

AVATARHOOD AND SELFHOOD

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VIDEO GAME JOURNEY

“Avatar” has for more than 20 years been a common term in studies of online games and virtual worlds, following its first adaptation into digital culture with the online role-playing game *Habitat* (1986) and Neil Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash* (1991). The concept has to a certain extent migrated from online contexts into the study of single-player gaming, although “player-character” and similar terms are here still often the preferred term.

There are broadly two different kinds of avatar theory. First, we may study the uses and meanings of graphic user representations in digital environments, including player-characters in videogames. The job of theory will then be to describe and map out the multiple and complex ways in which people interact with and through digital user representations, across a broad and diverse field of uses, arenas and social contexts, from *Pac-Man* to social media.

But we may also apply *avatarhood* as an analytical concept. Avatarhood is then thought of as a version of *selfhood*, and a unique principle of interfacing with computer-generated environments. Applied analytically to a given context and design, the principle

of avatarhood is a function, which means that an object or a mechanism is an *avatar* insofar that it manifests this function. With respect to videogames, this implies that playable characters can have other uses and meanings than avatarhood, other functions.

The concept of avatarhood is useful for identifying and delineating avatar theory as a field of study, as well as for analysing notions of “avatar” that are guiding creative practices in gaming and digital design. Indeed, in terms of its origins and central position in digital culture, the concept of “avatar” is primarily a creative and commercial idea rather than a theoretical-analytical construction.

VIRTUAL BODY \ PERSONA \ GAME PIECE

So what is avatarhood? The first ever graphical online multi-user game, *Habitat* in 1986, was also the first to adopt into digital culture the term “Avatar”, from Sanskrit, which refers to the crossing or *descent* of a Hindi deity (usually Vishnu) into human form, as a material incarnation of a deity on earth. Chip Morningstar, one of the game’s creators, felt that avatar was an appropriate term in the sense that “we humans are like deities, or at least external souls, with respect to a virtual world that exists only inside a computer simulation”¹. The concept has since become a popular reference for any graphical representation of users or players in computer-generated environments.

Early literature on avatars shows that the general idea of user representation, manifestation or “embodiment” in virtual environments captures two interrelated but distinct ideas. The first idea is that avatarhood is an interface to Virtual Reality, a virtual body. The focus is on embodiment in computer-generated environments in the corporeal sense, of the kind that is produced by immersive VR technology. Frank Biocca’s early formulation of this concept in “The Cyborg’s Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments” (1997) is instructive:



THE FIRST GRAPHICAL ONLINE MULTI-USER GAME *HABITAT* (1986)

In immersive virtual reality systems the avatar is not the small puppet used in standard computer interfaces, those regular computer monitors on which an iconic representation of the self is moved in a world via a mouse or joystick. In immersive VR the whole interface defines the boundaries and shape of the body by defining the boundary between inside and outside, between the part of the VR world that is “me” and the part that is “the world” (...) From coherent patterns of energy impinging on the senses (i.e., the proximal stimulus) the virtual world is divided into “self” and “environment”. (Biocca 1997)

The idea that avatars are bodies in Virtual Reality has links to the concept of “presence” or “telepresence” in VR literature (Rheingold 1991, Steuer 1992). In Biocca’s approach it is the embodied self-presence itself that is the avatar (“the whole interface defines the boundaries

¹ <http://heritage-key.com/blogs/michael-kan/what-avatar-creators-chip-morningstar-and-randy-farmer-trace-ancient-roots-latest/>

and shape of the body”), not a visually represented character. The idea of avatar as virtual body is heavily embedded in avatar etymology; the avatar is a corporeal manifestation of the player in a world of ones and zeroes, the player incarnated in digital flesh.

