

WOOD AND CODE: IDEOLOGY, EARLY MODERN PUPPETS AND CONTEMPORARY AVATARS

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Abstract: This article studies the capacity of Early Modern puppets and videogame avatars, two seemingly unrelated objects of research, to produce and reproduce gender discourses. Despite being made very differently, their wooden and coded natures both participate in acts of aligning with and resisting against existing ideologies. This is because puppets and avatars' relation to ideology does not depend exclusively on the stories they contribute to tell; the materiality of both cultural texts as well as the puppeteers and videogame players themselves all contribute to the reenacting and contesting of gender discourses.

Key words: Performativity, theatre, videogames, gender studies.

Resumen: Este artículo explora la capacidad de producción y reproducción de discursos de género de dos elementos en principio muy dispares pero que este texto acerca como próximos y similares: las marionetas de madera del teatro renacentista inglés y los avatares en videojuegos contemporáneos. Pese a su materialidad y composición distinta, madera y código, marionetas y avatares poseen una capacidad inusual para servir de foco de diversas reproducciones y resistencias a discursos de identidad que dependen no sólo de la escritura de los personajes representados, sino también de los agentes detrás de dichas representaciones o de la materialidad que los sostiene.

Palabras clave: Performatividad, teatro, videojuegos, estudios de género.



Act 1, Scene 1: Introducing the avatar-puppet.

At the climax of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (Jonson, ed. 2000), Busy, the puritan zealot, accuses two puppets that are performing in front of the other characters of the play of sinful cross-dressing. The situation is solved, however, with the puppets' removal of their clothes and subsequent exposure of their wooden, sexless bodies. In their sexless nakedness, they seem to point out that, being objects, they are not subject to the gender divide that applies to humans, and therefore their cross-dressing is not a real form of transgression. However, as Ian Woodward (Woodward, 2007) claims, "objects are constructed by particular power relations, and in turn also actively construct such relations" (p.12). Puppets are also the products and the reproducers of specific power relations. As any other object¹, a puppet is immersed into flows of social discourses, power relations, and material practices that shape the ways it is created, handled, looked at, used, and discarded. However, one of the first ideas this article defends is that Busy was indeed fooled and that puppets, just like many objects, are not, in fact, genderless.

At first sight, puppets are capable of acting as avatars of the masters that control them. In this sense, puppets are able to absorb social discourses because of their very condition as objects. More importantly, during a play they also reproduce these discourses in a subrogated form according to what their masters stick to in a conscious or unconscious manner. The performance of a puppet is a complex one: It is accompanied by sets of changeable or removable clothes, different types of voices, as well as a potentially ample repertoire of roles. Thus, the materiality of the puppet and its connection with social discourses is continuously supported by the materiality of other objects and media such as clothing, sound, and a gendered voice². The wooden nature of a puppet is important. From my view, the very acts of carving, modeling or piercing wood during its transformation into a human-like object are in themselves performative acts of writing into the wood discourses about human identity, race, sexuality or gender. The human-like aspect of a wooden puppet is what remains; the splinters and wooden chunks are simply non-human. Once carved into a puppet, wood still retains its variability in shape (i.e. more wood can still be cut or removed). Under these circumstances, the puppet could be whittled away repeatedly up until the point when it can no longer be perceived as a puppet. This raises an interesting relation between performance, perception and being. This is because performativity can end up eroding and erasing the medium (the body in the case of hu-

¹ If interested in fundamental bibliography on critical analyses of material culture see: (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981), (Dant, 2006), (McCracken, 1988) and (Riggins, 1994).

² And the suggestion of a gendered body at the end of this voice.

mans and wood in the case of puppets) through which performative power is manifested. Performativity has then the potential of destroying the “puppetness” of the wooden puppet by transforming it back into just wood.

The peculiar performative capacity of the puppet finds outside of the theatre a very good near-equivalent in the controllable characters in computer games. Although made of radically different materials —organic wood versus computer code; tangible vegetable tegument versus electronically-inscribed traces on silicon chips—they have more in common than might meet the eye. Both puppets and digital characters in videogames can act as avatars of the human user that commands them. But also, as I will show later, both the wooden puppet and the characters in a videogame share similar processes of construction oriented around an attempt to resemble the human. Ultimately, this article is a comparison between two different³ types of puppet-avatar (one drawn from Elizabethan culture and the other from contemporary popular culture) that, despite their divergent materiality, behave similarly. First, however, let us explore the concept of performance through a puppet.

