

Introduction

SACRED AND SECULAR AVATARS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF A SECRET SYNERGY

In the 1986 novel *Count Zero*,¹ William Gibson describes the proliferation of what appear to be voodoo gods inhabiting a virtual-reality data space referred to as the “matrix.” The novel’s protagonist, Bobby Newmark, a young computer hacker, meets these entities as he plugs himself into the matrix and transforms into his digital second self, the novel’s eponymous Count Zero. It turns out that the seeming gods are the fragmented remains of two Artificial Intelligences (AIs), who are named Neuromancer and Wintermute. The AIs’ choice of voodoo-god form is a fitting testament to their technological powers and an effective way to communicate and interact with humans in the matrix.

Reading *Count Zero* in the 1990s as a graduate student of anthropology, I was struck by Gibson’s joining of religion and technology. That creative fusion stuck with me for a long time and is on some level the spark for this book written decades later. For me, Gibson evokes what I refer to in this book as *avatars*²—material embodiments of consciousness, which, as second selves, allow humans (or other agents such as gods and AIs) to accomplish things in realities alternative to their own.³ In this case, computer hackers enter cyberspace via their digital avatars (though Gibson did not use the term *avatar* in this novel, which entered popular culture later). And the AIs Neuromancer and Wintermute do the same, each having the ability to enter cyberspace in the form of multiple voodoo gods, the exact character of which depends on the AIs’ current needs.

It is interesting—and appropriate—that Gibson chose a religious idiom of voodoo gods to frame a story detailing technological embodiments in

digital realities. The spirits of Haitian (and Haitian diasporic) voodoo are referred to as *loa*—also, in French creole, *les mystères* and *les invisibles*. They are understood to be vehicles or intermediary forms via which God, the supreme deity, enters the world to communicate with humans. Le Bon Dieu, the supreme “Good God,” takes specific form depending on the task at hand. If battle is necessary, that form could be an aggressive and warlike *Petro loa* such as the red demon spirit, Met Kalfu, the “master of the crossroads,” who is associated with the Christian Satan. Met Kalfu has a taste for rum infused with gunpowder and the power to grant (or deny) access to all the other loa. Or le Bon Dieu could take an older, “cooler,” and less aggressive water-spirit form such as the white *Rada loa*, Papa Legba, who remains closely connected to ancestral Africa. Papa Legba, also an intermediary spirit, is again closely associated with the crossroads and thus understood to have the ability to grant permission to speak and interact with the other loa. All the loa, then, are vehicles through which le Bon Dieu becomes embodied in earthly reality and thus in this instance able to intervene in human affairs—*avatars* in the language of this book. But Met Kalfu and Papa Legba, as spirits of the crossroads, represent the very principle of crossing over into other realities, given the way they control and manage that process. They are thus simultaneously examples of avatars and a kind of metacommentary on processes that facilitate crossing over into realities alternative to one’s own—again, what I refer to as an *avatar principle*. Given the importance voodoo places on crossing boundaries and realities, this sacred tradition becomes an appropriate touchstone for avatar processes in general, whether religious or digital.⁴

Gibson intuited an underlying parallel between what I would call *sacred avatars*, such as voodoo loa, and *secular avatars*, including the second selves many now commonly use to enter online gaming or other internet-based virtual worlds. Indeed, Gibson was not the only North American artist to make this connection. One need only think of James Cameron’s hugely popular and profitable 2009 epic science-fiction film *Avatar*,⁵ which is perhaps the first thing some readers think of when picking up this book. Cameron’s film is set in the twenty-second century on Pandora, a densely forested and habitable moon of a fictional gas-giant planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. The film’s drama centers on conflicts between colonizers from Earth extracting the mineral unobtainium, used to make room-temperature superconductors and thus very valuable on an Earth increasingly depleted of natural resources, and the Na’vi, the moon’s ten-foot-tall,

blue-skinned indigenous humanoid inhabitants, whose ecologies and lifeways are threatened by the extraction.

