D I G I T H U M

The Humanities in the Digital Era

From masks to avatars: transformations through digital prostheses

Renato Teixeira Bressan
Graduate Program in Communication and Society
Federal University of Juiz de Fora (Brazil)
renato.bressan@yahoo.com.br

Abstract

This paper proposes a critical approach to and reasoning on the connection between notions and practices related to masks, avatars and humans, attempting to find out about and understand their functions and developments in contemporary technoculture. Masks and avatars have many features in common, both are notions created by oral cultures with a strong religious meaning which have changed over the years, becoming part of leisure activities in daily life. At the beginning of 20th century, Sigmund Freud said human beings were a kind of Prosthetic God and in the 1960s Marshall McLuhan coined the idea of technology as an extension of the human body. Nowadays, in a mobile, networked and digital society, humans should be defined not only as the users of prostheses, but also as prostheses controlled by an avatar in multi-user virtual environments like Second Life, There and World of Warcraft. Our hypothesis assumes that contemporary avatars, in the field of computer sciences, are prostheses that include and replace the early notion of mask, coined in theatre and literature, transforming the way we interact and think about ourselves.

Keywords

masks, avatars, technologies, prostheses

De les màscares als avatars: transformacions mitjançant pròtesis digitals

Resum

Aquest article proposa un enfocament i un raonament crítics sobre la connexió entre nocions i pràctiques relacionades amb les màscares, els avatars i els éssers humans, i mira de conèixer i entendre'n les funcions i els desenvolupaments en la tecnocultura contemporània. Les màscares i els avatars tenen moltes característiques comunes; totes dues són nocions creades per cultures orals amb un fort significat religiós que han canviat al llarg dels anys i han esdevingut una part de les activitats lúdiques de la vida diària. Al començament del segle xx, Sigmund Freud va dir que l'ésser humà és una mena de déu ortopèdic, i a la dècada de 1960, Marshall McLuhan va encunyar la idea de la tecnologia com a extensió de l'ésser humà. Avui dia, dins d'una societat mòbil, digital i connectada en xarxa, mitjançant entorns virtuals multiusuari com Second Life, There i World of Warcraft, s'hauria de definir l'ésser humà no solament com l'usuari de pròtesis, sinó, al mateix temps, com una pròtesi controlada per un avatar. La nostra hipòtesi proposa que els avatars contemporanis, en el camp de la informàtica, són pròtesis que inclouen i substitueixen la noció original de màscara, utilitzada per primer cop en el teatre i la literatura, i transformen la manera com interactuem i com ens pensem a nosaltres mateixos.

Paraules clau

màscares, avatars, tecnologies, pròtesis

On masks and avatars

As said by Oscar Wilde "a mask tells us more than a face". A passage of a Fernando Pessoa's poem called *Tabacaria* ['Tobacco Kiosk'], written by his heteronymous Álvaro de Campos, says: "When I wished to lift my mask/ It stuck to my face./ When at last I did succeed in raising it and looked in the glass/ I had aged in the meantime."[1] But what is a mask?

Etymologically the term *mask* comes from the Italian word *maschera* which has origin in the Latin word *masca* ['fake appearance/witch'], which comes from the pre-European Hindu *masca* ['false appearance'], probably with origin in Sanskrit *mákara* that refers to an "ornament to put and wear on the head" or an artefact that somebody uses and becomes unrecognizable, causing deception to who had identified that person with what the *masca* represents (Faitanin, 2006).

Britannica Online (2009) explains that a mask is a form of disguise. It is an object that is frequently worn over or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being. This essential characteristic of hiding and revealing personalities or moods is common to all masks. As cultural objects they have been used throughout the world in all periods since the Stone Age and have been as varied in appearance as in their use and symbolism.

According to José Jansen, in its primitive expression masks were used to frighten the enemy (in wars) and demons and ghosts (in rituals), because in humanity's early history humans thought masks had magical power (1952, p. 3). But gradually, with the development of civilization, people lost their frightened and primitive respect for the mask, beginning to use it also in entertainments (Jansen, 1952, p. 5).

