Thus nothing acts unless by acting it
makes patent its latent self.
Dante, *De Monarchia*, I, 13.

Adamant Bodies. The Avatar-Body and the Problem of Autoempathy

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1. Conquerors of the lost world

With the advent of multi-user mode in video game environments and online 3D virtual worlds, the presence of the Other has broken the 'loneliness' of the individual player. Never as today have new media transformed the ways that human beings relate to each other. How do they affect the categories of perceptual, cognitive and emotional experience, and influence the practices of everyday construction and negotiation of sense in relationships? My hypothesis is that, especially in immersive and non-performative simulated environments, such as *Second Life*, players are still interested in elaborating a representation – or even a simulation – of their own Self, rather than relating to Others. Using an approach that combines semiotics and phenomenology, this paper deals with the practices of constructing and 'playing' (in the double meaning of gaming and acting) the 3D avatar as a space of negotiation of relational sense. Such an investigation may delve right into the embodied processes of experiencing and interpreting the physical and interactional space, analysing the visual, motional and emotional patterns of relationships in virtual worlds and video game environments. In game environments as in non-gaming universes, the avatar is a constantly visible presence that may be considered the "digital incarnation" of the Self[1]. It is an extension of the player's own body, and entertains a prosthetic relationship with it; it incorporates the player and disciplines his/her body. It is the embodied manifestation of the player's engagement with the game-world; it is, at the same time, a reflection of ourselves and an envoy of ours in the parallel world in order to conquer new territories and retake possession of the lost world.

Semiotics has begun to take an increasing interest in phenomenology since Algirdas J. Greimas's and Umberto Eco's works in the 1970s. Moreover, the development of the Greimasian theoretical proposition, operated by Greimas himself (Greimas 1987) and Jacques Fontanille (Greimas & Fontanille 1991), located the body as the fulcrum of the epistemological turn, as well as the object which accompanies the current debates on both perceptions and passions. The presence of a subjectivity that *feels* the world is the necessary condition for the origin of sense. This argument is fundamentally connected to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought. He argued that the subject is not a mind that "has" a body, but rather is constituted as a subject by virtue of 'being' a body-in-the-world. The body is both object and subject, because embodied and perceptual existence is the *a priori* condition for there to be any meaningful relationship to the world. The way we perceive the world and our position in it through an avatar is grounded in the phenomenology of the body, which is "our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 1945). In semiotic terms, the avatar-body means 'position' in both a physical and enunciational meaning. It signals a "first person" passional subjectivity who acts and interprets reality in order to give sense to both the Self and the world. The avatar gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a virtual world (an actant). In fact – as Merleau-Ponty argued – the human body is both part of the world and a point of view (Merleau-Ponty 1964). "The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking" (*ivi*, p. 162). Therefore, the body is an object in the world that experiences itself as itself and, at the same time, as part of the world of things other than itself. It is the origin of our gaze and the mainstay of environmental objects arranged around us. It is both the threshold and the border of the interoceptive/exteroceptive system.

The reflexive nature of the sensorial dynamic is extremely interesting for our purposes. In the avatar, both the experience and the negotiation of sense take place within the 'boundaries' of a body in which the relationship between actual and virtual subjectivities is performed. As a space of both reflexivity and inter-subjectivity, the avatar is the conjunction of an only apparently existential fracture between the actual body, which remains in the actual world, whereas its representation moves to the virtual world. The player simultaneously lives in both the virtual and actual environments, but his/her Self is not divided into two distinct identities. "Giving life" to an avatar means creating an extension to (rather than causing a fracture of) our body and our identity, and this kind of extended-Self is the reflective consciousness of the recalling of the Self, or the recognition of oneself as *another* oneself. Virtual embodiment in

