

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this study I will suggest a theory of the avatar in singleplayer computer games¹, and discuss how avatar-based games are different from other kinds of computer games as well as from other kinds of media. I believe that a closer study of the role of the avatar will cast light on some of the central aesthetic parameters that structure both how we play and why we play computer games. This knowledge will also have potential implications for our understanding of other formats and genres in the wider domain of digital media and culture.

The notion of the avatar that I am suggesting is not concerned with playable characters as a vehicle of communication and self-expression, but addresses how players engage with singleplayer gameworlds through fictional and vicarious embodiment. This approach connects computer game avatars to a broader category of avatars, from radio-controlled model planes to Lego men and paper dolls. In computer games, the vicarious body can take different forms; a character, a racing car, a rolling ball, a camera, a gun.

The emphasis on the role of the avatar also reflects a theoretical concern with the notion of embodiment and the notion of fictionality in computer games. My general claim is that the concepts of 'fiction' and 'representation', as these are typically being employed in game research and analysis, should be critically discussed and revised. Game studies needs a new concept of fiction, which can better account for the relationship between play and simulation, and which is more sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of computer-simulated and screen-projected gaming environments. This re-orientation needs to question the assumption that 'fiction' is synonymous with recounted (or diegetic) fiction, and it needs to be able to address the different mechanisms of embodied interaction

1 While it is common to differentiate between 'video games' (console games) and 'computer games' (PC or Mac), the two terms are also sometimes used interchangeably. Used as a general term covering games on all platforms, I have chosen in this thesis to use 'computer game' rather than the more widespread term 'video game'. As I will be arguing in chapters 3 and 5, the central element that distinguishes computer games from other types of games is the computer, not the ('video') screen.

and corporealized pleasure that are involved in computer game play. My analysis of avatar-based play in computer games is meant as a step in this direction².

The computer game avatar, as I will define it in this thesis, exploits the digital computer's unique capacity for realistic simulation, and acts as a mediator of the player's embodied interaction with the gameworld. The relationship between the player and the avatar is a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes an extension of the player's own body. Via the interface of screen, speakers and controllers, the player incorporates the computer game avatar as second nature, and the avatar disciplines the player's body.

However, the computer game avatar is not to be understood as a tool or a mouse cursor; it gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a fictional world. This vicarious body is not merely a mediator of agency or 'interactivity' in a general sense, but belongs to and is exposed to its environment. In other words, an avatar is interesting and playable not just because of what it makes us able to do or perform, but because of what happens *to* us in the world that the avatar lets us inhabit. The avatar is the embodied manifestation of the player's engagement with the gameworld; it is the player incarnated.

There are different kinds of avatars, and different forms of avatar-based play. A central concern in this thesis is with the difference between the 2D avatar and the 3D avatar, as well as with the various ways in which the relationship between the player and the avatar can be configured in different types of games. The 3D avatar is the more radical and ambitious variant of the computer game avatar. The central perceiving body of the 3D avatar, I will argue, is the navigable camera, which situates the player perceptually within a gameworld that is no longer flat, and no longer a miniature. This camera-avatar (or avatariar camera) brings avatar-based games closer to the aesthetics and discourses of cinema and Virtual Reality. However, in games, spatial continuity and visual realism has a different role to play. The goal of visual realism in avatar-based 3D is not to imitate cinema or to make cinema interactive, but to give the player realistic agency within the gameworld. On the other hand, the strict disciplining of avatariar embodiment, and the embracing of the simulated cinematic camera as a prosthetic perceptual apparatus, can only be seen as counterintuitive and inhibiting from the point of view of fully immersive VR.

2 My approach here differs from, and partly conflicts with, my earlier 'In Defence of Cutscenes' (Klevjer 2002), which was, broadly speaking, an attempt to analyse narration in games from the point of view of communication and rhetoric. While this effort was not entirely unproductive, it suffers from a lack of theoretical tools to describe the basic operations of fiction in simulation-based game environments. Also, my discussion pays little attention to the fact that different genres of games follow very different principles and mechanisms of fictional participation.

The generic category of 'avatar-based' singleplayer computer games does not refer to a clearly delimited group of games, which any given game would either belong to or not. It defines a particular kind of play, a game form, which is centred around avatarial embodiment as the primary mediator of interaction with the game space. In this sense we can talk about 'weak' or 'strong' avatars, depending on the relative importance of the interaction that is performed independently of the avatarial prosthesis. As a generic form, the avatar has a central position in the contemporary computer games market, especially on consoles, which have been more or less designed for this particular mode of play³.

