Avatar

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Abstract

This essay gives an introduction to the study of avatars and player-avatar relations in video games and virtual communities. It propose a short history of avatars, distinguishing between different aspects of the concept and its uses, and then highlighting key debates and research efforts in the field. Drawing on the emerging interdisciplinary field of the philosophy of computer games, the essay provides a brief phenomenological account of avatar-based play in contemporary 3D games, and addresses the question of player-avatar identity.

A short history of avatars

The Sanskrit word avatar refers to the manifestation of a divinity. In Hinduism, Vishnu has manifested on Earth through multiple avatars, but several other gods have also appeared as avatars. Game designer Chip Morningstar is usually credited as being first to use the word to describe a user-controlled character. The idea of avatars gained cultural prominence during the 1990’s preoccupation with virtual reality and cyberspace, but had been prefigured in earlier popular
culture. The idea of entering a computer-controlled space with a virtual body was first popularized in the 1982 movie *Tron*, and subsequently in William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.

In the 1990’s, the figure of the avatar was associated with an erroneous understanding of computers and the internet as consisting of three-dimensional worlds and avatars. One example is the 1994 Barry Levinson movie *Disclosure*, in which the protagonist accesses an important company database through an avatar-based virtual reality interface. The avatar was therefore initially tied to the conception that future computer interfaces would be constructed in three dimensions and accessed using virtual reality displays. In practice, avatars have since been used almost exclusively for video game and virtual community purposes, rather than in more utilitarian contexts.

In games, we can distinguish between different aspects of *avatars*, each of which appeared at a particular historical moment:

1. Allowing a user to exert direct control over a visualized spatial game world was first demonstrated in the 1958 *Tennis for Two*, where the player-controlled paddle is the mediator of the player’s agency.

2. In the 1962 *Spacewar!* the controllable spaceship represents the player in the game world; what happens to the ship is taken as happening to the player («I was hit», «You missed me»), and the core goal of survival is implemented as the survival of the player’s ship.

3. The ability for a user to control a non-mechanical character in a graphical world first appeared during the 1970’s, but it was popularized in games like *Pac-Man* (1980).

4. Next, users could role-play an avatar, so that the avatar has a customizable personality that is distinct from that of the player, yet is controlled by the player. Jon Peterson argues that the *character sheet* for describing the skills and personality of the player-controlled character was developed in the *Blackmoor*, a precursor to the *Dungeons & Dragons* game around 1972 (Peterson 2012).

5. With the emergence of 3D games like *Doom* (1993), *Tomb Raider* (1996), and *Everquest* (1999), avatars also took on the role as vehicles of perceptual immersion and embodied presence within in real-time 3D environments, bringing them closer to the popular image of *Tron* and *Neuromancer*. The navigable virtual camera became integral to avatar control, especially in first-person shooters (Rehak 2003). In 1998, the introduction of Playstation’s Dualshock twin-stick controller established a new interface standard for consoles, designed to suit the particular demands of avatar-based 3D games.

**Key debates**
The history of the concept of the avatar, as well as dominant current uses, reveal a dual emphasis of
meaning. When conceptualized as a vehicle of direct control and perceptual immersion, this idea is independent from the notion of playable character, which implies some kind of humanoid figure or personality. Playable characters in for example Habitat (1986) or Maniac Mansion (1987) are avatars even if not directly controlled in any way. Vice versa, we could say that the controllable marble in Marble Madness (1984) is indeed an avatar according to its function, even if lacking the character aspect. However, in common use, the notion of «avatar» implies some kind of personality, either as a simple figure (like Pac-Man) or as a fully-fledged role-playing character.

Related to this double aspect of the avatar, a key issue in academic research has been the relative significance of the avatar’s appearance versus its capability through players’ engagement with avatars (Tronstad 2008), particularly the question of whether single-player game avatars like Mario or Lara Croft should be conceptualized as vehicles of agency rather than objects of representation, as tools rather than as characters in the traditional sense. Against this view some theorists argued that the dual nature of avatars, as sets of capabilities and visual representations combined, is essential to their distinctive appeal.

In research on virtual communities and online role-playing, the main emphasis is on the avatar considered as persona, a vehicle of self-representation rather than a vehicle of perceptual or narrative immersion. In sociology and cultural theory, there is a central concern with how players express and negotiate identity through their avatars, especially as this relates to gender and ethics. The status of avatars is also key in broader discussions on the legal and economic status of actions and achievements in virtual communities.

