

# The "I" as an "Other". Technological Intentionality and the Avatar.

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## Introduction

It is hardly a new insight that the avatar shapes the player's experience of the game world. In the discussion of the role of the avatar in the *action*-adventure genre, I would suggest that there are two major paths followed in the pursuit of making sense of the avatarian connection. There is what I would refer to broadly as the instrumental path. Typical for this approach is a notion of the avatar as "a set of available techniques and capabilities" (Newman 2002). This aspect has been elaborated by Rune Klevjer who proposes, following Merleau-Ponty, that providing certain techniques and capabilities within the virtual world implies another fundamental aspect of the avatar: embodiment. The avatar is not a mouse cursor, as it was conceived by Fuller & Jenkins in 1995 (Fuller & Jenkins 1995: 4) as Klevjer makes quite clear (Klevjer 2006: 10). It enables the player to experience the game world from within, it provides her with a vicarious body (Klevjer 2012: 6). As the body is our general means for having a world (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 147), the vicarious body of the avatar is our means for having a gameworld. It is the vehicle of being in the gameworld. Therefore, I shall call this the vehicular stance.

The other path that we encounter could be called the narrative path. This view is marked by a comprehension of the avatar as character, as agent that is primarily defined by narrative or diegesis. While it is still recognized that the avatar's function is that of a tool, the narrative aspect, the character, is equally important (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 107; Salen 2004). Here, the player is expected to fill the character's shoes. It is the world of the character that we experience. Here, we might only be in for a ride, as the form the action can take on might be shaped very strongly through the narrative, as e.g. in *Heavy Rain* (Sony 2010) or any other interactive fiction/action-adventure games.

Surely, in most games those roles of the avatar are intertwined. Leaving games like racing games and the likes aside, in which the avatar literally functions as a vehicle,<sup>1</sup> the player's incarnation in the game world has a story or a life of its own. And still, it provides the player with the means for being in the gameworld. Daniel Vella among others has argued that it is exactly this awkward position of the avatar as both the player's embodiment in the game world and as distinct character (Vella 2013) that makes it most intriguing.

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<sup>1</sup> which also plays a role in the experience of the world as Henrik Nielsen claims (Nielsen 2012: 136)

I shall follow the instrumental path, but still strive to gain insights that put together the two functions of the avatar. Regarding the avatar as an instrument does in no way mean to deprive it of a life of its own.

### **Experiencing the world**

To make sense of the mediated experience of the game world, I will make a short side trip into the ways our physical world is experienced. Drawing from the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty I will demonstrate that the physical world, which we might think of as experienced directly, is a mere representation of the world provided by our body or lived body, that is.

For Merleau-Ponty, "[t]he body is our general means of having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 147). It is "[...] the vehicle of being in the world, ..." (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 84). With this, Merleau-Ponty aims at the old topos of mind-body-split whose most prominent instalment is probably the cartesian "ego cogito, ergo sum". Without a body, he argues, there is no world to experience. The body provides us with access to the world, with means for perceiving the objects of the world and for acting within it. Body and world are inextricably intertwined, the world provides background and context for action and perception. Being in the world means to have or better to be a body and it is this composite of body and world that provides the subject with means for potential actions.

I like to think of the body as an instrument, which, unlike every other instrument, is irreducible. The physical body cannot be separated from the human subject. "I am my body," as Merleau-Ponty puts it (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 187). Our notion of the world is not given a priori as Descartes conceived it, instead it is experienced through our incarnate existence. Therefore, it is not easy to grasp the body as fundamental instrument, as tool that you cannot put away. Jack Loomis states: "The perceptual world created by our senses and nervous system is so functional a representation of the physical world that most people live out their lives without ever suspecting that contact with the physical world is mediate; [...]" (Loomis 1992: 113)

This instrument (the body) is, like every other tool, not neutral. It mediates our relation with the world. Its capabilities for action and perception as well as its spatial extension shape our experience of the world.

### **Intentionality**

This structure of being-in-the-world is called intentionality. Basically it is just another word for the primordial relations between human subject and world. It is the fundamental structure of our being-in-the-world, the function of human existence itself. World and human subject are forever intertwined. There is no consciousness without content. There is no action without context. The philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek claims: "They [the human beings] cannot simply "think," but they always think something; they cannot simply "see," but they always see something; they cannot simply "feel" but always feel something." (Verbeek 2008: 288)

Intentionality is a pre-reflective process "that silently and spontaneously organizes our world of perception" (Shusterman 2005: 161). Basically it is the expression of existence, of our incarnate being in the world. Merleau-Ponty conceives motricity as original intentionality. "Consciousness", Merleau-Ponty states, "is originally not an "I think that," but rather an "I can"" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 139). On this account, we can understand intentionality as pre-reflective function that provides us with possibilities for action.

Because motricity depends on perception to provide the foundation for meaningful actions, they form a single whole. Merleau-Ponty argues: "Vision and movement are specific ways<sup>[SEP]</sup> of relating to objects and, if a single function is expressed throughout all<sup>[SEP]</sup> of these experiences, then it is the movement of existence, [...]" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 139).

