

About AVATARA: Christiane Paul Talks to Jeremy Turner

Christiane Paul talks to Jeremy Turner about the inspiration behind and making of AVATARA.

Conducted by email on July 16, 2003.

CP: First of all, could you give me some history of how you and your collaborators came up with the concept for the project and how you proceeded?

JT: It is a very long story but I will do my best to summarize.

I have known Donato Mancini since 1993 as we both studied Art History and Music Composition at the University of Victoria. One of the many things we have in common is that we have both studied the Ancient Vedic texts, the Upanishads. This has direct relevance for AVATARA as I will explain further below.

Donato and myself eventually moved to Vancouver and we became two of the five or so core founders of the 536 Arts Collective.

We began in 2000 out of our house (536 E. 20th Ave) and are well known locally for exhibiting work through portable galleries (we became micro-curators) and bi-annual group exhibitions -- sometimes with as many as 30 artists in the show.

You might also know my curatorial work with the Digital Pocket Gallery (with the iKatun collective and Jess Loseby).

Anyhow, quite often Donato and myself would produce work under the 536 banner. We have produced an earlier avatar project with DigitalSpace Traveler called the "Avatar Talent Show" (2002) at the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver.

We got local talent (highbrow and lowbrow artists) to show off their projects as avatars in an avatar room called "The Cellar," which is the virtual singles bar and the main virtual nite-spot in Traveler. There may still be some documentation of it at www.grunt.bc.ca

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This particular project was a kind of technical beta-test for a more ambitious avatar project we had in mind that gradually became AVATARA. At that time, we were thinking about an art installation based on DigitalSpace Traveler and the Upanishads. I should add that none of the footage of the Avatar Talent Show at the Grunt Gallery was used in AVATARA. All the footage in the feature was generated entirely from AVATARA-related interviews.

In early 2002, The Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A -- Vancouver -- www.centrea.org) and SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective in Toronto -- www.savac.net) commissioned us to produce and develop a New Media piece for their group show about Globalization and its effects on culture called "ESC."

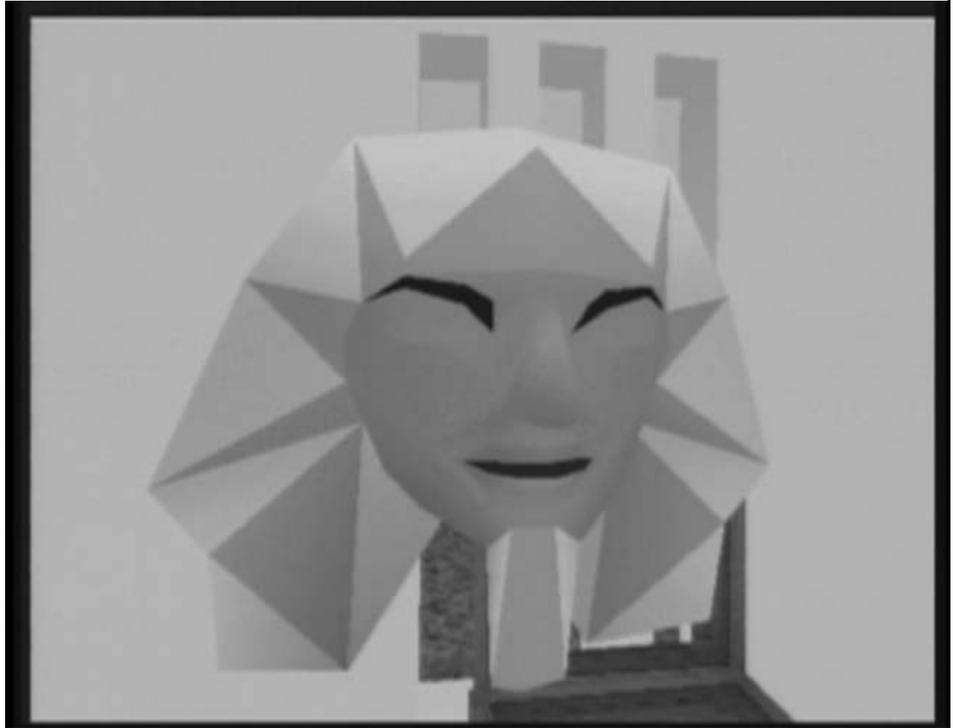
We had a year to conceptualize the idea with the guidance of a panel of internationally known artists, curators and critics. The critical panel included: Gu Xiong, Sylvia Borda, Sadira Rodrigues, Stephen Tong and Hank Bull. We figured they wanted our project to have some "Asian" content as it was for two Asian Arts collectives.

This is why Donato and myself turned to the Upanishads for inspiration. We wanted to show the Upanishadic qualities of cyberspace and the metaphysical properties of existing as an avatar. This is why we used the Hindu root word, AVATARA.

I have been personally avatar-obsessed for many years and have been in DigitalSpace Traveler since 2001. I met the inventor of Traveler, Steve DiPaola as he just moved from San Francisco to Vancouver to teach New Media at Simon Fraser University (also known as Tech BC).

