Authoring the Intimate Self:
Identity, Expression and Role-playing within a Pioneering Virtual Community

Steve DiPaola
Interactive Arts and Technology
Simon Fraser University
steve@dipaola.org

Jeremy O. Turner
Interactive Arts and Technology
Simon Fraser University
jot@sfu.ca

Abstract

We examine Traveler, a social-based 3D online virtual community with over ten years of continuous community use, as a case study. Traveler is a client-server application allowing real-time synchronous communication between individuals over the Internet. The Traveler client interface presents the user with a shared, user created, virtual 3D world, in which participants are represented by avatars. The primary mode of communication is through multi-point, full duplex voice, managed by the server. This paper reflects on the initial design goals of the developers in the mid 1990s to emulate natural social paradigms and, more recently, reports on how the online community uses distance attended multi-point voice and open-ended 3D space construction to express themselves both on a personal level and collaborative level to facilitate a tight socially based community. This paper situates the historical importance of Traveler within the framework of contemporary virtual worlds and provides insights into the ways that this software platform might influence next-generation virtual communities.

Introduction

Traveler is a multi-user, voice-enabled 3D browser. It employs 3D environments and avatars with complex facial animations to provide a platform for synchronous, multi-point voice communications (DiPaola & Collins, 1999, 2003; Damer, 1998). The goal in developing Traveler was to deliver a rich and compelling experience of human socialization, using a common consumer PC platform over the World Wide Web. With this goal in mind, a number of very specific design and implementation decisions were made to achieve the intended level of free-form socialization while operating within the platform constraints. Our design goal was to develop a virtual community system that emulates natural social paradigms, allowing the participants to sense a tele-presence, the subjective sensation that remote users are actually co-located within a virtual space (Stephenson, 1992). Once this level of immersive 'sense of presence' and engagement is achieved, we believe an enhanced level of socialization, learning, and communication are achievable.

Figure 1: Group voice chatting in Traveler via lip-sync emotive avatars.

In Traveler, users are immersed in a shared 3D world with a first-person perspective. Each user is able to navigate with six degrees of freedom, and each sees the other participants as fully modeled 3D characters. As a user speaks, his or her voice emanates from the corresponding avatar viewed by other clients. The avatar's lips and facial structure synchronize with the words spoken, and voices sound distance-attenuated and spatialized in stereo according to their position in the 3D world relative to the local user. The voice communication in Traveler is full-duplex and fully multi-point; the user is receiving audio while speaking and multiple streams of voice audio are delivered to each client. The overall effect of the voice delivery in conjunction with the visual environment is that of a virtual 'cocktail party'. Users spontaneously form and re-form conversational subgroups using natural social conventions.

Our design goal was to develop a virtual community system that emulates natural social paradigms, allowing the participants to sense a tele-presence: the subjective sensation that remote users are actually co-located within a virtual space. Once this level of immersive 'sense of presence' and engagement is achieved, we believe that an enhanced level of socialization, learning, and communication are achievable. Similar beliefs are reflected in the writings of cyber-visionaries such as Howard Rheingold and Michael Heim (Rheingold, 1993; Heim, 1998). We examine a number of very specific design and implementation decisions that were made to achieve this goal within platform constraints. We also will detail some observed results gleaned from the virtual community user-base, which has been continuously online for over 10 years.

History

Traveler was initially created for a large Silicon Valley start-up, Traveler! Technologies. It was used in a commercial sense for major entertainment, broadcast and educational organization including MTV (see *Figure 1*), ABC Monday Night Football, Case Western and Stanford University. After many years at a second company known as communities.com, the authors along with other 3D virtual community pioneers brought the software and servers to an open source world, making Traveler a Creative Commons licensed community. Completely open, the community flourished and allowed the founding author and a handful of others to do anthropological research on exactly how long-time community members were using the software, many of whom were still using the system after 10 years. This last section of the paper documents a specific case study from this research.

