

The Ultima Online Avatar

Few franchises in the world of computer gaming have been as popular and long-lasting as the Ultima series. Over seventeen years, creator Richard Garriott and his team produced ten games in the Ultima sequence, making it one of the most successful PC role-playing game series in history. Entering the fantasy world of Britannia, players of the Ultima games took on the role of a knight from another land. This knight was intended to be an embodiment of the player, a proxy by which they could become part of this world, a character that was “really truly the player.”¹ In this way, the player embarked on “a quest of personal exploration to see how [they would] react to different social circumstances.”²

A fundamental shift in the nature of Ultima games occurred in 1997, with the release of Ultima Online. Previous Ultima games had been played by a single player on a single computer – Ultima Online was one of the first ‘massively multiplayer online role-playing games’. It was an Internet based game where players participated in a persistent shared world where they could interact with a wide variety of objects, creatures, and other players.³

Obviously it was no longer practical for everyone to play the same heroic knight – it was necessary to provide a wider range of experiences for a wider range of ‘characters’. In this way, the characters became individuated representations of the players within this shared social space. Drawing on a Hindu term for the descent to Earth of a god in bodily form, such virtual representations have been termed ‘avatars’.

This new type of game challenged the existing notions of game design as scripting experiential narratives. Multiplayer gameplay is “a terrible way to deliver a story. Even if we try to generate quests, everybody knows about it once five people have done it.”⁴ Previous virtual world developers had reached the same conclusion, cautioning against “thinking like game designers”, counselling that those responsible for managing online worlds should see themselves as facilitators – that the key is interaction between the players, and not the quests or challenges provided by the designers for players to overcome.⁵

This paper examines the way that Ultima Online avatars are produced, consumed, and represented; the way they augment our social identity, and the emergence of social regulation from within this virtual world.

¹ Garriott 1999, p.198

² *Ibid.*, p.190

³ *Ibid.*, p.193

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.193

⁵ Morinngstar and Farmer 1990, ‘World Building’ para.7

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making loop

The shift from the single-player Ultima series to Ultima Online changed what constituted the 'production' of the game. The role of Origin Systems (producers of the Ultima series) had been to design an exciting narrative, write the software, and distribute it. Purchasers would then consume it in many hours of immersive gameplay. Referring to the importance of narrative in these games, Garriott suggested that "the greatest thing about the solo game is it's a story for you. You get to be the hero, and every feature we put in the game you experience as if it were created for you and you alone."⁶

With Ultima Online, the role of the production company changed dramatically. The distributed software was merely the 'client application' – the virtual world's mechanics were moved to a series of central servers (referred to in Ultima Online as 'shards'). It is these servers that manage the gameplay, and handle large numbers of players simultaneously.

With this shift, Origin Systems has moved from manufacturing boxed narratives to producing an ongoing experience. Pricing changes for Ultima Online reflect this shift, as the cover price of the game dropped dramatically from previous Ultima games, but monthly subscription costs were introduced.

The role of the producer in online games is to manage the entirety of the virtual world, from basic physical laws to complex social interaction. In running Ultima Online, Origin Systems must track each action of a player's avatar, and calculate the impact of that action on the game-world. Further, the system must then provide feedback to the avatar as to what occurs as a consequence of that action, past actions, and other events occurring in the game-world. In short, Origin Systems is in the business of generating feedback, of 'making loop'.

The responsibility of producing the avatar, as an ongoing process, does not rest solely with Origin Systems. The players themselves, in cooperation with other players, produce the avatar as an ongoing work, created from moment to moment. Unlike traditional computer games, players interact real-time with other players, and "the real strength of Ultima Online is those other people."⁷ As such the avatar is never a 'finished product', but rather a means of generating the experience of playing that character.

