Abstract

This essay considers the digital avatar not simply as a name for a virtual double of the player of videogames, but as bound to or manifesting psychological drive, a kind of homunculus of the drive. Drawing on a wide range of theories that have informed technical constructions of the subject, it applies in particular an important moment in Lacan's description of the drive to the concept of the gaming "avatar." It argues that the avatar is a variant of precursor representations of the drive specific to the technical imaginary of videogames.

The avatar haunts media and cyperspace in multiple guises. Nested in online chat rooms and seminars, internet commodity arcades, art installations, game worlds, architectural models, data-shadows, and program algorithms, the avatar has become the face of it-ness, who-ness, and what-ness mediating community and unseating the subject's Eigentlichkeit (self-possession, the "having" of what is my own). As the visible interface of the psychic drive, the avatar is not so much the double of the subject in the digital field as a kind of "puppet-homunculus" or totem that "drives" the drives. Freud's notion of psychic drive as "constant force" (konstante kraft), instrumentalized in its goal-directed motricity, becomes newly relevant to the object-oriented worlds of games and internet markets in their subsumption and transformation of subjective properties. Like the Aristotelian hyle (the causative and self-circular property of a form), avatarity, as I develop the concept here, bears on post-poststructuralist accounts of the destinations of agency in a technical milieu.

Parade of the Subjects

No theory of the avatar can be divorced from theories of the subject. Subject theory—buoyed in successive waves by the time-lag of French and German translations—predominated in the human sciences from the postwar period through the mid-1990s. Though some argue that it lost traction in the "post-critical" contemporary moment, I contest this idea. Subject theory endures as a "technics of the subject" situated at the juncture of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and media theory, and nourished by subfields as far-flung as systems theory, pragmatism, cybernetics, chaos theory, Heideggerian and Benjaminian notions of techne, Deleuzian vitalism and projections of the virtual, symbolic logic, artificial intelligence, computer programming, prosthetics, genomics, posthumanism, and game theory. The time-line of these disciplinary interactions is uneven, but not so uneven as to obscure the subtle yet generic shift from poststructuralist accounts of subjective impersonalism—from the mid-1990s on—to medial
theories of the subject imbued with what French sociologist Georges Friedmann dubs "the technical milieu." A specialist of factory life and subjective submission to the technical environment, Friedmann stands alongside Raymond Ruyer and Gilbert Simondon (especially important in conceptualizing a hylomorphic understanding of the human as ontologically utensil, as well as a somato-psychic theory of the existence-mode of objects) among the precursors of Deleuze and Guattari who together most significantly articulated philosophies of machinic expressionism and virtual ontology. As a set of thinkers, they join Freud and Lacan—the founders of analytic technique, and Heidegger, the premier theorist of technè and Bestand ("standing-reserve," by which he refers to nature's latent capacity to be technologically entrained by man), in setting the terms of subject technics. The work of Bernard Stiegler is also especially germane; his La Technique et le temps I, La faute d'Epiméthee [Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus] examines the sophist devaluation of technè in the history of philosophy, tracing its retrieval and gradual fusion with epistemè in Enlightenment modernity. Aristotelian distinctions between nature and technology thus give way to the "technicized life," engendered through biopower, genetic and social engineering (education, marketing), "psychotechnics" (cognitive technologies), "phenomenotechnics" (technologies of memory, consciousness, individuation), and the noosphere of "psychopower" (the program of a new human under conditions of evolutionary complexity, cyberspatial orders of cognition) (276).

Technics is of course a neologism in English and is adapted here from Samuel Weber's translation of Heidegger's Technik. "Technology" and "Technique," according to Weber, are inadequate English equivalents because they fail to convey the range of associations subsumed in Heidegger's usage, which include knowledge, craft, skill, the placing of orders (stock and trade orders, military commands), poeisis, and art (51-72). Arguably, Heidegger's "Questions Concerning Technology" [alternately translated as "Questing After Technics"] sits at the fulcrum of a burgeoning "technics theory" bibliography comprising Gilbert Simondon's Du Mode d'existence des objets techniques, Bernard Stiegler's Time and Technics, Derrida and Stiegler's Echographies, Friedrich Kittler's Network Systems and essays in Literature, Media, Information Systems, Samuel Weber's Mass Mediaurus and Targets of Opportunity, Brian Massumi's Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Avital Ronell's The Test Drive, Alexander Galloway's Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture, McKenzie Wark's Gamer Theory and Eugene Thacker's Biomedia. What distinguishes these works from a host of other titles at the juncture of philosophy and media theory is their default to techne as conceptually constitutive of thought, being, and agency.