Goals and Design Points

Traveler was first developed in 1995 in response to a number of basic observations. The initial hypothesis in implementing Traveler was that the use of human voice is the most natural way to carry on shared conversation. The implementation of an effective multi-voice audio environment was the primary design target. The human voice is tremendously rich in the layers of meaning expressed, beyond the simple stream of words. Inflection and timing inject meaning into a sentence that is very hard to include in simple text. With this in mind, Traveler was intended to facilitate a virtual multi-way conversation, with participants contributing randomly, spontaneously and in arbitrarily shifting combinations. Since the use of voice in communication is fundamentally an interactive one, it was considered essential to allow for interjections, overlapping commentary, encouraging responses, and other natural elements of verbal communication. To achieve this, it was necessary to provide a mixed stream of audio on the down channel. To create this effect in a limited bandwidth environment, Traveler provides each client with up to two audio channels on the downlink, chosen from all the available up-linked audio streams. Each client receives a different set of audio channels based on a number of heuristics, taking into account proximity to other speakers and which of the other participants are speaking at any given moment. Since the downlink stream set is re-evaluated every 60 milliseconds, the resulting voice environment appears to be perfectly fluid. The client software uses knowledge of the relative positions of avatars to individually attenuate and stereo-locate the corresponding voice channels. This allows the user to manage the influence of their voice on individuals and groups by approaching or retreating from other avatars. For example, a user engaged in conversation is vaguely aware that another group of users are also speaking some distance away. As a member of the distant group approaches, his or her audio becomes increasingly loud and combines with the original conversation. The direction and distance of the new voice can be intuited from the attenuation and stereo queues. By seamlessly combining these various audio techniques, Traveler provides users with a broad range of natural social behaviours in the shared environment.

The intention of integrating an immersive 3D environment into the Traveler experience was in large part to give the user intuitive tools for managing their experience. Frames of reference are required for navigating amongst conversational sub-groups. The use of distance and orientation in a social context are only meaningful in a spatial environment. However, in addition to providing familiar paradigms for managing voice interaction the shared virtual space also allows the user other quasi-organic channels of communication. Using basic navigation skills, the user can implement common gestures as non-verbal communication (for example, nodding, cocking the head, or turning away in disgust). Dancing and exuberant motion can be used in conjunction with voice to enrich emotional expression. Landmarks can also be used to rendezvous with other individuals for planned events. The 3D environments in Traveler also provide a symbolic and thematic background for communication. In addition to theme, mood and setting can be suggested in a space through the use of architectural and sculptural elements as well as background textures. Environmental audio in the form of randomly cycling layers of sound or music can also be added to a space to provide greater depth of experience (see *Figure 2*).

In an attempt to further enhance the organic feel of the Traveler experience, the decision was made to implement avatars as smoothly morphing 3D models that animate in response to the user's voice (see *Figure 3*). Usually, as in the case of anthropomorphic avatars, this animation takes the form of synchronizing the movement of the jaws and lips to the phonemes used by the speaker. This creates the profound illusion of a human face in the process of producing speech. This animation helps the user to determine which avatar in the field of view is speaking and adds to the overall illusion of being in the direct presence of living, conscious creatures. This same morphing technique is used to implement blinking, breathing, changes in emotional state and other lifelike sequences to further enhance the subtle impression of life in the avatars. Because Traveler avatars showcase the face so prominently, this organic effect is highly resonant with users due to the extreme psychological and neurophysiological importance of the face to the human psyche (Arya et al., 2006). Users have reported a desire to maintain eye contact and to feel the effects of personal space during a Traveler session, indicating a high level of immersion in the social environment.

Figure 2 (left): Spaces have several social staging areas and use visuals/sound to convey an ethereal setting. *Figure 3* (right): An avatar is constantly morphing according to 3 categories: Blinking, Lip-sync, and Emotions.

