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EMBODIED LUDIC TRANSCULTURALITY. THE GAME AVATAR AS A METAPHORICAL PLAYER-VEHICLE FOR DIGITAL TRANSCULTURAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. This paper examines the role of video game avatars as metaphorical vehicles facilitating transcultural gameplay experiences through metaphorical avatarial control in open-world digital environments. By integrating theories of player transport (Järvinen, 2007), conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, [1998] 2003), extended embodiment (Gergensen and Grodal, 2009), and the concept of transcultural understanding (Chin and Golding, 2016), the study identifies avatars as metaphorical player re-embodiments that connect player subjectivities with procedural gameplay mechanics. Through examples like Arthur Morgan in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), the paper employs qualitative research to illustrate how players negotiate diegetic moral, cultural, and narrative complexities through their AVATAR, bridging the gap between individual identity and gameworld contexts. The findings suggest that COMPLEMENTARITY between procedural (HARD) mechanics and player-driven interpretive (SOFT) mechanics fosters deep diegetic transport, enabling players to personalize their experiences while exploring diverse in-game cultural values in gameplay practices structured by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor. This framework highlights how metaphorical avatars embody player identities and mediate transcultural play practices.

Key words: video games, avatar, player transport, embodiment, ludic transculturality, conceptual metaphor

INTRODUCTION

Cinematic and literary traditions have a long history of portraying and depicting the cultural peculiarities of various peoples. More recently, interactive media, or interactive fiction, such as video games have built up a striking reputation within communication, cultural, and literary studies as important sociocultural artefacts worthy of scholarly scrutiny (Aarseth, 2001). In contrast to the written word and motion pictures, video games offer unparalleled degrees of interactivity within the bounds of what Espen Aarseth (1997) describes as 'ergodic literature'. Video games have been traditionally described as interactive digital media in that they are immersive (Crawford, 2012: 77-78). Immersion, however, is sidelined

in this study in favour of player transport (Järvinen, 2007) as a more emphatic referent of the player experience as a direct and embodied phenomenon rather than a vicarious and psychological one.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is a prominent framework within cognitive linguistics developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the latter part of the 20th century. CMT argues that metaphors are not just rhetorical flourishes but that they structure our understanding of various abstract concepts by grounding them in more tangible, embodied experiences (Lakoff and Johnson, [1998] 2003: 56-60). The theory further proposes that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental cognitive process through which we understand abstract or complex concepts in terms of more concrete and sensorimotor image schemata structuring experiential domains. The present study follows the cognitive linguistic typing convention whereby conceptual metaphors are written in small capital letters and examples of metaphoric linguistic expressions are marked by italics. Note should be made that the conventional notation for conceptual metaphors is not a sentence, its apparent formation as such (Subject-Predicate-Object) notwithstanding, but 'a name for a metaphorical mapping across conceptual domains' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 60). Conceptual metaphors shape our everyday thinking and reasoning by mapping knowledge from the source domain with literal meanings onto an abstract one called the target domain (Kövecses, 2020: 50-56). The theory suggests that metaphors are not limited to language but are also present in our thought processes, influencing our perceptions and reasoning; consequently, Lakoff and Johnson ([1998] 2003: 5) define the essence of metaphor as 'understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another'. These conceptual metaphors are deeply ingrained in our cognition and often operate at a subconscious level drawing mostly on our conceptual system influenced by our embodiment. Conceptual metaphors offer the domains required to construe the basic metaphorical sense of the utterance and structure it according to concrete bodily experiences. In *Metaphor Wars*, Raymond Gibbs explores the basis of embodiment in conceptual metaphors by looking at the metaphoricity of multimodal experiences such as gestures, paintings, and computing experiences, among others. For instance, by applying primary metaphors such GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN, and SADNESS IS DOWN (Gibbs, 2017: 252-255) to the analysis of bodily patterns in dance, Gibbs observes that 'the interplay of language with gestures and actions highlights the degree to which metaphor is spread out across the entire body in action' (ibid., 2017: 252). Accordingly, the current article sets out to explore the metaphorical potential of embodied avatarial control and to show how it is structured by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor employing qualitative analysis methods.