Subject technics also redounds to an earlier history of systems theory and cybernetics that flourished across disciplines during the Cold War. The short list of references includes Talcott Parsons (whose The Social System, a foundational work in social theory, appeared in 1951), Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Warren McCulloch (celebrated for mathematical modeling of neural networks), Claude Shannon, Norbert Wiener, and John von Neumann (the legendary inventors of information theory, cybernetics, game theory, quantum mechanics). It is also important to mention the engineer Jay Forrester, who introduced core memory and random access magnetic storage in computing and extended systems theory to "world dynamics" using biofeedback models to examine the organization of industries, cities, and environmental situations. The idea of the "open system" emphasizes ways in which systems, interacting with the environment, evolve into new hierarchical structures of organization, and was applied in the fifties and sixties
to organismic exchanges between matter and environment, or to instances of negative entropy. Cybernetics led to a further "opening" of the open system onto vistas of genetics and language. Swarms, adaptive and random response models, input/output, complexity, cost/benefit/risk calculations, information spread, allometry, entropy, morphogenesis, pattern recognition, space-to-surface algorithms, autocatalytic networks, world dynamics — each yielded formal systems governed by structural logics and topologies. Starting in the early 1970s, and following in the steps of Chilean cognitive scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann linked autopoiesis to social systems (The Autopoiesis of Social Systems appeared in 1986). Modeled on the life cell, on the construct of a "self"-region patrolled by an autonomous boundary (filtering environmental stimuli to enable a distinct identity to self-create), autopoiesis in its very name heralded a migration of systems theory into the "softer" human sciences, where it was developed by Gregory Bateson, Ilya Prigogine, Friedrich Kittler, Manuel Castells, and Luhmann.

For Luhmann, the "systems" subject is self-selecting and impersonal, even in intimacy:

"today the ego's Self is no longer called the transcendental Self, but rather identity. The concept does not have a logical, but rather a symbolic relevancy, in that it proves that in a society characterized by predominately impersonal relationships it has proved difficult to find the point at which one can experience oneself as a unity and function as a unity. The ego's Self is not the objectivity of subjectivity in the transcendental-theoretical sense. The ego's Self is the result of self-selective processes; and this is precisely why it is also dependent upon others for its being selected by others. The problem now is not enhancement, but selection from among one's own adaptive capacities."

(164-65)

I am prepared to argue, in accord with Peter Sloterdijk (in his short book Derrida, An Egyptian), that subject technics is that unlikely place where Luhmann and Derrida meet. If Derridean deconstruction may be said to have pushed the history of language philosophy past the known limits of grammated thought and into the arena of genetic, metabolic and ontological process, Luhmann, it could be argued, re-modeled post-ontological, metabiological logics of system and environment. Derrida converges with Luhmann insofar as deconstruction is the code of late modernity's unraveling self-description. This means that the "me" versus "not-me" conditions of self-ownership and self-property no longer hold. "Me," "Mind," "Interface" and "Face," "Self" and "Own" – all these self-denominators melt into transmissive circuits.

Transmissive circuits, topologies of agency (as in Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's diagram of Lacan's "Agency of the Letter"), Moebius strips, Klein bottles, Gordian knots, continuous folds, bodies without organs, "allegorithms" (the modal shift from systems of sign to sign reference, to systems of sign and number, adduced by Alex Galloway and McKenzie Wark), each of these represents the "subjectless subjectivities" of technics. "Hypostacizing process into a super-subject is the error of idealism," Brian Massumi cautions, but he makes an exception when he invokes "subjectless subjectivity," as defined by Guattari. "By 'production of subjectivity,' [Massumi argues] Guattari does not only mean the actual subjects that emerge in the ontogenetic net articulating context and expression, determining their potential. He also means that the movement of expression is itself subjective, in the sense that it is self-moving and
has determinate effects. It is an agency, only without an agent: a subjectless subjectivity" (xxiv). The Lacanian counterpart would be "subjectivization without a subject," identified with that moment in a patient's analysis in which he "experiences the fantasy of becoming the drive" (95). Avatarity

Who is the "character" of this system-subject? Not to be confused with the protagonist of cyberfiction (epitomized by William Gibson's "Case" in Neuromancer, who acts like a traditional character despite being "jacked into" a network), the subject of technics, as I am defining it, is really a way of construing the ontology of "what-ness" and "who-ness," or the ""It in the I"" of agency, once the subject is framed as cognitive and affective algorithm, or a systemic configuration of the drives.

