Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

Electronic Mediations

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Digitizing Race

Visual Cultures of the Internet

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"Ramadan Is Almoast Here!" The Visual Culture of AIM Buddies, Race, Gender, and Nation on the Internet

"The right to control one's data image—outside of social and entertainment contexts—has yet to be obtained in the current political struggles over citizenship in cyberspace."[1] So wrote David Rodowick in 2001, and it is certainly the case that the Internet has been both the occasion for, and subject of, numerous debates over the extent to which control societies ought to be able to exercise power over citizens through data images. And while Rodowick is correct in asserting that the state has yet to exercise as much control over the use of data images in social and entertainment contexts as it does in others, these are far from unregulated spaces of digital representation. As numerous feminist critiques of female gaming avatars in *Tomb Raider* and *Everquest* have shown, the narrow range of body types available for gameplay certainly deprives female players of the right to control their data images in ways that feel comfortable to them.[2] Digital gaming is a large and highly lucrative and organized form of cultural production, and thus the profit imperative takes the place of the state when it comes to the ways that gaming's visual cultures of bodily data imaging are managed. Rodowick's claim that social and entertainment contexts are *part of* a struggle for "citizenship in cyberspace" is well taken, however, and the notion that these are perhaps fruitful places to look for subversive data images that are more "owned" by their users than those available in commercial, governmental, and corporate spaces is certainly useful. To that end, in this chapter I will examine the use

of user-produced buddy icons in Instant Messenger applications on the Internet; these feature visual images of the databody as an instrument used simultaneously for both socializing and entertainment, since in the case of IM, socializing *is* entertainment. I wish to repurpose some of the rightly pessimistic discourse of surveillance surrounding such things as electronic signatures with a more hopeful reading about minoritarian identity creation on IM. In particular, it is possible to find images of national, religious, linguistic, and sexual identities created by users as icons on IM: overtly gay, fundamentalist Muslim or Christian, Armenian, or Asian American visual images are easier to locate there than in other media forms, including other parts of the Internet, and are certainly not often seen in commercial games. The creation and use of these images have particular relevance to questions of freedom, diversity, and racial equality online considering the use of dataveillance technologies to track precisely those groups—fundamentalist Muslims (but not Christians) and immigrants—who are least likely to be fairly or self-represented in American mainstream visual culture. In creating and using these very personal and amateur digital signatures of identity, IM users literally build themselves as subjects of interactivity.

Synchronous or real-time networked textual interaction, from one person to another person, has existed since the early command-line interface days of the Internet. Unix applications like "chat" and "phone" remediated the most familiar person-to-person form of communication known by most people—the telephone—but with little in the way of graphics; clients could regulate the flow of text streaming down a screen so that it didn't appear radically fragmented and thus was more readable, but it really was a text-only environment, with the user's only intervention into it being the size and perhaps style of font displayed. These applications also ran in the background of others and could thus be overlooked by a busy user. Instant Messenger, while it shares these basic qualities with "talk" and "phone," remediates an early application called "write" in that it pops up or supersedes other open windows in graphical user interfaces; it is meant to intrude on the visual field of the user, and though it can be demoted later, its use of alert sounds to signify the arrival of an instant message makes it seem more immediate. Instant Messenger has its roots in ICQ, a text messaging application that became popular in 1996, and occupies a unique position in that it is in many ways a low-bandwidth, anachronistic technology despite its popularity, and one that defies academic prediction. As recently as 2001, new media theorists David Bolter and Richard Grusin and Per Persson seriously questioned text-

only Internet interaction's relevance in the coming graphical age. Bolter and Grusin ask: "Can this digital, textual self maintain its claim to authenticity against the claims of the self expressed visually in virtual reality? The MUDs [multiuser domains] and chat rooms of the 1980s and early 1990s were exclusively textual and therefore remediated in the first instance the novel and the letter. Chat rooms may also remediate telephone conversations, but they suffer from the fact that the spoken voice on the telephone has a more obvious claim to immediacy than the typed word. As the transmission of video, animated graphics, and audio over the Internet is improving, these textual applications are threatened." They conclude by citing the now-defunct Palace as an example of a "visual MUD" that "remediates the comic book" and mention that other "visual MUDs may remediate cinema and television more effectively, by offering animated figures or even video images of the participants themselves. . . . In our visual culture today, it seems unlikely that any textual representation of the self can hold out long against the remediations of a rival, visual technology."[3] One of the central claims of *Remediation*—that one of the most important yardsticks by which to evaluate digital technologies in relation to analog ones is on the basis of their enhanced immediacy—necessarily leads to the notion that online discourse supplemented by visual images is superior in terms of liveness or realness to the "typed word," and thus graphical MUDs must be more appealing than textual MUDs because of their improved immediacy. They claim as well that televisual images made possible by broadband and applications like the Palace, which supported graphics in conjunction with textual interaction, would produce a hybrid form, less book than comic book or graphic novel, which would threaten the survival of text-only chat rooms and MUDs. Their discussion of the Palace dominates the chapter titled "The Virtual Self" because they believe that graphical MUDs are excellent examples of both immediacy and hypermediation not only because they embody both "live" and real-seeming interaction combined with overtly artificial or stylized uses of interfaces and visual conventions, but also because they enable identity swapping across the axis of gender, which is an essential feature of the type of postmodern self that the authors posit as the inevitable product of a networked culture. Per Persson concurs, speculating that cinema-desktop convergence will result in text-only MUDs being inevitably replaced by "'rooms' [that organize online conversations in terms of visual 3-D spaces] and environments like Palace, Active Worlds, or, in more sophisticated cases, VR teleconferencing systems."[4]

Instant Messenger is primarily a textual form in which most of the space and interactivity associated with it consists of typed words, but it also possesses important visual aspects, like emoticons, blinkies, avatars, and buddy icons.[5] These images are often animations rather than scanned photographs, often extremely small, and usually depict set pieces rather than "live" or continuously changing images, and are certainly subsumed to the textual, but their existence supports one claim made by Bolter and Grusin, which is that visual images do enrich real-time textual interactions and are attractive to users. However, predictions that users would prefer more "virtual reality" when it comes to real-time interaction online are disproved by IM's present form, in which images are subsumed to text. Their notion that users might be interested in using imaging technology in the context of online conversation mainly to visually represent themselves to interlocutors, to create "video images of themselves" while chatting online, speaks to a conception of Instant Messenger as being concerned primarily with identity. And certainly, much work has been done on MOOs (multiuser domains object oriented) and MUDs (multiuser domains) that confirms this.[6] Bolter and Grusin are interested in visual MUDs partly because of the ways that they enable identity play across gender, but the authors are less interested in racial formation in this realm of self-representation. Their critique enables a discussion of the ways that the male gaze may be confounded or confirmed online by avatar switching and gender play in the realm of self-authoring, but precludes much discussion of the way that the racialized gaze may contribute to digital racial formation. In fact, a thriving culture of both textual and graphical racialization exists on IM. Some of these engage in both registers to enable racial ventriloquism by literally altering the text that a user writes: helper applications such as Tizzle Talk translate a user's speech into one of seven ethnic and racialized dialects on the fly and accompany it with a matching buddy icon. Tizzle Talk, which can run on top of most popular Instant Messenger programs, lets the user speak in "Ahnold, Ebonics, Jacko, Pig Latin, Redneck, Dubya, Pirate, Jessica, and Engrish." These dialects are all accompanied by small buddy icons representing parodic cartoons of Arnold Schwarzenegger, George W. Bush, Michael Jackson, Jessica Simpson, and William Hung, an Asian American college student with a pronounced accent who acquired notoriety as one of the least musically gifted performers on the popular television show *American Idol*. This application is quite self-consciously automating the process of cross-racial and ethnic mimicry that has always been a part of popular culture's process of racial formation: as Shilpa Davé's work on the use of Indian accents by white voice-over actors

in *The Simpsons* shows, the use of "brownvoice" as a form of electronically mediated passing has been a feature of Asian American representation for many years and across media forms.[7] The makers of Tizzle Talk, which is available for free download at www.tizzletalk.com, anticipate that users will find the software offensive, explaining, "We are a diverse bunch. Tizzle Talk originally started as a way to make fun of ourselves," thus deflecting accusations that they are engaging in cross-racial mimicry by whites "against" nonwhite groups. Though Tizzle Talk has not become a widespread IM helper application, due partly at least to the inconvenience and difficulty of speaking or reading in "Dubya" for extended periods of time, the practice of using graphical buddy icons is widespread, and Tizzle Talk includes these to enhance the sense of racial presence that it parodies.

AIM buddies are tiny bits of screen real estate that operate in several registers. They can work to signify identity in a straightforwardly pragmatic, relatively nonideological way, for when conducting multiple IM conversations, users quickly track who is speaking or "texting" by glancing at their AIM buddy icon. The icons serve as visual flags for shaping the tendency toward distraction that characterizes this type of online activity. Buddies help users with multiple windows open to organize their attention. These icons perform an important cognitive as well as signifying function in the world of IM. However, users do frame their posts with numerous visual objects that are strongly valenced in terms of gender, racial, ethnic, national, and religious identity, the buddy icon being just one among them. If we wish to parse the meanings of this immensely popular application, one that defines the Internet as a communicative tool for vast numbers of its users, we would do well to examine its visual culture. AIM buddies and other user-chosen IM images are the product of a user's desire to create a desktop mise-en-scène that signifies the self, and they are thus part of an ongoing process of digital racialization. They constitute part of a new visual culture, a visual culture imbricated within a peculiarly oral discursive form, the online chat, that brings together cinema, signboard culture, and the graphic novel and works to literally embody desubstantialized and ephemeral virtual speech. AIM buddies run the gamut of cartoon characters, television and movie stars, and figures from fantasy and mythology. It appears that anything from a scanned photograph of Jennifer Aniston to a cell-phone-camera image of the user's cat can be (and almost certainly is) an AIM buddy. These tiny graphical images function as remediations of both older visual media and "sigs," or the automated identifiers appended to the end of e-mail messages from back in the days of text-only Internet. AIM buddies occupy a liminal

role between the more traditional graphical avatar and the textual sig familiar to pre-1995 Internet users. Their use as graphical proxies of identity warrants some theorization of its own, yet the visual culture of AIM buddies has yet to be written. This chapter will start that work by discussing the topic in light of racial signification and identity in this area of avatar construction.