To this end, CMT is used to define the player-avatar interaction, not so much as a mechanistic process of using a prosthetic to navigate a virtual ecosystem (Klevjer, 2007: 130), but as a 'metaphorical' representation of the player herself

whereby she is transported within a digital gameworld following structuralizing entailments between experiential gestalts and domains. Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Felix Schröter (2016: 252) apply CMT in their analysis of player-controlled characters as audiovisual metaphors. The two authors draw on Gonzalo Frasca's statement that video game interactivity is metaphoric since video games 'model a (source) system through a different system' (2003: 223, cited in Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 253). Real-world processes, experiential gestalts, and metaphorical schemata, according to Fahlenbrach and Schröter (2016: 252-255), act as a bridge between narrative and gameplay, where audiovisual metaphors structure players' cognitive understanding and affective evaluation of the diegetic content. In their findings, immutably thematic characters such as Batman in *Batman: Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios, 2011) or Cole MacGrath in *InFamous* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2009) embody metaphors like 'human is an animal' or 'human is a technical force,' which are expressed through the characters' appearance, abilities, and movements (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 259-264). These metaphors communicate not only values, emotions, and moral dilemmas but also structure gameplay, the authors conclude, by integrating narrative depth with interactive mechanics (ibid., 2016: 264). The present study will look at the video game AVATAR less as an audiovisual metaphor that communicates and connects players' cognitions to a predetermined and immutable narrative meaning but as an interactive and mercurial metaphorical self, allowing players to pursue self-relevant gameplay practices.

In their discussion on 'transcultural understanding', Esther Chin and Dan Goldin (2016: 5) draw on theories of transcultural literacy, defined as one's ability to lead a meaningful life in a multicultural context and cultural intelligence namely, one's ability to live efficiently in a different cultural context. Their analysis focuses on migration-related video games which, the authors write, 'simulate the migrant's experience for the player by directly asking them to play as migrants' (ibid. 2016: 2). Chin and Goldin compare three migration-related video games, *Escape from Woomera* (EFW Team, 2014), *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2014), and *Everyday Racism* (All Together Now, 2014). In *EFW*, the player assumes the role of Mustafa, an Iranian asylum seeker detained at the Woomera immigration detention centre in South Australia, who, after being denied asylum, must attempt to escape while navigating interactions with fellow detainees and guards in a detailed first-person recreation of the centre. *Papers, Please* centres on the work of an immigration inspector at a border checkpoint for the fictional country of Arstotzka in 1982, following a war with Kolechia and ongoing political tensions. The player reviews the documents of entrants from an isometric perspective, allowing legitimate travellers through, while denying entry or arresting those with invalid or suspicious documents. Entry rules become systematically more complex, and the player must interrogate applicants, compare fingerprints, and conduct scans. Violating protocol

results in citations, and the player has limited time each game day to process as many entrants as possible. Finally, *Everyday Racism* is an alternate reality mobile video game in which players may explore the racial challenges faced by three characters: a Muslim woman, an Indigenous man, an Indian student, or a self-made player avatar. Its gameplay centres around player interaction with tweets, audio recordings, and emails 'in a hypermediated smartphone aesthetic' (Chin and Goldin, 2016: 9). The games increase transcultural understanding, the authors conclude, 'by opening up the ethical space for players to encounter more nuanced representations of cultural differences and to negotiate for themselves the complexities of action […]' (ibid., 2016: 14). Fostering transcultural understanding in video games, then, hinges on the game's interactivity defined by Mark J. P. Wolf (2007: 260) as the 'very specific interactions' players use to pursue the objective of a video game through a player-character and player interpretations of the game content.

In what follows, conceptual metaphor theory concepts will be applied to the discussion of the metaphorical avatar in an attempt to outline the systematicity of the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor. Furthermore, the metaphor will help show how the player-avatar interaction transports the player inside the cultural context(s) of the game through the AVATAR as the player's re-embodiment by which they can negotiate their interactions and interpretations of their in-game actions.

AVATARS AND/OR CHARACTERS

To convey the idea of a metaphorical avatar – avatarial control underscored by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor – this article borrows its definitions from literary and theological perspectives where a separate entity or a deity takes possession of an 'avatar' to be embodied and inhabit a certain space by crossing down (Mukherjee, 2015: 206) across ontic domains (Wilumsen, 2018: 2). Samson Jacques Ghoul definitively states that the Hindu origins of the idea of the avatar are rooted in an asymmetry between two distinct spaces: the transmission space (the plane the entity taking possession exists in) and the receiving space (the location of the avatar). He then makes the compelling argument that instead of an exclusive relationship, the user and the game avatar are mutually influential (Samson, 2022; Sloan, 2015:172).