### Technological Intentionality

Before we venture into the realm of the virtual, I want to address how the use of technology co-shapes our relation with the world. To engage with the world through technological artifacts makes us subject to the latent *amplification/reduction structure* of instruments. That is, if, e.g., you are using a dentist's probe you get a better sense of the structure of the tooth than with your fingers. You feel the hardness and softness of the tooth, the cracks and holes far better than you would using your fleshy fingers. The probe extends or amplifies your *tactil intentionality* (Ihde 1979: 18). But you won't sense the wetness or warmth of the tooth that you would experience with your finger. The use of the instrument reduces and amplifies your tactil intentionality at the same time. Don Ihde claims "The difference [between body and technological artifact] is that all instruments have *differently* shaped 'intentionalities' which expose precisely those aspects of the world which have hitherto either been overlooked, taken as unimportant, not known at all, or even totally unsuspected." (Ihde 1979: 78) The technological intentionality, we could state, is more narrow than the general intentionality of the body.

Ihde, who came up with the concept of technological intentionality in the first place, is reluctant to call the amplification/reduction structure of the probe "technological intentionality". He reserves that term for instruments that do not provide the user with direct access to the world, but let her experience only the results of the instrument's engagement with the world, like e.g. radiotelescopy or infrared photography (Ihde 1979: 78). These instruments, Verbeek states, "do not represent a phenomenon of the world but construct a new reality." (Verbeek 2008: 393) They reveal a reality that is inaccessible by human intentionality alone. Verbeek states a double intentionality that is involved in this kind of relations: "[...] one of technology toward "its" world, and one of human beings toward the result of this technological intentionality." (Verbeek 2008: 393) Verbeek has schematized this *composite relation* like this:

human → (technology → world) (Verbeek 2008: 393)

I would argue, following Verbeek, that the intentionality involved in embodied relations, like using a probe, is not completely human either. The specific ways of experiencing the world through the probe can only exist because of an intimate relation between human and technology. The major difference is that – while all instrumental use co-shapes our experience of the world – the instrumentally constructed reality, that we encounter in

computer games – is exclusively accessible via instruments. Therefore, to experience *that* reality, the use of instruments is indispensable. Like the body is the only means to access the world, to experience the game world is to become involved with technology. It is impossible to untangle human intentionality and technological intentionality from the gameplay experience because the gameworld is only accessible via technological artifacts. Ollie Leino makes the special role of instrumental use quite clear: "Unlike my eyeglasses which I can take off and see what the world looks like without them, there is no way to see game without technology." (Leino 2012: 72)

## **Experiencing the Gameworld**

The experience of the gameworld includes means to act and to perceive the objects of the game world. More, in avatar-based games the player-subject experiences the gameworld from within. So, leaving interfaces like controller, screen or health bars aside – which of course also heavily influence the player's experience of the game world – I focus on the avatar as means to provide the player with a meaningful experience of the game world.

The most common english translation of the word "avatar" is incarnation. This is quite fitting because it encompasses, as Mukherjee (2012) has pointed out, the avatar being real (which could be translated into being part of the world) and able to die. Even the ontological divide or the phenomenon of multiple avatars has its counterpart in this figure: "[...], the avatar is either a full manifestation of the deity or a partial one; it is also possible for the deity to manifest himself or herself as multiple avatars, simultaneously."(Mukherjee 2012)

The avatar as incarnation of the player, as the player made virtual flesh, organizes the gameworld. It is the only way to experience that space, like the lived body is the only way to experience the world. Its capabilities for action and perception, the "I can" as Merleau-Ponty has put it, determine the affordances of the game world and vice versa. The avatar is indeed the player's virtual body. But still, the avatar is hollow (Martin 2013: 321). It has to be filled with the subjectivity of the player to become more than an object. This is why only in the process of playing, in teaming up with the player, the avatar can be considered part of a lived body, a virtual subject. Mind you, I am not speaking about the avatar as character that we encounter in e.g. cut scenes. This narrative aspect does play a crucial role in the experience of the gameworld and reflects the role of the avatar-character as a subject-for-itself. Still, I will focus on the alterity that we encounter in the process of playing, the otherness of the technological artifact. To put it rather grossly: "He could be a bunny rabbit for all I care" (Shaw 2011).

## **The Avatar as Other**

When I speak of the avatar as an other, I am not conceiving it as a literal other. It is not the character aspect of the avatar I am aiming at here, but its alterity as an evolving instrument. I stumbled upon this phenomena in GTA III (Rockstar Games 2001) while riding around San Andreas on a bicycle. Riding a bicycle in this game was a slightly annoying and difficult activity (and I'm not sure why I even bothered). Still, over the time it became easier and easier. After a while I wondered if it was just me who was getting better at this activity. Turns out it wasn't. I became an experienced biker in the process but so did the avatar.