In her work on avatars in gaming, Mary Flanagan discusses avatars in terms of film, as synthespians or virtual personalities or celebrities. Because games have immersive diegetic narratives and characters that users may already know from cross-media tie-ins like films and literature, it makes perfect sense to talk about gaming avatars in terms of narrative and character, but it makes less sense to use cinematic language to discuss IM, which lacks scriptedness. AIM buddies are less like synthespians or virtual stars (though many of them may consist of screen shots of stars) and more like avatars in other textual or graphical chats. And unlike synthespians and gaming avatars, images of the digital body that are benefiting so quickly from improved production standards that they verge on photo-realistic representations of the human, so "real" that they have to be virtually "roughed up" to read as digital people, AIM buddies are low-fidelity and will remain so because of screen size constraints. And unlike other avatars used in chats or other synchronous online communication, their quality is far more static and smaller in scale than those in high-bandwidth graphical chats like there.com, which feature three-dimensional high-quality CGI.

It seems particularly appropriate to invoke the notion of iconography in the case of AIM buddies, since they are indeed icons in terms of the way that they function on the computer desktop. AIM buddies are fifty by fifty pixels and consist of either a single still image (usually in JPEG or GIF format) or a series of up to seven images that can be programmed to "play" one after another, at a rate of about one frame per second, to create an image that appears to move. (These images will show up tagged with a "movie" icon if imported into PowerPoint slides.) The images are usually fairly low quality, consisting of around 75 dpi, and even multipart animated buddy icons are very small, around 8 KB or so. Animated buddy icons can be arranged in a series of sequences that are themed but not meant to convey a sense of movement or temporality, as in the case of animated GIFs that consist of different but essentially unrelated head shots of the same star, such as Angel from the cult television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or they can consist of slightly altered versions of the same image, thus simulating movement in the same way that early flip-card books did. In many cases, they are hybrid forms that do both: examples I look at in this chapter reserve the first three frames for

a short "movie" or animated sequence that depicts an avatar's body, and the last two or three for photographs, slogans, and signs such as national flags and other sorts of imagery. I will also focus on the communicative aspects of these icons as well as their formal ones. They address the eye in a particular way, but they are also objects that exist on the margins of the popular and heavily used networked communicative space of IM that involves a complex of different types of icons, fonts, windows, and other visual frames for what is essentially a textual event, that is, the creation of written messages, themselves written in a colloquial English of such recent vintage that it is unintelligible to most readers over the age of twenty. This English, composed of abbreviations, symbols, and numbers from the QWERTY keyboard, and emoticons, is a hybrid language designed to facilitate person-to-person computer-based communication as quickly as possible, in real time. Thus AIM buddies are tools of person-to-person communication in a way that other avatars, such as gaming avatars from nonnetworked games, are not.[8]

In the first case, an homage to a star like a *Buffy* buddy icon works like a photo album that one flips through; the viewer is presented with a selection of photographs of the star in different poses that remediates a traditional slide show in which still images are shown in a particular order, or a "shrine" of photographs that a teenage girl might build as a display in her room. Though the order in which these are shown may signify something, we cannot properly call them moving or cinematic images. In the second, we can see an attempt to remediate cinema by creating extremely low-bandwidth animations that test the limits of legibility; at fifty pixels square (approximately one-quarter inch at low resolution) and about one frame per second, far below the twenty-four frames per second required to simulate movement on a more traditional cinematic screen, they are a form that requires elegance of expression and enforces strict limits on what sorts of images can be displayed.

As I have already noted, this is an anachronistic technology. AIM buddies belie the technologically determinist argument that "better" image quality, smoothly streaming video images, higher image resolutions, and photo-realism or near photo-realism are always more valued and preferred by the user. Instead, AIM buddies have more in common with a signifying practice from the early days of the Internet, the "sig" (or digital signature, a form of digital racial formation that I will focus on in more detail in chapter 4). Like ASCII art, images constructed with QWERTY characters that were often deployed in conjunction with early pregraphical Internet sigs, AIM buddies are extremely compact and designed to load onto users' systems

quickly.[9] Because there are relatively few pixels available to create them, since they need to coexist with the IM window, they often have the grainy, chunky, pixelated, or "tiled" quality of earlier graphical forms in digital environments. In addition, their function is more akin to that of the sig, which is to signify identity in a static way. However, while early sigs were appended to e-mail messages, which are an asynchronous electronic textual form and are themselves made up of written words, AIM buddy icons are designed to accompany a form of Internet writing that is more dynamic, in real time, and fluid in nature—a form of writing that is in constant motion. Instant Messenger is a writing practice that is live, and this form is reflected in AIM buddies that also move; this is particularly true for animated GIFs.

Tiny, low-bandwidth icons that are customizable by the user are characteristic features of many popular commercial operating systems and Web portals. Apple's Operating System X requires a user to choose an image of an animal, an abstract pattern, a logo (such as Apple's own), or a nature-based picture such as a flower or a leaf to identify himself or herself as a user distinguishable from other users in their multiuser mode, as does Windows XP. These desktop images are, like many screen saver and desktop patterns, tasteful, bland, and corporate. They are decorative and are never expressive of identity categories like race or ethnicity (this is not as true for gender: kitten and flower icons are most likely intended to appeal to female users). Indeed, the ubiquitous green rolling hills and cerulean blue clouds that are the default desktop image for Windows XP are meant to invoke a space outside the office or the computer: they present a soothing image of nature. Their neutrality in terms of user identity works by invoking nature, a conspicuously missing and correspondingly overvalued part of digital culture, and also by interpellating users into a community of consumers unified by the twin priorities of shared aesthetic "good taste" and an equally strong devotion to the notion of user choice. Thus, while the visual styles of these icons are quite homogeneous, the emphasis lies on the user's customization of everyday digital space with the icon that appeals to him or her personally, thus communicating identity in a narrow, depoliticized, ostensibly non-ideological way.

Buddyicon.info, Badass buddies, and "The Doll Palace: Where Cartoon Dolls Live" are Web sites that all offer a variety of AIM buddy icons for downloading. Their mode of organization creates distinct types or genres of buddy: nationality is one category, listed along with gender, but not race. This dodging of race as a category or an overt subject of discussion or reference is characteristic of Web sites of this kind: several years ago in *Cybertypes*

I described the ways in which race is routed around in menu-driven interfaces, a point to which I will return in more detail later in this chapter. Buddy icons from noncorporate, volunteer-run sites are far from neutral, and these sites frame their icons as overtly marginal, in conscious opposition to more conventional icons: they flag themselves as "badass" in terms of the subversiveness of their content. Considering their close ties to digital youth culture production, they are best viewed as contested spaces: like everything else on the Internet, they are possible sites of resistance, but certainly not necessarily so. The drive to signify identity on the Internet continues as one of their most robust features.

AIM buddies are liminal objects in several ways. They occupy the space separating still image from cinematic sequence, icon from avatar, between personal signature and mass-produced image, between photo-realistic representation and cartoon representation, between orality/textuality and visuality. AIM buddy icons function somewhat like avatars in digital games in that they are meant to reflect the self; however, because they are often static, they are not keyed as closely to the user's movements through an interface.[10] In addition, while Bob Rehak stresses the role of the avatar as a means of resolving the split engendered by the mirror stage, he posits this in the context of a game/player relationship that doesn't include other players; the game itself functions as the mirror. His analysis takes no account of games as a social or communicative medium. Because IMers almost always know each other, unlike chat room users, buddy icons are deployed among a community of people likely to share the same cultural referents (*Elf* is the most popular AIM buddy at MSN as of April 2005.) These images have a structurally global circulation but in fact circulate in a limited way. They also have a small tag that lets you know the number of downloads: thousands are typical. Buddies that depict beer drinking, vomiting, drug use, sexual acts, passing gas, and other acts dear to the hearts of adolescent boys are the mainstay of sites like badassbuddies.com.

While many of them are quotidian, tacky, embarrassing, in poor taste, and inexpertly produced, it is essential that new media theory develop a method for analyzing taste in our inquiries into digital culture. The Internet is the largest participatory mass medium in use today, and as its user base continues to grow, we can expect it to resemble reality television rather than PBS, but with fewer controls, more interactivity, and even more sensitivity to trends and youth culture. Youths envision AIM buddy icons as they do other accessories of popular culture, such as cell phone ringtones, digital photographic images, cell phone and backpack charms, T-shirts, key chains,

and car modifications—in other words, as ephemeral, often replaced or swapped-out modules of signification that convey a sense of identity, style, and community in everyday life, particularly for girls. And like them, the language of AIM buddies has much to do with popular televisual media, licensed characters such as Hello Kitty and Powerpuff Girls, and musical trends. Yet on the other hand, AIM buddies differ from these in that they are part of a graphical real-time communicative practice that occurs on the computer desktop, the same space most commonly associated with the Internet and computing. David Silver's study of teen girls' use of the Internet represents them as a group of users who are more resistant to the commercialization of the online sphere than had been thought, and notes that the online activities most popular with girls, e-mail, IM, surfing for fun, and visiting entertainment Web sites, have more to do with communication than with consumption: "Female teens approach and use the Internet as a communication tool rather than as a consumer medium. It appears to us that although American female teens are eager to use and explore various activities on the Internet, e-commerce is not one of the major ones."[11] He also defines IM as a "girl dominated activity" along with using e-mail and obtaining dieting and fitness information, and he documents unsuccessful attempts by new media industries to commodify IM, perhaps as a response to having failed to do so before it reached its current height of popularity with youth. In any event, the commercial stakes as well as the theoretical ones for articulating IM with identities in formation, in particular female and racialized diasporic and other marginal types of identities, are undeniably high. Herbert Gans's writings on the formation of popular culture preferences and practices shed some light on this issue. Given that the Internet is used with particular intensity by youth, it makes sense to look to networked new media for representative examples of diasporic taste cultures. Gans defines popular culture as the raw material for "*taste cultures,* because each contains shared or common aesthetic values and standards of taste. *Aesthetic* is used broadly, referring not only to standards of beauty and taste but also to a variety of other emotional and intellectual values that people express or satisfy when they choose content from a taste culture."[12] IM is a communication practice that possesses a mixed and chaotic taste culture partly because it has resisted formal modes of commodification until now, and part of its potential lies in its ability to be repurposed or tweaked in ways that convey identity differently from received digital networked images.

Identity is a category that has long been perceived as central and important in cultural studies. Stuart Hall describes the development of the concept

of identity into the central term that it is today in his provocative article "Who Needs 'Identity'?" and explains that *we* do: "identity" is a term that persists in critical discourse despite anti-essentialist challenges to its usefulness because it permits analysis of the ways that discourse *creates* subjects. Identity is a concept that proves particularly useful in the case of signifying forms that, like new media and IM in particular, engage in the active rearticulation of self and discourse. "It seems to be in the attempt to rearticulate the relationship between subjects and discursive practices that the question of identity recurs—or rather, if one prefers to stress the process of subjectification to discursive practices, and the politics of exclusion which all subjectification appears to entail, the question of *identification.*"[13] These subjects are created partly by a process of identification and disidentification: in this, Hall agrees with Judith Butler, among others, who asserts that "all identities operate through exclusion." When we speak of diasporic and female populations, questions of identity and culture become especially layered, complex, and important. While in earlier work I have stressed the ways that Internet users in the mid-1990s employed online discourse to create cross-racial conversational performances or identity tourism, the racialization of IM has worked much differently since the massification of the Internet as a popular form.

