

## Darn it, “I” Keep Dying! The Metaphysical Self in Computer Games

By Peter Day

The first computer game I remember playing was a 2D platformer about a knight, presumably from Camelot. I only remember the first few minutes of game time, during which my father, my older sister and I tried in vain to find a way over the small stretch of water on the right side of the screen. Whenever I pressed the right arrow key, the little knight charged right until he fell into the water and flailed his arms as he sank beneath the screen. I turned to my sister, pointed at the screen, and said “Look, *he* drowned.” My sister looked, nodded, and confirmed “Yup, *you* died.”

The problem this story is meant to illustrate is a problem of meaning. It is common enough, when playing computer games, to use such phrases as “I got new armor,” “I saved the princess,” or “I died.” Of these examples, the last one, “I died,” might be the most interesting because if spoken in normal situations it would produce a paradox. How are we to understand statements like this? They demand that we either assume a connection such that a player can consider things which occur in a virtual world to be happening to the player, or say that the player is simply speaking nonsense.

There are two approaches to the problem of the connection between the player and the avatar which have received the most attention. I am here using “avatar” to refer to any entity in a game whose purpose is to stand for the player. The first influential theory about the player-avatar relation belongs to James Gee, who investigates the relationship between player identity and avatar identity in his excellent book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Gee’s proposal is that we examine the relationship between the character and the avatar in terms of three categories: *player as avatar*, *player as avatar*, and *player as avatar*.<sup>1</sup> Each different version of emphasis indicates a different way in which the identity of the avatar and the identities of the player interact during gameplay. As important as Gee’s theory has been and continues to be, it does not in this case present an answer to our question. In his book, Gee brings in his theory of player-avatar identity to address issues of identity which arose in the interaction between him and a character he was playing in an RPG, or role-playing game. His theory presupposes that the character represented by the avatar has an in-game identity which is complex enough to demand an interaction with the player’s various identities. But this is not obviously the case in games such as *Pac-Man* and *Super Mario Bros.*, where the character represented by the avatar is so vacuous it is hard to see how it demands the same sort of interaction with the player’s identities. But the intuition to say “I died” is not made any weaker by the avatar being an empty shell for the player to fill, as opposed to a fully fleshed out character in a detailed world. A player may say “I died” just as easily of the frog in *Frogger* as of an elf druid in *World of Warcraft*, even though the frog does not seem to invite the same level of identification.

A second influential theory of the player-avatar relation belongs to Bob Rehak, who offers an interpretation of Lacan’s mirror stage. Rehak suggests that the avatar is a way for the player/subject to play out a split in the subject’s ego, with the agency of the ego endowed in the avatar. Part of the investment of the player in the avatar lies in the fact that the avatar, as both self

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<sup>1</sup>James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 54-55.

and other, can be killed or destroyed, resulting in a sense of wholeness and a fictive unity of the ego. While the importance of this approach too cannot be ignored, it also does not provide a solution to our problem. As Rehak himself notes, “The long history of video games also makes clear that there is no perfectly ‘reflective’ avatar, that is, one that resembles the player visually and (in the fashion of a real mirror) seems to gaze back on him or her. If the avatar is a reflection, its correspondence to embodied reality consists of a mapping not of appearance but of control.”<sup>2</sup> Rehak is here attempting to explain how the avatar can function as a mirror image in Lacan's sense when it bears no resemblance to the player. But if being under the subject's control is the only quality that an object requires to be able to take on the role of Lacanian mirror-image, can this role extend to any object? We control countless tools throughout the day, but these do not claim the same sort of connection which an avatar does. If the special quality of avatars is not explained by their resemblance to the player, we need to investigate further to show exactly what in an avatar makes it possible for it to embody the ego. We are therefore still left with the question: given that we use phrases such as “I died,” how should we understand this use of language?

To answer this question, I turn to a twentieth century philosopher who took an interest in investigating everyday meanings: Ludwig Wittgenstein. In particular I will look at Wittgenstein's first published work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I will also be borrowing liberally from Eli Friedlander's interpretation of the *Tractatus* in his *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, which is of particular note because of the way it attempts to bridge early and later Wittgenstein.

