

Vishnu and the Videogame: The Videogame *Avatar* and Hindu Philosophy

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In 1986, Chip Morningstar, designer of the videogame *Habitat*, tied the 'Sanskrit term "avatar" to [one's] real-time presence in an online world' (Global Neighbourhood 2011). Soon after, the novelist Neal Stephenson popularized this usage in *Snow Crash* (1992) and in little over a decade, the word has gained phenomenal currency in Game Studies, discussions of gameplay, virtual reality, social networking and even in a blockbuster film. This, arguably, is more popular than the original Sanskrit usage. The concept of the avatar is the key point of departure for analyses of in-game identity and involvement. What relationship players have with their avatars has always been a moot question for Games Studies scholars. There are, obviously, extremes such as the avatar in James Cameron's film where the protagonist's consciousness seamlessly leaves his human body and wakes up into his avatar body. He is also able, at the end of the story, to sever ties forever with his real body and remain as his avatar. This seamlessness, although claimed as the characteristic experience of gameplay in early Game Studies theory, is too simplistic a description of the relationship between players and their online presence. Likewise, the description of the avatar as the 'graphical representation of the user's alter-ego' is also extremely limited. In videogames, the player and the avatar can operate in complex ways such as when the player is simultaneously aware of and experiencing both her non-game and in-game identities. This situation is further complicated when the player reloads the game sequence and consequently the in-game identity is (re)formed each time a different game event loads.

In the original Sanskrit usage, the avatar is an object of worship and is the manifestation of divinity that descends on Earth to destroy evil. The commonest English translation of the term is 'incarnation' (literally 'the being made flesh') and with this is also associated the idea of cyclical appearance of divinity. Vishnu, the preserver of the world, is said to have descended on earth in various avatars (commonly considered to be ten but the number varies) and is yet to arrive in his apocalyptic avatar – *kalki*. Other gods such as Ganesha and Shiva also manifest themselves as avatars. This paper explores how the original avatar concept taken in its fuller complexity from Indic philosophy is useful in understanding the videogame avatar in terms of identity-formation because it includes within its conception the notion multiple shared identities and cyclic recurrence.

'Avatar' comes from the words 'ava' and 'tri' meaning 'below' and 'crossing' respectively – thus an avatar is the 'crossing-down' of a god to free humanity from evil. Geoffrey Parrinder (1997) identifies twelve characteristics of the Hindu doctrine of Avatar: avatars are real; if human (the early avatars of Vishnu bear non-human or semi-human forms), they take worldly birth; they mingle the divine and human; they die; there is a historicity to some avatars; they are repeated; they are often exemplars of proper living; they have a mission and they guarantee divine grace. Further, the avatar is either a full manifestation of the deity or a partial one; it is also possible for the deity to manifest himself or herself

as multiple avatars, simultaneously. As an example of the latter, the brothers Krishna and Balaram are both said to be avatars of Vishnu. In the epic *Ramayana*, Ram and Parashuram, both said to be avatars of Vishnu, meet each other. The time-schema of the avatar concept is complex; unlike the one-time incarnation in Christian theology the avatars in Hindu philosophy are cyclic but they can also appear simultaneously and interact with each other. The other complexity is of course the relation between the deity himself or herself and the avatar as the manifestation of the deity. For example, as Freda Matchett (2001) poses the question: what is the supreme reality: Krishna or Vishnu? Reviewing Matchett's book, Peter Schreiner sees a parallel with the Christology question and problem. Matchett points out that relationship between Krishna and Vishnu is 'something altogether more mysterious, the *āścarya* which reflects on earth the wonder that is Vishnu.' Describing the relationship of Ram to Vishnu, Raimundo Panikkar comments that 'Rama in fact is totally human and totally divine, Rama is material and spiritual, temporal and eternal' (Panikkar 38).

Morningstar's usage of the word is based on a very specific interpretation that 'seemed an appropriate mapping [...] in the sense that we humans are like deities, or at least external souls, with respect to a virtual world that exists only inside a computer simulation.' As a history simulation website claims: 'With the popularization of the term, now it's not just Hindu gods who can descend upon different worlds, but people. Today, avatars come in the form of characters ready to fight in some virtual battlefield to the simple picture used to identify oneself on an internet forum' (Kan 2010). In another recent popularisation of the term, James Cameron describes it as follows for his film, *Avatar*:

It's an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body. It's not an avatar in the sense of just existing as ones and zeroes in cyberspace. It's actually a physical body. The lead character, Jake, who is played by Sam Worthington, has his human existence and his avatar existence. He'll be shown using live-action photography in 3-D and computer-generated imagery. (Keegan 2007)

In a similar usage, the *Second Life* platform allows one to 'create an avatar that resembles your real life or create an alternate identity. The only limit is your imagination. Who do you want to be?'