The figure of the performative self is central to the scholarship on online discourse and has been part of the argument establishing the Internet as a postmodern communicative space: as Hall writes, "the endlessly performative self has been advanced in a celebratory variant of postmodernism."[14] Indeed, the Internet seems made to argue postmodernism's case, as online anonymity makes it necessary for identity to be signified in active rather than more passive ways. However, as the Internet's user base changes, and changes in software make it a more enriched graphical space that enables youth in particular to express their taste cultures, which are often imported from other media, the "profiles" and avatars they create to literally embody themselves in disembodied spaces become less about performing a cross-gender or cross-racial alternative or "passing" self to deploy in public communities and more about expressing diasporic, ambivalent, *intersectional* selves to use within closed communities.[15]

What is the visual culture of nation, race, gender, and age on the Internet? In what ways do we see immigrants, girls, youths, and people of color using the medium to express themselves as subjects of interactivity in the face of their persistent objectification by digital imaging practices such as computer gaming, videos, advertising, and commercial Web sites? Justine

Cassell and Henry Jenkins's seminal *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* addresses this question in relation to gender and age with a collection of scholarly articles in addition to a group of interviews with producers of girls' games, thus acknowledging the importance of intervening into the generally sexist genre of computer gaming, which tends to be dominated by first-person shooters and scantily clad, Barbie-shaped images of women. One issue not taken up quite as directly, but perhaps by implication, in their argument is that of racial representation: this is a problem most clearly and obviously demonstrated in the popularity of mainstream blockbuster games, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, let alone in "fringe" games like *Vampire: Bloodlines* and *Ethnic Cleansing*. All these games figure ethnic and racial minorities as victims of screen-mediated violence initiated by the player, who is exhorted to do things such as "Kill the Haitians!" in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. (This line of dialogue was later removed from the game after Haitian Americans protested strongly against it.)

Clearly, gaming is a tremendously important aspect of digital visual culture.[16] In this chapter, I will get at a different but related aspect of this field by examining the comparatively less glamorous visual culture of Instant Messenger. IM is a particularly important use of the Internet for youth and women, and its users, in particular the young female users who make up much of its participant base, are engaging in significant and complex forms of digital subject formation in creating, sharing, and deploying buddy icons. Though AIM buddies are deployed by more people than will ever use more rarefied parts of the Internet or will ever view digital art, they are a dramatically underexamined, though ubiquitous, feature of online life for many users. These icons are sites of robust identity creation in which we can already see girls actively scripting and circulating images of the body, of nation, and of race and language use. This pattern of use contrasts with the state of things in digital game development, which, despite the interviewees in Cassell and Jenkins's 1998 book, has not markedly improved in terms of creating content that will appeal to girls or, most importantly, in involving girls and women in the most important aspects of game development. Purple Moon, a girls' game company headed by Brenda Laurel, a pioneer in the field of gender and computing, went out of business since she was interviewed for the collection, and the other women's companies that were profiled have failed to produce any popular girls' games. This is a sobering fact, yet one can find girls creating digital images of themselves to deploy in social spaces on the Internet if one is willing to shift focus from digital media forms that

require relatively heavy capitalization and distribution mechanisms, such as computer game production, to those that are free, ubiquitous, and native to the Internet, such as Instant Messenger, a form of computer-mediated communication that dominates young people's use of the Internet. Since users usually already know the identities of their interlocutors, these avatars serve a radically different function than that served by avatars in early online social environments like MUDs and MOOs and in other multiplayer digital games. Rather than embodying a user who has no other body in play, thus functioning as part of a culture of identity deception decried by earlier Internet users, instead these avatars work as *supplementary* imaging practices: they are part of a visual culture in which identity is added to, rather than replaced by, images of race, gender, and nation. To initiate a session, users of IM must already know the screen names of those they converse with, and message senders are likely to be ignored if they are not already known by, and on the buddy lists of, the message recipients. Thus Instant Messenger is a communicative practice with an avatar culture that needs to be discussed quite differently from earlier ones, like MOOing and chatting, since it is part of a social network that is founded on prior offline relationships. AIM buddy avatars do not stand alone to signify a disembodied self; instead they represent choices made by the user who wishes to build an online identity that is warranted by a preexisting offline relationship. Much Internet utopianism, especially that which used metaphors from travel and tourism to promote the notion of diversity, assumed a public-access structure for real-time textual interaction in which users might encounter strangers, "random" interlocutors, and thus widen their circle of friends or social contacts beyond what their physical worlds and offline neighborhoods offered them. Thus would "diversity" be served. The heady early days of the Internet both mocked and celebrated the idea that an African American youth might find herself talking to a Scandinavian grandfather encountered in a chat room. This representation of the Internet as a social leveler and bringer-together of disparate races, cultures, and backgrounds was always problematic—digital inequality made it much more likely that one might encounter a Scandinavian man than an African American of any gender in the nineties—and has become even more unlikely today, in an age in which parents' injunctions not to talk to strangers have become incorporated into the ways that parents now often monitor their children's buddy lists as part of familial caretaking. And while some television advertising has continued to invoke the notion of the "global village" in relation to what the Internet offers, such ads have

become the exception rather than the rule. The 2004 eBay commercial titled "Clocks," a notable exception, depicts racial and ethnic diversity in the context of online commerce. While earlier advertisements stressed the idea of cultural and ethnic diversity for its own sake, "Clocks" envisions access to global marketplaces as an asset to users who wish to buy commodities at the lowest possible price.[17]

It is all the more important that we pay attention to girls' labor on the Internet, since there is a covert identity politics regarding race, class, and gender at work in much of the scholarly discourse regarding digital production and its implications for media that acknowledges their marginal position in light of digital media, despite a narrowing digital divide in terms of use. In short, girls are envisioned as avid users but not producers, as consumers but not creators. In "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture," Henry Jenkins describes the potential of digital cinema to empower DIY-oriented fans to produce their own media. He proposes that the creation, distribution, and exhibition of fan-produced media on the Internet—a complex that he classifies as participatory media—is the antidote to a serious problem with media's current political economy. This is the problem of media consolidation, or increasingly few companies controlling media production.

Jenkins's argument that audiences of the digital age demand and deserve the right to participate in the formation of media texts to put in dialogue with those that they see around them, thus resulting in productive forms of "textual poaching," puts much faith in the notion that this is a desirable outcome because it will result in "better," or at least more diverse and democratic, art. In the epigram to the article, Jenkins cites Francis Ford Coppola's ringing endorsement of digital camcorders and the way that this technology will enable "a little fat girl in Ohio" to use her dad's equipment to become the "new Mozart" of digital filmmaking. Digital production is thus envisioned as empowering potential Mozarts who might formerly have been kept out of the realm of media creation by the Hollywood cultural gatekeepers who police the production, distribution, and exhibition of film. The celebration of the digital as an inherently democratic medium is nothing new: discourses of liberatory interactivity have been around since the early days of text-only Internet and hypertext theory, which posited that readers could choose their own endings to digital narratives and thus exercise their postmodern subjectivities and literalize the notion of readerly resistance to authorial intention by becoming coauthors of a work. In *Web Theory*, Robert Burnett

and P. David Marshall term this the "cultural production thesis" and define this blurring of the line between audience and author as a key feature of the World Wide Web.

As Jenkins goes on to describe fan-produced films such as *Alien5* and *Alien 5(2)*, which were made using some *Alien*, *Mork and Mindy*, and *Planet of the Apes* action figures filmed against a backdrop of a television screen running a copy of the *Alien* video game, all filmed and edited in-camera with digital equipment, one cannot but marvel at the ingenuity and creativity displayed. Indeed, the logic of new media relies on the notion that compositing of digital media ripped from other sources constitutes a legitimate means of artistic creation, perhaps the only kind that is possible in a postanalog environment. The *Alien 5* films were created by male teenage prodigies, devoted *Alien* fans who initially conceived of the film as a way to fulfill the requirements for a school project and later distributed the film via the Web.[18] Thus Coppola's and Jenkins's idea that digital image production, distribution, and exhibition redistribute power in a radical way across formerly impassable barriers of gender, region, body type, and age seems amply proven by this and other examples. However, the two identity positions that are pointedly omitted here are race and class. How much differently might Coppola's claim read if he inserted them into the list of objectionable attributes—obesity, femininity, provinciality—that go into the formulation of a hypothetical "little fat girl in Ohio" as a possible "new Mozart"? If this statement was formulated to read "fat little black girl" or "fat little Asian girl," it would read as racist, and what's more, it would acknowledge an unpleasant fact; the cultural gatekeepers keep out not only the young, the female, and the obese but also the poor (defined as people whose fathers don't own digital video cameras, in this case) and people of color. Coppola's claim is a variation of the now-iconic cartoon from the *New Yorker* published on July 5, 1993, during the early days of the Internet's massification, which depicts a dog using a computer and the caption "On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog!" In the years since that cartoon's publication, scholarly concerns regarding new media and power relations have shifted. The Internet's supposed anonymity and status as a race-free space has been challenged, and in addition, there has come into being a new emphasis on the Internet's promise as a place of radical production or intervention rather than as merely a space of anonymous consumption. Indeed, Jenkins seems to value the Internet precisely because it allows disenfranchised members of society to make themselves visible as cultural producers of media. Both

formulations assume that former voiceless beings, such as dogs and young, unattractive females, can be given voices via the Internet: that they can become subjects rather than objects of interactivity.

The craze for self-representation on the Internet mirrors in some sense the mania for photographic portraits that characterized nineteenth-century America: hordes of middle-class people wishing to use the new technology to create images of themselves and their families clogged daguerreotype parlors and were parodied in newspaper illustrations. Much of the popularity of early photography was premised on the idea that it enabled a do-it-yourself culture in the realm of the image; a popular 1839 picture by Maurisset titled "La Daguerreotypemanie" depicts people waiting eagerly in line to purchase photographic equipment while artists hang themselves in the margin, indicating that the new technology had rendered them jobless and suicidal. In addition, professional photographers themselves were depicted as marginal, thus putting the emphasis on the user as cultural producer, as well as on the form of self-portraiture as a means of asserting class identity and agency. When we look at the case of AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) buddy icons, we can see an instance of popular digital culture in which the desire to intervene in existing media franchises—many AIM buddies are screen shots from current Hollywood films and cartoons—is bent toward the service of self-representation or self-portraiture. In addition, their circulation and production has a multiply distributed quality: they are available for free download from a multitude of Web sites, and they possess even more ephemerality than other new media products: BuddyIcon.info organizes its icons by popularity, and this changes often. Britney Spears buddies give way to Jessica Simpson buddies, and many users change their buddy icons frequently, as they do their cellular phone ringtones, to keep up with these trends from older media. AIM buddies reflect a particular moment in our collective digital history in which mainstream youth culture is beginning to present a challenge to the corporate and hacker/engineer/hippie countercultures that preceded it. IM users participate in established media franchises and popular iconographies in all kinds of ways, and it is the networked form of the technology that enables this. In this chapter I examine a set of AIM buddy icons downloaded from a popular Web site that depict racial, gender, national, and linguistic identities from the perspective of adolescent girls. The visual culture of Instant Messenger allows us to see active and creative digital production by precisely that group of users who are least enfranchised, even within academic discussions of digital disenfranchisement, and to parse the ways that they employ aspects of icon creation such as animations, juxta-

positions of idealized female body images and national and religious slogans, and how they otherwise manage the limited digital space of the buddy icon to articulate complex statements of often-reviled identities.