The intention behind Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is to indicate the limits of language: to show what is possible and what is meaningless to say. The book is a list of propositions, with lesser propositions modifying the more important ones, as indicated by the number the proposition is given (so, for example, proposition 1.1 modifies proposition 1.) A central claim of the work is that, to put it simply, language is a picture, or a model, of the world. That is, when we use language, we are constructing a picture of how the world is. A significant proposition, i.e., a proposition which has sense, is a logical picture of a fact. The totality of facts is the world. The idea that language is a picture of the world might seem like a simple truism, but Wittgenstein claimed that the *Tractatus* solved all of the problems of philosophy, which arise only due to a misunderstanding of what it is possible to do with language. Philosophical questions, such as “is the good also the beautiful,”<sup>3</sup> simply have no sense, and so are not significant propositions. We may ignore such questions because they are not really questions.

This raises the question of how we should distinguish between what can and cannot be said. I turn for help here to Friedlander's *Signs of Sense*. Friedlander notes that Wittgenstein, following Frege, makes a crucial distinction between sense (Sinn) and meaning (Bedeutung).<sup>4</sup> For a proposition to have sense it need merely be expressed correctly. The fact which a

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<sup>2</sup>Bob Rehak, “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar,” *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003) 107.

<sup>3</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 4.003.

<sup>4</sup>Eli Friedlander, *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001) 103.

proposition pictures is that proposition's sense. Different languages can express the same sense, which is what allows them to be translated into one another. We call the different ways in which different languages express the same sense "different signs." So the spoken sentence "Es Regnet." in German is the sign which has the same sense as the sentence "It's raining." in English. Importantly, the limits of sense are the same as the limits of language. With language I only make a model of the world; I do not bring the world itself into my language. The connection between a proposition and the world is the proposition's meaning. What this connection is, the structure of meaning, can never be said; it can only be shown. To illustrate, we may consider this example. It is impossible for me to say in words the connection between the proposition "The sky is blue" and the world. This connection, the structure of meaning, is the rule by which language can model the world. It is of the same type as the connection between a musical score and the music itself. The meaning is presupposed in language, so it is circular to use language to say that meaning. Trying to do so would only result in the tautology "'The sky is blue' means 'the sky is blue.'" By Friedlander's translation, Wittgenstein makes this point with proposition 3.221: "I can only speak *about* [objects]: I cannot *put them into words*. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are."<sup>5</sup>

Meaning is what makes it possible for language to have sense. So how do we get meaning? Unlike making sense, meaning is something which belongs to us without us making a conscious effort. The split between sense and meaning is actually reconciled in everyday language, since it is in everyday life that words gain meaning, that things are shown.<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind, we have a way of reading the world created by computer games. The world of a game is communicated to us in a representational language of picture and sound. What is represented in this language is, in every sense, a world. The signs of that language (the different groupings of pixels), express various senses: tree, human, covenant soldier, etc. These signs mean the sense that they have. So far, so good; but reading the game world like this so far gives us nothing in that world which has the sense "me." When I play *World of Warcraft*, the collection of animations which make up my avatar are not a picture of me; they are a picture of a level 72 undead rogue named Holas. In order to find out where "I" am in a computer game, we need to look elsewhere.

We return to the *Tractatus* and to Wittgenstein's discussion of the metaphysical self. The *Tractatus* begins a crucial discussion of the self with the exceedingly opaque proposition 5.63, which reads "Ich bin meine Welt," "I am my world."<sup>7</sup> He reformulates this later as "the subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world."<sup>8</sup> It might be thought that the subject Wittgenstein refers to, which is obviously not the physical subject, is instead the subject's mind. Wittgenstein is quick to deny this, however, with proposition 5.641, which reads "The philosophical I is not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit – not a part of the world."<sup>9</sup> What, then, is this subject, and

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<sup>5</sup>Friedlander 104.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid 107.

<sup>7</sup>Wittgenstein 5.63.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 5.632.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. 5.641.

what does it mean to say “I am my world?”

