Responsibility in Silence: Player-Avatar Relations in the Virtual Face-to-Face

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Introduction

How is that we come to *know* another person within the confines of a gamic interaction – to acknowledge a responsibility towards them as just that: another *person*? In having become accustomed to forming and carrying out relationships by means of verbal computer-mediated communication (Walther 1992: 72), a certain measured form of intimacy has arguably come to inform many of our day-to-day interactions, as we purposefully and selectively reduce our communicative faculties for the reach, speed and convenience of new media. But even as we continue to ponder how the paradigmatic efficiency of the media we use to interact shapes the ways in which we relate to one another, little has been made about the philosophical perspectives of online multiplayer games' oftentimes entirely unique remediations of human communication: How games, as a medium for accommodating that first desire to, in existential phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas' words, give and receive "beyond the capacity of the I" (Levinas 1969: 51), can perhaps be said to transcend more conventional modes of communicating online.

As Paul Gee reminds us in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, "language is not the only important communicational system" in the modern world (Gee 2003: 13). Few systems illustrate this better than multiplayer virtual game environments (i.e. where ludic challenges or goals are set within a virtual spatiality - Calleja 2011: 11-15), which mediate interpersonal communication through a specific location in virtual space, an experience of co-presence I would argue is largely grounded in the affordances of the embodiable game avatar: When I assume the role of an avatar I enter into a situation in which my communicative capacity is augmented, moving beyond mere verbal discourse towards an embodied state of being and interacting, grounded in the avatar body. By extending my lifeworld to include the avatar and its immediate surroundings, I enable a re-situation of my visual perceptual apparatus to a phenomenological proxy body (Klevjer 2012: 2), which not only also lends me agency but also in theory allows me to extend and become telepresent with the live remediation of another person. This capacity to not simply communicate, but in fact co-exist in the undertaking of a shared activity that has meaningful consequences to a shared environment (Isbister 2016: 45), is arguably a fundamentally distinguishing quality of the game medium as a social and communicative platform. And yet, curiously few multiplayer game designs encourage players to fully explore the possibility space of their avatars in virtual encounters, relying instead on variations of a text- or voice- chat feature to augment the game experience. As a result, a potentially disruptive level of metaludic communication is a ubiquitous presence in most online games, with which players can (and

do) circumvent their present avatar bodies and indeed the game diegesis entirely in conversation (Ensslin 2012: 96).

Hence, this paper aims to investigate the potential and inherent communicative possibility space of the played avatar in the encounter with the Other, as represented by another player's avatar. By approaching the avatar as a phenomenological system, and drawing upon multiplayer game cases that eschew the possibility of verbal communication between players entirely (adventure art-game *Journey* (2012), and action role-playing game *Dark Souls* (2011)), I will use Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of ethics as presented in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) to elucidate on the processes of what it means to acknowledge the Other player, her intentions, feelings or thoughts, solely in the context of the game-world. The core model presented for this purpose is an adaptation of Levinas' concept of the *face-to-face* to the meeting of two player avatars, what I shall refer to as *the virtual face-to-face*. The terms of the face-to-face allow us to consider whether the ethical dimension of player encounters in-game can be said to be shaped by an epiphany of non-reciprocal responsibility manifesting itself through the avatar body, and if so, how avatarial action in this regard can be said to function as a *language* prior to spoken or written language (Levinas 1969: 199). I am relying on the idiosyncratic approaches to multiplayer functionality found in *Journey* and *Dark Souls* to provide context for this model; particularly the former's all-purpose wordless, musical "shout", and the latter's built-in "gesture system," will be analyzed in relation to how they lend their respective player avatars communicative agency.

The phenomenology of the played avatar and the avatar as a factor of incorporation

In the recently published *How Games Move Us*, Katherine Isbister suggests that our tendency to become absorbed in social play can largely be ascribed to an increased sense of something being at stake: "When playing together," she explains, "(…) players take in-game actions that have real consequences (…) for one another's *in-game virtual bodies and selves"* (Isbister 2016: 44-45). It illustrates the importance of recognizing the played avatar as something transcending the pure instrumentality of, for example, your average GUI cursor (Klevjer 2012: 3). The avatar as it appears before us signifies instrumental agency, but it also signifies presence, an entity decidedly *in the thick of* the action on our behalf. In his article on embodied presence in games *Enter the Avatar* (2012), Rune Klevjer elucidates on how we as players deal with this duality through an exploration of the avatar as analogous to Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject. He builds on Bob Rehak's (2003) critical film-theoretical approach to the embodied nature of the game camera, and Ulf Wilhelmsson's (2008) notion of an avatarial *game ego* as a function of player agency, to explain what he calls *prosthetic telepresence:* The idea that I can experience the avatar both as an extended part of myself as well as a distinct entity in the virtual game environment through which I experience *presence* in said environment – at once an extension of my body *as well as* a functioning proxy of said body. The key to unlocking this seemingly paradoxical notion of a "here" *and* "there," subject *and* object avatar, lies in the metaphor of "prosthesis," alongside an understanding of the Merleau-Pontian *gestalt* "the body-image," i.e. the subjective perception of what constitutes my body in space at any one time (Klevjer 2012: 8).

