



ATTRACTIVE sales ... an avatar from Second Life virtual world.

Avatars at your service

Fran Metcalf

WHY use a fallible mortal when women like Queen Cazalet can do the job? With her flowing locks, big blue eyes and kissable lips, the Queen is likely to attract more potential buyers than a real-life sales assistant prone to bad hair days and a few excess kilograms. Avatars are the latest evolution in customer service technology, with many large corporations now opting for attractive virtual assistants over real-life staff to liaise with their clients. While Queen Cazalet was created for Second Life virtual world, her maker Tracy Whitelaw is developing similar avatars for big insurance and finance companies to provide customer advice and information on their websites.

"Having an avatar provides more of a personal touch," says Whitelaw, chief knowledge engineer for Sydney-based company MyCyberTwin. "People feel more comfortable speaking with something that they can align with a human. They know it's software but they like it to have a human face."

Avatars may provide a more convenient service to customers but some social commentators fear the trend will exacerbate the growing problem among men and women of negative body image. The virtualisation of the female body and the issues surrounding body image will be a topic of discussion next week at the Ideas Festival, which runs from March 25-29 at South Bank. The festival is a celebration of fresh ideas and home-grown innovations and attracts brainstormers from around the country as well as the world. Whitelaw will be one of the panellists for the **Beyond Size O: Is Anything Real?** session alongside University of Queensland PhD research student Philippa Diedrichs, Queensland University of Technology justice

lecturer Dr Angela Dwyer, and writer, director and producer Phoebe Hart, who has made an autobiographical film about body image featuring herself and her sister.

The panel is being hosted by the State Government's Office For Women and will canvas questions relating to how women's bodies are represented in film and the media and whether the moral panic about the impact of media on young girls and their bodies is justified. Diedrichs says there's a large body of evidence that proves exposure to media, which depicts stereotypical body shapes and sizes, has a negative impact on men's and women's body image. She's more interested in working on ways to change that fact for the future

and says labelling airbrushed images could be one way to break down the stereotypes of what makes an attractive body.

"Another thing we can do is promote size diversity in media imagery," she says.

"The Dove advertisement (which depicts several women of different heights and shapes in their underwear) is one example of this and it's been one of the most successful in advertising history." But any changes would need to apply to online identities as well as real-life ones. Whitelaw says the stereotypical notions of what makes attractive men and women is magnified in virtual worlds where people can produce idealised images of themselves and others. "We would love it to be that virtualisation was an equaliser between the sexes and that what we see and experience online is far more interesting than what we look like, but that's not the case," Whitelaw says. "The attractive avatars get far more attention in virtual worlds."

Beyond Size O: Is Anything Real?, March 28, 6-7pm, State Library of Queensland Auditorium 2. More info at www.ideasfestival.com.au

Ideas FESTIVAL