Professionally created buddy icons are available through the software companies that create Instant Messenger applications and make them available as freeware, such as MSN, Yahoo!, and AOL, but there are also numerous "amateur" Web sites run by individuals who collect them and make them available for free download. Thus AIM buddies are definitely a part of the gift economy of the Web; sites such as buddyicon.info and badassbuddies .com invite users to both download and "donate" buddies that they have created themselves, and these same sites have links to avatar-building software as part of their package. Budding Mozarts in the field of AIM buddy production are thus invited to hone, display, and share their cultural products, and in so doing, if Jenkins's premise is correct, to theoretically circumvent the "cultural gatekeepers" such as Microsoft, AOL, and Yahoo! that govern the visual culture of IM. The peculiar and extremely specific technical requirements of buddy icon production are demanding, and I wish to focus on actual rather than theoretical fifteen-year-old girls who create minifilms in AIM buddy icons that express nuanced and layered representations of nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender. In contrast to Coppola's notion of a hypothetical and valorized marginal and deracinated digital social subject who uses media technology to create great "art"—a universalizing definition of aesthetic value that remains unchallenged in this formulation—we see in the case of ethnic AIM buddy production and use a genuinely new digital expressive form that, while not "artistic" by conventional standards, creates raced and gendered bodies with a distinctive and innovative visual culture and mode of circulation and deployment. Ethnic AIM buddies are sites of digital racial formation and part of a racial project of carving out an imagistic computer-mediated communication (CMC) practice for youth of color online. It is their deviation from unproblematic notions of artistic value carried over from older media—the Mozart paradigm, which invokes traditional classical music—that accounts for their peculiarities of form and, I would argue, innovative use of cinematic and iconographic convention.

The buddyicon.info Web site offers thousands of AIM buddy icons (28,838 by my most recent count), as well as "away" icons and "blinkies," and many of these feature animated GIFs. Most of them appear to have been made by amateurs, and the site organizes them into different categories such as "animals, animated, buddies, cars, cartoon, celebrity, college, dollz, drinking,

funny, holidays, jobs, logos, love, men, movies, music, nationality, other, personal requests, religion, sports, tv, videogames, website, women, and wrestling." The "requests" icon page features icons made by users at the specific request of other users, thereby exhibiting the value given in this site to participatory media creation and the generosity with which users with graphical "skillz" employ them at the request of strangers whose only link with them is participation in IM as a media and communicative practice. Indeed, this volunteering of help at image creation is itself a way of suturing together media, communication, and identity: by creating a "gay pride" icon for use by the community, a user can help make literally visible identities that may not come through in the medium of IM writing. The fact that users wish so strongly to signify their identities in this medium attests to the ways that racial, gender, sexual, national, and other identities (such as sports and university affiliations) are willingly brought into play in a medium where the majority of users already know each other—as mentioned before, IMers rarely IM with users who are not already on their buddy lists—yet are not physically copresent.

The site's complicated relation to identity is signaled on the splash page that I accessed on April 26, 2005, which listed two "featured" icons, one of which displayed a rainbow and the words "gay pride" and the other one, titled "homophobe," that contained a mininarrative told in a cinematic language consisting of ten GIF images or slides that are programmed to cycle one after another. Each image contains the word "homophobe" in large letters at the bottom of the box and depicts a cartoon character approaching a closed door, uttering the words "Richard?" and "ya there?" in two cartoon bubbles. The next few frames depict him confronting another character clad in a rainbow shirt who emerges from the "closet" to say, "I'm gay, Tim." The last two frames of the animation represent a puff of smoke as "Tim" disappears. This icon, accompanied on the site by a description that reads "fear the gay," has been downloaded 148 times in comparison to 246 for "gay pride." Both were posted on the same day, March 12, 2003, and the fact that they appear together signifies the heterodox nature of the site's principle of icon organization. There is no implication that one ideological stance regarding homosexuality is favored over another; instead, the download statistics are provided to speak more or less for themselves.

The "dollz" category is the largest, containing over twelve thousand icons. In contrast to the state of gendered production in digital gaming, which is still dominated by men and male avatars, these are mostly female and appear to have been made by girls, since most of the nicknames of those who claim

authorship of them are female. Most of these depict curvy cartoon female figures, many of whom "wink," and whose images depict entire bodies represented in pieces: the first slide consists of a head, the second a midriff (often bare, and conventionally buxom), and the third a pair of legs. Of course, this is a practical technological move that enables a relatively large image to be conveyed in a space that is only fifty by fifty pixels large. These slides are then followed by three to seven more that contain a textual message, such as "gettin' dirty" or "I'm going crazy, I need to be your lady." (This last one contains the lyrics to a popular song; as the creator writes in the "description" box, "I love this song!") Importantly, despite the gift economy of the Web site, users are careful to signify the source of the image: one poster writes of her icon, titled "I Love Mike," "for anyone who loves a Mike *I didn\\\\\\\'t make this, got it from another site and changed some stuff*."

At first glance, it may seem that there must be more of a sense of ownership or consonance with self achieved when a user makes an avatar for herself as opposed to downloading one made by another. Filiciak agrees with this idea: "Obviously, it is easier to identify ourselves with something that is partly created by us than with pictures imposed on us by somebody else."[19] If we follow this line of thinking, then, it would seem that the more "original" an avatar is, the better an indicator it must be of a user's individual identity and subjectivity. If this is true, then amateur-produced buddy icons from buddyicon.info downloaded by users who do not modify them further might not necessarily be more effective at communicating "unique" identities than Yahoo!'s or Microsoft's corporate sites; they would simply offer a wider range of identity categories, but these would still be keyed to received notions of identity and might in fact serve to reify and stereotype users even more than had been the case before. However, users' modifications of existing avatar or doll templates or the insertion of a single extra slide in a premade animated GIF on buddyicon.info attest to the flexibility that allows buddies to be at least "partly created by us" or collaboratively created even though the modifications might be minimal. The notion that even small alterations to a new media object might legitimately be counted as original production is part of new media theory and indeed one of the key aspects by which new media are distinguished from old media. Lev Manovich writes that the logic of new media defines the principle of selection as a subset of the act of production, thus calling into question the idea of "original creation." This is meant not as a downgrading or criticism of the principle of selection but as a modification of the notion of authorship. He claims that just as some Web page creators put up sites that are simply links to other

sites, so too does the logic of new media production create "a new type of authorship" in which "the user does not add new objects to a corpus, but only selects a subset." It is the "logic of the advanced industrial and post-industrial societies, where almost every practical act involves choosing from some menu, catalog, or database," that gives rise to "the logic of identity in these societies—choosing values from a number of predetermined menus."[20] This line of thinking is the logical consequence of a postmodernist notion of diffused, compromised, or even dead authorship that can be traced back to Foucault and Barthes.[21] A meaningful definition of self-authorship in the case of AIM buddies resides in another basic principle differentiating new media from old, according to Manovich: modularity. "Media elements, be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts). These elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities. The objects themselves can be combined into even larger objects—again, without losing their independence."[22] The stress in this passage on the independence and singularity of new media objects foregrounds the ways that "discreteness" is also part of the language of new media: digital compositing works to create an illusory sense of seamlessness where none properly exists. AIM buddies, on the other hand, do not strive for or attain seamlessness; they are a form whose overt modularity and independent parts betray their origins in amateur experiments in modular self-authorship and visual representation. This formulation is also useful because it can be read in reference to the process of diasporic and gender identity creation, particularly under the sign of new media: just as the assemblage of digital "objects" continually references the independence of their parts, so too do the signs of identity in late capitalism consist of recombinations of aspects rendered discrete by categories of racialization, gender, and nationality. Because AIM buddies are put together from already-existing body parts, clothes, fonts, borders, decorations, and other graphical "pieces," they are hybrid images that sometimes radically violate the principles of aesthetic and media continuity. Some of this radical fragmentation is accounted for by the purpose of these buddies: unlike corporate desktop images, these images overtly highlight extremely varied political positionalities, geographic locations, religions, and sometimes-occluded nationalities not covered in the conventional IM query requesting age, sex, and location: "A/S/L?"

Buddyicon.info offers twenty-seven alphabetized separate categories for buddy icons and away messages. Some of these reference other media forms, like "celebrity" and "tv," but others, like "women," "nationality," and "reli-

gion," directly confront identity (as is typical on sites of this kind, there is no category on this site for "race"). Armenian ("Armo Thug"), Salvadoran ("reppin' that Salvi life"), Polska, Irish, Serbian ("Serbian Pride"), Boricuan, Asian ("AZN pride"), Macedonian, Turk, Ukrainian, Latvian, and Arab buddies all appear under the category of "nationality," but so do "Anarchy," "Capricorn," "3 Nails + 1 Cross = 4given," and "Muslim." And though there are separate categories for "women" and "dollz," most of the buddies that depict human forms feature girls. (Under "religion" there is an icon depicting a white male wearing a baseball cap; this is so exceptional as to be noted in the description: "Description: i love Godalot of guys say there is not anofe guy icons so here a guy icon saying i love God.") Rather than interpreting this use of the "nationality" category as a sign of an inaccurate understanding of what nation, race, religion, and astrology mean, the particular mode in which these categories overlap indicates a multidimensional conception of what "nationality" means. Since users decide where to post their own buddies on this site, this mode of categorization reveals intersectional thinking along the lines of race, politics, language use, religion, ethnic identity, and references to nationally defining historical events such as September 11. Many of the buddies that indicated American identity overtly referenced 9/11: one reads "God Bless America" and depicts a still photographic image of the World Trade Center towers; its caption reads "a little tribute to the heroes of 9/11." This buddy's purpose is thus stated as a memorial to fallen national heroes: the modest modifier "little" in reference to the icon as a "tribute" figures AIM buddies as sites of memory. This buddy works less to represent an absent body, as an avatar does, and more to mark a national political identity, displayed in the same spirit here in the space of Instant Messenger as other types of public/personal iconography worn in offline public spheres, such as bumper stickers, pins, and T-shirts.