The character could, in this respect, be identified with the avatar. The avatar has emerged in the last ten years as a familiar character-player, custom-built from a commodified menu of enhanced body parts and facial features, and assigned a starring role in game spaces, MMORPGs (the acronym for Massive Multi-player Online Role Play Game), and online communities like The Sims, Second Life, Eve Online, EverQuest, Proxy and World of Warcraft. The avatar might also be identifiable as a totem; less a second self or alter-ego than an animal companion or emblem.8 Avatar identity, in other words, is no fixed entity; it can be an anthropological proxy, but it might equally well take an indistinct form that is pure materiality, what Alex Galloway describes, in relation to the hive or swarm, as an "autochthonous material phenomenon unrestrained by the projection of a human spirit within" ("StarCraft" 93). In Galloway's framework, the avatar is possessed of agential characteristics operating within a projected technical imaginary (something like cyberspace) that is held apart from an actual body. Here the avatar stands in marked contrast to Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of l'intrus (the "intruder" hosted by the human). After receiving a heart transplant, Nancy wrote: "If my own heart has deserted me, up to what point was it 'mine,' my proper organ? Was it even an organ? . . . . There is an intruder in me and I become a stranger to myself" (13-15).9 Where the implant represents the alienability of self-property it falls short of dispensing entirely with the fiction of a "human spirit within." By comparison, the avatar takes shape as the prosthetic extension of desubjectivated agency, as in a joystick or mouse.

Philologically speaking, the word avatar derives from avatara, a Sanskrit term that breaks down into ava—"down"—and tarati—"he goes, passes beyond." The word is traced by Gregory Little's 1999 A Manifesto for Avatars to the Fourth Teaching in the Bhagavad gita, specifically to Krishna's phrase, "when goodness grows weak, when evil increases, I make myself a body." "Originally referring to the incarnation of Hindu deities," according to Little, "avatars in the computing realms have come to mean any of the various 'strap-on' visual agents that represent the user in increasing numbers of 2 and 3D world" (2). As distinct from the cyborg, avatars are more fully fused with the human user. Little claims that the cyborg (christened in 1960 by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline's article on "Cyborgs in Space"), "incorporates body and prostheses in the forms of mechanical, optical, coded, pharmacological, electronic, telematic, genetic, and biological agents, hosted by an original human consciousness to form a unified but hybrid lived body" (Little 2). By contrast the avatar "is a mythic figure with its origin in one world and projected or passing through a form of representation appropriate to a parallel world. The avatar is a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world" (3).
The nature of this parallel world was famously characterized some fifteen years ago by Neal Stephenson in the novel Snow Crash. As he describes Hiro's avatar:

By drawing the moving three-dimensional image as a resolution of 2K pixels on a side, it can be as sharp as the eye can perceive, and by pumping stereo digital sound through the little earphones, the moving 3-D pictures can have a perfectly realistic soundtrack.

So Hiro's not actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo this universe is known as the Metaverse.

Hiro has, of course, created "a piece of software called an avatar," one that is joined by a multitude of others on the "Street," avatars that communicate with each other in the Metaverse that date, join crowds of groupies around clubs, and act out any of innumerable fantasies:

Stunningly beautiful women, computer-airbrushed and retouched at seventy-two frames a second, like Playboy pinups turned three-dimensional—these are would-be actresses hoping to be discovered. Wild-looking abstracts, tornadoes of gyrating light—hackers who are hoping that Da5id will notice their talent, invite them inside, give them a job. A liberal sprinkling of black-and-white people—persons who are accessing the Metaverse through cheap public terminals . . . A lot of these are run-of-the-mill psycho fans devoted to the fantasy of stabbing some particular actress to death.

The avatars of Snow Crash have spawned endless contemporary offspring at the nexus of film, literature, game culture, and biomedia. The last is exemplified by Eugene Thacker's experiments with digital anatomy and virtual surgery in which animations seem to fly through the body or produce morphs that exceed anatomical classification.

