

Embodiment in skateboarding videogames

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Abstract

This article analyses the avatar in action games as both object of perception and instrument of action and perception. This allows for a picture to emerge of the way in which avatars in 3D action games serve as a kind of commentary on what it is to have a body in space. Two skateboarding games are analysed primarily through the lens of Martin Heidegger's exposition of equipmentality in *Being and Time*. These skating games are chosen since they are examples of games which on the one hand provide spectacular images of the body in performance and on the other allow the player to feel in a heightened, focused and distorted way what it feels like to skate. By attending to the formal characteristics of the avatar as object of perception and instrument of perception and action and placing these within the context of the games' different ideological positionings and assertions, it is possible to unpack some of the ways in which these games investigate embodiment as a culturally constituted phenomenon.

Keywords

videogames

Heidegger

empathy

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phenomenology

Introduction

Videogame play constitutes a performance in which the player's sense of bodily presence is reconfigured. This article focuses on the formal elements of two skateboarding videogames, *Tony Hawk's Project 8* (Neversoft 2006; hereafter *THP8*) and *Skate 3* (EA Black Box 2010) to describe the different ways in which this sense of bodily presence emerges.

In these games the avatar is the central figure through which the player's sense of bodily presence is organized. The avatar is an unusual object in that it is both a powerful image in itself and a means by which the player exercises control over the game environment.

As an image we might look to the presentation of the avatar on-screen and to the player's perception and aesthetic response to this presentation. But the avatar's status as a means of exercising control over the game environment requires a second approach. This casts the game as a set of tasks and the avatar as a tool for the completion of these tasks. Here, the avatar is defined not so much through how it looks as how it is mapped at one side to the control schema and on the other to the game environment. Espen Aarseth's comment that when playing the adventure game *Tomb Raider* the dimensions of protagonist Lara

Croft's body are 'irrelevant to me as a player' (2004: 48) distinguishes between Lara as image and as tool and these two modes are determined by the identity of the user – viewer or player.

The avatar as performing image and as means of performance: we will need to synthesize these two approaches – the one concentrating on the audio-visual display, the other on a manual performance on the part of the player; the one taking place in a representational mode the other through a kind of embodiment – in order to look at the mapping between the two realms of the screen presentation and the player's body. This will help to think around questions of how particular kinds of mappings between player input and on-screen presentation mediate emotional, intellectual or otherwise aesthetic responses.

Heidegger and equipmentality

For Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the dealings we have with entities in the world take two forms. The first is 'concernful dealings', or *praxis* ([1927] 1962: 68–69).

Concern is an existentials of Dasein; that is, it designates a way of Being-in-the-World for that entity for which its Being is an issue.

Heidegger calls the entities with which we have these concernful dealings 'equipment' ([1927] 1962: 69). In using equipment we encounter it 'in order to' accomplish something, where:

the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and

the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is – as equipment.

([1927] 1962: 69)

The second way we may encounter entities in the world is in a mode of refraining:

When concern holds back from any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into what is now the sole remaining mode of Being-in, the mode of just tarrying alongside ([1927] 1962: 61).

Here, there is a ‘refraining’ or a ‘holding-oneself back from any manipulation or utilization’ ([1927] 1962: 61–62).

There are two ways, then, of encountering an entity. In the first case we put it to its use. We use the hammer for hammering. The look we adopt here is a look ‘in-order-to’; what Heidegger calls circumspection and in which the entity is ‘ready-to-hand’ equipment. In the second case we ‘just stare at’ it. This is to look ‘theoretically’; a kind of looking in which the hammer is ‘present-at-hand’. It is ‘a bare perceptual cognition’ ([1927] 1962: 67). In circumspection, the entity withdraws from theoretical looking in its readiness-to-hand.

