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Thatgamecompany's emotional avatars: digital human connection through video game worlds

Thatgamecompany's emotional avatars: forging digital human connections through the worlds of video games

SUMMARY:

We preconceive the avatar as a kind of digital puppet that is usually customized to our taste and likeness to navigate a virtual environment through a screen. This discourse of creating digital identities usually focuses on the pillars of aesthetic customization and the search for visual realism. But what happens when we focus the experience on the emotional, on the human connections that they allow us to make? This research examines this concept through the company Thatgamecompany, being a specific and unique case, which explores the avatar from the emotional and aims to create an unforgettable impact on the player's experience, facilitating in its works anonymous encounters with other players and promoting collaboration between them through non-verbal communication. The player embodies in his characters the vulnerability and loneliness of the journey, inviting them to an inner search for their own meaning, following the path to the final objective of the game. Through beautiful landscapes, the inner journey of the player with his avatar allows to explore universal themes such as loss, hope and transcendence. Therefore, the analysis for this research focuses on how the elements of their games (design, narrative and mechanics) contribute to the creation of an emotionally meaningful experience, facilitating simple but unique human interrelations, dealing with universal themes through these digital characters, which are an extension of our own being.

KEYWORDS:

avatar, video games, Thatgamecompany, emotion, human connection.

ABSTRACT:

We preconceive the avatar as a kind of digital puppet that is usually customized to our liking and resemblance, to travel through a virtual environment through a screen. This discourse of creating digital identities usually focuses on the pillars of aesthetic personalization and the pursuit of visual realism. But what happens when we focus the experience on the emotional, on the human connections that it allows us to make? This research examines this concept through the company Thatgamecompany, being a specific and unique case, which explores the avatar from the emotional and aims to create an unforgettable impact on the player's experience, facilitating in its works anonymous encounters with other players and promoting collaboration between them through non-verbal communication. The player embodies in his characters the vulnerability and loneliness of the journey, inviting them to an inner search for their own meaning, traveling the path to the final objective of the game. Through beautiful landscapes, the player's inner journey with their avatar allows them to explore universal themes such as loss, hope and transcendence. Therefore, the analysis for this research focuses on how the elements of their games (design, narrative and mechanics) contribute to the creation of an emotionally significant experience, facilitating simple but unique human interrelationships, dealing with universal themes through said digital characters, which are an extension of our own being.

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1. Introduction

At the crossroads of art and technology, video games have emerged as a new art form capable of evoking deep and meaningful emotions. The Los Angeles-based development team, Thatgamecompany, stands out from the rest of the companies as the creator of evocative works where the minimalism of their proposals, far from being an aesthetic and functional characteristic, facilitates and provides a whole series of conditions for creating a deep emotional experience.



This research will explore how this design decision directly impacts the human connections that occur within their digital environments. How narrative, gameplay mechanics, and visual design combine to evoke universal emotions, creating a sense of community and support through anonymous interactions, even when there is no defined verbal communication.

Avatarity in video games is essential to understanding how players represent themselves in the virtual world and how they interact with others. Avatar creation and customization not only influences the individual player experience, but also has a significant impact on the social dynamics within the game. Research such as Trepte and Reinecke (2010) has shown that game competitiveness and player life satisfaction are factors that influence avatar choice and identification. In non-competitive games, players tend to create avatars similar to themselves, while in competitive games, they seek to differentiate themselves through personalization. This identification with the avatar is strongly related to enjoyment of the game.

game, since the greater the emotional connection the player has with his avatar, the greater his immersion in the game world and his satisfaction with the experience.

2. Methodology applied in research

This research is based on a bibliographic review of studies, theses and research articles related to avatarity in video games, making this study:

Special emphasis is placed on the work of Los Angeles-based company Thatgamecompany, which serves as a landmark in the medium, addressing the different avatar typologies found in the young video game industry. A qualitative analysis of Thatgamecompany's games, including their works *Flower* (2009), *Journey* (2012), and *Sky: Children of the Light* (2019), is conducted, examining how avatar design, narrative, and gameplay mechanics contribute to the creation of meaningful emotional experiences and human connection in virtual space.

