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Profile 8: Being Baccara and Chasing Aimee: The Artist as Avatar - A Tale in Two Parts

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

BEING BACCARA AND CHASING AIMEE:
THE ARTIST AS AVATAR—A TALE IN TWO PARTS

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THERE'S A WOMAN IN A LYCRA BODY SUIT AND NINE-INCH CLAWS

protruding from her gloves; there's a lankily handsome Parisian photographer who flew straight to California from France for the occasion; there are multimedia artists, DJs, musicians, filmmakers, gamers, and entrepreneurs with fresh deals from the likes of Adidas and Toyota to create versions of products whose only drawback is that they've never really existed. There are at least a couple federal government officials, plenty of academic types, and rocket scientists from several aerospace companies; there's also a man with dark glasses, a shaved skull, and a Southern drawl who cheerfully announces, at the beginning of his talk, "My name is Stroker Serpentine, and I'm a pervert."

Wagner James Au was Linden Lab's official 'embedded journalist' in Second Life from 2003 to 2006, and continues to cover the world on his blog New World Notes (nwn.blogs.com) and for his upcoming book from HarperCollins. He has also written for Salon, Wired, and Lingua Franca. He lives in San Francisco.

But the girl with the electric blue butterfly wings isn't there, even though she's among the most famous of them all.

Then again, few expected "Aimee Weber" to make it to this year's Second Life Community Convention, an annual real world gathering of subscribers to the user-created virtual world for which it's named. Aimee is many things—a 3D artist, a business owner, a fashion designer, a creator of immersive educational/nonprofit installations—but one thing she isn't is forthcoming about the person behind the avatar. In the online world of Second Life, your "avatar" is the 3D alter ego you create for yourself—it's the Sanskrit word for "godly incarnation," and if it's unique and engaging enough, it becomes your identity and your trademark. People are free to reveal as much or, as in Aimee's case, as little as they want about the real person behind their avatar. And while some five hundred Second Life subscribers—known as "Residents," the title given them by the Bay Area company, Linden Lab, that created Second Life—have come to SLCC '06, revealing who they are in the physical realm (sometimes for the first time), Aimee opted out of

the event altogether. More mysteriously, she'd also been a no-show at the first SLCC the year before, which was held in Manhattan, the place she claims to live.

"Baccara Rhodes" is there, however. In real life, Baccara is a retired wedding and *bah mitzvah* planner from New Jersey, and this is the first time that she's met "Nick Rhodes," the aforementioned photographer from

early innovators in the most improbable of artistic mediums—a virtual world that ultimately exists only as binary code on several thousand nondescript servers in San Francisco. By now, media attention has expanded awareness of Second Life, telling stories of quick virtual wealth and sexy alternate lives, a superficial narrative that blurs a deeper and just as important story. It's about Second

IN THE ONLINE WORLD OF SECOND LIFE, YOUR "AVATAR" IS THE 3D ALTER EGO YOU CREATE FOR YOURSELF—IT'S THE SANSKRIT WORD FOR "GODLY INCARNATION," AND IF IT'S UNIQUE AND ENGAGING ENOUGH, IT BECOMES YOUR IDENTITY AND YOUR TRADEMARK.

Paris, in person. They've known each other for nearly three years, both enjoying celebrity status in Second Life, Nick for his glamour screenshots of female avatars, Baccara for, well, *being* Baccara—the high-born lady in a Versace evening gown whose Second Life weddings and spectacular events have elevated her into Second Life's power elite. For a time, Nick and Baccara shared an adoring "in-world" relationship, and co-hosted intellectual salons in Nick's art gallery. But that ended when Nick's roaming became too much for Baccara ("I'm not gonna sit around here like Rapunzel!" she recalls thinking). She piled up their keepsakes and mementos and turned them into a giant bonfire. Baccara declines to call the relationship romantic, but hearing her describe it, it had a depth beyond surface friendship. And so the next time Nick logged in, he found himself standing in front of the fire, and several women he knew, waiting for him with their arms crossed.