⁶ Garriott 1999, p.193

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.193



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baking bread

The way in which the avatar develops over time grows from the desires of the player, while occurring within the structure provided by Origin Systems. For this reason it is important that the structure facilitate a wide range of activities that the avatar can perform. To do this, the game involves over forty-five separate skills, which can be combined in innovative ways to create new means of self-expression.⁸ Players can skin animals, bake bread, chop wood, or tame pets.⁹ Some players have even dedicated themselves to amassing land – becoming Britannia’s unanticipated real estate barons.¹⁰

The consumption of the Ultima Online avatar is not consumption in the traditional sense of “the using up of a finished product”, but rather a creative process of collaborative meaning-making.¹¹ In this sense, the production and consumption processes of the avatar overlap, as is the case with many post-industrial products. Many of the means of consumption may not have been foreseen by the developers of the game, but that is part of the strength of this type of gameplay. Following their experiences with Habitat, developers Morningstar and Farmer recommended providing the broadest possible ranges of activity, and constantly monitoring the behaviour of players to expand that repertoire of activity when and where possible.¹²

⁸ Electronic Arts 2003, p. 11

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.30-31

¹⁰ Garriott 1999, p.204

¹¹ O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery & Fiske 1994, p.244

¹² Morningstar and Farmer 1990, ‘Running the World’ para.4



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coding law

While such interesting modes of consumption start with individuals, they can be communicated and adopted by others. Through such communication, the way in which the game is played develops as a set of in-game social norms. These norms are an intrinsic form of regulation that players may not explicitly codify, but which will be part of their Ultima Online experience. The other type of regulation that is experienced as intrinsic is the set of rules that define the nature of the virtual world. Avatars are regulated not to fly, but such regulations are understood to be a fundamental part of the gaming experience, natural laws coded into the fabric of the Britannia universe.

More overt regulation is experienced when the development team intervene to address specific social problems. The most dramatic form of intervention is the modification of world-norms, creating coded laws that are at odds with the established worldview. For instance, to limit 'unlawful' acts, stealing and fighting are technically impossible within certain areas of Britannia – designated 'safe zones' such as Trammel and Ilshenar.¹³ The problem with solutions such as this is that they destroy the illusion of the game world.

An alternative to such a drastic approach is 'in-game' regulation by the developers. The problem of unlawful acts is mollified in other areas of Britannia by computer-managed guards who will attack anyone observed breaking the law.¹⁴ Techniques like this are more in keeping with the world as a whole, and provide a more grounded milieu of social regulation within which avatars can exist. In creating the structure of the Ultima games, Garriott suggests "it's better to make a game where you make [gameplay] repercussions realistic".¹⁵

In developing games, it is true that "software designers provide the law, the courts, the constitution, and the very physics of existence."¹⁶ How this potential is actualised will shape the nature of the virtual world, and the gaming experience. While some environments favour draconian limitations of the system, more often, designers are leaving players to solve social problems themselves. The solutions may be as numerous and varied as those we see in reality. Hunter and Lastowka describe an in-game group who "enforce norms against player-killing by putting player-killer names on a board with posted rewards. Poses are deputized to hunt them down, execute them, and confiscate their property."¹⁷

Both overt and in-game regulatory mechanisms were experimented with in the Habitat system. General consensus was that player experience was considerably more satisfactory when regulation was embedded within the illusion of the world.¹⁸

¹³ Electronic Arts 2003, p.27

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27

¹⁵ Garriott 1999, p.198

¹⁶ Hunter and Lastowka 2003, para.9

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, para.16

¹⁸ Morningstar & Farmer 1990, 'Keeping "Reality" Consistent' para.2



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being avatar

Several times, this paper has alluded to the maintenance of the illusion that is the game-world. The clear belief of developers such as Garriott is that the suspension of disbelief is a vital ingredient in a good game experience. In understanding the way such games work, it is necessary to understand exactly what this suspension facilitates.