The research focused on identifying and analyzing the key elements that characterize avatarity in Thatgamecompany's games. How the minimalist aesthetics of avatars, non-verbal communication, the evocation of universal emotions, and the creation of a sense of community among players create unique experiences that transcend the barrier of the screen. A descriptive and analytical methodology was used to examine how these elements interrelate and contribute to the overall player experience, relying on reviews of interviews conducted with Jenova Chen, founder of the company, to gain a deeper understanding of the design philosophy and goals behind the creation of their games.

The combination of these parameters in the methodology has allowed us to have a comprehensive understanding of avatarity in Thatgamecompany's games, as well as its impact on human connection in the virtual environment.

3. The concept of avatarity: Identity and representation in virtual worlds



Huizinga (2012) points out that traditional forms of play allow us to explore and understand our own subjectivity, the ways in which we construct the world and our survival in it. This concept of play could also be applied to video games, since their innate capacity to generate intense and memorable emotions is linked to the very nature of the activity of playing and to interaction as a human phenomenon.

We could define avatarity then as the representation of the player within the videogame, not only as a virtualized image of his physical appearance, but of his own functional and fictional identity in a digital character. The player assumes a role to be virtually embodied, which may or may not coincide with his own reality, but respecting a whole series of regulations or parameters defined by the ludic-fictional world (Planells, 2015).

To understand the concept, we will use as an example Navarro's thesis (2016), which analyzes avatarity based on eleven main factors, thus allowing us to obtain a complete vision of how this construct is represented within the game world.

First, it is necessary to define how many controllable subjects the player has access to and how they alternate. This alternation can be predetermined or at the user's discretion depending on the section of the playable world, the narrative imposed during the adventure or the type of simultaneous control sought.

To do this, you will have to define what control method the player uses to interact with the controllable subject and the environment, as it can be through a controller, keyboard, mouse,

touch screen, etc., which will define the parameters, commands and, by extension, sensations that are to be transmitted to the user through the controls (Swink, 2008). These controls help define the communication of the work with the player, who, indirectly, through non-controllable characters, or directly, by recognizing it through the screen in an exercise of breaking the fourth wall (Ruiz, 2016), describe how the game experience communicates with the player.

In terms of aesthetics and appearance, we must take into account the facial and physical features of the avatar or character, which in most current games can be modified or edited, either according to the rules, fiction or by the player according to their personal tastes and preferences. In this factor, appearance concerns both the physiological features of the avatar and the clothing and accessories that they wear.

Other important factors are determined by the subject's autonomy, its capacity for dialogue, interaction with other subjects and objects, and whether it possesses any trait of sensory perception. These variables, which can define a certain pathos of the character, determine the avatar's capabilities to act autonomously on its own, through a trained artificial intelligence, or through predefined animations activated by the user.

user's hand using the controls. This affects interactions with the rest of the elements of the virtual environment, whether the avatar is silent or has the ability to speak, or whether certain physical senses are simulated, which will directly impact the player's immersion.

For all this, it is also necessary to define how navigation is carried out and what information the user has to orient themselves in the digital world. The subject moves around the game world, so it is necessary to define what type of camera perspective is used: two-dimensional or three-dimensional, first-person or third-person perspective, fixed or dynamic camera, controllable or automatic. In turn, a HUD or user interface of the game will be displayed on the screen, which provides valuable information to the player for their interactions.

Finally, it is necessary to decide what type of mortality the subject will have, whether he or she can die and how death is represented, since it can be reversible or permanent, conditioning the user's tension and skills to face a challenge (Parkin, 2016). Thus, we can see how the importance of each factor can vary depending on the type of game, its genre, its aesthetics or the different characteristics defined by the studies. Some of these factors will be more relevant than others depending on the performance sought, the type of interactivity provided or even the budget used for its creations.

Beyond these factors, it is important to consider how the avatar's gaming experience may influence the player's self-perception in the real world. Li, Kien, and Khoo's (2012) study investigates the concept of "identity transfer," where the avatar's in-game characteristics and experiences are integrated into the player's identity. In an experiment with players of the online video game *World of Warcraft* (2004), it was observed that those who played with more physically attractive avatars perceived themselves as more attractive in real life. Furthermore, those who played with more physically capable avatars felt more capable of performing physical tasks in the real world. This study highlights the importance of considering the possible effects of video games on player identity and behavior, especially when there is a strong identification with the avatar.



