

# The Player Character as Performing Object

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## ABSTRACT

Engagement in games is manifest through a player's representation of action in game. The main mechanism for this engagement is through direct control of a player character. This control mechanism can be seen as a form of puppetry in which the player manipulates a game figure ranging from the abstract to the super-human. Through a focus on the player character, this paper posits that it may be productive to conceive of the player focus as one akin to that of the puppet artist, or puppeteer, and discusses one approach to unpacking the abstract sign systems of game-play in this setting.

The player character acts out the movements of the player and marks her progression in game. A doubling happens in this action, between the physical movements on the controller and the representation of agency on screen. As a player I act, then watch the results of my action on screen, always already audience to my own play practice. One ongoing challenge for games studies is the framing of the relationship between the player and her player character. From a phenomenological perspective this has been conceived of as an instrumental extension into the game world [9, 18]. Using the 'binocular lens' [19] of performance analysis semiotic work is necessary to balance our sense of the improvisational act of digital game-play. The player binds to the lived experience of game-play through engagement with the sign systems at play in a specific gaming experience.

Puppetry has existed across world cultures, as entertainment, ritual and celebration, and broadly involves the animation of inanimate performing objects. The insertion of objects between the performer and the audience allows for different, and deeper, levels of signification than live actors alone can offer. Puppets consist a developed form of performing object, one that moves. The fascination with puppets reaches far back into history, revealing our yearning to play god, to exert domination over our human experience. Similarly, the seductive illusion of control plays a central part in the appeal inherent in digital game form. In the modern setting much work on puppetry remains relatively hidden across a broad spectrum of fields, from

computer science to anthropology. However performance theorists such as Tillis [20] introduce a broad semiotics to conceive of the multitude of ways we engage with puppetry. Other theorists have engaged in embracing digital and mediated puppet form, not least in games studies in areas such as machinima and alternate-reality gaming, yet attention has been slow in broadening the application of puppet theory to player characters. Tillis [20] offers a focus on signs of design, movement and speech as core to building an aesthetic of the puppet. For the player character signifiers of affect and control require addition to any such tentative schema. This paper argues that the metaphor of the puppet offers a useful frame for the central figure of our game-play focus by allowing for a kind of 'double-vision' [20] that enables a player character to be seen in two ways at once, 'as a perceived object and as an imagined life' [20].

Using the tools of performance analysis this paper addresses the liminal relationship between player and player character in the flux of play. The intention is to offer an explication of the range of methods, whether stylistic, instrumental or kinesthetic, deployed in this relationship to engage the player in the act of play.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

player character, game puppets, puppetry, performing objects, performance theory, game studies, theatre semiotics

## INTRODUCTION

"Performing objects... are *material images of humans, animals or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance.*" [15]

"The fascination with puppets... reaches so far back into human history that it must be regarded as a response to a fundamental need... it reveals a yearning to play god, to master life." [17]

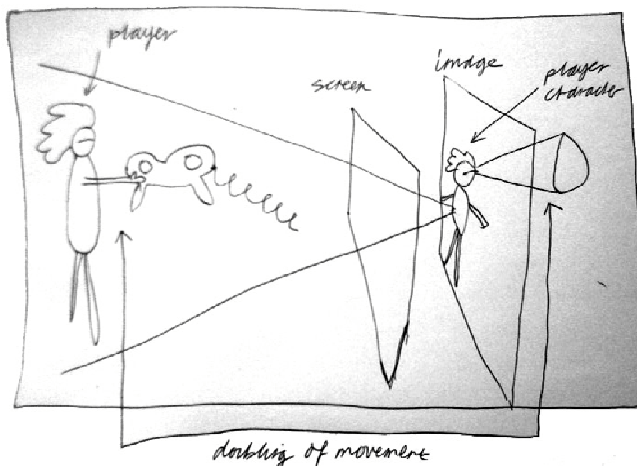
"Plato's allegory is more than a historical curiosity... for he identifies, however tentatively, two of the major concerns of the semiotic study of puppetry.

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First, he describes the enthralling illusion of performance, that marvellous instant during which we integrate our perceptions of sometimes disparate phenomena from different sensory channels... Plato's second important realization is that the shadows are, as we have said, twice removed from natural things: they are cast by humanly shaped artifacts," [15]

The celebration of the videogame as a modern performance form [2, 5, 24] prioritises gameplay experience over and above any isolated focus on either the players or the games themselves. This framing of gameplay as performance positions digital gameplay within a long history of cultural significance and signification that allows us to draw on a rich theoretical heritage whilst celebrating the unique aspects of digital game form. Closely connected, play becomes performance via the game screen. Digital gaming always involves a screen, producing a doubling in which actions on a controller are represented back on screen. Thus the player is always audience to her own play act. She progresses through a given game always watching the results of her actions on a screen that shows an ever-changing theatrical performance built by code and run by numbers.