While the hammering example suggests a switch between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand, Heidegger complicates these existentials further. It is not that the once ready-to-hand hammer becomes present-at-hand when we cease to view it through circumspection and begin to theoretically inspect it. Rather, there are several aspects of our engagement with equipment that brings ‘to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-

hand in what is ready-to-hand' ([1927] 1962: 74). These are conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy. Of these, the first two are most relevant to the present analysis. Conspicuousness is when the equipment that is ready-to-hand presents itself in a certain unreadiness-to-hand ([1927] 1962: 73). Obtrusiveness is when the equipment required is absent, leading to that equipment which is present becoming obtrusive to our task.

However, even in this transformation of equipment into a conspicuous or obtrusive unusability, its readiness-to-hand does not 'vanish simply': it retains a trace of its readiness-to-hand ([1927] 1962: 73). Heidegger suggests that its equipmentality remains as 'something we would like to shove out of the way' ([1927] 1962: 74).

If we think of the avatar as an element of game equipment – a means through which the player takes action in the game environment – it proves an unusual kind of equipment.

There are several characteristics of the avatar that encourage the player to 'seize hold'. It is one of the chief means by which the player can access and perceive different areas of the game environment and accomplish game tasks through the controller/keyboard. But as well as being the *means* of perception it is also a main *object* of perception, encouraging the player to 'just stare'. Unlike hammers, pens, or other kinds of equipment, the avatar is represented to a greater or lesser extent as a sentient being with its own character, awareness and intelligence and this encourages an empathic as well as a practical relationship for the player. The strange form of the avatar as equipment requires an adaptation of Heidegger's description of the way in which the present-at-hand comes to the fore in the ready-to-hand entity.

The doubleness of the avatar

Discussing the role playing game *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997; hereafter *FFVII*) A. Burn and G. Schott see the avatar as ‘a two-part structure, partly designed in conventional narrative terms as a protagonist of popular narrative, and partly as a vehicle for interactive game-play’ (2004: 2). The former they call the ‘heavy hero’ and characterize as an ‘offer act’, where the game offers an image or character type to the player. The latter they call the ‘digital dummy’ and characterize as a ‘demand act’, where the game requires particular actions on the part of the player. We ‘read’ the ‘heavy hero’ but we ‘play’ the ‘digital dummy’ (Burn and Schott 2004: 11). These two acts become integrated through gameplay.

A. Gregersen and T. Grodal (2009) suggest two separate systems for how the player’s body and the game world interrelate. Empathy caused by the response of mirror neurons to the game’s audio-visual information activates the player’s motor systems, recreating the conditions of the virtual world in the body. At the same time, tool use activates the somatosensory and proprioceptive systems – the systems pertaining to the sensations of the sensory modalities and of the relative position of the body’s parts, respectively – extending the player’s body into the virtual world (2009: 69). Empathy for the avatar is associated with the avatar as image, while placement of the player in the game environment is associated with the avatar as tool.

Gregersen and Grodal identify an important distinction in how we encounter videogames: they are both a project to be done and a representation to be interpreted. Their description of the precise means by which these different modes operate is speculative, and may be open to dispute. But while the cognitive science they cite may be a subject of some

controversy (e.g. Hickok 2009), the identification of empathy as a separate response in videogame play is helpful. Outside of cognitive science, the concept of empathy has been fruitful in aesthetic theory, which may be a more useful lens through which to understand empathy in videogames. As employed by the term's originator, Robert Vischer ([1873] 1994), empathy is pleasure derived by the viewer of an artwork through an imaginative taking on of its physical form. This has been employed in performance theory, including in criticism of dance (Martin 1939), film (Anderson 1998) and games (Swallowwell 2008). Though empathy came to be understood over the course of the twentieth century as fellow feeling for other people, for Vischer an object does not need to be human-shaped to elicit an empathic response. However, when the object *is* human-shaped, another form of empathy comes into play. I am no longer contemplating lines that I can imaginatively trace within my body, as when I experience the curviness of a vase, but am also contemplating a human figure that is suggestive of particular gendered, ethnic and otherwise social and cultural identities.