In a neoliberal gesture that informs the "color blindness" of these categories of categorization, the site's designers omitted a "race" category, yet users have managed to work race, such as "AZN," or Asian, into the discourse of nation because they have pressing reasons to do so. Pan-Asian identity relies on a notion of race or at least a partially shared geopolitics and orientation to American racial politics that challenges the idea of separate and conflicting Asian nations, with different and competing interests, priorities, and degrees of political power. On the other hand, the "nation" category does have the effect of including whiteness, a category that would generally be omitted from the "race" category even if it were offered. While it fails to challenge the idea of whiteness as a normative social identity on

IM, it does work to question the idea that whiteness has no relation to ethnicity or geographic location. Latvians, Irish, Italians, Poles, and other nationalities appear in the same category as Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, and "Asians," a term that might normally appear under "race" if such a category existed. On the other hand, there were few African American or diasporic African buddies to be found in any category. There was also strikingly little diversity under the "religion" category: all the buddies in it represented Christian identities except for one, titled "Taoist ying yang."

The "Muslim," "usachick," and "nails n cross" buddy icons appear in the "nationality" category. They work to create intersectional identities in terms of race, religion, nation, gender, and politics. They are all built using the same "doll" template, a slender yet buxom cartoon avatar with easily replaceable hair colors, styles, clothing, and poseable limbs. The three buddy icons are all composed in the same way: all are animated GIFs consisting of four to seven separate images that play in sequence. "Muslim" depicts a blue-eyed, pink-chador-wearing avatar whose clothing, composed of a formfitting, long-sleeved, high-necked pink sweater emblazoned with the designer brand DKNY in large white letters on the chest and a long but formfitting blue flared skirt, conveys an ambivalent combination of "traditional" Islamic modesty and Western teen fashion. The veil is open in the front to reveal a conventionally pretty face—the same face shared by the dolls in "usachick" and "nails n cross"—with medium tan skin, a sidelong gaze, and a smile. As this animation plays, the first three slides, which depict a veiled face, a torso, and a lower body, are succeeded by three other images, which do not depict this female digital body but rather the religious and geographic images that define the ways we are to read it. Slide four consists of a pink field on which is written, in darker pink letters, "Ramadan is almoast here!" and it is followed by slides five and six, which represent first a digital image of a dark field with a gold crescent moon and star—the sign of Islam—and conclude with a scanned photograph of Mecca. When this last slide is reached, the program loops to the first slide and continues to play this six-slide sequence during an IM session until it is disabled. Thus the female body is depicted from top to bottom, sutured to a religious exhortation having to do with observing Muslim ritual and holidays, followed by the images of particular national identities and religious sites. The effect of this is to situate the viewer's observation of this religiously "observant" female teenage body—revealed yet virtuously covered up, modest yet winking, veiled yet exposed—within a narrative that reminds the viewer that we are to see it (and by extension the user) framed by the context of Islam. The author of "Muslim" is
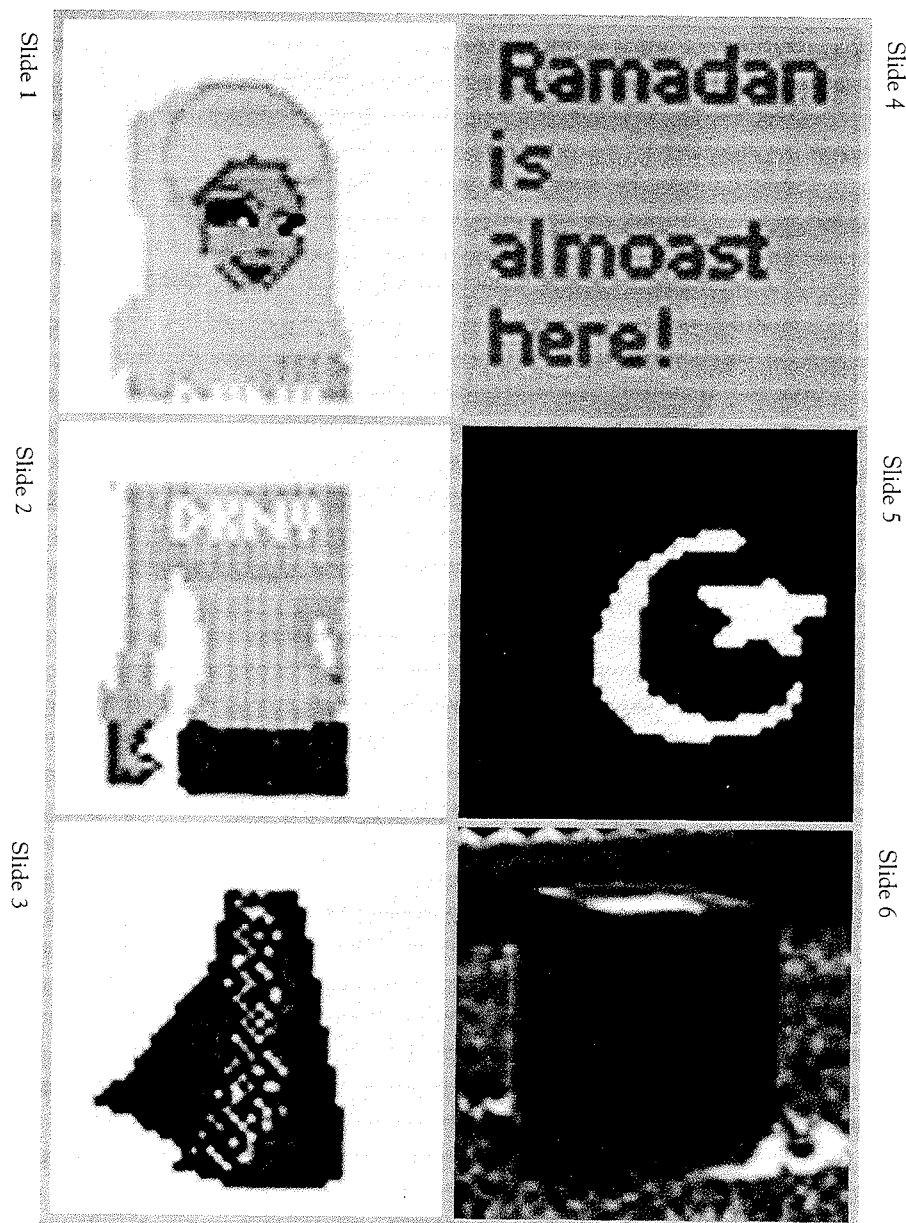

Figure 1.1. "Ramadan is almoast here!" animated GIF AIM buddy icon. Source: buddyicon.info.
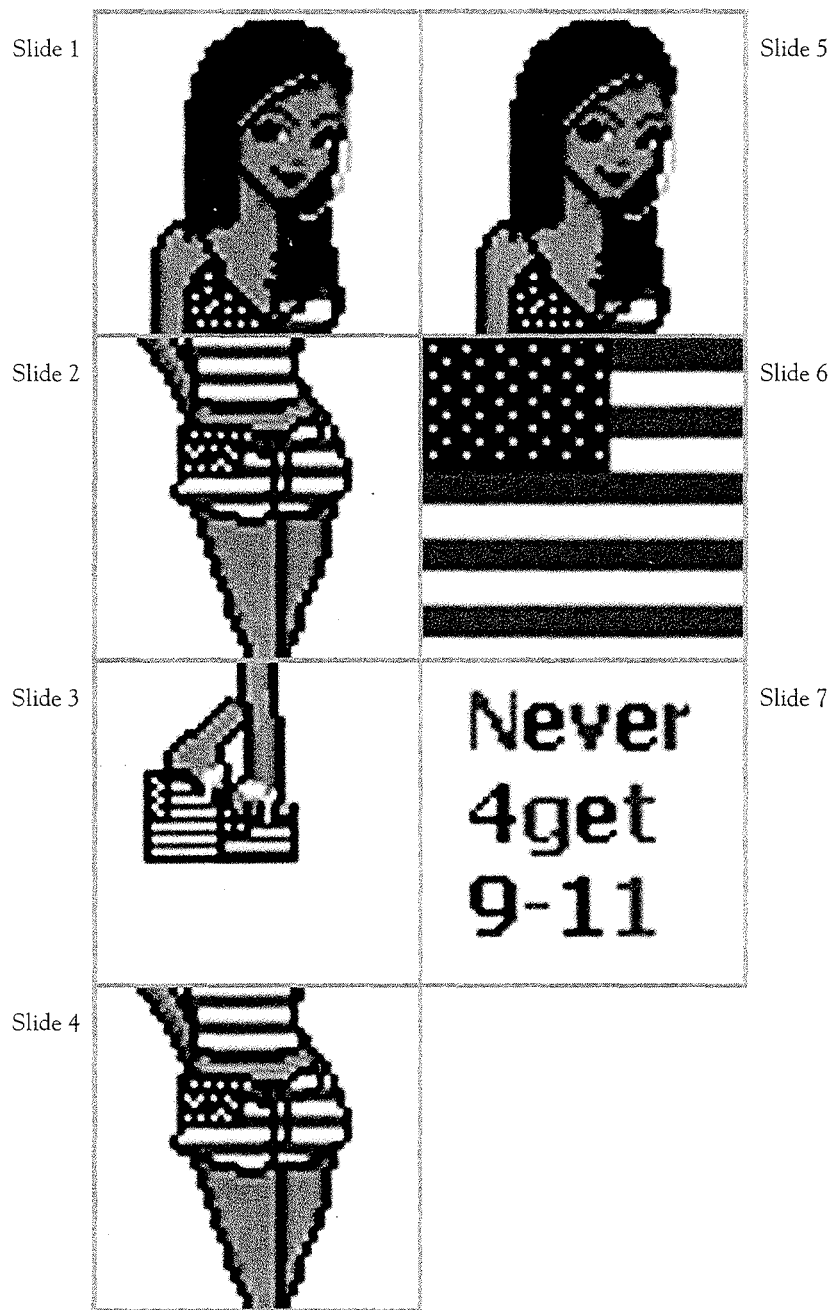
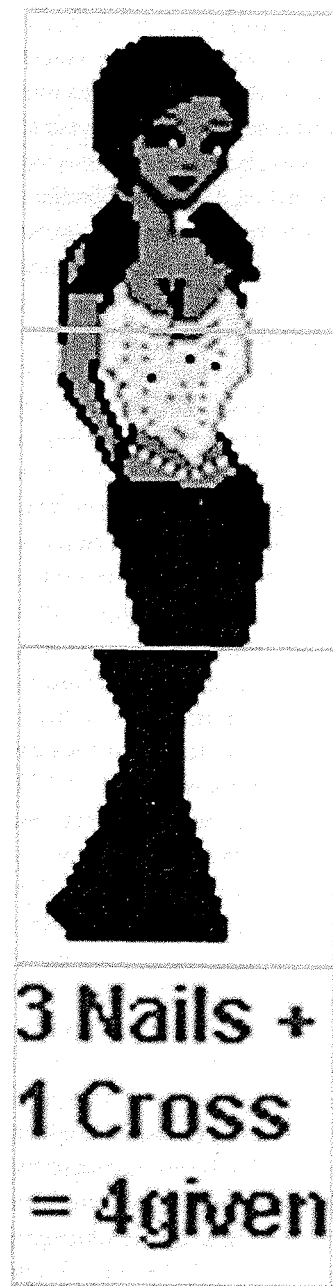Figure 1.2. Animated GIF AIM buddy icon "usachick." Source: buddyicon.info.