In video game studies, however, the differences between avatars and characters are worth mentioning. While avatars are representations of the players in a game, characters are distinct entities with their own personalities, motivations, and backstories. Characters are predefined narrative devices or 'fictional identities within the narrative setting of the game' (Turkay and Kinzer, 2016: 2) that usually rely less on active player customization (Sloan, 2015: 67-71) through various combinations of attributes and physical characteristics (Calleja, 2007: 16).

Game developers design and create characters to fulfil specific predetermined and immutable roles within the game's narrative, gameplay mechanics, and overall aesthetic experience of the story they want to tell (Sloan, 2015: 175-177). Today, however, open-world video games give the player greater freedom in fashioning a character's diegetic development according to their dispositions.

The concept of avatar will spearhead the conceptual interests of this study, given its potential for metaphorical mappings between/across domains. The avatar is the transmedial re-embodiment of the user in a virtual environment (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, and Wadley, 2009: 1151), also called player/playable character (PC) acting as the in-game representative of the player as opposed to a non-player character (or NPC). Rune Klevier defined game avatars as prosthetic extensions of the player, thus hinting at the digital synthetic materiality of the avatar as a tool. He defines in-game agency and interactivity as the 'real-time control' of an avatar, suggesting that 'the more an avatar takes on behaviors that reflect either its own agency or which emerge as passive responses to forces and agents in the environment, the less it functions as a prosthesis of the body-subject, and the more its status as an avatar is being weakened' (Klevjer, 2007: 94). Essentially, Klevjer's control schema refers to games where avatarial control is constant (sustained input: keyboard, controller, and so on) rather than segmented (clicking; one-time input-based games), open-world video games as opposed to point-and-click games (Wilumsen, 2018: 2), for instance.

This article approaches the concept of avatar as a virtual target domain receiving structural characteristics encompassing fundamental human experiences as source domains, emphasising a player's embodiment projected onto the in-game playable figure (Vella, 2015). James Paul Gee (2008: 66) remarks about 'this dual nature of the 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 (Gee) refer to them as projective beings'. As a result, the concepts of 'avatar' and 'character' will both be interchangeably used depending on the type of digital game under scrutiny. Since this study explores conceptual metaphors in Single Player Open-World Video Games which often use diegetic characters, for example, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2), 'avatar' is the most useful designation for an interpretation of the virtual self as the player's re-embodied (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 106) metaphorical self regardless of its status as a self-fashioned avatar or pre-determined character. The avatar allows players to project themselves into the virtual world and become active participants in the game through what Gordon Calleja (2007: 27; 2011: 169-185) describes as incorporation.

The formal system is thus considered as the underlying structuralizing component of procedural gameplaying as a potent receiver of metaphorical mappings and a simulator of experiential domains actuated solely through interactivity, namely player control over the game's rules and mechanics (Crawford 2013: 27-44).

Rules dictate and structure what Christina Wilumsen (2018: 2) calls 'restricted avatar control' whereby the game system generates automated avatar actions through player input. Aki Järvinen (2007: 190) takes into account the importance of ludic 'transportation' during gameplay when all the formal game systems work holistically to characterize and structure variegated player experiences, and offers the following definition, 'Gamer-related transportation is an experience of cognitive, emotional, physical, and imagery involvement in the behaviour of a game system, its appraisal structures, and the world they create'. Nevertheless, while avatar autonomy and possible in-game actions are procedurally restricted, player identification with the avatar and 'wreader' control of it will be discussed next in connection with freeform gameplay in open-world digital spaces structured by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor allowing players seemingly unbounded freedom in terms of self-relevant and self-fashioned gameplay experiences. However, to do this, novel concepts explaining the structuralizing entailments of avatarial control as part of a complex metaphor such as AVATAR IS PLAYER are required.

HARD AND SOFT MECHANICS

To properly define HARD mechanics and SOFT mechanics, the definitions of the terms are drawn from computer science where HARDware describes the physical components of computers and SOFTware describes the intelligence or set of instructions behind the manipulation and reactions of hardware to user input (Frankenfeld, 1993: 718-719). HARD and SOFT digital game mechanics are different in much the same way and work holistically to bring forth a functioning whole. The two concepts first appeared in a game-design-philosophy blog post by Bjorn Sundström (2016). In Sundström's (2016: Online) taxonomy, however, hard and soft mechanics refer to procedural systems for game difficulty and the degree of freedom a player has when encountering either of the two, for instance: difficult and easy, rigid or flexible, respectively. My use of the terms is similar to Sundström's insofar as SOFT MECHANICS are liable to 'flexible' player interpretations and negotiations, whereas in my taxonomy HARD MECHANICS are immutable in-game systems of computation and representation, and are intended as target domains for a conceptual-metaphor-oriented framework.