The phenomenon of the avatar becoming more and more skilled through playing or practicing, is not a rare thing in video games. We encounter it most prevalently in RPGs where leveling is a science in its own right. What I found enticing about the use in GTA III was though that I wasn't aware of it. The boundaries between player and avatar became blurry, who was the capable rider? Whose skills did improve?

In the case of RPGs there is still another aspect to consider. There are things the avatar cannot do, i.e. the player cannot do, because the avatar's skills are too low. Let's say we walk around in an RPG and we want to discover the entrance of a cave. We will only find it if the perception skill of our avatar is high enough. Even if we as player know the cave is there, we won't ever discover it, only the avatar can do that. Or if we talk to someone and want to persuade her of something. This does only work if our talking or charming skill is high enough. But it is not our skill, it is the skill of something other: the avatar. Or let's think about things the avatar just won't do. I am not referring to things it is not capable of, but of things it actively refuses to do, like e.g. in *The Secret of Monkey Island* there is a scene where Guybrush won't grasp a pot, because "it is too hot" (Lucasfilm Games 1990). Where would that leave us? Should we comprehend that particular avatar as a broken or inadequate instrument, not up to its tasks? Is it a move from readiness-to-hand to presence-at-hand as Heidegger might have put it (Heidegger 1963)? Or is it simply the disobedience of another subject? I think it is neither. What we encounter here is an extreme manifestation of technological intentionality. It is admittedly a borderline case, a case where alterity relations and embodied relations clash.

Klevjer has argued that the skill-related world experience – he refers to it as "the principle of playing through character" (Klevjer 2011) – is a role-playing function that "can only be injected into it [the avatar-based play of the action-adventure gaming] by force, in a way that insists on a schizophrenic structuring of player identity." (Klevjer 2011) He claims that the in-game identities of playable character and extended player-subject contradict each other. "Either you are perceiving via a playable character's perceptions and actions, as determined by the computer, or you are acting and perceiving in the world as yourself, extended into game space." (Klevjer 2011) Klevjer states here that an epistemological clash comes about. While I agree with him that cramming a role-play system into action-adventure gaming is not very beneficial for the overall gameplay and moves the action somewhere else, his notion of the telepresent player could be elaborated on. The tele-present player is indeed re-located, but it is through technological means that this relocation comes about.

### **The Structure of the avatarian relation**

Looking at the avatarian relation in a postphenomenological way, we find an *embodiment relation* similar to regular tool use, schematized by Don Ihde in this way:

(human - technology) → world (Ihde 1990)

While this would be a valid way to describe regular instrumental relations, in the case of the avatar we have to take into account the otherness of the instrument. The interaction with an technological other, the alterity relation, is schematized like this:

human – (technology – world) (Ihde 1990)

The aforementioned *composite relation* is still relevant, because it is only through technological means that we gain access to the gameworld. Therefore, once again:

human → (technology → world) (Verbeek 2008: 393)

If we now try to schematize the relation between player, avatar and gameworld, we might come up with something like this:

(human/technology) → (technology → world)

To be able to act and perceive within the gameworld, to be relocated into it, the human player needs to merge to a certain degree with the technological artifact that is the avatar. It is this connection that we can speak of as a cyborg relation between player and technology. Here, human and technology form a new experiencing (and acting) entity (Verbeek 2008: 391). I would argue that this relation is an extreme form of embodiment relation where no distinction is possible between player and avatar in the process of playing. We still have to deal with the relation between the instrumentally extended or even relocated player and the avatar as technological other. In my opinion it is not at all contradictory to combine the extremely close embodiment relation between player and avatar with an alterity relation. To illustrate my point I borrow Ihde's example of the use<sup>2</sup> of a "spirited horse" (Ihde 1990: 99) which he uses to picture the alterity relation. Here we find certain features we have attributed to the avatar earlier like the ability for skill development or a possible inclination for disobedience. While Ihde is focussing on the animal subject as an other, I consider the relation with the horse also an embodiment relation. The rider uses aids to give cues to the horse and ideally the horse responds so swiftly, that we could speak of an technological extended rider-subject. Still, the horse is an animated being, a quasi-subject. The main difference between horse and avatar is that we cannot "dismount" from the avatar if we still want to experience the gameworld that is mediated by it.

## Conclusion

I have argued that it is not necessarily the character that is encountered as an other, but that the avatar as instrument can be conceived as alterity in its own right. Applying postphenomenological theories to the relation between player and avatar I have tried to show how the structure of being-in-the-gameworld is shaped through technological mediation and how deeply embodiment and alterity relations are intertwined in the process of making sense of a world.

## Games

GRAND THEFT AUTO III. Rockstar Games. PC, 2001.

HEAVY RAIN. Sony. PS 3, 2010

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<sup>2</sup> I do not put the word "use" in inverted commas because I want to emphasize the instrumental character of that relation, i.e. using the horse or riding as applied technology.

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND. Lucasfilm Games, PC, 1990.

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