The avatar's relationship to the player, then, can be considered in two ways. First, it is an instrument of perception and action. But unlike other instruments of perception (spectacles, microscopes, hearing aids) or other instruments of action (hammers, keyboards, weapons) it is also one of the objects of perception. As an object of perception it is an image of some kind with which it is possible to relate empathically. This image may entail or point to human characteristics, identities, personality traits and personal history or may be an object with few or none of these features.

The avatar in skateboarding games

Let us see how the avatar as ready-to-hand equipment in which presence-at-hand comes sporadically to the fore works in videogames by focusing on two skating games: *THP8* and *Skate 3*. These skating games are chosen for three reasons. First, the avatar in each has a vivid visual presence as well as being the main agent for player action. They therefore illustrate the avatar as simultaneously practical equipment for getting things done and object of theoretical inspection capable of inducing empathy. Second, they offer different control schemes for similar sets of actions and so demonstrate the impact of control scheme on presence. This focuses on the avatar as ready-to-hand. Third, they represent skateboarding slightly differently in terms of viewpoint, the body and replays. This demonstrates the importance of presentation on presence.

By attending to these games we may see how the body as it emerges in these skateboarding games reflects upon ‘the body’ as a site of athletic achievement and of failure and punishment.

The avatar as object of perception

As has been noted, the avatar as image can be both character and spectacle. In *THP8* and *Skate 3* this mode is mainly as spectacle because the story element of the games is generally not emphasized and the skater’s ‘character’ is generally underdeveloped. We may at times see the skater’s body as human, but rarely as the outward representation of an inner character. But despite being in this sense extra-societal, the body is always culturally constituted, and in this case it is the culture of skateboarding that acts as the frame within which the spectacle of the avatar’s body is formed. In both games the skater’s body as spectacle is open to an empathic response. This response can be one of

admiration, when we see our skater pull off a gravity-defying trick, or of disparagement, when the skateboard hits a curb and the skater gracelessly crashes off the board. In both cases, the skater's body can tend towards the object or the human. As an object, the skater-avatar is an articulated machine responding to forces applied by the player through the controller and by aspects of the environment such as curbs, walls and ramps. But the human form means the avatar retains the capacity to arouse pathos, admiration and identification.

In both *THP8* and *Skate 3* the skater-avatar as spectacle (either human or object) comes to the fore at moments when the player is not in control of the avatar's body and at moments when the gameplay demands placed on the player are relatively low, either through changes and fluctuations in the gameplay, increased player proficiency or the adoption by the player of a spectatorial attitude. In *THP8*, gameplay demands are low during character selection and just before skating contests, when the view slowly rotates around the skater gripping the board in an attitude of determination.

Here, the avatar as ready-to-hand equipment recedes due to a form of obtrusiveness. An element of the avatar as equipment is missing – its capacity for interaction. Insofar as we experience the avatar as a means of interaction, we are confronted with this absence as a deficiency. The avatar is ready-to-hand only in the sense that the equipment that takes the place of the missing interactivity is to be shoved aside.

Throughout the rest of the game the skater's body is, of course, viewable, occupying the central part of the screen in a trailing camera configuration. But its displaying of itself is not its primary function. The avatar as spectacle is coupled with the avatar as means of perception and action. These two modes fluctuate as the gameplay demands change from

moment to moment. This fluctuation is particularly evident in the ‘Nail the Trick’ mode (hereafter, NTT). The player enters NTT by clicking on the two thumbsticks as the skater is in the air. We will return to this mode to discuss the game’s control mechanisms but for the moment let us focus on how it alters the spectacle of the avatar. On entering NTT, the sound and image slow down and the background loses focus as the view moves to the side of the skater, pulling focus on the feet and board.

