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# SIMULATED SELVES

**Erika Y. Gentry**



Graduate Thesis  
Master of Fine Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Imaging Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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# SIMULATED SELVES

**Erika Y. Gentry**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, Imaging Arts and Sciences.

Rochester Institute of Technology  
2003

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# SIMULATED SELVES

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## ABSTRACT

# SIMULATED SELVES

Erika Y. Gentry

In an increasingly virtual world, new identities that exist only in cyberspace are being created. Historically rooted, role-playing has been popular long before Shakespeare, and starting in the early 1990s, has moved into the computer. Now more than ever, it serves as a form of entertainment, escape and self-exploration to hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.

In interactive, text-based computer games that are designed to represent fantasy worlds, players become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction. On a MUD (Multi User Domain) game, places and selves are completely constructed through text. Thus, the short can be tall, the plain beautiful and the shy extroverted. "The anonymity of a MUD—one is known on the MUD only by the name of one's character or character's—gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self to play with their identity and to try out new ones. In MUDs one can be many." (Turkle, 10) *Simulted Selves* brings selected characters out of the computer and onto the printed canvas, further mixing fantasy and reality through artistic interpretation.

Standing between the boundary of real and virtual, new cultures of simulations become active. Through inhabiting the virtual and the real simultaneously, questions of how to achieve a better sense of ourselves by accessing our perhaps repressed multiple identities is evident. And the possible risk of losing reality in the process is undeniable. However complex the individual outcome, life on the screen is for many, more exciting, compelling and fulfilling than real life. By articulating the boundary between real life (RL) identities and existence on a MUD, the very concept of postmodern identity acquires new meaning.

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*“As more people spend more time in these virtual spaces, some go so far as to challenge the idea of giving any priority to real life at all.” (Turkle, 13)*

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Process, Materials and Constructed Histories

*"In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along." (Turkle, 10)*

The visual thesis work *Simulated Selves* is inspired by the research of MIT Professor Sherry Turkle and the postmodern philosophies explored in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Thus, in my discussion of the project, I will refer to her book as the predominate and underlying impetus for my own research and discovery into online virtual personas.

As an artist, I rely on visual clues which help me discern how to act, react and process ideas. While living in Rochester, New York, three thousand miles from my home town of Portland, Oregon, I became isolated and immersed in digital culture. At The Rochester Institute of Technology, a college emphasizing technology, I came to discover and identify with Turkle's studies of digital immersion and role-play. My unfolding fascination with her research inspired me to visualize the detailed text descriptions of fantasy online persona and meet the actual players. By bringing MUD characters out of cyberspace and onto digitally produced canvases, I transform the characters' textual descriptions of themselves into visual documents by way of my own interpretation. By creating "cyber portraits" of selected personalities and conducting video interviews of real-life players, I seek further understanding and exploration of the possibilities inherent to exploring our multiple and simulated selves. In addition, these images make an effort to legitimize and spatialize identities what would otherwise fail to be recorded. In the art work, I memorialize the characters by making



portraits of personalities that only exist in the temporary facility of an online chat room.

The characters themselves occupy an enormous amount of time and emotional energy from their developers and exist for weeks, months and even years. They are created and brought to life. They love, marry, struggle, disagree and overcome their own unique forms of civil disobedience. They live and die. They are legitimate extensions of their real-life owners, although offer a life of their own. They are separate yet coexisting identities living in a self-created virtual world inspired by personal experience and fantasy. Victor Burgin suggests that a definition of identity is indeed one that occupies space, time and belongs to a personal narrative. "Just as spatialization is a necessary condition of identity, so is temporalization. There is no identity—national, cultural or individual—which does not imply both a place *and* time. There is no sense of identity which does not belong to a narrative—in personal memory, and common history." (28) Similar to historically rooted portraiture, I choose to mark these postmodern personas in space and time by recording their representation using light, camera, computer and canvas.

I started *Simulated Selves* in 1998 with the final thesis show premiering at The Rochester Institute of Technology in November 1999. Over the last three years, the work has been shown in various venues in California, Kentucky and New York. The display contains seven cyber portraits represented as 20"x20" Iris prints on stretched canvas, an interactive cd-rom with video and sound installation (enclosed) and several text panels showing samples of actual role-playing logs and email communication. During my defense, I demonstrated how to log into and navigate a MUD by choosing to demonstrate one of the oldest games, "Lambda MOO" in real time for the defense audience.

I chose the material canvas for the digital prints because of its reference to portrait painting. We know that the act of recording persons in history and documentation via painting dates back hundreds of years. Thus, by using canvas as reference, I suggest that our self-fragmented cyber identities are just as valid to our memory and personal place in history than the traditionally painted



portraits of the artistically transformed, real and imaginary beings created before them. In addition, by creating a collaborated physical representation from the virtual, I seek to explore my place as visual artist and storyteller by entering into the world of cyber culture and introducing online identities to the real world.

Using motion as a key visual element created by camera exposures and digital imaging, I choose to document the characters—how they seem to be, how I see them and their psychology; not just as a two-dimensional depiction, but one that includes personality. Motion also acts as representation of multiplicity and illusion. In some portraits, outside models are chosen to represent character descriptions, while in others the authors themselves (Cleo, Diablerie) are photographed as their character. Objects, symbols and photographic landscapes were carefully made and then scanned and digitally collaged to enhance the interpretation. The text included in the imagery is text written in real time role-playing sessions by the depicted character but is not necessarily legible. Rather, it acts to enhance the anchor that makes the project a collaboration and serves as a reminder that text is integral to the portrait's existence.

Before the initial photographs of the subjects were taken, characters were solicited by sending emails to virtual communities as well as posting flyers in the RIT computer lab areas. As volunteers who met my interests contacted me, I sent them identical questionnaires. I interviewed local participants in person and the resulting edited video interviews exist on the enclosed cd-rom. I found that participants while diverse, were all tech-saavy. Additional interest in participation passed by electronic word of mouth to national and international players. Thus, participation I suspected would initially remain confined to the Rochester area spread to as far away as Germany. As a result, audio readings of questionnaires exist on the cd-rom in lieu of video interviews for some players outside of Rochester, New York.

Choosing photographic and digital imaging as my media was suitable due to each subject's transformation into a binary existence of zeros and ones. However, the role of digital imaging in image culture and its relationship to representation has been the topic of criticism. For example, in his article "will image

move us still" Kevin Robins writes,

The notion of techno-cultural revolution has been widely accepted and celebrated by cultural critics and practitioners, and such ready acceptance has tended to inhibit critical engagement with post-photography. There is a sense that photography was constrained by its inherent automatism and realism, that is to say, by its essentially passive nature that the imagination of photographers was restricted because they could aspire to be no more than the mere recorders of reality. ...the enhanced ability to process and manipulate images will give the post photographer greater 'control', while the capacity to generate (virtual) images 'real world', will offer them greater 'freedom' to the post-photographic imagination. What is supposed to be superior about the post-photographic future becomes photographic past. (29)

My portraits, I believe, are appropriately executed as the very world I am representing is one not based in reality, but in virtual reality. It is important however, to note Robins' comment regarding a lack of critical engagement as we grapple for artistic precedence and theories to discuss digital photographic media. Other critics have seen the emergence of image technology as one of a number of historical moments that identify new forms of social and cultural practice, marking the beginning of a new era of artistic exploration, much like virtual personalities themselves. I see an uncanny parallel between what Robins calls the 'death of photography' and the birth of online personas. He says:

..the death of photography, an image revolution, the birth of a postmodern visual culture: there is the sense of a clear historical trajectory of the image. The significance and implications of the 'image revolution' have already been discursively fixed and contained. The certainties of the photographic era have been deconstructed, and we are now ready, it seems, to come to terms with the fragility of ontological distinctions between imaginary and real. (32)

The histories I create on canvas may also be compared to Victor Burgin's discussion of the history of photography and new digital technologies where he highlights an analogy between the computer screen and psychic space. He states:

The history of photography is the history of forged testimonies. Digital image production invites us to view the history of photography in the light of here and now. Images are created anew in the surreal simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. They are not after nature, not after painting, not after photography. They are created in accordance with the technical and process possibilities of computability. (Hubertus v. Amelunxen, 116)

What differs from the above quote, is that in my project the subject *is* itself digital and surreal to begin with, inputted and processed using representational scanned subjects and then outputted again to tangible and real canvas. My process of creating in both the physical and digital space is, in itself, a significant tribute to the overall theme of *Simulated Selves*. The blurring of fantasy and reality and the ultimate intermingling of in real life (IRL) and virtual in character (IC) experiences are unique to each project participant.

“The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self fashion and self-create. What kinds of personae do we make? Do our real-life selves learn lessons from our virtual personae? Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real-life personality? (Turkle, 180) These questions form the core of this thesis and can be addressed by first examining a brief history of virtual personas followed by an introduction to the seven final participants of the thesis show *Simulated Selves*.



