What Do Avatars Do to Their Actors

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WHAT DO AVATARS DO TO THEIR HUMAN ACTORS?

Two Stories about Business and Leadership

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BECOMING A BUSINESSMAN
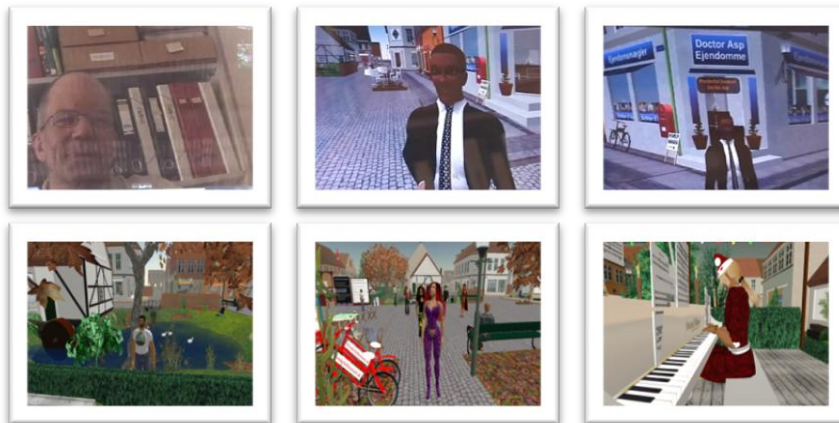*- practicing a new and different profession*

Figure 1. Thomas with his avatar DC Aspen. The Wonder DK business in Second Life.

THE STORY OF HOW THE AVATAR DC ASPEN ENABLES THOMAS TO PRACTICE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS.

DC Aspen is an avatar businessman in *Second Life*. Early in 2007, his owner Thomas starts an entrepreneurial business together with a team. Together they finance the establishment of the company Wonder DK. From the outset, the idea is to buy an island in order to design an urban environment with many similarities to Danish provincial towns. In spring 2007, the *Second Life* island is organised and well designed with a cosy and welcoming atmosphere, city guides to chat with, an environment recognisable to any Dane yet attractive also to international visitors. In the wake of the *Second Life* hype, the team decides to attract attention by remediating a famous fictional TV-series, Matador, known by any Dane. In this way, Wonder DK is successfully launched. The business idea is to become a real estate agency renting out shops in this urban environment. Thus, Thomas leaves his job as an IT-programmer to engage in this business. Several companies, some of them large and well known, move in and rent shops. The Wonder DK island of *Second Life* thus serves to make the team's business ideas a virtual-world reality by remediating a Danish urban cityscape with reference to a fictional TV series. This is the situation when the avatar DC Aspen is designed.

DC Aspen is a default avatar neglected by Thomas, who takes no interest in its design, only in the designing of Wonder DK. Early on, his business is well known among others due to the successful launch. Residents of *Second Life* know that DC Aspen is always present in-world; they ask for his advice and help. He gains a reputation and high in-world status. However, due to this, he has to change the relationship with his avatar, DC Aspen. His relationship with DC Aspen, has to take into consideration the culture and history of the Danish *Second Life* community of Wonder DK and of *Second Life* culture. The owner of a well-reputed and professional business like Wonder DK has to take seriously his avatar and its looks. Even if not

interested, Thomas is forced to adhere to the expectations and interpretations of how to look and be when running a professional *Second Life* business.

> My avatar looks like this [pointing] at the moment. In the beginning, I used a default avatar, because, appearance, it has never really interested me—neither here nor in real life. It was only when I started getting some complaints from people who said that I looked stupid that I realized I had better do something. (Thomas)

He is forced to remake DC Aspen to designate the Wonder DK business in a more convincing way. Thomas, with DC Aspen, has gained a reputation of being knowledgeable about in-world design and scripting; thus, his presence is part of the social history and culture of building Danish *Second Life* places, and his avatar is part of this history. The complaints about his avatar do not address his looks in the sense that he has to adapt to a stereotypical metaphor of a businessman; rather, it addresses the importance of making DC Aspen look like an oldbie and not a newbie. Judged by a *Second Life* scale of history, DC Aspen has quickly become an oldbie due to his knowledge, experience, and presence. The complaints address the fact that his avatar looks like a newbie, which means that it does not convincingly refer to the knowledgeable professionalism of his in-world business and design. Thomas has to accept that to focus on his avatar is as important as the excellent design of his metaphoric island and business. Very quickly, he changes both the look of DC Aspen—to that of a professional businessman—and his relationship with DC Aspen, experimenting with different outfits depending on the situation and purpose of his Wonder DK activities.