According to Merleau-Ponty, my body-image has a "spatiality of situation," or intentionality, that it directs towards specific tasks. As such, the way I perceive the world at any one time is directly related to my body's situation in it. Walking around a room it would not strike me as the same room from different angles were it not for my awareness of my body's retained identity as I move through it, as would I not be able to map out my surroundings on paper were it not for my preceding bodily experience of them (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 235). Therein my subjective experience of a "here" as opposed to a "there" is defined by the *situation*, the so-called "*I can:*" the laying down of "the first coordinates," through "an anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in front of its task" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 115). Likewise, when I assume the agency of the avatar, I am in a sense also anchoring myself in it, taking in virtual space as relative to its position. Thereby the body-image gestalt and the player's relationship with her avatar are similar in that both contain the totality of what the subject experiences as immediately part of her perceiving and enacting body, while also accounting for the experiential locus through which the present environment comes to make sense.

According to Klevjer, this goes some way towards explaining why I am able to retain a sense of self even as I embody the characteristics and agency of an avatar, that is quite likely unlike me (in appearance and ability) in most every way. Indeed, if my present surroundings, or *external space*, take on meaning via their position as relative to my body-image*,* then any meaningful, internalized perception of virtual space would theoretically pertain to my understanding of the situation of my body-image too (Klevjer 2012: 8), virtual space being experienced as continuous with my physical surroundings. Cognitive linguists Lakoff & Johnson have corroborated this notion, explaining how the embodied concept is in fact a neural structure that utilizes the sensorimotor system in our brains to create a very real experience of *locomotion*. The abstract conceptual inference of movement in the virtual game environment, they point out, is in fact *actual sensorimotor inference* (Wilhelmsson 2008: 62) – that is to say that to the brain, movement is movement, be it virtual or not. This helps resolve the paradox of prosthetic telepresence: I can in fact incorporate the immediate agency of the avatar into my body-image through sensorimotor inference and extend my perceptual apparatus to it, without relying on the Coleridgian "suspension of disbelief" that my body has in fact been "transported" to virtual space, because the avatar does not consume or replace my body, but extends *and* displaces it across the material divide. I am *here and there;* my perceptual capacity stretched, not superseded, by the avatar.

I would argue this approach to the avatar as a phenomenological hub for incorporation into the game-world allows us to see the meeting of two players in-game as indistinguishable from the meeting of their avatars; when players meet in-game, they do so through phenomenological extension as much as through any imaginative assumption of the role of their avatar. In this context, thinking about the avatar through the prism of "incorporation" is useful, as the term, coined by Gordon Calleja in his book *In-Game* (2011), provides shorthand for the complex conditions that relate to the player's involvement with a game in a broader sense. Most importantly, it accounts for the inherent instability of the two-way

dialogue we as players undertake when we become involved with a game, and in turn its avatar (unlike the more ubiquitous but non-game-specific "immersion"). According to Calleja, wholly engrossing incorporation with a virtual game environment hinges on a fleeting coalescence of several dimensions of experiential phenomena, a sort of precarious interplay of involvement with different aspects of the game (e.g. the *narrative* and *ludic* dimensions) (Calleja 2011: 38). Of these, particularly the dimension of *kinesthetic involvement* is interesting for our purposes, as it is what allows us a meaningful exertion of agency (2011: 55), the ability to move and feel in control in the environment. The internalization of kinesthetic movement, i.e. a fluency of movement for example through familiarization with a game's controls, is deeply tied to one's overall involvement with a game. Ideally, a well-designed game will allow kinesthetic involvement to increase to become "knowledge in the hands" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 166) - getting to a point where control requires "*little or no conscious effort*" (Calleja 2011: 45). Only, as any seasoned gamer would tell you, a perfectly fluent exertion of control over the avatarial self is a fundamentally elusive prospect, as the translation of intention to the game will always occur at the mercy of the autonomous logic and underlying "mathematical reality" of the game system (Aarseth 1997: 39-40).

This fact of gamic interaction, that our connection with the game is inherently unstable, reminds us that the player's relationship with the game avatar, and in turn the Other player, is dynamic, that incorporation is not simply a matter of taking a "unidirectional plunge" into the game (cf. the here and there of the body-image). As such, Klevjer's prosthetic telepresence theory leads into Calleja's idea of incorporation rather nicely: just like the avatar is incorporated into the player's body-image while remaining a distinct entity in the game environment, the game environment is incorporated into the player's mind without directly overtaking it. It is an "assimilation into consciousness of the game world in a manner that is coextensive with our being in the physical world" (2011: 183) – our taking in of something exterior in order to feel present *in* it. A great game will fix you in a state of incorporation for as long a time as possible, but Calleja also stresses the importance of recognizing that no game can do so indefinitely, that incorporation is inherently fleeting. If we are to perceive the avatar as the experiential locus of incorporation, it can from a philosophical standpoint then, for reasons that I will address in the following, never *completely* be the perfect mirror agent of the player Self. When I involuntarily fudge a jump and become suddenly aware of a breach in kinesthetic involvement, for instance, I am arguably forced to reckon with a split in my understanding of subjective agency. Thereby the question becomes not just how players assume the situation of their avatar as an agent of Self, but also how they deal with its inherent instability and alterity.