On the other hand, avatars have more commonly been thought of in expressive and interpersonal terms, as virtual *personas* rather than re-embodiments of the corporeal sense. The avatar as digital persona is a vehicle of self-presentation, make-believe and social communication. Gregory Little’s “Avatar Manifesto” (1999) articulated a variant of this concept of avatarhood: “The avatar is a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world”. His formulation exemplifies the way in which avatars and their “worlds” have typically been conceptualised as a discursive and communicative practice. In the field of computer-mediated communication, avatar studies has had a primary interest in graphical virtual worlds like *Second Life* (where user-characters are officially called “avatars”) or online role-playing games like for example *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Among the core concerns in the early literature were the complex and sometimes “deceptive” nature of the relationship between offline and online identities (Donath 1999), the ways in which the visual language of avatars affects perception and social judgment in virtual communities (Nowak, 2004, 2015), or how avatars reflect and propagate stereotypical racial identities (Nakamura, 2002).

The original idea of avatar as persona has also been influential in game studies and gaming discourses. Avatarhood is here most often conceived in representational terms, as the *character* of the player, in online worlds as well as in single-player games. At the



STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

same time, there is an influential tradition of theory that de-emphasizes or even rejects the significance of player-characters in player experience. Fuller and Jenkins (1995) argue that Mario or Luigi are not really characters in the narrative sense but rather “capacities for action”, and as such “little more than a cursor”. The observation that player-characters are mediators of player agency has been developed into the idea that avatars are interfaces to a game system (Jørgensen, 2013). Such game-centric accounts in computer game theory point to a medium-independent concept of avatarhood. Linderoth (2005) notes that “we talk about our game pieces in board games as a part of ourself, and can in the game of Monopoly claim that ‘I stand on chance’”. In general game design theory, Bjørk & Holopainen (2003) define “avatar” as “tokens that represent players”. The notion of avatar as game piece, a *token* representative and mediator of agency within an abstract game system, indicates that avatarhood may indeed be given also a *formal* articulation. One could, after all, play Snakes & Ladders or Monopoly without tokens, just as one might do in any game that is not also a physical sport.

AVATAR: THE GENERAL IDEA

Looking for a general idea of avatarhood that may capture virtual bodies, personas/characters as well as game pieces, we may take a cue from Kristine L. Nowak. With reference to *Snow Crash*, she says that avatars “...in some way allow people to be embodied in, and

have experiences only possible in computer-generated environments” (Nowak 2015:4). This formulation connects to the original idea of descent and re-embodiment, while arguably being applicable to a range of digital environments, from *Pac-Man* to Facebook. The key idea is that avatarhood is about being “embodied” or *situated* in a digital environment, “in some way”, as opposed to having direct access and agency in relation to a digital space or domain, from the outside.

Hence avatars are not cursors or tools in a purely instrumental sense, but embodied representations within computer-generated environments. “Environment” does not necessarily refer to navigable spaces in VR or videogames, but to any bounded and consistently structured domain with characteristic properties and affordances. Via the interface of the avatar, we can say that we “descend” upon a computer-generated environment, in a way that allows us to relate to it as *our* environment, our “world”, our habitat. This situatedness or embeddedness, which I suggest we may call *native embodiment*, is a defining characteristic of avatarhood.

EXPERIENTIAL AND HERMENEUTIC SELFHOOD

What does it mean that an avatar is an embodiment of the *self*? In the literature on the concept of selfhood, there is broad agreement that selfhood can be defined in multiple dimensions, so that we can talk of for example “ecological self”, or “social self”, and so on. However there are different ways of slicing it up, different approaches to how to understand the relationship between different aspects, and different positions with respect to which aspects are more fundamental².

Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher have suggested that aspects of selfhood can be grouped under two main dimensions: the *experiential* self and the *narrative* self.³ The experiential self refers to the “I” of subjective experience, and the immediate givenness of first-person experience and agency as *my* experience and my agency. The experiential self may also be defined as a “minimal” and irreducible sense of self-awareness; the awareness that an experience is mine rather than the experience of another cannot be put into doubt, but is a given. Zahavi (2005, 2007) says that ownership of experience is by implication *perspectival* ownership. The self-aware subject experiences in a certain way, in a certain perspective; there is, in Zahavi’s words, something “it is like” for a subject to have an experience (2007:5).