What is important here is that the Na'vi's religion allows them to journey outside their own bodies and take other forms. For example, the Na'vi are able to access the consciousness of other animals in the forest, including their flying dragon-like predator mounts, thus joining with them in some important way. They can also join their own consciousness with that of the sacred Tree of Souls, via which they can then communicate with their supreme mother goddess, Eywa. Those acts of instantiating their consciousness in alternative bodies and realities, religiously based in these instances, are what I am calling a *sacred avatar process*. But the colonizers also have the ability to transport their consciousness into other vehicles and thus enter alternative realities. Specifically, the earthling colonizers have genetically engineered compatible Na'vi bodies, which, via technology, their brains can operate remotely at a distance, giving these human operators the ability to interact with the indigenous Na'vi in their native environment. Thus, for example, the film's lead human character, Jake Sully, a paraplegic former marine, has his own Na'vi body that gives him the ability to walk again—a technologically facilitated and thus secular avatar process. These Na'vi bodies are explicitly referred to in the film as "avatars," which in turn is the inspiration for the film's title. And the sacred-secular avatar parallels are most pronounced at certain moments, as when the Na'vi try to save a dying Dr. Grace Augustine (played by Sigourney Weaver), the head of the humans' scientific avatar project, by permanently transferring (with the aid of their deities) her consciousness from her dying body into her new Na-vi body. That attempt fails, but with the help of the Tree of Souls Jake does succeed in permanently entering his genetically engineered Na'vi body through a now-seamless fusion of sacred and secular avatar processes.

Even though some artistic renderings fuse sacred and secular avatars, the latter are now most closely associated with the term *avatar*. For example, the onscreen visualization of one's gaming character or online self is commonly referred to as an *avatar*, which now is understood to mean "a self-object in a virtual environment." Nevertheless, the history is in reality reversed, with sacred avatars inspiring the idea of a secular digital avatar. In 1985, working for George Lucas's LucasArts, Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar created the video game *Habitat*,⁶ the first attempt at a large-scale commercial graphical virtual world and what is considered the precursor of today's massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs, or simply MMOs for

short) such as *World of Warcraft*.⁷ In *Habitat*, Farmer and Morningstar improvised the term *avatar* to refer to the digital representation of a character, the first instance of such usage. But the inspiration for this was Hinduism. In the Hindu religion, *avatar*, a Sanskrit term, literally means “descent” or “incarnation.” And avatars most typically refer to the material incarnation or embodiment of a deity on earth. The most famous Hindu avatars are the Dashavatars—literally, the “ten avatars,” referring to the Hindu god Vishnu’s ten forms, which this deity took at various times to restore earthly and cosmic order (see plates 1–10). These included the animal-based Vishnu avatars Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), and Narasimha (lion), as well as other powerful deities such as Rama, Krishna, and Buddha (though scholars often do not count the Buddha a god).⁸ Hinduism, like Eastern spirituality more generally, had been popular in California since the 1960s, closely connected to hippie counterculture, rock ’n’ roll, and spiritual experimentation. The Beatles, for example, met the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967, from whom they learned transcendental meditation, propelling transcendental meditation and Hinduism to popularity in the West. Farmer and Morningstar, working in California and inspired by the idea of spiritual “alters,” deemed *avatars* the in-game character vehicles through which players entered their *Habitat* game-world. In their reasoning, just as heavenly Hindu gods incarnate into human avatars to battle demons, so might video-game players, godlike in their powers in scaled down video-game worlds, become embodied in technological second-self avatars to defeat virtual monsters.⁹

