

AVATAR MANIFESTO REDUX

Gregory Little

In this presentation, “*Avatar Manifesto Redux*”, I will bring specific trajectories of the 1999 essay “*An Avatar Manifesto*” to bear on some examples of the current state of avatar research and construction.

“The truth was that he was entirely dissatisfied with the image of his own face, yet the river, continuously changing under the continuously changing light, and promising so much to Narcissus, nurtured an inexhaustible hope in him, and hopes: the hope that he would be satisfied, and beautiful enough, as an image, a face and a being, to be able to be loved by a truly beautiful being.

But the river itself was the most beautiful of all the beings he had ever beheld.” [1]

_Delmore Schwartz, Last and Lost Poems

In 1989, after taking a test drive in “Reality Built for Two”, a virtual reality simulator built by Jaron Lanier and VPL Research, I began to speculate upon how we might appear to one another in Multi-user Virtual Environments (MUEs). The potential for choosing non-consensual, mutable, or hybrid self-representations led me to create a series of images called 'identity constructions', to design prototypes of identity creation interfaces, and to write speculative theory about the ramifications of this process. The decade hosted the emergence of the World Wide Web and Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML). Online spaces like *AlphaWorld™*, *WorldChat™*, and *WorldsAway™* combined MUDs with 3d virtual worlds. The popularity of Neil Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* brought the term avatar into public acceptance, and a plethora of cinematic efforts beginning with Disney's *Tron* (1982) including *Lawnmower Man*, *Brainstorm*, *Until the End of the World* and the television mini-series *Wild Palms* warned us of the dangers of our inevitable virtual futures. These fictions lost their momentum as the web increasingly became a space for the exchange of goods and services, for surveillance and mapping of consumption. As our enthusiasm and patience for MUEs and real-time 3D peaked mid decade, it became clear to me that the most significant property of the avatar was the freeing of personal identity from mapable relationships to consistency and social consensus. I wrote that the use of the avatar in on-line shared environments had the potential to become a revolutionary polymorphic trope as the human driver could choose to be unhampered by issues of class, race, gender, beauty, or age in how they represented themselves in MUEs. The avatar could become a potential site of resistance, a trickster figure, a viral glitch in the flow of online commerce.

In 1999 I published “*An Avatar Manifesto*”, an essay that posited a historical and theoretical definition of the avatar, contextualized the avatar among other types of representation, and articulated a set of poetic strategies for building avatars intended to resist the inevitable construction of virtual space as a new utopian shopping mall. The essay referenced Donna Haraway's “*Cyborg Manifesto*” of 1986 and used Artaud's trope, 'The Body w/o Organs' as a point of reference for the construction and articulation of representations of the self within digital, virtual space. In the current essay, “*Avatar Manifesto Redux*” I will revisit the definition of the avatar, and bring specific trajectories of the the avatar to bear on current state of avatar research and construction. I find at least four recurring variants on the avatar to be of interest: the profile, the portrait, the tool, and the double.

WHAT IS AN AVATAR?

Avatars are online, virtual constructions that both represent and act as a tool for a user in shared virtual spaces. As is widely understood, the origins of the term lie in Hindu philosophy: AVATARA-Sanskrit.; ava-'down', tarati-'he goes, passes beyond' literally, 'a descent', a conception described in the *Bhagavad gita*, 4th Teaching, 1-8 where Krishna confides: "when goodness grows weak, when evil increases, I make myself a body," [2] or, an alternative translation: "Whenever righteousness wanes and unrighteousness increases I send myself forth." The use of the term avatar to represent the self or user in the context of shared on-line Internet environments first occurs in the early 1980's with the development of LucasFilms's *Habitat* project and later came to popular consciousness with the success of the novel *Snow Crash*, where avatars are the digital representations of the inhabitants of the 'MetaVerse'. The past two decades have been marked by our pre-occupation with 'sending ourselves forth' into parallel worlds of signification.

THE PROFILE:

Today the most prevalent on-line representation of the self is the user profile, as found on social networking sites like: *LinkedIn*, *Friendster*, *MySpace*, *Twitter*, *Google Profile*, *Badoo*, *Bebo*, *Jaiku*, and *Facebook™*. User profiles are often information dense and provide tremendous involvement on the users part for tweaking and refining.

As Christine Rosen states in "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," users of social networking sites are committed to self-exposure. The impulse to collect as many 'friends' as possible on a social networking page is as much an expression of the need for status as it is the need for friendship.