I hosted a lecture with Steve at the University of British Columbia, and it was there that I discussed the avatar meta-verse with various Digital Media students and began to formulate some ideas with Donato to make a documentary about the Traveler community.

is a shorter piece called "536 talks with Pravin Pillay." This is actually the first interview for AVATARA and an early sketch for the feature. As Pravin was one of the other artists in the ESC group show and grew up with the Upanishads, we felt he would be the most ideal interview.



Back to Centre A, Donato and myself were originally going to make an art installation video-loop using Traveler. Various avatars would contemplate the Upanishads and even quote some of the text. We were originally thinking that we were going to have select avatars read out scripts. If we had continued along this path, AVATARA would have taken a much different shape and would not have become the documentary it is today.

We came to realize that it would be much better to have a documentary about DigitalSpace Traveler and its inhabitants using the Upanishads as the primary conceptual framework for our interview questions. We tried to coax Upanishadic answers from the interviewees.

If you look at the DVD menu, there

He came to our house to use Traveler. Turns out, we felt that although we still wanted to display his footage, we became more interested in doing a full feature documentary about the people who are real citizens of Traveler. So we decided to not have Pravin's footage directly in the documentary. **CP:** What was Flick Harrison's role in the making of AVATARA?

JT: With our commissioned funds from Centre A, we hired Patrick "Flick" Harrison as our editor (www.armedrable.org)

Flick is a local film critic and filmmaker. He is quite well known locally. Highlights of his career include an R.E.M. video and being the host videographer for "Road Movies," which was a show about Indie film-makers shown on the Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation (CBC). He has also made some politically motivated documentaries, one of them about the NAFTA agreement.

We felt that Flick had become a consultant as well as editor so we virtually gave him equal credit in AVATARA, although Donato and myself are officially the producers.

CP: How was AVATARA edited?

JT: Throughout the editing process, we weeded out 16 hours or so of footage down to just over one hour of an edited documentary. We tried to ensure that we fundamentally preserved the metaphysical awe of being in this avatar space while at the same time illuminating some cold empirical facts about Traveler itself.

We also insisted that the documentary remained entirely in-world in order to avoid breaking the spell of embodiment and immersion.

Once we had our beta-version assembled, Donato, Flick and myself organized a local focus group (about 30 people) one night at the 536 HQ to get creative feedback about the first edit of AVATARA.

Based on this input, we decided to stick to our in-world focus and our minimal audio solution. We also figured out which parts to highlight or delete on the basis of the audience's reactions and criticisms.

CP: What were your specific roles in the making of AVATARA?

JT: My role was that of the interviewer/guide in the documentary, and I chose to be a blue horse avatar named "Kalki" (named after the Hindu avatar incarnation of Vishnu who is supposed to be the up and coming one with judgments about the future state of

humankind). I took the horse form since it is written in some Vedic texts that Kalki is meant to appear to us in the form of a white horse. I chose blue because that happens to be my favorite colour (alongside purple).

Donato took the avatar called "Krishnamurti" and he was the camera man / avatar. Sometimes, his avatar looked like a hot-dog and at other times, he appeared like a flattened version of the black Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey. I must add though that you never see his avatar in AVATARA. That is, he remained silent and invisible throughout the feature but used the avatar to be the objective eyes behind the interviews. He only spoke to set up the camera shots and poses etc. He is virtually the Director of Photography (DOP) as well.

Once the first draft of AVATARA had been completed, we realized that we had a stand-alone piece that we wanted to show on a more widespread scale.

CP: Are you seeing AVATARA as an artwork to be presented in museums and galleries and hopefully to be acquired for a collection (for example in an edition)?

JT: AVATARA is both a documentary and a piece of art. We wanted to make this a hybrid and protean piece that we can exhibit as a work of art and/or as a documentary resource for avatar scholars. We also see it as a piece of entertainment for people who are new to experiencing avatar worlds. Therefore, we are currently snail-mailing promo DVDs to reviewers, scholars, critics, film festivals and art festivals, galleries, museums, etc.

CP: You mention in the artists' statement that it is 'one of the first ever' documentaries of this type -- I'm actually not familiar with any other documentary done in this way, could you tell me which other ones are out there?

JT: We did and are still doing a lot of net research into this subject and so far, we only have come up with ours as an avatar doc that has been shot only in-world. The other ones we came across still have offline components.

Even the so-called "Machinima Documentaries" posted on the newsgroup for Machinima.com have offline segments. I think, unless proven otherwise, AVATARA might indeed be the first truly Machinima documentary.

As for other documentaries, we just started corresponding with Daniel Liatowitsch who did the documentary called Avatars Offline (www.avataraoffline.com)

We have traded DVDs with him and have proposed to double-bill our documentary with his for cinema screenings although we also want gallery/museum exposure and support.

CP: What is your distribution model for the DVD? Are you selling the DVD (if so for how much and where can it be ordered)?

JT: AVATARA is currently independently distributed (536 productions) but we are open to the idea of an official distributor and/or carrier. We are selling copies of our DVD for \$20 U.S. When supplies are low, we plan to prioritize scholars, curators and writers as ideal consumers for the DVD.