Figure 1.3. Animated GIF AIM buddy icon "nails n cross." Source: buddyicon.info.

a user who claims to be a fifteen-year-old girl from Detroit, a city with a large Arab American population, who chooses the nickname "shishkabob." The creation of this complex AIM buddy attests to the way that this signifying space is used by young women of color who wish to signify an unpopular religious subject position and also attempt to stay within the confines of convention regarding sexualized digital female bodies in the space of IM. This buddy was downloaded 470 times since it was posted in October 2003, attesting to the need to convey this sort of complex identity among other young female users as well.

The construction of a Muslim American girl as religiously traditional yet "hip" in her DKNY sweater and stylish but modest skirt can productively be contrasted to "usachick," subtitled "9/11," contributed by a different user, an icon that is constructed on almost exactly the same formal lines: it consists of a multiple slide depiction of a female avatar body divided into equal parts, followed by a slogan and an image. However, the seven slides of "usachick" are used slightly differently: the first three slides depict the same "doll" base as used by "Muslim," but the female figure is wearing an American-flag-patterned bra top with exposed midriff, very short shorts exposing bare legs, and platform thong sandals, all featuring the Stars and Stripes. Slides one, two, and three divide up the female body as in "Muslim," but slides four and five then repeat slides two and one in reverse order, thus showing the female body from top to bottom, then bottom to top. Slides six and seven depict first an American flag, then the slogan "never 4get 9-11." The use of numbers in this slogan remediates the unique abbreviated language of IM, which often substitutes numbers for letters in the interest of saving space and making typing faster and places it in the context of another numerically inspired abbreviation—9/11—that has a political and national valence that is here attached to the figure of the "American girl," a figure depicted as practicing her own sort of observances of national identity.

My third example, "nails n cross," has only four slides and depicts the same avatar used in "usachick," only with larger and more exposed breasts and darker skin, and its first three slides show the figure wearing a green top that exposes her midriff, low-slung boot-cut blue jeans, and the slogan "3 Nails + 1 Cross = 4given." Thus the animation of the female body shown from top to bottom is sutured to a virtual signboard that uses the same hybrid alphanumerical discourse as "usachick," which then loops back to the image of another, less modest than "Muslim," but equally observant religious body— that of the American Christian girl. Her clothing does not signify her identity in the same way; rather, it signifies the notion that the "uniform" of

American Christianity has less to do with ethnicity and its attendant signs, like the chador and a lack of exposed skin, and more to do with normative teenage fashions for American girls. This is the default fashion ensemble of American girls: rather than the abbreviated starred and striped top and shorts of "usachick," the Christian girl keeps her legs covered, albeit with formfitting jeans, and does not wear her religion on her virtual body. The burden of representing religion in this buddy rests solely on the signboard that follows it.

Theorists of new media have made much of the notion of cinema as the dominant language of culture and of the computer desktop as a cinematic space: "screen culture" is posited as the hegemonic cultural interface. IM is itself an anomaly, one that has eluded commodification by new media industries precisely because it seemed such an unpromising and graphically nonimmersive user practice; its unexpected popularity demonstrates that digital print culture possesses durable attractions. AIM buddies suture together print culture and cinematic screen culture in two ways. First, within the form of the icons themselves, they create cinematic sequences that strikingly remediate the form of early film in that they alternate moving images of the body with explanatory textual titles or signboards that interpret the body's meaning and identity for the viewer. Like the cinema of attractions, which worked less to tell a complex narrative than to demonstrate the powers of the medium itself to simulate "real" experiences, these animated GIFs work like minimovies that have one purpose: to signify identities. Second, they work in conjunction with the practice of real-time text interaction, riding "on top" of the IM application and supplying a graphical component to online writing that expresses cinematic intersectional identities, but using narrative and spatial techniques unique to the form, techniques that were constructed by users themselves specifically to illustrate identities that exceed narration by either purely graphical-cinematic or textual means.

Per Persson describes the transition from early to modern cinema as occurring between 1905 and 1915 and explains the ways in which the drive for cultural legitimation directed the movement of the film form toward longer, more narratively complex structures that remediated theater and literature, as opposed to the earlier cinema of attractions, which remediated vaudeville and other lower-class entertainments. Several theorists have noted the way that new media remediate these earlier media forms: the similarity between digital games and the cinema of attractions, both of which attempt to reproduce an experience rather than tell a conventional story with a beginning, middle, and end, as Persson also follows this line.[23] Unlike other

scholars, however, Persson is especially interested in the ways that digital space, in particular the computer desktop, remediates early cinema in terms of its conventions regarding the use of backdrops, the rudimentary use of montage, and the visual disposition of human figures. Animated GIFs are like film in that they are a "push" medium, and like early film, they are silent. Also, like the early cinema of attractions, IM lacks cultural legitimacy. The popular sense of IM as a "time waster" positions it close to the perceived social function of early cinema, which before 1905 had not yet acquired the respectability accorded to narrative forms like literature and theater. Like the animated GIFs I discuss earlier, early films negotiate screen space in ways that promote a sense of spatial discontinuity and a flat, artificial looking backdrop. In an increasingly rich and photo-realistic digital landscape, one in which even desktop images provide an astonishing sense of depth and richness, IM buddies remain flat and one-dimensional. As in Muybridge's early films, IM buddy backdrops are usually a single color. Also, IM and early cinema share a mode of exhibition: both are exhibited in relatively private screen-viewing situations. As Persson notes, white-screen projection of early films was adopted after the peep show; and as Manovich notes, personal computer screens are private, rather than public, viewing devices. The sense of gazing into a private screen is shared by IM users, particularly when they are using laptop computers. In addition, the sense that the viewer is witnessing something voyeuristically or has a privileged view—in other words, is not being overtly performed *for*—is missing in both forms. There is little or no sense of witnessing a "private" body on AIM buddy screens. This is particularly true in the case of the female avatars in the animated GIFs I have discussed, which like early vaudeville and cinematic actors address the user in face-to-face situations and "gesture and gaze at the user."[24] Persson compares this early form of acting with the way digital assistants like Microsoft's "Clippy" perform cinematically in the context of desktop computing.

The most striking formal similarity, however, and one with ideological implications, has to do with the way that shots or slides are sequenced and meant to signify in relation to each other. Persson explains that early cinema did not create or assume spatial continuity between separate shots. "Whereas viewers of today make spatial inferences between different shots, early cinema and its audience did not conceive of relations between shots in spatial terms."[25] Thus two contiguous shot sequences were not assumed to inhabit the same physical space. One of the most vivid examples he supplies is the way that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912) presents a long shot of Hyde trashing his office and follows it with a close-up insert of a hand holding a

bottle of poison, depicted against a flat black backdrop that is at odds with the shot that came before it. The conceptualization of space as discontinuous that we can see in early film describes perfectly the cinematic logic that structures animated GIF buddies like "Muslim," "usachick," and "nails n cross," which promiscuously mix photographic and cartoon images of cities, signboards and slogans, avatar bodies, and flags. Far from occupying the same space, these minifilms exploit the discontinuity of these images to produce a complex intersectional identity in a highly compressed form that runs ad infinitum or loops in the context of IM.

Thus, when analyzing these icons, one can identify two forms of movement in play. The movement of the avatar itself—the means by which it can be made to appear to wink, for example—is accomplished by sequencing two images together that depict a identical face with open and then closed eyes, simulating a change in facial expression. This kind of movement requires minimal intervention by the producer. This is basically the same means by which all animated video sequences are created. The other and more innovative one, one that is specific to, and characteristic of, this genre, directs or simulates the movement of the viewer's gaze by depicting a whole body revealed in pieces, thus creating the sense of looking down an entire body. The slow frame-per-second rate of these animated GIFs produces a slow, deliberate quality in the user's gaze that draws attention to the use of slides to represent a whole body. This slow fps rate remediates Eadweard Muybridge's card sequences that one could flip to simulate motion; however, AIM buddies' low-bandwidth animated sequences are cartoonish and far from photo-realistic.[26] Unlike Muybridge's "films," which worked with high-quality photographs to create an illusion of movement, the effect is more like an animated cartoon or minifilm, which, like a peep show loop, repeats itself inexhaustibly. The difference between Muybridge's cinematic technologies and animated GIFs in the context of AIM, however, is that high-res and low-res digital cinematic forms coexist on the Internet rather than replacing each other. It is quite possible and likely for an IM user to engage in an IM session using an animated GIF while viewing a movie on streaming video in another window on the same screen. One technological innovation does not replace another, in this case, but rather occupies different forms and communicative spaces, thus affording "ordinary" users the opportunity to create digital signatures without needing to own expensive software or advanced graphical skills.

Animated AIM buddy GIFs loop, or "play" until they are turned off. In this way they resemble early filmic peep shows, in particular pornographic

ones, and like them, their subject is a female body that is optimized for viewing. The visual culture of these buddies governs the gaze to take in tiny images of curvy "dollz," digibodies that are flirtatiously revealed to the user as a series of slides that unveil the body's parts in sequence. This breaking up or partitioning of the female body into pieces to be put on separate slides invokes a way of looking that constructs the female digital body as a fetish.[27] As Mary Flanagan writes: "The role of fetishism, particularly the fetishization of the woman, in digital media is of great interest to any critical understandings of this new landscape, for digibodies are created from discrete elements and are positioned within a command and control paradigm of desire. Thus what is proposed here is that the means of this particular kind of 3D artifact production allows the body to be thought of as segmented and zoned. This breaking up of the female body into discrete elements, i.e. the creation of the image of woman as series of objects, is in terms of fetishistic scopophilia, focusing on the object or body part used for sexual enjoyment."[28] As does Manovich, Flanagan stresses the modular independence of the individual digital parts that make up digibodies and all new media objects, but unlike him, she identifies a "command and control paradigm of desire" that expresses an overdetermined female body that works as a site of visual pleasure in Western culture. Thus "independence" on the level of the image's structure and function results in a dynamic in which independence in political and representational terms is withheld from women themselves. Animated GIF AIM buddies of women's bodies or "dollz" employ this scopophilic mode of envisioning, virtually panning down the female body to represent it in parts, mimicking the surveying gaze of a spectator who "checks out" female bodies in the world. The sequence of images representing a face, a curvaceous torso, and a pair of feet repeat to imitate a stereotypically masculine gaze. As Roland Barthes writes in his dissection of the dynamics of looking embodied in striptease: "There will therefore be in striptease a whole series of coverings placed upon the body in proportion as she pretends to strip it bare."[29] In the case of the "Muslim" buddy icon in particular, the form of the animated GIF and its pan down the virtual female body accomplish a kind of virtual striptease, an unveiling of the veiled body in the very act of asserting its own religious difference. The insertion of messages, slogans, flags, and other nonbodily signs alternates with this visual trail down the female avatar body, valencing it in political, religious, and national terms that assert key differences between these bodies despite their shared means of digital exhibition. Thus the position of the viewer is inherently a fetishistic one, one in which AIM buddy female bodies are both fetishes and

fetishized. They are specifically fetishes of difference, signs of identities that are embattled and particular: there are thousands of buddies in use and under construction because there is an unappeasable demand. This compulsion to repeat when it comes to buddy creation and the compulsion to view them looping endlessly in a short repetitive sequence reflects the desire to signify identities that vary, even infinitesimally, from each other in terms of race, nationality, religion, and language use.

