

Extreme Bodies: The Uncommon Player-Avatar Relationship

Hongshen Xu, Jussi Holopainen¹, Olli Tapio Leino¹

School of Creative Media

City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

hongshexu2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk, jholopai@cityu.edu.hk, otleino@cityu.edu.hk

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INTRODUCTION

Research in video games has extensively explored player-avatar relationships (PAR), dissecting how various design aspects, such as interaction and appearance, influence player behavior and engagement within the virtual environment. Nonetheless, the impact of alien affordances and unconventional character designs on player experience and perception remains under-investigated. Certain studies have delved into avatar embodiment (Sudnow 1983; Gee 2008; Perron 2009; Klevjer 2012) and character perception in games (Vella 2016), while others have scrutinized the Proteus effect with characters (Yee et al. 2007) and the types of PAR (Banks et al. 2018). These studies collectively suggest that players tend to project their self-identity onto their in-game avatars, thus extending their sense of self within the virtual world. Further, Downs and Bowman's polythetic model of player-avatar identification provides valuable insights into the multi-faceted process of how players identify with their avatars, including appearance, control, and identity projection (Downs et al. 2019). These tools, such as the cPAX scale, offer a standardized measure for researching player-avatar interaction across various gaming contexts and cultures, reaffirming the intricate relationship between players and their avatars (Banks et al. 2019). Klevjer's (2012) theory of avatars, for example, states that players identify with their avatars, resulting in a sense of immersion and agency over the game's virtual world. The avatar becomes a prosthetic extension of the player, allowing them to interact with and manipulate the virtual world. This identification with the avatar can range from viewing the avatar as a puppet or marionette, controlled by the player from a distance to a more embodied experience, where the player perceives the avatar as an extension of their own body and presence within the game (Klevjer 2012). Vella's (2016) enactive approach highlights the significance of embodiment and interaction in shaping perception. Yee et al. (2007) introduced the Proteus Effect, a phenomenon wherein players adopt the traits and behaviors of their avatars, immersing themselves in the virtual world and becoming part of it.

The utilization of grotesque or otherworldly designs in video game characters has attracted interest, encompassing a range of appearances from humanoid beings with exaggerated or peculiar physical features to entirely non-human forms. These character designs enable players to have a one-of-a-kind and immersive experience by enabling them to discover new worlds and take on forms that are separate from their own. However, the key factor determining the players-avatar relationship with their given character as “Marionette” or “Embodied” (Klevjer 2012) also raises interest. The use of bizarre or alien appearances in video game characters can also serve as an extension of the player's persona, enabling them to investigate a variety of facets of their identity and agency. These characters can also function as a form of escape,

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enabling players to temporarily inhabit a world in which their physical shape is not a limitation. To deepen our understanding of how alien designs and their implications for player behavior and game aesthetics, it is essential to further investigate the association between extreme avatar embodiments and players' perceptions of avatars, specifically in the context of alien affordances.

Our preliminary analysis suggests that extreme avatar designs enhance player acceptance of the circumstances leading to character abilities. Unique physical designs help players contextualize character skill development. By intertwining character role-playing with backstories, the projection effect can be amplified, leading to an enriched gaming experience.

We observed that a character's physical constitution potentially impacts the extent to which they can utilize their superpowers or unique abilities. The alteration of bodily form was a prevalent theme among the initially selected games. As previously mentioned, the character's form significantly influences how players naturally acquire the skills required in the game. Controllable characters could be depicted as real animals (such as sharks) or imagined entities. Players would uncover animals' fundamental abilities as they progressed through the game.

These creatures can evolve and be narratively explained as the game progresses. For example, in *Eternal Cylinder* (Ace Team Software, 2021), the Trebhum begins as a ball-like creature with a nose and two legs. Based on the nose shaped like an elephant's trunk, players could naturally presume its capacity to roll and suck. It can later evolve into different shapes by consuming crystals present on the planet. Furthermore, by creating characters in the form of animals, players are driven to adhere to the intrinsic qualities of the respective species, such as hunting with a tail and stomping on fish. It has been observed that the shape of an avatar, which can range from modest to extravagant, provides a persuasive and appealing approach for players to project their own bodily embodiment onto a fictional game character. This projection strengthens the player-avatar bond and heightens the overall gaming experience, allowing deeper immersion into the virtual world. Through the lens of alien affordances, we aim to discern how player-avatar relationships (PAR) with unconventional characters diverge from typical PAR dynamics, thereby enriching our understanding of this unique aspect of gaming engagement.

METHODOLOGY

To date, we have carried out a preliminary analysis, combining gameplay and game aesthetics, to pinpoint unique attributes in a curated list of video games featuring atypical or extraordinary protagonists. The subsequent phase of our research will involve gathering and analyzing survey data to further corroborate the findings from our initial investigation.

We compiled a preliminary analysis on the selection of games (N=30) with detailed commentary on each game, either via a prolonged session of play or observation (one- hour minimum) of a gameplay video. The analysis contained a description of the controls, an explanation of the affordances, a corporeal depiction, and an explanation of why this is considered "extreme." We then coded the list to identify what unordinary characteristics (e.g. Shape Changing, Super Strength) they offered. For the preliminary results, we identified extreme character design in 66.7% of the games in the list. Allowing characters to transform their shapes to gain special abilities and powers was the main element within all selected games. Half of the games (N=15) featured characters based on fantasy or fictional creatures (e.g., dragons or aliens). Only 20% of the games utilized abstract protagonists (e.g.,

movable text) as their controllable characters, while the remaining 30% (N=9) were based on actual humans or animals.

In the next stage, we will conduct an online questionnaire (Figure 1). This survey primarily aims to: 1. Identify unique and unconventional characters and games recognized by players; 2. Understand the rationale behind their selections, including their gaming experiences and gameplay elements, and why they find these characters distinctive; 3. Analyze their relationship with the suggested characters (PAR), checking alignment with the four PAR categories (Object - avatar as a tool; Me - avatar as self-extension; 'Symbiote' - avatar and player are interconnected yet separate; Other - avatar as an independent entity.) (Banks 2015; Banks et al. 2019; Banks and Bowman 2021). Analyzing data from the proposed survey questions, thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis will be employed to identify patterns and themes within players' perspectives on unique characters and their avatar relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012). These qualitative approaches will illuminate the nuances of player-avatar interactions, particularly in relation to alien affordances. By cross-referencing emerging themes with the PAR categories, we can explore the interplay of unconventional character design and players' identification with their avatars, thereby unveiling the potential influence of alien affordances on the gaming experience.

Open Questions
Could you name a game you've played that features a character you consider to be unique or unconventional? Please describe this character briefly.
Why did you select this particular game and character? Please explain any distinctive gaming experiences, gameplay elements, or other factors that contributed to your selection.
To what extent did you feel embodied in the character while playing the game? Were there moments where you felt as though you 'became' the character? Please describe any such experiences."
In terms of actions, decisions, and emotions, how closely aligned were you with your character? Did you find yourself thinking or reacting as the character would?"
Were there any elements of the game (e.g., gameplay mechanics, character design, narrative) that particularly enhanced your sense of embodying the character?
How would you describe your relationship with this character in the game? Please consider your level of control, identification, and emotional connection. Does this relationship fit into any of the following Player-Avatar Relationship (PAR) categories: Object, Me, Symbiote, or Other? Please explain

Figure 1: Survey questions for identifying players' experience with extreme characters in video games.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Corresponding Author