

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to describe what the avatar is, how it structures our play and our participation with a fictional world, and how avatar-based single-player computer games are different from other kinds of singleplayer games; the avatar exploits the concretising realism of the computer as a simulating machine, and situates us in a gameworld via prosthetic and fictional embodiment.

More specifically, I have looked at what it is that makes avatar-based 3D different from other kinds of avatars, and different from other kinds of 3D, in games as well as in other media. Indeed the 3D revolution, which transformed the aesthetic of computer games during the mid-nineties, was mainly about navigable and inhabitable spaces, about the role of the avatar. Three-dimensional simulated environments emerged from a desire for a particular kind of embodiment and a particular kind of corporealization of computer game play. The implications of this new realism and new corporeality of gameworlds have not been given enough attention in the study of computer game aesthetics.

As a generic form of computer game play, and as a cultural form more broadly, the avatar re-invents older forms of avatar-based mimetic play, and re-invents older forms of game play and game spaces. At the same time, avatarial embodiment presents a distinct – although hardly very new – modality of human-computer interaction, and a generic form of digital media and digital art. Still, avatar-based 3D has so far not caught the same attention from theorists and artists of new media as Virtual Reality and hypermedia. Part of the reason for this could be that avatar-based interaction has emerged from the centre of commercial computer game culture, and has become a dominant and almost invisible generic form of mainstream entertainment. In the awareness of new media theorists and visionaries, avatarial embodiment has somehow gotten lost in the enthusiasm for VR, hypertext, digital cinema and *Myst*. Nevertheless, the artworks that have most centrally defined virtual spatiality and embodiment since the early nineties have not been *Myst* or VR installations but *Doom*, *Super Mario 64* and *Grand Theft Auto III*.

With respect to computer game theory, the avatar-centred approach is also meant as a contribution to our way of thinking about fiction and immersion, and by implication, about narrative, in games. The concept of fiction that I am suggesting emphasises the objective and shared (and non-diegetic) nature of

fiction, as well as the central role of subjective re-positioning in the establishing of fictionally actual worlds. Combining a theory of make-believe with a phenomenological perspective on vicarious embodiment, I have drawn attention to the role of the avatar as a prosthetic bridge to the fictional world.

The relatively narrow focus on avatar-based play, and on the particular mechanisms of avatar-based 3D, is also meant as a contribution to the theoretical conceptualisation of genre i computer games. In my analysis I have tried to show that avatar-based play, and the various ways in which the player-avatar relationship is being configured, is a central generic variable in game play and game fiction. This means that I have also used the notion of the avatar to describe other forms and modalities that make up the generic terrain of games today. These other and partly contrasting and conflicting forms have been described, as it were, through the lens of the avatar: system simulators, hypermedia games, instrument play, automatons, role playing and non-avatar-based physical interfaces. At the same time, some of the more general theoretical ideas that I have applied to the analysis of the avatar – fictionality and subject-positioning, model-based and gestural simulation, realistic agency and tangibility, miniatureness and spatial continuity – could also be productive in a broader and less avatar-centred investigation of computer game aesthetics.

A number of important questions and issues that relate to avatar-based computer game play have not been addressed in this study; the goal has been to describe the basic principles and mechanisms that define the avatar as a form. This raises a number of questions that have to do with what kinds of things we are actually doing and experiencing in avatar-based gameworlds. One central task for further study would be to look more specifically at different types and categories of avatars – how they have developed historically, and how avatars develop (or do not develop) throughout a game in different genres. This would include a closer investigation of the function of role playing and role playing elements in avatar-based play, which is a dimension that I have considered as separate from the basic configuration of the avatar, but which is yet an important and genre-defining element in a broad range of games (not least sport and racing). Also, the structural characteristics of singleplayer gameworlds have not been analysed beyond a general account of how the notion of the gameworld relates to avatariaral embodiment. Further studies in this direction would need to address the central role of the quest and various types of quest structures, a topic that has already been addressed by a number of studies in the field¹²⁴.

The role of narrative has not been directly discussed in this study, other than, we could say, in a negative sense; fictional participation through avatariaral embodiment is not dependent on storytelling and a storyline, and the notion of

124 See Tronstad (2001), Tosca (2003) and Aarseth (2005a).

the *diegesis* should be held separate from the notion of fictionality and the notion of the gameworld. At the same time, different forms and techniques of narration often play a crucial role in the description and characterisation of gameworlds (particularly in action adventure games but also, to a lesser extent, in racing and sport games) and the player's progress through the game is usually contextualised as a coherent linear story, a narrative adventure, with a beginning, a middle and an end. A dedicated study of the relationships between avatar-based play and avatar-based formats of storytelling would be an obvious next step in the analysis, particularly with respect to the contemporary 3D action adventure. The fusions, overlaps and tensions between embodied and story-based fictional participation in singleplayer computer games is a complex and diverse area of study. Studying this interplay would centrally involve the role of dramatic scripting and other forms of dramatic structuring of characters and events in the gameworld, and it would involve addressing the interactions and interdependencies between avatarial embodiment and the language of the filmic camera.