HARD MECHANICS are all the physical processes the player enacts in the game according to the overall game design or the game is pre-programmed to represent through its technology: character movement, manipulation of the environment, use of a physical controller for in-game interaction, the purely procedural selection of various in-game dialogue choices or handling of in-game items in multiple ways, character statistics and their computational effect on the game state, graphics, mechanics, dynamics and so on (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, 2004). HARD MECHANICS simulate and represent physical experiences through

the game state presentation defined by Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2020: 13) as 'how players see, hear, and feel the specific behaviour of an operational logic in the context of the game'. Moreover, Wardrip-Fruin (2020: 9-13) coined the term 'operational logic' to account for the computational processes by which games represent 'everything from physical space to economic systems, social relations, character development, and combat.

SOFT MECHANICS, on the other hand, describe modes of thought, skill sets, and subjective gameplay negotiations structured around the natural experiences represented by the HARD mechanics of a video game (movement, character appearances, gameplay affordances). SOFT MECHANICS describe the conceptual potential of HARD MECHANICS; that is, instead of emphasizing the simulated interactional properties of direct gameplay, SOFT MECHANICS lend structural coherence to player goals/dispositions as a reaction to formal game goals, strategic gameplay actions, and game states. 'The game's virtual world,' James Paul Gee (2008: 259) notes, 'is designed to invite the real-world player to form certain sorts of goals of his or her own'. SOFT MECHANICS allow the player to project a subjectively relevant 'player state' onto the formal (HARD) game state (Domsch, 2013: 15-19) filling in what Ian Bogost (2006: 109, 136) coined as 'simulation fever' defined as 'the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation'. Simulation fever can be used to describe the COMPLEMENTARY nature of HARD and SOFT MECHANICS, some of which the game procedurally represents directly (HARD) or has been programmed to obscure (SOFT) to accommodate the player's subjective response to its unit operations. Fahlenbrach and Schröter's study of audiovisual metaphors in video games voices a similar approach to what this study calls COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS since,

> …audiovisual metaphors in video games serve the double function of (1) making tangible the abstract and 'invisible' ludic properties of games (like rules, goals, game mechanics) and (2) structuring their fictional representation along primary metaphoric mappings that provide users with multisensory and cognitive experiences of their actions. (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 255)

Weimin Toh's (2017: 141-142) cognitive map analysis of video game mechanics through player interviews has shown that player character (PC) interactive movement may be construed as plot progression given some procedurally relevant game states. As such, when the PC is narratively driven to an extreme state of fatigue or low health, the game procedurally modifies the PC's movement to display the physical features of a human struggling to walk while injured; the predetermined game states the player encounters through progression modify the HARD mechanics of a PC and can make them COMPLEMENTARY mechanics

through individual interpretation (SOFT); linking HARD and SOFT mechanics narratologically and procedurally leads us to Dietz's (1999: Online) comment that 'simply put, procedural authorship makes the rules, which the reader en(inter) acts'. Souvik Mukherjee (2015: 49-52) conceptualizes Dietz's 'reader/interactor' dyad as 'wreader' – a blend between writer and reader defined as a reader and writer interacting with a piece of hypermedia. HARD MECHANICS are *wreadable* because they virtually stand in for real experiential gestalts we as humans interact with throughout our lives (Domsch, 2013: 19). The 'concreteness' of HARD MECHANICS makes them a workable source domain used in understanding and conceptualizing abstract concepts (SOFT MECHANICS) and how we live and play by them as metaphors. Furthermore, these HARD MECHANICS, to be conceptualized as COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS, need to fulfil some felicity conditions (Searle, 1969) the player gleans from the salient embodied affordances of their game avatar, which Fahlenbrach and Schröter (2016: 256) discuss as 'salient aspects of character design and their relation to conceptual source domains'.

