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# (Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar

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## Abstract

This article explores the cultural appropriation of the term avatar by Western tech culture and what this implies for scholarship of digital games, virtual worlds, social media, and digital cultures. The term has roots in the religious tradition of the Indian subcontinent and was subsequently imported into video game terminology during a period of widespread appropriation of Eastern culture by Californian tech industries. We argue that the use of the term was not a case of happenstance but a signaling of the potential for computing to offer a mystical or enchanted perspective within an otherwise secular world. This suggests that the concept is useful in game cultures precisely because it plays with the "otherness" of the term's original meaning. We argue that this indicates a fundamental hybridity to gaming cultures that highlight the need to add postcolonial perspectives to how issues of diversity and power in gaming cultures are understood.

## Keywords

avatar, cultural appropriation, diversity, game culture, postcolonialism

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Since the mid-1980s, the term 'avatar' has been used in technical and cultural discussions of video games and has become an everyday term in popular culture. However, the 30 or so years of using avatar in the context of video games substantially ignores over two and a half millennia of evolution and use of the term in religious traditions on the Indian subcontinent. Given the focus of most Anglophone scholarship on games and game cultures in the Global North, it is easy to overlook that this term has a history with a great deal of religious and cultural significance for many people from the Indian subcontinent. This article provides a critical exploration of the incorporation of the term avatar into the discourse of technology and gaming industries in North America and considers the significance of the adoption of avatar to describe users' virtual proxy by the wider cultures of gaming.

We argue that the adoption of the term avatar was not a random or dispassionate choice. Thus, we highlight crucial parallels between the original use of the term, predominantly in the Hindu religion, and the role that this technical element of video games has in placing and embodying the user in the virtual world (Mukherjee, 2012). Californian "tech" culture of the 1970s and 1980s had inherited a fascination with Eastern philosophy and religion from their "hippie" forebears (Pias, 2011; Turner, 2010). The introduction of avatar in the discourse of games—through the multiplatform *Ultima IV: The Quest of the Avatar*[1] and the proto-Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO) *Habitat* on America Online—began at a time that a new understanding of game design was emerging, which recognized the significance of the player-controlled digital object, both for player engagement and in order to market video games to a wider audience.

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of work that examines video games from postcolonial perspectives. Recent manuscripts by Mukherjee (2017) and Murray (2017) have added an important postcolonial voice to the already well-established literature on diversity in game cultures and scholarship of games. This article explores a sidelined issue in game studies, which we believe illustrates how "commonsensical" approaches to the subject of the avatar overlook an uneven encounter between cultures. Core to the argument that we make throughout is that the contemporary use of the term avatar in gaming cultures "plays" on and with the original meaning and that this hybridity is fraught because it is based on asymmetrical power dynamics and obscured through secularization, by which we mean both the long-theorized and observed general decline, in the Western world, of religious practice within and sense of "belonging to" institutionalized—for example, Christian—church religion (Bruce, 2002; Davie, 1990; Dobbelaere, 1999; Weber, Gerth, & Mills, 1919). Additionally, because cultural appropriation is a central concept in the following discussion, we should briefly introduce our use and understanding of it more elaborately.

*Cultural appropriation* refers to the uptake of ideas and notions from one culture by another. It is a normal part of the process of contact between cultures and is often celebrated as a source of cultural dynamism and change. However, in some cases of cultural appropriation, elements of culture from a subordinated group are used without consent, or the appropriated cultural object, concept, or practice is

recontextualized in a manner which is insulting or harmful to the original group (Rogers, 2006). Through uneven relationships between cultures, such as colonial and postcolonial relations, the processes of cultural appropriation can result in romanticized, orientalized, and/or generalized traditions or aesthetics being taken from minority cultures by the hegemonic cultures that were previously or are currently dominant (Said, 1979, 1985). In particular, cultural appropriation is seen as having a negative impact on people when it involves the trivialization or commodification of culture, and this may be further exacerbated when specific practices are shifted outside their original cultural context and values.

The appropriation of avatar into tech and gaming contexts is a new use of Hindu religious terminology in an everyday context while it continues to evoke mystical and spiritual connotations. Specifically, this article will show that the uptake and integration of Eastern traditions in art, philosophy, and religion is a recognized phenomenon within the Californian tech sector at the time the term was introduced (Aupers, 2009), and we argue that the use of avatar in the new context of gaming is a part of a deliberate process of re-enchanting the mundane world.

