

On the Embodiment of the Virtual: In the Age of the Collapsing Distinction Between Fiction and Reality

Falk Heinrich, PhD
Department of Media Technology
Aalborg University, Denmark
fh@media.aau.dk

This paper does not propose new technologies, but focuses on the avatar as a medium of embodiment. It is about an altered perspective on the concept of the avatar in virtual online worlds (MMORPG).

At least since the dawn of modernity during Renaissance, reality has been defined as a stable supra-personal fact beyond subjective perception since subjectivity distorts factual reality due to personal inclinations and idiosyncrasies. Reality has to be verifiable by measurements and is thus true for each person. The antinomy of reality is fiction, being something made up either by intentional active fantasies (novels, theatre plays, and motion pictures) or (supposedly) unintentional and sometimes pathological imaginations. Also virtual realities are inscribed into this epistemological divide being a part of fiction. The avatar has therefore long been compared to the mimetic representation of the theatrical role. Because the avatar in no way has to correspond to the user's 'reality', neither physiologically nor psychologically, it is seen as a representation of a fictitious figure (dwarfs, elves, etc.). The player is thus

enacting (role-playing) the avatar. Paradoxically, the avatar is at the same time seen as a representation of the player in the virtual world.

Theatre plays (and motion pictures) are artistic expressions that are presented to an audience. They have to communicate their very fictitiousness. Artificial online worlds, on the contrary, are made for players and users who want to communicate and (inter-)act with each other. Hence we have to look at the ontology of the avatar from the perspective of performativity. I want to claim that the very concept of the avatar in virtual worlds evades the Western notion of pictorial, mimetic representation by being profoundly performative and participatory. Hence avatars create affective and communicative bridges between the material realm of the player and the virtual worlds of his/her avatar. This change is supported by technological research trying to construct very concrete palpable feedback mechanisms that activate the majority of our senses (e.g. tactile feedback, biosensor systems, etc.).

In order to explain this decisive difference between mimetic and performative representation, I will revisit the concept of the Byzantine icon. The Byzantine icon is a ceremonial and performative part of the liturgy. It is simultaneously "a scenic representation and presentation" (Bek 2003). This duplicity is at the core of the eastern iconology since it contains two functions at the same time: it is both a visual representation (of the depicted saint) and a concrete materialization (of eternal forces). Liturgical veneration as "dramatic enactment" (Bek 2003) reveals and, more important, operationalizes a "likeness in essence" between the depicted (presentation) and the depiction (representation), making it an energetic transmitter for the believer more than a reflection in a Platonic sense. In orthodox '*weltanschauung*' "man must always relate to the spiritual *through* the physical" (Auxentios 1987). This 'physical spirituality' gives way for "that [the icon] constitutes a *real* image of that which it depicts. The image is in some way a 'true' form of the prototype, participating in it and integrally bound to it" (Auxentios 1987). A prototype is the energetic essence of



Figure 1: Avatar Shreya, World of Warcraft



Figure 2: Christ and Saint Mina, Bawit, Egypt, 6th Century

the depicted, and the icon the material medium for it, or as H. Belting expresses it: “The difference between the image and what is represented seemed to be abolished in [the icons]; the image *was* the person it represented, at least that person’s active, miracle-working presence, [...]” (Belting 1994)

Despite the undeniable differences between more profane MMORPG and religious iconology, between spiritual realms and virtual reality, there are striking similarities, which help in identify and describe the ongoing collapse between the mentioned divide of reality and fiction/virtuality. Like the icon, the avatar is a pictorial representation of the player and simultaneously an iconic presentation of the player’s communications and actions in the virtual world. The avatar is to be understood as a performative ‘prototype’ that allows for interpersonal communication in virtual realms. This expands the semiotic aspects of the avatar by constructing a direct affective and emotional bond between the player and his/her avatar. That is why we

can experiment with our personal and social behaviors and our identities in more than a symbolic way, and that is why occurrences in virtual online worlds can cause bodily effects (e.g. Turkle 1995, Taylor 2006).

Virtual online worlds “re-mediate” (Bolter; Grusin 1999) theatrical phenomena (like role, narrative themes, dramatic conflict, etc.) in order to create a sensory — yet virtual — platform for (inter-)actions.¹ In the re-mediation process, the avatar is transformed to be the player’s performative prolongation, and the avatar’s features (e.g. appearance, abilities, and status) are communicative attributions to the player rather than psychological aspects of the representation of a fictive figure. The avatar is not “an instrument of supernatural power” (Belting 1994) as the cultic icon, but an instrument and medium of bodily expressions and intentions in the intangible worlds of MMORPG. That is why the analogy between the theatrical actor/figure-relation and the player/avatar-relation is not sufficient. (Still, dramaturgical knowledge and capabilities are essential for the design of online worlds and avatars.)

Most online worlds/games offer rather limited choices for what concerns modulation of the avatar’s appearance (race, gender, etc.), its bodily and facial expressions, and its concrete actions (drinking, walking, flying, fighting, etc.). From a technological point of view, these are limitations. Yet these limitations disclose schemes (prototypes) that support the reduction of complexity necessary for the preservation of the game play and simplification of communication, similar to the Byzantine icon, which “was a scheme that could be filled with new life, for the intention was not to preserve an earthly form but to communicate the archetype that alone justified the cult of images itself.” (Belting 1994) Avatars are prototypes that sustain (phenomenological) reductions and yield efficacy in action (e.g. quest) and communication.

The avatars in World of Warcraft are divided into precisely defined races and classes with specific abilities and tasks. This is depicted by the avatars’

visual appearance. Avatars in Second Life are more personalized, but they do follow and construct communicational schemes, depending upon what the player wants to pursue and which reaction she/he wants to elicit. Players will communicate differently with an anthropomorphized cat with sunglasses than with a blond woman with tight leader robe and high heeled boots. Blast Theory's urban gaming project *Can you see me now* (2001) constructs two different avatar-player

relationships: a common one, where the player in front of a screen controls his/her avatar's whereabouts in a simulation of an urban district, and a reversed one, where physical players, chasing virtual players in the very same but real district, are depicted on screen by means of avatars. In Byzantine iconology, "the icon touches on the reality of God" (Auxentios 1987). In Blast Theory's piece, the icon palpably touches the individual player, conflating reality and fiction.

1 For a thorough review of the re-mediation process and its significance, see Heinrich 2008.

References

- Auxentios, Hieromonk. 1987. *The Iconic and symbolic in Orthodox Iconography*. http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/orth_icon.aspx (Feb. 2008)
- Belting, Hans. 1994. *Likeness and Presence*. Chicago: Chicago Press.
- Bek, Lise. 2003. *Reality in the Mirror of Art*. Århus: Aarhus University Press.
- Bolter, J.; Grusin, R. 1999. *Re-mediation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press .
- Heinrich, Falk. 2008. "Re-medierede iscenesættelser - om virtuelle og teatre verdener." In *i Peripeti* 9. Aarhus: University of Aarhus.
- Laurel, Brenda. 1998. *Computers as Theatre*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Taylor, T.L. 2006. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press.
- Turkle, Sherry. 1997. *Life on the screen - identity in the age of the internet*. New York: Touchstone.