

WHERE ARE THE AVATARS?

Article I – The Lawn Haul...

Waiting for Worlds to Come.

By Jeremy Turner (February 2002).

"The spiritlessness of the corporate worlds that Worlds Inc. has built on contract drives home an important point: technology does not make worlds interesting. People do. If these companies want their metaworlds to work as a business, they will need to bring people together. They will need to give users the tools they need to build their own culture. And then, they will need to get out of the way." - ROBERT ROSSNEY

"The avatar has not yet blossomed but has germinated quietly in small seed beds of hobbyists and avant-garde artists. Hovering on the verge, avatars are powerful presences that could transform the Net into true cyberspace, into an online multi-user virtual reality (OMVR). As broadband web access spreads, the 3D web brings us closer to the arrival of the avatar". – MICHAEL HEIM

The Promise of Avalawn or the Towering descent of Babylawn?

Exactly a decade ago, a B-Grade film called the *Lawnmower Man* (1992) showed us compelling and enchanting virtual worlds in which the antagonist, Jobe, learned to harness the power and influence of a virtual demigod. Offline, he mowed lawns. In cyberspace, he was an avatar who owned lawns.

In Hindu mythology, an Avatar was a God who “crossed over” or “descended” into the material world as a chosen representational identity. Both Jesus and Krishna are seen as historical Godheads who have visited the material world as avatars. In today’s terms, an avatar is a graphical representation of yourself in cyberspace. This applies of course, not only to video games (for example, *Descent*, *Ultima Underworld*, *Everquest*, etc) but to the online chat room environments that have been emerging communities since the now discontinued *Habitat* software made exclusively for the Commodore 64 by Lucas Arts Entertainment circa 1985.

In the *Lawnmower Man*, Jobe, the fallen Avatar, loved these compelling worlds so much, he hatched an ‘evil’ plot to immerse the entire “Real World” (commonly debased in both cyberpunk and academic culture as “RL”) into his online community where of course, he would be the virtual dictator.

The movie was meant to teach us a lesson that basically, virtuality will only offer the interested user two things. One would be the promise of a heavenly paradise (the ultimate escape from the hardships of the flesh). The other option would be none other than an immersive descent into a grid-like hell. Even if the act of descending into

virtuality as an avatar expressed ‘good’ rather than ‘evil’ intentions, *Lawnmower Man* bleakly stated that people would never fully achieve a healthy balance between fantasy and reality. As far as that zeitgeist was concerned, worlds as fantastical as those teasing us in the *Lawnmower Man* movie were doomed to lead us astray to a universe where reality was taken for granted.

That was the general consensus of virtual naysayers in 1992. At this stage of the game, it turns out that the shortcomings of avatar-driven virtuality are more about a lack of interest than the threat of becoming hopelessly addicted to them. Perhaps though, the current apathy towards this virtual hype that had (wheatgrass) juiced out after 1993 is a trifle immature -- we are now beginning to see worlds as powerful as those imagined in *Lawnmower Man* surfacing as beta-testable downloads.

But regardless of how alluring such a worldspace can be to prosumers and corporate executives alike, the “if we build it, they will come” philosophy may not be enough to draw people into signing on in droves as avatar citizens. In order for any avatar universe to catalyze a social renaissance, there needs to be a user-friendly way to instill a sense of genuine community. This can only happen when voice-chatting, videoconferencing, customizing avatars and building personal habitation spaces is second nature. A few years prior to the legendary dotcom crash of the late 90s, a couple of the right kinds of browsers began showing up at the wrong time.

A Grassroots Community...

In 1994, the OnLive corporation unveiled a very special and cared-for avatar voice-chat browser that emphasized intimate socialization over architectural pyrotechnics. Using emotive floating cartoon heads and functional spaces designed by a team led by Steve diPaola and advocated by Bruce Damer (www.digitalspace.com), OnLive Traveler assembled a close-knit community of people from all walks of life who were determined to rescue their new virtual home from the brink of bankruptcy.

The look and feel of Traveler may seem dated but even the rough hued pixels that outline the Traveler avatars seem to help define a real face and personality that will always be behind the inner-workings of cultural content online. Traveler in this case fulfilled Pavel Curtis’ requirement that a successful avatar browser must contain what he considered to be the “killer app” of the internet: People.

However, having only one application bundled with the software is barely half the battle. Even with the voice-chat function, the loyal Traveler community still has not exceeded the population of an average small town in rural America. Even though the Travelers themselves are friendly enough folk, their universe lacked the sublime energy that a big city has to offer. Shortly after Traveler appeared online, new competitors attempted to focus on the void this grassroots community left behind.

Bright Lawns, Big City...

In 1996, Worlds Inc launched Active Worlds and Alpha World where notable VR scholars such as Michael Heim (www.mheim.com) began to hold legitimate academic conferences in the Active Worlds Educational Universe (AWEDU), a network of virtual

universities. In many ways, Active Worlds and their franchises had strong advantages over OnLive Traveler. For one, the worlds began to look more like they were populated with 'real' architecture. It was also possible for citizens to build in realtime with the help of workaholic servants called bots.