He took the punishment in good spirits—which must have been a relief for both, considering how far Nick flew to come meet her there. And that's where they sat for the first time, in a hall just above the San Francisco Bay, idly chatting like old friends reunited (which when you think about it, they are), the handsome young Parisian and the retired Jersey spitfire, from two worlds that are, all else being equal, unlikely to converge. "He's a very sweet man," Baccara told me later.

What unites Aimee and Baccara is their status as

Life as a creative medium and as an emerging art form, which could—and for some, already has—become more engaging than film and more immersive than sculptures or interactive installations that exist in mere material form. If its full potential is realized, it will owe much to the pioneering efforts of both of them, which began years ago when Second Life existed as a niche purgatory,

WHAT UNITES AIMEE AND BACCARA IS THEIR STATUS AS EARLY INNOVATORS IN THE MOST IMPROBABLE OF ARTISTIC MEDIUMS—A VIRTUAL WORLD THAT ULTIMATELY EXISTS ONLY AS BINARY CODE ON SEVERAL THOUSAND NONDESCRIPT SERVERS IN SAN FRANCISCO.

neither online computer game or geek play thing.

And in a few weeks, I'll be flying from California to visit them both, in the places where they help remake this new world of the mind. I'll be the very first fellow Resident to meet Aimee Weber in person.

If she exists, that is. Or if she's even a "she."

A brief history of the metaverse

Before going any farther, it might help to describe this medium, sometimes called a virtual or online world or game, sometimes an MMORPG, for "massively

multiplayer online role playing game,” and to explain its development and its potential as a creative realm.

It begins with computer programs known by the charming acronyms MUD and MUSH—the former for Multi-User Dungeon, the latter for Multi-User Shared Hallucination. Throughout the 1980s, they were largely the playthings of those with the wherewithal to tinker on university mainframes. The programs were whole worlds described entirely by text and rudimentary graphics, but they were enough to create a picture in the player’s mind, and give them enough context to interact within it—whether by the dozens, hundreds, or thousands.

Paralleling the evolution of virtual worlds was a growing cultural awareness of their possibility, evoked most vividly in Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. The novel had predecessors, of course, but it was credited with making a virtual world (there called the Metaverse) a tangible and fully-formed concept for a wider readership; prophetically, the 3D virtual world of the Metaverse was not just a fantasy world, but a portal for accessing the Internet. Or rather, a portal for *diving* into the Net.

tries were busy creating their own spinoffs of MUDs. With Electronic Arts’ *Ultima Online* in 1997, graphically richer than anything that came before it, users explored an unfolding world while looking down at avatars from a birdseye view. Implementing the latest in 3D graphics, Sony’s *Everquest* made the fantasy world still more immersive. Now a user could not only look over the avatar’s shoulder, but take on a first-person view from their vantage point.

At about this time, academia began to perceive MMOs as petri dishes for socioeconomic, cultural, and legal analysis, a line of inquiry unleashed in 2001 by CSU-Fullerton economist Ed Castronova’s paper, “Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier.” A study of *Everquest*’s economy of gold coins and barter of magic items, Castronova’s study famously placed its gross domestic product above Russia’s and Bulgaria’s.

Other academics began approaching the medium from alternate angles. Working with a team of volunteers in a virtual world, Stanford graduate student Nick Yee reported an interesting phenomenon: male avatars

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This vision was part of a grander technoutopianism emanating from California futurists like Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow, figures who had taken a renewed interest in the speculations of a Jesuit priest from the early twentieth-century, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In particular, they were captured by Chardin’s vision of a time when mass communication technology would yield a “noosphere,” an aggregate of human intellect that would be united electronically into a greater world mind.

Ultimately, however, the bulk and awkwardness of early virtual-reality equipment suspended these grand aspirations. Still, the term “immersive” had secured a place in the high tech lexicon as a standard by which to judge how thoroughly and convincingly a virtual world could engage users’ senses.

Undeterred, the computer and videogame indus-

tended to make less eye contact with other male avatars and stood farther apart, while male and female avatars stood closer together and held eye contact longer. In-world avatar behavior, in other words, aligned with the unwritten social cues of contemporary society. This only confirmed the intuitions that people who already played in online worlds were familiar with—that there was a kind of literal reality being “embodied” in these worlds of 3D graphics. By a trick of the mind, users associated avatars with their sense of self.

