reviews
DVD

AVATARA (DVD)
by 536 (Donato Mancini, Jeremy Turner,
with Patrick "Flick" Harrison)

Review by Christiane Paul

My avatar doesn't need to breathe…

Since the advent of graphic chat environments, avatars as representations of online identity has been the subject of many discussions, research, and various books (the classic among them being Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*) but the 'AVATARA' DVD by two of the co-founders of the Vancouver-based media artists' group *536* -- Donato Mancini and Jeremy Turner, with editor Patrick "Flick" Harrison -- may be one of the most original contributions to avatar research to date.

'AVATARA' is a feature-length documentary consisting of interviews with the (mostly American) inhabitants of the voice-chat environment OnLive! Traveler, which has been in existence since ca. 1993 and is now accessible through The Digital Space Commons as DigitalSpace Traveler. The documentary was recorded entirely 'in-world,' that is within the Traveler environment and, according to its creators, is one of the first docudramas done in Machinima style -- displaying its content from within a virtual world. The interviewer and guide Kalki (a blueish horse head) and the inhabitants of the Traveler environment he talks to mostly appear as torso-size avatars in their natural virtual surroundings and comment on the topics Community, Identity, Art, Wars, and Loss.

The term avatar, now common language in cyberspace, originates from Hinduism and means 'descent,' most commonly the descent of a deity to earth in an incarnate form -- although definitions tend to vary depending on the source -- and it is interesting to note its connotations in the context of the upload and download (descent) of information or an 'identity' to and from a server. The interviewer's avatar, Kalki, takes its name from the Hindu avatar incarnation of Vishnu who, according to some Vedic texts, can appear to us in the form of a white horse. Both Mancini and Turner studied the Upanishads, the Ancient Vedic texts, which inspired their interest in avatar research.

Part of what makes 'AVATARA' enjoyable and relevant is the juxtaposition and fusion of (media) genres and modes of representation -- documentary meets online chat environment or Reality TV meets fantasy worlds created by elaborate sets and costumes (which may be an description of Reality TV as commonly experienced, but also a detail that producers don't care to make obvious).

The result is an interesting investigation of the boundaries between reality and fantasy, a musing on what Real Life really is.

The Community section of 'AVATARA,' for example, introduces us to the main characters (among them Purple Tears, Oz, and Angle Grinder) and recounts the history of the environment and a community averting destruction through corporate takeovers etc. While the story may be 'conventional' in terms of a documentary subject and one may have heard a similar account numerous times, one might usually picture this as a stereotypical TV segment with the interviewee (for example, a West Virginian, plaid shirt and baseball cap) telling his story while standing in front of his house in a small community -- as opposed to imagining the story recounted by

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avatar Oz, a talking Pharaoh head (from West Virginia) floating in a pixellated game world. The format effectively underlines that this community and its assets are by no means less actual and authentic than physical real estate; that the citizenry consists of 'real' people maintaining the homes and world they have built by investing considerable time and effort. As the chapter on Loss makes obvious, the destruction of the community would have a traumatic effect on its members who would literally lose their 'second life.'

