Swinburne University of Technology

Darren Tofts

When avatars attack! Anxiety, the creative act and the art of steam

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Abstract
Is the sleeping half-life of a drowsy poet the same as that of an avatar? Once the sonic conundrum of a tree falling in a forest was the acid test of the relationship between knowledge and perception. How do you know it fell if you do not hear it? The figure of the avatar is the cipher of our contemporary malaise to do with reality and its facsimiles. What then happens when we write in a dream? Is that text a copy or an original? Inspiration, accident and happenstance are perhaps other names for the avatar, and for that matter the creative act as well. Aren't they?
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> Energetic hubbub and thumping tum Going dark cool in the food zone Bain-maries conscientious giving mums. Familiar weird No expense spared High on the cliff a long way down in the dusk Ocean glimpses lots of people People I know Long time ago
>
> Party-time An island Second Life primary colours garish tones Flat horizon Toon-like Arrival coast Peter Jackson Hordes arrive by aquaplane Topless Techno blasts and bounces Moshpits and mayhem
>
> Then There is a then I know her She wants my phone Persuasive insistent Urgent She disappears phone in hand I'm overcome It's normal and strange Not a girl An avatar Looks like a girl
>
> Vibe pumps Hear it up here High I spelled eyrie in grade three E y r i e Alarming bubble-like and benign A dithering Tyrannosaurus Rex grimaces and snorts With people Real people Breathing false fire Crowd erupts Bright windows and agitation

Suddenly anonymous and sudden A crevice Then the phone
The screen is fucked scratched unreadable Myki screens at
Regent station Hand numb drowsy with memory And light
Bright curtain

Anxiety

Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's fragment 'Kublah Khan' (1816), this vignette came to me unexpectedly in a dream, though I will certainly not call it a 'vision' as Coleridge did. Dreams are a rich source of inspiration and material to be sure for any scribbler. Who wouldn't want to write about mixed reality or a digital T-Rex? Or be able to spell the word eyrie? But this dream was precipitated by anxiety, an anxiety about writing. Specifically, the anxiety of writing a paper for this conference. At the time, around mid October, I had not even thought of an appropriate or, dare I say it, engaging theme for this presentation (not to presume that you will or should find this engaging). And this was no 'how cool is that' procrastination. So it was during a typical night of insomnia that I found myself restless and anxious about the imminence of this event; anxious, critically, at that marvellous, algebraic interval between consciousness and sleep. I awoke with the drowsy trace of having been asleep, the residue of a dream encrusted on my eyelids, a dry mouth and the slippery, elusive attention of recall. But it was no ordinary recall, it was anxious, since I treated the dream as offering non-consciously-thought-of ideas that could become a potential text. In other words, no identifiable theme or topic shouted out from the clutter of dream weirdness. *Second Life* is *Second Life,* but why on earth do you want to hear about it? Or mobile phones, techno parties or vandalised Myki readers in Reservoir?

This anxiety about writing isn't without precedent. There are many precedents, maybe too many, like the infamous Socratic parable in *The Phaedrus* about the otherworldly and inhuman origins of writing, and like the too-cool-for-school posse of late twentieth century Francaphone grammatologists, who prayed at the shrine of Socrates' river Ilissus. Or the fictitious author Silas Flannery in Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, who, suffering from the trauma of writer's block, resorts to copying the first lines of another novel in attempt to kick start his own prose (Calvino 1982: 140). So this dream was yet another instance of the anxiety of writing. I was haunted by writing *as* anxiety, as well as the anxiety of *having to write*. It was the all-too-familiar burden to start from nothing and end up with something. Let's face it. A Robert Rauschenberg white canvas speaks, as does Marcel Duchamp's *Hat Rack*, or John Cage's *4'33'*. A blank page does not. Writing, or what the French call *l'écriture*, is not a thing, a static, hermeneutically-burdened text, but an intransitive process of seeing where you can go in the dark without a beacon otherwise known as a theme, a topic or subject.