THE AVATAR is the complementary conceptual entity incorporating abstract features as the virtual other and salient, 'wreadable' embodied features. THE PLAYER derives the image schemas applicable to the game content from the experiential domain of real embodiment drawing on a set of 'implicit expectations' about game rules and their in-game negotiations (Domsch, 2013: 17). As a result, the cross-domain mappings are indelible parts of the player's embodiment inevitably projected onto the abstract concept AVATAR to bring it into metaphorical proximity thus structuring its understanding through the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor. 'Complex metaphors' George Lakoff (2008: 25) writes, 'are made up of simple metaphors bound together and/or bound to commonplace frames'. AVATAR IS PLAYER, for instance, contains some of the following (simple) conceptual metaphors such as:

THE AVATAR IS A CONTAINER

THE AVATAR IS A TOOL

THE AVATAR IS A VEHICLE

THE AVATAR IS ME

THE GAME IS A JOURNEY

THE GAME IS A (LARGER) CONTAINER

The above metaphors incorporate 'literal frame-based knowledge' about the concepts they describe such that, 'A Vehicle is an Instrument for Travel,' A Vehicle is a container in which the travellers are close together' (Lakoff, 2008: 25), 'the game's story is a journey', 'I am my avatar since I recognize myself in it'. The player-avatar relationship agrees with schematic sub-mappings or entailments supplied by such metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, [1998] 2003: 90).

With this in mind, the avatar can be conceptualized as the vehicle used to explore the game's overarching narrative and goals or its main journey prefiguring the metaphor, GOALS ARE DESTINATIONS (ibid., 2009: 90) reached by operating a vehicle by one's driving skills, intentions, and so on. Furthermore, the two 'travellers' are closely bound together in the sense that they are *in* a relationship in a concrete physical space. The avatar is the concrete representation of the player's projected self-concept *inside* a virtual world (Hodent, 2018: 156), itself a container, whereby its mechanical functions mirror the structural and functional similarities of the player's body employed according to emotions, skills, and dispositions required to fulfil a predetermined or self-relevant goal. Steven Swink conceptualises this phenomenon as 'extension of identity' whereby players feel to be in direct physical contact with the digital game world (2009: 29). Celia Hodent (2018: 157) writes that the perception of the game content facilitates the players' emotional approaches to the game's representations and the procedural rules governing them. For all intents and purposes, identity is a cluster of SOFT MECHANICS used by players to structure their negotiated gameplay practices of the game's HARD MECHANICS within the game container.

The GAME IS A CONTAINER metaphor, for instance, structures the following linguistic expressions: *the player opened the game*, *the player closed the game*, *the player logged into the game*, *the player logged out of the game*, plus others that relay the transport from one physically bounded space to or into another. Taken holistically, the game is a container of other containers akin to a Matryoshka doll opening up to reveal yet another smaller container such as the avatar acting as a vehicle/container for the player inside of the game. In turn, the player is also a container of her self-location and proprioception projected onto the salient corporeal features of the avatar. In cognitive sciences, self-location is bodily proprioception concerned with the relationship between one's self and the body they inhabit (Lenggenhager, Mouthon, and Blanke, 2009: 110-111). Konstantina Kilteni, Raphaela Groten, and Mel Slater (2012: 375) use self-location to study player-avatar identification hypothesizing that self-location 'could be the feeling that one's self is located inside the biological body or an avatar's body'. Self-location is egocentric and heavily reliant on a visual perspective (ibid., 2012: 375) as Kwan Min Lee (2004: 40) shows in a discussion on self-presence in virtual environments that 'in the case of a psychologically assumed virtual self [...] a virtual environment reacts to users as if they were in there (e.g.: first-person viewpoint game, other people greeting you by name)'. On the one hand, a player's self-location is consolidated by perceiving the avatar as having salient source domain (body schematic) features such as embodiment and motor control. Playing by way of an avatar is becoming the avatar as Torben Grodal points out the neural and cognitive load game involvement implies,

> Video games and some types of virtual reality are the supreme media for full simulation of our basic first-person 'story' experience because they allow 'the full experiential flow' by linking perceptions, cognitions, and emotions with first-person actions. Motor cortex and muscles focus the audiovisual attention, and provide the 'muscular' reality and immersion to the perceptions. Even visually crude video games such as Pac-Man (1980) might provide a strong immersion because of their activation of basic visuomotor links. (Grodal, 2003:132)

The AVATAR, following Marelau-Ponty's description of the body as a 'system of possible actions', is a target domain of 'possibility (conceptual) spaces' (Bogost, 2007: 120-121) for player self-conceptualizations and emergent narratives constructed by the player against the backdrop of embedded mechanical affordances (Sloan, 2015: 172-174; Vella, 2015: 413-416).