The ludic dimension of self-transformation in avatar culture puts us in mind of the Freudian sense of "play drive"—the drive unfixed and allowing for infinite possibilities for the driver without consequences in the real world. In Instincts and Their Vicissitudes, retranslated in the recent Penguin edition as Drives and their Fates, Freud wrote of the capacity of drives "to stand in vicariously for one another and to change their objects with ease," thereby achieving "feats far removed from their original functions" (20). The allusion here to the changeability of objects, to living vicariously, and to the performance of uncommon feats, like flying and passing through material barriers, establishes kinship ties between the avatar and the "driver" or drive-transformer of Freudian Trieb. At issue here is the possible connection between the psychic avatar of the Freudian-Lacanian drive and the gamer avatar who, as a kind of holograph of drive, personifies the impersonalism of the id.

The name of Snow Crash character Da5id reinforces this interpretive drift. At first glance, it registers as a misprint of "David." On second reading, it homonymically sounds out "Da Id," the Id, or the It. Recall here that Freud's" Es, Ich, Uber-Ich was Latinized in the James Strachey
Standard Edition by the triad "id," "ego," "superego," and that ever since Bruno Bettelheim scathingly criticized the Strachey translation (in his Freud and Man's Soul) there has been heated interpretive controversy centered on these particular terms. Taking off from Adam Phillips's thought-provoking observation that "psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex" (xx), Leo Bersani distills a theory of impersonal intimacy from das Es, going back to the book that inspired Freud's theory of the Id, Georg Groddeck's 1923 The Book of the It [Das Buch vom Es].

Groddeck had famously affirmed that

man is animated by the Unknown, there is in him an "Es," an "It", some wondrous force which directs both what he himself does, and what happens to him. The affirmation "I live" is only conditionally correct, it expresses only a small and superficial part of the fundamental principle: "Man is lived by the 'It.'"

(11)

Groddeck's concept of "das Es" was itself borrowed from Nietzsche, who used it for "whatever in our nature is impersonal and subject to natural law" (23). In Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche curbed the hubristic "I" by making it subject to the "itness" of thought:

a thought comes when "it" wants to and not when "I" want it, so that it's a falsification of the fact to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think." It thinks: but that this "it" is precisely that old, celebrated "I" is, to put it mildly, only an assumption, an assertion, in no way an "immediate certainty." After all, we've already done too much with this "it thinks": this "it" already contains an interpretation of the event and is not part of the process itself.

(17)

The "itness" of "I" underscores the element of foreignness within the subject, a force-field of blind energy that serves as thought's predicate. Thinking as "itness," other to or outside of self-consciousness becomes key to any theory of subject technics.

Something of this "itness" informs Lacan's revisionist account of the Freudian drive. In "Démontage de la pulsion" ("The Deconstruction of the Drive"), a chapter of The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, Lacan reinstated the distinction between psychical drive (Trieb) and biological instinct often blurred in the English translation of Freud. Lacan maintained that

Drive (pulsion) is not thrust (poussée). Trieb is not Drang, if only for the following reason. In an article written in 1915—that is, a year after the Einfürung zum Narzissmus, you will see the importance of this reminder soon—entitled Trieb und Triebschicksale—one should avoid translating it by avatar, Triebwandlungen would be avatar, Schicksal is adventure, vicissitude—in this article, then, Freud says that it is important to distinguish four terms in the drive: Drang, thrust; Quelle, the source; Objekt, the object; Ziel, the aim.

(Lacan 162)

Interestingly for my purposes, in trying to avoid confusing drive with the thrust or vicissitudes of destiny Lacan clears a conceptual space for translating Triebwandlungen as avatar. Cautioning against the avatar, he nonetheless enters it on the oblique into the discussion of the semantics of
the drive. It is important to note that he italicizes the English word avatar in the original French text while discussing the connotations of Freud's term Triebschicksale: "il faut éviter de traduire [Triebschicksale] par avatar, si c'était Triebwandlungen, ce serait avatar, Schicksal c'est aventure, vicissitude." In Freud's German, die Triebverwandlung and der Triebumwandlung (used interchangeably as references to transformation) are invoked to emphasize the reversibility of select pairs of drives: sadism-masochism, voyeurism-exhibitionism, love-hate.