Toby Wilsher trying to describe the function of a mask says: "it transforms" (2007, p. 12). According to Wilsher, the mask is divided between two worlds: Secular and Sacred. In a sacred society a mask is totemic, shamanic, an object linked to deity, a liminal tool that stands at the threshold of the world they know and the world they don't. In a secular society such as Britain, masks are used for entertainment. But there is still a desire within the society for the comfort of total faith and belief, and to this end masks are being reimbued with a sacred magic. Some are fearful of them, of their transformative power, of both wearer and watcher (Wilsher, 2007, p.13).

But the central difference between these worlds is the imaginative leap, the suspension of disbelief at the heart of the theatrical experience, which differs from the unquestioning faith and total belief of a member of a sacred society. There is a willingness to join in, to play the game in a secular society (Wilsher, 2007, p.14).

In accordance with Jansen we can find in the sources of Greek Theatre the use of masks with great worth as part of the spectacle, serving at the same time finalities such as defining through strong traces the personality of characters, increasing an actor's stature and amplifying their voice – it was necessary because spectacles were presented in the open air, occupying large areas with a huge audience (Jansen, 1952, p. 6-7).

As well as the origin of the term *mask*, the sources of the notion of avatar are closely linked to the supernatural, the beyond-world, and mystical and religious practices in general. The term comes from Sanskrit *avatārah*, meaning *descent*, and was coined by Hindu culture (Merriam-Webster, 2009). In this sense an avatar is an incarnation of a deity in human form, an embodiment. Krishna, for example, is Vishnu's avatar and an extension of this deity on earth.

But if the early meaning of the term avatar is concerned with humans that incorporate some entity and become a kind of puppet, contemporary concepts of avatar in Western civilization suggest an inversion of senses and values: now avatar is not a representation of God, but an extension of a human, a graphic representation of user in web and digital environments. In the same manner as masks, while word and concept as well as costume and artefact, avatar took on a connotation very different and distant from its early context and use.

Narratological and semiotic research on the sources of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) can show us a literary background created by the Role Playing-Games (RPGs), which have a theatrical origin and, therefore, roots in orality and so on. What we are trying to say is that there is a kind of 'avatar operator' or transformative way behind any representation or 'extension' of humans as characters, *personas*, masks, etc. Indeed we can say a mask is an avatar, but not all avatars are just masks.

The main difference of contemporary RPGs, MUDs and MMORPGs in relation to early games and media is that today's users can be a kind of co-authors able to operate and modify their characters (avatars) through the many possibilities of gameplay and its affordances. This type of interaction and projection from user to character is called *derivative authorship* by Janet Murray (2003).

Before digital media a reader of *Lord of the Rings* could imagine, identify and project himself in direction to Frodo Baggins only through textual descriptions of actions and happenings predetermined by Tolkien. Today it is possible to be Frodo in a game, enjoy *Lord of the Rings Online*, create an avatar with Frodo's physical appearance in a 3D environment like Second Life, build a hobbit shire online, etc.

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1. See: <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=7659>

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Nevertheless, to speak about avatar requires thinking that regards different ways of expression through different processes and artefacts, and which can share the same platform or environment. Each of the following items can be regarded as a kind of avatar: nickname, emoticon, descriptive profile (RPG), online profile (Facebook, Orkut), virtual portrait, 2D picture and animations (MMOs, MUDs), character in videogames (Mario Bros., Lara Croft, etc.), Buddy Poke (Orkut); 3D representation in platforms (Second Life, There, World of Warcraft), etc.

Thereby, interactions through a 3D digital environment using an avatar, in the same way as when someone wears a mask in theatre, require engagement and agreement with certain rules. The main feature of this ludic environment or "magical circle of play" (Huizinga, 2004; Salen *et al.*, 2003) is perhaps the possibility of an experience of inversion and transformation of a user's everyday life during this process – both in practice and in theory, changing notions such as identity, *gender*, race, social class, space, time, etc.