## **Chapter Two: MUD History and Mechanics**

A rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities...most recently the computer has become even more than toll and mirror: We are able to step through the looking glass. We are learning to live in virtual worlds..we may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers, but increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well (Turkle, 9)

According to the MUD enthusiast website '[www.mudconnect.com](http://www.mudconnect.com)', a MUD is defined as a multi user domain, multi user dungeon, or multi user dimension, which refers to the same thing, an environment where multiple people may be logged on and interacting with one another in a text-based virtual environment. That is, typed messages appear on the screens of other players who are logged in the same virtual "room" or space in real time. The first MUD was created by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle at Essex University, UK in 1979 using assembler coding language that ran over the university network. This MUD was a fantasy game like Dungeons and Dragons. In 1989, a graduate student named James Aspnes at Carnegie Mellon University decided to see what would happen if you took away the monsters and the magic swords and instead let people extend the virtual world—this became the basis for a MUD. People's main activity went from trying to conquer the virtual world to building it collaboratively. (Bruckman, 45)

There are now literally thousands of MUDs around the world with complex geographical webs and areas to explore. All you need to join in is a telnet program and an internet connection. Other slightly different text-based games exist, and are referred to as MUCKs, MOOs, TinyMucks, FurryMucks and so

forth. Each game usually has a different programming language associated with it and varies thematically. To keep it simple, I will discuss and refer to these games as MUDs. A text-based adventure game, the original version merely allowed a user (player) to move about in a virtual location. Today however, contemporary MUDs have multiple locations, objects and activities. In a MUD, no one knows anything about the other players, except what they are told. Even by today's standards, MUDs are considered crude compared to the more sophisticated Internet graphical games (*Quake, Duke Nuke Em*) that the computer industry continues to generate.

Why have these text-based role-playing experiences survived beyond their graphical successors such as *Quake*? According to their users, the lack of programmed visuals is key. The ability to use one's imagination to discern text (much like reading a book) is highly satisfying. For example, often when we read a book we are allowed to visualize our own backdrop. Later we may see a movie version based on a director's visual interpretation and may be disappointed (or not) when comparing it to our own visual experience of the book. Another parallel can be drawn between the survival of radio verses the onset of television. Both media offer the public unique choices in audience experience and both are successful.

On a MUD, solving puzzles, discovering and inventing new geography, falling in virtual love and exploring multiple aspects of our simulated selves also prove to be part of the online allure. One player says,

Unlike 'normal' computer gaming, if you die you're dead and you have to start over again. You can't just hit reload. It's all about escapism. At the end of a long day at the grindstone it's great to be able to take on the personas of an assassin, a wizard, a warrior or a thief and enter a fictional world of swords and sorcery. MUD games are free to play, often run from university or personal servers and are operated by enthusiasts. The majority of MUDs are constantly evolving. And since the games are text-only, it is easier to add new areas to a game and build entire new domains filled with mystical characters. Normal computer games are boxed and sold, but a MUD with an active administration team never sleeps. This isn't a case of buying a game, finishing it in a couple of days and buying another one, I've been playing the same MUD game for over a year and there's still much I don't know about it. It's still fresh because the work never stops. (Shaka)

Most MUDs are thematic, centering around universes built from scratch or inspired by those previously developed in popular culture, such as *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galactica*; and some from novels, such as the post-apocalyptic dragon themes by Anne McCaffrey. Others use geographical reference, such as the one called *Twilights Edge* played by Lyssa as her character *Lara Guest*. (Figure 1) In this game, players have taken the small beach town of Newport, Oregon and turned its map into a post-apocalyptic adventure town where vampires rule and mortals are prey. The main difference from one MUD to the next is the degree to which the world has already been created or founded. It may be an existing story adapted to the online medium or an entire universe made to completely evolve as the users participate. In the MUD world, there is a core government that helps 'referee' the game by sorting out the serious from the inappropriate, deciding who gets points and designing major plots which occur in the main theme of the MUD. In addition, these administrative members are in charge of filling in for 'NPCs' or nonplaying characters (e.g., the bartender, chauffeur). On a MUD, hundreds of people may be simultaneously logged on and interacting in the same virtual space even though players are physically located in different parts of the world.

Rooms or spaces are described in text format and most interactive spaces simulate some aspect of real life. You may choose to move left, right, fast, slow, engage in private conversation, yell, whisper, etcetera. Marriages, concerts, art shows, wars and other events all take place on a MUD with the participants also "bearing witness" to the events. Most significantly, the real self is 'paused,' allowing players to interact in a post modern context, mingling fantasy personas drawn from various times and places in history, popular culture, and influenced by real people. The opportunity to experiment with new identities and approaches to simulated situations is unmatched—all within the armchair safety of one's personal computer.

Creating a role-play character does require one to follow some specific guidelines as set by the game designer and administrative team. In most cases, users invited or accepted to become a MUD player are given a certain amount



of points to distribute among particular attributes of their character. Attributes taken into consideration may include the following: WIS (wisdom), STA (stamina), AGI (agility), DEX (dexterity), INT (intellect), CHA (charming) etcetera. Having more point allocation in the 'intellect' category would mean a character that is smarter than average, while having more in the 'agility' category would mean you could dodge danger by running from your enemy faster. When the resulting points are allocated, the physical description—or DESC as it is referred to—is created. DESCs of the seven role-players in this project are found in Chapter 3.

Moving around and interacting in a MUD takes practice, especially when learning the special navigational commands and lingo. “Newbie” players often need the help of a seasoned character or “Wizards” to assist them for the first time. In addition, many MUDs have their own websites with a historical background of the universe or location, founders, rules and instructions for the programming language used—all of which should be carefully studied to show respect for other gamers. The following tips for newbies comes from the url <http://www.lysator.liu.se/mud/faq>:

A 'newbie' is someone who has only recently begun to participate in some kind of activity. You're a clueless newbie until you've got the hang of MUDding, basically. Most MUDs have a core of commands which players use to move around and interact with each other. For instance, there are commands for interacting with other players, like 'say', and other commands like 'look', 'go', etc. In TinyMUD, there are commands like 'home' (which always places you in your home—remember that), ':' (pose—try it), etc., which allow you to do stuff inside the database. Commands prefixed by a @ (generally) allow you to change the database! Commands like @describe, @create, @name, @dig and @link allow you to expand the universe, change it, or even, perhaps, @destroy it, under certain conditions. Whatever the case, these building commands are beyond the scope of these examples. Most MUDs have documentation online, so be sure to research your MUD online before you begin.

Also, as researched by Turkle, the opportunity to exist virtually opens up a forum for role-playing situations before moving forward with them in real life as a kind of “identity workshop.” For example, often it is recommended that role-

playing IRL with a counselor or friend before an important interaction such as a confrontation or job interview in TRW (the real world) is helpful to prepare for an actual interaction. In MUDs, role-playing in virtual situations is less direct than physical role-playing, making the means to the end less clear. However, the networked computer does serve as a forum for acting out larger social issues and cultural themes, such as love, sex, murder, power and also escape from the same issues IRL. In addition, the very kinds of community created in MUDs, while fragmented, could become co-dependent ways of existing IRL.

MUDs present a far more complicated case. In a certain sense, they don't have to end. Their boundaries are more fuzzy; the routine of playing them becomes part of the players' real lives. The virtual reality becomes not so much an alternative as a parallel life. Indeed, dedicated players who work with the computer all day describe how they temporarily put their characters to "sleep", remain logged on to the game, pursue other activities, and periodically return to the game space. (Turkle, website)

In the next chapter, video interview transcripts from the seven players who collaborated in the project illustrate how virtual personas directly affect their lives both inside and outside of the machine.

## **Chapter Three: The Players**

Maureen as **Diablerie**

Jim as **Eliara Starrunner**

Jen as **Kylariss Sslesthli**

Kkatman as **Friday**

Lyssa as **Lara Guest**

Shannon as **Shii Oeohfppe**

Sara as **Cleo**

*“Cyberspace is socially constructed as the postmodern paradise, and all our hopes for virtuality express our desire to escape the limitations of our bodies and the ills of our society.” (Porter, 122)*



## Maureen is Diablerie



*Diablerie, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*

### **Quotes from the video interview with Maureen, 30 years old, Rochester New York:**

"She was from France around the middle ages as the Renaissance ages were coming about, she is an artist and very influenced by a period of time that I spent in France. I chose this role-play because it was very dramatic and allowed me to exercise that dramatic muscle. I think I chose her qualities because it gave me control over something. While I was heaviest into the role-play I didn't have control over a lot of things in my real life."

