

Reading with the Body: Interpreting Three Dimensional Media as Narrative

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Abstract

This paper argues that virtual online worlds are sites for the realization of narrative, in a form reading that is posthuman and performative. The in-world avatar is the embodiment of an interpreting agent in the virtual world. Such devices accomplish a number of functions in terms of narrative realisation. The avatar contributes to the realisation of narrative through the navigation of the spatial attributes, the setting up of perspective in terms of Point of View (POV) in the reading, and as a character agent in the narrative architecture of the virtual world. Such characteristics are in the cybernetic relationship between the virtual world as a text, and the responses that can be made to it in reception. Architecture becomes the grammar of reading in the virtual world, with design and code, copyright and address directing narrative. The body of the avatar and the body of the person operating it are joined across the spaces of the digital and the physical in the navigation of the virtual three-dimensional.

Key Words: Virtual worlds, narrative, spatial, navigation, posthuman, cybernetic, embodiment, avatars, cyberculture, reading.

1. Introduction

The slightly built and ill-dressed figure makes his way over the narrow bridge towards the small stupa at the base of the frozen mountain. From some distant point the voice of a lone monk can be heard chanting the 'Om mani padme hum' mantra. The figure performs a prostration, the first of many as he makes his way towards the top of the mountain. He bows and falls flat to the ground with arms outstretched, then dragging his legs up under his body, he raises himself up again only to then repeat it all over again and again.

I am the figure in that landscape. I have been him for six years. I am an avatar in the virtual online world of *Second Life*. How I understand the virtual spaces through which I navigate as an avatar is dependant upon a form of reading that extends beyond the symbolic registers of language and into

the simulative properties of three-dimensional digital environments. In the simulative environment of *Second Life* and other virtual online worlds, it is objects, spaces, bodies, and places that are interpreted alongside languages. The avatar contributes to this posthuman realisation of narrative through the navigation of spatial attributes, the setting up of perspective in terms of Point of View (POV) in reading, and as character agents in the narrative architecture of the virtual world.¹

2. Terms and Conditions

The embodied agent in virtual worlds creates tensions between phenomenological and hermeneutical conceptions of meaning.² Building on the work of Haraway (1991), Aarseth (1997), Hayles (1999), and Jenkins (2003), this paper argues for the posthuman credentials of virtual worlds, as media that is read performatively. Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* is a relevant commentary on the social relations engendered by cybernetic technologies. Haraway recognises that "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction".³ This paper describes the avatar as a key element in the hybrid relationship of machine and organism that is the virtual online world. Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* addresses the textual possibilities for the hybrid of machine and organism. In this relationship "the text itself" cannot be subsumed by either side of the triangle and remains at the interstice, refusing to be reduced to either a linguistic, historic, or material phenomenon, while depending on all three.⁴ Such a three-sided system raises question about the nature of reading in relation to such texts. N. Katherine Hayles discusses embodiment in relation to the avatar in interactive and spatial digital texts in *How We Became Posthuman*, where 'questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage in this situation, for the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen. Instead, the focus shifts to questions about pattern and randomness. What transformations govern the connections between user and avatar?'⁵ The avatar is the nomadic point where transformations of the user into the virtual world are experienced as the shifting agency of embodied identity.

The narrative architecture of online three-dimensional worlds governs the connections between what Hayles terms a user and their avatar. The concept of narrative architecture is the constituents of the text, which must be negotiated, interpreted and responded to in reading, play and navigation.⁶ This architecture both enables and constrains responses to online virtual worlds and includes language in combination with cultural artifacts, social elements and designed spaces. These structures address the reader and

demand responses according to particular cultural, social and literary contexts. Narrative architecture addresses readers with features that rely upon a story unfolding simultaneously with the manipulation, navigation and exploration of the digital space, as an authored environment. In narrative architecture 'spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations, they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their *mise-en-scene*; or they provide resources for emergent narratives'.⁷ The role of the avatar in the enactment of narrative events involves a balance between the immediacy of simulation and the recounting that is traditionally associated with narrative.

3. The Avatar as Agent

In a three-dimensional virtual space the avatar is an embodied representation of its owner. Embodiment for an avatar exists in the sense of occupying time and space. Digital theorist and artist Mark Stephen Meadows has described an avatar as "an interactive, social representation of an Internet user".⁸ Neal Stephenson uses the word avatar in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash* for 'the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse.' or the virtual simulation of the human form in the metaverse, a fictional virtual-reality application on the Internet.⁹ Kai-Mikael Jää-Aro classifies avatars from a functional perspective as 'those objects, which *potentially* are in the high agency end of the spectrum, since the property of agency can change over the course of a session,' (original emphasis).¹⁰ In each of these three contexts the avatar is the anchor for a personality in a virtual world. The relationship between the avatar and the person(ality) that animates it is guided by what determines agency in the virtual environment.