Or a vision. We have learned much from literary criticism of Coleridge's dream fragment, but nothing more significant than the holding power of will over the creative act, of intention, ego and, ultimately, 'me'. Fuzzy, less planned things such as inspiration, happenstance and serendipity are central to the pre-writerly act of discovery ('Serendipity', Greil Marcus reminds us, 'is where you find it' [Marcus 1989: 93]). Accordingly, Greg Ulmer replaces the word composition with 'heuretics', a portmanteau word derived from hermeneutics (the art of meaning) and heuristic (the art of discovery) (Ulmer 1994). But for the proponents of subjectivity and conscious will, inspiration and aleatory invention are apparently not enough to constitute an act of writing. They have always been considered as starting points in the discipline of English and most

orthodox writing programs. And of course drugs as part of the curriculum are right out; well at least since the 60s, or maybe late 70s at La Trobe University. I should say at the outset that unlike Coleridge I had not taken an anodyne sedative prior to going to sleep; and Coleridge, as is well known, was not one to usually require the occasion of a 'slight indisposition' or illness to slide with pharmacological bliss into the arms of Morpheus (Coleridge 1977: 156).

To make the point then. I bet very few of you are familiar with the automatic writing and painting by schizophrenics published in the literary journal *Transition* in the 1920s, or the instant 'dial-a-poem' texts of John Giorno, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg in the 1970s. But I bet you do know that Jean Bedford's 1982 novel *Sister Kate* was *based* on the actual history of the Kelly Gang, while *inventing* much of the intimacy between Kate and Joe Byrne. The former didn't rate in the academy as inspiration, but the latter did, since it was fictional composition in its typical sense as willing suspension of disbelief. Accordingly, central to what and how we write. But despite the historical avant-garde, mail art, happenings, sound art and expanded cinema, the techniques of craft, drafting, re-drafting, dithering, delouthering and, ultimately, intention and conscious will, would be mandated as avatars of taste, excellence, authority and value (the question by whom, of course, is still hopefully being debated in the academies). Penguin, Random House, the Miegunyah Press, for example, are far more than publishing houses. They are institutions of taste and moderation, of fine letters that have been impeccably researched and finely and consciously written. In many years in this country its mandate was written by a damp patrician homeland in the North Sea. We, apparently, were its antipodes.

But for a minute let's forget the English home of letters. In Melbourne these values of official cultural capital were solidified in a curious imprimatur in the early 1980s. As pontificates of literary taste, writers Michael Heywood and Peter Craven precociously and surprisingly deferred not to FR Leavis, IA Richards or Virginia Woolf as having the final word on writing and intention, but rather to the fifth Prefect of first century Judaea, Pontius Pilate. Why? Thus declared Pilate, '*Quod scripsi, scripsi*' – what I have written, I have written. Piltate's Latin dictate over the condemned Christ is an unwitting cipher of the historical weight accorded to the prestige of authorial intention. An incipient OxBridge Don, Pilate's assertion clarified a hermeneutical quibble to do with meaning, of what was intended and what was not; in this case the meaning of the text written above Christ's crucifix. Therefore resolving the heated debates of Jewish high priests (whether Jesus *wa*s King of the Jews or just *said* he was), Pilate underwrote the certitude and finality of intention unequivocally, without even uttering the words 'Finitur leccionem', or 'Here endeth the lesson'.

A curious aside: that text above the crucifix, 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews' was written in three languages, Hebrew, Latin and Greek. Like the famous triscript carved into Rosetta Stone of Egypt in 196 BC, the deciphering of meaning and the clarification of intention was central to Pilate's exertion of power in late 30AD. For Jean-Francois Champollion in 1822, deciphering this so-called Memphis Decree not only cracked the code of hieroglyphics but translated another declaration of absolute power and authority for the new reign of King Ptolemy V.

So writing with a capital W, Authority with a capital A and Pretentiousness with a capital P equals what Roland Barthes called a 'preterite', a given and unassailable ideological truth (Barthes 1977). The Australian cipher of this literary mandate would not fully manifest until 1981 in the fustian halls of

Ormond College at the University of Melbourne under the guise of a new literary journal, a journal called *Scripsi*.