There always is a performative aspect to graphic chat environments and -- no matter if the conversation centers on mundane activities -- you are never sure if you are interacting with an alternate identity that has little to do with its 'physical' alter ego ("on the Internet nobody knows that you're a dog," as they say). Conceptually, 'AVATARA' is based on a deliberate break with the performance format, introducing the audience to the 'real' people behind the avatar and asking them to reflect on their being and environment instead of 'performing' within it. The set-up seems to lead to an interesting genre in and of itself, oscillating between the ridiculous and sublime -- think the cast of X-Men being interviewed on the movie set, inhabiting their costumes like a second skin yet seemingly unaware of their appearance and surroundings and earnestly talking about their off-screen life and craft as an actor or fluently switching back and forth between their two different lifes. As one of the inhabitants of Traveler points out, an avatar ultimately is just an extension of "the mask everybody has to wear out there," but, as opposed to the physical world, the roles you play in a virtual world are not determined as much by social and cultural conventions: they can be the product of your fantasies -- which may turn out be yet another product of conditioning but are by nature closer to a dream world. In any graphic chat environment, one might speculate in how far people's avatar is a reflection of their personality, a compensation of their shortcomings, or a product of their private fantasies but one will seldom hear them commenting on the relationship between avatar and 'real world' personality. There is something amusing and touching about watching and listening to the talking torso of a white giraffe named VanGo proclaiming that the avatar seemed to reflect her character -- soft, sensitive, and a little naïve. One inhabitant describes his online self as an opportunity for 'bettering' himself.
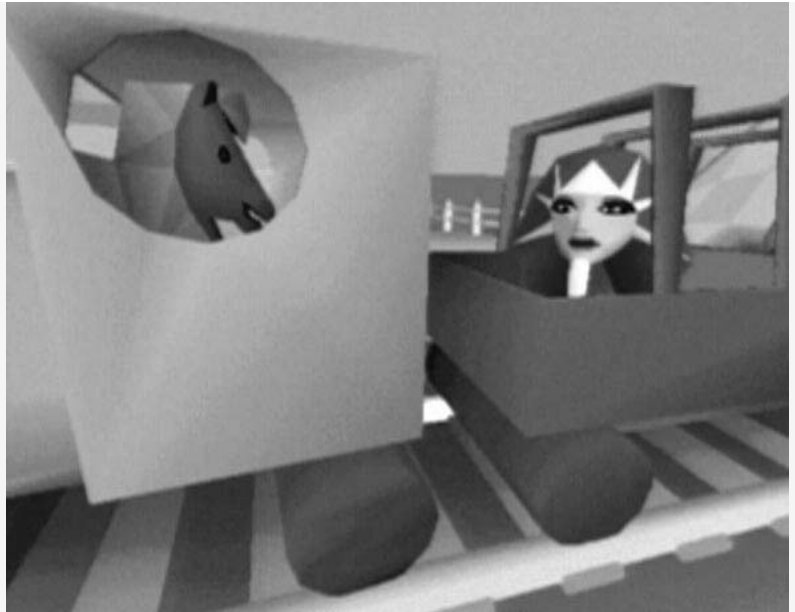
The rooms people created in the online world -- documented more in-depth in the Art chapter of the DVD -- are as much an expression of their personality as their avatar, and the 'filmmakers' are in the lucky position to have a choice among many inventive scenes as a backdrop for the conversations. (One interview features Kalki and the avatar Doppler cruising along the screen in the 'Little Train Ride' created by Angle Grinder.) 'AVATARA' features the online world at its best -- a community-building technology that offers a creative outlet for everyone -- yet doesn't neglect the darker aspects of any social fabric. One of the inhabitants cites the loneliness experienced in a life where the only human interaction of the day may be that with the salesperson at the local store as a major reason for her extensive presence in the online environment. The Wars segment tells the story of the world's 'free speech wars' (in 1999) that temporarily ruined the server and features an 'avatar bonking attack' (reminiscent of a group of kids jumping in front of the TV camera and interrupting an interview by screaming 'Hi Mom'). In another scene, Purple Tears shows the room she created as a reaction to an online relationship that turned into oppressive jealousy -- the room being inspired by Alanis Morissette's song *Uninvited* and consisting of a cage with keys floating around it. Considering the personal stories and conflicts featured on the DVD, it seems justified that the 'filmmakers' label their work as a Docudrama. Not surprisingly, the graphic chat world is a reflection of many of our physical world's tensions and conflicts.

'AVATARA' does not necessarily offer new insights on the nature of the avatar (which probably wasn't the objective of the documentary in the first place) but it most effectively brings to life some of the research done in this realm and documents one online community through snapshots. "My avatar doesn't need to breathe…," as one of the Traveler inhabitants puts it, but *AVATARA* makes clear that, despite defying the needs of the physical body, it certainly is a life form.

Notes:

Digital Commons: http://www.digitalspace.com/traveler/
Artist Statement by 536: http://www.centrea.org/ESC/Artists/536/
536: http://www.fivethreesix.com
Machinima: http://www.machinima.com