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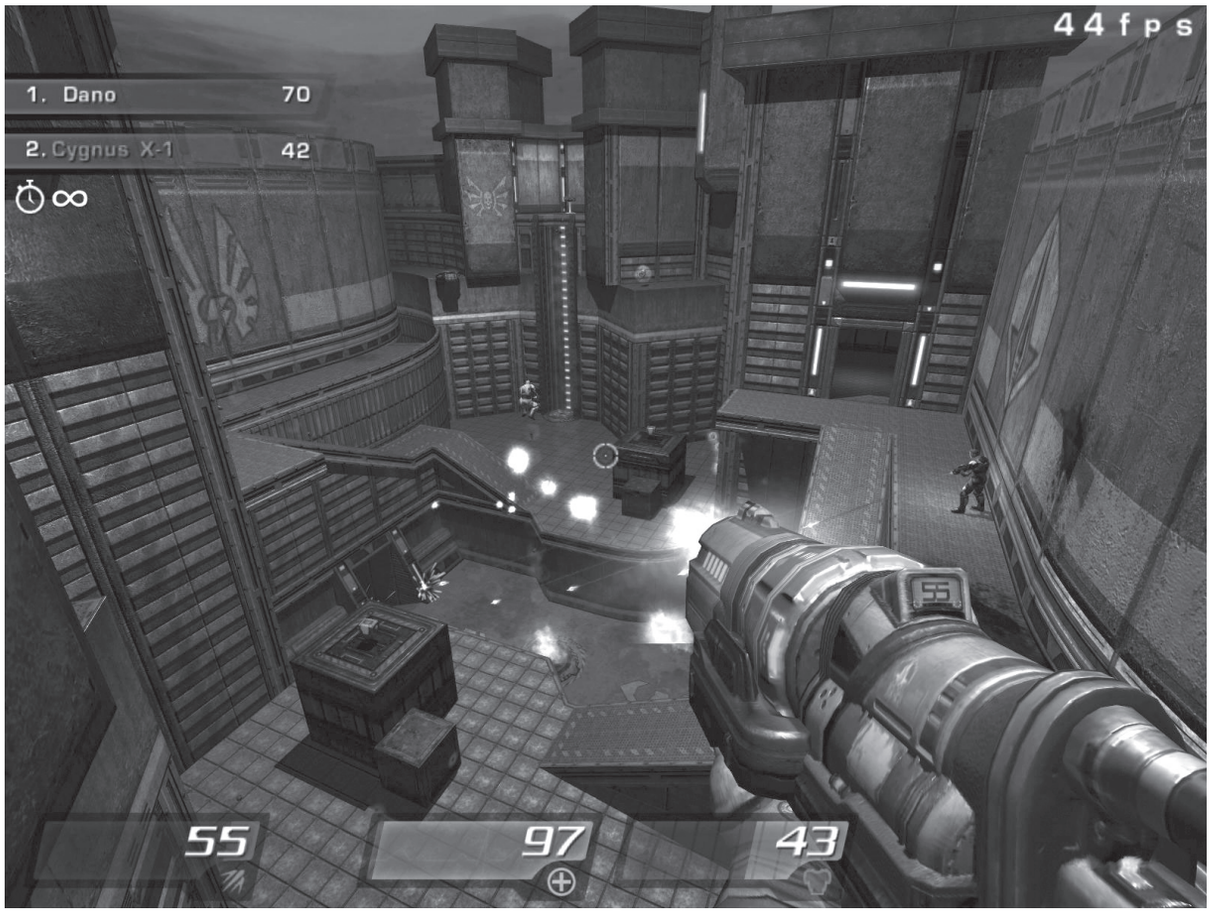

an avatar assures identitary continuity and uniqueness, but it does not avoid the generation of a dual actant that interferes with the nature of the relationship with Otherness. We could say that the role played by the avatar-body as a space of mediation has more weight *within* the Selfness (mediation between the actual user's Self and the virtual avatar's Self) than *between* the Selfness and the Otherness (mediation between the actual/virtual Self as a whole and the actual/virtual Other as whole). This obtains to the extent that we could speak of an *intra*-subjective front of a virtual relationship, wholly played out within the pole of Selfness. What are the implications of the visual and motional patterns in creating this paradox in virtual relationships? And what are the effects of such a paradox on the emotional dynamic?

2. Empathy in play

Fontanille has recently developed the passional vocation of semiotics (Fontanille 2001 and 2004). He argues that the functioning of passions requires us to acknowledge that semiotic existence has a basis in perception, and that signification emerges through a process leading from sensation to perception and then to interpretation. Moreover, "all happens as if the other's intentionality inhabited my body and as if my intentions inhabited his body"[2]. This mutual inhabitation of bodies, based on the "as if" dynamic, cross-refers to the peculiar process of emotional sharing that we call *empathy*[3]. Observing a still or moving body and its expressivity can involve the observer's motional and emotional faculties – an imitative movement bridging the 'external' visual-motional frame and the 'internal' emotional frame.