Digital prostheses and transformations

If the notion of *mask* was replaced and improved by the idea of avatar in 3D online digital environments, surely the transformations also include modifications in functions, processes, and the nature itself of that prosthesis[2] even in ways of engagement and immersion.

Sigmund Freud's book *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) presents us with the human as a kind of 'Prosthetic God', and Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1964) recovers this Freudian concept through the idea of technology as *extension* of human. According to McLuhan, all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is intensification, an amplification of an organ, sense or function (Mcluhan, 1969) – i.e. media are prostheses and can make humans like an omnipresent and global God.

In this sense, the Freudian/McLuhian approach can confirm the change from sources of the term avatar to its contemporary meanings and we experience it through 3D platforms like Second Life and World of Warcraft. If Krishna, a human, was an avatar (and prosthesis) controlled by the God Vishnu (a celestial user), today we are users controlling our digital prosthesis, like Gods. We extend ourselves when we operate avatars, choose its appearances, skins, clothes, genders, friends and habits and we can feel like a God changing a digital world, building and manipulating the weather, objects, terrains, species, etc.

However, if we can say 'God is me' in those platforms, the opposite is also true. Often newspapers report cases of videogame addiction, people who spend a large portion of their daily lives in computer games and prefer their 'second live' or 'virtual guild', sometimes like a 'digital slave'. The human is not always in control, even being the user. Mark Meadows explains:

> Part of the danger lies in how we control our avatar and how our avatar controls us. As people become more involved in the roles and rules of their avatar, they can also lose control of their alternative personality they have invented for that system. The alternative personality can become predominant and begin to take over the primary, daily one. […] People sometimes prefer their avatar personas to their 'real' ones. Your role as an avatar can take control of your life as a person. (Meadows, 2008, p. 82-3)

Johan Huizinga said the actor through a mask in Greek Theatre was in some manner out of the ordinary world, incorporating his character. According to Huizinga, the sight of the masked figure, as a purely aesthetic experience, carries us beyond "ordinary life" into a world where something other than daylight reigns; it carries us back to the world of the savage, the child and the poet, which is the world of play (Huizinga, 2004). This idea can be related to contemporary avatars in digital environments such as Second Life where is easy to do strange and impossible things like flying or teleporting.

As Meadows says, the use of avatars can seem safer because people do not need to be 'themselves', the person we are talking to is not right next to us; they cannot see our real faces. But the author points that we are more exposed precisely because we feel this way:

> We are more inclined to reveal ourselves when we use our avatars. […] We are more inclined to expose ourselves on the assumption that anonymity and distance matter. [...] We put these masks on, entered our virtual worlds, and had the feeling is that 'all is under control'. [...] Wearing this mask helps us feel as if things are really under control, but it is not necessarily true. (Meadows, 2008, p. 36-7)

Following Huizinga and Meadows, we understand how avatars are complex processes that can be, depending on the context, a reinforcement or inversion of our daily life: amplifying or changing our desires, thoughts and experiences.

Nevertheless, James Paul Gee in *What videogames have to teach us about learning and literacy* (2003), after experiencing

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2. **In medicine, a prosthesis is an artificial extension that replaces a missing body part. Prostheses are typically used to replace parts lost by injury (traumatic)** or missing from birth (congenital) or to supplement defective body parts. In this sense, an avatar is a prosthesis that replaces a user's missing virtual body or character that needs to explore a virtual environment.