Count Zero is the second novel in Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy, which is credited with solidifying and popularizing the cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction—stories set in typically dystopian near-futures, with emphases on street-smart characters, technology, and evil corporations often fomenting social disorder, or, as Bruce Sterling frames it, a combination of low life and high tech.¹⁰ Just a few years after *Count Zero*, in 1992, Neal Stephenson published the popular cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*,¹¹ another book I enjoyed in graduate school. The story features Hiro Protagonist, a hacker and pizza deliveryman, whose “avatar” in the computer-generated “metaverse”—unlike Gibson, Stephenson explicitly used the term *avatar*—is a sword-wielding, black-garbed samurai. In terms of historical sequence, it is of interest that Cameron’s eighty-page treatment for the film *Avatar* was written in 1994, just a few years following the publication of *Snow Crash*. These were followed by an eventual avalanche of fictional works featuring avatars, even if all of



PLATE I. Vishnu's fish avatar, Matsya. This is Vishnu's first of ten primary avatars, or Dashavatara—literally, “ten avatars or incarnations.” From Maurice Thomas's “Indian Antiquities; or, Dissertations Relative to the Ancient Geographical Divisions.” London, England, 1806. British Library.



PLATE 2. Vishnu's second avatar, as a tortoise, Kurma. From "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk." Punjab Hill, Mandi, India, c. 1780-90. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin N. Haas, 1977.



PLATE 3. To restore cosmic order, Vishnu descends to earth as Varaha, the Boar, his third avatar. From "Vishnu as Varaha, the Boar Avatar, Slays Banasur, A Demon General: Page from an Unknown Manuscript." Punjab Hills, Guler, c. 1800. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Jeffrey Paley, 1974.