The blazon is described thus by Barthes: "The spitefulness of language: once reassembled, in order to utter itself, the total body must revert to the dust of words, to the listing of details, to a monotonous inventory of parts, to crumbling; language undoes the body, returns it to the fetish. This return is coded under the term blazon. . . . Similarly with the striptease: an action, denudation, is predicated on the succession of its attributes (legs, arms, bosom, etc.). . . . As a genre, the blazon expresses the belief that a complete inventory can produce a total body."[30] In this passage from his monumental work of structuralist literary analysis, S/Z, Barthes describes the blazon as a mode of representation that systematically lists body parts in a "monotonous" fashion. "Muslim," "usachick," and "nails n cross" represent a female body cut into three discrete pieces, head, torso, and legs, so as to fit a sufficiently detailed "total" body into a small space; but this method, which may have originated as a technological fix for dealing with a space shortage, results in a mode of viewing that fetishizes the female body, creating a virtual "inventory" of its parts, a term that predates the notion of the digital database but is homologous with it. Though, as Manovich notes, all films are basically databases of images, this portioning of the body into parts is relatively uncommon in early cinema, which tended to depict the human form in its entirety. As Persson notes, it was considered "bad composition" to represent a body with its feet outside the frame.[31] Viewing the stately yet sprightly march of an animated GIF that cycles through its seven cards in an unchangeable cadence reminds one of the deliberateness of this mode of vision, one that offers no surprises and plenty of repetition and depends on a conventionalized succession of images to create something impossible: a "total" body. This interest in reproducing "total" bodies informs the current fetish with digitally photo-realistic bodies.

The collection, production, and deployment of these tiny modular female bodies evokes at least one aspect of the practice of collecting of miniatures: that is, fetishism. In On Longing, Susan Stewart anatomizes the ways in which the impulse to collect miniatures and in particular to create a specific form of the miniature, the tableau, satisfies psychic needs: "There are two

major features of the tableau: first, the drawing together of significant, even if contradictory, elements, and then the complete filling out of 'point of view'; and second, the simultaneous particularization and generalization of the moment."[32] Just as in AIM buddy icons, which are digital tableaux, tableau arrangements stress both the individuality of the user and the creation of identities that are irremediably particular along *with* the shared and generalized nature of these identities: though the AIM buddy icon depicting a fashionably dressed observant Muslim girl in pink intercut with a flag, an image of Mecca, and "Ramadan is almoast here!" may seem extremely eccentric, other users share enough identification with it to have downloaded it hundreds of times. In addition, the transposition of these graphical elements and textual signs in a digital motion sequence certainly draws together "significant, even if contradictory elements"; indeed, that may be its main purpose.

Barthes's revolutionary idea that any cultural product or practice, such as cheese advertisements or professional wrestling, can be read using the same sort of formal analysis that one would use to read classical French novelists such as Balzac, the author of *Sarrasine*, opened the door for the discipline of cultural studies to gain legitimacy. Semiotics seemed particularly well suited for studying popular culture and emergent expressive forms that were not yet covered under existing disciplines of academic theory. The Internet produces new media practices constantly, and there is still a lack of consensus over where and how they ought to be studied in the academy.[33] Nonetheless, despite cultural studies' open-mindedness regarding "proper" objects of study, there is already a canon of fetishized new media objects for academics, and AIM buddies do not belong to it. This may have something to do with the "tackiness" of amateur-produced AIM buddy icon images; along the axis of taste, cheese and wrestling are like Shakespeare compared to the AIM buddies I have discussed. The new media canon, as exemplified by work such as Manovich's, Darley's, and Galloway's, privileges interfaces, virtual reality applications, and digital art, games, and Web sites. The lower tier is reserved for youth-oriented ephemeral activities, like chats and IM, which may account for the dearth of critical research on these visual digital practices. While there has been published research on IM by social scientists mainly regarding discourse analysis, there has been little by cultural theorists. AIM buddies are everything that new media, as described and idealized by formalists such as Manovich, is not or is not supposed to be: while the ideal form of new media as described in much of the scholarship has value because it is interactive, synchronous, fully featured, immersive,

possessed of spatial depth, adventuresome in terms of content and form, and richly textured, AIM buddies are low fidelity, fairly uninteractive, often tasteless, and poorly produced simulations. This may account, at least partly, for their neglect by scholars; in a field that privileges the "virtual" for its ability to create convincing simulations and postmodern identity experiences, AIM buddies are on the low end of virtuality *and* virtuosity. However, perhaps for these very reasons, they are locations of overt and controversial identity formation by large numbers of IM users from minority groups who may not engage in any other graphical production practices online, which makes them an important aspect of analysis for scholars who study online community. These users are quite likely to be relative newcomers to the Internet, as young people are one of the fastest-growing groups of Internet users, as are people of color. Thus it is especially important that their creation of a visual culture in a networked communication form that is assumed not to have one—Instant Messenger—be examined carefully and considered in light of its ability to express identities that are resistant to normativity and presented alternatively to commercially produced images of the networked body. It is the confluence of textual and visual discourses that makes IM and its AIM buddies distinctive: while the conversation in IM rambles on in its distinctively disjointed, abbreviated, and free-associative way, the AIM buddy remains fixed in place, either marching through its predetermined frames, which simulate repetitive iconic movement, or standing still. The cinematic space of the animated AIM buddy anatomizes the use of gesture in the construction of gendered identities: winks, wiggles, and smiles direct the viewer to a performance of femininity that is far from resistant to gender norms. The containment of this digital image of identity creates a subject of interactivity who remains fixed within a small space, a space that cannot expand and is permanently supplementary to the performance of "live" conversation. On the other hand, the wild variety of buddies created and used by people who fit in "other" categories attests to a thriving, as yet relatively uncommodified visual culture of digital body representation. The ability to swap out slides in animated GIFs of female identity such as "Muslim," "usachick," and "nails n cross" creates a type of volitional ethnicity that can work as part of a new economy of digital visual capital, with several users figuratively sharing a common body but modifying it with references to Islam, Christianity, 9/11, or brand preferences that cause it to parse differently.

14. This is not to say that communication studies neglects the visual entirely: visual communication studies is an exciting new field that has yet to devote itself to new media. For a fine example of this new scholarship, see Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty*.

15. Gajjala, *Cyber Selves*; Mitra, "Virtual Commonality."

16. The Annenberg Digital Future report shows that time taken out of television use is put into Internet use, rather than detracting from other activities.

17. Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, 3.

18. Hall, "Introduction," 2.

19. Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk*, 6.

20. See Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

21. Eglash, *Appropriating Technology*; Nelson, Tu, and Hines, *Technicolor*; Tal, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being*.

22. McPherson, "Reload," 468.

23. Parks, "Satellite and Cyber Visualities."

24. Ibid., 284 (italics mine).

25. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

26. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 61.

27. On the topic of stars, see Dyer and MacDonald, *Stars*; and DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*.

28. Winant and Omi, "Racial Formation," 124.

29. See Hargittai, "Digital Inequality"; and Hargittai, "Internet Access and Use in Context."

30. Thomas Csordas, cited in Scheper-Hughes, "The Global Traffic in Human Organs."

31. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 176.

32. Stone, *The War of Desire*.

33. See scholarship on Virtual Valerie for an account of nonnetworked virtual pornography. Media convergence brought about by the Internet demonstrates the ways that this video offers the same view that television does; however, television has become more sexualized since the early nineties, while the Internet is a relatively decentralized many-to-many medium that has always distributed pornography.

34. Banet Weiser, "Consuming Race on Nickelodeon."

35. Shaviro, *Connected*, 77.

36. See Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, for a discussion of the power of "ethnic film" to authenticate difference via visual depictions of a exotic ethnic past.

37. See Mary Beltrán's work on Jennifer Lopez's transformations across different racial identities.

38. See Johnson, *Interface Culture*; Landow, *Hypertext 2.0*; and Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

39. Eglash, *Appropriating Technology*, vii.

40. See Wakeford, "Networking Women and Grrls"; and Squires, "Fabulous Feminist Futures."

41. Phelan, *Unmarked*.

42. Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 471.

43. Wright, "Finding a Place in Cyberspace," 53.

1. "Ramadan Is Almoast Here!"

1. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 216.

2. T. L. Taylor has researched the dissatisfactions that female gamers express with the range of female avatars available to them: "Unfortunately, what I have continually found is that women in *Everquest* often struggle with the conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling that they have to 'bracket' or ignore how they look." Because "avatars are central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces ... they are mediators between personal identity and social life," and thus the narrow range of female body types available to players constricts the variety of materials that they have to "work with" in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). Taylor, "Multiple Pleasures," 35.

3. Bolter, Grusin, and NetLibrary Inc., *Remediation*, 262.

4. Persson, "Cinema and Computers," 51.

5. Most popular Instant Messenger software, like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), MSN Messenger, and Yahoo! Messenger, allows and encourages users to customize their screen windows with buddy icons. I use the term "AIM buddy" as it is used colloquially, to signify buddy icons used by all IM software applications, not just America Online.

6. See chapter 2 of Nakamura, *Cybertypes*; and Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*.

7. Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice."

8. While many gaming consoles, such as Xbox online, support networked games over TCP/IP, several of the blockbuster games that generate most of the industry's profits—for example, *Grand Theft Auto*—are still either stand-alone or multiplayer, requiring players to occupy the same physical space. Computer games are more commonly networked, but almost all require membership fees: there.com and secondlife.com are notable exceptions in that they offer free trial periods. In addition, MMORPGs such as *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* tend to structure gameplay around accomplishing missions and engaging in battle rather than around unstructured socializing and interpersonal communication, unlike IM.