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the game *Arcanum*, proposed that during an interaction between a person and an avatar there are three identities in relation: virtual identity, real identity and projective identity:

> First, there is a virtual identity: one's identity as a virtual character in the virtual world of Arcanum - in my case the Half-Elf Bead Bead […]. The stress is on the virtual character Bead Bead acting in the virtual world of Arcanum (though I am 'playing/developing' her);

> A second identity that is at stake in playing a game like *Arcanum* is a real-world identity: namely, my own identity as James Paul Gee, a non-virtual person playing a computer game […]. The stress is on the real-world character James Paul Gee playing *Arcanum* as a game in real time (though Bead Bead is the tool through which I operate the game);

> A third identity that is at stake in playing a game like *Arcanum* is what I will call a projective identity. […] This is the hardest identity to describe but the most important one for understanding the power of games like *Arcanum* […]. In this identity, the stress is on the interface between - the interactions between - the real-world person and the virtual character. (Gee, 2003, p. 54-6)

Gee's tripartite classification regards the location of each character involved in the whole interaction process: a) virtual environment, where the 3D avatar is; b) physical environment, where the player is space-time situated; c) projective, liminal or interstitial space (Santaella, 2007), where a third identity stands, beyond and below digital and physical environments, a place that blurs the frontiers between real and virtual.

Conclusion

Contemporary techno-culture enhances *artificialism*[3] (Silveira Jr., 2006) in a context where players and users can immerge and feel a digital world, in terms of materiality, as a place both sensible and tangible. The virtual or digital world is not beyond us anymore, there is no Cartesian separation between physical and virtual. Moreover, today's prosthesis is not primly mechanically built and has complex processes involved during it usage.

In Second Life, for example, we can operate a 3D human-form avatar but we have a chat box, a voice system, a textual profile that blends 'First' and 'Second' lives, a viewer with a lot of possibilities in relation to gestures, camera control and manipulation of objects, skins, appearances and clothes, etc. Moreover, Second Life is still an online platform with users linked around the in-world (enjoying groups, RPGs, families) and out-world (through sites such as Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, etc.). Thus, what is the avatar in this process? Maybe it is not only a 3D human-form object, but the whole interaction, including the player who controls it. As the concept of *human* changed from a 'top-down' (ex.: rationalist, concentric, closed, Euclidean) to a 'bottom-up' perspective (ex.: unconscious, networked, open, Non-Euclidean), the notions about avatar should be following these contemporary paradigms.

Therefore, according to our hypothesis and recent critical works (Bressan, 2009) avatars, as digital prostheses, are not passive representations or extensions determined by humans. Many thinkers say there is no border between 'real' and 'virtual' (Barabási, 2003; Lévy, 1996, 1999; Mitchell, 2003; Castronova, 2005; Meadows, 2008). In agreement with this view, we suggest that during an online interaction through digital environments, human is a 'flesh and bone' prosthesis linked to others' digital prostheses – controlling and being controlled by them: the avatars. At the same time, during the game, humans are prostheses of their avatars, too.

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3. Artificialism is thought by MD Magno as including "spontaneous artifices" (those present in the so-called nature) and "industrial artifices" (those produced via culture) (quoted in SILVEIRA Jr., 2006).

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Digithum, no. 12 (May, 2010) | **ISSN 1575-2275**   A scientific e-journal published by the Arts and Humanities Department

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Renato Teixeira Bressan

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Renato Teixeira Bressan
Graduate Program in Communication and Society
Federal University of Juiz de Fora (Brazil)
renato.bressan@yahoo.com.br

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora
Rua José Lourenço Kelmer, s/n
Campus Universitário
São Pedro 36036-330
Juiz de Fora – MG

Renato Teixeira Bressan is a graduate student and has a fellowship in the Graduate Program in Communication and Society at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (Brazil). He is a member of the Communication and Contemporary Technologies team, a National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) research group. He has researched technology and new media since 2006 when he was still a student of the Bachelor Course in Communication. Between 2006 and 2008 he was a member of the PET/MEC SESu (Tutorial Education Program) and developed research on semiotics, web 2.0, cyberculture and games. His main current subjects are techno-culture, games, diagrammatic representation, epistemology, cinema, digital platforms (MMORPG, MMO, MUD, MUVE, etc.) and web. Currently Renato is also a member of the TV Motoradio (<http://tvmotoradio.com>) working as web agent, cultural producer, presenter and cinematographer. His full CV can be accessed through the following link: <http://migre.me/m3PV>.

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