**Figure 1:** The doubling of player action on controller and player character movement on screen

The primary signifier of action in game form is the game figure consisting the representation of player agency in game. Rune Klevjer's 2006 thesis presents a useful distinction between game avatars (conceived of 'in terms of what kind of fictional embodiment and fictional participation they enable' [10]) and player characters (broadly 'associated with a subject that acts and thinks within a *diegetic* world' [10]). My interest in this paper is

in the player character although many of my claims apply to game avatars; to this end I broaden my use of the term player character for the interest of this paper.

## APPROACHES

The main mechanism for gameplay is through direct control of a player character through a game controller. From cursor to fully animated game figure the player representation is always foregrounded on screen gesturing to the ongoing act of play. This deictic function of the player character helps the player negotiate game space in terms of how and where she can move. Gameplay consists, on the part of the player, a type of semiotic analysis, in and of itself, in which the player actively engages in understanding the specific sign systems exhibited in the particular game that she is playing.

One ongoing challenge for games studies is the framing of the relationship between the player and her player character. This ambiguous connection has been conceived of from a range of perspectives from the sociological to the psychoanalytical to the metaphysical. Sociological studies of player characters tend to focus on relationships built in multi-player games between groups and out of game contextual analyses of players. There remains much work to be done on how gaming re-codes social conventions and how groups function in game form but this broad field is less useful for unpacking the specificity of a player-to-player character connection. From a psychoanalytic perspective, theorists [3, 16] have made use of Freud and Lacan to conceive of the interplay between player and player character as example of doubling, mirroring and the uncanny thus weighting the relationship towards one of deeper psychic signification. More widely a metaphysical approach can be seen in areas such as the reality/virtuality debate around games and work on the ontological status of games makes a move to philosophical ground played out at conferences such as the annual Philosophy of Computer Games (<http://gameconference2009.wordpress.com/>) event.

Theorists have argued the phenomenal and signified relationship between the player and her player character centres around themes as diverse as instrumental extension [9, 18], identity play [23], ludic and dramatic function and some even postulate that our gaming bodies consist some form of post modern virtual life [4, 6]. Semiotic work on game characters [2, 13] points to a duality of their address to heroic archetypes at the same time as their function providing instrumental engagement with game mechanics. Industry designers refer to the necessity of the player character as representing a kind of "every man"<sup>1</sup> to enable

<sup>1</sup> "We tried not to give him [Snake] too much character because we want players to be able to take on his role. Snake isn't like a movie star. He's not someone you watch,

the player to fully and functionality inhabit their game prostheses whilst players refer to memorably iconic characters as central to the pleasure of their play practice from Lara to Mario and onwards. A multitude of terms are interchangeably applied to typify player characters: from customisable avatars often self-built to represent an actual player to iconic characters [22] to game actors acknowledged as identifiably separate from the player. This spectrum can be conceived of from another perspective. This paper suggests that the relationship can be usefully seen from a control aesthetic as a form of puppetry in which the player manipulates a player character ranging from the abstract to the super-human. Through a focus in this paper on the third-person player character, I posit that it may be productive to conceive of the player as akin to the puppet artist, or puppeteer, and discuss an approach to unpacking the abstract sign systems of game-play in this setting. This paper focuses primarily on one of the elementary signification systems of puppets, that of movement.

Dependent on the camera and genre of a particular game the player character (PC) is represented on screen in a number of ways; from first-person in which the player sees through the eyes of the player character (and thus is closely bound to the PC) to third-person where the player has a foregrounded view of the player character in situ (often consisting a customisable PoV). Many contemporary games offer the player both camera and PC control thereby extending the game puppet to include the co-joined PC and camera. Different cameras offer different senses of proximity to the player character and thus consist a modality for games expression. A detailed discussion of the game camera and its relationship to player character and games is beyond the scope of this paper but I point to the work of Atkins [1] and Nitsche [14] as a starting point for the issues at hand.

