The Freedom of Avatars (or rather, The Thingness of Dolls and Avatars)

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Introduction

Titles are mostly used to label texts retrospectively - after a set of arguments have been thought through. That is not the case here. The title came first and is meant to function as a trigger of reflection. "The Freedom of Avatars" is a bit of a paradox. Surely it is the higher being - the deity or the player - who is free, free to descend into virtual worlds using an avatar as his or her vehicle. What can "the freedom of avatars" mean - and why try to trigger reflection on this in the first place?

Because I feel something lacking from existing avatar scholarship - of which there is quite a lot of high quality. Existing avatar scholarship can be said to frame the avatar in terms of a subject-object relationship. That relationship plays out in three different ways:

1 as extension of a phenomenological *I can*[1]

2 as extension of, or alternative to, a psychological *I am*[2]

3 as extension of a social *we are*[3]

Bluntly put, existing scholarship looks at how the avatar can be used as a tool - a tool for embodiment, identity play, character engagement, community building etc. Something is falling between the cracks here: the avatar itself as something important on its own.

I would like to do two things with this presentation: first, I will try to break away from the established subject-object way of thinking about the player-avatar entity by framing the avatar in terms of its *artefactuality,* or *thingness*. Then I will consider how this shift in perspective might help generate an outcome in cultural history; I will be suggesting a certain kinship between handcrafted avatars and handcrafted dolls.

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1   It is one of the fathers of modern phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who introduces the idea of the I can. The term is used by Rune Klevjer (2012) in a book chapter which offers what is, to my mind, the best use of classical phenomenology in avatar scholarship; here Klevjer talks of "[p]roxy embodiment" that "extends from our body as a hard-earned habit" (36, my emphasis). For other examples of avatar scholarship exploring the subject-object, player-avatar relationship in terms of bodily extension, see Wilhelmsson (2006, 2008) and Gregersen and Grodal (2008).
2   For example: "avatars are extending the performances of identity found in offline contexts" (Hjorth, 2011: 72), avatars function "as extension of oneself" (Heljakka, 2013: 352).
3   Celia Pearce (2009) talks of the avatar facilitating "a kind of social augmentation" (116) in her book on "Communities of Play". It is probably because that book is based on ethnography, rather than pure philosophy, that Pearce is able to combine the three perspectives on the player-avatar relationship outlined here; Pearce observes how avatarial embodiment plays a part in the production of meaning in a social space.

From objects to things

In media studies, to start there, there has been an interest in things and objects at least since Scott Lash and Celia Lury's book, "Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things", came out in 2007. In that book, Lash and Lury argue for a methodological move from epistemology - where an outsider interprets a text - to ontology - where a user engages with things, or objects. Although they mainly talk of "thingification" and "the mediation of things", Lash and Lury sometimes use the words "thing" and "object" as synonyms. A couple of more recent books make it clear that it is actually useful to keep the two terms, thing and object, separate. I am thinking, for example, of two edited books published by Routledge in 2009 and 2014. Thus Penney Harvey and Hannah Knox find that

> [t]here is a general agreement amongst [the] contributors [to the edited book "Objects and Materials"] that the value of the 'thing' concept in contemporary scholarship derives from an interest in attending to how things act back on the world, manifesting resistances, capacities, limits and potentials, and thereby challenging the normative subject/object dichotomy. (Harvey & Knox, 2014: 4)[4]

My goal here is exactly to challenge subject/object thinking in avatar scholarship. Not by doing something as radical as flipping the relationship around - making the avatar rather than the player the "subject" - but by replacing "object" with "thing". "The thing," writes Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (2009) in the introduction to their edited book, "The Object Reader", "eludes the oppositional and hierarchical structure between subject and object perpetuated by modern philosophy" (10).

At this point, in order to say something more specific about avatars, I need to pick a specific theory or theorist of things. There are many options to be found in "anthropology and material culture studies, science and technology studies, technoculture and digital media, and critical theory and philosophy", to quote the categories into which Candlin and Guins' (2009: 4) place thing scholarship. I will limit myself to one single text, Martin Heidegger's 1950 lecture on *Das Ding*, translated into into English as *The Thing* (1971).

