Multimodal Framework for Enhancing RPG Playfulness through Avatar Acting Affordances

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The ludology versus narratology debate of the mid-2000s (Frasca 2004, Murray 2005, Kokonis 2014, Kapell 2016) was symptomatic of a tension between types of play in video games that featured both storytelling and gaming. Play as a verb, indicating competitive gaming challenges from the system or other human players, has a very different history and dynamic than play as a noun that indicates a narrative screenplay or script. One is procedure-based and skills-oriented with a heritage from tabletop board games and sports while the other is literary-based and spectator-oriented with a lineage from theatre poetics and cinema. These two types of play are also associated with different types of player affect, challenging game play may induce a state of flow (Chen 2007) while an engaging story arc can create narrative immersion (Sunderland 2019), which have overlapping aesthetics like loss of self and time-distortion, but one is active, nonlinear, and perceptual while the other is passive, linear, and cognitive. Both types of play and player affects are essential for popular AAA cinematic transmedia RPG franchises like Star Wars, Tomb Raider, Lord of the Rings, Spider Man, Walking Dead, and many others, to the point where the so-called debate faded away but the tension remained. Focus has since shifted to analyzing how well these two types of play align or don't align within player experience, with ludo-narrative dissonance (Hocking 2007) characterizing logical gaps between narrative and competitive play in some RPGs (Heinz et al. 2019). But since the player experience is always mediated through character role play in such games, avatar affordances for performing characters should be considered a third type of play. In this paper I propose that play-acting a character role in games should be studied separately from scripted narrative and competitive gaming, because figurative spectacle has a heritage from the artistic practices of acting, puppetry, and animation that fall under performing arts studies.

Avatar affordances should draw from intercultural performing arts studies on pre-expressive scenic liveness (Barba 1991), and participatory theatre concepts such as Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed "spect-actor" and "joker" acting play for exploring empathic drama (Boal 1992, Maraffi 2022), as well as from improvised live action role play (LARP) in tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons (Jonnson et al. 2006). Role play can support gameplay and screenplay through player expressiveness and style, which requires the design of avatar affordances that allow for performative customization of character form, abilities, dialogue, and actions. Narrative structure and competitive dynamics should support performative style preferences in a

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dramatic mise-en-scene, so that players have a variety of directed but expressive choices for improvising their avatar interactions. This performatology approach to avatar design informed the development of my SGRplay (pronounced "sugar"+"play") framework that analyzes three distinct types of play (Screenplay, Gameplay, Roleplay) corresponding to the narrative, competitive, and performative affordances in RPGs. My multimodal play framework aligns with and critically addresses issues of other tri-partite frameworks like the popular MDA (Hunicke et al. 2004), performing arts influenced frameworks that incorporate text/staging/performance (Fernandez-Vara 2009), and transmedia world-building frameworks like mythos/topos/ethos (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). I also draw from play studies that decompose structure from style (Hecker 2008), like Upton's horizons of action/intent for anticipatory play (Upton 2015), and previous work on stage magic principles used to create world-building and body illusions in room-scale VR experiences (Maraffi 2021). My framework seeks to address claims that gamers are not performers (Kania 2018) by showing how avatar acting affordances are increasing in many RPG games.

I taught my SGRplay framework in both undergraduate and graduate game studies and design courses from 2019-2021 at Florida Atlantic University. Students filled out a survey of thirty questions to evaluate the multimodal play affordances of any video game, with each play type covered by ten questions, and then they calculated the results as a 3-tuple value representing the SGR percentages normalized to a value of 1 (see Figure 1). Playfulness factor was defined as "fullness of play" or maximizing and harmonizing all three play types (.33, .33, .33), which plotted towards the center of a Venn diagram (see Figure 2). Questions were refined to separate the performative from the narrative and competitive features by focusing on spect-actor role play improvisation and figurative spectacle not dictated through either the scripted storyline or gameplay challenges, and which allowed for performative choices influenced by player preferences and style. In many fantasy RPGs like Assassins Creed Odyssey (Ubisoft 2018) or Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Productions 2020), a player can gain different types of skill points, weapons, and armor-costumes that can be assigned to their avatar to enhance preferred fighting styles, such as stealth assassinations, ranged attacks, or melee combat. Where the script may require a fight to advance the story and levelling up may require defeating an enemy NPC, the avatar fighting style and character blocking in the scene is improvised through player avatar performance. Other games may have dialogue choices that NPCs remember, such as in The Walking Dead episodes (Telltale Games 2012), or move the character towards a hero or rogue classification in the game world such as in the Mass Effect trilogy (Bioware 2010-2012).

Using the SGRplay framework to evaluate the performative features of an RPG experience alongside the narrative and game aspects supports a performatology approach to game studies (Maraffi and Jhala 2011). This approach has the potential to create a better understanding of players as spect-actors, and promote robust multimodal design of RPG interaction by factoring in avatar acting affordances. While this framework is applicable to any RPG where the player manipulates a character, a room-scale VR game like the episodic Vader Immortal series (Disney Interactive 2019) may be the ideal application, where avatar hand and prop manipulation simulates embodied performance with life-sized NPCs on a 360 virtual stage. Future work will include refining and automating the SGRplay questionnaire to crowdsource more robust game data online, while continuously updating the Venn positions on a web site to better visualize how RPGs cluster in this multimodal play space.