This use of the term avatar in game culture is a form of cultural appropriation, and this mostly unacknowledged issue has important implications for video games scholars.[2] But what the avatar designated in this new context had a curious resonance with its original meaning (Mukherjee, 2012), which underscores the significance of the avatar: that it indicates a fundamental hybridity of gaming cultures that is fraught by uneven power dynamics. In the first section of this article, we establish the Indic origins of the word avatar.[3] The second section examines the fascination that early California tech culture had for Hindu art, mysticism, and philosophy and situates the appropriation of the avatar into gaming as a part of this wider enchantment. The third section of the article elaborates the new technical and cultural approaches to game development, which signaled a crucial role of the newly designated avatar in the future development and success of the industry. The article concludes with a discussion of this cultural hybridity and appropriation in light of the significant role that the avatar has in our understanding of power, diversity, and inclusion in games and game cultures.

## *Origins of Avatar*

Avatar is a Sanskrit noun that originates in Hindu scripture and theological literature. In this context, an avatar is an object of worship and the manifestation of divinity that descends on Earth. Avatar is most commonly translated into English as a form of "(re-)incarnation," an often cyclical "making flesh" (*carn-*) of a deity. The cyclicity, numerousness, and the perfection of Hindu avatars differentiate them from the Christian linear, singular, and imperfect manifestations of God (Sheth, 2002, pp. 112–113). Avatar is a compound of the Sanskrit preverb "ava," meaning down or below, and the verbal root "tr," which means to float, sail across, pass, or cross over something, such as a river (Monier-Williams, 2008, p. 96, p. 454). The theological

**Table 1.** Avatar in Key Indic Scripture.

| Text | Author | Genre | Date Composed | Language | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bhagavad Gita | Vyasa | Epic poetry | 5th to 2nd centuries BCE | Sanskrit | 700 verses |
| Mahābhārata | Vyasa | Epic poetry | Composed from 8th or 9th century BCE, reaching its current form 4th century CE | Sanskrit | Over 100,000 couplets. Incorporates the Bhagavad Gita. Together with the Rāmāyana, it forms the Itihasa. |
| Rāmāyana | Valmiki | Epic poetry | Composed from 7th to 4th centuries BCE until 3rd century CE | Sanskrit | 24,000 verses. Together with the Mahābhārata, it forms the Itihasa. |
| Puranas | Compiled by Vyasa | Literature | Composed between 3rd and 10th centuries CE | Sanskrit and other languages | Divided into the 18 Maha puraṇas and 18 Upa puraṇas |

properties of the avatar are complex and were developed over many centuries (see Table 1; Parrinder, 1997). The word first appears in several books of the *Mahabharata* (originating somewhere between the 8th and 9th century BCE), as *avatarana* or *avatārana*, a verb that described the divine act of descending from the heavens to earth (*Mahabharata*, 1.2.34; cf. Hacker, 1960, p. 68; Couture, 2001, p. 313). The concept is primarily developed in the epic poetry of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which both follow the cyclic lives of avatars. Additionally, of the 18 most important Puranic stories (*Puranas* meaning "ancient," "old"), 13 center on the lives of avatars: Commonly, the texts are named after avatars of Vishnu as their central concern, such as the *Mahāpurāṇas* ("major" Puranas) named Kurma, Vamana, and Varaha (Dimmitt, 2015). From these key texts, the key characteristics of Hindu avatars can be distilled (Parrinder, 1997), that is, avatars

- are real,
- take worldly birth,
- are a mix the divine and human,
- are mortal,
- are historical,
- occur repeatedly (and can co-occur), and
- can guarantee divine grace.

This concept of avatar has developed over many centuries and is clearly distinguishable from other theological concepts of incarnation or divine manifestation. It has a rich, layered history and is fundamental to many important Hindu texts as well as to contemporary traditions within both Hinduism and Buddhism. Regional and historical variations of Hinduism can often be distinguished by their inclusion and exclusion of certain *dashavatara* (the 10 primary avatars) of Vishnu. Many major traditions of Hinduism similarly focus on avatar reverence, particularly Vaishnavism, the largest Hindu tradition, which is followed by about 641 million people (Johnson & Grim, 2013, p. 400). Thus, avatars still have a great deal of religious and cultural significance to a great portion of the world's population today.

