

Parasocial and Social Player-Avatar Relationships: Social Others in *Thomas Was Alone*

Elizabeth Loyer

University of South Florida

Abstract

The nature of the relationship between the player and a video game avatar has been the cause of much academic discussion and debate. While in the past most studies focused on parasocial relationships, the new Banks-Bowman social categorization system provides a beneficial and enlightening new framework with which to examine how the player relates to the avatar. The interactive mediums through which players relate with playable characters separate such relationships from those created with film or literary protagonists. This interactivity allows for social player-avatar relationships, including the avatar-as-social-other relationship exemplified in the game *Thomas Was Alone*, and creates new possibilities important for game designers to consider. This article first briefly explores the academic discussions surrounding the player-avatar relationship in light of the new Banks-Bowman categories, then turns attention to the ways in which the avatar-as-social-other relationship and its corresponding emotionally intense gameplay are exemplified in the game *Thomas Was Alone*.

Keywords

Player-avatar; avatar; playable character; Thomas Was Alone;

Press Start 2015 | Volume 2 | Issue 1

ISSN: 2055-8198

URL: <http://press-start.gla.ac.uk>



Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

Introduction

Action in digital worlds requires a coded digital tool that enables players to navigate and interact with the virtual space. In video games, this often humanized tool controlled by the player is known as an avatar and the nature of the relationship between player and avatar is one of great academic debate. Horton and Wohl's 1956 article "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction" first introduced the notion of a parasocial relationship between viewer and television character, where there is the illusion of a face-to-face meeting lacking the truly effective reciprocity present in genuine social interactions. However, the 2014 Banks and Bowman social player-avatar relationship classifications argue that video games have progressed to the point where relationships between player and playable character can be classified on a social spectrum. The Banks-Bowman classification provide a beneficial new lens for re-examining prior discussion of player-avatar relationships and for game designers and scholars to consider when creating and examining playable characters in the future. This paper first briefly surveys contemporary academic discussion of the player-avatar relationship in light of the new Banks-Bowman classifications before turning attention to the 2012 game *Thomas Was Alone* (TWA; Bithell, 2012), arguing that TWA provides an excellent example of the avatar-as-social-other relationship.

Digital avatars considered in academic discourse run the gamut from avatars designed almost entirely by the player, limited only by the creation constraints of the digital space, to those designed solely by the game creators. As avatars in video games are most frequently represented as sentient creatures known as playable characters (PCs), the terms player-avatar and player-PC will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this essay. Only player-PC relationships are considered, not player-Non-Playable Character (NPC) relationships.

In games, players act through "digital prostheses" that can be actorialized, as playable characters, or transparent, as in the mechanisms to act in games such as *Tetris* (Papale, 2014). The avatar is essentially an enhanced cursor, providing the link or contact point between the player and the game (Lankoski, 2011). In online or multiplayer games, the avatar is also the method through which players interact with each other (Kafai, 2010). The primary reason why the player-avatar relationship is of such academic interest is because it cannot be grouped with the analysis of film or literary protagonists, instead requiring new theoretical approaches. In his 2011 examination of player-character engagement in video games, Petri Lankoski explains that, as opposed to viewers of film protagonists, game players have control over the actions of the PC. In his 2002 article, "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame," James Newman counters that video games are not

uniformly ergodic but instead contain an interplay of controlling and non-controlling sequences; this interplay allows the player to experience varying levels of engagement that can resemble viewer-film relationships during non-ergodic game sections such as cut-scenes. Similarly, even non-playing audience members might experience a level of ergodicity through contributing advice or warnings to the active game player. The very presence of interactive control during part or parts of a game complicates the relationship between player and avatar.

