus the user attention on the interacting agent by for example blurring out all the surroundings, but the virtual representation of realistic situations with “perturbed-context interactions” cannot be restricted to this. The literature currently lacks from a model that would allow for the design of such situations with interactive virtual agents able to behave accordingly. In such a model, agents should be able to convey human-like expressions and reactions in accordance with their awareness of the surroundings, making it more convincing for VR users. Our paper proposes a model to enable virtual agents to behave like this by providing them with a sensing system to visually and audibly perceive their environment and thus to adapt their user-interaction behaviours in real-time.

2 A MODEL BASED ON PERCEPTUAL SENSING SYSTEM FOR INTERACTIVE AGENTS

We propose here a model for virtual agents to provide them with a human-like sensing system – visual and acoustic (so far), for more realistic expressions and reactions when interacting with other agents or VR users. In dyadic contexts, composed of one virtual agent employing our model and another interactant (agent or VR user), the model functionalities rely on a new two-way sensing system for the agent, i.e. not only with a sensorial user-feedback way, but also with a reverse-way of interpretation of signals on the controlled virtual agent involved in the interaction with the user.

In details, the system relies on the evaluation of emitted/perceived signals (sound and visual) with all the other potential interactants. The dimensionality of these signals is simplified by the computation of salient features, which are related to non-verbal communication elements. Examples of visual features are the apparent occupation of the other’s field of view, the apparent amplitude, velocity and direction of gestures and posture. Similarly, example of acoustic features are: sound intensity, interaural time difference, which allows for the computation of source perceived distance and orientation.

Relying on our sensing system, we propose a three-step interaction model (see Figure 2): 1) constant evaluation of two-ways visual and acoustic signals (from the controlled agent to one communication interactant), 2) synthesis, evaluation of the perceived signals to interpret and decide the next behaviour, and 3) triggering of the appropriate (re)actions on the agent. This requires a preliminary phase of features identifications and thresholds tuning for each reaction. These elements are case-specific, and can be extracted from data or user perception evaluations through the recreation of sample scenarios notably with simulated external interferences.

3 BENEFITS AND RELEVANT CASE STUDIES

Our system provides insights about the visual and sound cues from the own perspective of an agent but also from the other interactants. This enables more realistic behaviours such as more adapted

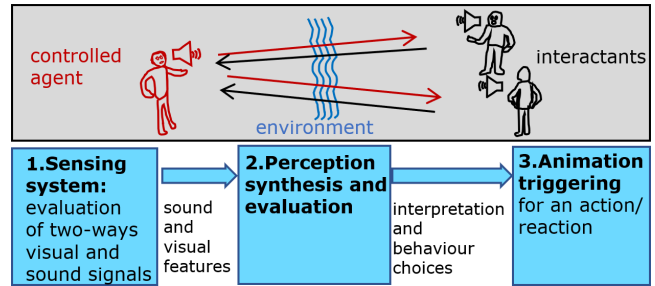


Figure 2: Top: the general communication case between the red agent (controlled by our system) and other users/agents, with exchanged signals in the VE. Bottom: our 3-step model.

reactions, or actions that would be more easily perceived. With our system, the communication state between the agents is available to them, enabling them to behave according to this knowledge.

Then, social situations with communication losses are particularly interesting for the use of our model. Indeed, classical interaction systems carefully generate voice and gestuality of the agent, but without considering if the intended messages are properly received, which is problematic in complex VE situations e.g., when VR users and agents can freely interact, and thus produce not-pretimed and not-precontextualised events. In such scenarios, the communication flow might be disturbed by external noises and visual occluders, jeopardizing the communication meaning. Agents using our system would be able to communicate accordingly to the situation since existing disturbances could be evaluated by comparing agents-perceived signals features with emitted ones, and faced by triggering appropriate actions/reactions (e.g., clarification, repetition, indications about the original communication failure).

An example of communication losses situation is: two agents are talking in a platform of a virtual train station; a train comes and starts stopping close to the red agent (see Figure 1), making a lot of noise: with our system, the black agent can perceive red agent’s difficulties to hear and thus increase its talking-volume; moreover, a crowd of agents gets out of the train, making noise and occluding agents’ mutual gaze line of sight, but our perceptually-driven agents can adapt their face position to improve their communication.

