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**PROPOSAL TO HOLD A SPECIAL SESSION
AT THE 2011 MLA CONVENTION
LOS ANGELES, 6–9 JANUARY**

FOR OFFICE
USE ONLY

All parts of the proposal must be received together in the MLA convention office. Proposals may be submitted electronically no later than 1 April 2010. Upon final submission of this form, you will be given the opportunity to submit a Request for Funding and a Request for Membership Waiver, if appropriate. Please print a copy of this form for your records before submitting.

1. **Session title** Life on Pandora: Immersive Technological Narratives and Nightmares in Avatar

Organizer name Keith Dorwick

2. **Detailed description of session** (See [part 2](#). Length can be no more than 1,000 words.)

The description of the topic should include (1) an explanation of the topic and the way in which it will be treated and (2) the rationale for organizing a session on that particular topic and an explanation of how the topic relates to existing scholarship. **Do not send abstracts, but do briefly describe the individual presentations and explain how they relate to the topic of the session.**

3. **Information on the panelists' and the presider's scholarship** (See [part 3](#). Identify participants only by name in this section--see part 4 for instructions for providing additional identification information.)

Particularly relevant is scholarship that directly relates to the session topic. **Do not send vitae.**

4. **Complete program copy, including names and institutions of participants** (See [part 4](#).)

All participants must be members of the MLA by 7 April 2010 and can appear in the Program as speaker, respondent, or presider only twice at a single convention. A member who submits papers or agrees to be a respondent or presider for more than two sessions must inform each session organizer, and the organizers should then indicate on their proposals who will replace the member if a replacement is necessary. Sessions may not include more than two participants from the same institution. To ensure consistency in the convention

program, panelists' names should appear as listed in the online membership database. (See pp. 1059–66 of the September 2009 *PMLA* for additional information.)

5. **Audiovisual equipment**, if appropriate (See [part 5](#).) It is the session organizer's responsibility to submit requests for audiovisual equipment to the convention office. Session organizers should check with their participants about audiovisual needs and include any requests on this form. **Requests must be submitted electronically or postmarked no later than 1 April 2010; late requests cannot be honored.**
6. **Contact person** (See [part 5](#).) If any of the contact information changes for the organizer to whom correspondence should be addressed, notify the convention office in writing immediately. (If the organizer does not intend to serve as session leader, information must be provided about how the panel will function.)

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Part 2. Detailed description of session

Please keep in mind that fifteen minutes must be left at the end of the session for discussion; therefore, the total session time before open discussion can be no more than one hour (including introductions). The Program Committee will reject proposals that do not appear to leave fifteen minutes for discussion.

Clearly, *Avatar* has, as film, advanced the ways in which 3D technology can help advance narrative, or at least has created new possibilities for audience enjoyment and involvement of film in theaters; nonetheless, critical review has focused on the ways in which the film, for all that it is produced with many cutting edge technologies, has also some older tropes that have become cliché. While this panel is interested in the ways in which *Avatar* is embedded in a number of ideologies, we are also intrigued in the ways in which *Avatar* the film qua film is a hugely immersive experience for the audience.

Thus, James Cameron's *Avatar* renders the ideology of the Information Revolution in three-dimensions. Proof positive of the power of invested capital to produce a version of reality that is more real than reality, the film pits technology against technology, employing its spectacular digital effects to simultaneously celebrate, critique, and ritually defeat a model of military-industrial capitalism that conflates progress with colonialism and whole-scale environmental exploitation. The film, however, portrays the hydraulically-driven, monstrous machinery of this capitalism as an expression of an equally flawed humanity, a humanity that, as embodied by the film's protagonist, seeks to overcome its inadequacies through crippling technologies and social practices. Cameron's film offers its digital

wonders as an antidote, arguing that humanity can only transcend its inherent racism, its outmoded, mechanical capitalism, and its crippled, violent relationship with technology through a total capitulation to spectacle, or more precisely, to the high-technology capitalism that makes the spectacle possible.

In so far as *Avatar* appears to offer a solution to humanities' problems through spectacle, it also may subject viewers to an almost addictive viewing experience complete with withdrawal symptoms. An albeit contested article by Kyle Duvall on Newsarama noted "with 3-D adding another element of information for the senses to process, a viewer must be allowed to settle in to each shot more gradually to avoid disorientation." The history of 3D movies has often included anecdotal accounts of nausea, shakiness and other physiological changes (usually in context of a handheld camera and shaky motion). However, *Avatar* may move the viewer beyond mere unease, inviting audiences to step through the magic mirror of the 3D screen repeatedly: Steven Axelrod notes "twenty four hours after the first viewing *Annie and I* both realized that all we really wanted to do was see it again. It draws you back. Its like a drug, and it leaves you feeling stoned shaky and dazzled and goofy and disoriented." In the same exact way character Jake Sully re-enters his human world after leaving his avatar seemingly asleep on the planet surface; Axelrod's text could describe Sully's return to his "normality," and it is Pandora, both Sully's real (to him) planet and the film's virtual equivalent, that seduces character and viewer alike into wanting to live on Pandora permanently.