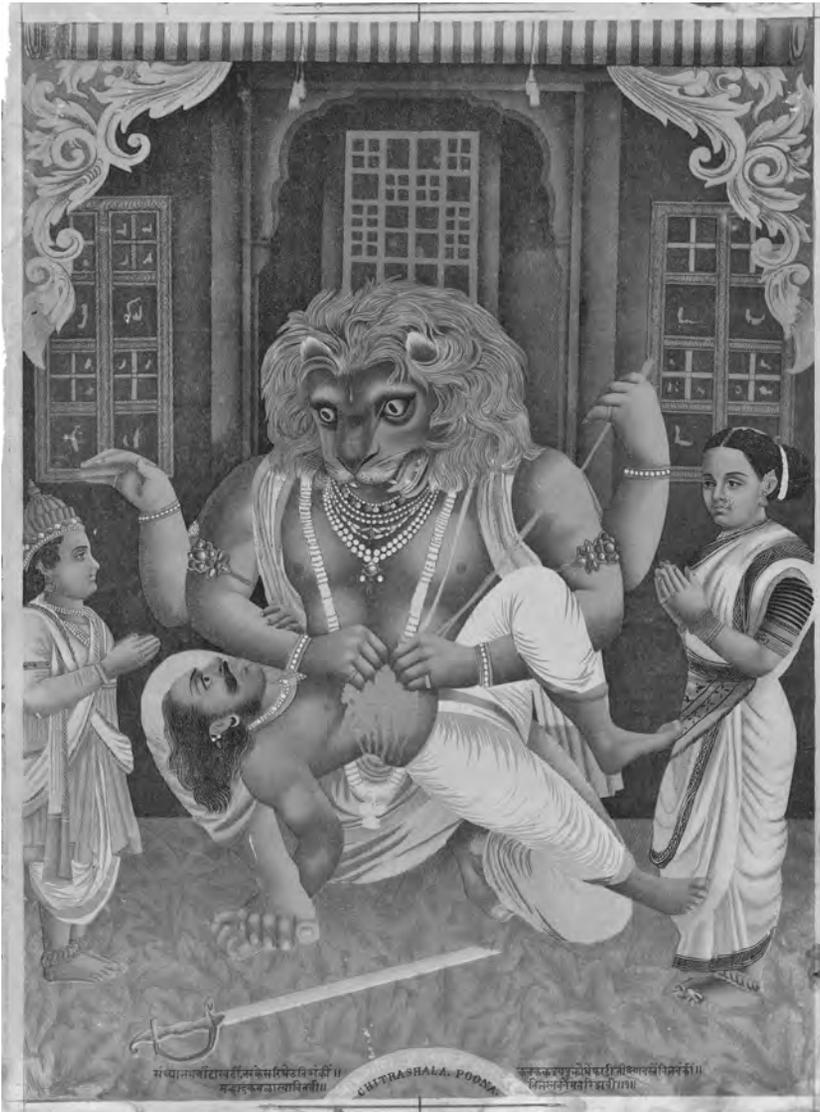


PLATE 4. Vishnu's fourth avatar, Narasimha, the man-lion, disbowels a demon king. From "Narasimha." Pune, Maharashtra, India, 1886. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Peter Louis and Chandru Ramchandani Gift, 2018.

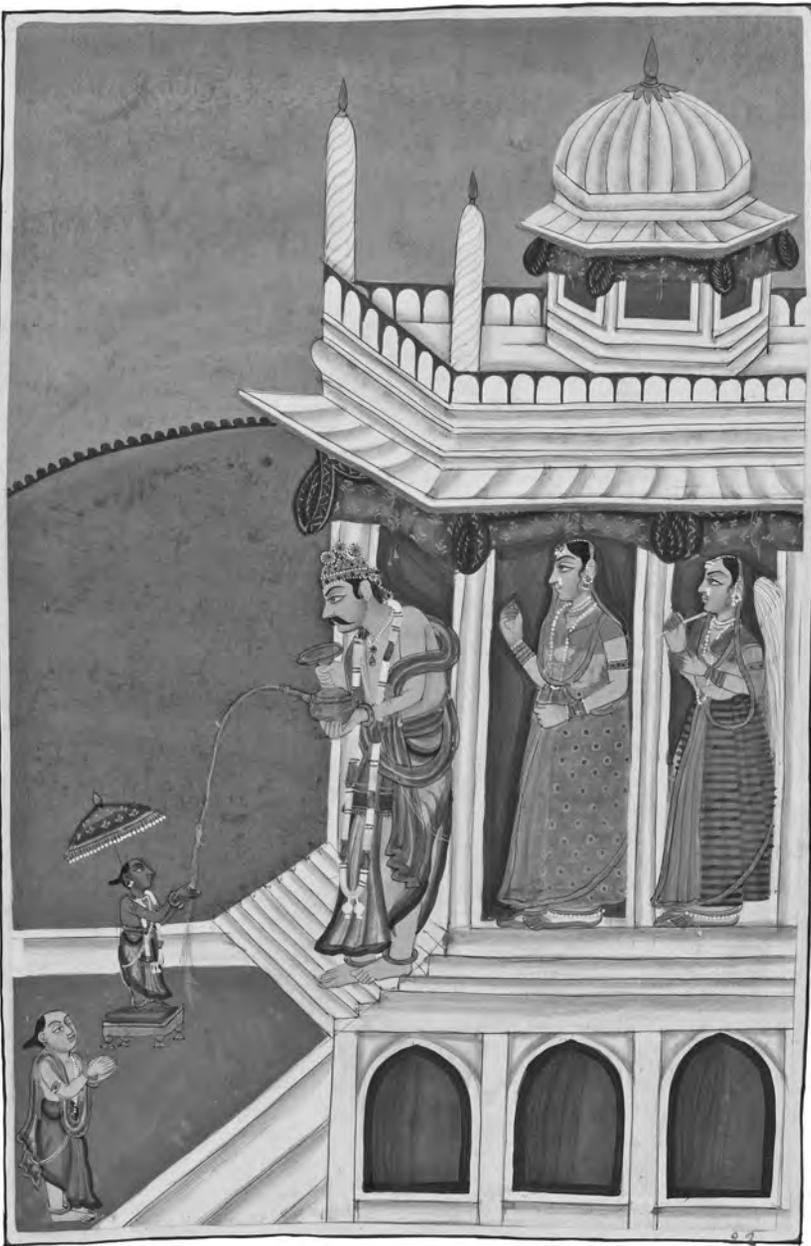


PLATE 5. Vishnu's fifth avatar, Vamana, the dwarf. From "Vamana (incarnatie van Vishnu also dwerg)." Anonymous, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, 1825-1875. Rijksmuseum. Gift of P. Formijne, Amsterdam, 1993.