Eric Landowski has explored how the empathetic characterisation of the relationship between bodies within the negotiation of sense takes place (Landowski 2001). He argues that a person in front of another person does not decode the signs of passions as if they are symptoms from which he/she can begin to detect the cause; the 'reader' does not *understand* the Other's emotional status by decoding the signs on the Other's body and face. Rather, he/she *feels* the Other's passions and shares them, for he/she *is* the body standing in front of him/her. The sense is firstly felt, and only secondly understood (*ivi*, p. 74). As an effect of co-presence, this precognitive process, known as 'contagion', leads to a deep involvement based on the logic of empathy: we share the body and soul affections in a somatic concomitance. I am "in your own skin" in the simulacral form of the "as if". The sense of the relationship – what we know about the Other and how we might be able to understand him/her – can not arise from conceptualisation. Rather, it must be felt as "a state of our own body"; "it must be recognised as already in itself" (Landowski

2003, p. 46). In other words, it must be felt as an iconic moment, based on a relationship of Firstness between the subject and the Qualities, immediately given, of the object of his/her experience[4]. Without making the least cognitive effort, we *feel* the Other as we feel ourselves, *i.e.* experientially. What happens in video games and virtual worlds? How is the empathetic process, connected to visual frames and visibility of the avatar's face and body, declined? Following Landowski's approach, we could investigate the perceptual patterns of the *intra*-subjective, avatar-based relationship, with the aim of evaluating their effects on the emotional and empathetic dynamic.

3. The gaze behind the eyes

The avatar-body as a "signifying body", as an "embodied meaning device", operates at different levels, responding to different semiotic needs. The avatar gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, "a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a fictional world" (Klevjer 2006, p. 10). As a "device of vision", it constitutes the scopic subjectivity in the virtual environment. Digital visual media place the point of view under the user's control, and allow him/her to alter the relationship with his/her visual surroundings (Bolter & Grusin 2000, p. 243). The user becomes the interactive, changing point-of-view of an "avatarial camera"[5]. The genealogy and typology of "forms of gazes" in video games have already been outlined in connection with cinematographic techniques (Marino 2004). In the earlier generation of first-person shooters (from *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* to *Quake* and *Half-Life*) the user entirely assumes the avatar's scopic subjectivity (just as in flight and driving simulators[6]). It is a substitution in which the purely subjective point of view makes the avatar-body transparent. That is to say, the character overlaps the narrator perfectly. The logically transparent substitution in first-person shooters is substantially non-empathetic or, at least, empathetically weak. With the subjective gaze, the user does not virtually (nor actually) feel the Other's emotions. Rather, he/she experiences those emotions in the first person. The simulacrum is transparent, the face and the body are not visible (with the exception of arms and hands when shooting) and this visual absence makes the concrete surface of emotional engagement intangible. Nevertheless, for an empathetic relation to be established, a process of *objectivation* is needed.

By contrast, in third-person games (action/adventure, such as *Tomb Raider, Grand Theft Auto or Gears of War*, or stealth games, such as the *Metal Gear Solid* series) the users are required to subjectively "play" a visible avatar-body that is represented as objective (that is to say, the users play the virtual Self as if it were a virtual Other). However, the virtual Self is conceived as a too-distant representation of the actual Self, although neither is it distant enough to be considered as Other[7] – an opaque simulacrum that barely allows emotional co-penetration. The visible user/avatar corporeal detachment is not enough to elicit an emotional response and thus, on this front as well, we are really referring to empathy. Moreover, even if users can always see their avatars' faces, the expressions are very limited, basic, primitive and predetermined[8]. To summarise, relational and pathemic deficit is an inerasable feature of the videoludic universe. Emotional experience in video games does not concern the process of alignment between user and avatar. There is a unique figure that we call 'player'. Paradoxically, considering the visual synthesis of the two modalities of existence of Selfness, user and avatar seem to be reciprocally too close in first-person games and too far apart in third-person games. This empathetic gap is due to *hyperactivity* (the player is, at the same time, enunciator, character and spectator) and *interactivity* (he/she performs a role). Independently of the form of gaze that embodies the user's visual frame, games locate the player either *in* game (as protagonist) or *off* game (as enunciator/narrator). Thus, the difficulties in establishing an empathetic relation are due to the lack of Otherness, both in the practice of constructing the world (or the 'text') and in the practice of experiencing it from the inside, *intra*-subjectively. An intermediate case is represented by those role-playing game environments and virtual worlds where the prevalent point of view is 'semi-subjective'. In this case, the avatar's shoulder or his/her neck is kept in-screen, so the overlap between the user's point of view and what seems to be the avatar's point of view is only partial. Could this reciprocal arrangement be considered as the right distance *within* the user and the avatar? Actually, by constantly keeping a part of the avatar-body in the visual frame, users are – perceptually, though not existentially – constantly reminded of their actant duality. Being simultaneously a performing spectator and a performing character, our being-in-the-world is felt as a being that is simultaneously "in front of" and 'behind' us. We are not aware of our own presence (transparency of Self) and, at the same time, we are constantly exposed to our own reflex (opacity of Self). In this sense, semi-subjective also means 'semi-immersive'. Because it happens in front of an ambiguous figure, our perception of the world and the Self oscillates between illusion and reflexive consciousness. Moreover, users do not usually see their avatars' faces. Instead, the part of their own 'back-face' obstructs part of the visual frame and thus restricts the "visual space of interaction" with other avatars. Forms of gaze and the avatar's body and face visibility are the basic aspects of the emotional patterns in inter-subjective relationships. Therefore, not even in the semi-subjective case does there seem to be fertile terrain for emotional involvement, as a result of both the simultaneous (rather than alternated) action of transparency and opacity, and the cumbersome presence of the visible (rather than sensorial) Self. The