## PUPPET CONTROLS

The cybernetic loop of digital gameplay involves sensate narrowing at various points, particularly in the restrictions of the controller in both control and feedback possibilities. The disconnect between our lived and game experience remains vast and necessarily so given the almost infinite range of human experience contra the possibility spaces of games created by designers. The new control mechanics offered by the Wii, Natal, etc. do not address this gap; merely offer the potential to extend it. What remains interesting is how games maintain their expressive range and visceral impact despite this narrowing, and how the player rapidly adjusts to often counter-intuitive control mechanics in order to progress the game. There is an obvious parallel between the physical constraints of the

game controller and the fixed control mechanisms of puppetry.



**Figure 2:** Player using controller and puppeteer controlling puppets

Puppetry can be seen as "the manipulation of inanimate figures by human hands in dramatic performance" [15] and has existed as a popular form of cultural expression throughout the world from ancient times. The insertion of objects between the performer and the audience allows for different, and deeper, levels of signification than live actors alone can offer. The use of these objects frees the performer from constraint, whether physical (through gravity or corporeal limitation) or conceptual (through freedom from reality and manifest through direct control). Puppets consist a developed form of performing object, one that moves. In one of the most famous pieces on puppetry, Kleist's 1810 "On the Marionette Theatre" the narrator suggests that grace appears most apparent in "that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god." [9]. The fascination with puppets reaches far back into history, revealing our yearning to play god, to exert domination over our human experience.

Similarly, the seductive illusion of control plays a central part in the appeal inherent in digital game form. There is a paucity of academic study on puppetry, spread across the humanities, and rarely conceived through a theatrical frame. The most focused study of this field as theatrical sign system is sited in the work of The Prague School between

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he's someone you can step into the shoes of. Playing Snake gives gamers the chance to be a hero." [10]

1931 and 1943 who developed a wide-ranging theory of semiotics, applied to language, art forms and communication systems. Theorists like Petr Bogatyrev considered analysis of puppetry productive as a more explicit signifying system than the theatre of live actors. The rise of the digital returns academics to the consideration of these performing objects as metaphor for our extension through machines, "the creative energy that animates the images is the same - the impulse to create objects to act in our stead, objects through which we can project intensified, artistic, and often holy speech and action." [15]. In the modern setting much work on puppetry remains relatively hidden across a broad spectrum of fields, from computer science to anthropology. However performance theorists [21] introduce a broad semiotics to conceive of the multitude of ways we engage with puppetry. Tillis [20] offers a focus on signs of design, movement and speech as core to building an aesthetics of the puppet. For the player character signifiers of affect and control require addition to any such tentative schema.

Pre-dating notions of globalised industry; puppet theatre has survived in an ongoing discussion with specific geographical contexts; as ritual, then entertainment. Over time puppetry has evolved in different parts of the world in response to social and economic necessity whether it be pared down for traveling one-man shows like Punch or consisting extravagant spectacles like the ornate *opera dei pupi* of Southern Italy or the highly ritualised Japanese Bunraku. Form has fixed in areas that have elevated particular puppetry styles to that of legitimate art form rather than that of craft per se. In the more fluid forms that change over time and place it remains possible to trace common archetypes that re-surface time and again. For example, Punch stands as a British version of the trickster archetype evolved through puppet form directly from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Commedia Dell'Arte. As representation of the common man Punch, as puppet, has survived in a number of settings for a range of audiences. As games spread into broader cultural acceptance it will be interesting to see if and how games can respond and reflect specific cultural context in an ongoing diversification of form.

## PUPPET SEMIOTICS

"The important, immediate consequence of their status as signs of signs is that theatrical signs are almost always abbreviated, bearing only those marks and elements 'which are necessary for the given dramatic situation' (1976b: 39)" [15]

So in theatre, performing objects are always at least twice removed from their signified, for example, a puppet signifies an actor who signifies a theatrical role. In games, a player character signifies a player who signifies an instrumental role in the ongoing challenge of a fictional game world. As such all the components of a puppet, whether material or virtual are intentional signs, chosen

according to dramatic necessity. This points to a particular design approach, for example the use of techniques like exaggeration as aesthetic device applied to the design and development of puppets. These techniques, including those of caricature, exaggeration and amplification, are shared across forms of representative expression as a way to clearly and effectively communicate a dramatic moment. In games the production need for strict constraints in terms of asset production runs counter to the marketing rhetoric of excess often associated with games. Games use exaggeration throughout, from visual representation and movement to player role in game. Many games centre on player movement through game space constructing the player character as some type of action hero displaying enhanced capacity as the player progresses through the game.