As Active Worlds saw their success as a numbers game, having a large population base became an asset culminating in the proliferation of academic and cultural content that its citizens patriotically generated. Active Worlds was like a metropolis whose cultural affluence made the OnLive Travelers appear at times like small-town hicks (with some very rare exceptions).

Where AW fell behind Traveler though, was its lack of having convincingly emotive faces and a voice-chat component. Bright lines of text hovered over the head of each avatar to help embody and identify one's avatar. This was the anti-social textopolis of Active Worlds that cared little for those outside the virtual elite. Even the most well-intentioned citizens on Active Worlds have had extreme difficulty getting intimate and interactive with wonderstruck newbies. To make matters worse, Active Worlds decided in mid-January to abolish tourist visas altogether and thereby halt the once rapid rate of newbie influx to that of a glacial trickle. If the powers that be at Active Worlds stick to their guns, they will also drag behind in the numbers game.

An Exodus back to the Primitive Grass Hut?

As history is always in danger of instantly repeating itself, lessons to be learned from Active Worlds should also be immediately applied to a brand new contender that has the official endorsements of Michael Heim and Bruce Damer. Very Soon, Adobe is planning to make the grand leap from photo and video manipulation to launch a new avatar community browser called Atmosphere that promises to finally immerse the mainstream populace into the once marginalized domain of the avatar.

It remains to be seen, however, the extent as to exactly how Adobe's upcoming product will surpass Active Worlds let alone become the ultimate compromise between this browser and the magical OnLive Traveler. It will need to be much more than a household name to attract even one newbie avatar, let alone a community of brand newbies. To be honest, Adobe Atmosphere currently resembles Active Worlds as much as the upcoming MUSE browser mirrors the worlds in *Lawnmower Man*. As it is a public beta, it is too early to tell if Atmosphere will go beyond Active Worlds and OnLive Traveler.

Are we not yet a-MUSE-d?

Also available as a public beta for client evaluation, the brand new avatar browser called MUSE (www.musecorp.com) developed by Steve diPaola (www.dipaola.org) of OnLive Traveler fame looks remarkably like the environments that hooked Jobe. The interface -- with its smooth realtime rendering, gorgeous portal geometry, streaming video wallpaper and 3D web-browsing -- is extremely seductive. Once broadband connections become cheaper over the next couple of years, MUSE may well become the heir apparent (or heir avvatarent) to Internet Explorer. For now, the bugs are still being ironed out in its

research and development. Now is the time to deconstruct a demo of a world browser like MUSE and suggest improvements.

Worlds to win...

At least from a World-design perspective, the grass seems greener on the other lawn. By most reasonable counts, MUSE has the upper hand. Both MUSE and Atmosphere still have time to realize Jobe's wet dream. As for the end-products' use@-value, voice-chat with careful lip-syncing, the revival of tourist visas and customization of both appearance and residence will be the necessary apps to appropriately retrofit the pop-culture avatar communities of tomorrow. Any other browsers not mentioned here that do not take into account all the blades of grass that help grow a virtual community will be consequently mowed down into one empty plot bereft of community and academic discourse.

ARTICLE II – Becoming Streetwise in the Golden Age of Graphical Representation

At the end of last year, I interviewed Myron Krueger for www.cttheory.net – an online cultural theory database that boasts a board of editors that includes such pop-theory icons as Jean Bauldrillard and DJ Spooky. Myron Krueger is without a doubt, the Godfather of Virtual Reality. His seminal thesis on Artificial Reality (ca. 1974) was not properly published until 1983 which was still before the fertile time when William Gibson published his definition of cyberspace in his Science Fiction classic, “Neuromancer” (1984).

So naturally, I wanted to pick Myron's virtual brain online to see if his ideas are still fresh and up to date with the wired world. Having an extra-special interest in avatar culture (see article #1 for further elaborations on avatar culture), I asked him if he has gotten around to visiting any avatar worlds yet and if so, what he thought about them in their current incarnation? This was the question I was most eagerly anticipating an answer from.

Myron's response confirmed what I had feared. He has not bothered with internet based avatar worlds at all basically because he feels that they have not caught up to his ideal set forth in his early installations. His answer went like this:

“Actually, I have not done that much with Internet-based interactivity. I live in an electronic ghetto with only a 56Kb connection which is too slow for the kinds of interactivity that I like to work with. In fact, I suspect that if I had DSL or cable access, I would still find the lag between my input and the system's response too slow for my taste. Finally, I gave up interacting with traditional computer interfaces long ago. I find video game controls stultifying and am shocked that the players' input vocabulary has not improved much since Atari.” – Myron Krueger, 2001

At first, I did not find Myron's response to be much of a problem. After all, Myron's ideas are decades ahead of their time and to give him due credit, I am sure his standards should always remain at least one decade ahead of the present developments if he is to remain a visionary pioneer. Sure enough, there is a noticeable lag even with Active

Worlds and OnLive Traveler on a 56k modem. Admittedly, Traveler was designed to run on a 486 and a 14/4 modem so one can argue that existing avatar worlds are much more accessible than they used to be. At any rate, I felt Myron had a right to wait until the most compatible avatar interface came his way. In the meantime, I figured I would send advance copies of my interview to friends, colleagues, prominent VR scholars and philosophers to assess their thoughts on the interview before it was officially published a couple months ago.