Again I borrow heavily from Friedlander. He points to proposition 5.6 to help explain Wittgenstein’s stance on the metaphysical self and the world. 5.6 reads: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”<sup>10</sup> It is important first here to say what Friedlander’s Wittgenstein means by “world.” This is not the scientific universe, but the world, or totality, of meaning. The limit of this world is not a limit in what can be represented. Using language, anything which can have meaning can be expressed. The limit therefore is in what can be meant.<sup>11</sup> As Friedlander stated earlier, the way in which we come to be able to mean something is by appropriating the meaning from the object in the world. After we have done so, it is possible to recognize that meaning in the sense which is expressed by language. This also explains why everyday language is of interest for Wittgenstein. It is in the life of the everyday, not in using precise logical language, that meaning is appropriated. Notice, moreover, that this process requires speaking of some subject which is doing the appropriating. Meaning is only possible with reference to some self: it must be meaning *for* that self. This self then underlies all meaning, and is necessary for the possibility of recognizing meaning. Here Friedlander makes a marvelous point: “What is at stake is not merely the appearance of an abstract transcendental subject, but a connection between the metaphysical subject and the concrete problem of saying “I,” of taking language upon oneself.”<sup>12</sup> This means that using “I” with meaning, as we assume we do when we say “I died” while playing computer games, involves the assumption of a world of meaning which underlies language. “I am my world” means that the metaphysical I implicit in all recognition of meaning is the limit of the world which is made up of everything it is possible to mean. Saying “I” requires the recognition of meaning in the language in which the “I” is presented.

What happens when we apply this notion of the metaphysical self to the language of representation we discovered in computer games? Again, unfortunately, not enough to solve our problem. To say that the world of the computer game is my world, or that I am the limit of what can be meant in the world of the game, does not yet explain why it is possible for me to say “I died.” It does raise interesting questions about a certain kind of solipsism implicit in computer games, but for our question it is not enough. To see why, look at the problem another way. My girlfriend does not play *World of Warcraft*, but she sometimes watches me play. When she is watching, the statement that “the world of the game is my world” is true of both of us. We are both recognizing the signs of the game, the pixels on the screen, as having a sense and meaning. For both of us, that meaning is recognized by the metaphysical self. What is the difference between us?

The obvious answer would seem to be: “The difference between us is that I am playing the game and she is not.” To see how this matters, we need to return to my first example. When I saw the knight flailing its pixelated arms in the water, I said “He drowned.” I did not say “I drowned.” My sister, on the other hand, corrected me by saying “Yes, *you* died.” She was able to make the connection between me and the knight while I could not. She had recognized meaning that I had not – the meaning implicit in the fact that I had pressed the button which had hurried

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. 5.6.

<sup>11</sup>Friedlander 114-117.

<sup>12</sup>Friedlander 120.

the knight to his watery grave. As a child completely inexperienced in computer games, I had only seen something like a movie: a movie of a knight running right and drowning, a movie which only played when I pressed the right arrow button. I knew something about the other arrow buttons; I had been shown how to play. But from where I was sitting, the up and left arrow buttons only played different movies: one where the knight jumped up and down, and one where the knight ran in the other direction. By pressing different buttons in combination, I could collage the movies together as it were, but I still saw nothing which made the knight I was controlling the same as me. What was I missing?

The answer I wish to propose is that there is a second language, and a second world of meaning involved in the playing of computer games. This is the language of input, whereby we communicate to the computer. The signs of this language are the key bindings particular to the game. Its sense is the command as it is executed by the pixels on the screen. Because it is a language, in order to use it competently, we have to recognize the meaning in it, which in turn requires a connection to the metaphysical self. This self, the limit of the language of input, is what we refer to when we use “I” in computer games.

This opens up a space often occupied in games by the avatar: the space of the game where the language of representation (the one I share with my girlfriend) and the language of input (my way of communicating to the computer) overlap each other. This space is made up of the signs which have meaning in both of these two languages. In a game played with an avatar, the avatar and its actions mean both the character in the language of representation, and the commands in the language of input. To recognize the meaning in either of the two languages separately is to assume the existence of the metaphysical self implicitly. But to recognize the dual meaning of the avatar makes the assumption of the metaphysical self explicit. This is because the metaphysical self is the limit of the world of meaning, and the limit of what can be meant by each language is made explicit by what can and cannot be expressed by the other language. Thus the language of input cannot mean an NPC or non-player character, and the language of representation cannot mean the player. This contrast shows off the metaphysical self which is the limit of the world of meaning which underlies the language of input. This metaphysical self is the “I” in computer games.