While primarily religious, avatar is also used in other nongaming contexts. The term has also taken on a secondary "secular and colloquial" meaning in Bengali,[4] where it can refer to "a person whose peculiar and flamboyant dispositions, habits, and characters traits isolate him or her (generally, him) from the rest of society as someone who looks or behaves strangely" (Basu Thakur, 2015, p. 1). Avatar has also been used in English (somewhat obscurely) since the 18th century to refer to an allegorical figure that personifies or embodies a principle, thus giving "a face to the abstract or untouchable" (Coleman, 2011, p. 44). This earlier borrowing illustrates the widespread influence of Hindu texts, especially the Bhagavad Gita, on European philosophy and other scholarly traditions as they were translated into European languages during the 19th century (Bayley, 2010). The cultural hybridity of avatar thus predates video games considerably.

Scholars have noted that the video game avatar is contradictory to the notion that the avatar of Hindu scripture is the divine made flesh. For Coleman (2011), gaming culture's use of the avatar rather "reverses the process, bringing the earthly into a realm of mediated abstraction" (p. 44). Dovey and Kennedy (2006) make a similar observation: "the in-game graphic characters that represent the player and the player's actions. Originally the divine made flesh in Hinduism, now the flesh made virtual" (p. 144). While no longer a divinity made flesh, the video game avatar marks a *crossing over* into the virtual. Avatar enriches the notion of player-controlled digital objects by situating that relationship in the virtual space beyond the screen and evoking a sense of embodiment and inhabitation. In the following section, we argue that this use fits a general trend in tech cultures to draw on Eastern traditions to re-enchant technology with a sense of wonder. This appropriation of avatar to describe everyday experiences of playing games signaled that gaming was "other" to mundane everyday experience.

## *Avatar in Games and Tech Culture*

There are several routes along which avatar enters tech culture in the 1980s and 1990s. The point of tracing multiple entry points for the term is not to provide a strict time line. Rather, we argue that the moments which we outline below each illustrate how the cultural appropriation of avatar as a term is part of a general fascination with

Eastern thought within the culture of the Californian tech industry. As the new everyday use of the term entered the lexicon, for the game industry and players, it came to refer to the representation of the user that was used as vessel or tool to operate within virtual space. Through its evocation of mystery and otherness, avatar signaled an opening into novel "re-enchanted" experiences within the mundane world. The avatar added a linguistic and conceptual nuance and depth, suggesting video games potential for creating embodied, empathic, and emotional experiences. By calling it an avatar, the playable digital object was now no longer limited to merely being a tool, but a potentially new incarnation of self. In the following subsections, we pinpoint three key reinterpretations of the avatar into the discourse of gaming and technology, which illustrate how the term both normalized and popularized the notion of an operational virtual proxy, while simultaneously mystifying the possibilities of the experiences that this enabled through the exotic, orientalized connotation of the term.

*Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar.* The use of avatar which most explicitly relies on the Indic origins of the term is from *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems, 1985). The game is the fourth in Richard Garriott's (1961–) influential *Ultima* series of games and the first of the "Age of Enlightenment" trilogy of the series.[5] In this trilogy, the avatar is a central figure for reaching a new age of peace and enlightenment. The avatar is a virtuous "chosen one" that acts as a shining example for the citizens of Britannia.[6] However, avatar was not used to describe the relationship between the player and a virtual figure that they controlled. Rather, the player is controlling a protagonist who will become "the Avatar" through achieving the victory conditions in the game.[7]

*Ultima IV*'s avatar is a cultural appropriation, used to re-enchant typical Christian values and render them mysterious. The term is employed as an Orientalist story device that exoticizes a familiar theme by reframing them as "other." Rather than an embodiment of a god out of many gods, Garriott's avatar is *the* singular embodiment of virtue. The term is appropriated into a traditional Christian framework as the avatar becomes a Christ-like figure who is the singular representative of moral virtue, who has come to earth to show humanity love, truth, and courage, and in doing so ushers in a new era. It remystifies the secular Western world through this gesture toward otherness, but the sacred world it invokes is thoroughly Christian and Western, yet rendered unfamiliar.