Just as suspension of disbelief while reading a novel or watching a film allows the reader or audience to become immersed in the fiction, that same process allows a player to become immersed in the game. Identification with the avatar occurs through action, as the player enters an altered state where 'flow' brings mind, body and avatar together and the player enters into a relation with the game itself.¹⁹

“[A]n avatar experiences *for* a master; it is that prosthesis through which the master feels his or her way through a world he or she cannot physically enter, and feels emotionally the presence of others, a presence entirely mediated through, and therefore entirely dependent upon, the identity of his or her avatar.”²⁰

This description clearly shows the close bond between player and avatar. This bond becomes particularly interesting when we consider critical theory that has “rejected the idea of the subject as a complete self-contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its own unique essence.”²¹ It is useful to look at performative theorists such as Butler, who suggests that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.”²²

In this view, our identity is a construction, built of signification processes inscribed on the body. But the nature of the body is to be questioned as well, when Butler argues that “the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field.”²³ Such a nebulous body need not end at the skin, but could conceivably be extended, augmented, to incorporate the digital form of the avatar. Seeing physical and digital bodies as a single assemblage, they become a single surface for the performance of identity.

Such a departure from commonsense conception of identity is supported by numerous elements of the game and discourse around it. In discussing the impact of Ultima games, Garriott acknowledges that “people are influenced by what they do”, making role-playing games “a powerful teaching aid”,²⁴ as well as “an opportunity to provide for personal reflection.”²⁵

¹⁹ Turkle 1984, pp. 84-86

²⁰ Egginton 2003, p.9 (italics in original)

²¹ Mansfield 2000, p.13

²² Butler 1990, p.173 (italics in original)

²³ *Ibid.*, p.177

²⁴ Garriott 1999, p.204

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.198



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split image

Confusion of identity between player and avatar is further seen in the representation of avatars within a number of areas of discourse. The first discourse encountered by most players is the material produced by Origin Systems promoting and explaining the game. Unsurprisingly, the manual begins by clearly defining the relationship between the player and the avatar, explaining that “[y]our player character (or PC) will be your persona in the world of *Ultima Online* and will be visible to any other players who interact with you.”²⁶ Clearly the text is written in the second person, addressing the purchaser/player.

This clear demarcation of terms is problematised shortly thereafter, when the manual advises that the attribute ‘strength’ “governs how much *you* can carry, how much damage *you* can do in combat, and which weapons and armor *you* may use.”²⁷ Suddenly, the second person refers more to the avatar than the player. This convolution worsens when the player is told that “[y]ou may choose your gender, skin color, hairstyle, hair color, pants/skirt color, and, if you’ve chosen to play a male character, facial hair style and color.”²⁸ Apparently, having begun to play a character, the player is now empowered to alter their own gender!

In part, it is this blending of self and avatar that was such a goal to the game’s creator and made the game so appealing. However, this is not the only view, player discourse outside the game often treats avatars as property. A search on eBay or any other online auction site will provide numerous examples of players selling avatars, showing a clear division between self and avatar. This view echoes novels such as Pat Cadigan’s *Tea from an Empty Cup*, and Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, where avatars are possessions of individuals, available for trade, sale, or theft.

Within the game interface itself, the avatar is represented in the third-person, as a figure somewhat distant, in fixed perspective. This reinforces the differentiation between the avatar and the player, no doubt one of the reasons that the upcoming release of *Ultima X : Odyssey* employs a first person perspective. The impact of this perspectival shift is vividly illustrated in the opening of Greg Egan’s *Diaspora*.

Perhaps the most intimate discourse with regard to the representation of avatars is in-game dialogue between characters. The manual hints at the liminal nature of the in-game speech act when it explains that “[y]our speech will appear directly above your character’s head.”²⁹ Clearly the words will be yours, though the head from which they emerge will not. Such an act of apparent ventriloquism highlights an apparent rift – who is talking to whom here? Is this communication between avatars, players, or can no such clear distinction to be made?

Establishing the identity of the speaker in this instance – player, avatar, or combination of the two – is at the heart of understanding what the avatar is as an artefact. Perhaps it is merely a doll to be enjoyed in an incredibly complex game, or perhaps what we are buying when we pay our monthly subscription fee is something more, some form of expression of ourselves, an extension into a world where we can escape limitations we feel oppressed by, a world where heroes still venture forth on quests, and minstrels gather in the firelight to sing ballads of their adventures.

