Tracing the Avatar. An Afterword

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I.

Rune Klevjer's dissertation is in many ways exemplary for computer game research: this is characterized by peculiarities that are in turn not atypical for the formation of academic discourses or – to speak with Thomas Kuhn – paradigms of research. In game studies, which developed a consciousness of itself at the beginning of the new millennium, there were necessarily departures from the 'old' paradigm or ultimately the 'old' teachings (and teachers). Thus, the new researchers came from literary studies, film studies or philosophy and set about defining the object they were describing in the first place. So there had to be a kind of 'ennoblement' of play, which was already dismissed as "frivolous" by one of the founders of the aesthetics of play, Friedrich Schiller, in his 15th of the Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man published in 1794, in order to elevate the free power of imagination above it. The situation was no different in the sciences, from which one sought to distance oneself; especially when these had similar problems of object justification in their own beginnings. In the 18th century, 'literature' was considered a nonsensical, even dangerous pastime that made people lonely and lethargic and thus incited them to commit suicide. In literary studies at the end of the 20th century, computer games were considered dangerous or at least 'low art' – at best, 'interactive fiction' in the form of Advent or Zork occasionally attracted attention among progressive thinkers. Game studies therefore had to clarify what they were talking about, before they could talk about it. Thus, the early works are thus characterized by ontological attempts to determine the game and, on the other hand, by a critique of the methods or tools that could be taken from the 'old world' into the new. Rune Klevjer's dissertation is also of this kind, and although it was only published in 2006, it still belongs to the first counter-ration of game studies publications, thus bringing them to a closure.

What also distinguishes the avant-garde of games research is that, due to the difficult situation, many of the papers were qualification papers at the doctoral or even master's level, which, of course, was accompanied by the problem that these papers were often not released by publishers, but were either published in

condensed form as conference papers or through websites, either private or of departments. Even though it was a challenge to bibliographise them correctly, the writings were perhaps read more (especially by those interested in the subject matter) than if they had been distributed in the conventional way. This criterion also applies to Klevjer's work, which is now finally accessible here as a regular publication, by which it leaves the realm of a debate within the game studies community. The fact that the contents of the dissertation are still relevant after 15 years is because that in Klevjer's dissertation, as in hardly any other early work, all aspects that make up computer game research are taken into account. The title-giving avatar is only one aspect of the paper, which deals with the major themes of 'simulation', 'fiction', 'embodiment', 'action', 'space' and (camera) 'perspective', right up to the question of 'virtual reality'. In doing so, Klevjer elegantly succeeds in two important things: on the one hand, he is able to justify the delimitation others before him missed to substantiate: the focus on single-player games; on the other hand, he is able to show conclusively that the lightly used concept of 'identification' is too under-complex and too psychologizing for computer games (and perhaps already for preceding media). For what is at stake is a description of a relationship that has been assumed since Plato, who strictly separates the two spheres of diegesis and mimesis, the narration and the imitation, or telling and showing.

It is precisely the intertwining of 'showing-telling' and acting out that makes computer games both fascinating objects as well as esoteric objects. Klevjer succeeds in breaking this down and making it accessible to non-gamers by referring at one of the key points to Kendal Walton's idea of 'make-believe', i.e., a philosophical concept of truth that has led a marginal existence in philosophy. It goes back to the art historian Ernst Gombrich, who, in his Meditations on a Hobby Horse from 1951, asks about the titular phenomenon of children's play in which a simple piece of wood can be transformed into an animal. Walton classifies this type of object under the category of 'props', i.e., objects used in theatre, which, no matter how faithfully they imitate an object, become what is then 'represented' by them only in the context of the performance. It is not the realism of the image but that of the action that determines the 'truthfulness' of the object. But this is no longer an object, separate from the acting subject, but both are merged in the act of execution.

Klevjer's theory of being of the computer game is consequently based on a process ontology and thus leaves behind all the problems that preceding approaches had, which chose one side of the Platonic dichotomy. Even though Walton himself initially attributes imaginative action to theatre and thus to mimesis as a result of the time-based separation of the arts, he brings the opposite side back in by showing that the imaginative process can be set in motion by fiction, i.e., diegesis. This is the initial moment for Klevjer: for computer games are not private imaginings inside the individual (which was still the epitome of free play

for Schiller), but public simulations, visible, audible and manageable 'outside'. For Klevjer, therein lies their seductive power: "Re-phrasing Walton's argument, we might say that representations – all representations – are essentially seductive in nature." But what they seduce us in is their own world, the space of play. In all this, Klejver is close to Jesper Juuls' description of computer games as 'half-real', published the year before, in which an interweaving of simulation and fiction (and thus also a reconciliation of the two 'camps' in games research of ludologists and narratologists) is also made. Only unlike Juul, who is also explicitly criticized by Klevjer, with Walton he assumes that the imaginary force is not just a private attitude of the players to the rules of the simulation (i.e., subjective projections), but that these are objective events of the game's execution. In this way, the very distortions that make a narrative appear become relevant. – Or to put it another way: computer games seduce through a strange overlapping of the inner-diegetic with the extra-diegetic.

