AVATARS, IDENTITY, AND VIRTUAL WORLDS
What do you consider to be virtual?

1. Cyberspace - 73%
2. Gaming / Second Life - 93%
3. Facebook - 52%
4. Texting - 34%
5. Video Chat - 48%
6. Other - 46%
Etymology of virtual

late 14c.,
"influencing by physical virtues or capabilities," from M.L. virtualis, from L. virtus "excellence, potency, efficacy," lit. "manliness, manhood" (see virtue).

The meaning of "being something in essence or fact, though not in name" is first recorded 1650s, probably via sense of "capable of producing a certain effect" (early 15c.).

Computer sense of "not physically existing but made to appear by software" is attested from 1959.
Virtual (adj)

1. being such in power, force, or effect, though not actually or expressly such: a virtual dependence on charity.

2. Optics.
   • A. noting an image formed by the apparent convergence of rays geometrically, but not actually, prolonged, as the image formed by a mirror (opposed to real).
   • b. noting a focus of a system forming virtual images.

3. temporarily simulated or extended by computer software: a virtual disk in RAM; virtual memory on a hard disk.
Virtual World
Virtual Reality
Virtual Environment
Virtual Worlds go back a while...

- Dungeons and Dragons (1974–)
- Electronic text adventure games (1975–)
  - Adventure, Zork, Hitchhiker’s Guide, etc.
- Multiplayer networked games (1974–)
  - Mazewar, Adventure, XTank, etc.
- MUDs and MOOs (1978–)
  - Specific track of multiplayer network games
- Virtual Communities (1985–)
  - The WELL, Second Life, etc.
Sensorama, 1962

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSINEBZNCKs
The Avatar Effect

Identity and Anonymity

July 5th, 1993
The New Yorker
Peter Steiner

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."
Case study: “gold farming”

- Digital sweatshop?
- Impact on virtual identities?
Etymology of Avatar

"Avatar" derives from the Sanskrit word *Avatara*, which literally translates as "descent," specifically, a deliberate descent by a god into the land of mortals, usually for the purpose of destroying evil or leading the righteous down the right path.
In Hinduism, an avatar is the bodily manifestation of Immortal Beings or "The Supreme Being." For example, Krishna is believed to be the eighth of the ten avatars of Vishnu.

Avatar as an "incarnation" into the internet.

Source: http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/6165.asp

Shahzia Sikander
Hoods Red Rider #2, 1997  Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper
Avatar (noun)

1. the incarnation of a Hindu deity (as Vishnu)
2. a : an incarnation in human form  
   b : an embodiment (as of a concept or philosophy) often in a person
3. an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user (as in a computer game)

Source:
www.merriam-webster.com
What do you consider to be your Facebook avatar?

1. Just your image - 30%
2. Your information - 6%
3. Status updates - 2%
4. Entire profile - 50%
5. None of the above - 13%
Naming and Anonymity
Would you share your “True Name”?

• “True Names” by Vernor Vigne (1981)
  – “In the once-upon-a-time days of the First Age of Magic, the prudent sorcerer regarded his own true name as his most valued possession but also the greatest threat to his continued good health, for—the stories go—once an enemy, even a weak unskilled enemy, learned the sorcerer's true name, then routine and widely known spells could destroy or enslave even the most powerful.”

• What power does knowing your true name hold online today? On Facebook? Twitter? E-mail? Forums?
Can we reinvent ourselves?

- In the book Snow Crash (1992) people lived much of their lives in a fully immersive 3D cyber-reality through avatars, but those with less money and/or fewer programming skills used generic, less emotive avatars (off-the-shelf or made with a prefab kit) and were seen by some as second-class citizens.

- Why were (are?) users with AOL e-mail addresses seen as “lesser” netizens? Are there other examples?