Game:___Vader Immortal_____ **Year Released**:_____2019_____

SGRplay Survey: rank questions, and then calculate the Playfulness Factor to plot on the Venn diagram.

I. **Screenplay (S)** Rank *narrative* play features 1-10 (1 = very little, 5 = average, 10 = very much):

1.	Does the game have a linear or branching storyline?	1.__10___
2.	Is there a narrator or narration (text or voice), possibly by the main character?	2.__5___
3.	Does the game have dialogue choices?	3.__1___
4.	Are there quests that support the narrative or take you on a new storyline?	4.__4___
5.	Does the game have cut scenes or cinematics throughout?	5.__8___
6.	Does the game require reading or writing (manuscripts, clues, backstory)?	6.__3___
7.	Are there in-game reference to literature, cinema, or theatre?	7.__5___
8.	Does game interaction further the storyline or dramatic arc?	8.__10__
9.	Do the game characters have a backstory that is revealed?	9.__3___
10.	Is the game part of a greater transmedia storyline or universe?	10.__10__

Add 1-10 to total (1-100), and then divide by 10 to get **(S) value**:__5.9____

II. **Gameplay (G)** Rank *competitive* play features 1-10 (1 = very little, 5 = average, 10 = very much):

1.	Does the game system keep track of a score, lives, or health?	1.__3___
2.	Do you play on teams or join co-op squads of players (human or NPCs)?	2.__6___
3.	Does the game result in winners and losers (human-human or human-computer)?	3.__5___
4.	Does the game feature hard play or bosses that result in a flow-zone experience?	4.__5___
5.	Does play simulate games of chance (possibly betting- gambling) or finding treasure?	5.__7___
6.	Does game challenges require thinking ahead or strategically?	6.__1___
7.	Is pattern matching, resource management or puzzle solving a core part of the game?	7.__4___
8.	Does the game give out rewards or badges as you progress?	8.__1___
9.	Does game play simulate physical tests (fighting, racing, shooting, jumping, etc)?	9.__10_
10.	Are there any timed challenges in the game where you race against a clock?	10.__3___

Add 1-10 to total (1-100), and then divide by 10 to get **(G) value**:__4.5____

III. **Roleplay (R)** Rank *performative* play features 1-10 (1 = very little, 5 = average, 10 = very much):

1.	Do you play or perform a fictional character in the game world?	1.__10__
2.	Does the game give skill points you can assign to various character abilities?	2.__1___
3.	Can you initially customize your avatar or change costume later in the game?	3.__5___
4.	Can you see your avatar's body (arms or more) in the game?	4.__5___
5.	Does game choices have moral consequences for your character?	5.__5___
6.	Can you improvise challenges and level-up in multiple ways (warrior, mage, etc)?	6.__3__
7.	Do you ever identify with the avatar when playing (like you did the actions)?	7.__10__
8.	Can you go off script and explore the game world in your own time?	8.__3___
9.	Does the game require gestures by the character that are not everyday actions?	9.__10__
10.	Can you develop a unique play style in the game that reflects your interests?	10.__4___

Add 1-10 to total (1-100), and then divide by 10 to get **(R) value**:___5.6___

IV. Add individual play totals **(S+G+R)** for the **SGR Total Value (max 30)**:__16___. Then calculate

Game Playfulness Factor: [(S/SGR), (G/SGR), (R/SGR)] = **[S(0.368), G(0.281), R(0.350)]** = 1.0

Figure 1: Survey questions for isolating three types of play to calculate a playfulness factor.

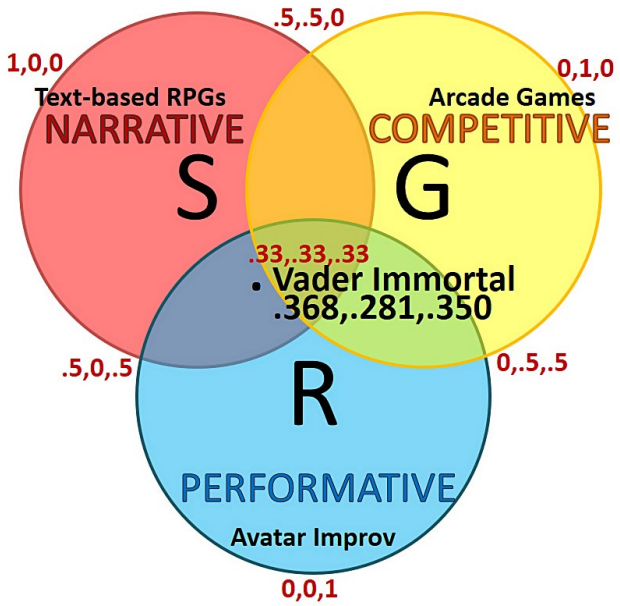

Figure 2: Plotting the SGR values on a Venn diagram, with more playful or balanced RPG experiences tending towards the center.

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