The Joy of Doing: The Corporeal Connection in Player-Avatar Identity

Introduction

The present paper sets out to investigate the relationship between players and avatars on the basis of three generally disregarded dimensions within research on player-avatar identity; corporality, locomotion and craftsmanship. This is done in order to establish a corporeal connection in player-avatar identity; a connection which is thoroughly grounded in the fusion of, what I coin, digital corporeality (the digital body and interaction) and corporeal digitality (the corporeal body and interaction). In this way, player-avatar identity is, to a large extent, something that comes together and is enjoyed through the corporeal-locomotive interaction of players. Through highlighting the corporeal connection in player-avatar identity as a fusion of digital corporeality and corporeal digitality, the paper asserts that in player-avatar identity it is the avatars that are being embedded within the players' body schema rather than it is the players that are being prosthetically extended to the avatars; meaning that it is a relation and identification characterized by centripetal corporeality, rather than centrifugal digitality. Consequently, the paper argues for a corporeal connection at the heart of (research on) player-avatar identity wherein players and avatars are united in the joy of doing through experiencing first-person presence, first-person engagement, first-person perspective and first-person immersion whether the players are playing a so-called first-person shooter like *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software, 2009), a third-person MMOG like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard/Vivendi 2004) or a an 'exergame' like *Move: Start the Party* (Supermassive Games, 2010).

As a theoretical undercurrent throughout the paper runs Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) as well as modern clarifications of the key concepts; boy schema and body image. But rather than instituting a pure Merleau-Pontian investigation, the paper tries, notably through the adaptation of frameworks for corporeal locomotion (Maxine Sheets-Johnstone *The Primacy of Movement*, 1999), corporeal interaction with digitality (Mark B.N. Hansen *Bodies in Code*, 2006) and incorporating (kin)aesthetic craftsmanship (Richard Sennett *The Craftsman*, 2008), to elucidate the ways player-avatar identity is grounded in and expresses itself through corporeality, locomotion and craftsmanship. Furthermore, these frameworks can also help clarify how 'the corporeal connection' stands out compared to the stereotypical framings of player-avatar identity within game research.

First, I would however like to set the scene with a short description of how this corporeal connection unfolds in a *WoW*-raid. Below is an attempt to catch the avatarian connection as grounded in the player's fusion of

corporeal digitality and digital corporeality. This is done through the juxtaposing of field descriptions focusing on the player's corporeal locomotion with video recordings of the corporeal hands in action and in-game captures of the digital avatar in action:

> The avatar stands motionless as the player's hands are resting on keyboard and mouse while the raid-group plan and align their corporeal interaction through communication before commencing the raid. After a while, the hands restlessly begin to make the avatar jump from side to side and dance in front of the other group-members' avatars. Several group-members follow the example as they wait impatiently to plunge into the intense corporeal locomotion of the raid-instance. Finally, the raid-leader call the corporeal interaction: '3-2-1-Go' and instantly the left hands fingers begin to dance on the keyboard while the right hand skates with the mouse and clicks its buttons. Rhythmic waves of key-taps and mouse-clicks ascend as a corporeal orchestrated music: '1-1-1-1-2-2-2-2-2-click-click-click-click'. The player's hands dance around in a square on the left third of the keyboard – up and down, in and out, close together and spread out as a spider in a death struggle or frantically spinning a very complicated, chaotic web. It is as if life and death depended on their performance as the left hand dance its distinctive 'square-dance' while the other hand ride with the mouse and composes its 'clickclickclick'-ing song. Not once is the eyes removed from the on-screen interaction as they intently monitor the other group-members digital corporeality in the player's attempt to, through intense corporeal interaction, keep the other group-members health-bars up. Simultaneously, the hands incessantly weave digitality and corporeality together as vision and digital locomotive interaction is created through corporeal locomotion. The player's fingers dance between the WSAD-keys and the spell-keys littered around on the left third of the keyboard while the on-screen digitality is exploding in shambles of information, bars, boxes, numbers, icons, dinging-sounds and digital locomotion as the game reacts digitally to the player's corporeal interaction and the player react corporeally to the game's digital interaction. It is craftsmanship at a high level as the player ceaselessly and competently fuse player-as-avatar with avatar-as-player through the hands dance to the rhythm of the raid, knowing that if they are caught off-beat for only a second the group will probably wipe.

Prior research: Pervading framings of player-avatar identity

As a symptomatic reading of game research on the avatarian connection, the following five paragraphs will present a condensed presentation of various pervading framings within prior player-avatar research. When game researchers have explored the relationship between player and avatar the assumptions regarding the nature of the avatarian connection have been manifold. However, certain patterns recur in relation to how this connection is framed. Game research on the avatarian connection can, thus, in accordance with the central terms applied, roughly, be divided into the following five stances:

1. Visuality: Player-avatar identity as body image and visual perspective

Here, players are framed as visual perceivers, viewers or spectators which monitor or perceive the screen's visual output. Players identify with avatars as being the players' *exteriorized* or *doubled* body images. Accordingly: 'the genre of computer games like *Myst* or *Doom* remediates cinema, and such games are sometimes called "interactive films"' (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 47). Newer adaptations of this stance are found in e.g. Bob Rehak's 'Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar' (2003) wherein it is argued that: 'spectatorship is clearly central to the form. As we play we watch ourselves play […] Thus it is more

accurate or at least more inclusive, to speak of the *avatarial relation*: a "structure of seeing" in which the subject, acting on its desire to see itself as other, pursues its reflection in the imaginary like a cat chasing its tail' (Rehak 2003: 118-19) and Miroslaw Filiciak's 'Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games' (2003) wherein she states that: 'Since our actions are visible on a television or computer screen, it is where we actually act […] Today, the mirror is replaced with the screen' (Filiciak 2003: 100) which players make 'a fetish; we desire it, not only do we want to watch the screen but also to "be seen" on it' (Filiciak 2003: 99). Thus, player-avatar identity is centered on structures of vision and visuality as the relationship is framed through terms such as 'appearance,' 'screen image,' 'specular body,' 'reflection,' 'mirror,' 'gaze,' 'on-screen visual representation' and 'projection' – To put it provocatively, this stance frames player-avatar identity as a relation of voyeurism where players are immersed in a *viewing* and *monitoring* of their own on-screen avatarian mirror reflections.

2. Cognition: Player-avatar identity as projected minds and transmitted intentionality

Here, players are framed as a kind of cognitive thinkers, embodied minds, interpreters or meaning-makers projecting their minds into or transmitting cognition to avatars in the digital sphere. Players identify with the avatar as they think *with* them, *in* them, *as* them or *through* them. This 'thinking through, in, with or as machines' has, as N. Katherine Hayles points out in *How We Became Post-Human* (1999) a long-standing tradition within e.g. information technologies, cybernetics, computer simulation and cognitive science that 'proceeded primarily along the lines that sought to understand human being as a set of informational processes' (Hayles 1999: 4) because 'information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality' (Hayles 1999: 18). An adaptation of the player-avatar relation as consisting of a thinking *with* avatars is e.g. found in Constance Steinkeuhler's 'Massively Multiplayer Online Games as an Educational Technology: An Outline for Research' (2008) in which she 'document and analyze these core practices that constitute gameplay in virtual worlds' (Steinkuehler 2008: 10). These core practices she lists as: 'complex forms of socially and materially distributed cognition,' 'collaborative problem solving practices,' 'novel literacy practices,' 'scientific habits of mind,' 'computational literacy' and 'collective intelligence' (Steinkuehler 2008: 12-13). An adaptation of thinking *in* or *as* avatars is found in e.g. James Paul Gee's 'Video Games and Embodiment (2008) in which player-avatar identity is defined as a relation of cognitive projection: 'This dual nature of game characters – that they are [cognitive] projects the player has been handed and beings into which the players project their desires, intentions, and goals – is why I refer to them as projective beings.' (Gee 2008: 260). Finally, an adaptation of thinking *through* avatars is found in e.g. Anders Gregersen and Torben Grodal's 'Embodiment and interface' (2009) where avatars are used as means for carrying out the players cognitive intentionality in the digital sphere, given that 'the embodied mind is what the organism does' (Gregersen and Grodal 2008: 66) and 'Video games are computer-and-monitor-supported activities that select a small basketful out of all the possible way that embodied brains may relate to the worlds and other agents' (Gregersen and Grodal 2008: 81). Here, avatars become players' embodied minds which are used to carry out players' cognitive goals and intentions in the digital sphere. Within this stance player-avatar identity is viewed as something players think *with* (i.e. avatars are players' cognitive tools), thinks *in* (i.e. avatars are containers for players' minds), thinks *as* (i.e. avatars become players' 'new mind') or thinks *through* (i.e. avatars are 'cables' which players transmit their intentionality through) – To put it provocatively, this stance frames player-avatar identity as a relation of mentalism where players are immersed in the projection, transmission or transportation to avatars as embodied minds.

3. Dramaturgy: Player-avatar identity as role-play, pretense and performance

Here, players are framed as narrators, protagonists, characters or actors projected into or enacting fictional characters in a fictional world. Players identify with avatars as they live through the digital interaction *as* the avatars and *with* the avatars. In Brenda Laurel's words: 'People who are participating in the representation aren't audience members anymore. It's not that the audience joins the actors on the stage, it's that they

become actors' (Laurel 1991: 17, emphasis in original). Newer adaptations are found in e.g. Kjetil Sandvik's *In and out of Character: Complex Role-play and Dramaturgy in an online World* (2006) where: 'The participant play roles, that is: fictitious characters' (Sandvik 2006: 15) and Andrew Burn's 'Playing Roles' (2006) arguing that: 'It is by means of the avatar that the player becomes embodied in the game and performs the role of the protagonist' (Burn 2006: 72) and experiences 'identification with a fictional character' (Burn 2006: 83). Thus, player-avatar identity becomes enclosed within dramaturgic structures characterized by terms such as 'storytellers,' 'protagonists' and 'actors' for players, (fictional) 'masks,' 'fictional characters' and 'fictitious identities' for avatars, 'acting,' 'pretending' or 'role-playing' for the interactions and 'stage,' 'cyberdrama,' 'dramatic structures' and 'dramatic fiction' for the activities to extract some central terms from various works within this stance. – To put it provocatively, player-avatar identity is framed as a relation of escapism wherein players are immersed in the *role-playing* or *performance* of avatars as fictional characters.

