



3rd Dimension

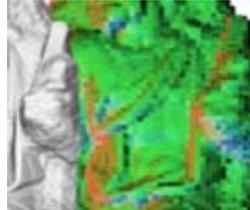
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Lord Vishnu...

by Mark Fihn

Living in central Texas sometimes provides me with an interesting glimpse of America that sometimes seems divorced from my world-view. Talk around-the-town about the film *Avatar* serves as a great example... While the local theater (recently converted to support digital 3D) has been jam-packed for the past week and my kids and their friends give endless praise to the epic cinematic experience, there are rumblings of discontent from three demographics, all of which are rather significant in this part of the world:

- **Concern from the Christian church about Avatar:** This past summer, a friend tipped me to the notion that *Avatar* is anti-Christian. Since I was pretty sure that no-one in my home-town had much real knowledge about the film and its theological implications, certainly last summer, I expressed curiosity and learned that this pronouncement came from a local preacher whose opinions were based solely on the roots of the word “avatar”.

I must admit that I assumed that the word had its origins from the Latin or the Greek, with a meaning from which our use of the word in virtual environments was somehow linked. But no, the word “avatar” is actually derived from the Sanskrit word *avatārah*, meaning “descent”. The word “avatar” is specifically linked to Vishnu, who is typically adorned in resplendent gold and yellow with a blue skin and is one of primary deities in the Hindu pantheon along with Brahma and Shiva. Lord Vishnu is the “preserver” and is said to preserve the universe against all its enemies including human beings and other forms of life on earth. Vishnu takes as many as 10 avatars (including Rama, Krishna, Parshurama, Vamana, Narasimhan, Buddha, Kalki, etc) basically to save the world from annihilation.



While the etymology of the word “avatar” is interesting, and it seems likely that the blue-skinned Na’vi from James Cameron’s film are indeed based to some extent on the visage of Lord Vishnu, in terms of the movie’s cinematic import, I find myself kneeling to Lord Vishnu on this one... Perhaps the “3D” in the title will assuage some ultra-conservative Christians – implying some sort of linkage to the holy trinity...but I doubt it...

- **Concern from the US military about Avatar:** I live about 30 miles away from Fort Hood, what is frequently touted as the largest military base in the “free world” and site of the recent shooting spree by Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan. I frequently go to bed with to the rhythmic thumping of artillery practice from off in the distance.

Fort Hood means that there is a huge influx of military influence in the local area, and a generally pro-military attitude and much higher level of support for the US military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan than is typical throughout the country. The portrayal of the military in the movie *Avatar* can easily be interpreted as negative, and some of the local Tom Clancy fans are not amused.



Overly stereotyped Rambo-like mercenaries, rippling with muscles, scars, and a gun-loving mind-set create a bad-guy that is arguably overdone. Napalm-dropping attack copters bring to mind images from Vietnam – and perhaps such overt political messaging detracts a bit from the plot line of the story. I personally think the mercenary characters in Avatar were less a criticism of the US military than a criticism of war generally, but if you want to skip a great movie because the bad guys resemble some American military stereotypes, then perhaps you should pause to consider that most action-adventure films tend to over-stereotype their characters. Cheering on Rocky when he’s fighting against the Russian champion Ivan Drago is an offensive and inaccurate stereotype.

- **Concern from Republicans/capitalists:** Less than 30 minutes from my home is Crawford, Texas, home to George W. Bush’s “Western White House”. This part of Texas is heavily Republican – which tends to flavor discussions about the environment a bit skewed in favor of big oil, big cars, and big industry. There were no lines for Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* when it came out a couple of years ago...

Avatar certainly has an environmental message; in fact, it borders on hypocrisy to see a film with a message that is linked to “Mother Nature” while it simultaneously is so heavily dependent on advanced technology to deliver the message.



Even if you drive an SUV, the visual impact of Pandora’s natural beauty is breathtaking. Equally breathtaking were the fantastic depictions of future display technologies, including a fabulous volumetric, gesture-based visualization system.

I thoroughly enjoyed *Avatar*. From crowd reactions to the movie, I think it's safe to say that most attendees enjoyed the film as well. I must admit that almost as much as the film itself, I've found it entertaining to read criticisms about the film – from the bigoted and banal to the truly thought-provoking. Numerous critics have suggested that the story-line for *Avatar* was uninspired, little more than repeats from previous movies like *Dances with Wolves*, *Star Wars*, *Braveheart*, and others. From my perspective, while there were certainly some linkages to historical movies, I viewed these mostly as homage rather than rip-off. There is so much about *Avatar* that is fresh and vibrant, that the less-than-totally-unique story-line is not a drawback in any way.



Whether the blue-skinned Na'vi are a reference to Lord Vishnu or they are a completely unique depiction is of no consequence. I personally have long been fascinated by Blue Man Group and their ability to magically delight audiences with a show that combines music, magic, and fun. Avatar did the same...



Likewise, we enjoyed Ann Gella from Star Wars and Mystique from X-Men... Beautiful blue women as stars in science-fiction films is hardly something new – but the repetition in Avatar did not detract in the least... There must be something about blue skin that we find to be both alien and alluring...

Two years ago in this newsletter, I expressed my severe disappointment that *Beowulf 3D* failed to live up to my expectations as a big-budget 3D movie. I thought that it not only failed to live up to the tale I learned in high school, but it was inappropriate for general audiences and failed to bring a story to the big screen that would help spur on stereoscopic cinema. I don't know if my call about *Beowulf* was accurate or not, but I have no such

concerns about *Avatar*. This movie will certainly help to further justify the rapid transition to stereoscopic cinema and will help serve as an impetus to bring stereoscopic display systems into the home.



We have no lack of blue-skinned heroes in the movies. The flashback to William Wallis in Braveheart is obvious. And considering the blue-monster hero Sully from Monsters, Inc. leads us to wonder if Avatar's Jake Sully is actually some Vishnu-like reincarnation from the past... And to continue the name-game, it's probably no coincidence that the main character in the 1980s film "Body Double" is Jake Scully....

For those of you who insist that everything great must also be original, you will find the following quotation quite interesting. Futurist Hugo Gernsback, back in the day when radio was still king some 60 years ago, offered a prediction about stereoscopic 3D television:

Future television will be a thing of great beauty -- no flat lifeless images but reality itself. We will still have a single screen but there will be two images, slightly out of phase. But you won't see this, because there will be a special finely grated optical film covering the television screen. This optical differential grating film combines the two images into a single one. You will see the end result -- a perfect illusion of real life--stereoscopic television. What is more, eye strain will probably be much less with this means of seeing higher-fidelity images.

- **Hugo Gernsback, *Radio-Electronics*, March 1949**

It's Christmas Eve – time I suppose to give thanks to Lord Vishnu and his avatars, among other things...

Merry Christmas and a Happy 2010!





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