stakes in the relationship bet do not move toward the Otherness pole. At least, not as much as they are raised on the Selfness pole.

4. Deep through the looking-glass

> I live in the facial expression of the other,
> as I feel him living in mine.
> Marcel Merlau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 146.

In this last paragraph I will try to clarify the reason why even the case of multiple simulated 3D avatar-based environments characterised by a semi-subjective visual frame could not be considered an empathetic key strategy. To do this I take Linden Lab's Second Life world as an example. In such an environment, even though the player is allowed to vary angle, perspective scale and point of view[9], semi-subjective is the common, or 'natural', scopic system. Furthermore, in such a multiplayer and collective world, users relate to other visible avatar-bodies – which explicitly signal the presence of the actual Other. But even if the system of gazes and the presence of others' avatar bodies do seem to encourage pathemic involvement and emotional sharing, there are several reasons, to do with the (in)visibility of the avatar's body and face and their faculty to express feelings and emotions, why an empathetic relationship does not seem possible. We will review these reasons by comparing the Second Life 'playing' experience with film spectatorship.

First of all, I emphasise that the face is the concrete surface of communication of emotions and gesticulation has an important role in human relationships. Currently, 3D visual design is still far from human mimicry, and even from film animation techniques, and the avatar facial mimicry is very basic indeed. In Second Life emotions are mostly communicated and shared by short, colloquial and cryptic verbal language or mechanical 'gestures' that the avatar can choose in his/her 'inventory' – as in a still-raw, huge body-based chatroom. A mediated process, conditioned by technologies and languages, forces players to resort to cognitive skills. The expression of feelings and emotions depends on the capability to activate and decode the correspondences between the avatar's gestures and the user's emotional states. Moreover, especially for advanced users, it is a performance based on 'scripting' – the inputting of a programming language, a synthetic "body language". This codified straining frustrates the experiential and immediate nature of empathy. The semi-subjective visual frame intensifies these problems. In fact, the user cannot see his/her own avatar's face and cannot perceive his/her own feelings in a direct manner. On the Selfness side, the fact that the user's own face is hidden precludes any possibility of mirroring the user's avatar's emotional state, which is supposed to be that user's emotional state. On the Otherness side, the hidden avatar's face is oriented toward the interlocutor, and thus other avatars' faces are visible. Emotions are expressed by their facial mimic and body gestures. But the codified restrictions are a further reason why the player cannot fully experience the pathemic quality of interaction, nor can he/she mirror the Other's emotional state. Even on this side, players are required to "decode" others' feelings and emotions expressed in their bodily movement and explicitly on their faces. Thus, not even here is immediate and pre-conscious "prehension" possible. In other words, the player cannot see himself/herself with his/her own eyes. Thus, he/she cannot *feel* on his/her own skin even his/her own feelings. Moreover, the player can *see* the Other's face, but the "pathemic language" is rudimentary and the emotional sharing depends only on the ability of players to express themselves verbally, requiring cognitive processes of mutual understanding. Compared to the film dynamic, what is lacking is the *objectivation* phase, a moment of direct and pre-cognitive experience of the Self through the eyes (and the feelings) of the Other. The Self cannot see its visible substance, neither with its own nor the Other's eyes. Avatarial-peculiar "face-to-face" interaction is based on substitution or partial overlapping between the user and his/her simulacrum, whereas in cinema, objectivation is accomplished by the shot/reverse-shot dynamic – that is, a logic of alternation, a relationship structure where the boundaries of Selfness (spectator) and Otherness (character) are clearly outlined. Many scholars oversimplify the role of empathy as an overlap of distinct subjectivities' points of view and argue that "the border of the self dissolves, as it occupies the position and experiences the problems faced by other creatures." (Bolter & Grusin 2000, p. 247) On the contrary, empathy is not simply a scopic or bodily substitution. It is simply thanks to an initial clear distinction that two distinct subjectivities can identify, permeate and even share emotions. Furthermore, as well as in online role-playing games (such as *The Sims* or *World of Warcraft*), in online virtual worlds such as Second Life, the virtual incarnation deals with the design of avatars' appearances. The Self's re-figuration into an avatar implies an explicit 'staging' and a special reflexive attention, when choosing the avatar's features, characterising its 'skin' and "editing its appearance"[10], *i.e.* creating a character that plays and interacts with the world and with other avatars. But in filmic experience, the body re-figuration is implicit, being a rite without the explicit 'staging', without the act of editing the avatar's aspect or building its bodies and taking care of it. To put oneself in someone else's shoes is very different from putting oneself in his/her own *alter ego*'s shoes.