This messianic figure is prevalent within video games. A figure, ordained by some ineffable past or cosmic order—and controlled by the player—enters the world and sets it to a sense of order (Bosman, 2017, pp. 199–200; Gray, 2014, pp. 20–21). The avatar in these contexts is a visible and material figure that players embody and act through. Yet the actions of such avatars are invested with a sense of divine right, as their role is to restore a sense of order to the game world. Examples include Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), Kassandra from *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018), and generic avatars which are

developed by the player, such as the Dragonborn from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011).

The use of the term avatar to signal this relationship in *Ultima IV* marks a beginning of a reliance on the exoticness signaled by the use of the term avatar to convey that the experience of playing a video game was outside of everyday mundane existence. The messianic avatar resolves crises within an ideological framework of truth and justice that clearly follows the secularized Christian values of the contemporary "West." They are often literally prodigal sons with traumatic pasts who move through the world encountering crises and events that they address and adjudicate.[8] Irrespective of how the crises in the game are solved, they are often developed within a recognizably Christian framework of "good" versus "evil" (see Ensslin, 2011). Through the repetition of this narrative pattern, the video game avatar is used to signal a deep and potentially significant relationship between the player and the world presented in the game. However, the use of the term avatar also enables and obscures the Christian values of these messianic figures and the consequent structuring of the virtual world that they set to order.

*Habitat.* In contrast to Garriott's use of the term avatar in *Ultima*, Morningstar and Farmer's *Habitat* unambiguously secularizes the term, using it to describe a mundane, everyday function within the game. In *Habitat*, avatars are tool-like and operational: "Avatars can move around, pick up, put down, and manipulate objects, talk to each other, and gesture, each under the control of an individual player" (Morningstar & Farmer, 2003, p. 665). Unlike the singular, messianic avatar of good virtues that is found in *Ultima IV*, the avatars of *Habitat* are everyday embodiments of any and every player in the game world. Yet in *Habitat*, this new term also signals a qualitatively different relationship with a mundane digital object that is social and indexed to an individual. Rather than picking up a tool to execute a function, an avatar was possessed, inhabited, and a representation of the self to others in the virtual world.

Shortly afterward, Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar, two game designers working at LucasArts, used the term avatar in their groundbreaking 1986 graphic multiuser dungeon or dimension *Habitat* which was already in development before *Ultima IV* was released (Rossney, 1996).[9] This timing confirms that avatar as a gaming and technical term had multiple entry points into everyday discourse. The term also resonated strongly with game designers working on what were, for the time, very innovative and elaborate virtual worlds.[10] *Habitat* was ahead of the curve, but in the MMO genre of networked games that flourished subsequently, very strong associations were formed between players and their digital proxies. It was through Farmer and Morningstar's use of avatar in *Habitat* that the expression was picked up by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first use of term (Morabito, 1986). According to Farmer, using avatar to describe the cartoon-like figure operated by the account holders in *Habitat* was something that "Chip [Morningstar] came up with" (Britt, 2008). In a later interview, Morningstar stated that he has

"been variously gratified, amused, and dismayed at the way the word has taken on the life that it has," adding that "he sometimes feels as though he ruined the term 'avatar'" (Kan, 2010).

*Snow Crash.* A final point of entry for the term is Stephenson's (1992) "cyberpunk" novel *Snow Crash*. The now classic novel cemented the avatar as a straightforward, everyday, technical representation of a user in an online space. The people in the online world of *Snow Crash* called "the Metaverse": "are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audio-visual bodies that people use to communicate with each other" (Stephenson, 1992, p. 33). It was through *Snow Crash* that the everyday Western, secularized use of the term became popularized, taking its final form in what can now be considered the canonical use of the word in tech and gaming culture. A core theme of the novel was exploring mind, language, and myth through computational models, endowing a transformative power to computation. The fictional avatars of the Metaverse are technologically advanced and signal a potential future where a great deal of human activity is augmented and enabled by avatar technologies.