In line with classic phenomenology as well as more recent ideas that cognition and the self is “embodied” or “situated”, Zahavi argues that the phenomenal self is *a priori* embedded in its environment, even if this relationship may be operating behind our back, as it were, insofar that it is not included in our self-awareness in its minimal form. Self-experience is “the self experience of a world-immersed self” (Zahavi, 2007:6). This idea of the world-situated self draws attention to the self as given in bodily and perceptual experience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). It also connects the experiential self to the idea of the ecological or “enactive” self, which implies that that selfhood and cognition is conditioned by the nature of human beings as *organisms*, “tuned in” to their environment and habitats (Neisser, 1988).

Zahavi and Gallagher’s “narrative” self, on the other hand, is a concept more familiar to sociology, literary theory, and media- and cultural theory. The narrative self is the reflexive and conceptually mediated self, constructed through a work of self-interpretation, and can be seen as the expanded or “thick” counterpart to the minimal or “thin” phenomenal self. It is more strongly interpersonal, expanding from the minimal intersubjectivity of me-other to the social construction of the self. Significantly, the “thickness” of the narrative

² See Gallagher (2000) for a concise overview.

³ The main idea and points of discussion are summed up in Zahavi (2007) and Belt (2019).

self involves an act of individuation, which fleshes out what it is to be “me” in particular, as opposed to someone else. In contrast, the experiential self is a “dry” or formal category, an attempt to articulate selfhood as such, in its most abstract and minimal sense.

The narrative dimension refers to the active shaping of the self, or in a stronger term, the self as an ongoing *project*. In a highly pluralistic and differentiated society, the hermeneutic self-project will typically be situated not only in a general historic and cultural context, but differentiated as multiple *roles* manifested in relation to different situations and contexts. Self-projects and roles are often made socially explicit through signifying and discursive practices, and through cultural activities of self-expression and self-authorship.

Avatarhood, then, may productively be seen as a proxy version of the kind of selfhood conceptualised by Gallagher and Zahavi. To avoid confusion in the context of avatars in digital media, *hermeneutic* is probably a better term than «narrative». In the hermeneutical dimension, selfhood is understood as a process of reflective self-interpretation and self-construction.

DIGITAL PROXY SELFHOOD

In general terms, a “proxy agent” is an authorised mediator, a representative who acts on behalf of an outside actor, an authorizer, in a given situation.⁴ A proxy agent mediates ownership of actions, in such a way that the actions of the proxy agent count as the actions of the authorizer, who is then also responsible for their consequences. We may say that an avatar similarly functions as a proxy of the user or player. When I am playing a videogame via an avatar, the failure of my avatar is *my* failure, and the weakening of my avatar within its environment is my weakening in the environment. At the same time, the notion of proxy *selfhood*, inspired by Gallagher and Zahavi, implies a relation that goes beyond agency and representation in the instrumental sense.

Proxy selfhood is defined by two proxy relations:

Proxy identity, or *self-embodiment*, means that avatars are embodied externalisations of the self, mediating a subject-position and experiential ownership. Experiences via digital proxy embodiment are *my* experiences, from my perspective or “point of view”. There is something “it is like” to be me as a particular avatar. Proxy selfhood is a *monadic* relation, a self-to-self relation. This distinguishes avatarhood from the relation between an authorizer and proxy agent, which is a dyadic relationship. It also differentiates avatars from the kind of dyadic relationships we are familiar with from literature and cinema, in which we are able to identify with or project ourselves into another person, imagined or real. Avatarhood is an identity relation, not a relationship of identification.

Proxy situatedness, or *native embodiment*, is the avatarial version of situated or embedded selfhood. The term “native” highlights avatarhood as interface, a traversal function, a re-embodiment of the self across the human-digital divide. Unlike a purely instrumental interface (like mouse cursor or voice command), digital proxy embodiment situates the player or user as a natural member of the environment. In native embodiment, the “passive” or centripetal relation between avatar and its environment—the ways in which agents and forces can *affect upon* it—is as important as the active or outward-moving, centrifugal relation of agency and mastery. The centripetal relation is of particular importance in gaming. Via the principle of avatarhood, video game players are being subjected and exposed to an alien and often hostile environment, as native inhabitants.