In designing the Traveler experience, we employed a consistent minimalism that served two primary purposes. The first was to provide the satisfying, responsive experience of an animated world on platforms with limited CPU power and communications bandwidth. The other was to keep the experience focused on a few essential channels of communication that maximized the user's sense of actually being co-located with other real individuals. Our approach was basically a narrative one. We used simple 3D graphical elements to merely suggest various elements of a world and its inhabitants, while at the same time insisting that these inhabitants are 'real' by investing them with certain very organic characteristics (voice, fluid motion, emotions, autonomic twitches, and so forth). We chose to make extensive use of voice because it is such a rich, multi-layered channel of communication which conveys a great deal of individual character. We emphasized the faces of avatars because of the immediacy and intimacy implied by face-to-face communication. The voice belongs to the user, but is fully transferred to the avatar's face through the use of lip-syncing and virtual location. Thus we talk about 'binding

the pair': the unification of the remote user and the corresponding avatar in the mind of the local viewer.

Some evidence suggesting a level of success in this 'binding' emerged during early user tests of the system (DiPaola & Collins, 2003). It was observed that users felt the need to maintain eye contact with the virtual avatars on the screen. They seemed hesitant to turn away from the screen for fear of being perceived as "rude", despite being aware that their turning away could not be visually perceived by the other users. The suspension of disbelief in using the system was such that unconscious social patterns of behaviour were in effect. Similarly, from participating in Traveler sessions it is clear that certain standards of social behaviour are naturally observed in the virtual world. Users describe a sense of discomfort when a novice user navigates too closely and thus violates a normal sense of "personal space". In response, the violated user will navigate backward to a "safe" distance. Users tend to unconsciously turn to orient on the current speaker as one would in the real world and generally organize themselves in social patterns with the virtual space. All of these things suggest a high level of immersion in the illusion of co-location.

Authoring the Global Self

"The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits [sic] *such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world."* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945)

If we were to upgrade Merleau-Ponty's quote and substitute "the body" for a virtual body and downplay the biological aspects of our everyday lives, we might be able to afford a clearer glimpse into a typical day in the life of a Traveler avatar.

As thousands upon thousands of people are now intermingling daily in avatar-based virtual communities, many are beginning to break down the traditional definitions of identity and self. Since the birth of Traveler over a decade ago, individuals in the form of partially embodied avatars have been directly exploring the trans-disciplinary intimacy and multiplicity of what Dr. Sherry Turkle has called our "Second Self" - a self that is more like a "distributed system" or a "windowed self" than a fixed first-person ontological perspective (Turkle, 1984). Not only do citizens of virtual worlds inhabit many identities that are each authentic in a particular context, but they also soon realize that identity itself is a dynamic construct that does not need to be ontologically confined to their biological body. In fact, even their personified virtual representation in cyberspace is not strictly confined to one of their chosen avatar forms.

Traveler was perhaps one of the first virtual world platforms to aesthetically encourage each citizen to express their core 'self' through architectural (and visually plastic) modes of being and becoming. In this way, a user does not have to choose between the extremes of either playing a role or strictly being 'oneself' or a separate self, but instead can meander through the

virtualized infrastructure of a narrative-prompting 'identity space' as one of many role-playing manifestations of a distributed self.

Based on post-beta anthropological case studies shown through the in-world documentary AVATARA (Harrison, Mancini, & Turner, 2003) as well as through independent qualitative analysis, we have found that Traveler's community members started to transcend the creator's original design goal of 'binding the pair'. As evidenced by this particular case study below, the more prominent avatars in the Traveler community experienced a novel way to ontologically inhabit their architectural surroundings as a valid manifestation of their inner personality (such as desires, emotions, or idiosyncrasies). Even if their avatar bodies were not present in their constructed space, there was a strong intuitive sense amongst other avatars that the hosting avatar(s) were ontologically "haunting" their virtual home(s) since most of these places were shrines that celebrated their localized celebrity and remote agency.

In aesthetic, phenomenological, and ontological terms, the Traveler avatar went beyond the self/other dialectic found in most other virtual world platforms and was even taking the concept of the "figure-ground relationship" found in two- and three-dimensional artistic discourse to a new level. On this level, the self could at least symbolically become both the figure *and* the ground simultaneously: whether by accident or design, key players in the Traveler avatar community successfully found a phenomenological way of 'binding the trinity'.