In all of the above later conceptions of the avatar, the issue of the identity of the avatar vis-à-vis that of the player is staggeringly simple: the player *is* the avatar and vice versa. In the movie, for example, the protagonist finds it hard to settle into his avatar but this is almost like trying on a new suit – once he is used to his new body, the identification is seamless. The other conceptualisations, including Morningstar's 'mapping', assume a parallel to divine inspiration (literally, a breathing life into a body) in the avatar concept. The player's consciousness, in an almost god-like manner, occupies a virtual body. The very concept of the avatar, however, resists such an easy identification. Laurie Taylor's analysis of

the problem with assuming total seamlessness emerges in the situation where the player looks at her image in a mirror within the game and sees that of her avatar:

Wilmore's looking at himself in the mirror assumes that the player (subject) has embraced Wilmore in such a way that Wilmore's looking, while outside the player herself, could be internalized by the player in terms of her representation of Wilmore as herself. Oddly, the player is fundamentally separated from Wilmore specifically because of the first-person point-of-view that the game uses primarily and in this episode in an attempt to more fully align the player with Wilmore. (Taylor 2003)

This is of course also Jake's predicament in the film *Avatar* and ultimately, an advantage of his avatar is that he has regained the use of his feet, which he has lost in his real life. Identification with the avatar is not seamless in that it always involves a mental acceptance of the constraints and differences of the avatar self and the real self. The avatar self is not therefore a seamless identification or an immersion (understood as a submergence in a different medium, or in this case, world). As Gonzalo Frasca (2006) states, the process of identification involves an 'outmersion' or the realisation that the player is also in a make-believe world and a 'meta-outmersion' or the simultaneous realisation by the player that she is aware of the entire process. In fact, unlike Cameron's conceptualization of the avatar, the process of identification is not that of a human consciousness filling in a virtual body. The identification with the avatar automatically involves the awareness of the characteristics and affordances not only of the avatar's body but also of the consciousness. A player of *Assassin's Creed* therefore has to share the consciousness of the avatars, Altair or Ezio, who have very different constraints - whether of character, psychology or social and historical environment. Unlike, the avatar of yahoo messenger or a virtual body filled in by one's consciousness, the videogame player identifies with the avatar in what has been called 'double consciousness' (Salen and Zimmerman 2003) and 'multiple consciousness' (Mukherjee 2008). Even in the film *Avatar*, Jake the marine's consciousness also exists in tandem with that of Jake-as-Na'avi (Na'avi are the aliens in the film whom Jake's avatar joins). In the film, Jake is able to give up his human body at the end; we are not told whether his human consciousness is also gone. For the videogame avatar and player, such a total absorption is not possible. Like the avatar in Hindu thought, the relation here is far more complex.

Moving on from the thinking of videogame identity as the seamless transfer of consciousness mediated by the process of immersion, the process of identification has been linked to partial immersion (Ryan 2001) and involvement (Mukherjee 2007). Involvement, in the sense used here, needs unpicking. Gary Alan Fine's comments on fantasy gaming in terms of sociologist Erving Goffman's discussion of frame-analysis will be useful in starting to address these issues. As Fine observes:

Goffman describes social worlds as constituting frames of experience. He defines a frame as a situational definition constructed in accord with organising principles that govern both the events themselves and participants' experiences of these events [...] Goffman

examines the linkages among frames of involvements, how individuals pass from one frame to another. (Fine 1983)

The process by which this happens is called 'engrossment' by Goffman. For Fine, such engrossment has an oscillating character and the frames 'succeed each other with remarkable rapidity'.