The presentation concentrates not on the skater-avatar as an independent character but on the interface between skater, board and environment. This is not only due to the closing in of the view but also the slowing down of the action. The slow motion reveals the intricate footwork involved in tricks that, in normal play, pass by too quickly to be fully appreciated. This is a conventional use of slow motion in skate videos. But it also lightens the player’s cognitive and performative load, giving space for a more contemplative attitude towards the avatar. The radical alternation of the relationship between avatar and player that NTT allows is identified by an enthusiastic Eurogamer review:

It’s just sublime. It’s breathtaking. You’re riding your skateboard through the huge city, and then at any moment, you click both analogue sticks, and you’re in. It’s bullet time, it’s slo-mo, it’s the high-def filming of a kingfisher diving into a pond. It makes you just stare and stare, and then inevitably crash into a railing, bail, and smear your face halfway down the street. But all so *beautifully*. (Walker 2006: 1, original emphasis)

This paragraph neatly points to the tension between the avatar as spectacle and as means of action. The player that is made to ‘just stare and stare’ transforms the avatar from ready-to-hand equipment to a present-at-hand object, but the transformation is not total and even at this most seductive of moments the avatar demands to be seized as well as seen. The reviewer that loses sight of the avatar as equipment in this ecstasy of the spectacle is immediately punished. This is only the most obvious example of a flickering that proceeds throughout the game. As the skater-body performs its line it both conceals and reveals itself as the player’s gaze shifts between circumspection and aesthetic or theoretical contemplation.

The reviewer’s crash seems to be a case of conspicuousness, in that the spectacle of the avatar is getting in the way of his attendance to the interactive element of the game. As we have seen, Heidegger suggests that the equipment that has become unusable remains equipment in that it is something we would like to ‘shove out of the way’. But this is not what is happening in relation to the avatar whose spectacular display of itself gets in the way of interactive control. Here, there is not necessarily a desire on the part of the player to regain control of the avatar. Rather, the spectacle of the avatar is enjoyable; not something to be dispensed with but something to be relished.

Does, then, the avatar remain ready-to-hand equipment at these moments? If so, how?

Heidegger suggests that concern can be ‘a kind of apprehensiveness’ ([1927] 1962: 57).

This apprehensiveness is seen in our relationship to the avatar. Gordon Calleja has argued that engagement with games is not only one of direct input, but is ‘first and foremost a *disposition* and readiness to act’ (2011: 41, original emphasis). At those moments when we are not directly interacting with the avatar, we are preparing to interact, and this sense

of readying oneself for action is a key aspect of gameplay. Even in cinematic cut-scenes we are getting ready to use the avatar once more. Its status as ready-to-hand equipment has receded but its presence-at-hand is, as Heidegger might say, 'still bound up in the readiness-to-hand of equipment' ([1927] 1962: 74). The above reviewer's crash landing was due to his allowing the practical equipmentality of the avatar to be taken over by a theoretical looking, to the extent that all apprehensiveness had disappeared.

The skater-avatar in *Skate 3* is more often a spectacle than it is in *THP8*. There is a much more fluid moving around the skater-body as the avatar is presented to the player in a number of modes and from a number of angles. Impressive tricks and spectacular crashes (or 'bails' in skater parlance) are automatically played back to the player. The skater-body as reproduced image is a prevailing theme. As we are warned in one of the series' slogans: 'Without footage it's fiction' (EA 2009).

In *Skate 3*, success is measured by photos of the skater performing tricks published in skate magazines. When challenges are completed there is an instant replay of the skater from a different angle; on photo challenges the player selects which image of the skater should appear in the magazine; and when the skater suffers a serious injury the reward is a slow motion instant replay complete with crunching sounds. But even while the player is controlling the skater the footage motif persists. The view that the player has is that of the skater's buddy Shingo, following on a board with a camera. The fish-eye lens and the default low angle ensure that the skater's body is displayed in the context of skater culture.

In *Skate 3* the skater's body is not only displayed back to the player. The player also has a hand in constructing the image of the skater for others. Videos of gameplay can be

uploaded to skate.reel on the *Skate 3* website, where the body becomes a pure spectacle, unencumbered by the role of instrument/tool. Here, the avatar becomes a spectacle not just for the player but also for a much wider community. It is in this community that the aestheticization of bails is developed.