It is immersive in another way as well; moving beyond the physiological, the movie's visual rhetoric is reminiscent of a giant video game in ways that may affect its treatment of ethnic difference; the manner in which Jake Sully moves from body to body blurs fixed definitions of race. This blurring is encouraged, not by the relatively new politics of happy multiculti mixing, but by two key, absorptive features of the film: the immersive narrative of captivity and the immersive narrative and rhetorical structures of video games. The presentation will engage postcolonial studies of race and difference to outline the troubled hybridity suffered by colonial bodies stranded between ethnic poles; it will couple this engagement with video game theory that analyzes the nature of the avatar. This collision of forms coerces the viewer to evaluate the film in complex ways, as the films immersive elements offer an alternative means to consider race, subjectivity, cultural identity, and ethical imperatives.

Finally, continuing the trope of immersion, this panel will explore the use of fan language (as in the development of artificial language Klingon following its use in *Star Trek* films) as another means of extending the filmic experience past the credits. Along with other examples of cinemantic xenolinguistics, *Avatar*'s Na'vi language has been met with popular admiration for its realism as a functional and aesthetically pleasing linguistic system. Yet business communication professor Paul Frommer's near-single-handed creation of Na'vi as an efficient and readily learnable language and its subsequent development and promotion by fan communities point to the persistence of a dangerous myth in fast-capitalist discourse about language: that culturally specific meanings reside solely in exotic linguistic forms, and not in contextually defined and verbally practiced differences of concept and worldview. Drawing from principles of linguistic anthropology and both cognitive and educational linguistics, this paper presents a critical discourse analysis of narratives of Na'vi's history and imagined futures by Frommer, *Avatar* director James Cameron and others, in order to argue that the elimination of culture and not its reification is the condition of possibility for the Na'vi languages

"authenticity."

Thus, while our panel may use a variety of theoretical approaches and readings, it focuses on the allure offered by this technology: that viewers can, whether in their imagination, fan sites on the internet, or through repeated viewings of the film, enter Pandora as a real place that is more real than real. The human world of the film ("Earth") and our own real world both may seem to pale in comparison to the rich if virtually realized landscapes and language of this construct called Avatar, a title that deliberately invokes the false bodies of cyberspace in order to drive out real bodies no matter how imperfect or even merely different.

We'd like to note as well that though our work will be presented in the traditional format of four 15 minute papers (with a timekeeper to keep presenters from going over their limit), we hope that the discussion that follows in the remaining fifteen minutes will engage both panelists and attendees in ways that go beyond a mere Q&A.

Part 3. Information on panelists' and presider's scholarship, particularly scholarship that directly relates to the session topic

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Kevin Moberly is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, New Media, and Game Studies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. His research focuses on understanding how computer-enabled manifestations of popular culture reflect, contribute to, and transform contemporary cultural and political discourses. In particular, he is interested in the way that contemporary computer games encode labor, often blurring already uneasy distinctions between work and play. He is currently working on a number of academic projects, including an article exploring the interplay between struggle and spectacle in massively multiplayer online role-playing games like World of Warcraft and has published in such venues as *Computers and Composition*, *Kairos*, and a number of scholarly essay collections.

Keith Dorwick is an associate professor in the English Department of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Dorwick is the co-editor of a new journal, *Technoculture* (<http://tcjournal.org>) and has previously published articles in a number of journals and collections of scholarly essays. He is co-editor with Susan Lang and Janice Walker of *Tenure2000*, a special volume of *Computers and Composition*. With Jonathan Alexander, he is the editor of *Looking Both Ways: Bisexuality in the Media*, a special issue of the *Journal of Bisexuality*. With Kevin Moberly, he is the co-administrator of *AcadianaMOO* located at <http://acadianamoo.org> and co-editor of a special issue of *Interdisciplinary Humanities on Technoculture*; his article on queering and de-queering *A Streetcar Named Desire*

appeared in *Interdisciplinary Humanities* as well. An article on political activism and queer YouTube videos will appear in a new collection called *Mediated Boys*, edited by Annette Wanamaker (2010).

Delores Phillips currently works as an Assistant Professor at Old Dominion University where she functions as co-Director of the Postcolonial Research Group and is a member of the New Media Studies Group. In 2009, she completed her dissertation at the University of Maryland under the direction of Dr. Sangeeta Ray. Her teaching and research in postcolonial literature and theory encompasses a wide array of narrative forms, to include culinary autobiographies in addition to video games and film.

David Malinowski is a Ph.D. Candidate in UC Berkeleys Graduate School of Education, with a focus on new media and technology in language learning. David has published in the fields of applied sociolinguistics and new literacy studies, has translation and teaching experience in Korean, Japanese and English, and blogs regularly on intersections of language and visual culture for the Berkeley Language Center. His publications demonstrate his interest in language: With Mark Evan Nelson, his "What now for language in a multimedial world?" will be forthcoming in 2010 in Anderson, Katherine, Alvin Leong & Caroline Ho (Eds.), *Transforming literacies and language from Continuum*; he has also published articles on authorship and multimodal discourse in three edited collections.

Part 4. Final program copy. Printed program information is taken from this part only.