Unlike Turkle's notion of the "windowed self", which was a concept first formulated from the study of text-MUD environments, avatar-authors in Traveler pioneered a way to take the window metaphor more literally and thereby expressed themselves three-dimensionally as a "housed self" or even a "built self" that also happened to contain multiple "windows" as part of their personal ontological architecture. In this sense, Traveler participants authored their multi-dimensional personality into some sort of eerie pan-solipsistic gestalt where visiting users would be allowed to partake – even participate – in a portion of the avatar-author's expressive emotional embodiment. It is primarily this aspect that made Traveler closer to being historically considered an emotional forerunner of contemporary mainstream platforms such as Second Life than the more architecturally similar predecessor to SL known as Active Worlds (ca. 1995). In Second Life, it is not uncommon to see dedicated citizens spending many hours of their time trying to express (even advertise) their core personal values, tastes, as well as their internal and external emotional states through the creation of virtual accessories such as clothing and custom designed home environments.

Generally, virtual communities since Traveler have taken this newly discovered need for multiple and differing identities and exploded the boundaries to the point where authoring the self has blurred the lines between both fiction/non-fiction as well as self/space.

As we have mentioned above, literally millions of new users have become accustomed over the years to the cultural protocols of virtual worlds thanks to the recent emergence of 'mainstream' brands of chat environments and video games such as Second Life (ca. 2003) and World of Warcraft (ca. 2004), respectively. These users have learned to acclimatize themselves to environments that are not only blurring the lines between Author and Audience but between fiction and non-fiction as well. To better understand the mechanisms that allow interrelation through collaborative socially based 3D space creation and communities, we began interviewing

long term Traveler participants. While much data was collected, for the purposes of this paper we will center on the work of one woman named Purple Tears and her community.

It is important to first understand how an individual's identity has been expressing itself since the dawn of the Information Age. We all have many identities. We carry multiple business cards, emails, or domain names. This new medium of socially based Internet communities simply takes that multiplicity of identity and intensifies it in every imaginable way. In fact, our identity – our persona – can be very different depending upon what function we are performing. Imagine if a person could change their persona, their very physical appearance, to better convey a message. Imagine, too, if they could change the setting where they presented that message to better convey a narrative atmosphere. Generally speaking, avatar communities effectively extend and express many (if not all) of the multifaceted interactive narratives that are contained within ourselves, and our virtual environments.

Much has been written about how various professional interactive authors, academics and designers change the face of how people relate to each other on the Internet, but within avatar worlds it is regular folks doing the authoring. For example, the avatar Purple Tears in Traveler is neither a professional author nor self-consciously an "artist" in the conventional sense but is a mother and house-wife in middle-America. In her deflated attempts to deflect her own ontological presence from her built environment, she simply describes her home as an "Early America Yard Sale". She told the creator that when she first came into Traveler's 3D virtual worlds she thought they were made from physical desktop models. She (Pam) authors herself: Purple Tears. In Traveler, Pam (as Purple Tears) can be an avatar and identity space simultaneously.

After a few minutes visiting with Purple Tears in her own intimate self-space, other avatars soon begin to receive an irrational yet emotionally compelling keen phenomenological sense that both her identity and ego-world are not merely the result of fantasy. Even when taking into account the relatively low resolution of the graphics within Traveler (compared with, say, Second Life), her image-textured walls and installed sculptural accessories are composed as if they were an actual part of her inner psyche. Her space is so emotionally intense and integrated with her avatar's torso-less visage that a visitor is equally persuaded (or at least seduced by the idea) that her chosen lifestyle is not a form of role playing but is actually a valid exploratory component of her 'true' persona. She creates spaces that are intensely personal to her. Her spaces are based on songs. She listens to a single song over and over while creating a world. In fact, she will take an excerpt from a particular single song and loop it within her space in order for the song to function as a kind of "personified muzak". Purple Tears has some of the most popular spaces because she hits a shared emotion. Purple Tears' worlds are a visualization of a musical narrative. So, in the case of Purple Tears' self-space called "Sad Lisa", song writer Cat Stevens is, too, the author, but Purple Tears' spaces go beyond Stevens' preconceived musical inspiration and narrative.