9. For a fascinating scholarly account of ASCII art, see Danet, *Cyberpl@y*.

10. Rehak, "Playing at Being."

11. Silver, "Shop Online," 265. In this chapter Silver provides other useful pieces of information taken from the Pew "Teenage Life Online" 2001 report that confirm the popularity of IM among young people while noting the differences between genders when it comes to use: though both girls and boys are heavy users, "78% of girls online reported using IM compared with 71% of boys who did so. In addition to using IM more than do boys, girls send or receive e-mail more than do boys, with 95% of girls reporting such use compared with 89% of boys" (159).

12. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*.

13. Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" 2.

14. Ibid.

15. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

16. See in particular Alexander R. Galloway's excellent *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.

17. A QuickTime file of the eBay "Clocks" advertisement can be found at "Duncan's TV Ad Land," http://www.duncans.tv/2005/ebay-clocks, along with a commentary by Duncan McLeod.

18. Probot Productions, the creators of this *Alien* series, has continued to make films using this method, and I thank them for sharing their work with me so generously.

19. Filiciak, "Hyperidentities," 91.

20. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 128.

21. See Barthes, *Music/Image/Text*; and Foucault, "What Is an Author?"

22. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 30.

23. For examples of this scholarship, see Bolter, Grusin, and NetLibrary Inc., *Remediation*; and Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*.

24. Persson, "Cinema and Computers."

25. Ibid., 42.

26. Rebecca Solnit notes the historical connections forged between two of California's biggest industries—computers and motion pictures—by Muybridge's motion studies, which were commissioned by Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University, a major site of technological innovation in the realm of information systems. "Hollywood and Silicon Valley became, long after these men died, the two industries California is most identified with, the two that changed the world. They changed it, are changing it, from a world of places and materials to a world of representations and imagination, a world of vastly greater reach and less solid grounding." Solnit, *River of Shadows*, 6.

27. For another example of a technologically mediated type of viewing of the female body in digital culture, see the essays in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*, on the Visible Woman. The Visible Woman project produced cross sections of a cryogenically prepared female body for viewing and insertion in a database.

28. Mary Flanagan, "The Bride Stripped Bare," 170.

29. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 84.

30. Barthes, *S/Z*, 113–14.

31. Persson, "Cinema and Computers," 41.

32. Stewart, *On Longing*, 48.

33. See Sterne, "Digital Media and Disciplinarity"; and Silver, *Critical Cyberculture Studies*. In particular see Nakamura, "Cultural Difference, Theory, and Cyberculture Studies."

2. Alllooksame? Mediating Visual Cultures of Race on the Web

1. See http://cogsci.ucsd.edu/~asaygin/tt/ttest.html for a Web site that details the history of the Turing Test. See also Hofstadter and Dennett, *The Mind's I*. See as well Stephenson, *Cryptonomicon*, for a fictionalized but extremely detailed and thoughtful treatment of the role of encryption in the development of modern computing culture and surveillant societies.

2. Codetalkers served in both Korea and Vietnam, and their contributions were evaluated by Major Howard Conner, signal officer of the Fifth Marine Division, as follows: "Were it not for the Navajo code talkers, the Marines never would have taken Iwo Jima." Quoted in Aaseng, *Navajo Code Talkers*, 99.

3. Cruz, "From Farce to Tragedy," 26.

4. Ibid., 27.

5. Omi, "Racialization in the Post–Civil Rights Era."

6. Robert G. Lee, *Orientals*, 217.

7. Omi, "Racialization in the Post–Civil Rights Era."

8. This depiction of cyberspace as a world of brightly colored, often geometric icon-images was very common in films of the 1990s that depicted navigation from computer networks. *Hackers, The Lawnmower Man,* and *Johnny Mnemonic* represent Internet use as a form of three-dimensional flight simulation through abstracted polygonal visual icons, a mode of interface use that resonates far more with video games than with actual computer use or programming today. The problem of representing a fundamentally immobile and reflective or cerebral activity in a visually striking and telegenic fashion has dogged cinematic treatments of cyberspace: the more recent *Swordfish* attempted to address this problem by depicting a computer hacker emoting violently while viewing several computer screens at once, a rare situation for actual computer professionals.

9. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 170.

10. Ibid., 88.

11. Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), a novel written almost twenty years after *Neuromancer*, amplifies the notion of networked societies as defined by postliteracy by focusing on the centrality of corporate logos and moving images, or "footage," as information commodities in the near-future world. The emphasis is far less on computers as posthuman entities and far more on the notion of nontextual human vision as constituting a new type of capital and commodity: the novel's protagonist Cayce, a play on the name of Gibson's original protagonist in *Neuromancer*, makes her living "coolhunting" or identifying successful products and logos, and her obsession with locating the creators of a set of streaming video files propels the plot. See as well Jameson, "Fear and Loathing in Globalization," for a discussion of the ways that *Pattern Recognition*'s focus on what he dubs "postmodern nominalism," or a central interest in style, taste, and the importance of branding or naming, creates "global cyberpunk," in which "eBay is certainly the right word for our current collective unconscious" (108).

12. Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art*, 82.

13. See Warschauer, "Language, Identity, and the Internet."

14. The Chiapas Web site at http://chiapas.indymedia.org is a good example of this.

15. See Darrell Y. Hamamoto, "White and Wong," for a discussion of "Mr. Wong," a comedic site that engages in ruthless racial stereotyping.

16. Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, 16.

17. On August 24, 2001, "Oaken Din" writes: "I am a Chinese guy living in the Los Angeles area. I see Chinese ppl all the time. I'll see Koreans and Japanese ppl here and there when I am out and about in the LA area. There are a lot of Vietnamese, Indonesian, Mongolian, etc. that I bump into. When it comes to telling them apart, I seem to get it right for the most part between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. But I scored measurably on your test. I got a four. That tells me how much I know. I suck and am forever changed. Thnx for the eye opener."

18. Original spelling, grammar, and formatting are reproduced from the original post as faithfully as possible.

19. In an article titled "Testing Out My A-Dar," Harry Mok remarks that when he first started the test, he thought, "This was going to be easy. No problem, I'm Chinese. I can spot Chinese people a mile away. I have the Asian sixth sense, an A-dar." After remarking that he failed miserably, he includes Suematsu's comment that "a lot of time just to be polite or politically correct, people go to a difficult long way to find out (what ethnicity or race you are)," Suematsu said. "It's almost like a whether-you're-gay-or-straight kind of thing."

20. Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 54.

21. Ibid., 69.

22. Robert G. Lee, Orientals, 147.

23. Ibid., 148.

24. See Palumbo-Liu's discussion in Asian/American of the face as a privileged signifier of Asian identity, in which he writes that the Asian "face is elaborated as the site of racial negotiations and the transformation of racial identity," and that "it is this 'face,' then, not (only) in its phenotypology but (also) in animation, that demarcates essential differences between groups" (87–88).

25. Robert G. Lee, Orientals, 148.

26. See the film Europa, Europa for a comic critique of this same theme of phenotypic racial identification in terms of German visual cultures of identity regarding Jews.

27. Nam, Yell-Oh Girls, 143.

28. Cheng, Inauthentic, 147.

29. Chuh, Imagine Otherwise, 13. Cheng agrees with this, claiming that "what we call 'Asian American' identity is a category that could be more fruitfully thought of, in functional terms, as a 'mixed' racial or ethnic category" (Inauthentic, 125).

30. Chuh, Imagine Otherwise, 145.

31. Spooner, Asian-Americans and the Internet.

32. See Everett, "Click This," as well as past programs and mission statements from the Afro-Geeks conference, http://omni.ucsb.edu/cbs/projects/05agcfp.html (accessed July 2005).

33. See http://eugene.whong.org/hapatest.htm (accessed July 2005).

34. Ginsburg, "Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies," 79.

35. Sardar, "Alt.civilizations.faq."

36. Michaels, Bad Aboriginal Art, 42.

37. Sarai makes all its excellent publications and readers available on the Internet under creative commons licenses. See http://www.sarai.net. This Web site also contains bulletin boards such as the "Cybermohalla," a discussion site designed to mimic a dense urban space such as that hosting the collective itself, as well as outstanding new media criticism by a range of artists, activists, and scholars from a global perspective.

38. Quoted in Lovink, Dark Fiber, 212.

39. Ngugi, Moving the Centre, 30.

40. Ibid., 31.

41. Gloria Anzaldúa tells a similar story that identifies academic institutions as

places where minority cultures and bodies are subjugated by enforced use of the imperial tongue, that is, English. Her chapter is titled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in Borderlands/La Frontera. Indeed, American minority narratives having to do with "foreign" language use being punished in institutional contexts are often framed in terms of trauma to bodies and to cultural identities. For additional examples, see Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior; and Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory.

42. See Lockard, "Resisting Cyber-English," for a discussion of the ways that linguistic imperialism contributes to widening "digital divides." Lockard writes: "English monopolization cuts deeply into the Internet's potential for social empowerment, as a linguistic prior condition for access ensures that Anglophone technology controls the contents of subaltern mouths. Ngugi argues that 'a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history.' Cyber-English acts as a cultural filter from this perspective, a filter that sifts out cultural particularisms and standardizes expressive experience" (n.p.).

43. Rushdie, "Damme," 50.

44. Ibid., 54.

45. Ibid., 56.

46. In "The New Empire within Britain," Rushdie does discuss racism as a central problem characteristic of Britain's postcolonial period; he calls it "a crisis of the whole culture, of the society's entire sense of itself." See Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 129. In his introduction to that collection, he remarks how he was "accused by both Geoffrey Howe and Norman Tebbit of having equated Britain with Nazi Germany" when they first read the piece, while no other negative response seems to have come from any of the others (5). It seems that Rushdie's position as a public intellectual in Great Britain is much more secure when he leaves the discussion of race and racism out of the picture.

47. This debate is not a productive one, yet its persistence is truly remarkable. It has been mirrored in several disciplines, including women's studies. In addition, if we equate language purity with cultural purity, if cultural authenticity and identity reside in the written as well as spoken language, there are already large numbers of people who are missing a vital component of their culture: the poor. This analog divide is a significant factor that was often neglected in early digital-divide rhetoric. Literacy in a "native" language and cultural authenticity are thus conflated, which is somewhat ironic considering the valorization of "primitive" preliterate peoples as somehow the most pure and authentic (though the most underprivileged) of all.

48. Ginsburg, "Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies," 78.

49. Ibid.

50. Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars."

51. Michaels, Bad Aboriginal Art, 81.

3. The Social Optics of Race and Networked Interfaces in The Matrix Trilogy and Minority Report

1. Thacker, Biomedia, 8.

2. Patricia J. Williams, The Rooster's Egg, 232.