The interest in digital puppets is not a new one and has been approached scientifically [8, 12] as a method for computer scientists to approach the creation of programmatic digital actors for use in simulations and software more broadly. In this setting puppetry refers to the control mechanisms developed to drive virtual characters for wide application. The general intent of this work is to extend the expressive range of digital puppets in the context of restrictive interfaces. From the theatrical perspective, technology has always been of interest to performance studies as it engages with the impact of mediation and digitality. Notions of the performing machine, automata and technology as performance tool circulate widely in performance discourse. Tillis' [20] proposed classification of new puppet form made possible by digital media production includes tangible puppets, virtual puppets and stop-action puppets. My contribution is my addition of game's player character. As always with technological extension new form augment possible experience rather than replace it. The evolution of puppet form in various cultural contexts has resulted in a wide range of control mechanics, from strings to rods to mechanical articulation to the code behaviours of modern game form.

"...there are striking similarities in the creation of computer graphics figures and puppets: the creation of both involves the construction of a figure imbued with articulation points that is then given surface design features." [20]

Once built, the mechanic that drives player characters responds to control schemes from the input device to trigger movement through game space. This movement is created from animations (made in repeatable loops), whether through key frames or motion capture, triggered to respond to specific key presses or jog controls. Generally this control can be seen as either gestural or movement related through use of animation paths to take a PC from one location to another. Due to the technical demands of calculating 3D worlds in movement in real-time the data budget assigned to PC's constrain the range of animations

on hand. The movement signatures are partly determined by convention (i.e. attack, die, etc) and partly by construction (i.e. run, jump, walk). These building blocks of dynamic player characters are pre-made and played-back during play as appropriate and thus consist a constrained gesture set. When effectively designed PC movement becomes part of an extended interface to gameplay in that it becomes intuitive to play practice. When poorly judged it can repetitively throw the player out of her play experience. It is arguable that it is indeed the 'figure'-ness of the PC that enables the player to initially bind with the game interface as we are intimately cued to read humanoid movement through space and time. Player character movement tends towards exaggeration where, for example, a jump can be realistic, arcade or platform-based: both of the latter consist of characteristics such as increased height and reduced gravity. This is known as amplification, and by triggering an extended range of interruptible movement through a single key press, represents another technique brought to bear in games to artificially signal responsiveness.

The techniques outlined above, amongst others, together with effective control mappings, invest the player character with exaggerated signs of life that enable the player to suspend disbelief and identify with the PC "as if" a relationship were possible at the same time as knowing that the PC is merely a game figure. The sign system of the puppet offers a useful frame for the central figure of our game-play focus by allowing this duality to enable a player character to be seen in two ways at once, "as a perceived object and as an imagined life" [20]. This dual address to a player's perception and imagination changes over time dependent on the gaming moment; when actively engaged in a particular game challenge the player character acts as central facilitator to game progress, in less frantic moments the player character acts as context provider through clues to the wider game setting. This experiential flux can be seen as a type of oscillation that maintains interest in the ongoing gameplay experience through direct address to human tendencies for identification.

"Juxtaposition of sign and reality is an oscillation between the two that heightens the aesthetic perception of the performance by making the performance a collaborative effort." [7]

## CONCLUSION

Like digital game form, puppet theatre can be situated as popular culture. The consideration of the puppet frees us from a historical drive to realism and builds a densely codified and condensed expressive form. The argument for game characters as puppet emphasizes that games are not real and stands in contradiction to contemporary discussions around games that drive towards the realism of the gaming experience. Indeed it is game form's theatricality, and therefore artificiality, that holds at least part of the

compulsion to play.

Application of puppet theory to player characters allows us to rationalise the dual address of the player character to the pragmatics of gameplay as well as to the human tendency towards personal identification with anthropomorphic figures. A key point in my argument is to emphasise the synthetic nature of the player character and to encourage the discussion around our in-game representations to deepen beyond their status as vehicles of our play practice without resorting to unnecessary discussions of realism.

The player binds to the lived experience of gameplay through engagement with the sign systems at play in a specific gaming experience. This is a live and improvised dramatic performance in which the player consists both puppet-master through her input control as well as audience through her screen gaze. The player character is a particular type of virtual puppet, one that moves within a specific game world, directed to a particular game objective, achieved through our skillful progression over time. The game puppet faces away from the player, a deictic marker in to the ever-changing game diorama.

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