"There was a point when it was therapeutic for me and I was getting something out of it personally. There was also a point where it became tedious. I can remember sitting in front of my computer night after night wondering why I was doing this. I think it had to do with the people I was interacting with. You grow attached to them, even though I never met them and never saw their face or even a their picture...but there was this personality you were interacting with all night or all day or whatever it happened to be. You became attached to the other characters and the one that you were playing. Sometimes it did become very tempting to divorce reality and it became pretty all consuming."

"In the peak of my experience, little things like having to get up and go to the bathroom became a real bother. My butt would become completely numb and I finally realized I would have to get up or become completely paralyzed and even that was a nuisance. I would become very antsy if the phone or door bell rang."

"It's very weird to meet someone in real life that you have role played with. Some of these people I had been role-playing with for over a year, and I think that they were as wigged out about me as I was about them when we met. Little things like how they would laugh, tilt their head, their teeth, little things that never made a difference to me online bothered me in real life. One person that I met smelled, really, really bad and that's something that you would never know via bits and bytes but he was extremely dirty."

"Now I tend to go and write myself an online journal for just me, I no longer feel the need to share it with a whole world of people that I don't really know."

**Description (DESC):** Diablerie is a vampire and a member of the Toreador clan, the "artists"... long flowing black hair, milky white skin, long fingers, symbolic dress and jewelry. She is wise, cautious, mature, and a seductress from time to time, but more often than not, just using the other for information, status or alliance. She was an actress prior to being embraced, and uses her acting skills to her advantage when dealing with other kindred and with mortals. She is reluctant to reveal much about herself, and is therefore considered rather mysterious by those surrounding her. She travels at almost light speed.



*Maureen, Video Interview*

## Jim is Eliara Starrunner



*Eliara Starrunner, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*



*Jim, Video Interview*

**Description (DESC):** Armored wizard - Schools of Magic - Abjuration, Alchemy, Alteration, Artifice, Conjunction/Summoning, Dimension, Elemental Air, Elemental Earth, Elemental Fire, Elemental Water, Enchantment/Charm, Force, Geometry, Greater Divination, Illusion/Phantasm, Invocation/Evocation, Mentalist, Necromancy, Shadow, Song Bladesong Spell Casting - May Cast spells one handed using the other hand to parry this is only for frontal attacks.

Her skin is fair even for an elf, her wavy brown hair cascades down to about her waist. She generally does not tie her hair, unless she knows there is going to be trouble. Though with her graceful skill even when it is down it is not in her way. She walks with as much ease as any well brought up elf would. Her muscles are lean and toned, and her body slender and sleek. Her breasts are of average size though she almost always wears armor that keeps them restricted and appear slightly smaller than they really are.

### **Quotes from a video interview with Jim, 23years old, Rochester NY :**

"She's not afraid if she walks into a bar and sees a guy she likes to go over and hit on him, grab his butt, whatever..she's a lot like your stereotypical biker, she has an attitude problem, she tends to be xenophobic, the nicest way to put it is she tends to be a bit of a bitch."

"The reason why I went to a female character is that I prefer them to males. When I looked at a female character I saw a broad spectrum that I could do just about anything with. You know, I could make a timid female who is very shy and reserved or I could make a very brash female or get any range within there, so I played a lot of female characters. And I've played a broad range, I've played a prostitute, I've played a character who is very shy."

"If I'm role-playing online I don't find out anything personal about them (the other characters), I don't want to know. A lot of the bad press comes from people who can't separate the fantasy and the reality and they become their character. I do understand that perfectly because I play elvan characters and in my mind there is a part of me that says, "yes, I am an Elf". And I've told people "I am an Elf". And people think that I'm crazy but what they don't understand is that I mean I have the Elvan spirit in me. It's my way of expressing myself. An artist paints, I role-play."



## Jen is Kylariss Sslesthli



*Kylariss Sslesthli, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*

**Description (DESC):** (Star Wars Universe: Sluissi Species) Kylariss is in her early 20s. Her snakelike figure has an odd delicacy to its form. The upper body is humanoid, the skin an olive green color. From the waist down, the body becomes serpentine, tapering out to a single scaled tail. Kylariss is a recently appointed senator from Sluis Van but grew up in the city of Ssenessa. She's very shy and quiet. A tech-wizard, to be exact--and a perfectionist who wants to feel useful but always downplays her skills. When something happens and no one else around seems to be taking charge however, a leader will emerge, issuing quiet orders without seeming to realize it. Very compassionate, she would help her enemies as well as her friends, a pacifist, she prefers to talk then fight.

When hurt, both physically and emotionally, she curls in on herself, becoming withdrawn and even more workaholic than normal. While most people don't catch it, she has a very very subtle sense of humor..

### **Quotes from the text questionnaire from Jen, 19 years old, Sparkhill New York:**

"Kylariss is a recently appointed senator from Sluissi Van. Although her snakelike features make her appear as having a delicate form, she is far from feeble. Her mind is sharp and she can't be said to be out of shape. She rarely talks about her past and is very shy and quiet. However, her stint in the military in a small area known as the Minos Cluster has her listed in the banks of the New Republic as a war hero."

"She was hatched in a small rural community on Sluis Van. She was an ordinary, though drab looking, sluisi. Despite her plain coloring of olive, her parents were quite happy with their first offspring. She grew up in the small city of Ssenessa, attended a regular school, doing most of the things that young sluisi do. Despite her coloring, Kylariss was always a popular young sluisi during her formative years, bright and with a remarkably lively sense of humor. However, one thing her schooling turned up is that Kylariss was remarkably bad in the technician field. Why, she was no better than a human technician by the time she was ten! It was quite an embarrassment for the entire family, and it started the downfall of Kylariss from an outgoing young sluisi, to one who was rather withdrawn and a perfectionist."



*Jen*



## Kkatman is Friday



*Friday, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*

**Description (DESC):** Friday is a female character. An anthropomorphic feline who embodies my more passionate side. (Passionate not being restricted to a sexual connotation, but meaning strong emotion of all sorts: anger, love, rage, sorrow...etc. As opposed to apathy or ennui.) She also is a vent for aspects of my personality repressed in Real Life, including but not limited to sexual practices.

### **Quotes from Kkatman, 27 year old male, location unknown :**

I role-play and chat on muds. I also engage occasionally in TinySex (role-playing sexual activity on a mud/muck). FurryMUCK, the world Friday was originally evolved in, started as a role-playing and socializing muck, but has slowly degenerated into a TinySex muck over the last eight years. I still occasionally activate Friday on that muck, often after weeks or months of inactivity, and when I do so, usually for the above.



*Kkatman*

I am a college graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, currently working as a dishwasher in the town I graduated in until I have enough money to try to survive on my art for a while. My hobbies include reading, writing short fiction (both alone and in group writing projects), artwork and role-playing (both online and offline). I am normally be an easygoing individual, but I suffer from a stress disorder. I use fantasy submersion as a method of reducing stress.

*\*\*Kkatman sent one email responding to my virtual questionnaire, but never responded to further emails.*

## Lyssa is Lara Guest



Lara Guest, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas

**Description (DESC):** British looking, red hair and blue eyes with porcelain skin. She's 22 years old and just out of art school. She's just had her second professional showing. Of course, the showing was premiered at night. That's the appropriate time for things like that, not to mention the fact that vampires, like her, can't be around in the daytime.

### Quotes from a video interview with Lyssa, 32 years old, Rochester, New York:

"I like creating a character from scratch and watching them grow up like a person. It's interesting because you're not the only one controlling their development and sometimes they grow in ways you don't expect them to grow...."

"Lara is my favorite physically, she's not gorgeous but she's kind of pretty with a ready smile, she's definitely the one I would want to look like the most in RL".

"I'm on the computer a lot, that's how I relax...most people watch tv, we sit and watch tv while we're on line, so I'm on about 4hrs a night during the week trying to juggle four different MUSHES. Um, I know some people that can role-play up to 15 characters at a time all at once, and their just flipping between worlds, because you can have more than one connection at once."



Lyssa

"I've been on some MUSHES where there's 125 people signed on at once, sometimes only 10 people are on....When you're online you can be anybody you want to be, you can look anyway you want to look, that's why a lot of characters looks are exaggerated. You'll log on and everybody in the room is gorgeous, it's not realworld, nobody can be that gorgeous all the time."

"It's different when you're meeting face to face because now they're seeing the real you. Up until you meet someone you're visualizing them as their character so sometimes it's kind of jarring to meet someone when they're not their character...especially in transgender characters it's really weird because you're used to thinking of this person as a woman and they're a man. But, what's strange is they put their mannerisms in their character so instead of seeing a little blonde woman making a gesture, you're seeing a 7 foot man doing it. It's weird."

"I know people better online than I do face to face in some cases, I think it's becoming a real part of our lives and a part of lives that we need to get used to because it's going to be more common that we socialize outside of our own local spheres. I have friends in Australia, Britain, Japan, I would not have met these friends if it weren't for this."