The performing puppet.

Judith Butler’s (Butler, 1990) understanding of identity formations as dynamic processes that depend on performance is a good starting point for discussing Ben Jonson’s puppets in *Bartholomew Fair*. According Butler, sexuality and gender identity do not have a fixed or pre-established value but, instead, they depend on the way societies produce identity discourses and the ways individuals perform in relation to any given set of social norms. Individuals are what individuals do; this is, identity is not pre-discursively given, since it depends on “doing” rather than “being”. Puppets can be hardly defined as individuals, but they are involved in more than one performance. First, the puppet is part of a theatre performance in which it represents a character; one that has been created for the purpose of the play. In this sense, we could argue that the process of character writing is in itself a process of selecting from identity and social discourses in order fashion a specific persona. In most cases, this selection does not only come from choosing from existing identity traits, but also from existing characters and/or plays. Such is the example of Ben Jonson’s puppets. As shown by Cokes in the next example from *Bartholomew Fair*, the puppets represent a story inspired by the Greek myths of *Hero and Leander* and *Damon and Pythias*.

3 They are different in material terms. The puppet is made of wood while the digital avatar is primarily formed by computer code.

Cokes: A Motion, what's that?

The Ancient Modern History of Hero and Leander,
otherwise called The Touchstone of true Love, with as
true a Trial of Friendship between Damon and Pythias, two
faithful Friends o' the Bank-side? Pretty i' faith, what's the
meaning on't? is't an Enterlude? Or what is't? (p.168)

This inter-relation with social discourses and pre-existing texts means that the identity construction of any character depends on existing conventions about gender, sexuality or race. That is, any human character is a portrayal as well as a condensation of pre-existing discourses about gender, sexual, racial and/or religious identity. In a similar way, a puppet, in its representation of humans, is also a receptor and producer of discourses about the human. A puppet is an object, true, but it is an object oriented to performing human-like characters⁴ and in doing so, it is inserted into processes of production and reproduction of identity discourses. The movements a puppet makes or the sounds and words it seemingly utters are just part of its performative force. Its clothing, color, hair, or make-up (whichever applies) are just as important. Just as a puppet may be used to represent any number of roles, its appearance can be also altered to accommodate its master's (or mistress's) wishes. In doing so, I would claim that the gender of a puppet⁵ is dynamic and flexible. However, the performativity of the puppet does not end with it as a standalone object, but can also be found in the puppet's relation with the puppet master.

A puppet master not only performs as the handler of puppets, she also performs the social discourses her puppets embody and reproduce. The master is both a medium through which puppets perform, but also a performer of identity discourses herself, both as a master and as a social being. In this regard, a puppet master is capable of deciding, to some extent, on some aspects of the puppet performance. But, in return, the master is irremediably influenced by the capacity of the puppet to perform gender and sexuality. We could say that just as the master actions the puppet she herself is actioned in return by it. Through her action on the stage, the master shares with its puppets the status of subject/object of identity discourses.

4 In fact, while at the same time always being different from humans; the humanoid nature of puppets is a recurrent part of many gothic and horror stories. E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* (Hoffmann, ed. 2016) is a good example of this.

5 Or, its capacity to perform gender.

Most objects, indeed, share to different degrees a relation with their users similar to the one between a puppet and its master. A pair of sunglasses, for instance, is also inserted into a flow of norms and social discourses as well as relations with other objects. The user of the sunglasses also becomes a participant/performer of the discourses attached to them. She can even subvert the associations her pair of glasses are normally⁶ inserted into by combining them with other objects and contexts that modify the social life of the object. Thus, even if an object does not have a gender in the strict sense of the word, it can still contribute to gender performance. The difference between the puppet and the pair of glasses (or rather, between the puppet and most objects) lies, however, in that the puppet allows for a second kind of performance: that of playing a role as part of a stage performance. Therefore, a puppet performs gender twice: Once as a pure object that relates with other objects and a second time as a humanoid shape used to mirror and/or satirize human-like traits and mannerisms. Because of this, it is difficult to accept the puppets' claims regarding their genderless nature in *Bartholomew Fair*. The lack of physical genitalia does not exempt them from participating in gendered discourses. In broad terms we could say that a puppet is an object cross-dressing as a human-like being that then gains the capacity to repeatedly cross-dress depending of the human role it is forced to adopt. In fact, Busy's⁷ acceptance of the non-gendered nature of the puppets (and thus, of the absence of cross-dressing in the puppet play) results from his lack of understanding of the true relations objects establish. This incomplete understanding of the social value of objects, and more specifically of puppets, may in fact foreshadow the Cromwell Regime's relation with puppet theatre. As George Speaight (Speaight, 1955) states, while Oliver Cromwell prohibited traditional theatre, puppet plays flourished under his mandate. Speaight claims that the Cromwell Regime considered puppets to be "too low for legal interdiction" (p.70); a clear sign of the Regime's inability to fully grasp said performances. Similarly, Busy's inability in *Bartholomew Fair* to perceive the capacity of the puppets to reproduce gender discourses may in fact establish a parallelism with Cromwell's way of perceiving puppets as empty objects devoid of any significant social value.