4. Prostheses: Player-avatar identity as prosthetic, corporeal extension and extending tools

Here, players are framed as extending their bodies to avatars and into the digital sphere by using avatars as prosthetic tools, vehicles, puppets or body doubles. Players identify with avatars as they *prosthetically extend* themselves to the avatar (serving as *prosthetic body*) either by remote controlling avatars as puppeteers pulling a puppet's strings or by inhabiting them from within as a driver in a vehicle. This stance can also be characterized through some of Donna Haraway's influential sentences from 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991): 'Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert' (Haraway 1991: 152), entailing that 'we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras […] There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic […]Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin? […] machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don't need organic holism' (Haraway 199: 177-178). Newer adaptations are found in e.g. Martti Lahti's 'As we become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games' (2003) stating that: 'much of the development of video games has been driven by a desire for corporeal immersion with technology, a will to envelop the player in technology' (Lahti 2003: 159) and that 'Games commodify our cyborg desires, our will to merge with and become technology […] our bodies have to develop a sort of prosthetic memory if we (our avatars) are to survive as we melt into electronic worlds' (Lahti 2003: 166) and Kathy Cleland's 'Prosthetic Bodies and Virtual Cyborgs' (2010) claiming that 'Our prosthetic technological extensions enable us to amplify and extend ourselves' (Cleland 2010: 75). Thus, player-avatar identity becomes the stretching of players to avatars through prosthesis. A stance focused on terms such as 'prosthetic vision,' 'surrogate bodies,' 'prosthetic re-embodiment' and 'prosthetic avatar bodies,' 'instruments,' 'vehicles' and 'puppets.' – To put it provocatively, this stance frame player-avatar identity as a relation of cyborgian extension wherein players are immersed in prosthetic technology and avatars.

5. Sociality: Player-avatar identity as self-representation and identity-play

Here, players are framed as cultural/social individuals engaged in self-representation or identity-play through their avatars. Players identify with avatars as they *perform* and *construct* avatars as their self image. As Sherry Turkle states, when talking about MUD's, that: 'The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life, we self-fashion and self-create' (Turkle 1995: 180). Newer adaptations of this viewpoint are found in e.g. Miroslaw Filiciak's 'Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games' (2003) arguing that: 'The virtual identity thus becomes one of many "selves" included in the user's identity' (Filiciak 2003: 92) where 'people play games eagerly to be able to shift their identities'

(Filiciak 2003: 98) and Rachael Hutchinson's 'Performing the Self' (2007) in which she proclaims that 'the player undergoes a process of identification, with the avatar becoming a projection or imagination of the self' (Hutchinson 2007: 288) and where 'the ability to choose between characters at will, offer limitless opportunity for experimentation with multiple selves' (Hutchinson 2007: 294). Thus, player-avatar identity becomes enclosed within structures of self-performance, self-construction and self-multiplication characterized by terms such as 'masks,' 'multiple selves,' 'virtual identities,' 'self-projection,' 'self-awareness,' 'identity-experimentation' and 'identity-play.' – To put it provocatively, this stance frames player-avatar identity as a relation of narcissism where players are immersed in the *role-playing* or *performance* of themselves as avatars.

Introducing the joy of doing

The above review and exposition of research on player-avatar identity is off course a provocative and coarse reading. Nonetheless, it is justifiable, as the enlargement of underlying tendencies can help expound and illuminate existing currents within the research area. While all five stances have validity and relevance; e.g. the player-avatar relation understood through the dramaturgic framing within explicit role-playing or the player-avatar relation understood as building on cognition within explicit puzzle games, it is however problematic that research generally isn't concerned with or mindful of the corporeal connection as a fundamental and foundational dimension in player-avatar identity. Therefore, the paper will in the following try to illuminate this sixth stance; player-avatar identity as a corporeal connection. This is done by moving through the stereotypical stances within player-avatar identity once more, but now with a viewpoint explicitly grounded in corporeality and locomotion, thus, enabling an overall movement

- from body images to body schemas and from visual perspectives to 'handsight,'
- from instrumental/intentional transmission to corporeal locomotion and form projected minds to body memory,
- from role-play, pretense and performance to digital corporeality,
- from corporeal extension, prostheses and extending tools to corporeal incorporation, handcraft and implemented tools and
- from self-representation and identity-play to self-being and self-doing.

By adopting and adapting philosophical and theoretical works on corporeality, locomotion, digital interaction and craftsmanship it becomes possible to transform and upend the pervading framings of player-avatar identity. In this way, each stance will be filtered through 'the corporeal perspective' and added a corporeal counterpart that when combined will constitute the corporeal connection in player-avatar identity.

Corporeal digitality: Body schemas and 'handsight'

Within this first perspective, 'Visuality: Player-avatar identity as body image and visual perspective,' the player-avatar connection was framed as a voyeuristic relation of visual perception and visual representation. In the following two core areas within this stance will be addressed; the body image and visual perspective.

From body image to body schema

Importantly, the concept of the body image must be distinguished from the concept of the body schema – Especially since Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'schema corporel' in *The Phenomenology of Perception* confusingly has been translated to 'body image'. As Shaun Gallagher states: 'A clear distinction between

body image and body schema is absolutely necessary if these terms are to serve any useful purpose […] The difference between body image and body schema is like the difference between having a *perception* of (or belief about, or emotional attitude towards) one's own body and having the capacity to *move* one's own body.' (Gallagher 2005: 234, emphasis in original). Thus, the body schema is the way players have and know their bodies (as player-avatar) in action; it is their corporeal focus on the concrete game at hand. In accordance with the concept of the body schema players know themselves as avatars through the corporeal-locomotive action they undertake. On the grounds of the body schema the avatarian connection is meaningful because of what players are capable of *doing* because of it, and not because of what players are capable of *looking like* or *looking at* because of it. Hence, the avatarian connection is more a question of corporeal-locomotive capabilities than of visual perception or appearance. According to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema players are bodies that have a world in e pre-reflexive connection between body and world. The body schema is, thus, the way players have, know and make sense of their corporeal-digital body in action in the material-digital gameworld. So, there is at the heart of player-avatar identity a fundamental connection between meaning in the material-digital gameworld and corporeal-digital doing in that gameworld. In other words, player-avatar identity becomes the doings of the player as corporeal and digital body fused within the unity of players' dynamic body schematic structures.