This deference to good form, regrettably, still casts a long shadow over the tribe of alphabetic and more recently, after James Joyce, 'verbivocovisual' or multiplex hacks that we call writers in 2012 (Joyce 1975: 341). With a reluctant and skeptical nod to Dr Johnson's appraisal of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), hypertext freeplay and *jouissance* 'did not last', whether on floppy disk or online, such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987) or Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1995). 'Easy creativity', such as inscribing dreams, riffing off HTML, Storyspace or, more to the point, Dreamweaver, is still haunted by the spectre of a real literature that it will never be. It is also plagued by the anxieties of influence (where did these ideas come from), of intention (did *I* will these ideas into being, into intelligibility) and of morality and ethics (is it right and does it matter). The intentionalist fallacy may have been dismissed by New Critical iconoclasts such as Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt, by post-critical heretics such as Emile Bénveniste, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. But the smell of that metaphoric *scripsi* snuff and all it represented still left its malodorous trace as the twentieth century dragged itself into the new millennium. This highbrow self-righteousness has without doubt troubled the long history of criticism of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. Thomas de Quincey couldn't wait until Coleridge's body was cold to denounce him as a plagiarist, which is suggestive of the anxiety over intellectual genesis at the time. As well it shows that there was no honour among opium eaters.

But with de Quincey in mind the *real* concern here is that such a classic English text as 'Kubla Khan' unwittingly highlights the tenuous boundaries between creation and plagiarism, which definitively implies that something *precedes* the act of composition that may not have been an act of will. Curious, then, that its canonical stature is so solid. But the poem is at the same time a text-book lesson in how the Great Tradition works. Literary borrowing has a long, established and even generic history. To certain modernists, definitely postmodernists and most poststructuralists, this is unproblematic, since all creation involves borrowing and appropriation, from TS Eliot's 'tradition and the individual talent', Harold Bloom's weak poets learning from their stronger elders, to metafiction, parody and pastiche, intertextuality, iteration, alterity and the trace. Not to mention the blues, funk, rap, hip-hop, turntablism, cyberpunk, remix and so on. 'Kubla Khan', like many other texts, among them *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, not only borrows but it generously acknowledges the borrowing (Eliot's publishers, remember, advised Tom to include a detailed appendix of reference and allusion to the second edition of *The Waste Land*, Joyce had Stuart Gilbert write a detailed text to outline the deep literary heritage that underwrote *Ulysses* and Pound never said anything other than 'Make it new!' as he translated the French Troubadour poets into English). We are told in the Preface, for instance, that having fallen asleep in his chair Coleridge 'was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in *Purchas's Pilgrimage*'(Coleridge 1977: 156). The similarity between words of the Jacobean Samuel Purchas' 1613 text and Coleridge's opening couplet is actually unremarkable, since it is an obvious borrowing: Coleridge: 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree'; Purchas: 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built' (156). But despite all the historical sophistry and agitated alarm, a source is a source is a source, right? Whether accidental echo, conscious literary borrowing or data theft, Coleridge's copyist act sustains the dualism of writing as a textual and compositional response to *something*, another text that precedes and, arguably, justifies it. In this case the subject is not Christabel, not the River Otter, nor an Eolian harp, a nightingale, frost at midnight or William

Wordsworth. It is another text, *Purchas His Pilgrimage: or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation unto this Present.* So, Purchas 1613, Coleridge 1816.