Avatars, like everything in a virtual online environment, are constructed from computer language code. How an avatar is able to move, what sounds it makes, how it communicates and physically interacts with other avatars, and what it looks like are all enabled by the code from which it is composed. However, in regards to the point/s of reception for the human participants in three-dimensional worlds it is the Graphic User Interface (GUI) that presents options regarding how the avatar can behave. The visual and spatial attributes of the GUI are what the person behind the avatar responds to in interacting with the virtual world space. These attributes include such simulative and symbolic characteristics as the space between a door (a place of entry) and a sofa (resting or meeting place) and the physical dimensions of the avatar. The avatar is the line of difference between the person controlling and the visual and spatial attributes of the virtual world. Interpreting the virtual world is performed from the perspectives and abilities of the avatar. The avatar as such a line of difference is determined by the agency granted to it as part of narrative architecture.

Agency is granted to avatars in virtual world reception within the structures of simulative representations. Sexuality, violence, family, domesticity, socializing, work, art, and learning are some of the cultural and social systems that are enacted out by avatars in online virtual worlds. The avatar is the embodied agent working within these structures that allows for particular forms of expression while not allowing for others. It was not until *The Sims 3* (2009) that same sex marriage was permitted in the game. *The Sims Online* adopted the same protocol and allows for gay marriage but does not permit children from the relationship. In contrast, the representation of gendered pairs in *Second Life* is not restricted to binary forms. Male avatars can take on the physical appearances of pregnancy as well as adopt children. The representation of child avatars in virtual worlds for sexual simulation has recently been made a criminal offence in Germany, and while the coding of virtual worlds such as *Second Life* allows for this practice, it contradicts the terms of service.¹¹ Dual gender in a single avatar and even interspecies relationships between avatars are possible in *Second Life*. In regards to work and economy, it is possible to earn money by working as an avatar in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *Planet Calypso*. In many online virtual worlds social relationships are common, and the concept of virtual adultery is a contentious one.¹² Groups of avatars construct families in *Second Life* with members given titles such as father, mother, brother and sister. Finally, learning with virtual online worlds is an established area, with universities, colleges and schools from around the world using virtual worlds for teaching. Research has found that many of the roles traditionally associated with the figure of the teacher, such as an authority in the classroom and as gatekeeper in regards to knowledge, is compromised by the more horizontal communicative structures of virtual worlds.¹³

By responding to the choices granted to avatars through narrative architecture in virtual worlds, readings can be performed of them as texts. The movements through the narrative architecture of virtual worlds suggest particular readings of discursive systems such as sexuality, violence, family, domesticity, socializing, work, art, and learning. In these explorations the navigation takes on meaning, or as Jenny Sundén argues, ‘what if computing gaming experiences are not primarily about narratives or the game-specific, but about moving through the game world. To become through navigation’.¹⁴ The social simulations, such as marriage and family, that are acted out by avatars in the virtual worlds are products of the narrative architecture of each. The prefaces such as the Terms of Service and End User License Agreement (EULA), attempt to control responses to the narrative architecture of the virtual world. The design of the world itself, in its material configuration, is this narrative architecture. The third element of narrative architecture that is

meaningful in relation to the avatar is the interpellation that hails the avatar's human person(ality) and anticipate the possible responses that can be made to the virtual world. Design and code, copyright and address thereby direct possible narrative outcomes in virtual worlds. Within narrative architecture, the agency granted to avatars in virtual online worlds has consequences for the embodied subject in physical space.

4. Point of View

Narrative architecture in relation to the avatar and reading is best illustrated by the point of view which the avatar instantiates. In the majority of online virtual worlds there are multiple visual perspective available in relation to the avatar. Third person, first person and a so-called God-view are the most commonly used visual perspectives in relation to the avatar. Third person is usually from a raised position above the avatar's shoulders from behind. First person is the visual perspective the avatar has based on the visual configuration of the human eyes. In first person what the avatar sees, to a perspective of about ninety degrees, is what the person attached to the avatar sees. The God-view is the omniscient perspective over the virtual world, usually from far above. Each of these perspectives grants its own set of relations to the virtual world as a text that is both interpreted and experienced.