Stephenson's novel has an important legacy for the avatar. This is illustrated in its acknowledgment as the inspiration for *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) by the lead developer Phillip Rosedale:

> *Snow Crash* has the closest practical resemblance to *Second Life* as it exists now: a parallel, immersive world which simulates an alternate universe, which thousands of people inhabit simultaneously for communication, play, and work, at various levels and variations of role-playing with their avatars (Van Winkle, 2006, p. 108).[11]

*Second Life* is a widely popular virtual world where millions of people first discovered how to make and use avatars (Maiberg, 2016). This popularization and wider adoption of the term avatar continues with the rise of social media. As a metaphor for user representation online (Coleman, 2011), the avatar extends to multiple sites of wider technological culture through social media (e.g., Dean, 2010) and cinema. On the one hand, social media platforms including *Yahoo!* and *Tumblr* use the term, as well as gaming platforms and other services (van Ryn et al., 2019). The concept encapsulated by avatar is demonstrably necessary, and although its appearance in this context may seem odd, there are well-documented parallels, to be outlined below, which indicate that it can be understood as a part of a larger cultural phenomenon.

## *Magic, Mysticism, and Silicon Valley*

The rise of what we now refer to as "Californian ideology," "tech culture," or "Silicon Valley culture" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; English-Lueck, 2017) is to a large extent influenced by the intersection of the counterculture of the 1960s and

the 1970s with the utopian potentials of technology and cyberculture (Aupers, 2009). Countercultural periodicals such as *Whole Earth*,[12] *Mondo 2000*, and *Wired* have been central in defining a uniquely Californian technology subculture (Turner, 2010). A key feature of that subculture is an interest in the possibilities of using computing and connectivity as a way to aid self-subsisting communities to reach communal independence (Golumbia, 2009). However, this technological focus is underwritten by a mystical dimension that borrows heavily from the traditional art, religion, and philosophy of China and India (Turner, 2010). In particular, this has influenced utopian approaches to computing that see the computer as more than just a "tool" but as a device for the self-actualization of the individual and advancement of the human collective.

The introduction of the avatar to Western tech and gaming discourse is part of this wider process of cultural appropriation of Indian culture through Californian counterculture, as part of the formation of Silicon Valley's tech culture in the late 20th century. During the height of the counterculture period, several organizations were pivotal in making the shift from counterculture to cyberculture, such as Nooruddeen Durkee's (1938–) USCO (US Company) art collective and Stewart Brand's (1938–) *Whole Earth* group (Turner, 2010, p. 50). Both groups drew freely on Eastern traditions in their organizational philosophies. This "techno-mysticism" drew on diverse influences, such as "rituals involving drugs, mystical forces and electrical technologies," and the various influences of Indian scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy (1887–1947) and the Indian guru Meher Baba (1894–1969; Turner, 2010, p. 50).

Tech culture's fascination with enchantment and Eastern religion goes far beyond the practical adoption of the avatar. References to enchantment are common in early computing: Installation software is called "wizards" and information technology experts "magicians" (Levy, 2001); Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) note that this "fascination with misty premodern fantasy" is a "paradox of emergent game hacker culture" (p. 90). The mysticism introduced to tech culture was "a means of invoking and reaffirming mystery in a world that seems to have lost it" (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 84). This mystic dimension drew both on the utopian possibilities of technological innovation and on the opacity of that technology (Aupers, 2010). Through drawing freely from and appropriating other cultures, the secularized Western world was re-enchanted with a sense of wonder.

The meaning of avatar is circumscribed by its entry into everyday discourse through the heart of U.S. technoculture in Silicon Valley. While the desktop visual metaphor meant that most elements of the computer's graphic user interface were clearly explained by remediation, avatar came to be used to describe the experimental interface that was developed fully in games and subsequently became widely relevant with the growth of virtual worlds and social media. To reiterate what we have said previously, this choice is neither random nor neutral. This appropriation of terminology is a result of the tech industry's long-standing fascination with the Eastern cultures, which also provided exotic and embodied connotations that

resonated strongly with tech culture's interest in the transcendent and utopian potential of the computer networks that they had dubbed "cyberspace."

## *The Necessity of the Avatar*

The adoption and appropriation of avatar also reflects a gradual but substantial change in how game designers understood the qualities of player experiences. While the technology was not new to games, the introduction of the term established that there was a particular need to demarcate a formal element in video games: the representation of the user in a digital environment that enabled "the user to experience and interact within the spaces of digitally mediated worlds" (Nowak & Fox, 2018, p. 33). However, this demarcation also reflected the increasing understanding of the importance of the avatar for establishing emotional connections with games (Isbister, 2016) and consequently became a site of both technical innovation and commercial intensification within the industry.