Für beide hier betrachteten Triebbeispiele gilt die Bemerkung, dass die Triebverwandlung durch Verkehrung der Aktivität in Passivität und Wendung gegen die Triebregung gegen die eigene Person eigentlich niemals am ganzen Betrag der Triebregung vorgenommen wird. Die ältere active Triebrichtung bleibt in gewissem Ausmasse neben der jüngeren passiven bestehen, auch wenn der Prozess der Triebumwandlung sehr ausgiebig ausgefallen ist.

(223, emphasis added)

[Translation: It is true of both kinds of drive under consideration here that transformations by reversal of activity into passivity and turning back on the self never actually involve the whole amount of the drive impulse. To some extent, the older, active tendency continues to exist alongside the later, passive one, even when the transformation has been very extensive.]

For Freud, the intellectual stakes of drive conversion include emotional ambivalence, a higher power of egoic defense, and the inhibition of destructive or self-destructive impulses, whereas for Lacan, psychic drive is principally of interest because it interferes with aim (Ziel), thereby restructuring the process of sublimation. Lacan's arguments, however rich in potential applications, beg the central, interrelated questions: Why select the anomalous word "avatar" (supported by no standard German dictionary) as the appropriate translation for Triebwandlung? Why was it imperative to replace "vicissitudes" with the surrogate term "transformation," variants of which are found elsewhere in Freud's essay?

One explanation is that the anomalous term "avatar" was in fact just what Lacan was looking for despite professing the contrary. The notion of avatarity arguably performs theoretical heavy lifting for him, enabling him to align Zeil with the physics of destination rather than the metaphysics of destiny. Lacan, one could say, functions the avatar, in the manner of a gamer theorist. Tuned to the nuances of Freud's references to verwandeln and umwandeln in Drives and Their Fates, Lacan projects the avatar as something on the order of a drive-transformer capable of reprogramming the Freudian elements invested as drive (triebbesetzt) (150). As avatarity, the drive is inserted into a new sequence of terms that involve play. Starting from the loaded expression "la pulsion en fait le tour," Lacan spins out le tour as driving around something, as escape, evasion or fraud [le tour d'escamotage] and as le trick (in the sense of to play a trick, to be tricked, to turn a trick) (152-53). The effect of this gaming, of this play on the terms of transformation, directional change, and reverse targeting, is to unseal the fate of the drives, relaunching the intellectual adventure of the avatar as proxy or object-cause of desire.11

For Lacan, the butterfly inspires phobic terror in the Wolfman because the Wolfman recognizes that "the beating of little wings is not so very far from the beating of causation, of the primal stripe marking his being for the first time with the grid of desire" (76). Here the wings act like a kind of faire causatif, a proxy or avatar that sets subject-formation in motion and resets the path
of the drives. In both Freud and Lacan the avatar comes off as distinctly threatening and persecutory, not in the same way as the Other of the interiorized social gaze, but as a causative force—inchoate and pressuring—beyond intelligible grasp. Operating like an adaptor, transformer, or refreshed game-start, the Lacanian Triebwandlungen gives us avatar agency as the unsettling yet exciting specter of subject "cause" temporarily unhitched from aim.

Contemporary gamer theorists have emphasized the "driven" gamer whose "move acts" translate the player character's position in the game world. Move acts give concrete expression to the abstract idea of Triebwandlungen; they swivel, reverse, and orient the flows of agency. They target an object that can easily shift course and aim. Alex Galloway writes that move acts "are commonly effected by using a joystick or analog stick, or any type of movement controller . . . in games like Tetris where the player does not have a strict player character avatar, move acts still come in the form of spatial translation, rotation, stacking, and interfacing of game tokens" (Gaming 22). Following Galloway's argument, move acts can stand in for avatars, but this does not prevent them from giving full suasion to avatarity in its multiple meanings as targeted pulsion, power tool, or proxy of multiple personality.

Subject-Avatar: A User's Manual

To equate the avatar with drive reinforces the purely abstract character of the subject of technics at the expense of the popular image. But this is to ignore potentially interesting theoretical connections between libidinal and cultural economy. It is surely no trivial symptom that avatars are occasionally referred to as "toons" (see Figure 1).