What am "I" to you? The avatar as self and the nature of "otherness"

Of all the elements in a game, the avatar will likely be the one that the player will relate most closely to his or her own *self*. But how do "I" as player come to identify the avatar as such, while still being aware that the avatar is not really "me"? In an article exploring the ontological and psychological perspectives of being as it relates to the playable avatar *Playing at Being* (2003), Bob Rehak repurposes French philosopher and psychoanalyst

Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage to elaborate on "the ways in which video games "reflect" players back to themselves" (Rehak 2003: 2). Rehak argues that the avatar is ultimately beyond self-identification, its supernatural agency (e.g. Super Mario's ability to jump impossibly high) imbuing it with an uncanny potential to both seduce and repel us, to resist *and* reassure any meaningful psychological – in addition to phenomenological - assimilation (Rehak 2003: 2). As such the complicated desire to assume the agency of an image that in ways resists our grasp, makes the avatar analogous to Lacan's idea of the specular image: an alienating but unshakeable self-image first encountered in infancy and perpetuated throughout life (Johnston 2014).

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is in a sense post-phenomenological: A narrative explanation of the formation of the *ego* in the infant child who recognizes himself in the mirror for the first time, it deals with the psychological ramifications of how we imagine (i.e. perceive) the world and in essence ourselves in it, giving origin to the internalized images that constitute our perception of the Self, or the *"I"* (Johnston 2014). According to Lacan, the specular image implies a wholeness that we eventually grow up to find perpetually unattainable, and it is in a sense what drives us to project and see ourselves in exterior objects. Lacan's ego *object* thus marks the first instance in psychoanalysis of an ego that is not simply a "locus of autonomous agency", but which, like the embodied avatar, functions as a mediation of the "enunciating subject" speaking *through it* while "remaining irreducibly distinct from it" (Johnston 2014). The Lacanian ego, in being "founded on the *assumption* of wholeness" (Rehak 2003: 21), signifies an elusive desire to transcend ones earthly body, a desire I would argue is also a big part of any virtual game environment's escapist allure. Thus, with the complicated function of misrecognition characterizing the ego (Lacan 1949: 80), we see how our relationship with the avatar, a reflection of our ego, becomes a complicated and potentially frustrating, but also ultimately desirable ordeal.

As the avatar reflects the player back at him through its movements on-screen (what Rehak calls a reflection of *control* more than of *appearance* (2003: 5)) the avatar plays into the promise of the mirror stage while definitively asserting its alterity in both its supernatural agency, as well as in the simple fact that no avatar *really* looks like the player, or even *looks back at* the player. That means that we come to know the game, to learn how to navigate its environment, its rules and diegetic constraints, through an entity that is *like* us, but also distinctly *other* to us. Thereby avatar gameplay comes to mimic a Lacanian fact-of-life: that subjective consciousness and desire is, to borrow Rehak's turn of phrase, destined to exist in "a tense, oscillatory motion toward and away from the other" – a continuously looping phase of "first originating consciousness" and "idealized reflection" embracing and rejecting each other indefinitely (Rehak 2003: 4). Rehak explains the seemingly illogical pleasure we derive from this, by concluding that we must be drawn to game avatars because they provide an outlet for the helplessness first experienced in our infancy; a way of toying with, and even destroying our on-screen ego reflections repeatedly; a "cycle of symbolic rebirth" (Rehak 2003: 5). In terms of the virtual face-to-face encounter between player avatars, the ability to reject the avatar as "not me", in language or in action, would certainly go a long way towards

explaining how players might cope with the always less-than perfect assumption of the avatar body.

However, I would ultimately argue that Rehak's emphasis on the symbolic importance of ludic "death" and ego-rejection is problematic, in that it as an explanation for the avatar's pull is ultimately incompatible with any player-avatar interaction where death or rejection is not an option. Take the entirely non-violent, non-verbal multiplayer found in *Journey* - why are we drawn to an almost entirely anonymous hooded character, over whose life we have no power, and on whose limited communicative affordances we so desperately depend on to make a connection with anyone else? In deliberating our attraction to our on-screen Self and the weight of the "I", it is perhaps worth considering for a moment, what significance metaludic communication and the pragmatic discourses we as players use while playing them hold in games that *do* allow for verbal communication (Ensslin 2012: 9).

Multiplayer games that allow text- or voice-chat can be said to have a certain meta-plane, a bridge from player to player that circumvents the avatar through verbal discourse, allowing the player to momentarily revert back to an "I" that does not necessarily include the avatar. As Astrid Ensslin observes in *The Language of Gaming* (2012), "I" has a particular deictic function in metaludic discourse: the player while gaming will verbally refer to her avatar as "I" ("I'm almost at the door!") as if she were in fact herself traversing the virtual game environment. And yet, Ensslin observes, as soon as the player feels that her avatar is performing poorly, she becomes all to comfortable disassociating herself from it, taking back the agency of "I" (Ensslin 2012: 102). It would seem that we are capable of directing our Self and the proximal deixis of "I" towards exteriorities, but only conditionally so, and always in accordance with our idealized ego-image. Language thus permits a relationship with the avatar's otherness that is contingent on the possibility of rejection – much like what Rehak sees as essentially the pleasurable freedom of being able to *destroy* ones ego in violent and fantastical ways. And yet, this presumed *need* to reject the avatar's otherness and faults as "not-mine" would mean that the avatar is in itself theoretically incapable of representing the player in a non-verbal encounter with another player avatar. If I can only vouch for my avatar's actions when I can also exercise an act of verbal or virtual violence to it – a "mandatory punctuation to the out-of-body experience", if you will (Rehak 2003: 6) - does that not make interacting through the avatar body an undesirable and ultimately always frustrating experience? One that, in the cases where not even escape or "suicide" is a viable option (e.g. as it is not in *Journey* or *Dark Souls* PvP), becomes unmanageable?