## Shannon is Shii



*Shii, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*

**Description (DESC):** Pacifist Medical Doctor in the Star Wars Universe who's personal hobby is using explosives to turn buildings into artistic designs. She's got skin of a light orchid color with darker purple hair. Her 'attributes' are nothing remarkable. Waist and Hips are close to the same size so she definitely doesn't have the 'idealistic' hourglass shape. She abhors violence and finds that it usually creates more problems than it solves. She's a member of the New Republic Military, but only so that she can use her medical skills to help the greatest number of people.

**Quotes from a video interview with Shannon, 26 years old, Rochester NY :**

"Shii is a set of traits where I thought his would be an interesting set of traits to play.."

"If I've spent 6 hrs online one Saturday in a really intense role-playing environment, it's sometimes hard to get up and walk away and go 'ok I'm me again', othertimes it's fine. I like doing the character development in role-playing, and it's a bigger challenge to role-play someone of the opposite gender. If you do enough observing of people to bring that out in the character it can help you understand maybe what's going on with the opposite gender. You know, there are all these books 'Men are from Mars and women are from Venus' to help men and women understand one another and I think one of the best ways to do that is to try being the other for a while."

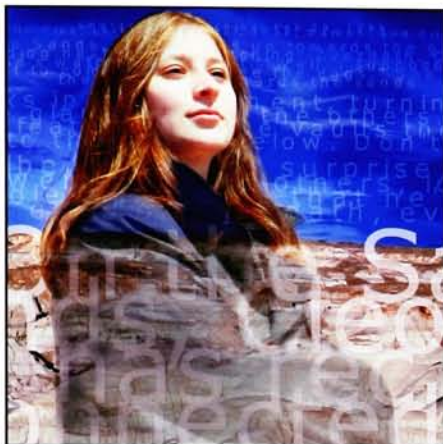


*Shannon*

"Men are Pigs (laugh) we really are. When I'm her, I can walk into a room she becomes a focus of attention, so suddenly anybody who's looking for a romantic interest who doesn't realize I'm a male in real life is like 'heeeeyyy'. The lines that men as a whole tend to use, that you don't think about except when you're in the other situation you realize, 'I've said that before, I didn't realize that sounded so corny'"...It lets you explore areas that you don't get to in RL, who hasn't ever dreamed of being the evil conqueror of the world who has everything at his beck and call?"

"At one point it wasn't so easy, I flunked out of college because I got up at noon and went to the computer lab and sat down at the computer and went through 8-10 role-playing environments and stayed until there until 2 or 3am when I was supposed to be at class or studying. I tried to be good about going to class but somewhere along the line it became 'it's just a Spanish class, already speak it, I'm not going to miss anything I'm not going to go now. Or, I really don't want to go to math class, I hate math and I just suddenly I woke up and realized that I'd been in the computer lab 12hrs a day for the last three months. What was happening online meant more to me than what was happening in the real world because the real world sucks. You know world hunger and all that pc stuff and you really do realize hey, the world is not always a nice place. Whereas in the box (online) it can be."

## Sara is Cleo



*Cleo, 20x20" Iris Print on Canvas*

### **Description (DESC):** (based on a cat)

Feline's grace has smoothed adolescent awkwardness, limbs no longer out of control. The prizes, the pangs of growing up, evidenced by wild rebellion -- especially that tawny mane of curls surrounding her face. No smoothing out /these/ locks, golden-green eyes peek out slyly, all-seeing orbs of hazel and amber. Pale skin gives rise to her Northern heritage, though delicate features mask her muscle beneath. Passionate when she wants to be, a cat's indifference nonetheless makes its way to the surface when needed.

Quotes from a video interview with Sara, 20 years old, Rochester NY :

"I was thinking of a cat when I created her, Cleo as in Cleopatra. The deal is that all of us are humans that have fled earth because there was an inner planetary war and earth was so ravaged by pollution and technology and everything so our remaining colonists wanted to get to a clean environment. Our goal was to keep the level of technology low on the planet Shards."

"A lot of times I'll be logged into multiple games at once. Cleo changed a lot over the year and a half that I've been playing her. She's a lesbian and that was an experiment for me. She is into sex, and I know that the other lesbian characters that she interacts with, at least one I know is played by a guy."



*Sara*

"I don't think it's because I don't like who I am so I'm going to be this person, it's like theatre you have a part but you make it up yourself. It's always fun to see how they interact with people."

"It's a way to express yourself. You're expressing yourself in words, it's like a textual theatre almost just because you're taking on a persona. You don't know how it's going to end up. You have an idea when you start but it can end as something totally different, it's full of surprises and you never know what's next."

"I think it almost helps because if you can get comfortable with somebody online and then apply that to your real life interactions you can be a lot more open minded. In rl people are quick to judge a lot of times but with meeting online you can't get those same sort of physical impressions."

"People can get sucked into it and be on the computer for hours and not deal with anything. I did that for a while and this year part of the reason I haven't been on as much is because I've been going out and doing stuff with real friends. I miss my online friends but it's a better balance. If you have a problem there's only so much you can do talking about it online verses in real life because at least then you can get a hug or whatever."



## Chapter Four: Real Life Lessons

The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (Murray, 98)

One of the most alluring parts of the online experience is interacting in a public space that remains private and intimate. Communicating, via text from the safety of a home PC can give us uninhibited access to emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are less accessible in real life. MUDers may find it easy to project their deepest desires and fears onto people they have only encountered as words on a screen. Each of the seven players I interviewed (and others in my research stage) described their own types of immersive experiences. And each, whether positive or negative, created virtual situations that ultimately needed attention in the real world.

“Kkatman” emailed me when he found out about my project from a fellow MUDder. I do not know his location as he failed to respond after I emailed to investigate further our initial email contact. He describes himself as shy and suffers from a stress disorder, thus inhibiting his own physical interaction with others. He plays an anthropomorphic character who is part cat and part female human, named Friday. Friday occupies several different MUDs where she enjoys engaging in TinySex. TinySex is sexual role-playing on a MUD that involves cybersex and cybermasturbation. “Tinysex consists of two or more players typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements and emotional reactions for their characters. In cyberspace, this activity is not only common, but for many people, is the centerpiece of their online experience..some people

have sex as non human characters, for example, as animals on “FurryMUDs.” (Turkle, 224) These are MUDs dedicated to characters who are anthropomorphic.

Kkatman has been role-playing for eight years in “furry worlds” in order to satisfy his lack of sexual and social activity in real life. He feels that being able to act on social and sexual impulses in a role-playing environment is important and satisfying and he would not otherwise do it IRL because of his shyness and anxiety disorder. Exploring our “alternative” or “dark” side in a safe and nonthreatening environment such as the virtual world has been one of the most popular lures to its participants. According to psychologist Carl Jung, the concept of exploring our “other selves” should not be viewed as deviant but perhaps healthful. As a matter of fact, Jung “encouraged the individual to become acquainted with a whole range of personae and to understand them as manifestations of universal archetypes, such as innocent virgins, mothers and crones, eternal youths and old men. Jung believed that for each of us, it is potentially most liberating to become acquainted with our dark side, as well as the other-gendered self called anima in men and animus in women.” (Turkle, 259)

When Friday is on screen, she is with several other FurryMUD characters in a room at one time, so Kkatman’s experience is more interactive and more satisfying than passively viewing a magazine, watching a movie or other forms of solo Saturday night entertainment. Janet Murray, author of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, comments on the passive versus the interactive in her amusement park model.

In environments based on the amusement park model, the story and the visit can be tightly meshed. Objects can perform for us as we pass in front of them, step off the moving platform, the visit will have to be short and intense to hold our attention...A more exploratory visit, on the other hand, can feel very lonely without other characters to engage with or a drama that unfolds in real time. Because we experience ourselves as present in these immersive worlds, as if we are on the stage rather than in the audience, we want to do more than merely travel through them. (Murray, 109)



Melyssa, or *Lyssa*, is a woman in her early thirties, attractive but obese by societal standards. During the day, she works at various temporary jobs as an administrative assistant. and in the evenings for four to six hours a night she juggles multiple personalities on multiple MUDs. In her spare time, she loves to read and write fiction and claims that MUDs help her to develop her impromptu writing skills. Lyssa is currently developing more than five characters in different MUDs and she enjoys the physical escapism that the role-playing games offer. Lyssa says "I've been on some MUDs where there's 125 people signed on at once, sometimes only 10 people are on...When you're online you can be anybody you want to be, you can look anyway you want to look, that's why a lot of characters are really, really exaggerated online. You'll log on and everybody in the room is gorgeous, it's not real world, nobody can be that gorgeous all the time." (Lyssa) She also adds that "I know some people who can role-play up to 15 characters at a time all at once, and they're just flipping between worlds."