Enacting narrative events in virtual worlds from a first person perspective places the avatar in the centre of the action and restricts the visual field to an immediate temporal space. Actors can enter and leave the field of vision in a relatively short amount of time. Events and actions related to those actors and the avatar witnessing them are compressed according to the linear format afforded by the restricted dimensions of the field of vision, which often has a corresponding audio field. One can analogize the first person perspective in virtual worlds as a window looking out over a busy street. When pedestrians pass by the window, the person sitting behind it can see, as well as possibly hear, them for the short duration it takes to pass by. If the window were larger then the figures moving across it would take more time to do so. In the god-view perspective of virtual worlds the window is much larger, more actors and events can be linked together in much longer chains and have a greater potential to follow simultaneous multiple narrative pathways as a result. In the case of first person perspective fewer narrative events can be linked together in comparison to a God-view perspective, but the speed with which events occur can make for particularly intense interaction with the virtual world space. The most famous example of this intensity in terms of rapid time and space changes within the first person perspective is the first person shooter genre of computer games. Such games as *Call of Duty*, *Counterstrike*, *Quake* and *Doom* are intense mediations in the speed and continuity provided by the first person perspective in virtual

environments. It is the reading of these spaces, as narrative architectures that is very much influenced by the perspective adopted by the avatar. The line between the space of the virtual environment and the player of the game is sealed in the avatar as the cybernetic embodiment of the person.

5. Conclusions

In the navigation and manipulation of the virtual space and the enacting of narrative events, the reading of virtual worlds has points in common with the narrative traditions of pilgrimage, megalithic sculpture and place bound religious rituals. When my avatar circumambulates a Tibetan stupa in *Second Life* it is as an embodied agent in a three dimensional space. The same reverence for the sacrality of the stupa can be observed in both the virtual and physical spaces it occupies. It is in this sense that the reading of virtual worlds has much in common with narrative in pilgrimage, megalithic sculpture and place bound religious rituals. The perspectives and design of such mega-structures as Borobudur in Java, Indonesia places the visitor to the site in a narrative relationship with the figures from the life of the Buddha. The architecture of the space creates this connection. The costumes and rituals of pilgrimage operate in a similar fashion, by creating embodied agents within narrative, and often sacred, spaces.

Locating the individual subject in the narratives of a virtual online world is not a one-dimensional situation. Rather, narrative realised through the navigation of virtual worlds is a balancing act between the hermeneutics of interpretation and the phenomenology of experience. In reading the virtual world a person is both in the virtual space and operating the computer in a cybernetic relationship. In the virtual world a person can have a presence, a reputation, an identity and even a life. In the virtual space a person can evoke and participate in the sacred, get married, and even start a family. Of course none of these activities are seen as 'real', but they do have consequences in time and space, and in this sense they can be regarded as posthuman forms of embodiment.

Notes

- ¹ The posthuman in this context is concerned both with the technological augmentation of the human and the state of distributed embodiment that can be attained with that technology.
- ² By phenomenological I mean the basis for any evaluation of virtual worlds lies with the virtual world's objects, their components and how they are experienced. Hermeneutics is the focus on the sign-like attributes of texts and in this particular case, textual environments.
- ³ Haraway, Donna. 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York; Routledge, 1991 p. 149.
- ⁴ Aarseth, Espen. 'Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature'. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997 p. 55.
- ⁵ Hayles, Katherine. 'How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics', University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999. p. 27
- ⁶ See Jenkins, Henry. 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', In Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.) *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 118.
- ⁷ Jenkins 2004, 123
- ⁸ Meadows, Mark Stephen. 'I Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life', New Riders Press, Berkeley, 2008. p. 13
- ⁹ Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*, Bantam Dell Press, New York, 1992. p. 32
- ¹⁰ Jää-Aro, Mikael. 'Reconsidering the Avatar: From User Mirror to Interaction Locus', PhD Thesis. (Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan. Stockholm Sweden, 2004). p. 23
- ¹¹ <http://blogs.secondlife.com/community/features/blog/2007/05/10/accusations-regarding-child-pornography-in-second-life>
Accessed 27 May 2010.
- ¹² The BBC Television program *Wonderland* documentary entitled "Virtual Adultery and Cyberspace Love" (2008) follows the lives of two married couples and their extra-marital relationships in *Second Life*. See <http://www.guba.com/watch/3000122615/Virtual-Adultery-and-Cyberspace-Love> Accessed 23 May 2010.
- ¹³ See Deutschmann, Mats and Luisa Panichi. 'Instructional Design, Teacher Practice and Learner Autonomy' in Judith Molka-Danielsen & Mats Deutschmann (eds.) *Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life*, Tapir Academic Press, Trondheim, 2009. p. 34.
- ¹⁴ Sundén, Jenny. *Digital Geographies. From Storyspace to Storied Spaces* in Jesper Falkheimer & André Jansson (eds) *Geographies of Communication: The Spatial Turn in Media Studies*, Nordicom, Göteborg 2006. p. 291.

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