But, of course, we can't simply leave the matter there. In Coleridge something certainly preceded an act of writing, another text that became the subject of his own writing filtered through a dream. Lacking a basis in lived experience, it is a perfect description of one kind of plagiarism as theft and appropriation as literary borrowing; what Jack Stillinger describes as 'creative plagiarism' (Stillinger 1991: 98). And so not for the first time in literary history the cause and effect relationship between an *a priori* thing and an *a posteriori* text is born out as the traditional and sanctioned duality of inscription. It is transitive, the passage of one thing, one state, to something else through the compositional and active process of scribbling. In this case the poet unconsciously and unwittingly borrows more than lightly from the learned cleric of Elizabethan travel writing Samuel Purchas. Coleridge insists that having slept under the influence of opium and the profound words of Purchas, he awoke and composed roughly two to three hundred lines of text. But his own reflection on the word 'composed' is suggestive here: 'if that indeed', as he says, 'can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, without a parallel production of the correspondent expressions'. And further, with my emphasis, '*without any sensation or consciousness of effort*' (Coleridge 1977: 156). Did I mention that Coleridge also had 'a distinct recollection of the whole', which he eagerly committed to paper? In this account Coleridge invokes a kind of automatic writing, though not of the spiritualist kind Madame Blavatsky might have written in the 1880s, or Shakespeare's 'affable familiar ghost' who 'gulls' the fraudulent, competitive sonneteer with fake intelligence. In both cases a benevolent or malevolent spirit still qualifies as a source, as something fundamental that precedes writing without intention. Coleridge automatically wrote out and wrote through another text. But please rest assured, 'Kubla Khan' is still a Classic.

However at the same time the opposite is true. This bristly logarithm of *writing* as a process that precedes writing as a *text* underlines the genesis of the very text you are listening to now. Writing as an intransitive verb. The problematic of what precedes *this* writing to which I am giving voice is of course as old as writing and literary studies itself. A branch of what has come to be called 'source studies', akin to textual editing, seeks to distinguish progeny from profiteering, pedigree from profligacy and other normative and sanctioned verifications of what is the source and what is the copy. However in the world of dreams, avatars, anxiety and the creative act, though, the centre cannot hold. Such values don't mean the same thing. That is, a dream motivated by anxiety enabled me to write, but the writing is not a narrative of that dream, or an interpretation of it. It is not, as in Coleridge, the dream as subject matter. What you are hearing was entirely improvised as a singular thing. This text is a copy without an original, a simulacrum. In certain halls of learning the resolution of this conundrum, how something can be a copy without an original, will guarantee you tenure.

But a more interesting thought experiment is to think of an avatar with an agency that is not controlled by a human. This thought experiment is clearly an apt metaphor for the implosive psychopathology of the closing decades of last century. This condition of virtuality has become more urgent and continues to become more invisible as we enter the third decade of a new century. In his *Parables for the Virtual*, Brian Massumi folds the idea of the virtual into the human/avatar in relation to contemporary phenomena of agency. He describes 'body-sites' that are multiple: corporeal, incorporeal, abstract (Massumi 2002: 3). The avatar/human agent is such a multiple, a manifold 'continuous body'

across thresholds of affect (21). This continuous body is made up of organic and digital life, *anime* and *animus*. It is a body not without organs but beyond them. Beyond organism, beyond games, spectacle cinema, effects that are no longer special, the ambient communications of CNN, text messaging, social media and an otherwise imploded global village. A body whose couture is the intimate apparel of personal screenery, from mobile phones to tablets and the pervasive urban screens in public places. And the artificially too-intelligent-for-their own good online personal assistants, lifeforms with whom we can converse about Ikea or Coca Cola. Digital life is one way to describe this seamless co-presence of actuality and virtuality. Another is avatar.

The creative act

Is the sleeping half-life of a drowsy poet the same as that of an avatar? Once the sonic conundrum of a tree falling in a forest was the acid text of the relationship between knowledge and perception. How do you know it fell if you do not hear it? The figure of the avatar is the cipher of our contemporary malaise to do with reality and its facsimiles. The literary critic Joshua Clover has written more persuasively than most of this condition, particularly to do with the spectacle of CGI cinema that is obsessed with artificial realities, with parallel digital and physical worlds, the confusion between the two and the intervention of one into the other (Clover 2004). However rather than simply asserting this it is important to summarise some of the symptoms of this condition, as they critically frame the conundrums of the preceding discussion of Coleridge as contemporary phenomena of a dramatic inversion of a natural order of things.