After a couple of weeks, I received an email response from none other than the scholar of all VR scholars, Michael Heim. Heim has written two very important books on the subject of the metaphysics of Virtual Reality (www.mheim.com). In addition to teaching Virtual Worlds Theory and Design at the Art Center in Pasadena, California; Michael was the first one who assembled all the crucial VR scholars into the Active Worlds Educational Universe for serious academic discussions on Virtual Identity and Culture. The venue for such a gathering of lofty minded avatars was dubbed the CyberForum (<http://cyberforum.artcenter.edu>). Of all the wonderful and informative responses I had received about the interview, it was Michael Heim whose opinions I knew would really be worth paying attention to.

After briefly complimenting Myron Krueger on his poetic way with words and brilliant mind, Heim wasted no further typing and dove straight into the nitty-gritty of his frustration with Myron's reluctance to explore the current manifestation of avatar worlds. With one fell swoop of a paragraph (Michael's avatar is a flapping bird on Active Worlds), Heim went on to say:

"The 'avatar' or self-presentational fantasy graphic is missing from Myron Krueger's conceptual repertoire. And it's not for lack of bandwidth because you can engage your avatar identity even over a 56K modem if you enter Active Worlds (or now Adobe Atmosphere). If your concepts have not evolved a notion of the avatar, then you are missing an important discovery in VR work since at least 1995. Just because the current Web imposes limitations on interactivity does not mean we cannot discover and explore some very important concepts for the future." – Michael Heim, 2002

As a qualifier, it must be said that Michael Heim has different (some would argue lower) standards as to exactly what form of graphical representation can be safely defined as an avatar. In his article, "Avatars and the Power Grid" (www.mheim.com/articles), he has imparted avatar status to the most amoebic form of avatar life, the networked cursor.

However, Michael has driven home a very important point that should not be overlooked. There have been very interesting developments since 1995 especially with regards to the developments of genuine virtual communities. With the OnLive Traveler (officially launched in 1995) browser, people have learned to speak to one another and even "hang out" in networked space. In 1996, Active Worlds brought the promise of a global academic community entirely online as avatars. Michael Heim alongside Bruce Damer (www.digitalspace.com) was actually a key player in the research and development of virtual academic communities since this time. Heim has been waiting six years now for the bulk of the VR academic circles to finally sign on as avatars.

Michael's frustration has mostly to do with the fact that he feels he has been waiting too long for these scholars and artists to show up onto Active Worlds. The worlds have already been built. Sufficient invitations have been distributed. So, why is virtually nobody showing up? Is the ivory tower too high to safely descend its inhabitants into the screen-space of avatar worlds that can exist on as small a plane as an eight inch flat-screen laptop monitor? This is where Michael begins to place responsibility on the invitees themselves:

“High-concept theories can miss important discoveries that are made ‘on the street’ (or via a 56Kbps modem). I have noticed a similar concept-percept discrepancy in most theory people who have tackled VR in recent years. The CyberForum series at Art Center brought a dozen or so theorists into Active Worlds for discussions, and the most surprising thing to me was that without exception the theorists were entering AW for the first time. Most VR theorists seem to have excluded from their thinking anything on the 3D Web. Is this a result of high-concept development that remains blind to simple modalities or is this a result of ignorance and lack of integration between academic and street activities?” – Michael Heim, 2002

I agree, there is not only a lack of integration between academia and the “street”, there is also a current void of cultural content behind these avatar worlds. I feel Michael's pain. I want to brush aside any high-concepts I had saved up for more articles and lend the guy a helping hand. With the support of some likeminded friends and colleagues, I plan to do my part by acting as an extra catalyst to entice academics, artists and citizens of the “street” to help nurture these famished avatectural spaces with cultural and scholarly sustenance.

At the University of British Columbia, I presented Steve DiPaola (www.dipaola.org) to an undergraduate digital arts class. There is a possibility that I may be able to convince the University itself to set up a virtual campus on the Active Worlds Educational Universe (AWEDU). I am also working with my arts collective here in Vancouver, Canada (536 Arts Society - www.fivethreesix.com) to set up open-call exhibitions and symposia in freely available avatar worlds. One such exhibition is the 536 Avatar Talent Show to be held on OnLive Traveler and broadcast at the Grunt Gallery (www.gruntgallery.bc.ca) in downtown Vancouver on April 4th.

For this exhibition, those from “the street” can learn to become more streetwise and enthusiastic about social spaces on the net. Of course, I still try and give a hard sell to the various high-concept theories I like to spew out onto unsuspecting audiences. As I see it, any press is good press even when the message can be convoluted. If the word gets out, they will come.

If you wish to become “streetwise”, here are some good places to start with that I have not mentioned yet above:

ONLIVE TRAVELER :

www.ozgate.com www.worldwideparty.net www.travelerville.com

ACTIVE WORLDS: www.activeworlds.com

BLAXXUN INTERACTIVE: www.cybertown.com

ADOBE ATMOSPHERE: www.atmospherians.com