The rapidly expanding market for broadband Internet, and the continued drop in the retail cost of home PCs with graphics, created a perfect storm by 2004 with the debut of *World of Warcraft* (affectionately acronymed *WoW*). Today, *WoW* boasts over seven million subscribers around the globe, with two million in China alone. To be on a *World of Warcraft* server is to share the

same virtual space with thousands of people from over a dozen countries, living a lucid dream of adventure and heroism. And because of the size and international scope, it's possible to consider MMOs not just as a game, but as a new medium.

While these commercially produced fantasy worlds afford little beyond the company-prescribed hierarchy of quests to complete, monsters to defeat, and avatars' character attributes to enhance, they have effectively become technological training wheels for another species of world, a descendant of the MUSH in which the users are able to construct the worlds themselves.

This is Second Life, created in its most nascent form

make it subject to gravity and inertia. Create another prim, merge it into the first one, and a complex object begins to take shape.

So what Linden started as a vast, untamed continent of mountains, meadows, and lakes was transformed by users into cities, suburbs, and built landscapes. From open oceans spring sailboats, submarines, and cruise ships; from the plains come racing tracks, clothing-optional nightclubs, and Resident-made games of all sizes and styles. From the mountains appear sprawling, Frank Lloyd Wright-style homes, tree villages, and heavily-armed World War II fortresses. In all this, there's a distinct sense of an expanding wilderness being settled.

WHEN AN AVATAR STRETCHES OUT A HAND, A STARBURST OF LIGHT TRAILS OUT OF ITS FINGERTIPS AND, AT ITS APEX, WITH A RUMBLE, A WOODEN SPHERE OR CUBE OR OTHER BASIC BUILDING BLOCK EMERGES.

in 2001 by Linden Lab, a company founded by former Real Networks CTO Philip Rosedale. Originally, Rosedale conceived the world as a barebones platform to demonstrate the virtual reality hardware, such as a force-feedback mouse controlled with a head-mounted rig, which he and his team were developing. But the hardware soon receded as the company decided the world itself was the thing to develop. Their task was clear—when Cory Ondrejka, Rosedale's lead developer, sought to recruit a programmer friend to the company, he began his invitation with, “Hey, want to come help build the Metaverse?”

The rise of 3D graphics and broadband streaming technology made it possible to transform this virtual world construction process into a dynamic, collaborative, real-time activity. In Second Life, for example, when an avatar stretches out a hand, a starburst of light trails out of its fingertips and, at its apex, with a rumble, a wooden sphere or cube or other basic building block emerges. They're called “prims” (as in *primitive*), and an avatar can stretch them, imbue them with different textures so as to change their substance, and enable their “physics”—a reasonable proximity of Newtonian mechanics—to

Add to this commerce, as well. An internal currency known as Linden Dollars, which users buy with real cash, fosters an economy, while the company's policy allowing Residents to retain

the intellectual property rights over everything they create fosters innovation, and the emergence of grassroots businesses. That was not always the case—months after Second Life's commercial launch, Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford law professor and Creative Commons advocate, consulted for the company and advised Linden to allow for creative property rights. Real estate and fashion design are among the top industries, with casino/nightclub ownership, game development, and adult entertainment close seconds; niche cottage industry gigs include tattoo artist, aerospace engineer, live music performer, architect, banker, escort, and private detective.

Into this breach, as well, in fitful starts and tentative attempts, come artists of all kinds. But that's a relatively recent expansion of the creative menu. Before then, the world had to prove itself as something more than a game, and more artistically fertile than mere fancy graphics. And that begins by transforming a disparate collection of people around the world into something like a community.

Which in turn begins, as it happens, in a small town in New Jersey where Tony Soprano survived getting whacked.

Being Baccara: The avatar as muse

Back in 2003, Nanci Schenkein was reading the “Circuits” section of the *New York Times* and came across a story telling of a new online game that promised an “infinite creation story.” A San Francisco start-up with the quirky name of Linden Lab had just opened up a beta version of something called Second Life. This, Nanci decided instantly, was where she needed to be.

