

# Avatars and *Lebensform*: Kirchberg 2007

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## Abstract

*The avatar is who we are and what we are becoming: A pointer to human presence on networks but also a phantom of future transnational communities. The first half of this paper scans initiatives in avatar research—a journey from promise to frustration. Experiments suggest that virtual-worlds technology holds promise for transnational empathy, beyond first-person point-of-view, which might someday ease conflicts between nations. But the unfulfilled promise reveals a disconnect between technological evolution and human empathy. The second half of the paper shifts to educational practices that might support trans-socializing technology. Reviving cultural artifacts like poetry, music, and drama, the interdisciplinary humanities might increase the likelihood of imaginatively adopting another’s perspective. The discussion and emulation of art works may belong to the future of avatars.*

## Preface

Several years ago, after a decade of experiments in the software industry, I returned to academia and found philosophy colleagues troubled by the term “virtual reality”—a term which enjoys wide usage in the field of immersive computing but which raises hackles in post-metaphysical philosophers. Some vocabulary in this paper may create similar unease, so a warning may be in order. What makes sense to software engineers may for philosophers carry too much baggage. Words like “empathetic” or “empathic” may cause similar discomfort for those with an allergy to Romanticism. While these adjectives associated with poets like Wordsworth, the term “empathy” belongs equally to software designers and video-game artists who use it to describe the opposite of “first-person shooter” software. Empathic, as opposed to “shoot ‘em up” software, encourages the exchange of viewpoints beyond

first-person perspective and may even merge several perspectives. Rather than deepen a user's first-person point-of-view, empathic software offers a socializing experience, and in fact, is sometimes called "social" software, "Net 2.0," or "computer supported cooperative work."

"Und eine Sprache vorstellen, heißt eine Lebensform vorstellen... 'Sprachspiel' soll hier hervorheben, dass das Sprechen der Sprache ein Teil ist einer Tätigkeit, oder einer Lebensform...Zu einem Sprachspiel gehört eine ganze Kultur."

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 19, 23; *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, 8)

## Part I. The Promise and the Frustration

The author's experiments with avatars in virtual worlds occurred over a ten-year period from 1993 to 2003. The experiments originated in Southern California at an intersection of graduate studies in design, architecture institutes, and the software industry's nexus of government and technology centers such as Technology Training Corporation (Torrance, California), Eon Reality Inc. (Irvine, California), Art Center College of Design (Pasadena, California), the Long Beach Virtual Reality Group, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, and California State University (Long Beach).

Rather than recount projects in detail, a web page with links has been set up to accompany this paper. Interested readers can follow the threads of the experiments by browsing online resources at [www.mheim.com/avatars](http://www.mheim.com/avatars). The upshot of the projects can be simplified for this paper as follows.

The experiments examined avatars or online identities similar to currently popular multiplayer games like *Warcraft* and *Second Life*. Driven by participation and designed for interaction—these experiments were shaped by art designers, architects, and online educators. They played with a possible collective "we," an ad hoc online community. During the 1990s, virtual worlds went from research to commercial game platforms. Unlike the later commercial avatars of *Warcraft* and *Second Life*, these early avatar experiments fostered non-programmed sociality. The model was less rule-based games than town meetings, discussion groups, or even casual parties. The specific design of virtual environments underscored the sensory imagination needed to support sustained encounters. During these years, a progressive momentum energized the virtual reality community. Books and articles from this period held out a less-than-utopian but nevertheless hopeful promise.

## II. Avatar Diplomacy?

“We need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses — and wolves. Fairy-stories help us to make this recovery. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish. Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining — regaining of a clear view. I do not say ‘seeing things as they are’ and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ — as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity — from possessiveness.”

(J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 146)

The 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States brought a sense of urgency and a search for fresh kinds of outreach. Avatar experiments went beyond typical problems such as identity authentication, world design, and self-expression. The Internet was—at least in principle—a world-wide network. The trans-national dimension might reveal links between online communities and planetary politics. The project called “avatar diplomacy” made appeals to educational institutions to sponsor software kits for trans-national bonding. Schools across the globe might become seedbeds for linking trans-nationally divided peoples—not unlike the children’s “pen-pals” in previous generations. Software kits with support from college students were envisioned for school children in the United States, Europe, Scandinavia, and eventually the Middle East. Presentations were made to UNESCO, peace alliances, and several colleges and university departments. While the 2-year project for avatar diplomacy was welcomed in theory, it was never put into practice.

### III. The Path into the Dark Forest

‘A te convien tenere altro viaggio’  
rispuose poi che lagrimar mi vide  
‘se vuo’ campar d’esto loco selvaggio  
(Dante: *Inferno*, Canto I, l. 92)

Why did avatar diplomacy never get off the ground? The failure seemed to this writer not so much inertia as a desire to achieve “business as usual.” After 9/11, academic leaders looked for comfort in self-imposed limits: “Our business is to be a school. We are academic institutions, not launch pads for action.” Where was the ability to feel and respond to a global situation? Does fear put a freeze on novel forms of communication? People who wear rubber gloves to open their mail—as prophylactic against anthrax poisoning—are in no mood to take long-range risks. Many analyses of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers see a “failure of imagination” in the inability of U.S. intelligence community to “connect the dots.” In years following the attacks, a similar failure of imagination may have weakened collective action in the newly developed social networks of the Internet. Is it not a larger failure of imagination to not connect information technology with trans-national communication? Or does Stoic *apatheia* slap every finger that reaches for the future?

These were some of the questions that experimenters faced as the way forward became blocked and as research pathways trailed off into the dark woods.

