

# Taking a walk on the wild side!

By Bruce A. Love

Angel was short in stature and had a waistline that even a Barbie Doll would have envied. I made my way over to her and introduced myself. I felt somewhat awkward being there. Dressed the way I was, I am sure I looked very out of place. I had not been in a place like this in ... well ... I had NEVER been in a place like THIS! Angel appeared to gyrate and toss her hair playfully as we talked. I told her I was a married man and that I wished she wouldn't do that. She laughed and said, "Oh, that's just my av."

I was not sure I wanted to ask what her "av" was, but, I was there for my first investigative story, and so I did. We talked for nearly 45 minutes. I learned many remarkable things about this culture and also about the person with whom I was speaking. By the end of our conversation, she invited me to a poetry reading. I politely declined and said, "maybe some other time." As I made my exit, I checked myself in the mirror. Everything seemed in place – from my beak down to my tail!

An avatar (or av") is the look a person assumes when they enter into a chat room. The 3-dimensional Internet chat world that I entered as a visitor, provided me with a default av in the form of a penguin. It was not until I walked past a mirror that I realized how I appeared to others in this virtual world.

I suppose a talking bird seems rather odd, but one look around these rooms, and you feel as if you have walked onto the set of a Star Wars movie. Mulling about the lobby are people (most with perfect computer generated bodies), animals, gryphons, and every other imaginable creature. Each has a set of "actions"

they can use, such as sit, laugh, point, etc. The avs also have a set of subtle random actions that can be perceived as flirtatious body language.

I am sure there must be some valid business uses for chat rooms and instant messaging, but from my perspective, their use is mostly social. To be honest, I have used text-based instant messaging and chat capabilities to stay in touch with friends and family members. It is much cheaper than long distance calls, and can be quite fun when multiple friends join in the conversation. Angel, it turns out, was in Canada when I spoke with her. She admitted that she met a man several years ago, and fell in love in chat. They married - first virtually, then in real life, and remain happily married to this day!

One week after being invited to attend the poetry reading, I decided to sneak inconspicuously into the auditorium to see what that was all about (well, as inconspicuously as a penguin can be, walking into a theater). There were no seats, but 4 sloping areas led down to a centrally located stage. I found my place between a fairy and some other mythical creature as the MC took to the stage. A window popped onto my screen from the host, and asked if I was interested in reading a poem. I said "no thanks," but as the night wore on, I decided to give it a try, and made my way to the stage.

Ironically, I wound up winning the poetry reading competition. The prize? Six free VIP months using this 3-D chat service. As a VIP member, I am able to change avs. This means I won't have to waddle around as a penguin anymore!

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