The avatar has been a site of scrutiny for scholars interested in the representativeness of game culture. The key issue in this case is how avatar represents and includes different demographics, as they have mostly been male, White, cisgendered, and straight (see Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). In a similar vein, one of the characteristics of early game studies scholarship was to emphasize the avatar not as a site of identification but rather as a tool (Consalvo & Begy, 2015, p. 102). Scholars such as Aarseth (2004) and Newman (2002) have approached the avatar as merely such a "vehicle" or tool for the player. Aarseth (2004) goes so far as to dismiss the avatar as an irrelevant body for players to "see through . . . and past" (p. 48). However, this position has been challenged and enriched by scholars who explore the complexity of the relationship with the avatar as a complex site of multiple (de Wildt, 2014; Kania, 2017; Vella, 2015), hybrid (Boudreau, 2012) identities, which suggest a permeability of subjectivity (Wilde & Evans, 2017) associated with posthuman identities (Giakalaras & Tsongidis, 2015).

However, the avatar as a technical element of games was originally developed primarily to perform a functional role for the player. They were "position indicators" that made no attempt to represent a character in any sense (Bogost & Montfort, 2009, p. 52). Typically, this function was a representation of a gun, a car, a spaceship, or some other vehicle or object, which often indicated which actions—driving, flying, shooting, and so on—were the dominant activity in the game (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). For example, the spaceship in *Galaga* (Namco, 1981) sets a framework for the in-game actions of the player, which may involve shooting alien spacecraft and flying around the game space in order to more precisely target particular alien ships, dodge missiles, and avoid collisions. In *Galaga*, and many other games from this era including *Defender* (Williams Electronics, 1981) and *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), a nominal human agency is still implied (Rehak, 2003). But while there may in actuality be a pilot of the spaceship,

there is no question of them existing as a character—they do not even have a name, let alone abilities, characteristics, or a "backstory."

A narratively rich form of avatar was developing by the end of the "Golden Age of Video Games." While they were functional extensions of the player's capacities into virtual spaces, they were also clearly identifiable characters that had their own traits and characteristics that made them distinct from those of the player (Bogost & Montfort 2009, p. 51). Aldred (2012) pinpoints this shift in the licensed games that Atari created after the company was purchased by Warner Communications in 1976. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Atari, 1982), for example, had the same 8-bit graphics that characterized the era but was able to make a symbolic connection between the game and its source film by integrating recognizable items in the portrayal and function of the Indiana Jones avatar, most notably his hat and whip (Aldred, 2012). The graphic constraints of the Atari 2600 meant that designers deprioritized accurately representing the visual and narrative elements of the film and instead focused on the "function and actions" of the avatar (p. 97).

By comparison, the simplistic design of *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) belies a carefully crafted concept for the avatar. *Pac-Man* is designed to look like a pizza from which someone has taken a slice. The (presumably male) designers believed that this would appeal to women, as they liked to eat (Donovan, 2010, p. 87). To supplement the pizza-like avatar of *Pac-Man*, official art was circulated on the arcade cabinets, and in other promotional materials, which provided more visual and emotional depth for the avatar. Lead designer Toru Iwatani (1955–) commented on this art in an interview:

> The hardware specifications of the time, compared to the present time, were very limited, so we could only have artwork in a very simplistic style and it was very difficult to create a sense of empathy for the player with this limited artistic style. But we wanted as many people as possible to enjoy the game, so by creating kawaii characters we thought we could appeal to women as well. (Donovan, 2010, p. 87)

The promotional figures were drawn in a *kawaii* style (Japanese cute aesthetic) and featured an anthropomorphized yellow ball possessing a broad grin and expressive eyes and eyebrows, to which limbs had been added, arms clad in orange gloves, and legs in red boots.