"The creation and conspicuous consumption of intimate details and images of one's own and others' lives is the main activity in the online social networking world." [3]

This constant self-monitoring and profile tweaking can be understood as classic Narcissism playing out on a massive social scale. Sherry Turkle has posited in "Always-on/Always-on-you" that our current, personally/personality-presentation technologies, especially social networks and smart phones, take self-monitoring to a new level. "We try to keep up with our lives as they are presented to us by a new disciplining technology, our new "relational artifacts." [4] As most of us spend a great deal of time constructing, monitoring, updating, and editing our various profiles, it seems that the purpose of the profile is, following Turkle's logic, to literally make the self into a relational artifact; to expose the self in all its monotonous uniqueness, of conventional individuality, of distinctive sameness, and to make the self available for monitoring by others. Earlier examples of this level of self-exposure include Jennifer Ringle's lifecast "JenniCam" (1996-2003), and Eva and Franco Mattes "Life Sharing" (2000) where the artists turn their personal computers into open source servers. Profile browsing is another form of monitoring and "data mining", a one-way action and voluntary voyeurism as we passively scan another's personal archive without their lived presence or knowledge. *Facebook™* is largely not face to face, our profiles are not temporal or spatially co-present with the profile of the other.

Indeed, our profiles are the organizing principle of these sites. Our profiles are mined not only by other users by the sites themselves, forming what Edward Castronova has called the "coding authority." [5] The coding authority uses the data from this mining to construct psycho-geographic 'spaces.' In the process the sites shift from organization via metaphors of place, to organization of and navigation

through anthropomorphized data spaces structured around personality attributes: for example, likes, interests, preferences, histories, comments, friends, occupations, or avocations. Such geographies are frequently rooted in constructions that are non-consensual and often deracinated. This data-mining by the coding authority in endogenic, and non-ludic spaces like *Facebook™* contributes to a redefinition of the function of community, of portrait, and avatar. Each becomes a relational artifact, a tool for self-monitoring, a personal panopticon. As we gaze into our screens, shaping our protean selves; the river gazes back and records our every gesture.

THE TOOL:

Edward Castronova, in his “Theory of the Avatar” posits that we, or more precisely, our minds 'drive' our avatar representations in a variety of spaces, both real and virtual.

“When visiting a virtual world, one treats the avatar in that world like a vehicle of the self, a car that your mind is driving.” [6]

Castronova posits that the avatar is essentially a body that represents a mind; that the body can be real or virtual...in other words, we always occupy an avatar, whether in real life on earth, or *Second Life™*, whether a flesh and blood body or a body of pixels and light. For Castronova the driver of the avatar is the mind, the earthly body is not the seat of the mind, of sensation, breath, of life itself; but merely an avatar we can choose not to inhabit, a tool in our toolbox. Castronova writes that we make our choice of tool dependent upon what we want to accomplish in a particular world, and that we make this choice according to three vectors: x is the fixed non-physical characteristics of the agent, v is the changeable avatar attributes, and z is the changeable world attributes. Our choice is dependent upon economy and utility, on which tool or representation will work best in the chosen world according to the perimeters of the vectors xvz as defined above. The ramifications of this definition are useful and insightful, but I must disagree with his definition of the avatar. Such an idealist view of the nature of mind is useful to Castronova's theory. We can all imagine Matrix-like futures where all sensation is virtualized; the corporeal body hangs in a closet, and the brain is in a jar. This view is not tenable. Rather, I support a materialist view of the relationship between mind and body which holds that the mind is a largely physical entity and that mental states are largely derivative of physical ones. Regardless of whether we are in SL or RL the corporeal body is required to sense and process either world. We use our sense organs whether located or co-located. Despite of our level of immersion in a virtual world we are constantly “poked” by the physical expressions of the real world, of biological processes and of needs of our bodies. Although the “driver” and “vehicle” relationship is a useful description, which draws from the prefix 'cyber' (as in cybernetics), meaning 'to steer', the avatar is not the automobile. The avatar is a highly unique form because it involves an ontological pairing, a contradictory hybridity. The avatar is both the driver and the driven, the lived representation composed both of flesh and light, an 'I' that makes a body. The avatar is a 'viractual' object; the contradiction between the virtual and the real is merged at the avatar's core. Castronova weaves an argument that the proper choice of the avatar can, and I agree, have utility and initiate positive change in our lived experience. I must simply add to vector x (the fixed non-physical characteristics of the agent) that the fixed physical characteristics of the agent mold the equation. The translation of live body and lived experience into a simple rasterized image is too lossy a translation to be useful. Liveness, the temporal co-presence of the lived body transmitting data and the simultaneous expression of that data as virtual representation (where duration is the same for the real and the virtual) is a definitive property of the avatar. The avatar joins the a computed representation with the presence of a lived body transmitting data, right now.