The phenomenology of avatar-based 3D
Phenomenological and cognitive theories have been dominant approaches to player agency in video games, with a central focus on the conditions for immersive interaction through directly controlled avatars. Andreas Gregersen (2008) offer comprehensive accounts of ways in which the player-relationship is rooted in the core cognitive functions of the embodied mind.

Analyzed in the context of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception (2002 [1962]), directly controlled avatars like Pac-Man or Mario have a very distinct way of creating and representing the phenomenology of the body (Klevjer 2012). Through practice and habituation, the player begins to incorporate the controller-and-avatar interface as second nature, like a prosthetic extension of his or her own body. Our body is not an object in the world, Merleau-Ponty states, in so far that “…it is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches» (2002 [1962]:105). Hence, like a prosthetic limb or a blind man’s stick, avatar-based play extends our acting and perceiving body into game space, allowing us to, in David Sudnow’s formulation in his phenomenological analysis of the video game Breakout, “…traverse the wired gap with motions that make us nonetheless feel in a balanced extending touch with things (1983:37).

Unlike other prosthetic extensions (such as a mouse cursor), an avatar represents the player in an ontological sense; via avatars, players can indirectly belong to a remote digital environment, and be
exposed to its dangers. In navigable 3D environments, the virtual camera itself is also controlled by the player, either directly or indirectly via the avatar. Therefore, the player is no longer looking at the screen or even through it, but with the screen, as if tele-piloting a vehicle (Klevjer 2012:21). The world of the avatar becomes the new “here” of the player, at the expense of the “here” outside the boundaries of the screen, which disappears from awareness, including the controller interface itself.

Avatar-based 3D has a distinct and fairly restrictive appeal: the thrill of being a different body, in the space beyond the screen. This design is optimized for travel, exploration and combat, within a perceptual framework of paranoid tunnel-vision and high-precision finger gymnastics. By contrast, mimetic interfaces (Juul 2009) establish instead the “here” in front of the screen as the primary space of play, and therefore do not need any prosthetic avatar. The paradigm of avatar-based 3D also conflicts with the dream of sensorially immersive VR as the future of game interfaces, which implies that the interface should be natural and immediate, and that we should immerse ourselves through our own actual bodies rather than through any extended proxy.

**Identity**
Linked to the above analysis is also the question of player-avatar identity, which has been a central topic in the emergent philosophy of computer games field (Sageng et al 2012). When players refer to the avatar they control as "I", does this also mean that they think of there being some kind of logical continuity between themselves and the character? On one hand, the “I” appears to reflect the standard way that our language expresses extended agency and representation of the kind that we find in avatar-based play, including "avatars" that we do not typically think of as such. We would typically say, for example, "I crashed into you" when playing with toy trucks, or "you passed me" in a board game. However, when avatars are also personalities or characters, there is a kind of identification coming into play that seems to go beyond mere agency (“I am doing”) or self-situating (“I am there/here”) to also include the principle of role-playing, which is when the player says “I am” with reference to a fictional character. In play theory, Marjanovic-Shane describes the utterance “You are a pig” as having three distinct meanings 1) as a literal statement 2) as a metaphorical insult and 3) as creating a fictional world in which the you of the sentence is to take on the role of a pig (Marjanovic-Shane 1989). Accordingly, the “I am” that players use to describe the avatar can be seen as a declaration of make-believe.

**The future of avatars**
The popularity of avatars continues to wax and wane. The peak popularity of avatars in game design was with the rise of the first-person shooter in the 1990’s, and later with online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft*. In a literal sense, the term reappeared in popular imagination with the 2009 movie *Avatar*.

At the same time, video games have seen a remarkable resurgence of 2-dimensional and avatar-less games during the early 2000’s. Juul argues that the history of video games can be seen as a movement from the 2-dimensional graphics of early games, through 3-dimensional graphics in the 1990’s, and then moving back to 2-dimensionality and to playing games using movement controllers in the physical space in front of the screen (Juul 2009). This trend is supported by the
popularity of games on touch screen devices, where the user’s role is often not to control a character, but to manipulate the objects on screen through touch.

Though avatars remain by far most common in games and virtual communities, the idea that the future of interfaces involves avatars and virtual reality resurfaces at regular intervals, most prominently with the focus on Second Life some years ago, and with recent developments in virtual reality.

References