While the appropriation of avatar into video games followed a larger and mostly unidirectional exchange between Silicon Valley and Eastern mysticism, it also encapsulated the development of a richly contextualized interface element that required a specific name—the formerly used colloquial "man," "life," or "ship" was inadequate. This new term could usefully signal the development as a whole rather than referring to the individual character actor by name. This branded commodification of the avatar made it into a marketable and identifiable product in itself (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003, pp. 125–126). The role of avatars for the marketing of platforms in the "console wars" is illustrative: Both Mario and Sonic

were the prime sites for identifying with *either* Nintendo or Sega's gaming platform (Harris, 2014). Through such marketing, Mario, Sonic, Pac-Man, Lara Croft, Master Chief, Pikachu and their kin have become the proselytizing face of game culture. Each has spawned merchandize, films, and other popular material that has a reach far beyond the medium of video games (Kline et al., 2003). More than hardware, storytelling or the figure of the "gamer," then, the commodified avatar is *the* locus of identification for gaming.

## Discussion

Explicitly acknowledging the uneven power relationship in the cultural appropriation of the avatar from India to North America has several important consequences for scholarship of video games:

1. Video games are culturally hybrid.
2. While video games are a global phenomenon, they draw from (and are experienced in) multiple, uneven local contexts.
3. Power and privilege shape how we experience and understand games.

Avatars have a pivotal role in discussions of identity, diversity, and inclusion in gaming cultures. This is evident in the way that discussion and critique of the gender, race, and sexuality of avatars is so polarized within game cultures. The avatar is central to the everyday understanding of inclusivity in gaming. Blizzard's popular multiplayer game *Overwatch* (2016), for example, has been both praised and criticized for its inclusive avatar design. A noticeable number of high profile games have recently shown a deliberate approach to including a female avatar, like *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. These developments reflect a growing understanding that game design is not without politics and that the games industry and game culture have a responsibility to be more inclusive of different bodies, beliefs, and cultures. However, making more representative avatars, particularly in order to attract new audiences, places a great deal of emphasis on the association between identity and avatar for embedding diversity; when for many people the relationship was not very important (Shaw, 2017). While welcome, avatar choice can reinforce unwelcome binaries, rigid demarcations, and essentialist notions and may promote one aspect of identity over others. Shaw (2017) thus argues for a more complex approach to avatar representation where the emphasis is on creating space within games for the possibility of difference (, p. 59). The origin of the term avatar in gaming through a process of cultural appropriation adds to the complexity of this issue, while also offering a potential way forward through realigning the avatar with its origins, in other words, through reorienting it.

By reorienting the avatar, we engage with issues of cultural appropriation that increasingly arise in public debates around cultural production, diversity, and cultural sensitivity in the Anglosphere, often in a very polarizing manner (King, 2013).

While some forms of cultural appropriation are clearly ethically dubious, it is a key part of the process of cultural exchange. This includes the long history of reciprocal cultural influence between the Indian subcontinent and the Western world up until the colonial era. Again, cultural appropriation mostly becomes a problem when there is a power imbalance between the two cultures, and the appropriation is done by the dominant culture. This may be exacerbated when that dominant culture also commodifies what has been appropriated, without compensation or acknowledgment (Rogers, 2006). We have argued that the adoption of the term avatar by tech and gaming cultures takes precisely this form of cultural appropriation. The use of the term plays upon its Indic origins through the strangeness, otherness, and difference evoked by the term. Although Kassandra and Geralt of Rivia might exist independently of the concept, the avatar signals a general quality to the experience of video games which suggests they are outside of mundane, secular Western experience: A signalization which was crucial for establishing the commodified experience of video game play.

The cultural hybridity of digital games in general is of growing significance in the global games industry as new areas become centers of global and local video game production, and new markets are opened through digital publishing and distribution. While digital games have long being understood as a hybrid cultural product (Consalvo, 2006), the conceptual hybridity that is illustrated by the use of avatar in gaming terminology suggests both a more widespread cultural exchange than between North America and Japan and one which has a history that predates the emergence of video games.

Video games are everywhere, but they are experienced asymmetrically. The history of the avatar illustrates that—beyond this technical unevenness created by multiple different arrangements of access to software, hardware, and infrastructure—game *cultures* are also asymmetrical. Recent work has highlighted game cultures in regions outside of the Anglosphere (e.g., Švelch, 2018) and Global North (Penix-Tadsen, 2019), and there is still urgent need for further work that explores these areas. Unevenness is a characteristic for game culture, and considering the cultural, religious, and linguistic dimensions of this unevenness, it is important alongside the growing body of robust work that considers the experiences of marginalized groups that have struggled for inclusion in game culture (e.g., Gray, 2014; Kafai, Richard, & Tynes, 2016; Shaw, 2014), both as players and designers.