In contemporary popular culture the relation between avatars⁸ in video games and players is similar to the one established between puppets and their masters in early modern theater. Just as in the case of the puppet, the avatar re-

6 My use of the word "normal" is intentional. It is used to denote both frequency and, more importantly, adherence to social norms.

7 Busy's and any other person who might raise skepticism about the lack of gender in objects.

8 The term avatar can be understood as any character in a video game a human user can control and, sometimes, customize. The appearance, moral stance, and skills are among the most common customizable aspects of avatars in video games.

produces and produces identity discourses based on the performances it allows and/or promotes. The construction of avatars is based on decisions that are in direct contact with social norms and regulations of the self. Thus, the creation of a princess, an orc or an elder mage is not the result of a sudden pop in the programmers and game designers' minds, but it is affected by the identity discourses that these individuals participate in. Once the avatar is inserted into a virtual world and a storyline, it is inevitably made participant of the ideology dominating the game. As such, any user playing the game is subjected to the social discourses contained in the game, and more importantly, is forced to participate in them (or to perform them) when playing. However, players also have agency to act on games. While some games grant more freedom to players than others, players can always act on the virtual world they are presented with. This is particularly evident in games such as *Infamous* and *Infamous 2*, o *Infamous Second Son* (Sucker Punch, 2009, 2011, 2014) the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2017) or *Soul Sacrifice (Marvelous AQL, 2013)* to name a few, where players can choose between several moral and, sometimes, gendered and sexualized options that end up having a direct impact on the virtual world of the game as well as on the way some of the plots are resolved. Just as the script of the play is for the puppet master a "performance on rails" (this is, according to limits of the script) players also play according to a pre-generated world that allows for very specific actions. Puppet and avatar both grant, however, the status of "master" to their users, allowing them to be, at least partially, the owners of their own performances as well the owners of their puppet-avatars.

This comparison would not be complete without a brief analysis of the materials that compose both the puppet and the avatar. In the next section I will study wood (the main material puppets are made of) and computer code. I will defend the material condition of both while I explore their relation with identity performance.

Carving wood, crunching code, piercing gender.

In *Testo Junkie* (Preciado, 2013), Queer Studies scholar Beatriz (Paul B.) Preciado revises the role of hormone manipulation and surgeries in the performance of gender. For this author, individuals injecting themselves with hormones or going through surgical gender change are clear examples of non-normative gender performance. In this sense, modifying one's body is in itself an example of radical identity performance; a way of performing and doing gender while redefining and contesting it. What Preciado sees in these types of performances based on the modification of one's own body is a way of doing gender that allows for a true dynamic change and flexibility. Also, these types of performances rely

heavily on institutions usually managed by State Power: Health care and the pharmaceutical industry. In these regard, for Preciado, an individual modifying her own body defies many of the very social norms State Power manages and reproduces by making use of the same means and institutions that State Power mobilizes. Preciado's idea of doing gender (and sometimes defying it) by working on one's own body is similar to the process of fabrication of both the puppet and the avatar.

The puppets in *Bartholomew Fair* are wooden. A wooden puppet originates from a piece of wood. From its raw state, the wood is carved, pierced, cut and inserted into other pieces of wood in order to be transformed into an object that looks reasonably human(oid). The act of cutting and removing matter is thus a process of inscribing the wood with notions of the human. For this reason, the manipulation of wood, as an act of working towards a resemblance to the human, is in itself a way of participating in and acting on identity discourses. It is a form of defining what is human, and what is not. Once the work on the wood is done and the puppet emerges, it would be always possible to re-work the wood and modify the initial body of the puppet. Each modification would be then an act of renegotiating the limits of the human imposed on the original piece of wood. There is a limit, however, to this performativity through material manipulation. While each carving gets the wood closer to the human (or closer to new interpretations of the human), it also brings the entire object closer to its own material limitations and finitude (there is a maximum amount of wood one can remove and manipulate before the human resemblance of the puppet is lost and the entire object becomes again a mere wooden chunk). This is similar to the manipulation of one's body as there is a limit to the amount of operations and injections a body can be subjected to before becoming unreadable⁹.

