
Chicago Tribune

More people escaping to world less ordinary

*Virtual alter egos called avatars are growing in popularity—
and creativity*

March 11, 2008

BY RICK MONTGOMERY

MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Avatar, in Hindu philosophy, refers to the embodiment of a higher being in earthly form, usually as a human or animal. On the Internet, the meaning gets reversed as humans assume otherworldly forms. Worldwide, at least 9 million 3-D avatars exist in the Second Life site, a virtual world where users can customize an avatar in order to socialize and connect with others using voice and text chat as well as explore alternative life paths. In this virtual world, avatars buy islands, race cars, raise pets, attend church, and meet friends. The fantasy role-playing game World of Warcraft boasts more than 10 million subscribers.

Avatar Bryan Mnemonic can fly. His suit never wrinkles, and his chiseled body never bruises—not even if he crashes into trees.

His human counterpart, Bryan Carter, wishes he could afford Mnemonic's diamond cufflinks. But a mouse click makes it possible for Carter—Mnemonic's maker—to indulge a little in the virtual world.

Pixel by pixel, Carter created an online alter ego, an avatar mostly in his own image. True, Mnemonic's goatee lacks the gray hairs in Carter's. The waist is tighter, the biceps beefier. Understand that where avatars dwell—and there are millions of them—vanity alterations are expected.

*Avatar Bryan
Mnemonic can fly.
His suit never
wrinkles, and his
chiseled body
never bruises—not
even if he crashes
into trees.*

Some avatars dance. Some educate or perform concerts, perhaps in the form of an ogre or a large squirrel. Some annihilate armies of other avatars. They are whatever you wish to be in a cyber-land that doesn't exist, yet does.

"An avatar is your embodiment in virtual worlds and virtual game spaces," Matthew Falk, an Indiana University researcher, said of what he and others call "synthetic worlds."

Between people and their avatars, gender reversal is nothing. Ethnicity, too, is a matter of choice. Children with physical disabilities can heave boulders.

Students at the University of Kansas School of Medicine learn how to prepare someone for surgery by logging onto the Second Life site and transporting to the hospital's "island," where an avatar patient awaits on a gurney.