Figure 4: "Sad Lisa": Stairs going nowhere, a room with a lone chair, spilled wine glass, and pills.

"Sad Lisa" is but one of numerous 3D community spaces from the prolific catalogue that Purple Tears has created (see *Figure 4*). According to Purple Tears' heartfelt subjective experience, "Sad Lisa" is about a friend of hers who, after many years of drug and alcohol abuse, committed suicide. As the space is about a very lost woman, Purple Tears has built winding staircases that seem to all go nowhere. The only poetic elements that seem to correspond to a fixed spatial (but not temporal) reference is that of a spare unadorned room that contains a lone chair, a spilled wine glass, and assorted pills.

Traveler and the Second Life of Oral Transmission

"Sad Lisa" is not a singular piece of art work (although it surely works on that level) but a space for others to come into and interact with each other. She creates her narrative in a form which can be thought of as a set in a movie or play. However, unlike a movie or a play, when other avatars visit this space in her absence they are still likely to believe that they are directly inside of her personal narrative or perhaps even her virtually explicated psyche. Others within the community might still be able to enter her domain and be able express themselves as discrete avatars but, by and large, these visitors are entering this identity space with their own personal narrative baggage.

On a more surreal level, the real life Pam often enters her own space as a different avatar identity (not as Purple Tears) to participate as an observer as if she was watching some unknown play gradually being presented to her on her own stage.

As we can infer from a situation such as this, Traveler was indeed one of the first worlds to truly blur the binary notions of author and audience. Speaking of authorship, it should be emphasized that despite an inability within proprietary Graphical User Interface (GUI) for users to collaborate on architectural building in real-time, even a 'primitive' virtual world such as Traveler was able to place Purple Tears' own narrative agency in doubt. Unlike contemporary virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL), Traveler avatars affect the real-time narrative agency of the hosting author through the use of orally overlapping parallel narratives. We take it for granted that Second Life's interface has always allowed avatars the opportunity and luxury to

build spaces together simultaneously in real-time. In SL, the observable expression of narrative agency amongst an entire avatar community is very visible and imprinted directly in the design of the architecture and/or accessory fashion line.

Since Traveler was developed too early to efficiently implement any real-time collaborative building tools, members of the indigenous community had to rely on more intimate modes of oral transmission to augment someone else's narrative agency with their own. In other words, Travelers could not directly alter the visual architecture that Purple Tears built but they were able to re-focus audience attention towards additional subjective inner-worlds generated by the close proximity and presence of their words alone. Speech itself became the only persistent way in which avatars could ornament an avatar's personal self-space with their own parallel narrative experiences. Since Second Life did not develop a workable voice codec until much later in its development, parallel narratives were either explicitly made visible in the collaborative visual design of the architecture/accessory (usually in the 'sandbox') or through the limited medium of text chat.

The advantage of being an avatar in the Traveler environment was that the personal narrative integrity of the avatar-author could be preserved (since the architecture could not be altered in real-time) while parallel narratives, at least on a psycho-somatic level, could still flourish. In fact, these parallel narratives often inspire an "artist" like Purple Tears to befriend these other story-telling avatars and provide her with the incentive to create a special tribute self-space that is custom suited to the orally transmitted narrative(s) of her friends. It is from this unique combination of individualistic permanence and oral fluidity that a genuine indigenous community mythology can organically evolve. After all, most of our collective mythological consciousness (including archetypes) has been derived from narratives transmitted by orally communicating societies.

As a result, it might take a few more years before a world like Second Life can develop a lasting indigenous mythology that will transcend its own reputation as a relatively mainstream corporate brand. In fact, Second Life's own mythological apparatus may have already been too fragmented by its own citizens to impart historical weight. The recent emergence of the voice-based community within Second Life is currently seen within the larger dominant SL community as a sub-cultural clique that occasionally is ostracized from the traditional text-based communities that helped form Second Life's officially recognized cultural character in the first place (Boellstorff, 2008). This is not to say that Second Life does not yet have its own pantheon of legendary figures and archetypes. However, it may still be a while before the Second Life community on the whole –including those communities who have 'lived' in SL before the arrival of its own voice codec – can fully understand the cultural impact of narratives transmitted via an oral-centric culture.