4. Avatarity according to Thatgamecompany: a focus on human connection

Pérez (2016) observes in his thesis how most interactions in video games are not based on language, but on non-verbal actions and behaviors. Players, even with limited interfaces, are able to collaborate and build meaningful relationships through non-verbal communication. This limitation, which could be considered a reduction in the avatar's capabilities, actually enhances other capabilities such as the emotional connection between players. By having to rely on other senses, players develop empathy and mutual understanding, creating a unique and memorable collaborative experience. Thus, the combination of non-verbal communication, kinesics (movements) and oculusics (visual cues) play a crucial role in creating meaningful connections between players.

Thatgamecompany, known for its evocative, emotional, and art-infused games, offers an interesting example of how avatars can be used to foster human connection in the virtual space. Choosing simple, clean, and noise-free experiences invites players to project their own identity onto their digital characters. The avatar becomes a blank canvas on which the player can express their own emotions and experiences.

The Los Angeles-based company is known for using minimalist avatars, with simple and stylized designs that avoid the detailed representation of facial or body features. This approach, which could be interpreted as an extreme simplification of the avatar in terms of visual customization, actually seeks to transcend individual differences and create a universal experience that resonates with players from diverse cultures and personal experiences. The player is invited to project their own identity, fostering a deeper emotional connection with the experience, whatever their personal condition in reality.

In the words of Jenova Chen, founder of the company, one of Thatgamecompany's missions is "to create timeless interactive entertainment that makes positive changes to the human psyche" (Takahashi, 2013). This mission statement reveals the importance that the company places on the emotional experience of the player, which is reflected in the design of its avatars and in the game mechanics. Throughout its works, the developer has moved from focusing on the individual and introspection, to fostering collaboration and human connection through its non-verbal interactions.

Each and every one of their experiences aims to be an extension of our own being, affirming the company's quest to create characters that are not mere digital puppets, but that allow the user to explore aspects of their own identity and connect with others on a deep emotional level far removed from the standardization that feeds the rest of the industry's works. The avatar becomes a powerful tool for self-exploration and human connection, transcending beyond the playful, the simple aesthetic personalization or the search for visual realism within its virtual spaces.

This design choice therefore moves away from the standards that predominate in the industry, allowing for a greater projection of the player's identity in the character, as they are not constrained by a predefined appearance or history. The person behind the controls can 'inhabit' the avatar in a more personal way.



In his first game, *Flow* (2006), the player embodies a voracious and insatiable creature within a primordial liquid, seeking to feed on other creatures to evolve and thus increase its extension and power, in an exercise similar to the dynamics of games like *Blockade* (1976) or the world-famous *Snake* (1998). Its two-dimensional aesthetic is a conscious stylistic and gameplay choice, as it somewhat mimics what we would see through a microscope.

Therefore, its dynamic interactions, as well as the narrative, are restricted to this visual art and its relaxing music. The work dispenses with metatextual frameworks such as introductory cinematics, tutorials or operating diagrams, to provide direct action focused on the user's experimentation, who is surprised to discover the controls through the controller's gyroscope, which, by tilting it, dictate the entity's movements, providing a fluid and visually attractive gaming experience.

Her second work, *Flower* (2009), inherits some of the concepts from her first game. Taking this dehumanization of the main character to the extreme, the player controls a flower petal floating in the wind, which, although simple in appearance, acts as an extension of her senses, allowing her to experience the beauty of the natural world and the joy of flight.

The avatar, in this case, is not an anthropomorphic representation, but an entity that facilitates the emotional connection with the virtual environment.

The player becomes a force that revitalizes a withered world, an experience that can be interpreted as a rebirth or an overcoming of loss. It is perhaps the work that relies most heavily on music, as it plays a fundamental role by responding and adapting to the player's actions, creating an immersive sensory experience supported again by the gyroscope sensor.



Their crowning achievement as a studio of relevance in the industry is *Journey* (2012), Thatgamecompany's third work. It perfects each of the company's previously seen features and game concept. The player's avatar is presented through a faceless, almost androgynous humanoid character, who communicates through musical sounds that play the role of his voice. This desert pilgrim flows with his movements through beautiful, desolate landscapes that hide the history of a lost civilization.