THP8 introduced ragdoll physics into the *Tony Hawk* series so that when the avatar is knocked off the board, the body, instead of following a pre-scripted animation, falls according to the effects that objects in the environment have on individual limbs. This also allows for the player to control the falling skater, pressing buttons to bounce off surfaces. This leads to an aestheticization of bails, where a good bail is one which results in a lot of damage to the avatar body. In *Skate 3* this is taken further. Throughout the game are 'Hall of Meat' challenges that require the player to bail in some spectacular fashion and inflict particular kinds of damage on the avatar body. If a 'Hall of Meat' challenge is achieved the game goes into slow motion and the skater's broken bones are put on display as though in an x-ray.

In skate.reel, the gallery of user-created videos for *Skate 3*, a substantial number of the videos depict skaters crashing. Of the twenty video categories, those labelled 'bail' and 'accident' are the sixth and eighth most populated (EA n.d.). Videos depicting skaters' skills are more frequent, but even these virtuoso displays frequently conclude with spectacular, surprising or comic bails.¹

In these bail videos the body is consistently presented as a mechanical object that is subject to outside forces. One video shows dozens of beach-balls bouncing down a stair case, referencing an ad for Sony Bravia, with a rolled-up skater bouncing down the concrete steps in their midst.² Frequently, the videos feature giant dominos, either set in

motion by the skater, or with the skater following the dominos and being battered by them in different ways.³

A lot of the videos are about taking animations that are intended for one purpose and putting them to another purpose, often sexual,⁴ but not always.⁵ In these videos the skater is hollowed out and turned into a functional object rather than an intending subject.

While puppetry attempts to imbue a piece of wood with a soul, elevating it from its status as object to the status of intending subject, these videos strip the skater's body of its intending possibilities and so reduce it to the status of object. However, they rely for their comic effect on the skater retaining some trace of humanity.

There is an obvious point of reference here to slapstick comedy. While the sadness of the slapstick comic lies in his transformation from human being into mechanical object, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the famous machine sequence in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), the skater-avatar exists in a perpetual limbo between mechanical object and human being. This is linked in general to the avatar's function as instrument and, specifically, to the game's relative neglect of the establishment of character, with the skater as an interchangeable, silent object with limited backstory. Unlike the slapstick audience, who are not responsible for the accidents befalling the comedian, the instrumental nature of the avatar means that the player is directly culpable. On the skate.reel website, the viewer is not responsible, but the avatar is still not viewed in the same way as the slapstick comedian, because we are always aware of the player who has set up the bail. Similarly, while the player of the game has access to some limited backstory of the avatar, this is removed from the context of the skate.reel gallery.

This reduction of the human body to an object is central to comedy in Henri Bergson's theory of laughter. Bergson writes 'The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' ([1924] 2008: 18). In the skate.reel videos the avatar is cast as machine – a thing that, in Heidegger's terminology, has a kind of Being that is not Dasein – in spite of the game designers' efforts to imbue it with human characteristics through impressive artwork and physics. The avatar as machine peeps through.

In her book on slapstick in film, Muriel Andrin distinguishes between early 'painless' slapstick, and a later, darker slapstick, which retains marks of violence (2010: 231).

While many of the videos in skate.reel ascribe to an aesthetic of painlessness, there are also a large number of videos where the attack seems if not more real at least more nasty. The hyperbolic gestures of the slapstick comic lead to laughter. The cuts and bruises of skate.reel frequently lead to wincing. Skaters are knocked about in many of these videos in a way that seems to be hostile rather than sympathetic to the body. Perhaps this is linked to the presence of a player who is consciously inflicting pain on the avatar.

One example of the darker slapstick that Andrin identifies is the MTV show *Jackass* (2000–2002), in which pain is central. This show, in which a group of stuntmen inflict injuries on each other, was intertwined with skateboarding culture in general as well as skating videogames in particular, with the casting of pro skateboarder and Jackass member Bam Margera as a central character in *Tony Hawk Underground 2* (Neversoft 2004).