Native embodiment is an *alterity* relation, a temporary re-embodiment of the self as a technological construction, the self as nonself. In cultural and psychological terms, participation and engagement through avatarial interfaces thrives on this underlying paradox. In avatarhood, selfhood is being offset and put into play; I am experiencing a version of my self that is native to an alien environment.

⁴ MacPherson (2010), quoted in Carlson and Taylor (2019)

Native embodiment is also a *role* at the level of experiential selfhood, a pre-reflective externalisation of the self, which may be brought to awareness and fleshed out in the hermeneutical dimension. This role is also very often designed to be an active proxy relationship, a project of self-construction and self-authorship, via the technological tools of avatar configuration.

DOMAINS OF AVATARHOOD

The concept of avatarhood as outlined above is rooted in video gaming and virtual worlds, but can also be applied more widely to throw light on avatar-like aspects of digital identities online and in networked society in general. With respect to gaming, the avatarhood approach emphasises situatedness and the centripetal dimension more strongly than established accounts in game studies, which overall tend to focus their attention on agency and creativity. The idea that avatarhood is a proxy self-world relationship also points to the *existential* relevance of avatars, as has been examined by Vella (2015) and Kania (2017).

With respect to online sociality in virtual worlds, attention to the experiential dimension of selfhood draws attention to the way in which avatars are *corporeal* extensions as much as communicative ones, even if this aspect tends to be given less attention in psychological and sociological research. In their study on avatar personalisation in three virtual worlds Ducheneaut et.al (2009) concluded that "...avatars might be a better vehicle to explore new forms of physical embodiment rather than for exploring new facets of one's personality (1160)".

The notions of proxy selfhood and native embodiment go against the popular idea of Total Immersion, which has been seen as the holy grail in a long tradition of immersive amusement technologies, and which has also been reflected in Hollywood fantasies like *The Matrix* or *Avatar*. This VR ideal posits that virtual embodiment should be, as much as possible, a *replica* of natural embodiment, and that, accordingly, interfaces should be naturally immersive and immediate. In contrast, the principle of proxy selfhood accentuates the alterity dimension of digital self-embodiment, which is premised on dedicated learning and habituation rather than sensorial immediacy.

Journey (Thatgamecompany, 2012) illustrates the significance of corporeal virtual embodiment and learned proxy embodiment in online environments. In this game there is no verbal communication when player-avatars meet and join, no identity markers, and limited possibilities for visual expression. Indeed there is very little beyond the experience of being physically together in a particular place, by extended proxy. This intuitive sense of bodily co-presence is not produced via immersive VR interfaces, but via the learned motor-perceptual practice of inhabiting the lands of *Journey* as avatar, via the fingertip interface of the game controller.

With respect to identities in social media, proxy selfhood is anchored not so much in the visual representations of users (which may sometimes be referred to as "avatars"), but in the activities and characteristics of a user profile as such. As in *Second Life* and similar virtual environments, saying that your social self on Facebook is simply yourself in front of the computer is not the whole story. In this context, the concept of avatarhood serves to highlight not only the mechanisms of active self-interpretation and self-presentation involved



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in maintaining our online social personas, but also the *formal* definition and positioning of ourselves as avatars in an algorithmically structured social and public environment. Such formally articulated avatars, like any avatar, are only in part constructions of our own design.

As a special variant of “extended selfhood” (Belk, 1988), the concept of avatarhood can also be applied more broadly, to address native embodiment in the dataspace of modern life. Avatarhood in this expanded sense would apply to the “you” that is being targeted by google ads online, as well as to our digital identities as defined by government, work and career. E-government platforms, workplace portals, and other personalised interfaces make formal identities accessible and manageable in a way that was unimaginable just thirty years ago. This development arguably changes the nature of formal identity from public record to proxy selfhood. As in the games we play, our avatars in digital society are vehicles of self-monitoring and scorekeeping, in ways that resonate with broader trends towards the gamification of modern life.

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