This is a long way from Rehak's and Filiciak's player-avatar identity as a body image relation in which players make the avatar a visual fetish wherein they desire to be seen and see themselves – A structure of voyeuristic desire where players lust for the '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' (Rehak 2003: 107) but a desire the long history of video games clearly shows is impossible (Rehak 2003: 107). However, with the advent of the Playstation 3 EyeToy Camera, this desire has unexpectedly been fulfilled. In *Move: Start the Party* players' body images are perfectly visually represented in the digital sphere gazing back at the players and mirroring their every movement. Then, why do players ordinarily not feel more intimately connected to their visually 'flawless' mirror image than they do to their 'flawed' *WoW* avatar? This is probably due to the fact that players do not primarily connect to avatars as 'visual output perceived' but more as 'corporeal-digital interaction experienced.' For players, player-avatar identity is caused by avatars intimate connection to players' corporeal-locomotive expressiveness. Hence, the avatarian connection is not a corporeally disengaged or detached relation, as Rehak would have it: 'We create avatars to leave our bodies behind' (Rehak 2003: 123). Rather, it is a corporeally engaged and attached relation and, thus, more in accordance with James Newman's claim: 'What I am saying is that the pleasures of videogame *play* are not primarily visual, but rather are kinaesthetic' (Newman 2002: unpaged, emphasis in original). Player-avatar identity unfolds in the body schema where the distinction between avatars and players are dissolved as corporeal player-avatar fusion takes precedence over visual player-avatar distinction. Players are corporeally engaged in avatars (regardless of their appearance) and avatars are absorbed within players' body schemas (as body schematic capabilities and structures). Players and avatars become dynamically interacting units where learning to play as player-avatar is to enrich one's body schema and acquire new digital-locomotive possibilities through corporeal locomotion – The avatars of *Borderland*, *WoW* and *Move: Start the Party* are specific instantiations of body schematic structures. Thus, player-avatar identity in *WoW* becomes the growing into and shaping of a *WoW* gaming body where identity exists within and through the player's hands and only emerge through corporeal effort. Entailing, that player-avatar identity cannot be understood or formulated cut off from that effort. The reason players invest themselves in their avatars, whether in *WoW* or *Move: Start the Party*, is because avatars are expressions of their body schematic competencies and corporeal work. In this way, one could even argue for stronger identification with a *WoW* avatar signifying thousands of hours of corporeal interaction, than with the perfect mirror avatar found in *Move: Start the Party*. Avatars are thus, not as much players' body images or body doubles perceived as visual output, as they are players' body schemas in action. Consequently, player-avatar identity becomes a structure of corporeal first-person engagement rather than visual voyeuristic perception - Leading to another core area within visuality; namely the concept of visual perspective.

From visual perspective to handsight

There exists in research a correlation between framing player-avatar as a relation grounded in the body image and characterizing the strength of player identification as dependent upon visual perspective. In this way, Martthi Lahti, Bob Rehak, Alison McMahan as well as Cathy Cleland privileges 'first-person' visual perspective as being the most 'immersive' (McMahan 2003: 67), 'embodied, (Cleland 2010: 85), 'subjective' and unifying' (Lahti 2003: 161) and as causing 'corporeal immersion' and 'sensory immersion' (Rehak 2003: 118). Thus, they are all in agreement on the fact that: 'Differing articulations between camera-body and avatar-body lead to different, though related, modes of play and subject effects.' (Rehak 2003: 109).

But, if the player-avatar relation is grounded in body schematic structures rather than body imagery, this view must be reformulated as corporeal interaction has bearing on the experienced degree of immersion, unification and subjectivity. Hence, players' first-person corporeal interaction with the material input-devices causes their visual perspective to always be first-person as 'the body is indeed "the natural subject of perception" and the "point of view on point of views"' (Casey 1987: 147). Or, in James Newman's words 'For the primary-player, however, viewpoint is important only in so far as it impacts upon the game […] During On-line play, videogames are experienced by the primary-player first hand regardless of the mode of their presentation or content mediation' (Newman 2002: unpaged).