It is therefore not surprising that the 'old medium' of film has been inspired by (computer) games to explore this boundary and no longer just to break through the fourth wall in the manner of theatre, but to bring narrative time and narrated time into play with each other. – To give just two examples here: Run Lola Run by Tom Tykwer from 1998 and Elephant by Gus van Sant from 2003. The genres to which these are assigned could hardly be more opposite ('action thriller' and 'drama'), but what both do is that they have understood a trait of the play: the overlapping or superposition of two space-times. That of the players and that of the game world. In Tykwer's film, it is the possibility of bringing about a desired result in the game world through three attempts (i.e., a coin drop); in van Sant's film, it is the elaboration of the real time of the game's execution through the repetition of the present from the point of view of a different avatar, embedded in their back stories.

II.

Digital performances sequentially come into view. Regarding and scrutinizing their mediality and mise-en-scène opens reflections on renderings as mediation between bodies and screens, where the manifestation of the human form gradually becomes invisible, while its rendering successively becomes visible.

The perception of the visual and the visible while playing a video game, where interactivity and simulation lead to bodily action, provoking synesthetic effects, and adding tactile and kinetic aspects to the experience, can be described as follows: Our bodies are extended to the displayed field and experience the animation as something other. With Don Ihde and his thoughts on Technology and the Lifeworld. From Garden to Earth from 1990, there is a sense of interacting with the "technological competitor" in a kind of "dialogue or exchange". There is

a fascination of and challenge with the quasi-otherness, with the animation on screen. Our bodies experience the animation as something different and interact with the something other. We phenomenologically understand the technologies as active relational pairs, according to Ihde, as pairs of human-technology. We realize the ways of bodily engagement within the sets of existential technological relations with the world.

The description of the experienced phenomena is always a description drawn from our actual and habitual knowledge of the world as it is there before any possible analysis of ours. Every moment of experience has its direction or reference to what is experienced. The outcome of this phenomenological endeavour is the realization of technologies as means of transformation one's sense of one's body. It is the realization of transformation of the bodily experience, based on interaction, in the act of experiencing. As in a room experienced through a mirror, to take an example from Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* from 1945, our bodies can be described as a "system of possible actions", a "virtual body" with its 'phenomenal' place defined by its task and situation. With Merleau-Ponty then, with whom both Ihde and Klevjer work, our bodies are wherever there is something to be done, where action and perception point to a perceptual ground, a basis of our lives, a general setting, in which our bodies can co-exist with the world, making our bodies an active part of experience with media, with audiovisual media, and its perception and expression of time, space, and subjectivity, its perception of the visual and the visible.

Our bodies therefore interact with this avatar in an avatar-based single-player computer game as one possibility. The avatar becomes both an extension and a model. It mediates fictional agency. It is, as Klevjer suggests, "an instrument and mechanism, that defines a fictional body for the participant" and is therefore "an embodied incarnation of the acting subject", "dependent on the principle of the model." Understood as a model, the avatar, like the avatar 'Mario' in Nintendo's Super Mario Bros. game series, defines a space of possibilities for the players and their fictional agency within the game. The avatar's objective properties are based on the capabilities and restrictions of the model, leading to the definition of "the noundaries of embodied make-believe." The avatar's game, Mario's game, with its phenomenology of the body, appeals to our bodies through the game, through Mario. It is, as Klevjer stresses, "the mediation of embodied agency that makes us relate to the avatar intuituitively as an 'I can'"; the avatar "transforms bodily space, it transforms the space of potential action for the 'I can', and it integrates with the body as a perceptual habit." Our bodies experience the avatar as something other, a virtual body, and actively interact with it, while simultaneously inhabiting the simulates environment of the game, while simultaneously being implicated. Unlike the tool, unlike the cane and the typewriter, understood as instrumental extension, the avatar can be defined as a reflexive extension. It is, as Klevjer points