I would argue, admittedly somewhat in defiance of Lacan, that the mirror stage as it occurs in the game speaks as much to the *hope* or *promise* of transcendence reflected in the avatar's supernatural agency, as it does to the satisfaction of eradicating one's ego; that central to assuming an avatar's agency and immediate affordances is the desire and responsibility to really *try* to assume an efficient unity with the avatar, however fleeting it might be, as it is only then that I truly experience prosthetic telepresence and a pleasurable state of incorporation. Otherwise there would arguably be no point in even trying to co-operate in a

multiplayer setting – you would just have the coexistence of myriad player-avatar duos brawling internally, the temptation to react with aggression and the fixation on Self subsuming every other relation. As the experiential locus for game incorporation, the avatar positions the player agent in the social encounter with the task of making his Self transcend the avatar's agential constraints so that he can engage the other player responsibly. Pertinent, as exactly this desire to understand and take in an *otherness* beyond the Self is central to Emmanuel Levinas and his concept of the face-to-face.

Avatar-to-avatar: Face-to-face relations in-game

According to Levinas, we assume an ethical responsibility towards the Other the moment we come face-to-face with him (Levinas 1969: 215). Levinas' Other is not an interior "other" like that of Lacan's Imaginary ego, but a more literal otherness first encountered in the *face* of another human being. "The Other," Levinas argues, "reveals himself in his alterity *not in a shock negating the I*, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (Levinas 1969: 50, emphasis my own): To the *I* the world is full of "alien things", but never do they contradict the self (Wild 1969: 12). Instead, seeing the face of the Other in a *face-to-face* setting straightaway calls into question my *sameness* (i.e. complacent sense of self), but does so non-violently through a captivating *transcendent, infinite* otherness that remains irreducible even in death (by being, per definition, infinite). Levinas argues that this in effect preempts any attempt of mine to reduce or comprehend the Other's otherness of my own accord, ordering me instead to explain myself to the Other and to exhibit a *responsibility* towards him. The "*face*" to Levinas is thus a source of a *desire*, a gestalt that, unlike the alienating desire to assume an impossible wholeness, raises a *goodness* in me, a concern for justice. For this reason, Levinas argues, the "relationship with the Other (...) precedes all ontology; it is *the ultimate relation in Being*" (Levinas 1969: 48, emphasis my own).

This Levinasian fact of being, that I should discover my own particularity in the relation with the Other, is what prompts the response that precipitates *language* (Bergo, 2015). For obvious reasons the significance of *conversation* in the face-to-face encounter therefore looms large in Levinas. As I have not encountered another academic use of Levinas' face-to-face for the analysis of encounters where a precondition is the absence of spoken or written language, I shall address the emphasis Levinas puts on conversation - the responsibility and *goodness* Levinas sees as originating from it - as less contingent on the literal transaction of words (Levinas 1969: 40), but more on unique forms of "welcoming" the Other; that is, making an effort to respond to his unknowable, transcendent otherness and kindness, to approach him in his *infinity* whilst being heedful of his autonomy and right to be other than me. Ultimately, it is "not freedom that accounts for the transcendence of the Other, but the transcendence of the Other that accounts for freedom" (Levinas 1969: 225). That such freedom should originate only in the intimate proximity of another person's *face* posits a challenge to the application of Levinas to the virtual game environment, albeit one that also highlights the particularity of the virtual encounter. Clearly an infinition of otherness manifests itself in the strange avatar in front of me; only here its "face" takes on a different form than the complexity of the human face.

The face can be said to be Levinas' central concept. It is through the face of the Other that I am exposed to infinity and my complacent totality is questioned:

"The Other does not only appear in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of freedom; (...) he presents himself there from the first as an absolute." - (Levinas 1969: 215)

It is in the instant that I recognize the Other's face that his intrinsic vulnerability and plea – *"do not kill me"* (Levinas 1969: 199) – is manifested and I come to realize that he is my fundamental responsibility. This insight affects me precognitively, as the precipitation of a concern for his well-being strikes me before I can make any other assessment about how I should relate to him. Mind you, this is *not* an empathetic concern - as empathy would require reducing the Other's feelings into my own totality of understanding - but an *ethical* concern. Succeeding the epiphany of the face, the capacity for interpreting and producing language is crucial to Levinas, who even argues that language is the *essence* of the I's relation to the Other, that "language conditions thought" (1969: 204). To Levinas, it is only language that enables me to coexist with the Other *and* leave his otherness intact (Wild 1969: 13-14). Thus, virtual encounters obviously create a fissure in applying Levinas' thesis that the *goodness* asserted by the face should *always* prompt a recourse to language; that is, at least, if we think of language in a traditional sense.