The critic Sean Brayton (2007) has described *Jackass* as a post-civil rights portrayal of white male victimhood. Brayton draws upon the idea of 'reflexive sadomasochism' as put

forward by David Savran (1998), who argues that since Vietnam the increased concessions made to the civil rights and feminist movements and to multi-culturalism has led to a perceived disempowerment amongst some white men. This has resulted in a victimized identity which ‘has the effect of splitting the subject’s ego between a sadistic half and a masochistic half. So the reflexive sadomasochistic, rather than humiliate and master others, turns this impulse back upon himself’ (Savran 1998: 129, quoted in Brayton 2007: 59). Reflexive sadomasochism allows the white male to cast himself as victim (of a feminized, multicultural society) while retaining the characteristics of the ‘pre-civil rights’ empowered, aggressive, controlling white male.

As Brayton acknowledges with respect to *Jackass*, the problem associated with this interpretation lies in the assumption that the demographic make-up of the audience can be inferred from that of the *Jackass* team. The same problem arises if we attempt to understand the punishment of the body in *skate.reel* through this lens. Certainly skateboarding is a predominantly male activity (Borden 2001: 144) though people of many racial and ethnic backgrounds participate from around the world (Borden 2001: 140). In any case, it would be a mistake to infer in the absence of empirical research that people who play skateboarding games are skaters. We can say that the vast majority of skater-avatars on *skate.reel* are white and male, though again this may not tell us much about who is playing. The default character in the customization screen is white and male and this might possibly account for the large number of white male avatars on *skate.reel*. What we can say is that *Skate 3* provides a space in which the kind of impulses Brayton identifies in *Jackass* can be played out.

The avatar as means of perception and action

Let us now turn to the avatar in *THP8* and *Skate 3* as a means of perception and action.

One important feature of equipment as discussed by Heidegger is that it always takes its position in the context of ‘a totality of equipment’ ([1927] 1962: 68). In order to understand the avatar as equipment we must understand its relation to the controller.

The PlayStation’s Dual Analog thumbsticks brought a sense of smooth movement to the *Tony Hawk Pro Skater* series when it launched in the late 1990s; a sense that is retained throughout the *Tony Hawk* games. These games integrated a smooth mapping of directions with continuity in trick combinations. In earlier skate games the player is at any moment either performing a trick or traversing the environment. There is a clear rhythm set up between these two kinds of actions. The first Tony Hawk game, *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* (Neversoft 1999) allowed tricks to be strung together through grinds, a move where the skateboard travels along a curb or a rail on the metal trucks that fix the wheels to the board. After *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 3* (Neversoft 2001), by which time manuals, a move where only two wheels touch the ground, and reverts, a move where the board is spun on its back wheels, had been added, the player-character could perform long combinations linked together by manuals, reverts and grinds.

In *THP8*, tricks are performed in the main using combinations of button presses and directions on the thumbstick. For example, perhaps the most fundamental skateboarding trick is the olly, where the skater jumps in the air, bringing the skateboard up without holding onto it. The skater starts with back foot on the tail (the back of the board), front foot in the centre of the board, and knees bent. The more the knees bend the higher will be the olly. The back foot strikes down hard on the tail and as the tail touches the ground

the skater jumps into the air. The front foot drags along to the front of the board, guiding it into a parallel position to the ground so that when the skateboard lands all four wheels come down at once. The move is accomplished, then, by various tensions between up and down and back and front. The player may be unfamiliar with the sequence of moves necessary to perform an olly in real life but the animation of the avatar gives a good sense of these moves and the tensions involved.

How is this achieved in *THP8*? By pressing down on the A button (on the Xbox 360) the skater pushes forward to accelerate. By releasing the A button the skater performs an olly. Here, the sense of 'up and down' and 'backward and forward' is transformed into a more general sense of 'hold and release'. The nolly, which is a reversed version of the olly, in which the tail comes up first, is performed by pulling on the left trigger while performing an olly. The left trigger, then, has an arbitrary relationship to the nolly stance. But while most of the tricks in *THP8* map according to a broad logic of tension and release, NTT has a more natural mapping. Once in the air, the player clicks both thumbsticks. At this point the avatar will kick the board with the right foot if the player uses the right stick and the left foot if the player uses the left stick. The kick will flip the board in the direction the stick is pushed. The result is that the player has a greater sense of responsibility for the trick performed.