Authoring the Game of Friendship

"Sad Lisa" is an example of the narrative of spaces, but what of the narrative of personas or avatars? Who are they and how do they change their identities from real life? Again, it is not about fantasy or role playing but about expressing a persona, or real part of you. Purple Tears is also known as Pam (see *Figure 5*) and moonlights as a housewife with husband and kids in the United States. As Purple Tears, however, she is more open, outgoing, and wild.

Figure 5: With Purple Tears in front, a group gathering becomes a greeting card for CyberStar.

So identity online is as real as 'life' itself. Pam has close friends that have known her for two years as Purple Tears. Others are living out their particular personas within their own lifestyle driven narratives. In Traveler, as in most other virtual worlds, concepts such as 'non-fiction' and 'fiction' begin to blur. Is fiction now the narrative of the persona, or a narrative that expresses a 'real' person and a 'real' part of that person's identity?

Pam has been a Traveler for over two years and she has close friends and even a long-term relationship as Purple Tears. She is not playing a role, but is actually expressing a more accurate aspect of her self – a part that is culturally difficult to express as a mom. To look at her identification as a Traveler in another way, Purple Tears is more like how Pam was when she was in her 20's in Hawaii: more open and free. "Open and free" this hardly implies that Purple Tears is suddenly *care*free and devoid of community responsibility. On the contrary, Purple Tears' citizenship in Traveler has invigorated a sense of community pride and mutual support within her very (virtual) being. For example, when friends found that one of the members of the community, CyberStar, had cancer, they took a picture (*Figure 5*) to represent a get well card for her. A few months later, when Purple Tears had just finished making this space, the community found out that CyberStar had died. The space became a quasi-religious gathering place and Purple Tears added a plaque in memory of CyberStar. Shortly after, an online wake occurred.

Because of her closely embedded community ties with her fellow Traveler citizens, Pam would rather live permanently in-world as Purple Tears than lead a 'real' life. For Pam, the reality and importance of Traveler directly mirrors the equal importance and reality of her closest friends – who just happen to reside in-world.

"Uninvited"

In addition to "Sad Lisa", Purple Tears had created an equally emotionally intense space called "Uninvited" (see *Figure 6*). "Uninvited" illustrates the aforementioned relationship scenario through its architectural and avatar (proxy) design. In this case "Uninvited" depicts a specific scenario that is close to Purple Tears' heart. This unnerving identity-space 'narrates' one

of Purple Tears' past relationships where her then-boyfriend knew their relationship was coming to an end and had suddenly turned into an obsessive stalker. He became irrationally jealous and possessive as he would virtually stalk her and fixate on every one of her avatar's gestures.

Purple Tears' alienated ex was ultimately worried about her straying because, in this atmosphere where everyone knows all and has had relationships with all, he knew it would eventually end. If Purple Tears did not move (nod) her avatar head around (she does not have a torso), he would accuse her of texting (using the person-to-person text chat) to other people "behind his back". She was feeling trapped and longed to be free.
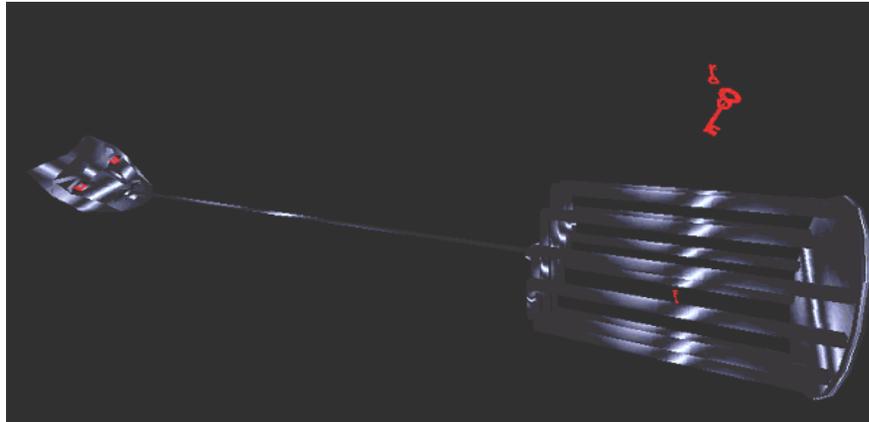

