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

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will try 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 do 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 extend 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.

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