At first glance, this seems like an incredibly boring answer: we find ourselves in our avatars because we control them. I think that something more interesting comes out of this investigation, however. To be a competent player of computer games, one who plays them as games instead of watches them like movies, requires a player to recognize meaning in his interaction with the computer. It is not enough to see that pressing “w” makes the avatar go forward, it is necessary to recognize that pressing “w” *means* “go forward.” This might seem like a false distinction, but it is the same as the difference between handing a Japanese waiter a piece of paper with some Japanese writing on it and having the waiter bring you a hamburger, and knowing that the writing on the paper means “hamburger.” It might be theoretically possible to “get through” a game without ever meaning the inputs, but such a person is no more playing the game than the man in John Searle’s Chinese room understands Chinese.<sup>13</sup> Certainly it is no more possible to go through a whole game without recognizing the meaning of the inputs, than it is to go through childhood without learning the meanings of basic words. Recognizing the meaning of

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<sup>13</sup>John R. Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs.” Behavioral and Brain Sciences 3 (1980): 417-457.

our inputs is so ingrained in us it takes effort to see that it is not a simple process. To get a glimpse of what it is like to play without this meaning, consider this example. John sits down with friends and plays *Star Fox* on multiplayer. Before he figures out which quadrant shows the jet which is “him,” he does not find himself in the game. He can move the joystick, and one of the jets will move. In this way, he is still communicating to the computer correctly; he is making sense using the language of input. But until he realizes which jet is reacting to his movements, he cannot recognize meaning in the button presses he is making, i.e., in the signs he is manipulating.

We now have an answer to what “I died” means in the context of computer game play. When I say “I died,” I am translating into English a proposition expressed to me by the computer. The proposition has meaning in the world of the game, which is made up of the worlds of meaning expressible in the two languages of the computer game (the language of what we see, and the language of what we do). The “I” refers to the limit of the language of what we do, which is made explicit by the contrast of this language to the parts of the world of the game where this language does not overlap the language of what we see.

This leaves one question: what exactly is the relationship between the avatar and the player? I mentioned that the space where computer games’ two languages overlap is often occupied by the avatar, but this is by no means necessary. I have no major psychological claims to make about how players identify with their avatars, or with the multiple characters they play. I have said something about where we find the *self* in computer games; but, for the most part, it will be up to others to say exactly how that self relates to avatars in different games. I have shown, however, what it is possible to say in games, and I believe this does inform psychological theories, in so far as what we can say affects how we think. If there is a psychological principle at work here, it comes down to a principle which computer game designers are already familiar with: players tend to identify with characters the more they have control over them, relative to the control they have over the given game as a whole. During fights in *Final Fantasy VII*, for example, what the player actually has control over is the menu which chooses the attacks for multiple characters. This makes it more difficult to identify clearly with any of the characters during combat scenes. Therefore this past winter, I often heard my girlfriend complaining that “Cloud died” or “Everybody died,” but only rarely “I died.” But this principle does not in itself decide whether I identify with, or how I relate to, a character. Other psychological and identity-building processes, even in small doses, have profound effects. As James Gee points out, even the fact that NPC’s in *Halo* often call Master Chief a “hero” causes some people to play the otherwise “blank slate” character differently<sup>14</sup> This is in spite of the fact that the player’s actions are always Master Chief’s actions, leaving very little room to separate out The Chief as a different identity.

But rather than pursuing this further I shall end here, and conclude by reiterating how it is due to the metaphysical self that we may use the first person when speaking about an avatar in a computer game. As for the crucial and immensely difficult questions of how we interact with the avatar psychologically, I will, following a long philosophical tradition, leave these “practical” matters to others.

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<sup>14</sup>Gee 58.

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