4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Our perceptual sensing system for interactive virtual agents might nonetheless suffers from some outcomes. First, it would require optimisation to avoid performance drop in case of crowded virtual environments with multiple interactions (social groups, in and out-group interactions, multiple VR users etc.). In any cases, it would be recommended to optimise the time dedicated to fully new computations of perceived acoustic and visual features, depending on the real-time likelihood for an agent to be interacting with others. Another limitation is the implementation of just two senses, whereas real humans have a more extended perception (haptics, proximity etc.). It could also be interesting to couple our system with a cognitive model, to improve our synthesis-evaluation-interpretation step, since real humans perform cognitive operations after perceiving (decision-making) and it would formalise rules/cases of

action/reaction decisions. Finally, our system must be tuned and stress-tested on multiple cases studies, particularly the ones that explained in Section 3. Our future work will focus on completing our implementation and testing it on case studies, as well as evaluations with users, either through videos or involving them in VR.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Robert, for the bagels and explaining CMYK and color spaces and, to Elliott Zimmermann, for all the conversations regarding human audio perception.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nadine Aburumman, Marco Gillies, Jamie A Ward, and Antonia F de C Hamilton. 2022. Nonverbal communication in virtual reality: Nodding as a social signal in virtual interactions. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 164 (2022), 102819.
- [2] Tenglong Ao, Qingzhe Gao, Yuke Lou, Baoquan Chen, and Libin Liu. 2022. Rhythmic gesticulator: Rhythm-aware co-speech gesture synthesis with hierarchical neural embeddings. *ACM Transactions on Graphics (TOG)* 41, 6 (2022), 1–19.
- [3] David Burden and Maggi Savin-Baden. 2019. *Virtual humans: Today and tomorrow*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, USA.
- [4] Constantinos Charalambous, Zerrin Yumak, and A Frank van der Stappen. 2019. Audio-driven emotional speech animation for interactive virtual characters. *Computer Animation and Virtual Worlds* 30, 3–4 (2019), e1892.
- [5] Ruizhi Cheng, Nan Wu, Songqing Chen, and Bo Han. 2022. Will metaverse be nextg internet? vision, hype, and reality. *IEEE Network* 36, 5 (2022), 197–204.
- [6] K. R. Chowdhary. 2020. *Natural Language Processing*. Springer India, New Delhi, 603–649. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3972-7_19
- [7] Virginie Demeure, Radoslaw Niewiadomski, and Catherine Pelachaud. 2011. How is believability of a virtual agent related to warmth, competence, personification, and embodiment? *Presence* 20, 5 (2011), 431–448.
- [8] Ylva Ferstl, Michael Neff, and Rachel McDonnell. 2021. ExpressGesture: Expressive gesture generation from speech through database matching. *Computer Animation and Virtual Worlds* 32, 3–4 (2021), e2016.
- [9] Arturo S Garcia, Patricia Fernandez-Sotos, Miguel A Vicente-Querol, Guillermo Lahera, Roberto Rodriguez-Jimenez, and Antonio Fernandez-Caballero. 2020. Design of reliable virtual human facial expressions and validation by healthy people. *Integrated Computer-Aided Engineering* 27, 3 (2020), 287–299.
- [10] David Griol, Araceli Sanchis, José Manuel Molina, and Zoraida Callejas. 2019. Developing enhanced conversational agents for social virtual worlds. *Neurocomputing* 354 (2019), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neucom.2018.09.099> Recent Advancements in Hybrid Artificial Intelligence Systems.
- [11] Manuel Guimarães, Rui Prada, Pedro A Santos, João Dias, Arnab Jhala, and Samuel Mascarenhas. 2020. The impact of virtual reality in the social presence of a virtual agent. In *Proceedings of the 20th ACM International Conference on Intelligent Virtual Agents (Virtual Event, Scotland, UK) (IVA '20)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 23, 8 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3383652.3423879>
- [12] Darragh Higgins, Donal Egan, Rebecca Fribourg, Benjamin Cowan, and Rachel McDonnell. 2021. Ascending from the valley: Can state-of-the-art photorealism avoid the uncanny?. In *ACM Symposium on Applied Perception 2021*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3474451.3476242>