SOME MIGHT HAVE BEEN SURPRISED AT HER CURIOSITY, COMING AS IT DID FROM A WHOLESALE FLOWER BUYER AND EX-WEDDING/BAH MITZVAH PLANNER CLOSE TO FIFTY YEARS OLD.

Some might have been surprised at her curiosity, coming as it did from a wholesale flower buyer and ex-wedding/bah mitzvah planner close to fifty years old. Her computer of the time was so ancient that she enlisted her college-age daughter Liza to help her first log in.

“I knew inside me exactly who I wanted this woman to be in this world,” Nanci recalls. “I wanted her to be strong, classy and someone who would lead the way in taste and social grace, which is why I was so careful in choosing her name and the way she looked...I think part of her is me,” she continues. “Other parts of her I think are indicative of a person I think would be necessary to the culture of such an emerging world.” She had played *The Sims Online*, a web-based social game launched in 2002, and that, too, formed Nanci’s sense of who this woman should be. “My experience in a prior virtual world was that most women wanted to portray themselves as young, more flighty types. That’s fine, but I think there is a place for the Baccaras of the world,” she said, “the woman to be reckoned with.”

In Second Life, users select their first name, then pick their surname from a pre-approved list. It’s a trick of social engineering from Linden Lab, inspired by a suggestion in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, *Slapstick*, that sharing the same family name gives people an enhanced feeling of affiliation. Nanci already had a first name in mind—“Baccara,” a kind of rose; scrolling through the available

last names, she saw “Rhodes,” and that was it. “Sounds like a WASP-y girl,” she remembers thinking now.

Nanci lives with her husband Leon in Roseland, New Jersey (population 7,000), where much of HBO’s *The Sopranos* is filmed. When she picks me up for the interview, she’s wearing sunglasses studded with rubies and sandals with gold lamé stars. “To me she’s someone very different,” she says of Baccara, “Audrey Hepburn, late thirties.” (Second Life female avatars, it should be said, tend toward the very young and extremely busty. Perhaps it’s a vision of the woman the person would like to be, or when it’s a man choos-

ing to play a female avatar, maybe it’s who they fantasize being with. Not so with Baccara.)

“I saw her, I really did,” Nanci tells me as we’re sitting in the living room of the townhouse she shares with Leon. Outside, there’s a view of deep Jersey forest; a large photo of Elvis dominates the room, while movie photos ring the dining room nearby. “I think she’s very no-nonsense,” she goes on. “She came to Second Life and knew what she had to do—she had to be Baccara Rhodes.” She sees Baccara Rhodes as a New York businesswoman, firm, can-do, but chic all the same. “I think the whole point of SL [is] having a life we never had.”

FROM THE START, SHE WORE ELEGANT GOWNS, ADDRESSED FELLOW RESIDENTS WITH HIGH-TONED SPEECH, AND SCOLDED THOSE WHO RESORTED—AS THEY OFTEN WOULD—TO VULGAR LANGUAGE.

From the start, she wore elegant gowns, addressed fellow Residents with high-toned speech, and scolded those who resorted—as they often would—to vulgar language. She once decided on a whim to move into the combat-enabled war zone, scolding the gamers there for their uncivilized behavior. Outraged, they launched a series of terrorist attacks culminating in the kidnapping of a monkey in an art gallery rigged with proximity mines. But the terrorists never threatened Baccara directly. As

one of them sheepishly admitted to me, she had too many powerful friends for them to risk doing *that*.

"I think they're afraid of her," Nanci muses now. "Maybe because she's not a chippy in a bikini."

Building Neverland

Nanci spearheaded one of the first major art installations in Second Life. It was called "Neverland." Working with land on loan from Linden Lab and more than a couple dozen volunteers including a dear friend who helped coordinate the project, a Southern woman she's never met in person, but knows in Second Life as "Fey Brightwillow."

By late 2004, Baccara was seen as a kind of mistress of ceremonies who the community could count on for planning the largest parties and hosting the grandest weddings. Spying a niche, Baccara drew on Nanci's real life experience to open "Bedazzle," an event planning business specializing in the production of in-world weddings (Second Life marriages were at first designed to last, but Nanci says most unions are now treated as temporary affairs for the sake of the wedding event itself). "More and more Residents are social players," she observes, "so weddings last like three weeks." In other words, paradoxically, Second Life weddings nowadays are more for roleplaying, and not taken as seriously as they once were.