Furthermore, understanding the metaphorical nature of an avatar mirroring the embodied player as an entity involved in the act or event of playing (Crawford, 2012: 85), the EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor provides structural elements that, according to Sebastian Möring, are common in digital games, such as FORCES, MOVEMENTS, LOCATIONS, PATHS, etc (2013: 320; Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 255). Video game mechanics represent and actuate the same experiential/embodied phenomena in the digital world (Muriel and Crawford, 2018: 91-8). In-game experiences activate the player's physicality in the real world. Diegetic events such as the avatar receiving damage or crashing at high speed during a car race can make the player react physically to the perceived event through 'extended embodiment' (Gergensen and Grodal, 2009: 66). Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004: 314) uphold the embodied nature of gameplaying by saying that playing a 'game is to experience the game: to see, touch, hear, smell, and taste the game; to move the body during play, to feel emotions about the unfolding outcome'. Implied proprioception and virtual physicality are therefore staples of metaphorical avatarial control where simulated events take on the experiential values of real embodied phenomena during gameplay. Causal knowledge of in-game events draws on a player's embodied action and the causal inferences of its effects in the real world (Gibbs, 2010, 55). Sita Popat (2018: 78) observes that 'in the lived embodied experience of moving, player and avatar may become sufficiently entangled for conceptual distinctions between physical and digital to blur'. Natural embodied/physical schemata thus lead to COMPLEMENTARITY between a player's SOFT body schema as a 'non-conscious performance of the body' (Gallagher, 1986: 548) applied to or deposited into the HARD game content representing salient physical phenomena understood through embodiment or the body image.

Daniel Vella (2015: 15) frames the discussion of projected proprioception around the player as the reflexive ludic subject 'I', enacting their ludic

subjectivities through embodied (player-avatar) gameplay; as such, the player 'is no longer looking at the playable figure (avatar), but looking at the gameworld through the figure'. The avatar, notwithstanding its digital presence as an alter figure, pans out of immediate conscious scrutiny, allowing the player to inhabit its points of view thus becoming a stand-in for the player's real embodiment inside a digital world. The AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor structures this intermedial bodily possession. In Vella's (2015: 172) words, the avatar is 'the ontic entity that the player *is* in the digital world'. Gabriella Giannachi (2004: 99) describes the player-avatar 'intermedial' point of connection as the 'hypersurface' which leads to a feeling of embodied projection through 'contamination' whereby the virtual and the physical bleed into each other. A high degree of COMPLEMENTARITY can increase game-player affinity and thus enjoyment of the digital game content especially when 'interpretive control' is afforded to the player through a metaphorical AVATAR (Verran, 2024). In essence, the AVATAR is the PLAYER through a mixture of mental and physical factors, incorporating the player into the cultural milieu of the video game. Given COMPLEMENTARITY, players can bend that culture to their will during gameplay through their avatar. This idea is explored in what follows.

COMPLEMENTARITY, THE AVATAR, AND TRANSCULTURALITY

My concept of COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS borrows Ian Bogost's (2006) theory of the simulation fever, Gary Alan Fine's (1983: 205) concept of 'self-play' as an extension of the player's self in role-playing, and Daniel Vella's (2015: 72) 'ludic subjectivity' concept in the sense of 'a subjective standpoint inhabited by the player in relation to the gameworld' to show that meaning in a video game results from the synthesis of rules (HARD) and player interpretations (SOFT) during gameplay situated at a juncture point between procedural rules and players' self-fashioned gameplay interpretations and negotiations (Bogost, 2007: 129-136). Thinking of game semiotics in terms of COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS offers researchers novel conceptual terminology to show how in-game meaning is structured by conceptual systems, metaphors, and perceptual judgments (Gibbs, 2010: 51) at work during gameplay in concert with symbolic and procedural interfaces. This awareness may, in turn, lead game development into placing more emphasis on how and why HARD systemic features of a digital game might appeal to or conjure up intimations of SOFT emotional and personal details about the player, underscoring a player-centric gameplay experience.