Figure 6: "Uninvited": Purple Tears' cage with keys just out of reach (right). Her ex-boyfriend's torso-less avatar (left) is represented as a demon face and the creator of the cage.

In summary, Purple Tears creates artworks-as-artworlds based on emotional release tied to a song, and then people co-opt her artwork as part of their habituated community environment. She exists in Traveler with past relationships, friends and possibly even future lovers. This is not about fantasy but about a real facet of her identity. Even though Pam is different in Traveler, her avatar is (essentially) her. When in a relationship they talk the truth – every aspect of their lives – more so than in a "skin" world, as she refers to the real world. For instance, the Traveller community knows that she is married, has kids and lives an "everyday" life. Her friends see the inner side behind the organic surface of her personality – the artist, the emotional, open side. They all use a narrative to tell their own truths and to therefore literally and symbolically author themselves.

Purple Tears creates art with a community of people (her friends) that becomes the very parks, streets, community squares that they meet in. From the dynamics of their relationships, both at the personal and community level, another artwork is created with sometimes very strong and personal narratives. These trans-personal narratives symbolically form a cultural bridge across ontological boundaries and terra-form their collaborative personality matrix into the very landscape and environment of their community. They are both expressing themselves and living inside their art work.

In the case of one Christmas event, they used their avatar design skills to set up what many small towns do: a living nativity scene where dressed-up participants sing Christmas carols

(see *Figure 7*). What is extraordinary, besides the fact that they were able to do this in real-time from all over the globe, was that after the event they were able to memorialize this event by 'freezing' their avatars into the virtual equivalent of town sculptures. These sculptures were permanently exhibited along with embedded audio of the songs sung, creating a memorial town square of the event for inhabitants to visit at any time in the future (unless the entire world disappears). Social events can spontaneously become solidified into community monuments or village squares.

Similar memorialization rituals are beginning to happen in Second Life as well and this should come as little surprise due to the fact that collaborative real-time building is a fundamental selling feature of SL's GUI. If Second Life and next-generation virtual world platforms eventually want to monumentalize history, Traveler would be the primary community for them to draw from. In fact, one of the main 'Mayors' of the Traveler community is in the process of working with Sweden's HUMlab in Second Life to create the first official Digitalspace Traveler Museum.

Figure 7: A nativity scene created from avatars for Christmas becomes a series of permanent sculptures; a nativity set that Traveler users can revise year after year.

Conclusions

Purple Tears and her community of close friends are living out this virtual narrative of spaces and people as we speak in Traveler, but in a few years all of us should be able to extend our personas via expression systems and form meaningful yet mediated friendships of our own. Exploring and extending different parts of our real identities and personas via narrative and expression based systems are forming, in real-time, a mythology template for the 21st century where the 'story' and the 'real' blend together. Imagine multimedia based online expression tools that can be used in different ways to express and extend your persona and your narrative. It appears that the near future is offering the aesthetic opportunity to augment your own personal narrative and embody it into an entire world-space that others can freely participate in as a holistic part of themselves, either singularly or collaboratively. Who is the author? Who owns the new art? Who is the consumer or audience of 'the art'? Who knows? Digitalspace Traveler has left behind a legacy for current and future generations of avatar users to express their inner

selves, not only as an expression of art, but also as an expression of the world that they choose to live in. In a way, Traveler recalls an early indigenous society that established mythological norms through the time-tested tradition of orally transmitted narratives. For all those who are waiting for the next Second Life, one might need to look back to the past so they can better understand what lies ahead for ontologically embedded narratives in the near future.

Acknowledgements

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