A description of the corporeal connection at play in the players' perspective in the 'first-person' shooter *Borderlands* and the 'third-person' MMOG *WoW* is possible through an adaptation of Mark B.N. Hansen's account of the digital artwork *Handsight* in *Bodies in Code* (2006: 71-82). By taking a step back from the screen and observing how 'visual perspective' is created through corporeal interaction, one is able to grasp how players' corporeal-digital interaction renders the difference between first-person and third-person perspective insignificant. Players of *Borderlands* and *WoW* alike experience first-person perspective due to their first-person interaction with the material input-devices through which they create and control their visual viewpoint. By looking at players' corporeality, and not just the visual output, it becomes highlighted how players in *Borderlands* as well as *WoW* see digitally through interacting corporeally as they ceaselessly navigate the visual field through corporeal interaction with the mouse or keyboard. Thus, traditional eyesight (visual perspective) is transformed to 'handsight' (first-person corporeal navigation) by routing visual perspective through players' corporeal-locomotive interaction with their hands. Consequently, *WoW*, as many other games, implement a tactile first-person presence in the visual field through a 'transductive coupling of vision and touch' (Hansen 2006: 81) as digital vision is mapped on corporeal locomotion. *Borderlands* and *WoW* require players to initiate and navigate the operation of vision through the hand, and thus, by routing the function of vision through manual manipulation the games make the user 'see with the hand.' Consequently, the digital sphere cannot be understood as a visual sphere and perspective cannot be understood in accordance with the visual output. Instead, perspective is created through active and proactive corporeal locomotion. As a result, 'handsight' takes precedence over 'eyesight' as both *Borderlands* and *WoW* require that their players develop first-person handsight.

Overall, competent players visually perceive their avatarian interaction in the digital sphere more skillfully than novices, precisely because they have learned to fuse on-screen digitality with off-screen corporeality; they can see on-screen how they must act off-screen and they know how they must act off-screen in order to act on-screen. Thus, competent players have skillfully rooted their avatarian connection in corporeality and this rootedness manifests itself in the form of a corporeal-digital fusion where players experience the digital sphere directly through first-person vision and first-person agency as they simultaneously interact corporeally and digitally in the gameworld whether in *Borderlands*, *WoW* or *Move: Start the Party*. On this version of the avatarian connection as grounded in body schema and handsight, success in generating first-person perspective, immersion and engagement is not gained by simulating visual body images and perspectives but by stimulating corporeal locomotion.

Corporeal locomotion and body memory

The foundation for a corporeal connection in player-avatar identity has been established by substituting body image with body schema and eyesight with handsight. This is, however, not sufficient if one wants to grasp player-avatar identity as a corporeal connection. Therefore, the paper now turns towards the cognitive stance in an attempt to grasp the body schematic interaction in gaming, not as instrumental actions transmitting cognitive intentionality to the avatar, but as inherently significant kinaesthetic streams of *locomotion*. Furthermore, player-avatar identity will be described as a relation stored and recalled as *body memory*, rather than as cognitive consciousness in the form of projected and embodied minds.

Within this second stance, 'Cognition: Player-avatar identity as projected minds an transmitted intentionality,' the player-avatar connection was framed as a mentalist relation of players as minds projected, embodied and immersed in digital avatars or as cognitive intentionality which unfolded in the digital sphere by transmission of cognition to the avatar through instrumental corporeal actions. In the following two core areas within this stance will be addressed; cognitive intentionality and projected, embodied minds.

From instrumental/intentional transmission to locomotion

Instead of framing corporeal actions and movements as mere means to a (cognitive) end, the frameworks of Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's *The Primacy of Movement* (1999) enables us to grasp corporeal locomotion as inherently expressive, meaningful and influential. According to Sennett, corporeal craftsmanship is 'the skill of making things well' (Sennett 2008: 8) unfolding as an intimate connection between head and hand wherein thinking, seeing and sensing are embedded and contained within the crafting hands. In this way: 'The craftsman represents the special human condition of being *engaged*. One aim of this book is to explain how people become engaged practically but not necessarily instrumentally' (Sennett: 2008: 20). Consequently, corporeal handwork (i.e. the player's corporeal interaction with the material input-devices) is never just means to an end – Rather it is always *part of* the end. But an approach grounded in instrumental cognitive intentionality is unable to reveal the experiential quality of the fusion of players' corporeal locomotion with avatars' digital locomotion. Following Sennett, corporeal locomotion in *WoW* cannot meaningfully be divided into separate instrumental motor acts of, for example, pressing the 1-key and then the 2-key in order to carry out the cognitive intentions of making the avatar cast a 'flash heal' and then a 'greater heal' in a *WoW*-raid. Rather, player-avatar identity emerges from the inseparable kin-aesthetic streams of players' locomotive corporeality fused with avatars' locomotive digitality. Entailing that player-avatar identity is based on the coming together of corporeal digitality and digital corporeality within players' unified body schemas as players develop and derive pleasure from their handcrafting skills, rather than based on the transmission of their thinking minds.

In the *Primacy of Movement* Maxine Sheets-Johnstone foregrounds corporeal locomotion, stating that: 'Clearly, movement in a quite literal sense informs perception' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 183). In accordance with this view, players get to know their avatars by relating them to their corporeal-digital locomotion. In computer games locomotion is, essentially, players' way of relating to their avatars, insofar as corporeal-digital locomotion necessarily is at work in every player-avatar relationship: 'In sum, whatever our differences, movement is our mother tongue' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 226). In *Borderlands*, *WoW* and *Move: Start the Party* players' corporeal locomotion is what establishes and upholds their avatarian connection; players can only 'become' avatars by letting corporeal locomotion flow from their hands. In this way, player-avatar identity is never still-born but always 'movement-born' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 244). This acknowledgement of and attention to corporeal locomotion is essential, as it highlights the fact that players can only experience avatarian connectivity through corporeal locomotion. When players-as-avatars venture on a *WoW*-raid they are wrapped in their hands corporeal locomotion, entailing that, in player-avatar identity, as in dance 'there is no "mind-doing" that is separate from "body-doing"' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 487). *WoW*-players integrate their avatars in the body schema in accordance with the patterns for corporeal locomotion the game puts at their disposal. Hence, the connection and identification players have with

avatars lie in the ways avatars get incorporated into the players' hands through corporeal locomotion expressed as a 'thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 485). This corporeal-locomotive avatarian connection and experience is kin-aesthetically different, but on equal footing, with the corporeal-locomotive avatarian connections and experiences found in *Borderlands* and *Move: Start the Party*. All three games have their own ways of making players dance to the beat of the game. Thus, player-avatar identity within these games signifies 'in a quite literal sense […] coming to grips with it – exploring it, searching it, discovering it in and through movement' (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 226); players are more corporeal-digital units in motion, than thinking minds unfolding cognition through avatars.