Moreover, passivity as a specific film spectators' condition also concerns the sensorial-motorial aspects. Evidently, spectators do not perform any effective corporeal activity. And this condition allows them to fully mirror the sensorial-motorial and emotional stimuli

coming from the virtual world *in* the screen[11]. Because of the motionless state of their actual bodies, the emotional dimension is decisive. Emotion is always accompanied by a "virtual tendency to action" (Frijda 1987) which may flow into substitutive forms (imaginary alignment and projection). Spectators have bodies that see and move and which are engaged in an inter-actional – though non-interactive – dynamic. In Second Life what we can define as the "body kinematics" is frenetic, since the avatar-bodies can move from one place to another without gravitational limits, by flying (engaging a peculiar motor specularity with the respective users' bodies) or teleporting (negating the physical referentiality of space and time). But in "avatar-to-avatar" relations, when motional activity shifts to relational and potentially emotional activity, hyperactivity and performativity become uninfluential skills, and there are no other tools that the avatar can resort to for the relationship to have an intense and emotionally meaningful exchange. Whereas the filmic embodiment is indeed "bodily-free"[12], videogames and virtual worlds require, so to speak, a "bodily-forced" experience.

To understand the nature of the empathy lacking in game and simulated environment experience, the comparison with film spectatorship should also deal with narrative structures. Empathy in film experience depends also on narrative progression, on characters' psychological development, and on the wealth of experience acquired over the course of the whole film. Empathy is fed by an evolving engagement with and growing knowledge of the Other. For these reasons, an empathetic relationship does not seem possible in games or virtual environments with non-linear narrative structures (open-ended, such as Sim City or The Sims, or sandbox mode, such as Grand Theft Auto, *Far Cry* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*), 'emergent' play-driven narrative structures (MMORPGs such as *EVE Online*, *The Matrix Online* and Second Life for advanced users), or non-narrative structures (Second Life for basic users). In all these cases, there is no story really going on in the traditional way, or characters acting independently of the user's performance. Thus, there is seems to be only an 'apathemic' contact between players and environments[13]. However, especially in worlds such as Second Life, which are characterised by immersivity rather than performativity and inhabited by residents rather than gamers, the narrative approach does not make sense. "It seems more useful to consider video games in terms of *narrative action* and in terms of *exploration*" (Manovich 2001, p. 306), because the player, rather than internalising or following a story, has to perform actions to proceed, speak with other characters, collect objects to improve his/her inventory, and refine his/her appearance: "movement in virtual space is one of the main narrative actions" (*ibidem*). Therefore, in this phase of Second Life history, in which the main feature is its being a space and above all an *explorable* space, the intentionality behind the narrative progression belongs to the 'player', who is simultaneously enunciator, narrator, character and spectator of his/her own story.