Walking with Heidegger and *The Thing*

Heidegger's lecture is one of those thought-walks where Heidegger performs "haptic analysis, akin to a walk in the woods, by which the stroller happens upon matters of interest", to quote Ian Bogost's (2006: 7) summary of the method.[5] My plan is to walk down Heidgger's path twice. First to scout the surroundings, to get a sense of the lecture by

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4   Owen Smith (2007) thinks along the same lines, using "artifact" where others might have used "thing", when he says that "[o]ur artifacts and tools are more than just those objects that we use to perform tasks. In the end, they are change agents" (5). Artefacts are change agents when they change our perception of a task, and thereby the task itself, rather than merely allowing us to perform a task. Gregersen (2008) observes something to that effect when he remarks that "the player's sense of agency may takes on a distinct tone of agility, muscular power or determined vulnerability through embodiment effects" (125) when playing a particular computer game avatar.

5   "In colloquial German a Holzweg is a path through the woods that leads nowhere" (Malpas, 2006: 363, n. 130), but as Jeff Malpas (2006) points out, "it may still be necessary to follow them. The mistake would be to remain stuck on the path" (174). In A Letter to a Young Student, which functions as an epilogue to the The Thing, Heidegger (1971) (also in the original German publication [Heidegger, 2000]) actually uses the metaphor of a "field path" (183) rather than a wood path.

following it chronologically, that is, step by step as Heidegger moves from a rather commonsensical starting point to a more "cosmic" conclusion. On the second walk, I will take an avatar and a doll with me. This is when I will try to move from philosophy to cultural history by suggesting kinship between handcrafted avatars and handcrafted dolls.

Heidegger uses a jug as his key example of a thing. He moves forward step by step, each step bringing him closer to a full appreciation of the jug's thingness, but with each step he also restlessly realises that he needs to press on, that he is not there yet:

1) The first step is taken by observing a fundamental difference between *object* and *thing*. The object with its "opposing 'ob-'" (174) "stands against" (164); this a wordplay on the German *Gegenstand* (Heidegger, 2000: 169). The object stands against the senses (through perception) and stands against the mind (in recollection). But the jug as thing rather than object is "something self-sustained, something that stands on its own", "something independent" (164) *qua* its ability to hold liquid, also when we are not looking at it or thinking about it.

2) "But in truth," continues Heidegger upon realising that another step is required, "we are thinking of this self-support in terms of the making process" (165). In order to think about the jug as thing, our thought must include that making of the jug, which was aimed at its "effective [feature]" (169) of holding. Where an object merely "stands against", a thing can "[stand] forth" because it "has the sense of stemming from somewhere, whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by another" (166).

3) But we cannot stop our thought-walk here, with the inclusion of *making* in our thought, we much go on to include also *use* in our haptic analysis. Using the jug reveals that its thingness *qua* independently liquid-holding vessel is strictly speaking material. The jug is not a thing because it has a base and sides made of clay or some other appropriately impermeable material. It is the "impalpable" "void that holds" (167), which the potter makes, and *qua* which the jug is a thing.

4) Heidegger's last step in search of thingness is perhaps, to some readers, more of a cosmic "leap". It is in his lecture on *The Thing* Heidegger introduces the notion of the *fourfold*, which also "appears in a number of Heidegger's important later essays" (Malpas, 2006, p. 233).[6] The fourfold consists of two conceptual pairs: earth and sky - which I will loosely translate to material and governing regularities - and divinities and mortals. I will return to mortality later and entirely bracket the issue of what Heidegger means by "divinities". Suffice to say that what "we call the world" is "the simple onefold of [the fourfold]" (177): "When we say earth, we are already thinking of the other three", "when we say sky, we are already thinking of the other three" (176) etc. This is what Heidegger refers to as the onefold's "mirror-play" (177). Thing is only that which comes out of the world's mirror-play, which "presences" in Heidegger's terminology the essential interconnectedness of earth, sky, mortals and divinities.

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6   A somewhat similar fourfold structure does, however, appear earlier in Heidegger's writing, see Malpas, 2006, p. 225ff.

Walking with Dolls and Avatars

I will now grab hold of a doll and an avatar and take them with me down Heidegger's thought-path, attempting to appreciate the thingness of the avatar and the doll.