From projected minds to body memory

The above foregrounding of players' body schematic and corporeal-locomotive interaction also have bearing on how player-avatar identity is acquired, stored and recalled. Instead of framing player-avatar identity as projected, embodied and storing cognition, the framework of Edward S. Casey's *Remembering* (1987) puts at our disposal a framework for grasping the relation as a type of body memory. As the avatarian connection is not an out-of-body experience, but an in-body experience characterized by corporeal handcraft and locomotion it is also within players' bodies that the avatarian connection is stored and recalled: 'My body not only takes me into places; it habituates me to their peculiarities and helps me to remember them vividly' (Casey 1987: 180).

When thinking back on games played heavily in the past, we often don't only remember the visual output, cognitive puzzles or digital sphere. The memories of heavily played games are just as much recalled as corporeal-locomotive patterns and memories *in* the body. Players' bodies resonate with the avatar-shaped corporeal movements, imprinted in their body schemas as unique rhythmic compositions. My hands still remember *Summer Games* (Epyx/U.S. Gold, 1984) for the Commodore 64; how my left hand, in sprinting, franticly but rhythmically pushed the joystick from side to side as I sprinted on the screen. My memories of *Summer Games* are (also) corporeal-locomotive memories - The platform diving exercise remembered as the gyrating of the joystick in a carefully metered tempo in perfect unison with my digital corporeality as my hands crafted a flawlessly executed dive from the springboard. In this way, players acquire and recall their avatarian connections through handcraft, not through 'mindcraft' (or 'eyecraft'). Consequently, player-avatar 'acquisition' cannot be fully understood without acknowledging and taking into account what Edward S. Casey labels body memory: 'I speak of "body memory," not of "memory of the body." Body memory alludes to memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own ways of remembering: how we remember in and by and through the body' (Casey 1987: 147). Players' body memory is the way their bodies remember its own activity; a pre-reflective and pre-cognitive dimension of experience, Casey labels 'performative remembering' (Casey 1987: 148). Body memory is a remembering with and through the hands as players' memories (as avatars) are inscribed in corporeal locomotion. Consequently, it is primarily through body memory that players subsequently have access to their gaming activity, and not through their narrative recollections, pictorial re-vision or cognitive storage. Body memory takes players' 'directly *into* what is being remembered' (Casey 1987: 167, emphasis in original) as their hands once again find their way to keyboards, mice or joysticks: 'What is particularly striking […] is not only the sudden unpremeditated return of the relevant body memory – for which no express relearning or review was required – but the fact that no explicit recollection of past learning was called for. […] All that is called for is that one exist bodily in the circumstance where a given body memory is pertinent.' (148)

And still today, players' don't play *WoW* year in and year out as avatars solely for the cognitive, social, narrative or visual experience. They play (just as much) for the game's corporeal-locomotive orchestration; the way it sets their bodies in motion – and their corporeal-locomotive creation; the way they set themselves in motion. They craft their avatarian connection through corporeal presence and engagement and keep and recall it in their bodies as body memory.

The player-as-avatar: Digital corporeality

However, for the corporeal connection to make sense it is not sufficient with an account of the corporeal player connecting to the avatar through body schema, handsight and locomotion and upholding the connection through body memory. In player-avatar identity, the connection goes both ways; from player to avatar, and from avatar to player. In games players are concurrently existing as 'players-as-avatars' *and* as 'avatars-as-players'. Therefore, the paper turns towards the dramaturgic stance in an attempt to frame players, not as actors immersed in fictional characters in fictional worlds through role-play or make-believe, but as '*inter*actors' immersed in fusing corporeal digitality and digital corporeality through corporeal-digital interaction.

Within this third stance, 'Dramaturgy: Player-avatar identity as role-play, pretense and performance,' the player-avatar connection was framed as an escapist relation of players as actors immersed in role-playing and pretending to be the digital avatars. In the following this core area will be addressed through the concept of digital corporeality. The concept of digital corporeality is meant to catch the player-as-avatar; that is, players' digital incarnations (on-screen beings) and interactions (on-screen doings) constituting the digital side of their in-body experience.