The *virtuality of action* in film experience, rather than the virtual *hyper-action* in multiuser 3D simulated worlds, better meets the empathetic prerequisites because the viewer plays, through the "system of gaze" and the vicarious experience of illusion, on a fertile terrain for emotional engagement. In filmic experience, the spectator/character relationship is based on perceptual-cognitive-emotional dynamics that are mutually related but which however remain autonomous and distinguishable (the filmic emotional structures leave the

spectator free to empathise or not with the character and does not necessarily imply a corporeal alignment). This distinguishability or freedom in organising, producing, experiencing, and attending to the filmic world is the 'insurance' of corporeal objectivity and "right distance". On the contrary, the videoludic experience requires an involvement process that is overbalanced towards the Selfness front. We see a condensation, or saturation, of the Self, to the detriment of the presence of the Other. Especially, online virtual worlds are environments where the player fundamentally experiences, almost auto-erotically, his/her own ego. The interactional axis hovers on the Selfness side and the *intra*-subjective logic is stronger than the inter-subjective one. Visual and sensorial perception oscillates between two declensions of the same Self. And if the actual Self is more concerned with empathising with the virtual Self than with the Other, then empathy is required only as a reflexive ability. In such auto-reflexive environments, in which users need to engage a motional and emotional relation first and foremost with themselves, a form of *autoempathy* emerges. Lastly, such a form of empathy is an anti-empathetic one, because of the lack of openness to Otherness. Too far from the Other, too close to the Self. Deep through the looking-glass, we are playing a *ludic* experience, but without the "vantage point" of *illusion*.

Notes

[1] It is appropriate to note the etymological origins of the word 'avatar'. In Hindu philosophy it is the 'descent' or incarnation of a divine being, or the Supreme Being, on planet Earth. The Sanskrit word 'avatāra' literally means 'descent' (*avatarati*) and usually implies a deliberate descent into lower realms of existence for special purposes. See Monier-Williams 2008.

[2] Fontanille 2004, p. 213. Fontanille refers to Merleau-Ponty: "It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body", Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 185.

[3] Deriving from Robert Vischer's notion of *Einfühlung*, empathy is a very ambiguous and misunderstood concept in aesthetics, psychology and philosophy, investigated since the turn of the 19th century by Theodor Lipps and many other authors (see the anthologies Mallgrave-Ikonomou 1994 and Pinotti 1997) and continued by phenomenology (Stein 1917 and Scheler 1923). The concept of empathy could still be employed primarily in relation to two different subject matters: the aesthetic experience of "feeling into", i.e. to project or transfer a subjectivity into an (artistic) object; and the inter-subjective experience of "feeling with", i.e. the experience of co-penetration of the mental and emotional states between two human beings.

[4] On the category of Firstness as a Quality of feeling and its relation to the notion of Icon, see Peirce 1867, Peirce 1903 and Peirce 1904.

[5] Klevjer 2006, pp. 173ff. For an analysis of the role of the cinematic camera in 3D computer animation see Manovich 2001.

[6] On this topic, see the comments on simulated trips in Darley 2000, pp. 205-206. In the same manner, in Immersive Virtual Reality, the purely subjective user's point of view is totally incarnated into the interface: it is not an identification as much as a perfect 'replacement' (see Bolter-Grusin 2000, pp. 245-248).

[7] For part of these remarks, I am indebted to Federico di Chio's courses on Illusion in cinematographic and videoludic experience. On the scarce ability of videogames to allow empathetic relation, see also Alinovi 2000.

[8] Moreover, it is very difficult to identify with an avatar inspired by a (real or imaginary) famous character (such as Darth Vader or Han Solo in Star Wars). See Fraschini 2004, p. 116.

[9] By acting on the mouse, keyboard, or scrolling controls or by activating options such as "Camera controls", 'Zoom', 'Focus', "Mouse look", etc., the visual frame may vary from "pure-subjective" to "unreal objective".

[10] For more on implications between avatarial "body building" and identity, see Ivi, pp. 236-240.

[11] It is worth adding that, in the context of the phenomenological reformulation of semiotic theory, the topics of body and passions are developing extensively, partly because of the influence of cognitivist and neurophysiologist research in aesthetics and media studies. In this respect, the main aspect relating to empathy is the activity of *mirror neurons*: the observation of an action – in particular, a goal-oriented action – leads to the activation of the same neural networks that are active during its execution (See Rizzolatti-Sinigaglia 2007 and Iacoboni 2008).

[12] For more on embodiment in film experience, see Sobchack 1992 and Sobchack 2004.

[13] An interesting case study in this sense could be those video games that contain "cut scenes" (such as *Final Fantasy*). But the insertion of a cinematographic medium and the fact that the player has little or no control over these sequences seems to confirm my general hypothesis.

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