

VIRTUAL BODY LANGUAGE



**The History and Future of Avatars:
How Nonverbal Expression is
Evolving on the Internet**

Jeffrey Ventrella

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Virtual Body Language – The History and Future of Avatars:
How Nonverbal Expression is Evolving on the Internet

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A Note on Punctuation

I have adopted the British style of placing punctuation that is not part of a quoted phrase *outside* the quotation marks, because the American convention is based on a historical accident. And Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, thinks it's silly. Lynne Truss totally ROCKS, and so I dedicate my civil disobedience to her. With apologies to my American sticklers in punctuation, I hope you don't mind that I have adopted the more logical convention for typographical body language.

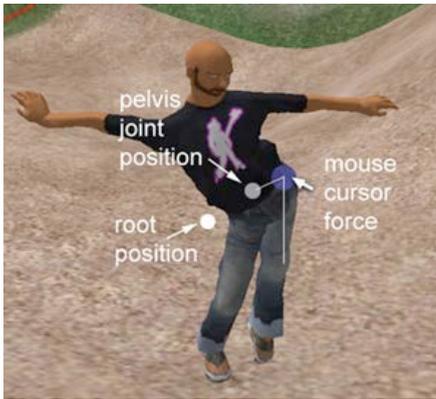
Also, in this book I have decided to occasionally pepper my text with members of a new species of punctuation, born on the internet. I sometimes use smileys as terminators, in place of commas or periods (I am especially fond of using smileys at the ends of parenthetical statements :)

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Virtual Pinocchio sculpture by Arcana Jasma (Image: Arcana Jasma)



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Faux Pas of an Unattended Avatar

Catherine was one of the most popular residents in a new virtual world that had just come onto the scene. She was creative, friendly, and entrepreneurial. She was quite attractive, and she was good at programming various aspects of her little piece of the world. But soon after she had established herself, Catherine started to get a bad reputation: people were calling her a snob.



image: Catherine Winters

This surprised Catherine, who had always made a point to be friendly to all the residents. Despite extra attempts at being sociable, Catherine's reputation continued. Then one day she overheard one of the new residents talking about her: "That Catherine—she's a snob. I had just gotten set up with my new account, and I decided to go find her, and introduce myself. As soon as I introduced myself, she turned

her head to look at me, stared at me for a while without saying a word, and then turned her head back, like I wasn't even there. How rude!"

At first it was a mystery. Catherine had no recollection of ever snubbing a newbie. She would never act this way in person, nor would she act this way in a virtual world. But eventually, Catherine figured out what was going on.

The virtual world I am describing is Second Life, and the woman is Catherine Winters (avatar name, *Catherine Omega*). When she enters into this virtual world she takes the form of an *avatar*—a digital character that represents her embodiment. The software engineers at Linden Lab, makers of Second Life, designed the system so that avatars would automatically respond to the utterances of other avatars by turning their heads towards them. This was meant to make the avatars appear more natural—after all, in the real world, people usually look at each other when they are talking. But there is one problem with this notion: Second Life is not the real world. In fact, it is very different! Let me explain.

Here is a typical scenario to describe what was happening: Catherine was logged into Second Life, chatting away with other avatars, and doing the various things that people—as avatars—do in Second Life. Then Catherine (the real woman) stepped away from her computer for a moment, while Catherine (her avatar) was still standing there among other avatars. An unsuspecting newbie walked her avatar up to Catherine's avatar and started chatting. Since the real Catherine was not present to respond with a chat, her avatar looked over at the new avatar (because of the automatic avatar "lookat" behavior). Then, because there was no communication coming from Catherine, her avatar's lookat mode timed-out, and resumed its usual gaze at nothing in particular. Catherine's bad reputation, it turns out, resulted from Catherine not being there. Her avatar was generating unintended body language in her absence.