From role-play, pretense and performance to digital corporeality

Instead of framing digital avatarian interaction as role-play and make-believe, the paper will in the following, on the basis of a thought-provoking quote from James Newman, try to grasp players-as-avatars as corporeally immersed, digital shaped and corporeal created, rather than as dramaturgically immersed in role-playing and pretending. According to Newman, players' relationship with avatars is different from viewers/readers/audiences relation to characters in film/texts/plays: "In the cartoon, Sonic has an autonomy and an independence. In short, he has character […] It only makes sense to talk of Sonic as "he" in this world beyond the On-line videogame. In the videogame, "Sonic" becomes the ability to run fast, loop-the-loop, collect rings' (Newman 2002: unpaged). Following this thought, player-avatar identity in e.g. *WoW* is not contingent upon dramaturgic representation or empathy but on interactional possibilities and agency, in that: '"character" is conceived as capacity – a set of characteristics' (Newman 2002: unpaged). When players play *WoW*, they create the game through corporeal locomotion, but their corporeal creation is, importantly, shaped by the game's patterning of their digital corporality. In *WoW*, *Borderlands* and *Move: Start the Party*, the connections and patterns between player-as-avatar and the digital sphere as well as the material and digital interface support and promote certain ways of corporeal-digital interaction and disregard or discourage other ways of corporeal-digital interaction. In Dovey and Kennedy's words: 'The game signals its dependence on the player as (except during cut scenes) the avatar will not move without some [corporeal-locomotive] action on the part of the player. Significantly though, it must be emphasized that the capabilities, the limits and possibilities coded into our avatars also determine the range and the form of *our* activities – action and reaction are interdependent, with agency flowing through the network in a constant feedback loop' (Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 109).

In this way, players' corporeal-locomotive input is shaped by the avatars' encoded capabilities and possibilities as well as the games' material and digital patterning. Combined, these factors constitute players' digital corporeality. However, digital corporeality doesn't fall under the headings of body image, appearance, representation or role-play. Digital corporeality is not players' on-screen body image or fictional character but their digital body schematic structures. For players it generally matters more how their digital corporeality *interactionally* and *body schematically* manifests itself, than how it is *represented* visually as body image or dramaturgically as fictional character. What matters to players-as-avatars is embedding their avatarian digital body schema within their corporeal body schema. In this way, players-as-avatars are corporeally immersed rather than dramaturgically immersed, as competent *WoW*-players during a raid can attest to. Here, there is no time for role-play or make-believe as players try to root their digital corporeality in their corporeal digitality as they concurrently interact digitally and corporeally in the gameworld. Not as

fictional characters involved in make-believe, but as body schematically immersed player-avatar's involved in real corporeal-digital interaction. The player-as-avatar is a body in movement in the digital sphere as the body moves in the corporeal sphere. In this way, players-as-avatars' digital corporeality is fused with their corporeal digitality to such an extent that it becomes impossible or meaningless to differentiate between or ask where the corporeally interacting player and the digitally interacting avatar begins or ends. To incorporate the avatar as digital corporeality is, for players, the normal way of relating to avatars; there is no avatar-doing delimited from player-doing. Accordingly, it becomes necessary to include the corporeal connection when investigating players-as-avatars, as it is necessary to include the digital connection when investigating avatars-as-players.

The avatar-as-player: Corporeal incorporation and handcraft

The above account of players-as-avatars and players' digital corporeality need finally to be connected with avatars-as-players and players' corporeal digitality in order to fully illuminate the corporeal connection in player-avatar identity. However, as will be clear in the following, corporeal digitality is neither accomplished through prosthetic interaction and extension nor through prosthetic and extending tool-use. Therefore, in order to clarify player-avatar identity as an *incorporating in-body* experience, the paper turns towards the prosthetic stance in an attempt to frame corporeal digitality and the avatar-as-player, not as prosthetic centrifugal extension of corporeality into digitality, but as handcrafting centripetal incorporation of digitality into corporeality. It is neither a case of players taking on the role of a puppeteer remote-controlling the avatar-puppet nor a case of players being drivers steering their avatar 'from within.' Rather, avatars are implemented within players' body schemas.

From corporeal extension, prostheses and extending tools to corporeal incorporation and handcraft

Instead of framing corporeal interaction as prosthetic extension and tool-use, the paper will in the following, through Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008), frame corporeal digitality and avatars-as-players as a corporeal presence and incorporating handcraft. Framing player-avatar identity as prosthetic extension and tool-use is in certain regards in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of tool-use; notable prostheses and the blind man's cane. Hence, it is a perspective somewhat related to the view presented here. However, important differences exist between how players' corporeality and tool-use are framed within 'the corporeal connection' and 'the prosthetic connection.' The difference lies partially in the tool-metaphors deployed to describe the players' corporeality and tool-use. While the latter view deploys 'tools of extension,' like the scalpel or the blind man's cane, the former deploys 'tools of implantation,' like guitars or skis. In the latter view, players extend themselves and feel *at the end of* the tool, while players in the former view implant the tool and feel it *as a part of* themselves. These two different tool-views are consistent with the distinction between tool-use 'at the fingertip' and tool-use 'at the end of the tool' as found in *The Craftsman*: 'In the hand, we have seen this localization occurring at the musician's or goldsmith's fingertip; in the eye, localization focuses on the right angle between warp and woof on a loom, or at the end of the pipe used in glassblowing. (Sennett 2008: 278).