Our knowledge of digital games is shaped and influenced by such factors, whether or not we may choose to acknowledge this explicitly. This is especially so considering that the main vehicle of knowledge in academia is our vocabulary; hence, we need to acknowledge the genealogical, linguistic, and cultural origins of the words and concepts we use in our work. The lack of critical work that deals with the cultural background of the concept of avatar suggests that many scholars of digital games, most of ourselves included, have been operating from a position of relative privilege. From such a position, it is easy and common to set some of these complexities aside, by uncritically considering the avatar a vernacular term that

has emerged from the community of players and designers. However, while the cultural history of the avatar is not hidden, and its origins have been acknowledged, the significance of this origin is rarely discussed. What is being overlooked is not merely an interesting footnote in the history of digital games but a cosmopolitan and hybrid perspective on the development of digital games as an aesthetic form and commodity.

The avatar illustrates how digital games are hybrid in multiple intersecting ways. The hybridization of humans and technology exemplified by the avatar is acknowledged and explored significantly in scholarship of games, from theories of hybrid identities (Filiciak, 2003), cyborgs (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006), assemblages (Taylor, 2009), through to the posthuman (Giakalaras &Tsongidis, 2015; Wilde & Evans, 2017). Our tracing of the incorporation of avatar into everyday and academic gaming discourse suggests that this approach to hybridity intersects with a less acknowledged form of cultural hybridity. The avatar is already a key site of debate around issues of representation (Shaw, 2014; 2017), and the cultural hybridity signaled by the avatar's history potentially destabilizes the default White and predominantly Anglophone understanding of the avatar in game cultures.

## Conclusion

This article has examined video game avatar from a postcolonial perspective to explore the cultural appropriation of Eastern culture by the West, in light of its firmly embedded conceptual use in game scholarship, game cultures, and social media platforms. The avatar's use and application in these contexts stems from a very specific moment in history, which is understood to have been characterized by widespread cultural appropriation of art, philosophy, and religion from the Indian subcontinent, in order to express a countercultural and mystical dimension to otherwise secularized and mundane Western tech industries. This newly appropriated concept of the avatar encapsulated an emerging communication nexus between humans, and humans and computers, which has had ongoing significance for video games and virtual worlds. The concept has become embedded in both the everyday and scientific understanding of the present and future of human interaction. Our intention is not to turn people away from this term but rather to open a space for reflexivity around the avatar that acknowledges its fraught background—to reorient the avatar. This fraughtness galvanizes the preexisting concerns about power and representation that have been formulated in relation to the avatar by scholars working from critical perspectives informed by critical race studies, queer studies, and feminism and indicates a developing constellation of critical game studies scholarship that includes postcolonial theory to examine inclusivity in gaming cultures.

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## Notes

1. Originally released on the Apple II, it was later ported to many key platforms of the day, including the Commodore 64, NES, and SEGA Master System.
2. Indic in this context refers to Sanskrit and those contemporary languages descended from Sanskrit, such as Bengali, Hindustani, and Punjabi.
3. Kücklich (2006) has cautiously noted that avatar "is a problematic term, however, due to its religious connotations, and should not be used without explanation" (p. 108).
4. Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh and the second most widely spoken language in India, after Hindi.
5. The trilogy included *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, *Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny*, and *Ultima VI: The False Prophet*, which were published between 1985 and 1990 by Origin Systems.
6. The world of the *Ultima* franchise was called Sosaria in the first three games.
7. By exercising the "Eight Virtues" and accessing the "Codex of Ultimate Wisdom."
8. One example is Carl "CJ" Johnson in Rockstar North's Grand Theft Auto III: San Andreas from 2004.
9. MUD = Multiuser dungeon or dimension, a multiplayer genre of games which was popular among early computer users.
10. In 2001, Morningstar and Farmer were recognized for the innovation and influence of *Habitat* at the first annual Game Developer's Choice Awards.
11. Phillip Rosedale also cites numerous more minor influences in the interview, including Philip K. Dick, John Brunner, Vernor Vinge, and William Gibson.
12. Under various titles, this publication dates back to 1968.

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