PORTRAIT:

The 38,100,000 hits returned when googling 'avatar portrait' is testimony to the ubiquity of the association of avatars with portraits (and the popularity of Cameron's *Avatar*). The internet is filled with avatar portrait generators, galleries of avatar portraits, services to create custom avatar portraits, artists willing to paint canvases of your avatar, even those claiming the ability to represent the aura of your avatar. As I wrote in 1999:

“the population of avatars could come to include the history of portraiture in painting, photography, and sculpture, as a projection or passing through of once living individuals into the virtual, timeless space of representation, metaphor, and mimesis.” [7]

In “Life and Its Double,” [8] (2007) the art critic and curator Domenico Quaranta, while discussing the work of Eva and Franco Mattes, writes of the status of the avatar as a portrait, and seeks to define avatar portraits as a new genre within the canon of Art History. Indeed it is a very appealing construct as I also believe that the avatar is a new, definitively unique genre of portraiture. However I cannot fully endorse Quaranta's construction of its significance or meaning as outlined in his essay “Life and its Double.” A distinction must be made between the portrait of an avatar, which is not in and of itself an avatar; and the avatar defined as a portrait. Quaranta outlines multiple arguments for the avatar as a new genre of portraiture while discussing portraits of avatars. Avatar as portrait is in my estimation a far more interesting candidate for a new genre in Art History than portraits of avatars. As I shall argue, avatars expand and redefine our notions of image, representation, liveness, self, and identity.

The collapsing of the definitions of avatar and portrait is useful to characterize the avatar in extant art historical classifications, but the insistence that the Mattes portraits of the avatars exhibited in-world in “Ars Virtua” are of the “same substance as their subjects” [9] is in my view incorrect. As argued above, the avatar is more than “in-world” pixels or image, the avatar is both “in” and “out of world”, it is driven in real-time by a corporeal person in a real, single location. Philip Rosedale, the creator of *Second Life*[™], places emphasis on embodiment when he defines avatar as “the representation of your chosen embodied appearance to other people in a virtual world.” [10]

To use Castronova's description, the Mattes' portraits of avatars are no longer being driven, they are now parked or abandoned avatars. Although like avatars they are representations of agents or users, they must not be confused with avatars, they are now portraits in the traditional sense, and like all such representations disconnected in time and space from their referents, the real-world human acting in real-time from a specific single location.

Each of the ideas about avatars that I address above deny, compromise, or underplay the existence of the real-time user as a condition of the avatar. As noted above, Joseph Nechvatal writes that the paradoxical condition of a viractual object fuses the computed representation and the uncomputed corporeal, therefore to define the avatar as a viractual object “tends to contradict some central techno cliches of our time.” [11] It is the condition of duality in the avatar, the parenting of the representation of the self to a real-life user in real-time that defines the avatar's unique ontology and distinguishes it from other forms of representation.

The avatar has proven to be a far more unique construct than I realized when I wrote “A Manifesto for Avatars” twelve years ago. Unlike most forms in telematic culture, e.g. the profile, the avatar does not

lack a Benjaminian 'aura' The driven avatar is not lacking in "its presence in time and space, its unique existence in a place where it happens to be," that is to say, it has what Benjamin called "authenticity," or, an "aura." Because the nature of an avatar is viractual; its methodology is essentially performative, involving the real-time transmission, through image, text, and gesture, of the simultaneous lived experience of its driver/user/agent. Any attempt to archive an avatar must include not only a library of visual representations, but a dataset of gestures, sounds, texts, and algorithms as well as information about the corporeal uncomputed body. Data-mining by the coding authority could provide this archive, and it should be open-source. When one encounters another avatar in a MUVE space like *Second Life™*, we must do so with a full knowledge that, like a psychological double, we are being presented with an uncanny condition that is both familiar and unknown, both revealing and hidden. There is a lived but hidden presence behind the avatar's back, ontologically and spatially separate but temporally and intentionally bound. This corporeal force, like the beloved river for Narcissus, is the origin of signification. Like the psychological or literary double the origin of the expressive power of the avatar lies in paradox and in fusing of opposites, in the condition Freud called the 'uncanny.' For Freud the uncanny was a province of aesthetics.

References and Notes:

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2. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales CA: Nilgiri Press, 2001).
3. Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the new Narcissism," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society*, Number 17 (Summer 2007), (accessed August 2, 2011).
4. Sherry Turkle, "Always-on/Aways-on-you: The Tethered Self," in *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, ed. James E. Katz (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 134-135.
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