Open-world, action role-playing video games (ARPGs) allow the player greater freedom and transport during gameplay. Nevertheless, this genre includes in-game missions that follow a strictly linear structure the player may fulfil according to diegetic instructions or self-fashioned gameplay practices. In the immensely popular open-world, action-adventure, role-playing video game

Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018), the player takes on the multi-faceted role of Arthur Morgan, a bandit struggling for survival in a fictionalized rendition of the United States in 1899 at a time when Native Americans were heavily outlawed by the U.S. Army. Missions in RDR2 expose the player to various cultural practices, traditions, and moralities actuated in-game through pre-programmed HARD and SOFT mechanics and interacted with by the player through their AVATAR, Arthur Morgan.

For instance, at one point during *RDR2*'s freeform gameplay, the player may interact with Charles Smith, a Native American, and go on an optional bison-hunting mission together. The player has now come into contact with Charles' cultural view of bison and the 'moral' way of hunting them, essentially instructing the player, through Arthur Morgan, about the practices of an unfamiliar cultural milieu (Chin and Golding, 2016: 5). The morality in the quest is diegetically implemented to show the Native American's cultural view of bison when Charles names bison 'the greatest of gifts'. Arthur Morgan, however, quips by suggesting an unguarded stagecoach as the said gift. The cultural divide between the two characters becomes evident. Natives like Charles value mindful hunting and efficient killing so as not to torture the animal or spoil the resources they might collect from it. Arthur Morgan, on the other hand, is canonically a trigger-happy bandit. Charles instructs the player to take down one of the bison as 'clean' as possible by using a bow and arrow. The player, however, may choose to hunt the animal down in any other way afforded by the game's mechanics, for example: aim for the perfect arrow to the bison's head, lasso the bison to wear it down for an easy kill or discharge a shotgun to quickly massacre the beast instead and waste its resources to Charles' chagrin. Players cannot complete the mission without hunting the bison; nevertheless, the game allows players to decide whether to keep hunting them or not during freeform gameplay. Mindlessly hunting animals, however, negatively influences the morality gauge, contributing to a low-honour playthrough.

In *RDR2*, players may choose to pursue moral/high honour or immoral/low honour gameplay styles gradually changing Arthur Morgan's diegetic character, the way the gameworld reacts to him, as well as the endings players get at the outset of the game. The morality system permeating the game's diegesis and gameplay is a COMPLEMENTARY MECHANIC, allowing players to pursue their own self-fashioned gameplay experience(s) with possible metaphoric mappings specific to each gameplay style (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 257). For instance, *RDR2*'s morality system is displayed as a non-diegetic gauge where immorality is to the left colour-coded red, and morality is to the right colour-coded white. Accordingly, the primary metaphors IMMORALITY IS LEFT, IMMORALITY IS RED, and MORALITY IS RIGHT, MORALITY IS WHITE structure the distribution of the two types of gameplay styles. Importantly, none of the gameplay styles is forced onto the player.

In comparison to Fahlenbrach and Schröter's (2016: 259-260) choice of characters, Arthur Morgan is a metaphorical avatar in that his interactive potentials are multifaceted in both procedural (HARD) and interpretive (SOFT) ways. Batman and Cole's character functions are tied to the game's narrative aesthetic as audiovisual metaphors inherent to the cognitive schemata established by the game's diegesis (ibid., 2016: 257); for instance, Batman can never kill anyone despite the player wanting him to, and Cole must always shoot lightning (his only power) at his enemies in linear game levels. *RDR2*, in contrast, employs gameplay mechanics that rely on COMPLEMENTARITY, or, in other words, indiscriminate negotiations and applications of HARD and SOFT mechanics in concert at any point during gameplay.