INSPIRED BY J.M. BARRIE'S PETER PAN NOVELS, "Neverland" was to be a grand, expansive experience, sprawling over forty-eight acres of fin de siècle London replete with pubs featuring working dart games, and the Darling's house, and a last star on the left that, if followed, led into Peter's world of pirates and Lost Boys. Nanci and her team play-acted as Captain Hook and the cast of Barrie's characters.

While it nominally resembled a theme park, its historically faithful depiction of Victorian England and its invocation of the classic children's story suggested a role for Second Life beyond light entertainment. Here, visitors could chat with beloved literary characters, learn details about their lives, and explore recesses and

dark places that were part of their world. On the one hand, it made history a first-person, interactive simulation, offering a kind of pedagogical time machine that could be rapidly prototyped in the space of weeks. On the other, it was literature transformed into an interactive experience, a merger between computer game and live theater, more personally engaging than a film—it was fully immersive narrative. If Baccara's Victorian London was the stage for an immersive children's story, why not employ it for one of Dickens' darker novels? Why not create Czarist St. Petersburg, explore Dostoevsky's Russia, or early twentieth-century Dublin to trace Bloom's journey in first-person? In recent months, in fact, a virtual Dublin *was* built in Second Life, and an immersive *Ulysses* proposed.

BACCARA'S VOLUNTEER CREW, COMING TOGETHER FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, WORKED UP TO FIFTEEN HOURS A DAY OVER A SPAN OF SIX WEEKS TO CONSTRUCT "NEVERLAND." To maintain focus and cohesion, Nanci had to coordinate many people across different time zones, with varying levels of English-speaking ability, and with distinct personalities destined to rub up against the others. Nanci wielded much of her leadership, as Baccara, through Second Life's chat/instant-message interface. Tens of thousands of words passed back and forth, to groups and person-to-person, subtle instructions transmitted in abbreviated text, practical specifics and political niceties alike. When Resident "YadNI Monde," a supremely talented 3D builder from France, refused to work in a group, for example, Baccara assigned YadNI his own tightly defined regions to work within.

THIS IS THE UNIQUE NATURE OF ARTISTIC COLLABORATION IN SECOND LIFE, BRINGING A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS TOGETHER TO WORK ON AN INSTALLATION THAT EXISTS FIRST ONLY IN THEIR IMAGINATION.

This is the unique nature of artistic collaboration in Second Life, bringing a group of individuals together to work on an installation that exists first only in their

imagination and as a digital representation streamed across the Internet, and oftentimes, doing so without even knowing each other's real names, or any personal details beyond what was produced by their avatars. As a Second Life journalist, I've watched astounding projects emerge from nothing—cityscapes, winter castles, and surreal sculptures out in the empty desert that evoke the Burning Man art festival—created over the course of weeks and months with a seriousness of effort and a professionalism that would rival the output of a production team working in the same room. Many projects, of course, fall through or fall far short—after all, any volunteer can abandon the team by just powering off their computer. But at the heart of any collaborative project that succeeds is trust between avatars and, almost invariably, a strong avatar leader like Baccara Rhodes.

"Maybe there's something about her that they respect," Nanci muses, pondering Baccara's ability to be the driving force behind the projects she's conceived.

"Or," she adds, "they're afraid."

As a character with authority, one not to be trifled with, Baccara Rhodes suggests the prerequisites for the medium to succeed. Please Baccara, and earn her affection, and share her triumph; fail her, and fear her scorn. It's the force of her fictional persona that made her creativity possible—not just an idea for a collaboration to cohere around, but a muse to inspire. And when necessary, to crack the whip.

Chasing Aimee: the avatar as entrepreneur

I first met the avatar known as "Aimee Weber" in 2004 at a virtual bar modeled on a real-world Manhattan dive. Aimee was (as she is now) a lithe brunette with librarian-sexy eyeglasses, and a fashion sense that tends toward punk rock ballerina (a diaphanous tutu worn

wings, it turns out, were the gift of a random stranger who gave them to her very shortly after her "birth" in Second Life.