So imagine. Imagine Coleridge as an avatar that acquired autonomy beyond dualism, beyond unseen human agency (I say *that* acquired, since personal pronouns as well as gender are affectations, conventional identifiers in an avatar as much as they are in humans). That is, as with the Tyrannosaurus Rex in my dream there is no unseen person in Tokyo or Vancouver animating Samuel Taylor Coleridge from their keyboard, infusing it with personality, difference and life-likeness. The Coleridge I am invoking is a simulacrum, a digital manifestation in a mixed reality populated by flesh and pixel people. Like the virtual reality of my dream, we accept this virtual writer without question. We can extend this blind faith to the history of English letters, to Wikipedia, Coleridge landmarks in the north of England, the Cambridge Tripos, etc. We have completely forgotten that there was a real, historical person called Coleridge, and forgotten that we have forgotten. Even the plaque at Greta Hall in Cumbria insists on the facts: ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge, avatar, lived here from 1800-1806’.

We remember, after Jorge Luis Borges, an illusory past. Literary works such as ‘Dejection: An Ode’ and *Biographia Literaria* are applauded as artificially intelligent texts composed by an avatar, a thing just as much a part of our world as those that flounce and fluoresce around Pandora in James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*. And if such an alternative history is far-fetched, think of the long history of art made by robots, cellular automata and other forms of artificial life, what Mitchell Whitelaw has called ‘metacreation’ (Whitelaw 2004). And while we are on the point spare a thought for American youth, a large chunk of which, according to a recent study, had never heard of the Beatles, let alone forgotten them. In the spirit of my simulacral Coleridge tinted by the false consciousness of *The Matrix*, an alternative musical history is ripe for the writing, which I offer you as homework. Think of it: Pete Best on drums, Klaus Voormann on bass, Stu Sutcliffe on guitar and Astrid Kirchherr as chanteuse.

Replace Liverpool with Berlin and you've got an historical phenomenon without a history, as well as a fake hysteria not unlike Beatlemania, with a name that's sure to blow everyone's mind: Das Beatle Aufregung.

Avatars are without question associated with ubiquitous computing in our lives. As Ulmer has suggested, the avatar is a kind of stolen identity, a 'prosthesis of ourselves on the Internet' (Ulmer 2012: xi). Avatar is the metaphysical state when the two are confused. Consider the real life San Francisco lawyer Arthur Siegel. Addicted in the mid 1990s to the Rand Brothers' interactive story-world *Myst* (1993), Siegel famously blurred the difference between the real world and the virtual world. 'The only problem was', he observed in 1994, 'when I began clicking on things in real life. I'd see a manhole cover and think, "Hmmm, that looks pretty interesting," and my forefinger would start to twitch. And then I'd realize, "No, it's real life. Real life is the thing that happens in between *Myst*"' (Carroll 1994).

For Ulmer avatar is a 'frontier site' for the shift from typographic to electrate identity in the twenty-first century (Ulmer 2012: ix). Well before his comprehensive 2012 study, the computer-based transformation of the business of being human was solicited in the writings of Alan Turing, Arthur C Clarke, Donna Haraway, Kate Hayles, Neal Stephenson and others. After the philosopher Michael Heim we are functional nodes in a pervasive alt-tabbing between urban space and cyberspace, or, after Bruno Latour, actors in complex computational networks. Such theories represent the increasing, almost hysterical complexity of the technological world we live in, a world forecast in the quantum mechanics of the early twentieth century, Norbert Wiener's cybernetics of the 1940s, Christopher Langton's artificial life and John McCarthy's artificial intelligence, Manuel de Landa's complexity theory, Deleuze and Guattari's chaosophy and Lotfi Zadeh's fuzzy logic. And this list is by no means complete. It is illustrative, though, of the radical otherness of much twentieth century thought that dramatically ruptures and changes our knowledge of and belief in who and what we think we are, as well as our relationship to intelligence beyond the human brain and the animal world. Complexity theory is arguably suggestive of our age in that it is infused with aspects of the other *ologies* and *isms* noted. It takes for granted the idea of emergence and change, of humans and machines becoming something else not through evolution, but technological sophistication. Critical theory, too, from Plato to Jean Baudrillard, has grappled with a persistent haunting by the phantasm, the simulacrum, the hyperreal condition of the copy of a copy of a copy. Computer game culture courts aspects of all these ideas, foregrounding the sprite, the avatar and the digital asset as being real in excess of what we understand to be real, real in a hyperreal world.