Accordingly, Arthur Morgan's mechanical affordances allow the player to decide on their gameplay styles where desires and their applications meet at a point of COMPLEMENTARITY, namely the metaphorical AVATAR. Consequently, Arthur Morgan cannot be conceptualized as typical of any one kind of audiovisual metaphor as much as he may be regarded as a metaphor for the player herself since his role in the game's narrative and gameplay is multi-dimensional and player-driven, underscored by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor. Granted, Arthur Morgan can display schemata typical of the HUMAN IS AN IMMORAL ANIMAL if players pursue low-honour gameplay styles with Arthur wearing a woolly bison hat similar to Batman's bat-eared cowl (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 258). Yet, the metaphor describes variable player-driven avatar actions instead of immutable character types like Batman and Cole. For instance, after the bison hunt, the player and Charles explore the surrounding area and discover multiple decomposing bison carcasses scattered around the plains. Following the carcass trail, they find two poachers employed by the army to blame the wholesale slaughter on the natives occupying the lands. Finally, following the murder of one of the poachers and the violent interrogation of the other, the game lets players decide whether to strangle the poacher or let him go free. The choice to kill the poacher may culturally describe an immoral action, yet the game does not procedurally count it as a low-honour one. Letting the poacher go, however, counts as a high-honour action despite Charles' disagreement. Metaphorical avatarial control allows the player to act on their decision at any point during this gameplay scenario despite the seemingly rigid diegetic variable. Accordingly, the player may shoot the poacher in the back during his escape without any procedural constraints. In this specific gameplay scenario, the AVATAR can be at once controlled according to the schematic entailments of the audiovisual metaphors HUMAN IS A MORAL ANIMAL and HUMAN IS AN IMMORAL ANIMAL. So, instead of representing the character actions of just one of these audiovisual metaphors, Arthur Morgan's degree of avatarial control and metaphoric dimensions (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, 2016: 264) are greater than Batman's, for instance, since Batman is procedurally and thematically

forbidden from killing, and his movements are restricted to a few immutable patterns. With this in mind, THE AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor structures a player's diegetic and interpretive freedom over *RDR2*'s mechanics, essentially making them COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS.

Linear narrative progression structures notwithstanding, *RDR2*'s freeform gameplay affordances dismantle culturally determined procedural constraints, allowing players to negotiate or renegotiate their approach to various diegetic tasks at will. This gives them freedom to pursue their own gameplay experience and fashion it according to their own cultural or personal quirks. Simultaneously, players can closely follow the diegetic culture's precepts to roleplay as an in-group member seeking to experience group cohesion. In transcultural literacy terms, *RDR2*'s degree of COMPLEMENTARITY allows players to use self-relevant gameplay practices to navigate and interpret multicultural diegetic spaces (Chin and Golding, 2016: 5). Moreover, this analysis corroborates Chin and Golding's (2016: 14) findings that transcultural diegetic interactivity guided by player agency opens up 'the ethical space for players to encounter more nuanced representations of cultural difference and to negotiate for themselves the complexities of action'.

As observed, COMPLEMENTARITY includes elements of player experience synthesising the union between the psychological/cultural nature of video game playing and the player's mechanical interaction with the system. Players have an innate affinity by which they inevitably structure and categorize various game rules and affordances as meaningful due to conceptual metaphors and subjective feelings of embodiment as they do in speech to reflect their physical and cultural reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Turkay and Kinzer, 2016). As shown in the *RDR2* example, COMPLEMENTARITY strengthens transcultural interactions with the game content by directly exposing players to cultural practices and experiencing the consequences of said practices through self-relevant negotiations of their in-game actions. Given this degree of agency in pursuing gameplay practices, THE AVATAR is THE PLAYER during moments of such gameplay where specific interactions with the game content are not diegetically bound but open to player negotiations effected through metaphorical avatarial control.

CONCLUSIONS

COMPLEMENTARITY allows players to draw on their self-fashioned or diegetically-borrowed gameplaying styles and conceptualize the game's formal systems (HARD) through their dispositions, emotions, and morals (SOFT). The AVATAR is the ludic liminal space *par excellence* where game rules and affordances meet with player-subjective gameplay configurations to effect metaphorical play structured by the AVATAR IS PLAYER metaphor, provided the game is procedurally structured by COMPLEMENTARY MECHANICS in the first place. Finally,

the concept of COMPLEMENTARITY desires to expand video game hermeneutics and be potentially used in metaphor-based, player-centric game design philosophies (Möring, 2013; Järvinen, 2007), as well as future studies on conceptual metaphors and video games that would expand this framework.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study has suffered from a lack of infrastructure for experimental research given its novel subject and economic circumstances. Nevertheless, further research can include the neural theory of metaphor and expand the analyses into qualitative player-focused research during gameplay. Research into language's role in shaping the player's play practices and metaphorical projection into the digital game world is scarce. COMPLEMENTARITY can be used to analyse cross-linguistic or inter-linguistic gameplaying practices to uncover whether there are conceptual and gameplay-oriented differences in multilingual gameplaying of the same video game. Parts of the present article are taken from my yet-unpublished doctoral dissertation which, he hopes, will expand the theories herein.

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