Lyssa's character, Laura (Chapter 3) is her favorite physically. "She's about 5' tall, around 110lbs, she's got red hair and blue eyes and a ready smile, and she's not gorgeous but she's kind of pretty, she's definitely the one I would want to look like the most" One of the strangest things Lyssa finds about meeting friends in role-playing environments is meeting them in real life, especially trans-gender characters. Lyssa met her fiance, Shannon (Shii) online and things quickly got serious. Lyssa claims that "I know at least four couples who have met and have gotten married and who are happily married. I think it's becoming a real part of our lives and a part of our lives that people should get used to, that we socialize outside of our own local spheres and I would have never met these friends if it weren't for this."

Research has suggested that using virtual systems such as the telephone and computer as a means of presence contains a microcosm of fascinating interplays between communication technology, the human body, and the uses of pleasure. (Stone, 17) As technology has evolved so has our relationship of the body in it. And, due to the amount of time involved exploring personas in the machine, we can safely say that new "selves" are being created. Stone continues to say that "these technologies, discourse networks, and social forma-

tions continue the trend toward increasing awareness of a sense of self; toward increasing physical isolation of individuals of Western and Western-influenced societies; and toward displacement of shared physical space, both public and private, by textuality and prosthetic communication....”(20)

Isolation is a common outcome of spending too much time online in a MUD. Conversely, making a shift to an alternate persona is inviting, especially when a player’s real world experiences are less than satisfactory. In short, escapism is easy but when unbalanced with real-world responsibilities, living life on the screen can have consequences. Shannon, who plays *Shii* in a Star Wars based MUD, is one example:

Shannon is now married to Lyssa. They met on the MUD based on the Science Fiction television show, *Battlestar Galactica* and fell in love online. Shannon moved to Rochester from Oklahoma to be with her, and they still continue to be avid role-players. Both consider themselves to have healthy and balanced lives and both spend a minimum of four hours a night after work in a MUD, side by side at their computer desks. For them, role-playing is the ultimate entertainment and escape. Shannon plays several different characters on various MUDs but is represented here by his transgender Star Wars persona, Shii. Shii is a doctor with orchid skin as well as a demolitions expert. Shii is also a pacifist who plants charges in strategic locations and blows up abandoned buildings to make abstract art. Shannon says that role-playing was not always a healthful experience and that sometime—even now—it is difficult to transfer between virtual and real worlds.

“If I’ve spent six hours one Saturday online in a really intense role-play environment where I’ve been thinking in character, it’s sometimes hard to get up and walk away and say, ‘ok I’m me again’. (Shannon) Much of what Shannon enjoys about role-playing is developing a character from scratch and watching it “grow like a real person” because outside influences of the game have a lot to do with how the character develops. Due to online interactions and events, virtual lives are not ultimately 100 percent controllable by the role-player. Shannon also enjoys the challenges of playing multiple transgender characters:



If you observe people of the opposite sex enough to understand how to play a female character, then it will help you understand perhaps what's going on with the opposite gender. You know there are all these books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* to help men and women understand each other. I think one of the best ways to do that is to try being the 'other' for a while. Men are pigs—we really are. When I'm with her (Shii), I can walk into a room and if there's a new male player online she becomes the focus of attention. So now suddenly anybody who is looking for a potential romantic interest who doesn't realize that I am male in real life is suddenly like "hehhh." The lines that men as a whole tend to use that you never think about from this angle but when you're suddenly in the other situation, you realize I've said that before, I didn't realize that sounded so corny. (Shannon)

Shannon is excited by the potential that role-playing brings to exploring multiple personas. In his past however, Shannon has suffered consequences of spending too much time on a MUD:

At one point, it wasn't so easy I flunked out of college because I got up at noon, went to the computer lab, logged onto three to eight different role-playing environments and stayed there until two or three in the morning when I was supposed to be in class. Then I started the same schedule the next day and forward... Somewhere along the line it became "it's just a spanish class, I already speak fairly fluent spanish, I'm not going to miss anything, I'm not going to go." And just suddenly I woke up and realized that I'd been in a computer lab twelve hours a day straight for the last three months.

What was happening online meant more to me than was happening in the real world, because, the real world sucks. We realize that the world is not always a nice place whereas if you're in the box it can be if you want it to be. I suppose in some ways it's much like an addiction to a drug must be. You think you're in control, you think you're handling it but you're not. You have to be careful and stay aware of what you're doing. As we've seen on the news there are people who take advantage of it, but if you approach it with moderation and caution like you approach any new thing where you're meeting people for the first time, it can be a very safe place. (Shannon)

Turkle agrees:

Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth. Having literally written our online personas into existence, we are in a position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices.(263)

Interpretations of deception and its relationship to real-life emotions is of interest in the role-play environment. Boundaries are further blurred by some who expect that transgenering is part of the game, while others feel deceived once they discover that their RL online partners are not the same gender as their character. In addition, when different genders start playing the 'other,' their interpretations of the other sex reveals their personal fantasies and stereotyped belief systems. Jim is a man in his mid-twenties with several role-playing personas. One of his favorites, Eliarra Starrunner, is a voluptuous Elvan woman with magical powers. As an ambidextrous 'bladesinger,' Eliarra is full of physical sexual energy. "She's not afraid to go into a bar and if she sees a guy she likes, hit on him, grab his butt...she's a lot like your stereotypical biker; she has an attitude problem, she tends to be xenophobic, the nicest way to put it is that she tends to be a bit of a bitch." (Jim) I asked Jim why he preferred female characters, and he responded: "When I look at female characters I see a broad spectrum that I can do just about anything with, I can make a timid shy female or I can make very brash female or any range within there. I've played the entire range, I've played a prostitute and others who are very shy...I've been in female relationships and I try to portray females the best I can...when I'm role-playing online I don't want to know anything personal about any of the other characters."

While virtually playing the 'other gender' provides exposure to what gender role-playing is like, the virtual experience is obviously far different from the



physical. Turkle has also interviewed transgender characters who claim that it has enabled them a greater understanding of what it's like to be the opposite sex. However, what about real-life worries of physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy or infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much make up to wear to a job interview and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps? (238) While experiencing 'otherness' from the nonphysical plane does not give us total immersion into other physical limitations and nuances it can still uphold fantasy. Jim currently plays more than six female and male characters, plus several NPC (nonplayer characters—like the bartender). He believes that online role-playing has gotten bad press due to those people who have trouble separating fantasy from reality. "You get these people who think they are their characters, I do understand that because I feel like an elf—what I consider the elvan spirit is embodied within me." (Jim)

Deception and accountability for one's virtual actions are real-life issues that surface from living life on the screen. There are implications of choosing gender, age, race and physical attributes unhindered by true physical embodiment. While consenting adults engage in tinysex, the way that point systems and power are allocated in the game can lead to virtual sex crimes and real-life misrepresentations. During my research, a woman named Holly contacted me with her story. (Figure 2) Holly met a man on a MUD (let's call him Joe) and started an online relationship with him in and out of character (IC and OC). After several weeks, Joe had convinced Holly that he was in love with her and asked her to fly to North Carolina to see him. According to Holly, the weekend was a disaster as he sexually accosted her and then abandoned her for two days, claiming a heavy work schedule. After returning to her home, she discovered that not only did he already have a girlfriend, but that he had had several woman come from various parts of the U.S. to visit him. As Holly put it, she felt "played."

As we saw with Shannon and Melyssa, not all real-life encounters turn sour. However, Holly is not alone in experiencing a shift from the satisfying fantasy of the virtual to the disappointing physical results of meeting someone in real life. Turkle states "when people become intimate, they are particularly vul-

nerable, it is easy to get hurt in online relationships. But since the rules of conduct are unclear, it is also easy to believe that one does not have the right to feel wounded...for what can we hold ourselves accountable?" (228)

Maureen is a single mother who lives in a small town, isolated from the large city where she is accustomed to socializing and feeding her artistic interests. She found that role-playing filled the creative void that was lacking in her real life. Online she is a vampire named Diablerie, part of the Toreador clan, an extremely artistic group. Maureen speaks fluent French and has spent time in France so Diablerie's persona is extremely influenced by the period of time that Maureen was abroad.

She is very dramatic...I chose that type of role-play because it allowed me to exercise that dramatic muscle that I wasn't able to do in my day to day life. I think I created her in that way because I had control over her during a time I didn't have control over the other external factors in my life. There was a point where it was therapeutic for me, I was getting something out of it personally but it also became tedious....I can remember sitting at my computer night after night wondering why I was doing this. I think it had to do with the people I was interacting with. You grow attached to them, even though I never met them and never saw their face or even a their picture... but there was this personality you were interacting with all night or all day or whatever it happened to be. You became attached to the other characters and the one that you were playing.