The avatar heightens this difference but also the confluence of the material world in which computers are objects and the immaterial representation of a world, even the material world, processed across computer networks. The commonly understood Sanskrit meaning of the word avatar implies such a duality. The religious avatar is a thing with a copy or, as the Hindu word implies, the manifestation in the earthly world of an otherworldly entity; a deity that has descended from the theistic pantheon into human form, such as Merwan Sheriar Irani, otherwise known as Avatar Meher Baba. The crucial idea of dualism and a crossing over from one plane into another sustains the idea of two states of being – that is, Meher Baba was both human and a deity. The digital avatar, be it a gun hunk in *Halo* or a fanciful chimera in *Second Life*, is underwritten by this notion of manifestation, in this instance the agency of a human performer translated into the behaviour of a digital actor. As a cynical aside, Robbie Cooper's 2007 book *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators* is a sizzling exposition of the huge discrepancy between the modest

human and its phantasmagorical other. The avatar in my dreams, like the previously imagined Coleridge, is an imploded form of *anime*, it is a singular artificial lifeform that possesses its own will. Ulmer poetically registers this intransitive, singularity by referring to avatar, rather than *the* avatar. The absence of a definite or indefinite article signifies that avatar is a condition, rather than a thing, an immersive state of being rather than the computer-assisted presence or intervention of a human operator into a virtual world (Ulmer 2012: ix). The title of his recent book, *Avatar Emergency* signals the emergence as well as the urgency associated with avatar. Avatar always descends in times of crisis, in particular technological and philosophical crisis. Like William Gibson's oracular definition of cyberspace in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, avatar is a conundrum, a paradox, a perplexing and even distressing state in which there's '*no there, there*' (Gibson 1988: 40). And you thought getting your mind around what was going on in the Wachowski brothers film *The Matrix* was confusing. There are without doubt more than thirteen ways, with the poet Wallace Stevens in mind, of looking at an avatar.

Which brings us back to our virtual Coleridge, to dreams, scribbling and the creative act. The notion of the avatar as I am using it here, then, is not that of the computer-generated agent of digital games, such as *Grand Theft Auto* or Joshua Clover's 'edge of the construct' cinema such as *The Truman Show* and *Strange Days*, of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, such as *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*, of 17th century automata, holography and flight simulation. In the way that I am using the concept avatar, things such as inspiration, accident and happenstance are perhaps other names for it. But also other names for the creative act as well. Avatar is a manifestation of weirdness, the voodoo that quantum physicist Murray Gell-Mann described as quark, strangeness and charm. This bedazzlement stooged Coleridge into believing his own writing was original, as well as troubled my own sleep. Avatar, after Ulmer, is a kind of *thought-imaging-inventio*, an emergence/emergency that blurs a dream and an act of writing. Avatar is dreaming *as* writing.

The art of steam

Which brings me to steam. Most days I sweat it out in the sauna at Reservoir pool. On the morning of Friday the 12th of October I awoke struggling to solidify and hold on to a rough *mise en scène* of scattered dream images. As I did so they flittered uneasily just beyond a narrative of anxiety. The details of the dream sequence described at the start of this talk were cobbled together after the fact that morning over a cup of tea with a pad and pencil. This rummaging around the scattered ruins of a fugitive dream continued as I sat in the steam room. There was something reassuring, even appropriate about the evanescence of steam in the light of trying to grasp something that evaded capture. Steam begins to evaporate as soon as it manifests itself as vapour, just as dream images resist recall as either sense or sequence. Steam, then, is an apt metaphor of something that is more like a bodily humour than a narrative, an energy that vanishes into heat and obscure motivation. Shakespeare's Mark Antony best grasped this elusive process of fluidity and melting, condemning the solidity of Rome to dissolve into the protean waters of the Tiber.