We are perhaps better off perceiving the telematic flight across the "material divide" we undertake when we inhabit an online virtual game environment as something that in a way speaks, not only to a desire to escape the corporeal body, but also to expand upon our lifeworld. In gameplay as in life, there is invariably a distance in a face-to-face that is maintained even when one is able to engage in verbal conversation, an absence exemplified in the "questioning glance" of the Other (Wild 1969: 13). It is a lingering strangeness that I believe is amplified in online game encounters, where the Other's avatar might often conceal an unknowable, sometimes hostile intent - one that I could theoretically confirm in language, but which the communicative affordances, the game mechanisms and/or my involvement with other parts of the game might not allow me to (Ensslin 2012: 97). Hence, it is crucial that we consider how players placate this irreducibility when a game all but forces them to tackle it head-on, as is the case, for example, with *Dark Souls'* unique invasion PvP system where players can invade each other's games, and at any time find themselves suddenly having to engage in battle with a complete stranger who appears in their world.

We can say that, in a game like *Dark Souls*, the entirety of the Other avatar as it appears before me can theoretically constitute its *face* in a Levinasian sense - one that is with its whole body by default fixed in a "questioning glance," an alterity embedded in its very presence. It is an otherness that first appears before me in the strange form of a weapon-wielding humanoid shape, but which starts to take a certain identifiable humanity once I realize, through the distinctive pattern of its actions, that an attempt is being made to approach me in my own alterity. Any transcendence of a virtual face's unknowable nature thus comes down largely to how the particular game manages to elevate its avatar's particular

affordances to the function of language; how each player subject is given the agency to assert his or her particular subjectivity, to assert a personality, if you will. This suggests that before the matter of conversation even arises, players must make up for the intimacy the virtual encounter lacks, by *making* a proverbial face for themselves through their avatar. This, however, also means the avatarial face and the avatar's language assume something of the same function in the virtual face-to-face; that is, they both become that which constitutes the player as a subject beyond static, visual identity (something transcending, say, your average NPC).

It thereby helps if we start to see language in Levinasian terms as a matter first and foremost of bridging the gap – that is, any description "I" make of an object or event is ultimately made in an attempt to connect with the Other. All language, verbal or not, is dialogical – it always has an addressee:

"*In designating a thing I designate it to the Other. (...) The word that designates things attests their apportionment between me and the others. (...) This disengagement has a positive meaning: the entry of the thing into the sphere of the other.*" – (Levinas 1969: 209)

Here, the designating word is key. In-game text chat makes designations theoretically simple, but they also contradict Levinas' emphatic position that "*oral* discourse is the plenitude of discourse" (1969: 69) – as does voice chat disagree with his insistence that oral discourse happens only in the *physical proximity* with the Other (who thereby can come to the aid of his discourse with his face). I would therefore argue that the particular circumstances of the virtual face-to-face in fact conditions language in a direction where speech itself comes to negate the *intimacy* of the virtual face-to-face. As in-game voice chat always emerges in sound a step removed from both avatar and the enunciating subject, speech thereby in effect reinforces the split subject's divided nature by making you aware of player and avatar as separate entities, on separate sides of the phenomenologically present environment. Avatarial action however, be it in a competitive or co-operative context, is hardcoded into the gamic present in which the two players find suddenly themselves face-to-face. Hence, in using something like *Dark Souls* built-in avatar gesture system, which for example allows me to point or wave to others, each gesture can as designation manage to diminish the distance and otherness in the face-to-face, without contesting the shared diegetic present of the game-world.

Thereby the purely avatarially mediated virtual face-to-face emerges as an inherently unstable but nevertheless distinct remediation of human intimacy that is consistent with the incorporating game experience as a whole. Levinas considers face-to-face discourse as the highest order of interaction "*because* the speaker does not deliver images of himself only, but is *personally present* in his speech, absolutely exterior to every image he would leave" (Levinas 1969: 296, emphasis my own). Being that verbal discourses in-game are always "extra-avatarial" activities (Ensslin 2012: 96), in perceiving the Other player as present in his *actions,* not his words, we can immerse ourselves into the avatar's present even more. If the Other player and I are both equally out of our element in the game environment, extended from our habitual selves into a sometimes-alienating body (Rehak 2003), any meaningful

avatarial expression of mutual responsibility will become a matter of recognizing this fact, of being heedful of the irreducible coded otherness neither of us can help. The intimacy and the ethical interpersonal life of the virtual face-to-face stems from the sudden recognition that an attempt by the Other has been made to receive "beyond the capacity of the I," and the justified belief that the avatarial figure you are looking at does indeed represent another person, one who has acknowledged your presence the same way you have theirs. Hence, the virtual face-to-face might not be rooted in the sort of immediate epiphany that seeing the face of another human being provides, but it is an epiphany nevertheless.