The construction of avatars in computer games follows a considerably different process. This process, however, is not as divergent or immaterial as the reader may expect. The materiality of code may seem difficult to accept, particularly because it is contaminated by the influence of terms such as "virtual". The virtual seems to occur outside of the area of influence of the material. However, the virtual and the material are closer than they seem. According to Wendy Chun (Chun, 2011), the process of code crunching and writing when constructing any piece of software seems to rely heavily on material contexts that are often overlooked. This is, the material and working conditions under which code is written affect the very creation of virtual interfaces, AI [Artificial Intelligence], and virtual spaces and avatars in videogames. Similarly, the way the material world is arranged and ordered also affects the designs of virtual worlds. A game, for instance, that reproduces the city of New York not only reproduces (with a varying

9 Unreadability would be then a form of challenging normative ways of conceptualizing the human.

degree of success) the way the material world is ordered; it also reproduces a portion of the logic and forces that shape social space. And while the virtual worlds of videogames may seem immaterial, they certainly force players into bodily motions (e.g. pressing buttons in order to perform actions in the game or to choose between morally different options) that connect the virtuality of the screen with the materiality of hardware and the human player. For this reason, despite its seemingly immaterial nature, computer code, just as any other object, is connected with very real objects, users, and discourses that modify the way virtual objects are created and used. Also, as Chun suggests, code writing is in itself a material process based on material actions (e.g. the punching of buttons in a key board) that involve the continuous use of objects such as a keyboard, an office chair or a screen. Computer code, then is not only able to relate to social discourses and meanings just as any other object, but is also depends on material actions and objects for its creation and manipulation.

Avatars are compilations of lines of code that enter in relations with other lines of code (i.e. the way an avatar is written enters in relation with the lines of code that manage virtual space). By modifying these lines of code, an avatar can be made to move faster, jump higher, or be made to resemble a different gender or speak with a different voice. In this sense, just as wood carving and hormone alteration are ways of playing with material and bodily substance in order to perform identity, the creation of an avatar through code crunching is a form of production and reproduction of identity discourses. Making an avatar look female and then inserting “her” in the plot of a game is not just an empty choice¹⁰. The way this female character looks and behaves not only reproduces a specific vision of gender identities, but is also based on existing pre-conceptions coders (as well as graphic designers, publishers, and the players themselves) may have internalized. Code, however, can be rewritten and modified, just as one’s own body can be altered. Thus, the “virtual” identities created though code are open to modification. This modification is in itself a form of identity performance that occurs, at least, twice: Once when re-writing code and a second time when playing with the altered avatar. The process of modifying code also encounters a similar situation to the one faced by the carving of wood and the modification of the human body: The re-writing of computer code is always challenged by the menace of self-erasure: Too many modifications may render the virtual objects unintelligible (or unplayable).

¹⁰ For studies on choice and the impact of historical identity discourses see (Belmonte, 2013, 2017).

The curtain falls: Do objects have a gender?

I began my paper by questioning Busy's misled acceptance of the genderless nature of puppets. I claimed that puppets, indeed, have a gender. They perform gender by being inserted into social flows and identity discourses. From this perspective, all objects have a gender in the sense that all participate, reproduce, or challenge existing discourses on gender performance. In the particular case of puppets, they also have a gender because of the very act of participation, by simulating human beings, in gender discourses. What may be specific to puppets is that they can be used as external personas by their masters and, because of this, their performative force is more complex. The puppet and its master participate in both the discourses associated with the puppet as part of a flow of material relations and also in the discourses that emerge from the roles the puppet has in a play. In this sense, using a puppet already puts its master in relation with other objects and social norms, but, by performing a particular role through the puppet, the puppet master also enters into an additional form of identity performance (one that, for instance, puts into motion ideas of gender representation and sexual behavior). As shown in this paper, despite its material differences, puppets and computer avatars allow similar forms of performativity. In addition to the ways these two types of characters participate in establishing and/or negotiating identity norms, both the puppet and the avatar are manufactured according to processes that, in themselves, define, describe, and sanction specific forms of understanding the human. If all objects perform gender, the gender of puppets and avatars is, simply put, more nuanced and multiple.

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