A Phenomenology of Breakdown: Avatar, Tools, and Ontological Friction

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation applies Martin Heidegger's (1927/2008) tool-analysis to theorise player-avatar relations through three distinct modes of engagement: present-at-hand, ready-to-hand, and unready-to-hand. While prior scholarship (Bayliss, 2010; Conway & Elphinstone, 2017; Gualeni, 2015; Janik, 2017; Martin, 2012; Vella, 2013) has examined avatars through Heidegger's categories of readiness-to-hand (tools experienced as transparent extensions of embodied action) and presence-at-hand (tools objectively analysed as detached entities), this work foregrounds the underexplored unreadiness-to-hand, a mode where tools, even digital ones such as avatars, paradoxically reveal their contingent nature while remaining partially operational (Rautzenberg, 2020). This framework is deployed to analyse the fumblecore genre, a category of games defined by deliberately awkward avatar control. By examining moments of friction and failure in fumblecore play, this paper uses phenomenological analysis to make ontological claims about the avatar as a resistant and contingent entity. In doing so, it engages with posthumanist critiques of mastery and autonomous subjectivity, arguing that unreadiness-to-hand destabilises humanist assumptions about control, embodiment, and agency in digital environments (Wilde, 2023).

When encountered as present-at-hand, avatars become objects of reflection: their visual design, narrative role, or statistical attributes dominate the player's attention. In contrast, ready-to-hand avatars recede into transparency, enabling players to act *through* them, e.g., navigating a platformer's obstacles via intuitive movement. However, Heidegger's tool-analysis also identifies a third mode: the unready-to-hand, where tools disrupt engagement through: 1) conspicuousness (malfunction, e.g., input lag or glitches); 2) obtrusiveness (absence, e.g., locked abilities halting progress); 3) obstinacy (mismatch, e.g., a slow avatar clashing with time-sensitive challenges). These *breakdowns* (Ryan & Siegel, 2009) force players to oscillate between embodied action and reflective distance, exposing the avatar's dual role as both prosthetic and obstacle.

This framework is explored through a consideration of the 'fumblecore' genre, which features videogames intentionally designed for awkward, imprecise, or chaotic avatar control, often featuring exaggerated ragdoll physics. This 'frictional embodiment' often cause hilarity, and some argue that fumblecore games "enthusiastically embrace comedy as their *raison d'etre*" (Ian Bryce, 2016, p. 87). Yet, beyond comedic value,

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fumblecore games offer compelling case studies of unreadiness-to-hand as a deliberate aesthetic and ludic strategy that causes a critical re-evaluation of the avatar as embodied prosthetic. In titles such as *QWOP* (Foddy, 2008), *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Foddy, 2017), and *I Am Bread* (*Bossa Studio*, 2015), the avatar resists seamless incorporation by the player, becoming a site of failure, friction and negotiation.

Fumblecore games thus operationalize unreadiness-to-hand: breakdown not as something to be avoided, but as the very condition of play. Fumblecore avatars exemplify unreadiness-to-hand by being conspicuous when control malfunctions (e.g. in *Octodad*, the avatar's tentacle-based movement system produces unpredictable and imprecise response to input); obtrusive when absence of functionality halts progress (e.g. in *I Am Bread* the avatar's lack of conventional locomotion and manipulation abilities prevents transparent and frictionless interaction with the environment); obstinate when a mismatch between avatar capability and game demands frustrates action (e.g. in *Getting Over It*, the avatar's hammer-based locomotion clashes with the precision and speed required by the terrain). These breakdowns reveal the avatar's dual role as both tool and barrier, inviting reflection on digital embodiment and the limits of control.

By analysing the fumblecore genre as an emblematic example of an unready-to-hand mode of play, this paper reframes player-avatar relationships as sites of 'designed-disunity'. These games challenge usability paradigms in user-centred design, where clear, consistent and transparent interaction is assumed to be the ideal mode of engagement for players. Fumblecore games thus shift the player's experience from one of mastery to one of failure, negotiation and adaptation. This shift also foregrounds the unique ontology of avatars, which are not extensions of the self or transparent vessels of intention, but rather resistant and contingent entities.

Such ontological instability aligns with posthumanist critiques of Cartesian subjectivity. Fumblecore avatars, in their conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy, disrupt the fantasy of the player as a rational, autonomous agent, who projects intentionally onto a world through seamless technological incorporation. Instead, they expose the limits of conscious control, foregrounding the role of 'bodily' intelligence and motor competencies typically operating beneath conscious awareness. When these competencies are undermined, players may potentially confront the fragility of their own agency and the material conditions sustaining it (Ian Bryce, 2016). Through this destabilization of embodiment, fumblecore games reveal the player as a relational and distributed entity, embedded within a techno-material assemblage, where agency is contingent and embodiment frictional, and where humanist notions of subjectivity couched within discourses of mastery are rendered partial, situated, and ontologically entangled.

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BIO

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