DC Aspen imposes change on Thomas. His avatar makes him aware that he is now about to become a businessman and real estate agent in *Second Life*. This is initiated by his avatar, which plays an active part in translating Thomas's in-world presence to construct himself as a businessman using iconographic sign relations. This is an important step in his translation from a previous job as an IT programmer to the new profession of a real estate agent. It takes a lot of informal learning. Using his avatar as a personal mediator of translation and learning, he teaches himself how to make sales speeches, to convince customers to rent his services, to cash and bill, etc. DC Aspen is the mediator that takes an active part in mediating this personal and professional change and history. Thus, Thomas is not free to do whatever he likes. He cannot look like a newbie, according to the scale and standard of his in-world being and business. The Wonder DK business, his real estate agent avatar, and the many social relationships with other avatars, are part of situated in-world culture and practices which influence his personal and professional history. As a businessman, he has to convince and persuade. Thus, he has to appear professional, according to *Second Life* scales and standards, in the creation of his mediator. From a semiotic point of view, the procreation of interpretants is as important as the construction and interrelations of self as referenced by the avatar. Thomas is not free to do whatever he wants, given the procreation of interpretants—that is, the interpretations of professionalism by *Second Life* standards as well as by *Second Life* communities, culture, and history.
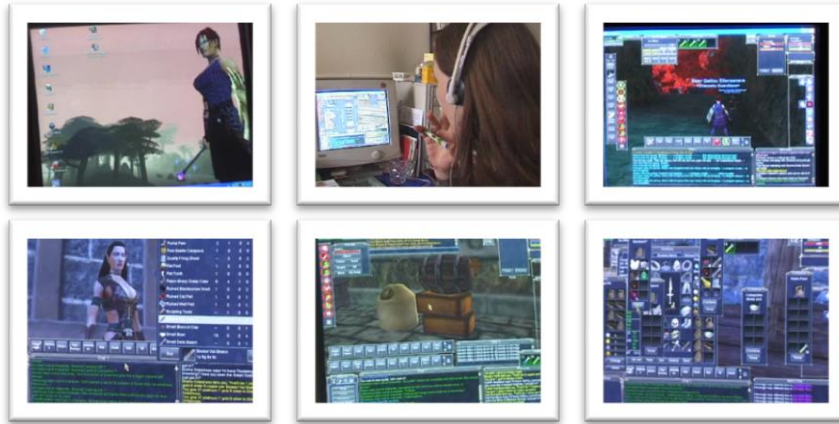
BECOMING A LEADER

- practicing leadership

Figure 2. Sia with her avatar Gelinu the Shaman. Draconic Guardians in EverQuest.

THE STORY OF HOW GELINU THE SHAMAN ENABLES SIA TO PRACTICE LEADERSHIP SKILLS

The shaman Gelinu is Sia's preferred avatar, her main. Gelinu is a really cool avatar and she is almost a goddess to Sia. The shaman can heal. Not as good as some of the other classes, such as a cleric, a priest, or druid, but well enough to make it an important part of Gelinu's repertoire of actions. The shaman is a difficult class to play. One must always be aware of what is happening, what the other players in the guild are doing and what they need. Therefore, the shaman can do many things. Gelinu has many talents and skills of her repertoire. She can slow-down the mobs, throw curses, do damage and eliminate resistance, throw disease-based spells and saves in various forms. And she can buff, which means that she can cast beneficial spells on other avatars to strengthen them. These are just some of the many things she has to see to. Therefore, Gelinu is busy improving the skills of the other members of her guild, Draconic Guardians. She can increase their strength and speed, resilience, and she can prolong their lives. Also, a shaman, who reaches level 34, gets a pet as a companion. It is a wolf, who is summoned from the spirit world. It can also make her stronger and better to attack.

As the shaman is a class difficult to play, from the outset, she shared her friends' knowledge and experience to get an introduction to *EverQuest*. Friends, who guided her, enabled her to quickly reach up to level 34, where she could get her pet. Now she has reached level 70, which is the highest, she can achieve in the guild and the version of *EverQuest*, she plays.

> What is also difficult is that it makes many demands on a shaman. If you join a group, then you very often must buff the members all together. You can throw so many different things, and you will have to do it. It is not enough to regain the other gamers' lives, they must have aguility, runspeed, rush, and there are a lot of things. You are very busy. Every time a mob turns up, then the shaman will have to throw slow on the monsters. *If it fails, then there is a danger that the other members of the guild will die*. --Sia

In short, the other players' strength and life depends on the fact that their shaman, Gelinu, is played by an owner who understands her role in the game. It is demanding, but it is also a role, there is reason to be proud of, if you play it well. The others in the guild become very attached to their shaman. And there is no doubt that Sia is very proud of her Gelinu, and that it is a role she likes to play.

Gelinu calls for Sia to heal the members of the guild when they face severe dangers in the many fights and missions; it is an important first step for her to become the leader of Draconic Guardians. To play with a shaman and leader when the guild is raiding, Sia has set up her interface to continuously get feedback about the standing of each of the gamers of the guild. This set-up allows her to follow and support each member and to supply them with life and resources through healing and other kinds of support whenever it is needed. Her leadership is based on these monitoring agencies. In a fight, the other gamers know that their shaman is there to support them when their standing is low and also when the guild is in danger. It is not the fighting as such that is the interesting part of her gaming; rather, her interest is in the monitoring, timing, controlling, and sharing of pillage, when successful, and the spotting of other talented gamers. Gelinu's looks, her ranking, abilities, equipment, etc., makes Sia enact her leadership of the guild. Striving for and achieving leadership of the Draconic Guardians also means that she has to know exactly how to support each member of the guild given their roles, levels, and resources.

Sia's avatar, Gelinu, helps her build up acceptance and authority to act as the leader of Draconic Guardians. Although demanding, Gelinu designates Sia's leadership, and with that new personal abilities and skills. Gelinu imposes change on Sia. Her avatar makes Sia aware of personal abilities and skills of leadership and of the fact that she has become a leader. It takes a lot of informal learning in which the avatar acts as a transformative agent of Sia's monitoring, timing, controlling skills and of distributing equally among the members of the guild pillage from raids and valuables from trading.