Fine, writing about the then popular role-playing fantasy games (like *Dungeons and Dragons*) rather than digital games identifies a separation between the *character* identity and *player* identity. Fine bases this separation on the basis of knowledge possessed by the two identities. In fantasy games, the character might know certain things about the game world that the player may not be aware of and similarly the player brings his own knowledge from the real world to his character. This differentiation, of course, is contestable. Just as the player brings her special set of skills to the game, the game environment is also invested with its own special set of information coded into it by way of the rules. The player, whether involved in the game as a character or as a configurable element (which plays the part of a character, like the paddle in *Breakout*) has a multiple identity. These multiple identities work as supplements for each other. Like Matchett's position on Vishnu and Krishna in relation to the avatar question raised in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Puranas*, the identities of the player and the avatar are supplementary. 'Supplement', here, is conceived in the sense that Jacques Derrida perceives it. Nicholas Royle's elucidation of the Derridean concept might be useful here:

Derrida explores the strange but necessary 'cohabitation' of these two significations of the supplement. In both cases the supplement is conceived as exterior, as an 'extra'. Yet the supplement entails a kind of crazy logic: it is neither inside nor outside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time. It forms part without being part, it belongs without belonging. (Royle 2003)

The avatar is neither an added-on entity nor is it formed inside the player identity. It is in addressing this relationship that another recent concept from Game Studies comes in useful.

Gordon Calleja (2011) proposes the process of 'incorporation' as the way in which the player interacts with the game and the avatar. For Calleja, incorporation is a process that operates on a double axis: 'the player incorporates (in the sense of internalising or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while *simultaneously* being incorporated through the avatar into that environment. [...] Put another way, incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment.' This formulation retains the traditional interpretations of the concept as the assimilation to the mind and as embodiment. Calleja differentiates incorporation from involvement which he sees as occurring when any dimension of the player's experience requires the player's full conscious attention, for example in the case of a new player negotiating and struggling with the WASD keys for moving the avatar within the game environment.

Calleja's description of the player's experience vis-à-vis the game avatar is compelling. As mentioned earlier, the process of identification in videogames, involves the avatar consciousness as well as the player consciousness. In a parallel from the earlier discussion of Hindu theology, avatars such as Krishna and Narasimha (or the man-lion avatar) share in Vishnu's essence and vice versa. Krishna in the *Mahabharata*, to counter Arjuna's reluctance to fight overwhelms him by showing manifesting himself in the myriad divine forms of Vishnu. At other times, in the avatar of Krishna, Vishnu is constrained by the worldly environments of that of a cowherd and then a king. Although differing from the idea of incorporation in that for the Hindu avatar there is no greater or lesser involvement, the participation in both the player consciousness and the avatar consciousness holds close similarities.

The two-way identification is not a discrete event: in Hindu mythology, the relation between the avatar and the deity is a process rather than a defined metamorphosis from one form to the other. As Matchett points out about Krishna:

The best known of these descents is Krishna. The Vaishnava tradition oscillates between two different ways of seeing him. Besides being the eighth in one version of the standard list of the Supreme God Vishnu's ten avatars,, he is also worshipped by millions in India as the Supreme God himself (even though the very same temple in which Krishna's image occupies the central place may also contain a picture in which he features among the avatars. (Matchett 2001:1)

Vishnu's relationship to his avatar could, arguably, be seen as a becoming rather than a being. Becoming, here, is used in the sense in which Deleuze and Guattari apply it. As they describe it:

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. [...] We fall into a false alternative if we say that either you imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that becomes passes. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 262)

In this definition of 'becoming', it is clear that the human subject does not take up a single new identity. Rather, what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'block of becoming', is synthetic and a process. In fact, instead of establishing connections through filiation, the block of becoming operates through a process analogous to symbiosis between certain roots and micro-organisms. As a process, becoming is more akin to what they call 'involution': according to them, 'to involve is to form a block that runs its own line "between" the terms in play and beneath relations' (Deleuze and Guattari 263). Claire Colebrook, commenting on the Deleuzian idea of 'becoming' describes it as a '*contracting* from the complex flow of life [as well as a] becoming one with the flow of images that is life' (Colebrook 127). Almost analogous to the process of identification of the God and His avatar, the Deleuzoguattarian becoming proposed here addresses the various positions on involvement within Game Studies: Deleuzian 'becoming' takes into

account and modifies the idea of identification that proponents of the immersion have and at the same time, also links to the opposing concepts such as those of 'double consciousness' and 'meta-outmersion'. The idea of 'involution' could be seen as linking with concepts such as incorporation, especially as the bipartite assimilation of the player into the game and vice versa cannot be seen as a series of discrete events but as a process which is important in itself and which occurs between and beneath the player and avatar selfhoods. The avatar concept in Hindu religious texts offers a parallel in the process of Vishnu, the Supreme God, becoming Krishna, the avatar. Among the avatars of Vishnu, marginal and mixed avatar forms such as the man-lion or *Narasimha* add further layers of complexity where the process of man becoming beast and *vice versa*, simultaneously, is reflected. Of course, there is the added level of God becoming man-beast in this case and one could call this a classic illustration of the process of incorporation.