A relational model of the virtual face-to-face encounter

Taken as a whole, the pertaining theories show that the encounter between player avatars in the online virtual game environment is a complex and distinct telematic analogue to the actual face-to-face relation between human beings. While lacking in ways (e.g. in physical intimacy and a phenomenological equivalent to the *immediately* ordaining power of the human face), it in others (i.e. the phenomenological incorporation of new modes of conversational agency) appears to contain heretofore-unexamined dimensions to player interaction. The "Virtual Face-to-Face" as a concept thus suggests that recognition of how gamic interactions mirror interpersonal relations in the actual world maybe should be secondary to a fundamental recognition of how they do not. Because while intimate oral conversation remains the supreme form of ethical interaction in the physical face-to-face, it should not be counted on to serve that same function in the virtual face-to-face. Quite to the contrary, it might only be when we recognize verbal game conversation and its propensity for fractured expressives and metaludic discourse (Ensslin 2012: 96) as something existing outside of, or around the avatarial self, that we can truly examine how players can and do relate to each other through the game; how a bond can be formed without undermining the avatar's unique capacity to be incorporated with the player as prosthetic extension and proxy.
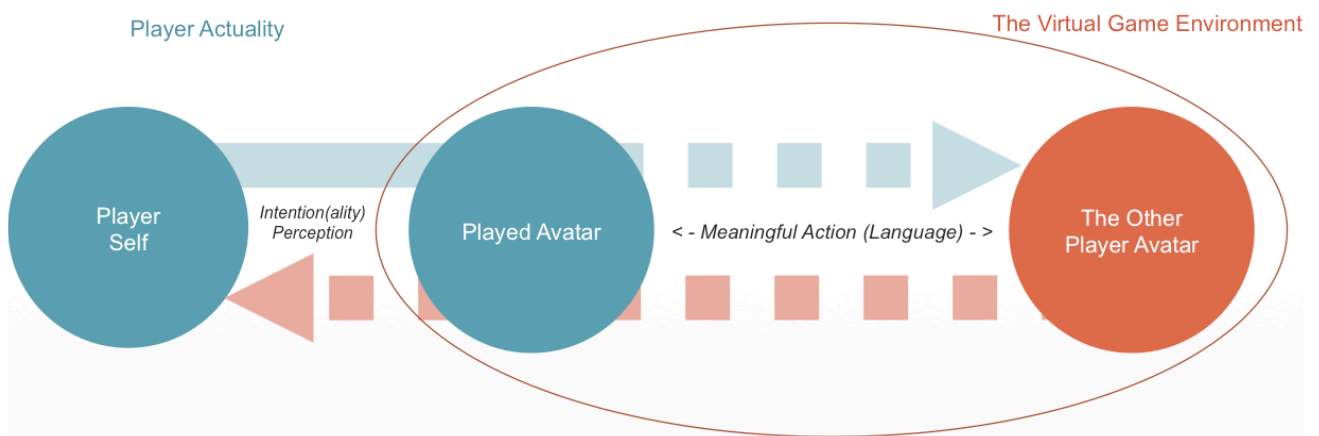

Fig. 1 – The Virtual Face-to-Face

The above model attempts to account for this by visualizing a dialogical exchange from the perspective of the enacting player subject across two dimensions: The Player Actuality

contains the player in front of the game, and the Virtual Game Environment the staging of the Virtual Face-to-Face as experienced by the subject, accounting for the subject's phenomenological perception of her played avatar as well as the Other, represented by his or her avatar. Observing player avatars as isolated in the virtual face-to-face as the very conduit for conveying meaning between players forms a basis for an analysis of how players might embrace present limitations to find new, creative ways of "conversing," ones that Levinas could of course not have predicted when he first deliberated the face-to-face. In our cases, those limitations are the absence of conventional modes of voice/text chat affordances, but one could also imagine other instances where diminished agency or access to otherwise available chat functions would cause the subject to find creative ways of using the avatar and its affordances to relay a message to the Other. In perceiving the avatar as a medium for pure phenomenological intentionality and perception, and the resulting in-game actions as a meaningful attempt on the subject's part to positively give (i.e. explain) its world to the Other "as a gift" (Levinas 1969: 50), one is able to dissect the different semiotic *images* manifested in any gamic interaction as both an expression of moral responsibility and an attempt to understand that which is currently beyond the capacity of the "I".

Obviously, a sufficient methodological framework for applying Levinas to player interactions in-game would have to be established before any definitive conclusions on the nature of purely avatar-mediated social gameplay can be drawn. Unfortunately, that is an undertaking that exceeds the scope of the present paper. However, having continually referred to the factor of agency (i.e. the capacity to act), allow me to suggest that a method of identifying *avatar affordances* should be a principal priority in the matter. I would propose that the avatar does not yield any *one* perceptible affordance as much as it is actually, following interaction design professor William Gaver's train of thought, an "acted-upon" environment onto itself (Gaver 1991: 80) – i.e. an *ecology of affordances* that together form a totality of agency in the virtual game environment as perceived by the player. Identifying and analyzing individual avatar affordances could thereby address instrumental aspects of the avatar that preconditions, but do not necessarily preclude, phenomenological discussions of player and avatar agency.

Similarly, one might look at avatarial actions semiotically, through what Bolter (2001) calls "reverse ekphrasis", that is how they perform "the task of explaining words" (Ensslin 2012: 112). As such, any extra-avatarial speech act or word (e.g. a player tag, an item name) could exist within the totality of the image (but subordinate to it), which could factor in the symbolic value of avatar appearance and actions equally. Movement in game space, for instance, could be analyzed as an avatarial mediation of proxemics (Norris 2004) in-game (i.e. "the distance that individuals take up with respect to others and relevant objects" (in Ensslin 2012: 127)) as well as an act of Levinasian face-making, with something approximating the scrutiny we would otherwise subject a verbal declaration to. Naturally, individual semiotic/discursive modes would have to be considered as they materialize in close study of different game cases, which, again, is a matter for another paper. But for the time being, consider the above illustrative of the challenges related to delimiting an approach to an inherently open-ended medium and the irregularity of the interpersonal situations it

carries, in the service of making a philosophical argument about the "anatomy" of an experience.