²⁶ Electronic Arts, 2003, p.9 (italics in original)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11, italics added

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21



letting loose

The player's body and avatar are mutual prostheses³⁰, an assemblage of concrete machines³¹ embracing with one another through layers of hardware and software. Together, they link to abstract social machines (roles, norms, stereotypes)³² on both sides of the interface. Avatar-machine plugs into world-machine, action and sensation parsed and packeted, this mediated flow³³ situating the assemblage-that-is-player within the assemblage-that-is-virtual-world.

This player-assemblage, a collective assemblage of enunciation,³⁴ is linked rhizomatically through the world-machine to other player assemblages. Across this extended network of presence, signification inscribes identity on the surface of a virtual body, and subjectivity condenses, emergent in the liminal spaces between machines. Such a constructed identity, nothing more than the appearance of substance, is reinforced through the stylised repetition of acts, through sustained social performance.³⁵

When the assemblage enunciates, when it speaks that slipperiest of signifiers, "I", what is the body to which it refers? The agent "I" inhabits a transpersonal space, thumb-tacked in context to the place of enunciation, insinuating itself into a body³⁶ – any body will do. The subject is merely one more abstract machine,³⁷ folded into the multiplicity of the player-assemblage.

The player-assemblage is cyborg – a machinic-organic hybrid; part social reality, part fantastic fiction.³⁸ Such a beast is an iteration of that loop which may ultimately alter the rapport between real and virtual.³⁹ In a technoscientific nightmare, the ever-increasing complexity of the avatar-machine syphons agency from the human body,⁴⁰ diluting our subjectivity as we become appendices to technologies we have given rise to.

We are become third order simulacra, the simulacra of simulation.⁴¹ The identity of the avatar is no more an 'expression' of the player, than the identity of the player is an 'expression' of some deeper true self. The avatar is the player. All is immanence, without transcendence.⁴² Just as the digital map of Britannia is the territory itself, so the coded articulation of the avatar-self has become hyperreal, and the real has deserted us.⁴³

Origin Systems is in the business of manufacturing hyperreality. A rhizomatic machine, ceaselessly connecting avatars, the dimensions of its multiplicity increasing with each player that logs on.⁴⁴ Similarly, unavoidably, each new logon also adds dimensionality to the player-assemblage.

³⁰ Massumi 2002, p.116; Stelarc 2002, p.204

³¹ Massumi 1992, p.192

³² *Ibid.*, p.75

³³ Deleuze and Guattari 1972, p.1

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.7

³⁵ Butler 1990, p.179

³⁶ Massumi 1992, p.33

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26

³⁸ Haraway 2000, p.291

³⁹ Virilio 1995, p.147

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.151

⁴¹ Baudrillard 1994, p.121

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.122

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.8

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The player-assemblage acts on semiotic, material, and social flows simultaneously.⁴⁵ It continually establishes networks between elements from all three orders, from the physical and the digital, from the actual and the virtual; creating connectivity that is experienced as intensity in the space of flows.⁴⁶

The avatar-machine is a means of induction.⁴⁷ The player is becoming, the virtual bleeding into the actual during the moments of intensity that situate the self in the player-assemblage, bridging two bodies – one flesh, one bits.

The player's reflexive sense of self is a distraction; intensity and sensation must be at the level of the player-assemblage. The channelling of field-potential must be experienced at the level of the world-machine.⁴⁸ Action is located within the game world; the player-assemblage acting as a single machine, operating within the event-space of the world-machine. The player must "belong"⁴⁹ in Britannia. And when we belong, we bleed;⁵⁰ the boundaries of our identity dissolving...

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22-23

⁴⁶ Shaviro 2003, p.131

⁴⁷ Massumi 2002, p.63

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.74-75

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.76

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.57



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