Perhaps more important than the natural mapping involved in NTT is the fact that it makes the player responsible for the style of an individual trick. In the face-button tricks, the player's responsibility for style is only in terms of the larger combination and the landing. But in NTT, the player is able to control the style of the move itself. A jump that allows for two or three button push tricks in normal mode might allow five or six kicks to

the board in NTT. By breaking the trick down into more primitive units of kicks, the player has a greater sense of building a bespoke trick rather than stringing together a number of discrete, generic tricks.

Arriving the year after *THP8* the first *Skate* game took the natural mapping of NTT and applied it to the game as a whole. Instead of the arbitrary mapping of button presses to specific move types, *Skate* differentiates the moves and tricks almost exclusively through the triggers and the right thumbstick. Grabs are not executed by pressing one of the buttons but by pressing the right trigger for the right hand and the left trigger for the left hand. More central to the gameplay, however, is the 'flickit' control scheme, in which the right thumbstick is used not to control movement of the avatar or the player's view but to control a particular action.

The analogue stick can be understood in two ways. In the first schema, up and down on the stick are considered up and down in the screen's y-axis. In the second schema, up and down on the stick are considered forward and backward in the z-axis. These schemas overlap. In *Skate 3* some tricks make sense as a natural mapping according to both schemas while in others one or other breaks down. Compare, for example, the olly and the nolly. In *Skate 3* the olly is translated as follows: the player points down with the right thumb stick. The longer it is pointed down the higher the olly will be. It is then quickly moved directly up to jump, and it lands automatically as long as it is on an appropriate surface. The game simulates the tensions in the olly not just in terms of hold and release but in terms of up-down and back-front. The thumbstick movement gives the sense of tension or contrast between crouch and jump and between the downward movement of the back foot on the tail and the immediate countermovement of the board. Up and down

on the thumbstick translate more or less directly to up and down for the skater. We start off by pressing down and the skater bends the knees, up and the skater and board go into the air. However, it also could be thought to signify the position on the skateboard – that is the position of the skater in the z -axis. When we press down the skater not only crouches but also shuffles the back foot to the tail of the board in preparation for slamming down on the tail. When we press up the skater not only goes up in the air but also drags the front foot forward to level out the board. The nolly is accomplished by pointing the right thumb stick up, again for a longer time for a higher jump, and then quickly moving it directly down. This makes sense in terms of board position in the z -axis since it is a movement from the front (pointing the thumb-stick up causes the skater to move towards the nose) to the back (pointing the thumb-stick down brings the back foot back to level out). But it does not make sense in the y -axis. This dissociation of the two schematic mappings of the thumb-stick that are unified in the olly makes the nolly a slightly less intuitive trick in the game. This dissociation is most keenly felt when initially learning the trick, but even after a great deal of practice the olly remains a smoother mapping between player and skater.

Here we can identify a distinction between the control schemes of the two games. *Skate 3*'s olly control schema maps the kinaesthetic image of the trick – that is the sense of the way the trick moves – onto the player's hands in a way that has a primarily kinaesthetic logic. The olly control schema in *THP8* uses a primarily semantic logic. Of course, in the case of both games there is a kinaesthetic image associated with the player's hand movements, but this image maps smoothly onto the trick in *Skate 3* whereas it bears a more arbitrary relation in *THP8*, requiring the intercession of a semantic explanation.