Sometimes it did become very tempting to divorce reality and it became pretty all consuming. In the peak of my experience, little things like having to get up and go to the bathroom became a real bother. My butt would become completely numb and I finally realized I would have to get up or become completely paralyzed and even that was a nuisance. I would become very antsy if the phone or door bell rang...It's very weird to meet someone in real life that you have role played with. Some of these people I had been role-playing with for over a year, and I think that they were as wigged out about me as I was about them when we met. Little things like how they would laugh, tilt their head, their teeth, little things that never made a difference to me online bothered me in real life. One person that I met smelled, really, really bad and that's something that you would never know via bits and bytes but he was extremely dirty. (Maureen)

Maureen has since moved out of the relationships she found on her computer and is concentrating on relationships in real life. For her, the opportunity to escape into the online world helped her bridge the journey from complete social



isolation to active online participation and finally to entering back into relationships existing in the physical world. Entering into the world of otherness via bits and bytes can be all consuming, yet it is increasingly becoming a part of ordinary life; and balancing each is our new challenge. "We correspond with each other through electronic mail and contribute to electronic bulletin boards and mailing lists; we join interest groups whose participants include people from all over the world. Our rootedness to place has attenuated." (Turkle, 178) As Western society shifts even further into a technological revolution, the revolution has moved into the home and has reformed how we find community, get to know one another and represent ourselves.

When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. This reconstruction is our cultural work in progress....This utopian discourse about decentralization has come into vogue at the same time that society has become increasingly fragmented. Many of the institutions that used to bring people together—a main street, a union hall, a town meeting—no longer work as before. Many people spend most of their day alone at the screen of a television or a computer. Meanwhile, social beings that we are, we are trying (as Marshal McLuhan said) to retribalize. (Turkle, 178)

Sara plays Cleo in a post-apocalyptic world based on Ann McCaffrey's Pern novels in which humans interact with Dragons. McCaffrey began writing science fiction during a time when it was believed women were unequipped to deal with science. Ever devoted to her novels, her fans have adapted her worlds into online role-playing environments. Sara describes the theme of the game as being nontechnical: Colonists have left a war-savaged and polluted Earth to start over again. There is a low level of technology used (e.g., computers and such) and Cleo is in charge of raising dragons, which serve as transportation. Sara has played many characters, including a lesbian character, Priscilla, whom she she created to experiment with something different. According to Sara, Priscilla is significantly involved in sexual role-playing and many of the female characters with whom she interacts are played by men. Men playing women, as previously discussed, occurs in varying frequency in a MUD—an established practice as evidenced by Elizabethan theater in which men regularly played

female characters. "Pavel Curtis, the founder of Lambda Moo, has observed that when a female-presenting character is called something like FabulousHotBabe, one can almost be sure there is a man behind the mask....Gender swapping on MUDs is not a small part of the game action. Inside the MUD ratio is only three male characters to one female character. That is to say, a significant number of players, many tens of thousands of them, are virtually cross-dressing." (Turkle, 211-12)

Sara explains that MUDding is like a "textual theatre" wherein the drama unfolds as words on a screen:

You don't know how it's going to end up. You have an idea when you start but it can end as something totally different, it's full of surprises and you never know what's next....I think it almost helps because if you can get comfortable with somebody online and then apply that to your real life interactions you can be a lot more open minded. In RL people are quick to judge a lot of times but with meeting online you can't get those same sort of physical impressions. People can get sucked into it and be on the computer for hours and not deal with anything. I did that for a while and this year part of the reason I haven't been on as much is because I've been going out and doing stuff with real friends. I miss my online friends but it's a better balance. If you have a problem there's only so much you can do talking about it online verses in real life because at least then you can get a hug or whatever. (Sara)

Real-life lessons emerge from virtual experiences. Players use the games as testing grounds for future real-life interactions and as a form of psychoanalytical discourse. However, balancing the real and the virtual is precious:

People can get lost in virtual worlds. Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk. We must understand the dynamics of virtual experience both to foresee who might be in danger and to put these experiences to best use. Without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual we cannot use our experiences there to enrich the real. If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen persona, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation. (Turkle, 268)



## **Chapter Five: Avatars and Online Identities of the Future**

Avatar is a word that is commonly heard but rarely understood. In English, the word has come to mean "an embodiment, a bodily manifestation of the Divine." However, the Sanskrit word 'Avatara' means "the descent of God" or simply "incarnation." In contemporary India, distinguished personalities may be called avatars, which is a sign that even at the source, the original theological meaning has shifted in popular culture. (<http://www.avatara.org/essay.html>)

In the world of online computer identities, 'avatar' describes a graphical or visual representation for a persona. The use of mystic words, such as avatar, upload, download, guru and their relationship to computer vocabulary is a critical study in itself:

The idea of the avatar "coming down" from an unspecified source in one of many possible manifestations connects well to the reverse hierarchy established originally by the scientific community at the inception of what would become the Internet: the client "uploads" to, and "downloads" from, the server that resides above.

The software industry's debate on avatars is really about object interactions passing between a variety of servers in real-time. Talking about avatars personalizes the discussion and brings up issues having to do with the nature of identity, security, interpersonal relations, and societies of the Internet.

The concept of an avatar can also be easily transferred to the many variants of computer messages and presentations being transferred from the Web to "client" computer screens. And, finally, all these concepts and hierarchies fit perfectly with financial markets used to trading numbers. The idea of products or services constructing themselves on a computer screen as a result of information "coming down" from the Internet and the World Wide Web is a very attractive prospect for entrepreneurs. There is a sense of power and control the owner of a server has, once removed from the flesh market. (Vesna, website)

What once was merely textual, such as using a description on a MUD, can now be represented by a visual icon. We use symbols like the smiley face :- ) that are called “emoticons” when communicating in email but the new representations are three dimensional, much like a video game character. (Figure 4) With advances in technology and the onset of broadband Internet connections in the home and at work, avatars and their communities are becoming more graphically immersive. These graphical representations are being greeted with enthusiasm. An ad for Internet avatars or “avs” as they’re referred to reads: *What is the next big thing? People seen on the Internet! Get there first with Avatars!*

The new medium of multi-user virtual worlds allows ordinary Internet users to interact as avatars in real time within shared two- and three-dimensional virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are fast changing the notion of the Internet from ‘interface’ to ‘place.’ These worlds include vast three-dimensional cityscapes reminiscent of the Metaverse in author Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. Virtual worlds represent a new frontier for interaction design and an opportunity to move boldly beyond two-dimensional GUI as seen on webpages and the use of text descriptions. (<http://www.digitalspace.com/avatars>) Some current examples of these interfaces already exist: One is called “Traveler, A Journey Through Sound” (Figure 3). Another website called Active Worlds (Figure 4) acts as a portal for the participant to interact in three dimensional worlds created by members. Their home page states:

In minutes you can create fascinating 3D virtual reality environments that others can visit and chat in. The Active Worlds Universe is a community of hundreds of thousands of users that chat and build 3D virtual reality environments in millions of square kilometers of virtual territory...you can also shop online in our 3D virtual reality mall and chat with store clerks...Whether you are new to chatting on line, or an expert, you'll love the Activeworlds user-friendly Plug-in. As soon as you enter into Active Worlds you will be greeted and made to feel right at home by one of the Active Worlds community volunteers. ([activeworld.com](http://activeworld.com))

Active Worlds offers a range of pre-designed avatar forms from which to choose. “In Active Worlds your own three-dimensional avatar represents you.



There are a vast number of avatars to choose from. You can change your avatar with just the simple click of a button. Avatars can run, jump, fly, dance, and enable you to express a whole host of emotions. So say goodbye to your old one-dimensional emoticons. :)" (Figure 4) The concept of an avatar has been widely received on a commercial and corporate level. In Vesna's article she adds:

The avatar in cyberspace represents a strange interplay of left-wing utopianism with right wing entrepreneurism, mixed up with esoteric spiritualism. New Age religion operates in tandem with networking technologies and "organic" corporate structures—the new "cool" companies that are emerging all over the high tech industry map. James Hillman, a psychologist widely read by the corporate sector's elite, writes in his influential best-seller, *Kinds of Power*: "Economics is the only effective syncretistic cult remaining in the world today, our world's only ecumenical faith. It provides the daily ritual, uniting Christian, Hindu, Mormon, atheist, Buddhist, Sikh, Adventist, animist, evangelist, Muslim, Jew, fundamentalist and New Ager in one common temple, admitting all alike."