Embodied communication and avatarial language

Having only taken a cursory glance at *Journey* and *Dark Souls* and the interpersonal experiences they facilitate up until now, let us finally consider what perspectives on player interaction we can gain from looking at precisely these games. Characteristic for both games is that neither provide the player with much information about the Other player beyond what his or her avatar might convey in itself within the virtual game environment (i.e. no readily accessible player profiles or MUD-type player/character descriptions). Both games incorporate online multiplayer functionality into the primary single player experience organically, in lieu of a more conventional, separate multiplayer mode, factoring in an element of surprise that arguably enhances a certain otherness. In the case of *Journey* this happens seemingly at random (with the game fluently "merging" two players' presences seamlessly into one temporary shared game environment), whereas in *Dark Souls* multiplayer play is contingent on the player engaging with certain mechanisms in the virtual game environment (as is the case with the aforementioned ability to "invade" other player's worlds, which requires the player obtain and use certain in-game items). In both cases it is entirely possible to go an entire playthrough without encountering another player, however, it also goes for both that social and shared experiences heightens and deepens the game experience in tangible ways. Let us consider why that might be.

Studies have shown that *"non-verbal communication (...) can make up more than 90 per cent of information in face-to-face communication"* (Koneya and Barbour 1976 in Ensslin, 2012), so the notion that communication does occur even in "silence" is perhaps not too unexpected. What remains uncertain however, is how well avatarially mediated non-verbal communication conveys the intended message and how players pick up on and interpret particular subtleties in each other's avatar actions; how and whether the face and language put forth in an avatar is in fact read as presumed. For this we can consider the applied phenomenological agency of the extended player body-image in terms of what constitutes, not only a "face," but also avatarial language: how it is asserted and how it is read, pragmatically and emotionally. To that end both *Journey* and *Dark Souls* employ distinctive forms of avatar expression, which only through use in multiplayer situations reveal useful communicative affordances. Playing both games, I have come to observe patterns of "player etiquette" and a sense of a shared language emerge over time, not through any explicit elaboration of such, but through genuine in-game player-avatar conduct.

For instance, the musical chime in *Journey*, which doubles as a de facto "use"-button, for many players appear to function as way of signaling sustained interest in the presently shared experience with the Other player. *Journey*'s avatar is the rare one that exhibits supernatural agency (e.g. the ability to fly) while also deliberately limiting use of familiar bodily schemas (i.e. the use of arms or hands). It is also, in appearance as well as ability, exactly the same for all players – a faceless, hooded nomad, with glowing eyes peaking out from darkness, who

can walk, temporarily glide/fly and, of course, produce a chiming sound. By burdening all players with an insurmountable, shared sameness, the singular musical chime cannot help but become instrumental in individualizing players. The chime, which can be emitted in everything from short bursts to a more emphatic holler by holding down the O button on the controller, allows players to transcend their avatars' shared sameness and establish an individual voice of sorts, imbuing an otherwise simple one-button control with a subtle, but useful, sophistication.

It does, however, not have any power with regards to shifting the constraints of the game as a whole. In all there is but a set amount of personality to be instilled in the otherwise anonymous hero, who gives just enough agential elbowroom to let the player assume an identity in the game, but also not so much that interpreting player actions become potentially incomprehensible or restrictive. The avatar is as such seemingly designed for amicable interactions, being that its *otherness* is in a way contained, the disclosure of its irreducibility made within set, coded boundaries that are the same for every player. What this means, is that expressing non-cooperative intents or frustration is complicated, as *Journey* by design stifles negative or hostile intent. If two players happen to be standing on the precipice of the same narrow cliff, one cannot push the other off – the game quite simply does not allow it. Even shutting down the game and stranding your partner will only lead to another character just like you eventually taking your place. Hence, while such actions are in some way felt, they are not necessarily felt as intended. It is impossible not to be subconsciously aware of this discord when playing.

Thus, the *conversation* and the *face* you put up in the game are bent towards either leaning into the journey or pulling out of the shared experience - accepting or flat-out refusing the Other's presence in front of you and his invocation to journey onward, without negotiation. When I play *Journey* I will often seek out the Other player as she appears in my environment, chiming incessantly as if to say "I am here, ready to follow where you lead". Sometimes this is met with a more or less enthusiastic response (e.g. a spirited chime back-and-forth or some jumping up and around each other), and sometimes my fellow avatar will seize up for a long stretch of time or run in the opposite direction, as if to signal "leave me alone". If successful, a journey will sometimes last to the end of the game – other times I will be abandoned mid-trek. As a result, each playthrough of *Journey* has the potential to be both an emotionally rewarding co-operative trek through a strange land with a virtual stranger, as well as an ultimately frustrating experience of rejection without reason or context. The strength of the game as a medium for face-to-face encounters therefore becomes its focus on maintaining the irreducibility of the Other. No matter the outcome of your playthroughs, *Journey* will always make you curious about the nature of the Other player. It will cause you to question their motives, ponder on their perspective of the environment you presently share, and wonder what reasons they might have for doing what they are doing. By restricting your communicative agency to movement and a single musical note, and playing up the unknowable nature of the Other player, it in a sense pushes you to express a curiosity towards them. As a result, the game comes to encapsulate that primordial Levinasian desire to

approach the Other in their infinite alterity, as the driving force of its multiplayer gameplay. Considering the game's overall simplicity, that is no small feat.