Djnaughtyjay Valentine Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG 2006 Digital print on canvas 87 x 114 cm Image used courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.
They have a recognizable cartoonish look, part special effects, part mutant creature, that has given rise to imaginative work by artists like JODI, Toni Dove, Keith Cottingham (Fictitious Portraits 1996), Masaki Fujihata (Nuzzle Afar), Eddo Stern, John Klima, and the Italian duo Eva and Franco Mattes (a.k.a. 010010110101101.ORG), whose recent exhibition, 13 Most Beautiful Avatars, plucks its "subjects" from Second Life. The artists are clearly wise to the way in which Second Life changes out the tradition of character Bildung in favor of building your character in a capitalist economy. Building equals buying (in Linden dollars, the currency of Second Life). The players of Second Life opt for a kind of "digital Darwinism" (Wark) as they adapt the principles and procedures of cosmetic surgery—augmentation, enhancement, nose jobs, liposuction, botox—to virtual body-construction. Generating a portrait gallery that warrants comparison with Facebook Andy Warhol's silkscreens of celebrities, or Diane Arbus-inspired "family albums" of marginals, freaks and superheros, 13 Most Beautiful Avatars tests the limits of communitarian "life-sharing" against the online conventions of a post-human meat market. As Jenny Diski notes,

eventually your avatar becomes a caricature of what you have always wanted to be, few can resist producing the tinseltown dream version. Second Life is almost entirely inhabited by
impossibly long-legged, big-breasted, muscle-rippling blondes with lips so plumped full of what would be collagen in the real world that they make Ivana Trump's mouth look mean. The males are much the same only taller.

Despite this conformism, avatars move beyond the commercialized beauty ideal towards an aesthetics of virtual surface and augmented bodies: skin, jewels, and tattoos, extreme morphology, intersectional race and gender, cross-speciation. Avatars in this way reinforce the utopian conviction that, in the words of the Mattes partners, "the most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself."

Avatars tender the hope of a surrogate self capable of unseating the lexicon of "self" and "own" underwriting possessive individualism. Though with avatars, as one critic puts it, "the cloud of raw data has finally solidified into a body and a face," they can also be regarded as screen-savers of the ego; as decoys masking the thingness of data and the autonomy of the drive. As Laetitia Wilson notes with respect to the game Proxy, "your agent suddenly really does have a life of its own." Wilson complicates the notion of avatar agency with the notion of proxy, defined within the confines of the online game of the same name as an "interpassive object" that mediates program and cybernetic dopplegänger:12

Proxy is an art: software and game fusion that playfully stretches the parameters of each of these spheres while addressing notions of subjectivity, community and surveillance and juggling issues of agency and interpassivity. As a "player" one can adopt an "agent" or series of "agents." These agents function as avatars, as information watchdogs, seekers and battlers in a variety of information spaces (textual and graphical). A given agent is personalised with your chosen psychological profile and the aim is to maintain stability in your agent's psychological state. This interpassive object—as a mediator between oneself and the game-space—is thus a surrogate self that demands appropriate action or dialogue to avoid psychological problems; one's game score decreases when the program "detects" feelings of anxiety or alienation in one's agent. Individual agency is extended into the game-space as one is required to act appropriately, according to the "rules" of the "game" and in response to dialogue with other agents (other players).

The critical issue at stake here, clearly, is that "control over your symbolic stand-in is denied." What we have is not just feedback, but blow-back; a pressure exerted by the proxy drive. Galloway's correlative to the proxy is the informatic avatar. "Any informatic instance of a 'role,' [he writes] is thus always subtended by the necessary and continuous input of 'rolls' in the form of random-number generation and other nonrandom informatic inputs. Identity becomes mathematics, and mathematics becomes identity" ("StarCraft" 92). Galloway enables a subject of technics characterized by a constantly self-updating set of algorithms that mold bodily form, choreograph gestural affect, and redirect the drives.