I will also argue that avatar-based play is a form of make-believe, a fictional form, which defines a particular way of participating with simulated environments and fictional worlds. Considered as a fictional form, avatar-based interaction has grown out of and is embedded in computer games and computer game culture. On one hand, the avatar can be thought of as relatively independent from computer game play – as a principle for interacting with computer-simulated environments in general. On the other hand, the notion of avatarial embodiment that I am suggesting implies that as long as there is an avatar, fictional participation cannot be detached from play. Without a gameworld, or at least some kind of playworld, the central motivation for vicarious embodiment falls away.

My emphasis on the significance of avatar-based play in computer games is not meant to support any notion of 'invisible' (or 'embodied' for that matter) interface design. Avatarial embodiment is a particular way of fictionalising play and interaction. From the point of view of human-computer interaction, this fictionalisation is rooted in the principles of reification and concretisation. As I will be arguing in chapters 5 and 6, this process is antagonistic to other and more transparent forms of human-computer interaction, including many kinds of computer games⁴.

My aim is not to argue that avatar-based play is more valuable or more artistically interesting than other forms of play – and certainly not that it should be a general norm for human-computer interaction – but to describe what avatarial embodiment is, and how it structures our interaction with game spaces. The analysis does not aim to produce rules or guidelines for computer game design, but it may still carry some implications for how to think about the role of the

3 This tendency excludes, notably, the Nintendo DS' touch-screen interface, as well as, possibly, the innovative hardware interface of the upcoming Nintendo Wii.

4 The concept of reification that I will be using in chapter 5 overlaps with but is far more limited than the Marxist and more socially oriented concept of reification. At the same time, it can be argued that reified forms of computer interaction, when applied as a norm for interface design, also have problematic ideological implications. See Kirkpatrick (2004:53ff) for a discussion of reification (or 'double reification') as a paradigm for human-computer interaction design.

avatar within the overall player experience; what kind of play and what kind of make-believe are we designing for if we choose to build a design around the vicarious embodiment of an avatar?

The concept of the avatar that I am suggesting here is different from how the term is typically used. In computer game discourse, the most general and accepted meaning of ‘avatar’ seems to be synonymous with ‘playable character’, in all its diverse aspects. However there is still an important common ground between this general meaning and my own definition, namely the basic idea of embodiment or ‘incarnation’, which connects computerised avatarhood to the original religious meaning of the concept.

The dominant definition of the concept of the avatar in computer game discourses originates in the tradition of role-playing games⁵, but its typical use has been expanded to include also distinctly non-configurable and ready-made playable characters like Mario and Lara Croft. More narrowly even, and further removed from my own use of the concept, ‘avatar’ is also sometimes used to refer to the playable character as a mediator of communication and self-expression in multi-user virtual worlds. This use of the term – which refers to the ‘virtual persona’ of the user or player – was introduced by the massive multiplayer online game *Habitat* (1987:103), and popularised through Neal Stephenson’s influential 1992 novel *Snow Crash*.

The notion of the ‘avatar’ as prosthetic vicarious embodiment, in contrast, emerges from the tradition of action, racing and action adventure computer games, from *Spacewar!* (Russel/Graetz/Wiitanen 2006[1962]) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981), via *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 2004[1985]) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 2004[1986]), to *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), *Halo* (Bungie 2001), *Gran Turismo* (Polyphony Digital 1998) or *Super Monkey Ball* (Amusement Vision 2002). In all these games, the relationship between the player and the gameworld is rooted in the principle of prosthetic and vicarious embodiment.

The category of the ‘action adventure’, as I will be using it here, is broader than how the term is typically used in the gaming press and gamers’ communities. In those contexts, ‘action adventure’ (2D or 3D) is usually taken to be a very specific genre, which includes as part of its definition a significant proportion of puzzle-based challenges. While this definition of the genre includes *Prince of Persia* (Brøderbund Software 1990), *Tomb Raider* and their followers, it does not include – as my own broader category does – platform games, First Person Shooters or

5 The notion of the ‘avatar’ was introduced in the *Ultima* role-playing game series with *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (*Origin* 1985). In role-playing games, the ‘avatar’ is the player’s customisable on-screen character or persona in the game.

action-oriented role-playing games, all of which do not necessarily put a lot of emphasis on puzzle-solving⁶.