- [13] Alberto Jovane, Pierre Raimbaud, Katja Zibrek, Claudio Pacchierotti, Marc Christie, Ludovic Hoyet, Anne-Hélène Olivier, and Julien Pettré. 2023. Warping character animations using visual motion features. *Computers & Graphics* 110 (2023), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cag.2022.11.008>
- [14] Thomas Kiderle, Hannes Ritschel, Kathrin Janowski, Silvan Mertes, Florian Lingens, and Elisabeth André. 2021. Socially-aware personality adaptation. In *2021 9th International Conference on Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction Workshops and Demos (ACIIW)*. IEEE, IEEEExplore, New York, USA, 1–8.
- [15] Aelee Kim, Minha Chang, Yeseul Choi, Sohyeon Jeon, and Kyoungmin Lee. 2018. The effect of immersion on emotional responses to film viewing in a virtual environment. In *2018 IEEE Conference on Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces (VR)*. IEEE, IEEEExplore, New York, USA, 601–602.
- [16] Sun Kyong Lee, Pavitra Kavya, and Sarah C Lasser. 2021. Social interactions and relationships with an intelligent virtual agent. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 150 (2021), 102608.
- [17] Divine Maloney and Guo Freeman. 2020. Falling Asleep Together: What Makes Activities in Social Virtual Reality Meaningful to Users. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (Virtual Event, Canada) (CHI PLAY '20)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 510–521. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3410404.3414266>
- [18] Mehdi Mekni. 2021. An artificial intelligence based virtual assistant using conversational agents. *Journal of Software Engineering and Applications* 14, 9 (2021), 455–473.
- [19] Brian E Mennecke, Janea L Triplett, Lesya M Hassall, and Zayira Jordan Conde. 2010. Embodied social presence theory. In *2010 43rd Hawaii international conference on system sciences*. IEEE, IEEEExplore, New York, USA, 1–10.
- [20] Péter Mileff and Judit Dudra. 2022. The past and the future of computer visualization. *Production Systems and Information Engineering* 10, 1 (2022), 15–28.
- [21] Nuria Pelechano and Jan M Allbeck. 2016. Feeling crowded yet?: crowd simulations for VR. In *2016 IEEE Virtual Humans and Crowds for Immersive Environments (VHCIE)*. IEEE, IEEEExplore, New York, USA, 17–21.
- [22] Pierre Raimbaud, Alberto Jovane, Katja Zibrek, Claudio Pacchierotti, Marc Christie, Ludovic Hoyet, Julien Pettré, and Anne-Hélène Olivier. 2023. The Stare-in-the-Crowd Effect When Navigating a Crowd in Virtual Reality. In *ACM Symposium on Applied Perception 2023 (Los Angeles, CA, USA) (SAP '23)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 4, 10 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3605495.3605796>
- [23] Valerie E Stone. 1993. Social interaction and social development in virtual environments. *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments* 2, 2 (1993), 153–161.
- [24] Guanzhong Tian, Yi Yuan, and Yong Liu. 2019. Audio2face: Generating speech/face animation from single audio with attention-based bidirectional lstm networks. In *2019 IEEE international conference on Multimedia & Expo Workshops (ICMEW)*. IEEE, IEEEExplore, New York, USA, 366–371.
- [25] H. Van Welbergen, B. J. H. Van Basten, A. Egges, Zs. M. Ruttkay, and M. H. Overmars. 2010. Real Time Animation of Virtual Humans: A Trade-off Between Naturalness and Control. *Computer Graphics Forum* 29, 8 (2010), 2530–2554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8659.2010.01822.x> arXiv:<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-8659.2010.01822.x>
- [26] Alan Wexelblat. 2014. *Virtual reality: applications and explorations*. Academic Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.
- [27] Carolin Wienrich, Nina Döllinger, Simon Kock, Kristina Schindler, and Ole Traupe. 2018. Assessing user experience in virtual reality—a comparison of different measurements. In *Design, User Experience, and Usability: Theory and Practice*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, 573–589.
- [28] Guihua Zhang, Junwei Cao, Dong Liu, and Jie Qi. 2022. Popularity of the meta-verse: Embodied social presence theory perspective. *Frontiers in psychology* 13 (2022), 997751.
- [29] Katja Zibrek, Sean Martin, and Rachel McDonnell. 2019. Is photorealism important for perception of expressive virtual humans in virtual reality? *ACM Transactions on Applied Perception (TAP)* 16, 3 (2019), 1–19.