Choosing to view corporeal digitality in player-avatar identity as more akin to playing music, than to the use of prostheses, enables a framing of player-avatar identity as a centripetal body schematic incorporation rather than a centrifugal prosthetic extension. Like guitars become part of musicians' bodies and playing the guitar becomes incorporated in the musicians' body schemas, the interface and avatars in *WoW* becomes part of *WoW*-players' bodies and *WoW*-gaming becomes incorporated in *WoW*-players' body schemas. Musicians and *WoW*-players don't make guitars or interfaces/avatars prosthetic extensions of their bodies; rather, they incorporate guitars and interfaces/avatars into their bodies and implement them as inherent parts of their

playing bodies. Thus, players are not *transplanted* or *extended* into the tools they use (like scalpels or canes) but *implementing* or *incorporating* them into their corporeal-locomotive bodies. Avatars reside *within* players' body schemas; in *WoW* they exist in the hands of the players not at the tip of their tools. Hence, players are, under this view, no longer puppeteers pulling a puppet's strings, but corporeally occupied with and engaged in incorporating first-person vision and agency into their one and only first-person body. Player-avatar identity is expressed and experienced as corporeal presence rather than corporeal extension, where 'Hard-won movements become ever more ingrained in the body; the player inches forward to greater sill.' (Sennett 2008: 160). Corporeal digitality is craftsmanship as a formgiving activity, where players carve out avatars in the digital sphere, drawing them out into the corporeal sphere with their crafting hands. In this way, the avatarian connection is not an in-technology or in-bodies experience but an in-body experience; where the avatarian connection is contained within the process of making. As a result, a body schematic fusion between players-as-avatars and avatars-as-players occurs, making the avatar part of the players' body rather than the other way around. Consequently, player-avatar identity is more a case of digital implosion into corporeality than of corporeal explosion into digitality.

The joy of doing as fusion: Self-being and self-doing

The components for the corporeal connection have now been gathered and taken together they constitute a player-avatar identity expressed as self-being and self-doing, rather than as self-representation or identity-play. Below is a summary figure containing the core elements of the corporeal connection as well as its stereotypical counterparts.

Stereotypical framings of player-avatar identity				
Visuality: Body image Eyesight (Visual perspective)	**Cognition:** Intentional transmission, instrumental actions Projected, embodied, stored cognition	**Dramaturgy:** Role-play, pretense, performance	**Prostheses:** Prostheses, corporeal extension, extending tools	**Sociality:** Self-representation, identity-play
The corporeal connection in player-avatar identity				
Body schema Handsight (First-person corporeality)	Kin-aesthetic streams of corporeal locomotion Body memory	Digital corporeality, digital locomotion, players-as-avatars	Corporeal digitality, corporeal incorporation, handcraft, avatars-as-players	Self-being, self-doing, players-as-avatars-as-players

Off-course players can *choose* to assume a stance of visual voyeurism, cognitive mentalism, dramaturgic escapism, prosthetic cyborgism or social narcissism in relation to their avatars, but the 'default position' or 'natural attitude' in player-avatar identity is the corporeal connection emerging through the joy of self-being and self-doing. When players play in *Borderlands*, *WoW* or *Move: Start the Party* they become players-as-avatars-as-players; they move their hands as they move on the screen. Whenever they want to make something happen as avatars in the digital sphere, they have to take action as players in the corporeal sphere. Players-as-avatars-as-players are fundamentally characterized, not by *inhabiting*, but by *being* corporeal-

digital bodies *inhabiting* the gameworld. This entails, that playing *WoW* is an activity (also) experienced as a corporeal activity – an activity in which players-as-avatars-as-players are corporeally engaged and which depends on their corporeal interaction in order to make sense. Consequently, player-avatar identity is, for players, a deeply engaging, expressive and meaningful corporeal connection as they, following Sennett, are aesthetic craftsmen saying: '"I made this," "I am here, in this work,"' (Sennett 2008: 130).

There is only one 'identity' interacting in *WoW*-raids, *Borderland*-sessions and *Move: Start the Party*-competitions which is the united identity of the player-as-avatar-as-player; a unity experienced as self-being and expressed as self-doing. In actuality, this is a much more engaging (and dangerous) relation, than that of social self-representation or identity-play, as: 'Inadequate personal performance hurts in a different way than inequalities of inherited social position or the external of wealth: it is about you. Agency is all for the good, but actively pursuing good work and finding you can't do it corrodes one's sense of self.' (Sennett 2008: 97). In a *WoW*-raid the weight is on *me* as self-being player-avatar and my self-doing abilities to skillfully express my hands' knowledge through corporeal interaction and expressed as avatarian digital interaction – A circumstance, also present in the initial description of the *WoW*-player as he expressed his player-avatar identity as the unity of self-being and self-doing work and experiencing the joy (and anxiety) of (self-)doing at the heart of player-avatar identity. In playing and at the heart of player-avatar identity is, following Casey 'The lived body is a center which refuses to be decentered, a central boundary that will not become peripheral" (Casey 1987: 179).

This paper has tried to capture and establish the corporeal connection at play in player-avatar identity by highlighting 'those things we might come to know if we listen to the body' (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2009) through the incorporation of corporeal-locomotive frameworks. Adopting novel frameworks such as corporeality, locomotion and incorporating craftsmanship within research on the avatarian connection presents the possibility of seeing player-avatar identity in a new fuller light. Furthermore, it presents the possibility to escape the 'theoretical imperialism' that Espen Aarseth (Aarseth 1997: 16) cautions us against and the 'hegemony of occularcentrism' that Bryan G. Behrenshausen (Behrenshausen 2007: 335) opposes. But the escape could prove difficult as, what is applicable for sport studies, unfortunately also is applicable for research on player-avatar identity; namely the fact that 'Surprisingly, given the focus of study, relatively few accounts are truly grounded in the corporeal realities of the lived, sensuous sporting[/gaming] body' (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2009: 71). The present paper's investigation of the corporeal connection in player-avatar identity has, however, been such an attempt to ground player-avatar identity in the lived, sensuous gaming body as well as to highlight how corporeal digitality, locomotion and craftsmanship aren't peripheral dimensions but at the heart of the avatarian connection.

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