#### IV. Leftover Notes from the “Music of Humanity”

“Hier kann ich, wie so oft, nicht umhin, mich im Vorübergehen an dem inneren und fast geheimnisvollen Zusammenhang des altphilologischen Interesses mit einem lebendig-liebevollen Sinn für die Schönheit und Vernunftwürde des Menschen zu weiden,—diesem Zusammenhang, der sich schon darin kundgibt, daß man die Studienwelt der antiken Sprachen als die *‘Humaniores’* bezeichnet, sodann aber darin, daß die seelische Zusammenordnung von sprachlicher und humaner Passion durch die Idee der Erziehung gekrönt wird und die Bestimmung zum Jugendbildner sich aus derjenigen zum Sprachgelehrten fast selbstverständlich ergibt. Der Mann der naturwissenschaftlichen Realien kann wohl ein Lehrer, aber niemals in dem Sinn und Grade ein Erzieher sein, wie der Jünger der *bonae litterae*.”

(Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 16)

Disappointment with the inadequacies of virtual subjectivity leads to a further question that goes to the heart of communication technology: Can the apathetic imagination be re-invigorated? Can collective subjectivity be re-tuned in a way that makes empathic performance more appealing to technological culture? If we have become deaf to “the music of humanity” (Wordsworth), can our listening be re-tuned, re-connected, re-sensitized? What tools are available for reviving a lethargic imagination?

Certain threads of Heidegger’s thoughts about language point to language as usable heritage. The pre-given art works of poetic traditions enshrine residual power where imagination is preserved in a rich music of rhythm and patterned sounds. Several generations have protected and venerated these imaginative incantations. In searching for practical tools of revival, might not the current humanities—the interdisciplinary discussion of literature, history, music, and drama—turn to these works to awaken empathic imagination? By listening to the songs and legends built into language by poets and dramatists, might collective subjectivity regain depth of feeling—not as a personal psychological acquisition but as an awakening to the possibilities of feeling and imaginative action? Might the musicality of poetic language, as well as the making of musical improvisations, awaken lethargic imaginations to the “music of humanity” (Wordsworth)?

## V. Visiting the Shrines of Imagination

“Wir sprechen und sprechen von der Sprache. Das, wovon wir sprechen, die Sprache, ist uns stets schon voraus. Wir sprechen ihr ständig nur nach. So hängen wir fortwährend hinter dem zurück, was wir zuvor zu uns eingeholt haben müßten, um davon zu sprechen. Demnach bleiben wir, von der Sprache sprechend, in ein immerfort unzureichendes Sprechen verstrickt. Diese Verstrickung sperrt uns gegen das ab, was sich dem Denken kundgeben soll. Allein diese Verstrickung, die das Denken nie zu leicht nehmen darf, löst sich auf, sobald wir das Eigentümliche des Denkweges beachten, d.h. uns in der Gegend umblicken, worin das Denken sich aufhält. Diese Gegend ist überall offen in die Nachbarschaft zum Dichten.”

(Martin Heidegger, “Das Wesen der Sprache” in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 179; *GA* 12, 168 f.)

In recent years, some leading thinkers have taken up Heidegger’s advice and have moved their philosophizing into the neighborhood of poetry and the arts. Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida are notable examples of philosophers who have practiced their discipline in the context of literature departments rather than in departments of philosophy. Like the philologist and author J.R.R. Tolkien, many “poetic dwellers” see the need for a “loose semantics” (Tolkien) that seeks to evoke multiple levels of imaginative reverberations rather than seek a literal correspondence that “pictures” a univocal world. The consistency that a Tolkien seeks is one of deep resonances and fully imagined configurations of details. Such an interpretive language can be an independent art work or a discursive prose that wraps around art works.

The centrality of hermeneutics is nothing new. But the urgency of the technological horizon requires special emphases for fostering the music of humanity in the interpretive process. Some of the conditions that might be important for awakening empathic perception are: (1) Disarming the fortresses of disciplinary towers; (2) Suspending the apparent conflict between philosophy and poetry, logic and myth, by welcoming the loosely haunting semantics championed by great myth-makers and philologists like Tolkien—as opposed to the modernist semantics of propositional representation; (3) Worrying less about the self-definition of the humanities or what the humanities *are* and focusing more on what the humanities *can do* and how they actively contribute; (4) Retrofitting the *studium humanitatis* with an interactive dimension. This includes a physical, phonological, musical involvement on an amateur level. The song might again stand on its own as a felt experience with a participatory, energetic dimension. In this way, the pre-modern

style of creativity might address the spontaneity and improvisation valued in online interactions. A goal for the humanities might be to awaken empathic perception which may someday feed the self-organizing action of avatars.

“What was Wordsworth’s ‘healing power?’ How does his best poetry work so as to save not only the poet himself in his own crises, but so as to have been therapeutic for the imagination of so many poets and readers since? Six generations have passed since Wordsworth experienced his Great Decade (1797-1807), and still the attentive and dedicated reader can learn to find in him the human art he teaches better than any poet before or since, including precursors greater than himself (but no successors, as yet, of his eminence). Wordsworth educates the affective life of his reader. He teaches how to become a renovated spirit, free of crippling self-consciousness yet still enjoying the varied gifts of an awakened consciousness.”

(Harold Bloom, *Best Poems of the English Language*, 323)

## Literature

Note: Thanks go to Dr. Oliver Berghof, my colleague in Humanities Core at the University of California at Irvine for responding to an early draft of this paper. The views in it are, of course, entirely my own. —M.H.

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