1) Dolls and avatars are not merely objects. They are things standing independently on their own although historically, dolls have done this with varying degrees of success. 19th century male dolls "lacking the support of a long skirt" (Armstrong, 1996: 43) often had difficulties standing on their own, as have the Barbie doll. Since 1964, with the introduction of the G. I. Joe doll, or "action figure" with its 21 moveable joints, dolls have been able to stand on their own in a literal sense (Bainbridge, 2010). Avatars are also of independent standing and many contemporary avatars often remind us of this by heavy breathing and flexing of muscles if we do not tend to them.[7]

2) Only *made* dolls and avatars are truly things. I have argued elsewhere (Liboriussen, 2013) that what makes "computer games" novel in the grand scheme of cultural history is that they allow the playful desires identified by Caillois (1961) to be contaminated with craftsmanship, or "the desire to do a job well for its own sake" as Richard Sennett (2008: 9) puts it. "Doing a job well" has a double meaning for Sennett. It points to both the pleasure of seeing the final result of one's labour and to the contrastingly non-teleological pleasure of simply exercising craft-skill built up through rehearsal. Many avatars can be understood as crafted things, especially the avatars of MMORPGs.

   Also dolls gain in thingness when made, modified or at least named by their owners. As Roland Barthes (2009) puts it, toys that are created rather than merely owned "act by themselves", they "roll" and "walk" (40). Drawing on *Pinocchio* and other examples from cinema and literature, Lois Kuznets (1994) notes how "toy making [exemplifies] art, with the toy maker as consummate artist, who experiences great joy when toys take on life" (180, my emphasis). The avatar-crafter has something in common with the toymaker; both enjoy that their creations take on a certain life of their own.

3) Dolls and avatars are only truly understood through use. Just before, I quoted from Lois Kuznets's book, "When Toys Come Alive", a study of toys as literary characters. One of the assumptions underlying that book is that experiences "of the toy outside the world of books" (1994, p. 5) linger, and that such experiences, including childhood experiences, enrich literary appreciation of toys. I find it straightforward to assume something similar for avatars: that our experiences of avatars are somehow enriched by experiences of physical toys.

   Use reveals that just as Heidegger's jug holds an impalpable and holding void, the avatar holds something. Ulf Wilhelmsson (2008) suggests as much when he distinguishes between a *Game Ego*, which might or might not be focused in a visually representable avatar, and the *point of being* enacted by a Game Ego. As things, both avatar and doll hold a point of being. By that I mean to say - and here I am diverging from Wilhelmsson's use of "point of being" - that avatars and dolls invite us to participate in game worlds by saving us a spot in them. They are in a sense empty vessels holding

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7   This behaviour has been observable in avatars at least since Baldur's Gate (BioWare, 1998) avatars in battle stance.

spaces for players, but their invitations only become attractive when they are also gathering worlds around them.

4) True thingness stems from becoming a thing of a world.[8] It has been observed how children can use toys to create their own private worlds, or *paracosms* (Cohen & MacKeith, 1991). The nature of computer game "worlds" has been discussed in various ways, from discussions of their spatiality[9] to their status as social worlds[10]. Crafted avatars bring worlds "near" by gathering the fourfold - Heidegger's entire exploration of *The Thing* is actually motivated by a concern for nearness. He finds the living conditions of the modern world increasingly hostile to nearness, and then attends to things because "[n]ear to us are what we usually call things" (Heidegger, 1971: 164).

It would probably not be very useful to perform a one to one mapping of the fourfold onto computer game worlds - perhaps with rules as the regularities of "the sky", designers as divinities etc. - but using Heidegger's language we can say that the fourfold's mirror-play as onefold is gathered by the nearness of an avatar. The fourfold includes "mortals" and, writes Heidegger (1971), "[t]he mortals are human beings. ... Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it" (176). To make a world, the avatar also draws near the player's death.

The Thingness of Dolls and Avatars

The appropriate title for this talk - in terms of retrospective labelling - is clearly not "The Freedom of Avatars" but "The Thingness of Dolls and Avatars". I intend to develop these thoughts further, believing it worthwhile to first break away from the subject-object dichotomy by way of thingness, and then harvest a cultural-historical outcome from that shift in perspective. Here I have tried out Heidegger as the main theorist for performing such moves, but many other theorists and theories of thingness stand ready for use, and I am looking forward to your critical suggestions. Thank you.

Games

Baldur's Gate. BioWare, PC, 1998.

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8   Klevjer included the notion of *fiction* and of *(fictional) worlds* in his answer to the research question given in the title of his PhD thesis, *What is the Avatar?* (2006). He later (2012) decided to follow a different path and exclude "theories of simulation and fiction" from his explanation of what he calls "the defining mechanisms of avatarial embodiment" (21). The earlier approach is more useful for an understanding of avatars as things.
9   See, for example, Aarseth, 2000 and Jenkins, 2004.
10   The question of online computer games as "worlds" becomes particularly focused when rephrased as a question of their status as "places", hence suitable sites for ethnography (see Hine, 2000 and Boellstorff, 2008).

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