The Other Otherness of the Avatar: Technological Alterity in Player-Avatar-Relations

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will try to disentangle the narrative otherness of the “playable character” from the technological alterity of the avatar as instrument. I focus on the action-adventure genre because here the tension between the different modes of avatar-player relation is most tangible. In this genre, the player relates to the game world necessarily via a prosthetic avatar.

I refer to the action-adventure using Klevjer’s definition of the term, which, in contrast to more traditional definitions that put the emphasis on puzzle-solving, entails also platformers, first-person-shooters and action-orientated role play games (RPGs) (Klevjer 2006). In action-adventure games, we encounter a protagonist, a subject that has a life of its own, introduced to us via cut-scenes and other narrative elements. Still, in the process of playing we do not interact with the protagonist, but with the avatar as “a set of available techniques and capabilities” (Newman 2002). The character as subject-for-itself seems to be absent from the process of playing. As an instrument, the avatar is hollow. It needs to be filled with the player’s intentionality to function and still, it is decidedly different from being “little more than a cursor” as Fuller and Jenkins have claimed (Fuller & Jenkins 1995).

To avoid confusion, I follow Klevjer’s distinction (Klevjer 2006) between the avatar as “playable character” that derives mainly from a comprehension of computer games as story and as “prosthetic vicarious embodiment” that emerges from an action-orientated concept of gaming. The role of prosthetic embodiment becomes obvious in games that have little to offer in terms of story, like racers or classic arcade games. Equally, the “playable character” is foregrounded in interactive story games like Heavy Rain (Sony 2010). While there are some cases where the avatar as prosthetic instrument exists in a pure form, the playable character is necessarily a hybrid between protagonist and instrument. The extent to which the playable character is conceived as subject-for-itself or instrument respectively varies, though. It oscillates between cut scenes, which do not require player action at all, and regular gameplay, where the player conceives the avatar as mediator of her own actions, as instrument.

To which extent are the properties of the avatar as extension of the player-body shaped by narrative considerations and what is owed to instrumental aspects alone? Does the
character silently fades into the background and leaves the stage to the player? Does it even make sense to differentiate between the two?

Playing *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1983), it becomes obvious that Mario’s day job as a plumber does not influence the skillset of the avatar. When we think of Mario as technological other at all, we regard him at the most as obedient puppet. He is mainly conceived as extension of the player’s body. Mario might have a live of his own, as we can witness in various TV series, films and comic books, in the process of playing, though, this is of no consequence. Regarding the differentiation between instrument and protagonist, we can state that Mario is, probably owed to his very limited skillset, very much on the instrumental side of the playable character.

The protagonist of *Mirror’s Edge* (EA 2008), Faith, again is more distinct in terms of playing. Her narrative existence as a female, martial arts and parkour trained courier reflects heavily on the capabilities that are available to the player (Nielsen 2012). Though the player learns more about Faith’s story here than she does about Mario while playing *Mario Bros.*, it is not primarily the narrative that presents us with her capabilities for action but the process of playing itself.

I suggest that both the instrumental properties of the avatar and its narrative elements spring from its being-in-the-gameworld, its virtual-material existence, to ground the playable character in the game world as a quasi-subject. In a way, the avatar reminds me of the horse that the phenomenologist Don Ihde has used to demonstrate the alterity relation (Ihde 1990). While this horse certainly has a life of its own, it can be employed as instrument. Still, the physical properties and capabilities of the horse stay the same and its subjectivity does never cease completely. The horse might occasionally be given to disobedience in a similar way to the playable character which, e.g. in cut scenes, acts without the volition of the player.

Pulling apart the different although totally intertwined modes of the avatar as technological and narrative other might contribute to create more credible or realistic gaming experiences which reflect the assumed life of the protagonist to an extent that merges story and gameplay better than the often slightly disruptive combination of action and cut scenes. This work therefore aims at game designers and scholars interested in the nature of the avatar.

**OPTIONAL BIO**

*Frank Fetzer* is a PhD student at the University of Vienna. He holds a Mag. Phil. in film studies from the same institution.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Nintendo Mario Bros. (1983)

In computing, an avatar (also known as a profile picture or userpic) is a graphical representation of a user or the user's character or persona. It may take either a two-dimensional form as an icon in Internet forums and other online communities or a three-dimensional form, as in games or virtual worlds. Avatar images have also been referred to as "picons" (personal icons) in the past, though the usage of this term is uncommon now. An avatar can also refer to a text construct found on early systems

While Avatar Aang and Korra are the two main protagonists of the franchise, both the television shows and comic series explore the Avatars who came before them. Their power to communicate with the past Avatar's spirits has allowed the audience to know exactly what their life was like. To test this fascinating theory, here are the most recent Avatars and how they make up for their predecessors' faults.Â Yangchen's successor, Avatar Kuruk, is a lot more carefree and spiritual in comparison. He does not take his duty seriously and uses his powers for his own entertainment, rather than helping the world. Kuruk is lucky that he could afford to goof off because Yangchen left the world in a peaceful state.

-Disclaimer: I (meaning me as Inkgirl) do neither own Avatar nor this story. I post it on behalf of the author Vathara, with her permission. Also: This story is already finished and if you want to read the full version right now, just search it on fanfiction.net. I just post it here on her behalf and also because it is easier to read on AO3 in my opinion. Have fun. (See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one.)

Chapter 1: Chapter 1. Chapter Text.

At least nothing is on fire. Though considerable ashes had been shoved to one side of the hearth. A small, steady fire still burned on the other, flames bending away to-. Iroh held still, scarcely daring to breathe.

Ursa was seated directly on the stones bordering the fire, heedless of soot and smoke staining her loose robe. The opening sequence is an introduction to the series Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra. It is played at the beginning of every episode. The sequence opens by showcasing the four elemental bending styles: waterbending, earthbending, firebending, and airbending, performed by Pakku, an unknown earthbender, Azula, and an Air Nomad, respectively. The sequence cuts to a map of the Avatar World, followed by Katara's narration explaining the origins of the Hundred Year War launched.