In its earthly incarnation, the Bellevue Bar was a semi-notorious joint in Hell's Kitchen known, as New York magazine notes, for its "sordid vibe, with beat-up couches and aging local barflies propped up against the bar." Aimee had built the in-world tribute because she was a regular at the real place. She designed it to be as skanky as its real life counterpart, right down to the graffiti in the imitation toilet. Building it when the world was still a relatively Arcadian, close knit community of roleplaying creators, it seemed strange that someone would create not a castle or a futuristic city, but a smutty bar with tattered movie posters on the exposed brick walls and a floor where one might find hypodermics lying in the corners.

Aimee was also one of the first female avatars who seemed to cross the "Uncanny Valley"—the term robotics engineers and computer graphics animators use to describe how a simulated human looks real, but somehow creepily "off." Like "Mistress Midnight," a full-lipped Latina with pronounced, Jennifer-Lopez topography, Aimee was distinct from the more generically female avatars. She was unique enough to have, for lack of a better word, soul. Consequently, as I bumped up against her in the Bellevue's narrow space, I felt another phenomenon for the first time—the awe-struck, stupefying giddiness a man usually feels when in close proximity to a beautiful woman. It was visceral proof that Aimee and her friends had vaulted across the "Uncanny Valley."

I kept it touch with Aimee in the ensuing months, watching her meteoric rise as an in-world celebrity. Fame came first through her founding of *Preen*, her line of

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with combat boots, ripped and torn stockings with a tiara—that sort of thing) and those butterfly wings always sprouting from her back: violet blue, idly flicking open and shut, as she interacts in the world. The ubiquitous

avatar fashions and the brand and identity anchored by her persona as an outrageously brash, flirty, vaguely tipsy ballerina with blue butterfly wings. The avatar as brand. Aimee Weber was one of the first to innovate this new

kind of Net-driven entrepreneurship. With the Aimee Weber identity, she invested her designs with a cultural sensibility and set of experiences based on her activities in Second Life. Wear her clothes, come to parties she hosts and attends at the best locations, and hang with her and other Resident “in”-crowders. In Second Life, the *Preen* line could actually deliver more fully on the promises real world fashion companies make in ads that depict their products as tickets to the dream life of youth, beauty, and exotic locales. *Preen* advertising was brashly sexy with a third-wave feminist edge, depicting cute *Preen*-wearing avatars doing disreputable things. “*Preen* girls poop,” one marketing poster announced defiantly over an image of Aimee sitting on the toilet, tutu down around her ankles.

It was enough to launch her to the top tier of Second Life content creators; it was also enough to earn her a real income. At its peak, she says, the *Preen* line was earning her three to four thousand dollars per month.

Her facility with the creation tools moved her from fashion to 3D property development. She built the island of “Midnight City,” a virtual New York City with textures and lighting that rivaled the best of contemporary videogames, and on the strength of those creations, began to take on real-world clients. By the beginning of 2006, Second Life had eclipsed a hundred thousand registered users. Coupled with intensifying media attention from the likes of the *New York Times* and CNN, Second Life started to attract growing interest from corporations and nonprofits. Real companies like Wells Fargo and American Apparel expressed interest in “immersive advertising” of their products; the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law and the Public Diplomacy program at USC’s Annenberg School of Communication want to experiment with it as a venue for international, Internet-mediated education.

Recently, Aimee took a commission from the San Francisco Exploratorium to re-create a Roman amphitheater in Turkey, where museum guests and Residents could view a video stream of a solar eclipse that was occurring simultaneously in Turkey. For another project, with Warner Brothers musician Regina Spektor, she created a “listening box” made up to resemble a New York City loft, where avatar friends could hang out and

listen to Spektor’s latest album. American Apparel’s CEO heard so much buzz about Aimee Weber that he sought her out to create the first virtual branch of a real-world retail chain. Her sites are unique for extensive texturing and shadowing, which is graphic design jargon for imbuing the surface of objects with unique detail and for simulating the play of light on surfaces.