In their quest to reach the mountain of light at the end of the path, the player's pilgrimage involves experiencing an emotional journey of introspection about the passage of life and the experiences that comprise it. Along the way, they will randomly cross paths with other players connected to a network who come and go, communicating only through their simple songs, but forming ephemeral yet meaningful bonds to overcome obstacles and help each other. No matter the age, gender or culture of each player, they all embark on the same emotional journey.

The absence of facial features and particular details allows each player to see themselves reflected in the solitary traveler, experiencing vulnerability, resistance or the hope of surviving in a hostile environment full of doubts. This great metaphor for life experiences has served to make this video game recognized as a work of art and to be permanently exhibited in art museums such as The Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington or the MoMA in New York (Thatgamecompany, 2013).

Their latest game, *Sky: Children of the Light* (2019), repeats the formula seen in *Journey*, but expands that multiplayer experience by creating a persistent universe that is constantly updating.

over time, and depending on the season of the year in which it is played. As with the previous games, non-verbal communication plays a key role in *Sky*, allowing players to collaborate and explore a magical aerial world together through their predefined actions. It is filled with clouds that hide floating islands with treasures and discoveries, and, taking on the role of childlike figures called the Children of Light who are capable of flight, players search for fallen stars that represent the ancestral spirits of the different realms.

The goal is to encourage players to do good for each other, prioritizing compassion, generosity, and collaboration between people. Flying between clouds and dream spaces is one of the core mechanics, designed to be accessible and enjoyable for all players. It is designed to be a family-friendly, accessible, and inclusive game for players of all ages and experience levels, and uses imagery inspired by constellations, stars, and music.

5. Conclusions

Video games, in their relative youth as an artistic medium, have struggled to shake off their initial image as simple entertainment for children. In recent decades, however, we have witnessed an evolution that has led them to explore more complex and artistic terrain, reclaiming their transcendental role for today's society. As we have observed, Thatgamecompany is at the forefront of this movement, using video games as a canvas to express ideas and emotions with a language typical of the 21st century. Through interactive experiences that prioritize emotion and aesthetics, Thatgamecompany creates works that transcend conventional entertainment, approaching at times performative visual poetry.

As we have seen throughout our research, the works of the Los Angeles-based company demonstrate the potential of video games as a medium for artistic expression and the exploration of existential themes. *Avatarity*, in this context, transcends mere visual representation and becomes a vehicle for self-exploration, empathy and the construction of meaningful relationships in the digital space. The simplification of the avatar's form, as opposed to the search for realism that dominates the industry, facilitates the projection of the player's identity and immersion in the emotional experience of the game. Non-verbal communication, for its part, promotes cooperation and connection between players of different cultures and languages, creating a sense of global community.

This new approach to *avatarity* opens up new avenues of research in the field of video games and their impact on the human psyche. Future research will be needed to deepen the understanding of how aesthetics, narrative, and gameplay mechanics interact to generate meaningful emotional experiences and foster human connection in the virtual environment. The developer's distinctive environmental narrative relies on a more subtle and evocative language, far removed from traditional narrative where the story is built through dialogue and cinematics.

In his works, the environment, music, and interactions with other players become the primary narrative vehicles. The player is not merely a passive recipient of a story.



The gamer is not a story-teller, but an active participant through his avatars, who constructs his own meaning from the experiences and emotions that the game provokes in him. Its minimalist visual styles and simple, direct gameplay mechanics provide echoes of existentialism and humanist philosophy, in short. These influences demonstrate that video games, like any other art form, draw on cultural and artistic tradition to create new forms of expression.

Thatgamecompany is part of a vanguard of pioneering developers in the video game industry who are challenging the medium's commercial conventions, demonstrating the potential of this young artistic expression as an art form. Their works, with their emphasis on emotion, experience and aesthetics, resemble interactive art installations or contemporary performances. As technology advances and the barriers between art and entertainment blur, it will be crucial to analyze how these changes and emerging trends will allow us to better understand the future of human connection in the digital age, and how video games will participate in this by surprising us with new forms of artistic expression.

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