Fighting games and action-oriented sport games are left partly on a sidetrack in this study, even if they definitely belong to the broad family of 'avatar-based' games. This relative neglect is mainly the result of the analysis' central focus on avatar-based 3D as a specific form of avatar-based computer gaming. Fighting games like *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing* (Point of View 1999) or *Dead or Alive* (Tecmo 1998), and action-based sport games like *FIFA 06* (EA Canada 2005a) or *NBA Live 06* (EA Canada 2005b) do not adopt the navigable camera as part of the player-avatar relationship in the same way that the 3D action adventures and racing games do. This means that the distinction between two-dimensional game spaces and three-dimensional games spaces, which is one of the central concerns of this thesis, becomes less important. It also means that, from a historical point of view, sport games have not to the same extent gone through a marked transition between a 2D and a 3D 'era'; with respect to avatar-based play, the difference between *FIFA International Soccer* (Extended Play 1993) and *FIFA 06* is of less significance than the difference between *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo 2003[1991]) and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998).

As noted above, the role playing Avatar – somewhat paradoxically – is not my object of study. Role-playing games have their own specific characteristics and their own history, a topic that would need a dedicated study beyond the scope of this thesis. Nor do I discuss in much detail the particular characteristics of action-RPG's like *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996) or *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) – games that marry the stats-oriented play of role-playing games with the prosthetic extension of the avatar. For the purposes of this study, in other words, the action-RPG genre is treated as a sub-genre of the broad action adventure genre rather than as a sub-genre of role playing. The distinctive role-playing elements of these games may serve to put avatar-based play and avatar-based fiction into sharper focus; one of the defining features of the prosthetic avatar is precisely that it does *not* depend on role playing or character customisation, and that it structures the relationship between the player and the gameworld in a different way than the role-playing avatar does.

6 Next to the action adventure, racing is the other major genre of avatar-based play among today's computer games. Compared to the action adventure, racing in its various forms – and here I would include also games like *SSX* (EA Canada 2000) or *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* (Neversoft 1999) – represent a relatively 'pure' form of avatar-based play, placing considerably less emphasis on narrative, dramatic and cinematic elements. This makes racing games a good case for illustrating some of the basic principles of avatarial embodiment, but makes them less relevant to the study of hybridisations and tensions between avatar-based interaction and other forms of play and fiction.

My analysis of avatar-based play is restricted to singleplayer games, and is motivated by a specific interest in singleplayer games as a particular form of play and as a unique type of gaming experience; the focus is on how the avatar mediates between the player and the game, not how it mediates between the player and other players. This implies addressing the relationship between the player and the game system, between the player and the simulated environment, and between the player and a fictional world. These concerns are of course relevant to any kind of game, but in multiplayer and online environments the social interaction of play nevertheless demands primary attention.

Methodologically, the study implies a relatively wide sweep of empirical observation and analysis. I cannot of course aim to get a complete first-hand knowledge of all games that could be relevant to the concerns of the analysis. In trying to capture the essentials of avatar-based play and its major variations, my strategy has been to play through a limited number of popular games that have been recognised as classics in some respect within their (sub-)genre, and then add to this by playing a larger number of games only briefly (1-4 hours of play). I have also been able to draw on fan-based knowledge from the numerous reviews, FAQs and walkthroughs that exist for practically every game that exists out there. Such written sources are particularly valuable in this kind of broad descriptive-analytical research.

The research process itself has evolved in a relatively disorderly hermeneutical fashion. I started out with a few games that were perceived to be central to my concerns, with no clear idea as to what would be the conceptual and generic boundaries of the study. Originally, the project started out as a study of a more specific genre within the action adventure umbrella: the First Person Shooter. I eventually discovered, however, that the aspects that this genre shares with a wider category of games needed a more dedicated focus, particularly because very little research has been done in this area. While the FPS definitely boasts a few interesting 'special features' that are specific this particular genre, those features would be difficult to describe without positioning them within a more general generic domain. Of particular importance to my change of emphasis from the FPS genre to avatar-based play as a game form – and to avatar-based 3D in particular – was the realisation that the 'first-person' camera, which is supposed to be the ultimate marker of the genre (hence its name), is not different in its basic functioning from the camera in *Tomb Raider* or *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996). In other words: the most distinctive feature of the FPS is not the perspective but the gun.