How is pure drive made domus or environmental form? What would avatar architecture be? One is easily led to assume that it would simply replicate the period styles and signature designs of the "real world." In Snow Crash, this hypothesis is borne out. Metaverse architecture is divided between garish, Las Vegas-style structures, "freed from the constraints of physics and finance," and better neighborhoods of the programmer elite. Here "you can see 'Frank Lloyd Wright reproductions and some fancy Victoriana" (26). Simulation is the rule in MORGS like the Sims
or Second Life: prime estates reproduce icons and blue-chip buildings, from Harvard University to a high tech Swedish Embassy. But there are clearly other models of avatar environments, identifiable perhaps as "The algorithm made me do it" architecture. Here the program is allowed to run, self-evolving according to principles of autopoeisis, producing architecture that is dynamically responsive and stochastic. Such experimentalism has of course been realized for several decades now, influencing blob architecture and preoccupying research teams at places like MIT's Media Lab, and stimulating projects like Façade Ecology (2003-06), a recent collaboration between Small Design Firm and EAR Studio that transformed a building skin into a responsive membrane coated with informational organisms. Many recent projects have contrived a subject of technics in architectural form. "Body Temperature Scan" by the Italian design studio laN+ experiments not just with body-reading surfaces, but also with avatar morphologies that re-scale human size and proportion. In "Sangre," a project by Hernan Diaz Alonso, a vitalist, corpuscular architectural avatar is built out of the formal properties of blood. In "Hypnocenter" (see Figure 2), by the French firm R and Sie, a man lives in a cage of giant vertebra-algorithms made solid—encircled by screen monitors, or perhaps it is architecture as brain or coextensive cognitive milieu.

Paris Hypnochamber By R&Sie (François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux)
Arguably, "the man" is not so much imprisoned by technics as ingrown to its environmental and neuronal structure. Subject technics in this instance merges with a techtonics that is invasive of the urban surround. The program runs rampant, submerging facades, encircling a lamp-post, and charging ahead full-throttle to infinity.

Avatarity, identified with a construct of the techno-subject as "driver" of the drive or "the algorithm made me do it" form, is adduced here to be continuous with theories of technical milieus, subjective impersonalism and psychoanalytic neutrality. In this sense, "theory" is given
a "second life" as media or subject technics. The question remains, however, why one might want to hold on to a de-ontologized subject of technics. What accounts for the enduring investment in an impersonal subject? One explanation is that subjective impersonalism keeps the cloying individualism of mainstream humanism at bay and prepares the conditions for a new universal subject, a generic subject as Alain Badiou would have it, modeled through set theory and mathematical ontology. Subject technics also endures because it is congenial to capitalism. Avatars, as we have seen, commoditize the component "features" of top brand bodies and buildings, promote "safe" communitas through online zones of sociality, re-sell already sold properties (land, houses, institutions), and inflate the value of trademark and signature by effectively marketing identities, ideas and products. But they also, countervailingly, contour a parallel universe characterized by a de-privatized commons. Avatarity in this instance might well refer to an equalized playing field of egoic drives and aims that undercuts fantasies of omnipotence and possessive individualism. If, as Brian Massumi suggests, one takes the theological element out of gaming (removing the trigger for targeting goals and the reward system for scoring), what remains is play or the topology of a ludic circus in which multiperspectival common angles, gestural syncopations, and convergent affects produce a fluctuating, gradient field of individuation and de-individuation. For Massumi, ever the Deleuzian, avatars can become agents of a technological utopia. With their high-performing motion sensors, gravity-defying power to jump worlds, and capacity for becoming subject and other at the same time, avatars have the potential of making the virtual feel. For Stiegler, something like this avarity is identified with process-thinking, programmed into future robotics (which will emphasize the reproducibility of psychomotor as well as motor skills). Stiegler glimpses an evolutionary model based on (Simondonian) transindividuation that gives new life to experimental phenomenology (Prendre 184). I have emphasized that the avatar embodies the structural condition of the drive's expression, its performative vicissitudes or Triebwandlungen that substitutes for a Freudian metaphysics of destiny (Schicksale). In this sense, the avatar is a partly-subjectified, partly impersonalized vicissitude of the drive. As a subject of technics, the avatar is not the idealized double of the player-subject (which is the naive concept of avatar), but a transformer of fates, at once independent and mimetic of some modicum of subjective agency.

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Works Cited

Little, Gregory. "A Manifesto for Avatars." Intertexts 3.2 (Fall 1999).
Footnotes

2. The term avatar emerged in the mid-eighties as the name for an ideal, victorious player (as in the game Ultima IV of 1985) or to designate the virtual double of the agent-player (as in the George Lucas game Habitat of 1987). See Morningstar and Farmer (http://www.fudco.com/chip/lessons.html). The essay was first given as a lecture in 1990, but much of what the authors have to say about the object-driven parameters of Habitat's world is relevant to a theory of the avatar as "driver." One can chart the gradual abandonment of the theological position of drive-programmers in favor of a libertarian approach in which programmers cast themselves as choreographers or "facilitators."

