

# Flesh, Plastic, Stone: The Pleasure of Recontextualised Character Models

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## INTRODUCTION

Videogame characters are complex entities, acting as both 'fictional beings' and 'game pieces' (Schroter and Thon 2014, 40). This paper analyses moments where videogames intentionally undercut their own fictions by inviting players to see characters not as dynamic, lifelike agents, but as inert digital objects. Seeking to understand the particular quality of enjoyment to be derived from such moments, it joins discussions about forms of pleasure and comedy native to games (e.g. Patterson 2020; Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022), while also venturing some broader observations about gamework, the ontology of digital games and the medium's cultural status.

## GIVING THE GAME AWAY

Towards the end of *Shenmue II* (Sega AM2 2001), protagonist Ryo Hazuki pursues villain Dou-Niu to a penthouse atop a Kowloon towerblock. Having finally reached the top floor, players are confronted with an enormous marble bust of their adversary (see Figure 1). Diegetically, the bust foregrounds both Dou-Niu's narcissism and his daunting bulk. But the moment also functions as a metaleptic joke, riffing on the fact that this is not, in reality, a work of sculpture, but the same 3D model, scaled up and retextured (see Figure 2).

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**Figure 1.** The bust of Dou-Niu



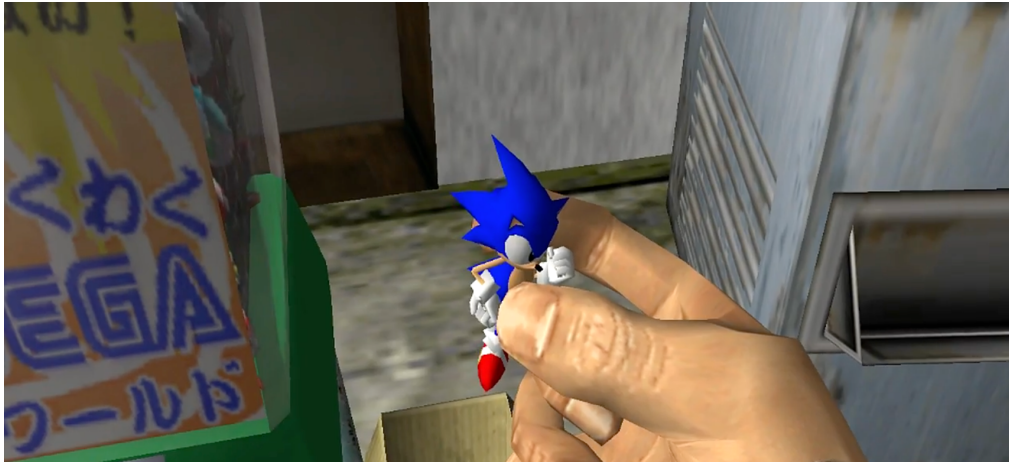
**Figure 2.** Shot of Dou-Niu from an in-engine cutscene

What makes such moments pleasing? One way to answer this question would be through theories of comedy. Henri Bergson (1984 [1900]), whose work has been a key reference point for theorists of videogame comedy (e.g. Jones 2016), famously proposed that laughter functions to reinscribe the distinction between living beings and inert matter, pleurably dispelling our unease at the human tendency to lapse into states of quasi-machinic inflexibility. If this moment is a joke, in other words, it may be a joke at the expense of the kind of player literal-minded enough to mistake a digital puppet for a living person. Yet this is not the only way to read such moments. We might equally see them as playfully mediating other anxieties, anxieties regarding the cultural status of games, the precarious nature of gamework, and the terms on which games represent reality.

## **ARTWORK OR PLAYTHING?**

One question these moments pose is whether it makes more sense to see videogames as commodified playthings or serious artworks. In games like *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005), *Metal Gear Solid 2* (Konami Computer entertainment Japan 2001) or *Gungrave* (Red Entertainment 2002), character models are reframed as toys. In *Nier* (Cavia 2010)

and *Data Mutations* (AAA Collective 2017) they become sculptures or museum exhibits. The *Shenmue* series takes both approaches; if Dou-Niu's statue turns a character model into an artwork, some of the game's *gachapon* figurines appear to be models recycled from earlier Sega games (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The Sonic *gachapon* toy in *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 2000) is apparently a repurposed character model from *Sonic the Fighters* (Sega AM2, 1996)

It can be hard to know which way the irony cuts in such instances. Are the developers endorsing or rejecting comparisons between games and toys? Are they emphasizing the artistry of 3D modelers, or admitting how much harder it is to create a sculpture of a living sitter than it is to copy and edit a polygonal mesh? From one angle, these moments function as reminders of just how vulnerable gameworkers are to forms of technological development and deskilling that mean yesterday's cutting-edge assets can quickly come to look like crude juvenilia or dusty museum pieces.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

Within *Shenmue's* fiction, Ryo's hands and the *gachapon* toys occupy different ontological registers. In reality, however, both are texture-mapped polygonal meshes, fundamentally equivalent from the console's point of view. By juxtaposing them the game underscores gaming's pursuit of graphical photorealism, while also gesturing toward the nature of digital objects. As Jacob Gaboury writes, 'while we may believe certain properties "belong" to certain objects... with computer graphics... their unique properties may be alienated and applied to any other object' (2021, 88). With the click of a cursor flesh becomes marble; adults are shrunk to the size of action figures; solid bodies become limp ragdolls.

Under the regime of object-oriented programming, moreover, every piece of software is essentially a collection of 'modular, reusable objects... structured and defined as classes with instances' (Gaboury 2021, 129). In the case of a videogame, many of these *virtual* objects will be representations of *physical* objects – items, vehicles, characters' bodies. In play, these assets are arranged into lifelike tableaux and subjected to (piecemeal, highly selective) simulations of physical laws. Behind the scenes, however, they exist within the game's database like items in a collector's cabinet: 'a finite collection of elements', outside 'the realm of temporality' and potentially subject to an 'infinite' play of 'combination' and recombination (Stewart 1993, 151-2).

By integrating character models into intra-diegetic museums, toyshops and trophy cabinets (or extra-diegetic model viewers, menus and inventories) the moments I am interested in surface this database logic. Doing so opens up certain forms of pleasure even as it forecloses others. Rendering characters immobile, these recontextualisations make 3D models available for aesthetic appreciation and voyeuristic scrutiny. Yet they may also compromise the ‘erotic’ frisson that Christopher B. Patterson sees as emerging from the tension between the player’s desire to stop and look and the ludic pressures that typically keep them moving (2020, 176-9).

## CONCLUSION

There are many ways to read games’ recontextualizations of character models as toys or sculptures. Playfully puncturing the onscreen fiction, these moments invite us to take pleasure in looking rather than acting, while jokingly interpellating a player who understands enough about the medium’s workings to find them charming (reinforcing, by so doing, a certain vision of who games are for). But, like much humor, these moments also give cathartic vent to nagging anxieties and troubling ambiguities. Surfacing tensions around the character of immersion, the precarious nature of gamework, the uncertain status of games as a cultural medium, and the costs of pursuing photorealism, they simultaneously invite us to laugh these tensions off, if only momentarily.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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