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Life on Pandora: Immersive Technological Narratives and Nightmares in

Title of special session Avatar

Presider Kevin Moberly

Affiliation Old Dominion Univ.

Main subject American Literature

Main sub-subject Twentieth Century

Please consider this session as part of the 2011 Presidential Theme.

Please consider this session as part of the special initiative on "The Academy in Hard Times."

The Delegate Assembly has approved a policy that there must be a fifteen-minute discussion period at the end of each session; therefore, the total session time before open discussion can be no more than one hour (including introductions). The Program Committee will reject proposals that do not appear to leave fifteen minutes for discussion.

In the fields below, supply the titles of papers (if applicable) and the speakers' names and affiliations (as listed in the online membership database). Only *one* affiliation may be listed. Please specify campus for institutions that have several branches or city and state for nonaffiliated persons.

All participants must be MLA members by 7 April 2010. A member may participate as a speaker, respondent, or presider only twice at a single convention. (At the discretion of the executive director, waivers may be granted for nonscholars [e.g., medical doctors, visual artists, etc.] and scholars in the United States and Canada who work in disciplines other than language and literature. You can complete a waiver form online after submitting this form.) Please note that waived nonmembers cannot organize or chair a session. No more than two participants (including the session leader) may be from the same institution.

Meeting Information

Expected attendance 40 (If you don't indicate expected attendance, your session could be assigned to an inappropriately sized room.)

Formal session (include speakers' names, affiliations, and paper titles; ideally three papers but no more than four)

For Abstracts, visit www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~kxd4350/avatar
 type of material Web site URL or e-mail address

1. Single White Human Looking for Group: Spectacle and High-Technology Positivism in James Cameron's Avatar
 Paper title
 Moberly Kevin
 Last name First name
 Old Dominion Univ.
 Affiliation

2. In the Magic Mirror that is Pandora: 3D Technology, Disorientation and Seduction on and before the Screen

Paper title

Dorwick

Last name

Univ. of Louisiana, Lafayette

Affiliation

Keith

First name

3. Ethnicities and Captivities: Avatar and the Politics of Immersion

Paper title

Phillips

Last name

Old Dominion Univ.

Affiliation

Delores B.

First name

4. An Avatar with No Body: Removing Culture from the Na'vi Language

Paper title

Malinowski

Last name

Univ. of California, Berkeley

Affiliation

David

First name

Respondent (optional)

Affiliation

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Part 5. Final program copy (continued)

Audiovisual Equipment

Requests for audiovisual equipment must be received by 1 April 2010. Session organizers should check with their participants about audiovisual needs and include any requests with this program copy form. Members are encouraged to use technology when it is essential for an effective presentation but are asked to bear in mind that the cost of audiovisual equipment increases every year. Please encourage your participants to consider using photocopies or still photographs when feasible and to share equipment when possible. Check the appropriate box below for the equipment you need, and indicate how each piece of equipment requested will be used and who will be using it. Cost may prevent the MLA from providing kinds of equipment other than what is listed below.

- Projection Equipment for a Computer. Presenters must bring their own computers and software [CPRO].

Name of person using equipment: Keith Dorwick, Kevin Moberly, Delores Phillips and David Malinowski

We are presenting a paper on one of the most technologically and visually advanced films ever made. In all four papers the film with its visuals is the primary text with which the speakers will

How this equipment will be used: grappl

Contact Person

This is the person to whom edited program copy should be sent for approval in July and who can respond to queries at that time. Please note that the July mailing is the only opportunity you will have to verify the accuracy of your program copy. Program copy will be sent by e-mail. If any of the contact information changes for the organizer to whom correspondence should be addressed, notify the convention office in writing immediately.

Name Keith Dorwick

Affiliation U of Louisiana

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Lafayette, LA 70503 US

Home phone (337) 962-1991

Office phone

E-mail kdorwick@gmail.com

Fax

Alternate e-mail kdorwick@louisiana.edu

Start and end dates of summer contact information

Phone (day)

Phone (evening)

E-mail

Fax

Request for Funding

See September *PMLA* or the MLA Web site (www.mla.org) for guidelines on applying for these limited funds for nonmembers. MLA members and allied and affiliate organizations are not eligible for funding. Requests must be on the MLA's Request for Program Funds form and must be submitted electronically or postmarked by **15 April 2010**.

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Part 6. Accessibility

 Session organizers must contact their participants about accessibility needs. Please indicate what kind of assistance is needed.

- Sign language interpreters Large-print handouts Papers in advance
 Real-time captioning Ramps and space for wheelchair access at head table
 Other (please detail)

Contact information

If you wish to edit your proposal, click the link below for the information you wish to modify. When you are satisfied with your entry, click "Submit proposal." Please print a copy of this form for your records before submitting.

Please double-check to be sure you have included the following:

- [Session title, type, expected attendance, and advance materials](#)
- [Presider, speakers, papers, and respondent](#)
- [Audiovisual equipment, accessibility, and contact person](#)
- [Detailed description of session and participants' scholarship](#)

Submit final copy

Save and finish later

[PROG_ID SP1059]

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