out, not just acting upon, but also being acted upon and affected by. In other words, the avatar is a body that exposes itself. Especially learning from theories of computer games, from Klevjer, actors, for example, gradually lose their background, their bodies, in front of the blue or green screen, surrendering their descent (from Sanskrit: avatara), down (ava) to fragments, passing over (tar) any human relation to reconsiderings and restructurings in digital codes. The spectators watch a digital performance and become involved with another, the 'alienness' of an avatar, its opaque impenetrability that does not establish a relation. Instabilities now appear, where hybridization generates indecidabilites, where the digital programming of avatars is tied to a misguided realism and we, without consideration, do what we wish with it – going as far as a distortion of all familiar characteristics of humanitas. In this case, the experience of self and other and the manifold threads tying together performativity and responsivity systematically come apart and are destabilized: From the ubiquity of screens to a wide variety of features related to media convergence, spectatorship and the modes of performance are undergoing a radical transformation. Media forms play across multiple platforms, and new genres – particularly ones that revise and reconfigure forms of 'reality', on the one hand, or develop extended menas for the depiction of perceptually realistic fantasy, on the other – emerge from these new conditions. One key site of transformation is the shift from celluloid to digital. Many films today have little relation to classical film and its materiality, that is, celluloid. They are shot, edited, and projected digitally, and even films that are shot on film-material today typically pass through digital phases in editing and projection. The mutability of the digital image, the extreme ease with which it may be manipulated, is engendering new types of performances and new challenges to its theorization.

III.

Simulated bodies, faces, movements, animations, live-acts, and digital surroundings have become ubiquitous not only in gaming but also in the use of internet platforms, on screen, and even in every-day communication with digital devices. The avatar has developed into a universal mediator, a medium that serves the interface between digital tools and ourselves and thus forces specific forms of dialogue. The question of the avatar, its 'nature', its practical possibilities and technical restrictions is therefore more urgent and topical today than ever before. One must not forget, however, that avatars, regardless of their function, are primarily graphic surfaces made for screens and only exist as design objects. They are based on mathematically generated diagrams in 3-D environments, which make use of the entire tradition of geometric knowledge since antiquity, early modern times and the geometric revolution in the 19th Century. For this reason, they are

to be understood less as tools, as also Klevjer points out, than as characters and image agents that 'live' in a fully iconically defined universe and can be modeled and controlled in a decision-logical way within the framework of their underlying programs. They then execute hodologically prefigured narratives, engage in limited technical conversations or chats, and perform a range of everyday functions useful with respect to operating computers, technical systems, and net communications. Thus, they appear as dematerialized figures exclusively in virtual Euclidean spaces. At the same time, they maintain a curious indifference to their fellow avatars. Asocial at their core, they are fully oriented toward their users, as it were: fixed in chains; but increasingly endowed with artificial intelligence, they advance to *automata* capable of making certain autonomous decisions with respect to specific tasks.

However, if they are understood as prostheses in the sense of Marshall McLuhan's extension thesis, then only insofar as they do not extend our corporeality, but rather our experimental action into the screens. Moreover, it is obvious to understand them – beyond Klevjer's remarks – in the context of *Actor-Network-Theory* as actors in a network of other actors, but they exclusively form 3-D models of artificial others, which do not take over real social functions, but play with them. Therefore, Klevjer is right to examine them primarily in the context of ludic processes in which they function neither as 'virtual doubles,' as David Gunkel has suggested, nor as 'technoid homunculi' or 'posthuman agents,' as Emily Apter or Katherine Hayles have pointed out, but as play figures indicating that our conceptions of sociality and humanity in general are about to shift towards play. And yet, they are nothing more than images or icons in limited virtual environments where everything is algorithmically determined—even their degrees of indeterminacy. Therefore, when we speak of interaction, it invariably takes place in the imaginary. We come into contact with them as images within images, endowing them—like props—with autonomy and meaning, sometimes even with fictitious identities.

Thus, in order to comprehend their 'work' and performance, one must consider both the essence of their technical-mathematical construction, and also remain aware that the digital milieus in question are solely simulative 'in nature', whose non-simulations consist, at best, in being replicas of theories about human life-worlds. Their degrees of freedom are thus just as narrowly limited as these theories contain time-related scientific restrictions that reveal nothing more than their historical biases. It would then be too far-fetched to put avatars on a par with ourselves, to consider them as fully valid techno-morphic others, or to see them as part of a complex techno-social future, so that Klevjer's rather sober analysis differs agreeably from some media and cultural studies exaggerations. Rather, what lies behind the design of technical avatars is primarily the idea of creating virtual artifacts that facilitate our dealings with the opacity of digital environments, as it were, allowing us to act in mathematical environments in just

as appropriate a manner as in our everyday ones. They are consequently programmed to appear to 'learn' and 'remember' or to 'show emotions' and make 'decisions', all of which produce 'quasi-learnings', 'quasi-remindings', 'quasi-emotions', and 'quasi-decisions', mimicking traits of apparent 'personhood' in such a way as to help us navigate and orient ourselves through technological worlds. There is no danger of confusion between persons and avatars: like children who immerse themselves in their imagined worlds and indulge in their fantastic stories, they are nevertheless always able to draw a line between what is and remains play and what reality means. However, more disturbing seems to be that the 'avatarization' of the social goes hand in hand with its 'ludification', blurring the sense of what sociality can mean at all.