How perfect the Internet, then, to unite the multi-national corporations with their customers regardless of nation, race or creed. The multi-user environment with its dynamic design for instant communication and relations is the ideal space for the creation of communities with their various interests and markets, commercial or otherwise. Hence the World Wide Web, with its friendly graphical user interface--not like its predecessors, the text-based virtual realities, only accessible by the unix literati. (Vesna)

Whether text-based interaction or three-dimensional virtual reality, the practice of entering new worlds raises fundamental questions about our community and ourselves. Turkle insists that the use of technology offers no "simple or bad news." Life on the screen offers a new lens through which to examine ourselves, our community and our identity. "For every step forward, in the instrumental use of technology (what technology changes us as people, changes our relationships and sense of ourselves)...the issues raised by the new way of life are difficult and painful, because they strike at the heart of our most complex and intransigent social problems: problems of community, identity, governance, equity, and values." (Turkle, 232)

## Figure 1

Log file from Lara - Twilight.

Balcony - St. Fifteen Gallery

A moment's respite within the balcony area gives one a whole new vantage point upon the art below. And better still, the people passing through. Quite the advantageous position. No doubt the owner at times takes advantage of it. The balcony itself is a semi-circle, which in shadows leads one around the whole of the main gallery. There is a wooden railing, deeply varnished, waist-high to guard against falling, and there are pockets of sitting areas. The furniture is as much on display as the art below, spotlighted by sconces of electric light upon the walls. The soft light provided lands here and there upon other art pieces that line the balcony walls. Done by a modern hand--paintings so alive, eyes would seem to blink and lips to smile. The spotlight also illuminates crystal decanter of deep red and quartz-colored wine, cooled and waiting for the guests to help themselves Tempting, electric liquid. At the far end of the balcony, where the front doors to St. Fifteen can be viewed, is the spiral staircase leading to the main floor and gallery. Voices echo. Long dead artists still argue, perhaps, over brushstrokes, and sounds from the gallery below invite you back downward.

<+views and 'places'>

Contents:

Victoria(#171PJXce)

William(#634PJXce)

Obvious exits:

Main Gallery (M)

Current IC time is: Sun Dec 9 13:27:33 2007 - Light

**Lara**(#2134Pc)

Fair anglo skin glows almost transluscently, smoothly stretching over her features without scar or blemish. Her face is attractive, though not beautiful, with a pointed pixie-chin and delicate cheekbones. Large blue-grey eyes are framed by full lashes, and definitely prove to be her best feature. Her lips are a bit thin, but seem to readily form a pleasant smile most of the time. She stands a bit over 5' and weighs a fraction more than 100 pounds soaking wet. Thick, waist-length auburn hair is pulled back into a fat ponytail, swinging as she moves. Fire-red highlights shimmer and add depth to the silken tresses.

There is an open bottle of brandy. There are two glasses. One is empty. The other holds a swallow left of some golden liquid. Presumably the brandy. Did you feel his presence on the way up the staircase? Are you at first surprised...to see no one there? Is it a play of shadows, a play of light? A hand reaches out and draws toward him the last remaining swallow of the brandy earlier poured. And William...appears. Where eyes had looked but had not found him. He is settled on his lounge, a lordly half sprawl. Indigo flickers as his attention lifts. To the sounds the stairway makes. At night, St. Fifteen is a marble cavern -- everything echoes. By design.

**Lara** climbs the stairs, almost tiredly, but a contented expression on her face. It's been a productive night, one to be celebrated with a bit of indulgence by wandering the gallery for a time. She blinks a bit then smiles, murmuring, "Should've known I wouldn't be the only one with the idea tonight."



## Figure 1 (cont.)

The doctors follow up the stairs behind Lara, far enough that she probably didn't come in with them but not much off of her heels. Victoria slightly precedes Ui through the arching entry into the balcony. She grins as she sees the other people on the landing, "Evening, I hope we're not intruding..." Then hearing Lara, "Well, great minds? Or something like that anyway."

**Lara** turns and chuckles, "Sounds right to me."

Indeed, the two doctors, while their arrival is not as powerful, as the majestic one... there is something there indeed. Ah, perhaps maybe it is Ui coming into his own... His 'birth' right as it were. As he comes up the stairs he resumes his place at Victoria's side and smiles to Lara. "Well, I don't know if I'd call my mind great, but at the very least...." He chuckles a little... "And good evening to you William..." For the way of the room, it could be noone else. Ian's feeling.. is a little.. different.

"No...not interrupting at all," comes William's voice. Smooth baritone, and languid...in part due to the clinging of his accent. Now that he is in full view...One may note the charcoal stains on his fingers. A dusky color upon bronzed olive. "Please...have a seat. Those of you who can drink, feel free to help yourselves..." The thick paper, bound by leather, is also set aside. Within it, sketches. In a hand like Leonardo's ...with something of his own passion to it. A smile is playing upon his lips --very Cheshire-like...Knowing. Enigmatic. And his hands, his fingers...are laced together and resting against his stomach. No, his power is very different from Ian's. Ian's is Efficient. William's is Passionate. They are...two halves of the same coin. One is the head. The other is...on occasion...just an ass. He seems to be in one of those moods tonight. Something in his eyes -- a fire that has been missing. His eyes are dark, with violet shards in them. "Ui, Victoria...Lara..." A glance to each one. "Just a pleasure stroll through the gallery then?" Or...do any of you have business for the Prince?

**Lara's** own fingers are stained, but with the rich pigments of her choice. Brilliant reds and greens colour her skin, blues stain her nails, the colours forming a patchwork on her flesh. "Just relaxing after doing a bit of work, I'm afraid."

Well... she doesn't have anything on her fingers, but Victoria smiles and nods, "Well, not especially, no. We were just out really and thought we would see who was here. I at least haven't been in for a while." She smiles at Lara, "Getting ready for the next show already?"

**Lara** chuckles softly as she moves for a seat, sinking into it with a luxurious sigh and stretch, "No...I have some private commissions to finish first."

William lifts a brow. "Another show?" For William's part, he is getting ready for his own show. Ergo the sketches -- the blueprints of paintings.

Indeed, well one can have both... but today. Well never mind for today... Ui's smile is a little less cheshire, simply because he's... not in one of those moods. But there you go. It is hard to consider him.. or any Ventruie without ~some~ sort of business, or so it has come to be learned atleast by Ui. And He smiles towards them all... but William gets a considering look... as he moitons Vic to sit and he takes his seat beside her. Maybe it's not anything super difficult to see, but there is the presence of the two of them. Doctors both, they seem to spark off of each other... moving unconsciously to adapt and form around each other.... Indeed. An eyebrow lift. A look to Lara, and to the Sketches... but beyond that he says very little.



## Figure 1 (cont.)

Nothing at all in fact....

On soundless hinges, the door concealed in shadow at the back of the balcony opens, and yet another joins the party on the balcony. He speaks before he hears the voices, mellifluous French flowing from his lips until the rest are seen, and heard. "William... I think you must be getting a bit senile in your old age. I'll be damned if I can find those char...Well, it would appear that you have begun a party in my absence my friend." Dark eye brow arches at Ui and Victoria, a smile to each, but the eyebrow drops, and eyes even crystal blue eyes smile as they see Lara. 'Lara, darling! What a pleasant if unexpected surprise.'

Lara's smile gets brighter, her expression becoming an odd mingling of shy and brilliant all at once. "Kyle...I didn't know that you were here."

Victoria laughs lightly at William's comment and glances over to Ui, letting him answer that question for himself. She certainly hasn't cut out his tongue or anything that drastic of course, though she does seem amused by his idea.

A quiet laugh... and he shakes his head... remaining silent for but a moment.. and then quietly... "Oh, my no... Not unless my Prince demands it." Humility.. but indeed there is a teasing quality to it. "Should I wax upon how her beauty has cloven my tongue to the room of my mouth while I goggle in unabashed surprise? No. But indeed... I'm feeling thoughtful...Victoria convinced me getting out of the house would do me some good." A slight grin... "I disagreed... but she convinced me." You're not the only one who can take on the rogues Curve.. my dear.. William

Lara sits fairly quietly at first, just listening to everyone. Her fingers remain in Kyle's for as long as he lets them and her cheeks remain slightly pink.

Kyle chuckles and shakes his head, as he wraps an arm about Lara's shoulders, snuggling her close to him. But his look and words are directed at Victoria. "You, my dear Victoria, have been letting that man spend MUCH too much time with this old renegade." The old Renegade being William of course. Then he turns to answer Lara. 'My apologies love. I've been preparing for the trip, trying to make certain everything would be in place for us when we get there. It /is/ going to be the holidays after all. trying to get a room at this time of the year is near impossible there.'

Lara blinks, looking startled, "The...is it that time of year already?"

Victoria laughs good naturedly at Ui's reaction and then Kyle's as well, "I'm not sure that it's really that, he's been that way as long as I've known him." Just not necessarily with everyone it seems. She then laughs again at Lara's response, "And here I thought that I was the only one that

## Figure 1 (cont.)

missed things like that sometimes." Grinning lightly she nods, "Yes, Lara, it's already past Thanksgiving and coming up quickly on Christmas again."

Turning back to Ui she grins a little more triumphantly perhaps, "See, it isn't just me. You don't have to worry."