All these projects were arranged and negotiated through Second Life. She didn’t speak to her clients by phone, let alone meet with them in person. Executives from established companies created an avatar for themselves, took the trip to “Midnight City,” and met her. Avatar as *brand* had become avatar as *entrepreneur*.

But then, *no one* who knew Aimee Weber in Second Life had ever met her in person. Some theorized she was actually a gender-bender, which, they thought, would explain Aimee’s brash, sexually provocative style. Another hypothesized that Aimee was not an individual, but a group, for how could one person engage in such extensive 3D building and fashion design, while also keeping up with the prodigious amount of writing she contributed to three different Second Life blogs?

So it was with some relief and not a bit of surprise, when after some coaxing, she recently agreed to meet.

THE AVATAR AS BRAND. AIMEE WEBER WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO INNOVATE THIS NEW KIND OF NET-DRIVEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP.

It was in Manhattan during the late summer, on a day when the last waves of humidity were still lingering on the streets; she picked the place, and to give things a nice narrative circularity, she chose the Bellevue Bar in Hell’s Kitchen. The thing was, the Bellevue’s heyday as decadent and seedy hangout had already passed, and it took me awhile to find the place, which had been spruced up and re-dubbed. It was now the kind of place executives at nearby design studios could take their corporate clients to for a business drink.

And that’s where I finally met Aimee Weber in person. It took a while to get accustomed to calling her by her real name, Alyssa LaRoche. Alyssa is a brunette in her mid-twenties with a creamy complexion and large brown eyes, with a distinct resemblance to Natalie Portman. Tutu and combat boots remained at home (they do exist, she insists); instead, she wore a demure

white blouse and blue jeans, her only visible flair a pair of decorative ruby earrings. And over a pint of draft and a gyro across the street, with a bubbly and girlish voice, she told me how Aimee came to be.

Her avatar is more or less her, Alyssa explained. After graduating in the late 1990s from Columbia/Barnard, where she double-majored in computer science and English, LaRoche went straight into the peak of the dot-com boom as a consultant with Bering Point, a branch of KPMG. She'd often present her analysis of the Internet economy to Fortune 100 clients. "That's the main thing Ivy League colleges train you in,"

she muses now. "It teaches you how to have confidence when you have no reason for it." By night, she ran with the club kid scene, often in the punk ballerina garb that was popular at the time (and sometimes with a pair of butterfly wings on her back), with wild late night partying at meatpacking district clubs.

Until, that is, she got into a serious scrape she prefers not describe on the record. The nightmare incident made her a stay-at-home hermit, while the boom's bursting bubble conspired to keep her there. As did a bipolar diagnosis a couple years ago, which led to a battery of various antidepressants, and a rollerblading mishap that thrashed her knee. "In large groups I start to freak out a little," she notes. So Aimee Weber is a safe incarnation of the life she lived in those downtown halcyon days, in those years when Limelight and Mother were the clubs to go to.

While she's all but abandoned the **Preen** fashion line (though in-world vending machines keep sales trickling in), real life fashion companies have approached her about converting her designs into real life. She hesitates to get into the real-world side of the industry. "It's a really nasty, back-biting industry."

In any case, she's already made the move into full-time metaverse developer for a variety of clients, both corporate and nonprofit/educational. One involves simulating diseases like smallpox for the University of Idaho's rural health center. She acquired a limited liability license for Aimee Weber 3D Content Creation, making her one of a small but growing number of real companies that originated within the metaverse.

She misses the celebrity of being Aimee, Alyssa told me in a French café near the Bellevue. "My time is being

taken up more with business work." She was steeling herself for the inevitable time when clients would insist on an in-person meeting. "I guess I know it's coming," she sighed, resigned (And it did. Several months after our interview, the unlikely client, a department of the United Nations, asked for a real-world sitdown. So Alyssa made the trip to the UN building, and is working

OVER A PINT OF DRAFT AND A GYRO ACROSS THE STREET, WITH A BUBBLY AND GIRLISH VOICE, SHE TOLD ME HOW AIMEE CAME TO BE.

with them on creating a poverty awareness campaign in Second Life).

