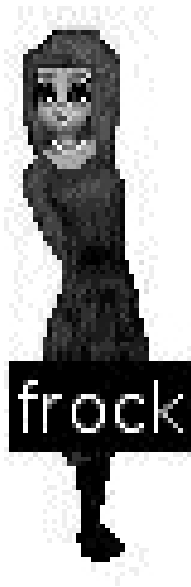


# Frock (assisted by Helen Varley Jamieson)

## Avatars in Cyber-space



Hi, my name's Frock, and I'm an avatar. An avatar is a character in a graphical chat room, the visual representation of the real person who is at the other end of the line. I say that I am a character, because I'm not that person at the other end of the line, I am their invention, their fantasy. And in cyberperformance,<sup>1</sup> we avatars become the characters in a story.

Creating a character in cyberspace is similar to creating characters for the stage, with two significant differences: firstly, there are different technical limitations; and secondly, we are characters already. When Helen uses me, Frock, to create a new character, do I submit completely to that new character, or is there always something of Frock lurking beneath the surface?

"A character is something which lies in between the idea of an event and the event itself, a strange kind of physical being exactly halfway between possibility and reality."<sup>2</sup> So says Doña Musica in *Wind in the West* by Julia Varley; she is talking about the character within the context of theatre, but she could easily be talking about cyberperformance.

"Halfway between possibility and reality" is how cyberformance often feels. As I write, *Avatar Body Collision*<sup>3</sup> has just begun online rehearsals for our next show, *swim*, and the work is an unwieldy collection of ideas, images, stray thoughts, loose ends and embryonic characters - definitely halfway between possibility and reality.

*swim* is not a narrative or naturalistic piece, so the characters will always be intangible - archetypes, stereotypes, prototypes and typos. While Helen is working on the words that our characters will speak, we have begun our rehearsals by discussing and trying on different avatars.

Visual appearance is one of the main signifiers of character in both cyberformance and proximal performance. "The

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1. Cyberformance is live performance in chat rooms on the internet.

2. Julia Varley, *Wind in the West - a character's novel*, Odin Teatrets Forlag, Denmark, 1997, p. 8.

3. *Avatar Body Collision* is a globally dispersed cyberformance group, performing at the meeting points of theatre and cyberspace; group members are Leena Saarinen, Karla Ptacek, Vicki Smith and Helen Varley Jamieson. [www.avatarbodycollision.org](http://www.avatarbodycollision.org)

costume", says my friend Doña Musica, "is one of the character's most evident tendencies, something which transforms and is transformed."<sup>4</sup> Our costumes (which are also avatars in themselves) are such evident tendencies that they transform us completely indeed. I can be a human figure one minute, then instantly change into a cat or a computer game.

We already have many avatars/ costumes to chose from - mermaids, swimmers, rock stars, animals, roundheads, ghosts, stick figures, dolls, fish, strawberries, masterpieces and more. Some are animated, some are tiny, some huge, some cartoonesque, some photographic. And when we need something different, we make our own, limited only by pixel size and by our imaginations.

The other main signifier is the text: the choice of words and how they are spoken, the words that are put into our mouths the same as an actor's lines. But in cyberspace, the clues which usually accompany an actor's speech to add subtext and character - vocal inflection, facial expression and gestures - are missing. Our computer-generated voices are fairly monotone, but we are learning to approximate some inflection through the clever use of punctuation and phonetic spelling.

Our voices also produce some unexpected pronunciations, for example, the words "clown" and "clone" sound the same (like "clone"). We indulge in word-play, cross-referencing and allusion at every opportunity.

Facial changes and simple gestures can be achieved through changing avatars, and the tiniest change or movement can be very effective, such as the nervous blushing of Vic, a very shy avatar in our group.

Some of the other tools at our disposal are movement (from leaps to slides) and

sound effects: burps for rude characters, kisses for the flirts, applause for the enthusiast. We can create and use visual props of any description, within a pixel size. And appropriate backgrounds, or scenery, can be created to enhance a characterisation.

You may be thinking that everything I am saying could be applied to puppets, and indeed some people call us digital puppets. But the world of the avatar, hovering "halfway between possibility and reality" is also inhabited by the operator, the puppet-mistress, the human at the keyboard. Where does the human end and the avatar begin? Is there a definite line, or do the two leak into each other?

When Helen and the others settle on the group of characters that they want for *swim*, and she changes my name and my costume and puts words into my mouth that feel like someone else's, where will I, Frock, be? Those who know me well might spot me underneath these new creations - it might be a tiny movement here, or a carefully timed word there, or a particularly clever piece of business. And you will think, ah, that was Frock!

HELEN JAMIESON (Aotearoa New Zealand) accidentally completed a BA in English and Drama in Wellington where two of her plays have been professionally produced. She helped to establish the arts lobby group, Artists' Round Table, and is currently creating performances in cyberspace.

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4. Julia Varley, *Wind in the West - a character's novel*, Odin Teatrets Forlag, Denmark, 1997.