Dream images are always recalled in the past tense, so their telling or assembling is piecemeal, liquid and fragile. As I often do when trying to hold this slippery wild-fire in place as a sequence, I relied on the *punctum*, or sting of memory to remind me of the most weird, interesting and fucked up aspects of the dream, as Roland Barthes had persuasively done in his last book, *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1982). Barthes' enigmatic sheets and dead bodies in

Nicaragua, finger stalls on 'idiot children' or the elongated neck of a condemned man about to face the gallows, all make sense in relation to the overall subject matter of the photograph, its studium, from which the unpredictable punctum emerges. In my dream the rampant Tyrannosaurus Rex avatar and the overall *Second Life* vibe of parts of the world I was in were uncanny, ill-fitting, but at the same time very familiar. The next day I picked out such ideas from the dream and wove an essay around them. But here is the rub: not any paper, but a paper for this conference. The composition of this text, grounded in the anxiety of what to write, simply used the occasion of *having to write* to find something to write about. This something was a found object, not a contextual thought or conscious theme, such as the theme of this event, of 'encounters, place, situation or context'. But, on the day I am writing this sentence, Thursday October 25th, I confess that this paper, as writing, may indeed be the means, as this conference hopes to do, 'to evade or transform systems and contexts of writing that restrict us'. To whit, one moment I had nothing, the next I had commenced a paper. What happened in between is something called writing, another name for the art of steam, the creative act and, as James Joyce evocatively named the process of writing *Finnegans Wake*, 'scribbledehobble' (Joyce 1961). Like 'Kubla Khan' and *Finnegans Wake*, writing and dreaming was intertwined. Like the vivid nature of Coleridge's oneiric recollection, the 'aslip' (Joyce 1975: 597) world of the *Wake* is also vivid, a kind of screen of writing or a 'dreariodreama setting, glowing and very vidual' (79). As with most things I write there was no three-act synopsis or ur-text, a blueprint to work from that presumes an idea in advance of the act of writing. And suffice to say, Samuel Purchas had not written this text prior to my dream, nor for that matter had Coleridge (well, as far as I know). But now we have uttered this anxiety, how can you *not* entertain the suspicion that Alan Sokal had written it? But how can you prove that he didn't? After all, Sokal, the infamous forger of scientific mumbo-jumbo, the conscience of anti-pomo good sense, intentionality and reputable scholarship, fooled the readers of *Social Text* in 1996 (Sokal 1996). Sokal did not write 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'. His avatar may have scripted this text. That is one agonistic thought-experiment. Suffice to say, I am more than happy to be outed by anyone in the audience.

This perplexing conundrum still remains for all of us, as audience and speaker, to reflect upon before we leave wherever we are today. One writer, both person and their avatar, famously concentrated this in 1871. The Reverend Charles Dodgson, also known as Lewis Carroll, wrote a text in which a character called Alice was described as being a thing in a dream of the sleeping Red King upon whom she stares. But the Red King is a figure in her dream, in a dream-text called *Through the Looking-Glass*, *and What Alice Found There*, a fiction dreaming of the fiction who dreams him.

Conclusion

A final word on death. As we know, death is not only associated in the Western imagination with termination and sex, but also, after Socrates, with writing, the *pharmakon*, that which is treacherously read in the absence of its author. What, then, actually happens when avatars attack and worse, when they kill? And I mean really kill, not frag, nuke, osok, or gank to use the game-speak of murder. Our understanding of the finality of the end has dramatically changed in the age of simulation. For years the urban legend had it that the original TV Superman, George Reeves, jumped to his death from a New York skyscraper believing that he, like the fictional character he had become, had super powers.

The truth is far more mundane than that, since it was a shotgun, and not the sudden fall at the bottom, that shuffled Reeves off his mortal coil. It's unsurprising then that the immortality or God code IDDQD was coveted by players of the id computer game *DOOM* in the 1990s. Accordingly, life and regeneration are forms of digital capital that we garner, store, trade and otherwise take for granted as being renewable in virtual worlds in which life-force or *anima*, like ammo, power, transformation and magic, is cheap.

Murder mysteries are one of the great death genres beloved of the bookish literati and fans of costume drama on TV and film. They are also prone to make this shift from real to virtual life, if our forecasts are not in error. The butler? Not in the hyperreal age of chaos theory and the simulacrum. No, the avatar did it.

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Darren Tofts is Professor of Media and Communications, Swinburne University of Technology. www.darrentofts.net

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General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au