Her therapist (a behaviorist) is fascinated by her life as Aimee. "She thought it could be destructive, as it cut out a lot of my so-called 'real' life," Alyssa told me. While still mystified, she now thinks it's a perfect place for her to be, a place which, matched with therapy, has created a safe environment where she can develop. Emotionally and economically. Since it draws on her skills as a 3D graphic artist and offers a creative outlet for the literary flair that made her an English major, Alyssa reasoned, "In a lot of ways, you couldn't write up a more perfect job description for me."

At last, art

There's no shortage of Residents who've experimented with Second Life's building tools and scripting language as a new kind of artistic medium for sculpting and interactive installation art.

Early innovators included "Angrybeth Shortbread," a professor in multimedia arts at a British arts college who experiments with installations—e.g., a wishing well that repeats words spoken by visitors, twirling them off into the air as gossamer letters; or "Arahan Claveau," a futurist who creates a number of immersive experiences, including "Sick Cat," a black chamber with walls featuring fragments of memory, a hospital gurney floating amidst stars, and giant pills strewn everywhere. It reads as both a demonstration and a cautionary tale for the artist's vision of a time when we ensure our immortality by "downloading" our consciousness into a virtual world like Second Life. There's "Stella Costello," a self-taught artist from the Midwest who sculpts with such detail and

abstract subtlety that she's developed a large, grassroots following within SL. Her most popular piece depicts a uniquely metaverse-style evolution, from wooden block, to abstract figure, to young woman leaping free of a display case.

For the most part, in the world's first years, this arts scene was organic and homegrown within Second Life, comprised of individual Residents who independently discovered an affinity for the creation tools and made art projects part of their repertoires. Gradually, however, these grassroots originators have been joined by real-world artists with formal training who see Second Life as a new palette. And, perhaps, as a new market. In 2005, a group of artists and architects sponsored by the Swedish government launched The Port, an arts laboratory arranged on an island resembling a cube-shaped mesh

IN THE WORLD'S FIRST YEARS, THIS ARTS SCENE WAS ORGANIC AND HOMEGROWN

of glass cells. It's meant to be a 3D wiki and to foster experimentation in several media.

San Francisco Art Institute graduate DC Spensley re-dubbed himself "Dancoyote Antonelli" (his avatar is an obsidian shadow) and introduced his own aesthetic of hyperformalism into Second Life. A merging of 3D graphics and pre-computer-age forms, his most famous SL-based work to date was a ensemble performance that combined flying dance animations, music, and particle effects. Seattle artist Susan Robb—who's won real-world acclaim as a 2003 Genius in Visual Art by a local alt-weekly, the *Stranger*, brought her ironic scientific photography and other experimental playfulness into the metaverse. For Seattle's 2006 Bumbershoot festival, she created a national park within Second Life.

In doing this, she explains, "I recalled my initial feelings of both absolute freedom and total vertigo when I first went in-world. A lot of those feelings for me had to do with SL's lack of time on both a daily and geologic scale. ... I wanted to make something that took advantage of the freedom I felt."

In her first experiences in Second Life, she saw the world as another environment for her to respond to. "However, as I learn more about what is possible in SL," she said, "I am starting to see it as a place where I might want to make things that I can then import back in to real life—like videos for example." She isn't the only artist to make this realization. Last fall, for example, the Jen Bekman gallery in New York hosted a series of screenshots taken by photographer James Deavin, reimagining SL as a minimalist, surreal landscape.

As the SL art world of innovators and creative pioneers grows and evolves, it won't even be strictly necessary to recall figures like Aimee Weber or Baccara Rhodes, who established themselves as Second Life artists when the world counted itself as a community of thousands, rather than today's millions. But the world as it exists now would not be possible without them; and those who would carve their own place in the metaverse would do well to follow their trajectory, from self-defined avatar to self-defined reality.

Of course, the next challenge (as it is with all innovators, no matter what reality) will be how far to take creative success into commercial enterprise. Last I checked in with Baccara Rhodes, she was promoting and hosting corporate-sponsored events in Second Life, for companies like Toyota and Popular Science.

And Aimee Weber? The girl with the butterfly wings *incorporated* herself. Aimee Weber Studio, Inc., is now a company registered for business in the state of New Jersey. ✨