This is not to say that *Skate 3*'s control schema is a pure mapping of the trick to hand and controller, but that it is smoother than the mapping in *THP8*. Both games contain a semantic element

The semi-gestural *Skate 3* flickit controls posit the controlled body as mechanical object. Unlike controls based on button presses, the flickit controls have a certain dynamic shape, which relates to the shape enacted on-screen by the avatar. At its most satisfying, the flickit control takes the salient aspects of the complex body movement of the avatar and translates these into a simple schema that can be performed by the thumb. This leads to a concentration of energy in the thumb that helps to make up for the reductions that are necessary in the game. The thrill of skateboarding depends in large part on the risks it entails, and these risks are obviously erased in the game. Some of this thrill is recaptured in the concentration of energy in the hands.

For Heidegger, the ready-to-hand, as well as having an 'in-order-to', also has a 'towards-which', which for Heidegger is the production of more equipment in a line of production and use: the shoe is the 'towards-which' of the shoemaker's work, but it is also itself equipment with a 'towards-which' of its own: wearing ([1927] 1962: 70). However, it may be possible to think about the end of this line, for example where the object produced is produced for aesthetic inspection rather than circumspection giving rise to further equipment. In this sense, the work we do with the skater-avatar has a towards-which of aesthetic contemplation as our efforts are rewarded with spectacular displays. This spectacular display is encountered in empathy, which is surely just another form of 'concernful dealings', though the concern is of a different sort. The transition between

ready-to-hand and present-at-hand is in this light a transition from one form of concern to another.

The towards-which of using an avatar as equipment could be seen as playing with embodiment. The differences in how the avatar embodies the player in game space have implications for the pleasure involved in each of these games but they also have implications for how the games represent the body and how they are expressive of what it is to have a body in space. While Ted Friedman suggests that the pleasures of strategy games lie in 'learning to think like a computer' (1999: 135), the pleasures in action games lie in acting in the manner of an action. By representing action through action these kinds of games clarify action not in visual but in kinaesthetic terms. And these kinaesthetic terms are not the result of a synaesthetic transfer of the visual to the kinetic. Rather it is kinaesthesia understood through kinaesthesia. In the same way that poetry may investigate language through a heightening of language, action games investigate action through an intensification of action. Part of this intensification is achieved through the miniaturization of the control schema.

Conclusion

The avatar is an important aspect of how players use games and access game space. But it is important to avoid the trap of attending to these avatars only as characters or visual images. Similarly, we must not over-correct, reducing avatars to the status of functional objects that allow players to achieve game goals. The avatar's importance, rather, lies in the coexistence of these two identities during play.

Heidegger's work on equipmentality has been used here to suggest some of the ways in which the avatar as equipment for getting things done in the game environment might dynamically coexist with the avatar as spectacular image with which the player might form an empathic bond.

By attending to both of these identities, it is possible to give a fuller picture of the role of the avatar in videogames, and this has been attempted in relation to *THP8* and *Skate 3*.

This analysis has suggested some of the ways in which action videogames reflect on the body, not only through their visual representation of a body performing, but also by involving the player's own body in this performance.

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Notes

¹ All following links to skate.reel, accessed on 6 August 2011:

http://skate.ea.com/gallery?contentType=SKATE_REEL&subType=VIDEO&platform=xbox#sortBy=TOP_RATED&filter=ALLTIME&slice=search&galleryType=ALL&subType=VIDEO&contentType=SKATE_REEL&itemId=1697061.

²http://skate.ea.com/gallery?contentType=SKATE_REEL&subType=VIDEO&platform=xbox#sortBy=TOP_RATED&filter=ALLTIME&slice=search&galleryType=ALL&subType=VIDEO&contentType=SKATE_REEL&itemId=182197.

³http://skate.ea.com/gallery?contentType=SKATE_REEL&subType=VIDEO&platform=xbox#sortBy=TOP_RATED&filter=ALLTIME&slice=search&galleryType=ALL&subType=VIDEO&contentType=SKATE_REEL&itemId=338395.

⁴http://skate.ea.com/gallery?contentType=SKATE_REEL&subType=VIDEO&platform=xbox#sortBy=TOP_RATED&filter=ALLTIME&slice=search&galleryType=ALL&subType=VIDEO&contentType=SKATE_REEL&itemId=798563.