IV.

In his small but seminal philosophical essay *On the Marionette Theater*, Heinrich von Kleist examines the manikin and its manipulated play, which indeed may serve as an analogy of that what today can be addressed as the 'play of avatars'.[125] The puppet-on-string is simultaneously clumsy as well as magical, because it is dominated by the "wire or string" of the "machinist" as the puppeteer is called, lacking all self-consciousness. It follows the movement of its mechanics, which in turn follows the laws of the center of gravity, so that puppet theater becomes a paradoxical "dance," which, Kleist writes, could not be more perfect because it is *antigrav*, that is, it escapes the inertia of material. The same escape seems to apply to avatars, who are not attached to wires, but to programs and algorithms. For that reason, there is "more grace in the mechanical manikin than in the structure of the human body," for gracefulness became "more radiant and powerful" as "reflectiveness became dimmer and weaker"[126] – again comparable with the figure of avatar, which seems to be more perfect in shape and animation than we are. Only when knowledge has passed through the absolute and "consciousness" has become infinite does gracefulness reappear, so that humans are imperfect beings between manikins and God, ensouled only by their attempts towards an unachievable perfection.[127]

However, one can also reverse these thoughts and oppose the avatar. Marionettes fascinate us because they have the charm of broken and ungainly corporeality, like young children who cannot yet coordinate their movements. They form a caricature of human liveliness, whose partial grotesquery is literally deathly earnest, because it points towards the finality and fragility of existence and corpo-

125 Heinrich von Kleist. "Über das Marionettentheater," in: *Sämtliche Werke* (Wiesbaden: Löwit,1972), p. 980-987.
126 Ibid., 984; 987.
127 Ibid., 987.

reality. In exchange, the figures can fly; effortlessly they jump in the hands of the puppeteer, defying gravitation and then suddenly striding with seven league boots to a change of scene. Their mechanisms control them like an alien god, so that drill, incapacitation, and the excessive desire for transgression all belong together. The marionette, like the mask, plays a game of similarity and dissimilarity, whereby the similarity first becomes visible through the dissimilarity, and one reflects the other. Its *imperfectum* is however is for humans *perfectum*, because its special potential, its creative leaps, stem from its imperfection. These are the true poetics of the puppet.

Digital avatars, in contrast, neither know anything of such reflections nor of such poetics. For them, it is enough to be simulation and surface, which are in turn nothing other than the completion of a mathematical formula. An avatar can never be more than an approximation, for its image is made out of a network of point-to-point connections and their geometrical rotation, as in facial "landmark" detection and in the "motion capture" functions used in animation. The closer together the points are, the more exact the image is. But photorealism and hypermimesis never achieve infinity; the forms created can never be more than approximations whose strange smooth surfaces—lacking the abrasions of real singularities—reveal the failure of identity. Aporetically, the mathematical function—and the geometric figure—create nothing more than an idealization that has no counterpart in reality, just as mathematics always comes up against the wall of empiricism. The perfect sphere is not a part of reality, and so every mathematical simulation is incommensurable with the uniqueness of the living creature.

Nevertheless, imperfectability is not unknown to avatars. It consists paradoxically in the impossibility of fulfilling their foundational will to perfectibility. The strange jolting, angular movements, the uncontrollability of every individual body movement alongside facial and vocal expressions—seen in particular in *Second Life* or when computer games change scenes and it is necessary to go from one room into another—result from the "logic" of chronic inconsistencies and programming that can perhaps never be perfect, because, finitely, it can never have enough processing power. But this does not make us recall grotesquery, but rather the endpoint of the models, the algorithmic tools, the slowness of the processors, and the technical and physical limits of computation. They have no existential meaning, only a formal one. In this respect, Klevjer's considerations can be continued and spun further: Avatars seem to be free of metaphors at all: no symbolic meaning appertains to them, at best only an informatical "not-yet"–the never-ending dream of the phantasm of mathematical identity.