Lara looks a little startled still, "It's been almost a year. Christmas Day will /be/ a year."

Take on the curve, Ui? There are some who have claimed over the past several centuries...that it may have been the Serpent who captured Eve. But William gave him directions to the Tree. You have a long way to go, my son. There is a chuckle for it, held in the throat. And William moves. Rising. To pour a little more brandy in a glass. "Do save yourself the torment, Lara...and stop counting." His voice is deep and quiet. Holding both humor and warmth. And it seems William is content enough to let the conversations swirl around him. You all are the storm...he is the Eye of it once again. It seems to suit him well.

Kyle's smile has been dampened, and now concerned eyes are focused on Lara alone. 'My apologies love. I didn't know. WOULD you prefer to postpone the trip for now?'

A slight smirky sort of smirk for Victoria... while he maybe less demonstrative in public with her... there is no question there. It's something perhaps a bit more intense than the other two here now but beyond that... what can you do? Not much. "Vindication it seems eh Bella?" He grins and shakes his head... a look to Lara, and Ui nods quietly. He knows... he knows indeed.

William adds quietly, "And please do not wax on, doctor...There is nothing whatsoever the matter with my eyes. I can see Victoria very well..." A wink to Victoria. William glances toward Lara and Kyle. Mon Dieu. A look away. To the golden brandy. He takes a swallow of it.

Lara shakes her head to Kyle, smiling again, "No. After all, shouldn't I be celebrating it? Not treating it like something to be mourned?" She pats his leg as she sits snuggled against his side. "What better way to celebrate the broadening of my horizons than a trip to a place I've never been before?"

Ui murmurs quietly.. as one would around a drink had Ui one. "I understand, I know you are a man of.. taste."

William chuckles quietly. "Ah, I do not want to talk of mourning...pick another subject..." A general glance of indigo to you all. "I have done enough mourning for everyone in this room...Just close your eyes for a moment...and steal a second of joy..." The prince does not retake his seat upon the lounge, but instead he wanders to the railing. Leaning against it.

Victoria laughs lightly and shakes her head again at both Ui and William, but



## Figure 1 (cont.)

doesn't say anything, letting Lara and Kyle make their vacation plans for the moment in peace, knowing some of the things that this must be bringing up for the other woman after talking to her.

Kyle smiles warmly, and even looks somewhat amazed at Lara's response. He shakes his head slightly as he speaks. 'I must say dear, you're certainly handling it much better than I did, but then... I believe the circumstances set the tone of the event in the first place. Mine were... less than pleasant shall we say....But that is many many years in the past. I accept it and move on.'

Lara smiles and shrugs, "I chose my fate that night. Michael offered it and I chose it." She wrinkles her nose, chuckling wryly, "Of course, I didn't realize at the time what the consequences would have been if I'd said no, but that's rather moot since I said yes."

Kyle's smile widens even further as he pulls her close against him, arms wrapped about her holding her tight to his chest. "And I, my dear, am very glad you did. Had you not, we would not be here together, like this. And that, would be a very unfortunate thing."

Lara blushes and laughs, "Kyle...really, there are others here."

There is a grin. "I would have died anyway..." The old knight leaning against the railway gives a small shrug. Half-turning...he more faces those gathered around...than the artwork below. "I had a mouth full of blood and sand. This...was merciful..." William's arms fold against his chest. "And despite my first few nights...it has been a blessing." William pushes away from the railing, languid stride carrying him past Lara and Kyle. And there the prince pauses. "A blessing, Lara..." The same tone he once had for Victoria and Ui...when he told them to "look deeper." The prince does not give instruction often. And it is not followed by more here and now. "If you all would excuse me..." And then he hears Lara. "My dear...I have seen more..." Of you in particular. Actually, both of you on separate occasions. William grins a little and heads for the stairway. "I'm a little hungry. I hope you all do not mind if I do not have any of you for lunch...ne c'est pas?"

Eyes follow William... Ui's look to the Prince... and there is a quiet silent nod. "Take care William..." He hmms softly and then a thought flickers along his eyes and then simply he shakes his head and bobs in farewell...

Kyle cannot help but chuckle. He suppresses the urge to inform the old English kniggit that it would certainly not be the first time. "Non, not at all Wills. As a matter of fact I somehow think we would all prefer it...." His own version of the rougish slant steals across his lips.



Figure 2

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Microsoft Word 97  
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**Read Message** RELATED: [Outlook](#)  
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**In-Box**

**From:** "Holly" [mailto:holly@...]  
**To:** "Kleon" [mailto:kleon@...]  
**Subject:** info that might be useful. (thesis)  
**Date:** Thu, 25 Feb 1999 17:14:38 -0500

I kind of wish I was in the Rochester area so that I may be able to participate in your thesis. I find the subject matter rather interesting as well as familiar. I will explain.

About January of 1998 I was introduced to MUDding by a friend of mine. It was a roleplaying MUD that is based on the Wheel of Time book series by Robert Jordan. After learning the MUD I then learned how to roleplay. With this new way of using the internet I was once again addicted to being online. This time I was addicted to roleplaying, not chatting.

About January or so I met someone who I became friends with more because I was sorry for him. He seemed so sad. We ended up roleplaying a lot and also seemed to get close IRL (in real life). It started with him asking me personal questions about me OCCy (Out of Characterly) which I answered. I had no reason to lie or make myself seem better than I was. It progressed to him calling me on the phone and I calling him. At first we only talked about the MUD but quickly changed to something else. Around March he started telling me he was in love with me. I didn't want anything to do with an online relationship at the time so I had told him I just wanted to be friends. He persisted and for some strange reason I "thought" I fell in love with him too.

Time passes, fast forward to November of 1998. By this time I have a job and I had saved up to fly from Ontario where I live to North Carolina. I had had the trip planned and paid for since September. I was only going for a weekend and it was part of the plan that I stay at his apartment. 4 days before the trip he tells me his roommates do not want me to stay there because it would cramp their style. I was upset at first but since this was my first big trip anywhere by myself I managed to find money to pay for a hotel room.

I flew there. The weekend was a disaster. The first night (Friday) I was there he was all over me. After that first night I didn't see him again until Sunday afternoon. He "had to work".

Fast forward again to about a week after my trip to North Carolina. I get a message on ICQ from someone claiming to be this person's girlfriend. She wasn't claiming. It was true. Turns out that this person I had been talking to since January of 1998 had had a girlfriend IRL the whole time. He had played me.

This might sound familiar but there is more to this. No one on the MUD had thought or known he had a girlfriend IRL. He had had several girlfriends from the MUD visit him from various places in the USA and he had even visited one in Vancouver, Canada. All the while having a girlfriend IRL.

He had always been faithful to his online girlfriends that we knew of since everyone on the MUD knew what was going on. That is, if he only had a couple characters that we knew about. If there was another character that we didn't know about then there could have been countless more online girlfriends.

His IRL girlfriend could not about me flying to see him which is why I had to stay in a hotel room. I even called her on the phone. I'll tell you one thing. Finding out that someone you thought you cared about had lied to you the whole time hurts bigtime.

I have talked to the some other girls he's "dated" online and others that he has tried to "pick up" and all tell me and others that he never said anything about having an IRL girlfriend. Actually, I should say he's engaged since on Thanksgiving he asked his IRL girlfriend to marry him. I see being blind said, "Yes."

Blah.... I don't know if you wanted this info but when I say the short thing about your thesis I felt I had to say something about my experiences. I sure there is more I could tell you about it if you want to know. Please e-mail with any question you might have.

Holly  
Student of Life

Figure 3



**“Traveler** is your gateway to many intriguing worlds of sound and voice. Remember Citizens Band (CB) radio, or perhaps you are a HAM radio operator? Onlive!

Traveler brings that experience to the new avatar Cyberspace. In a Traveler world like Utopia or MTV Tikkiland, you choose an avatar (which looks like a giant head, or a costume party mask), fly around in three dimensions, and when you see other talking heads or hear their voices, you can join in the conversation. Because the sound is also three dimensional you can tell when someone is talking from your left or right side or when a conversation is right in front of you or in the distance. You will feel as though you have really visited with your friends in Traveler. Any way you look at it, Traveler is fantastic journey through sound.”

**Figure 4**



“Avatars can communicate with each other by gesturing as well as by chatting. Many of the emotions that you might have used "emoticons" to show before can now be "acted out" by clicking the appropriate Gesture button.

The Gesture buttons are located just above the main view screen. Just click the appropriate gesture that you'd like everyone around you to see. There may be different gesture choices for each avatar.

Each gesture has a hot-key equivalent. One letter in each Gesture button is underlined. Just press ALT + the appropriate hot-key letter to send a gesture. That way you can send gestures to people while you're moving or chatting, without having to stop and use the mouse.” ([www.activeworlds.com](http://www.activeworlds.com))



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