The standard English translation for avatar in Hindu mythology is 'incarnation'. The etymological root for the word is the Latin *incarnation*, literally the 'making flesh'. *OED* defines 'incarnation' as a person who embodies in the flesh a deity, spirit, or a quality. Consider now the meaning of 'incorporation' – derived from the Latin *incorporare* it means 'form into a body' and bears a close resemblance to 'incarnation'. As Calleja points out, the literary meaning of incorporation is that of having a bodily form or being embodied. The etymological similarity is not superficial and it merely backs up the earlier analysis where the becoming-avatar and the becoming-God as well as the becoming-player have been seen in terms of incorporation. To add to Calleja's already robust explanation, the process of incorporation is seen here as a 'becoming' and the very conception of the avatar in videogames, especially when seen in terms of the avatar concept in Indic religious thought, is to be understood as an experiential process rather than a holistic essence.

To add to the complexity of understanding the identity of the videogame avatar, is the fact that the avatar can be reloaded and respawned. The problems that this causes in the temporal understanding of the avatar have been discussed by Game Studies scholars () and lie beyond the immediate scope of this analysis. However, with each reload, the identity-formation may be seen as different – the avatar (re)appears much like the incarnations in Indic mythology. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna as the avatar of Vishnu famously declares, '*yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata abhyutthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srjamy aham*' (Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion--at that time I descend Myself). This assertion of divine incarnation to Arjuna in the field of battle is one of the most quoted lines in the Hindu religion; it also attests the phenomenon of the descent of the Supreme God Vishnu on the mortal world, in his many avatar forms. The game avatar too appears again and again, adding another level of complexity to the understanding of the identity of the avatar and the player.

At this stage, a couple of clarifications need to be made before proceeding to the conclusion. This relooking at Morningstar's and later on, the videogame industry's borrowing from Indic philosophy although prompted by etymological curiosity has serendipitously led to the exploration of a deeper parallel and one that arguably addresses recent debates on identity in videogames. The comparison of how the avatar concept works in Hinduism and how it helps understand identity in videogames is a purely philosophical venture and has no pretensions to religious commentary; as such, it doesn't intend to offend any religious sentiment.

With this in mind, a brief analysis of an example from videogames might be attempted. In the *Assassin's Creed* games (Ubisoft), the player enters the game as the avatar-protagonist Desmond Miles whose genetic code is read by a futuristic machine that resuscitates the lives of his ancestors in his memory. His ancestors, Altair ibn Ahad from the age of the Crusades and Ezio from the Italian Quattrocento, appear in the memory of Desmond's past lives and resemble the repeating divine incarnations (although in the protagonist's memory as the game's SF plot tells us). Desmond, Altair and Ezio all fight the forces of evil in their respective historical times, much like the avatars of Vishnu. Self-reflexively, the games talk about the process of incorporation in their plot itself. Desmond can be seen to be playing out his memories in the avatars of his ancestors. Various different memories result in respective avatar instances and Desmond is incorporated in the avatars and they in him literally through his genetic code and experientially as he plays out their adventures as if in a videogame. As players, those who play *Assassin's Creed* of course have a similar identification with Desmond himself as well as with Altair and Ezio. The experience is a continual process of becoming-Desmond, becoming-Altair, becoming-Ezio and becoming-player .

In India, 'Avatar' is a household word and has been so well before for millennia before its new usage in videogames and its popularization in Cameron's epic movie. Despite Morningstar's borrowing from Indic philosophy, the two usages seem quite disparate and yet similar. It was intriguing to see how the Indian gamer had accepted the avatar concept and it was through such an exploration that the avatar concept from Hindu philosophy revealed unexpectedly complex models to describe identity in videogames and how through incorporation the process of becoming-player works in tandem with that of becoming-avatar.

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