Avatarial manifestations of social etiquette

Dark Souls is in ways similar in that it by design pushes players towards engaging each other, while actively enhancing their otherness by design. Only, the game in facilitating much more complex and oftentimes hostile encounters has a more pronounced need for a method of expressing mutual responsibility in-game. To that end *Dark Souls'* aforementioned gesture system, while at first appearing like little more than a playful curiosum, reveals very concrete uses for players interested in placating the otherness of a stranger and establishing a common ground. Particularly in PvP combat, the ability to "bow" seems to be universally understood as a way of responsibly bookending face-to-face encounters, to the point where a failure to employ it as such, sees frustrated players with no recourse in-game take to community message boards to cry foul about their experiences (van Nuenen 2015: 12). In my experience, the sheer difficulty of the game in addition to the complexity of its combat mechanics, factors into creating virtual face-to-face encounters where you as player are driven to assert yourself and present a face to the Other, through the confident display of deliberate and consistent avatar action. In the process of doing so, a sensitivity to what might be perceived as "proper behavior" therefore also has a tendency to plant itself in the back of your head within seconds of playing with another player, and is only intensified with each subsequent encounter.

Notably, almost every player I have encountered in the game have bowed upon first seeing me. In the case of an invasion, I find I am almost always given until the Other player and I have both bowed, to gather myself before duel. Although I can only infer the intention of each gesture, by rationalizing the nature of the desires underlying each gesture I have nevertheless felt involved and acknowledged by the Other in ways I have not experienced in other games. Indeed, the few experiences where the intentions of gestures have failed to register entirely have tended to lead to swift and uneventful interactions, be it competitive or cooperative ones. There is clearly a common, implicit understanding of gestures' value, suggesting that a shared avatarial language with a specific functionality emerges in *Dark Souls* that is largely interpreted the same by players – players who defined it to begin with. The fact that players so willingly accept this, suggests that there is a shared understanding among *Dark Souls* players that the ability to signal responsibility positively shapes the experience of the game without diminishing any of the competitiveness of, for example, a PvP battle.

The exposition of how players assert and derive meaning from each other's conduct in *Dark Souls* could provide material enough for a paper of its own, the bow being but the most pronounced manifestation of "etiquette" among players. Let me therefore conclude here by reemphasizing how, in the absence of the ordaining power of the human face, perceiving the face of the Other is always a matter of interpretation. In *Dark Souls* and *Journey,* limitations

in players' affordances for communication facilitate meaningful connections exactly because players are driven to overcome them. But it also creates situations where you are never *exactly* certain if the Other player does indeed acknowledge you as you appear before them. It would seem that a precondition in the virtual face-to-face is that, although we try our hardest to make it so, an immediacy of ethicality is not a given. Hence, the problem with examining any avatar-to-avatar encounter, and applying Levinas' concepts to these, is that they will always lack the instantaneousness seen in Levinas' own phenomenological accounts of the face-to-face. Likewise, due to the heterogeneity of avatars across games and game genres, it will remain difficult to really zero in on a substantial, reliable and consistent definition of what constitutes a "face," even as we attribute it to active player behavior as it manifests itself in-game. We might perhaps do right in reminding ourselves how Levinas built his philosophy of ethics first and foremost on experience. That is to say, he did not set out to write rules or definitions, but to explore lived life and the hidden meanings of intersubjective relations. Ultimately, by approaching player-avatar encounters with the same keenly observant eye, we can only hope to do the same.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the experiential domains of multiplayer play hint at possibilities for interpersonal relations that are far more intricate than my brief forays into the present cases could ever convey. What player conduct in *Journey* and *Dark Souls* do show is that, although it might require an effort of interpretation, the failure to effectively read the language put forth by another player does have very real consequences – consequences that might be inflicted upon the avatar in the moment, but are nevertheless phenomenologically experienced as inflicted upon the Self.

As such, examining the non-verbal player-avatar exchange in isolation should permit for a finer granularity of analysis in unpacking the emotional as well as phenomenological dimensions of multiplayer play. It allows us to perceive the subject's incorporation into a multiplayer situation as a trip across the material divide that resituates not only our perceptual apparatus, but also our intentions and desires in an immediate situation where they can be reflected back at us through the prism of the Other player avatar's questioning glance. The played avatar thereby becomes a phenomenological hub for our experience, not only of a virtual world, but also of the people inhabiting it, revealing new ways of interacting and being in the world. Thereby online virtual game environments are in a sense not just concurrent with our "media-saturated" lives (Calleja 2011: 179), but they in fact appear as immersive, amplified reflections of them, where we can gain the agency to stretch, bend and extend our subjective selves towards entirely new modes of being, communicating with and learning from others. It is escapism with a uniquely ethical bent, one that challenges our complacency and forces us to make a call about the people we engage, if we are to immerse ourselves deeper into, and in turn get more out of, the shared game experience.

Games

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