PLATE 6. Vishnu's sixth avatar form, Parashurama, lit., "Rama with an axe." From "Parasurama (incarnatie van Vishnu als Rama-met-een-bijl)." Anonymous, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, 1825–1875. Rijksmuseum. Gift of P. Formijne, Amsterdam, 1993.



PLATE 7. From the concluding scene of the Ramayana epic, Vishnu as Rama, his seventh form, restores order and benign governance to the world, accompanied by his family, priest, and a kneeling Hanuman, his monkey-general. From "Uttara Rama Charitra, The Assembly of Rama." India, undated, c. 1910. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mark Baron and Elise Boisanté, 2015.



Printed at the Choro Bagan Art Studio.

কৃষ্ণের দমন কালীয় দমন

24, Bhoolun Bana, 7a Lane, Calcutta

PLATE 8. Vishnu as Krishna, his eighth form, triumphs over a river snake-king (nagaraja) who has been poisoning the waters of the Yamuna River where the cowherd maidens (gopis) bathe, while the snake-king's wives (nagini) plead with Krishna to spare their husband's life. From "Krishna subduing Kaliya." Calcutta, West Bengal, India, 1885–95. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Barbara and David Kipper Gift, 2021.

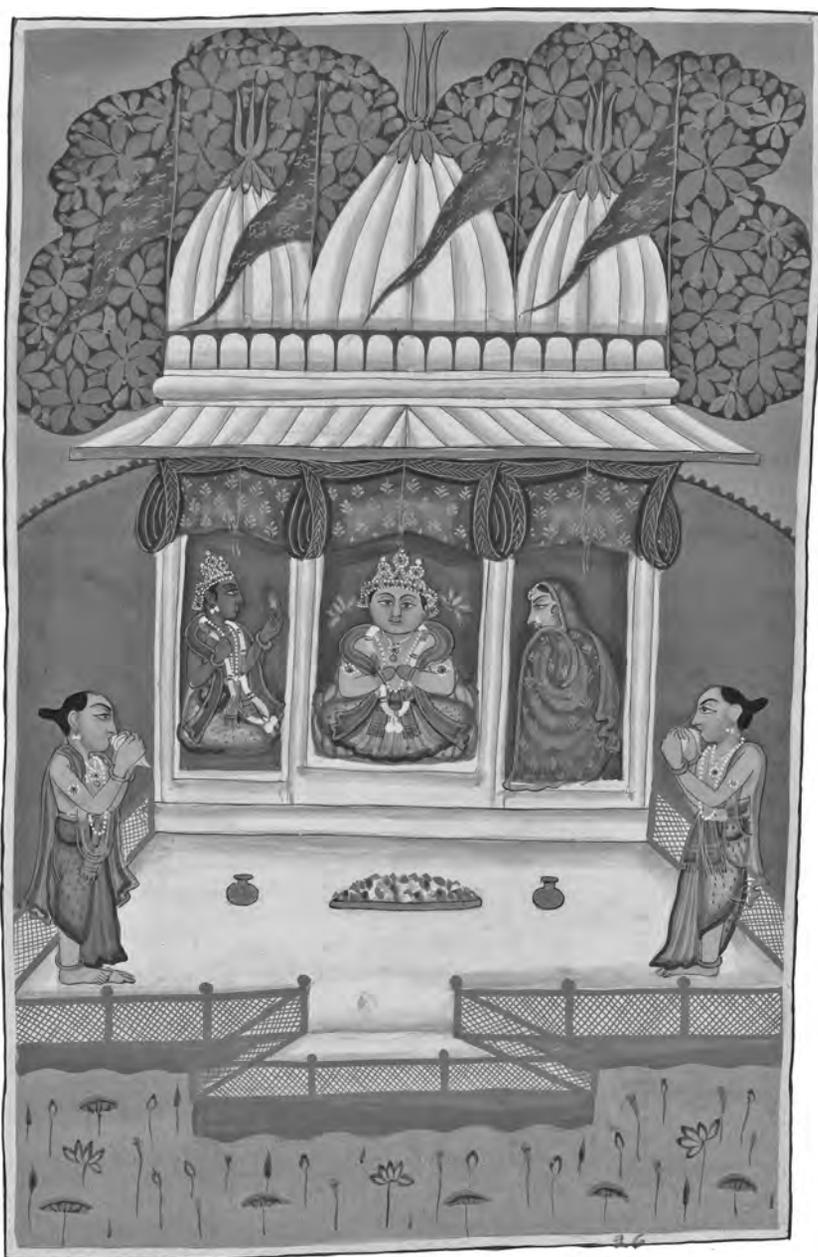


PLATE 9. Vishnu's ninth avatar, as the Buddha. From "Boeddha als een incarnatie (avatara) van Vishnu." Anonymous, Jaipur, 1825-1875. Rijksmuseum. Gift of P. Formijne, Amsterdam, 1993.



PLATE 10. Vishnu's final form and tenth incarnation, Kalki, who, typically portrayed as a white horse or a warrior on a white horse, will end the age of evil (Kali Yuga) and usher in a new age of truth and righteousness (Satya Yuga). From "Future Incarnation of Vishnu." Basohli, Jammu, India, c. 1700–1710. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, 1991.

them did not explicitly refer to computer-generated second selves as *avatars*. Among the most notable and influential is the 1999 film *The Matrix*¹², which I viewed the year it was released, two years after completing my PhD.