3. Friedmann sets off his theory of the technical milieu, with its emphasis on the subject's environmental entrainment, over and against André Leroi-Gourhan's anthropological use of the term, which emphasizes how the tool (and the know-how of utensility more broadly) "invents" the human. Both Friedmann and Leroi-Gourhan were working with the concept in the 1940s. By the 1950s, cybernetics, information theory, and debates over human engineering would expand the parameters of technical milieu theory in relation to consciousness, subjectivity, and immersive ambience. Raymond Ruyer's La cybernétique et l'origine de l'information (Paris: Flammarion, 1954) and Gilbert Simondon's Du Mode d'existence des objets techniques (1958) are key representative works for these theoretical and disciplinary extensions.


5. See also Bernard Stiegler, Prendre soin de la jeunesse et des générations (Paris: Flammarion, 2008). In this last work, we see the influence of the Foucault lectures from 1977-79 in which the notion of "discipline" is extended to disciplinary techniques and new modes of governmentality that grow out of and are newly applied to genetics, the politics of security, social and urban planning, and new forms of biopolitics. See Michel Foucault, Sécurité, Territoire, Population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978, ed. François Ewald et. al. (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004) and Foucault, Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979, ed. François Ewald et al. (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004).


8. Alexander Galloway, in an email of June 10, 2007. In his essay "StarCraft, or, Balance" Galloway writes of the avatar: "the homonymic pun is crucial here insofar as it shows the extent to which the very definition of the avatar is impossible to separate from the uncanny effects of linguistic techne" (92).


11. Samuel Weber, "Medium, Reflexivity and the Economy of the Self." Writing about Walter Benjamin's dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" [Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik], Weber glosses Benjamin's insistence on the transformative (alterity-producing) potential of thinking qua medium or pure mediacy:

In contrast to Fichte, the Romantics do not shy away from affirming the "absolute" dimension of "reflection" and Benjamin explains this precisely through the notion of medium. But his use of the term here, far from resolving the ambiguities of the Romantic tendency to regard reflection as Absolute, actually brings them to the fore. They can be described in the following way. On the one hand, "medium " designates a process that is not simply instrumental or teleological but that seems to have a certain autonomy: it functions immediately, as indicated, and leaves nothing outside of itself. This in turn tends to construe the medium of reflection as ultimately a movement of the "self," a Selbstbewegung. On the other hand, however, this "movement" is precisely never simply circular or self-contained: it may be "continual" or "constant"—stetig is the German word Benjamin uses—and it may also entail a kind of unfolding or development—Entfaltung—but it is also and above all, a transformation. In the first pages of his dissertation, Benjamin emphasizes this point: "Under the term 'reflection' is understood the transformative (umformende)—and nothing but the transformative—reflecting on a form" (20/XX). Form is already a reflective category that in reflecting itself further, alters and transforms itself. A certain alterity is thus essentially at work at the heart of the reflective movement. The ambiguity or tension thus results between such alterity, on the one hand, associated with a dynamics of transformation and alteration, and on the other the notion of a movement of the self returning to itself also associated with the notion of reflection. The nature of the movement itself "reflects" this constitutive ambiguity: on the one hand it is "stetig," continual, on the other it moves by leaps and bounds.

12. Interpassivity is a term used by Slavoj Zizek to "denote those abundant mechanisms we employ to avoid actually doing something. Hence, the hidden function of canned laughter—namely, that it laughs for us, so we don't have to feel obliged to respond to the program in an active mode, expending unnecessary energy laughing for ourselves. For Zizek, interpassivity is keyed to a conception of the body as a "desubjectivized multitude of partial objects" (180).

13. Badiou, much like Zizek, articulates the desire for empty and/or mechanical structures of subjectivity with quasi-religious discourses or credos of fidelity to the event are invoked to shore up the desire.

14. My summary of remarks made by Brian Massumi in discussion following a presentation by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning titled "Arts of Relation," given at the conference "Architecture in the Space of Flows" held at Newcastle University on 24 June 2007. Massumi and Manning both work with notions of process, flow, and concrescence indebted to the work of Alfred North
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