One notable feature of many technologically facilitated avatar stories is their explicit merging of sacred and secular processes. I point to this earlier in the discussion of *Count Zero* and the film *Avatar*. But in *Snow Crash*, we also find religious themes alongside the technological ones. In its fictional universe, the Semitic goddess Asherah takes form in a computer virus; the Sumerian god Enki creates another computer virus that causes all humanity to speak different languages, as protection against Asherah's attacks and influence; and a religious organization, the Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates, distributes Asherah's virus in the form of an addictive drug and via infected blood to establish control over the consciousness of the drug's users. Reader's might also recall that *The Matrix*'s Neo is described as "The One"—an explicit messiah reference or God's avatar in Hindu terminology. This equation makes sense when one thinks of the godlike powers Neo exerts in the matrix's digital reality.

This is to say that we now think of avatars as second selves found primarily in video-game worlds, given the way that the term *avatar* is now commonly used in those and other internet and virtual-world contexts. But as the examples here drawn from fiction show, a sacred history and concept of avatars animates the now-common secular usages. One of the main tasks of this book is to draw out and explore more explicitly these sacred/secular avatar parallels, in order to clarify foundational processes underlying human psychosocial functioning and well-being. I have used these examples from popular culture in part to better draw readers into my thinking on avatars. But the fictional examples are also relevant in this context in their own right, in the way that imagined realities such as these allow us to transport ourselves into alternative spaces and bodies. Fiction itself, then, is also informed by avatar principles, an idea that readers might keep in mind over the course of this book.

AVATARS AS VEHICLES OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION IN SPIRIT RELIGIONS AND VIDEO GAMES

I use the parallel between sacred and secular avatars to explore the role that symbolic second selves—*avatars*—can play in regulating human well-being. I am an anthropologist who studies both religion and new technology. In the first case, I have written, for example, on spirit possession in India, and am