Struggles Defining Interactive Player-PC Relationships

To those who have not experienced emotional engagement while playing a video game, the idea of forming a relationship with personified digital code may seem strange. Yet the very engagement players feel while controlling these digital actors comes from the active and interactive participation players experience with the virtual world of the game (Lankoski, 2011, p. 293). Some academics, such as Professor Luca Papale, have observed that confusion arising in defining player-PC relationships stems from the shifting feelings players feel towards the character during gameplay. Even the player's relationship with a single PC might oscillate through any combination of identification, empathy, sympathy, projection, and detachment. In his 2014 article "Beyond Identification," Luca Papale explains that identification occurs when the player assimilates aspects of the PC and undergoes a transformation modelled upon the avatar's attributes. Belief that player-PC relationships consist solely of identification is a major factor in the societal concern that video games cause violence in adolescents; if the player identifies with a character, the game could have the agency to alter the player's personality (Papale, 2014). However, before debate concerning the question of video games encouraging violent behavior can be addressed, I would argue that the complex nature of the player-avatar relationship in its many forms must first be understood.

Projection, one other possible player-PC relationship, concerns the misattribution of internal intentions onto another. Lankoski's exploration of player-character engagement uses projection, a psychological trick of the brain often used as a defense mechanism, to describe how players may 'project' by crediting the character with intentions actually held by the player (2011, p. 298). In this way, players projecting intentions onto avatars influence their own perception of the avatar's perceived personality. Lankoski further explains how decisions in games and game goals are especially potent areas of projection, as the player actively participates in a way not possible in other media such as films (2011). Placement in a character's shoes yields the possibility of strong player-PC projection.

The amount of input the player has into the design of and choices made by the avatar are a contributing factor to the complicated nature of defining player-PC relationships. Freedom to influence character design

and dialogue can influence both the player's perception of the character and the player-PC relationship. Lankoski contends that the more freedom the player has, the less personality the character truly has (2011). Therefore, the more actions and choices available to the player, the larger the role the player has in creating the character and the more varied player perceptions of the same character can become. However, Drs. Jaime Banks and Nicholas Bowman posit that player-PC relationships are not just parasocial non-dialectical relationships where the player identifies with, projects onto, controls, or empathizes with the avatar (2014, p. 2). Instead, player-avatar relationships can also and should also be categorized on a social relationship spectrum.

Banks-Bowman Social Classifications of Player-PC Relationships

The Banks-Bowman social classifications, published in October 2014, are a new addition to academic discourse concerning player-avatar relationships and have not yet been discussed in detail. However, the Banks-Bowman classifications are a beneficial new system for examining the nature of player-PC relationships but also for guiding the goals of game designers and future analyses by game scholars. The social classifications of avatar-as-object, avatar-as-me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-social-other are extremely relevant when surveying the myriad theories concerning player-avatar relations. Past discussions of player-PC relationships tend to align with one or more of the four social categorizations, even if the categorizations are not explicitly named as the Banks-Bowman social categories. Each of the four relationships presents a very different approach a player might take when interacting with an avatar. The categories were developed by Banks and Bowman during a case study of the linguistic behavior of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) players when discussing and playing as their game avatars.

In "Avatars Are (Sometimes) People Too: Linguistic Indicators of Parasocial and Social Ties in Player-Avatar Relationships," Banks and Bowman explain that most analyses of player-avatar relationships focus on the parasocial issues of identification, control, suspension of disbelief, and player sense of responsibility. Parasocial relationships are unilaterally controlled, existing in the player's mind, where the player acts and feels *toward* the avatar without reciprocation (Banks, 2014, p. 2). The closest possible parasocial relationship between player and avatar would be unification (2014, p. 3). Banks and Bowman challenge the notion that all player-avatar relationships are parasocial, instead contending that examining player-PC relationships on a social spectrum and allowing for bi-directional influence is necessary as avatars "increasingly take on independent agencies and act toward players" (Banks, 2014, p. 2). Social investigation of player-avatar interaction results in four additional relationship dynamics that change the player's experiences and level of emotional engagement during play.

While Banks and Bowman feel parasocial character attachment is more useful when examining player emotional intensity during a game, player-avatar social connections take into account the interactive nature of the relationship and provide a new framework from which to examine academic discourse on the matter. Regardless of classification, the player-avatar relationship varies based on the game genre and moment, player emotional state, and the level of player involvement with character creation (Papale, 2014). Later, I will argue that the avatar-as-social-other relationship is not only encouraged in the 2012 game *Thomas Was Alone*, but was also directly linked to the player's emotional intensity during gameplay.

Banks-Bowman Classifications and Player-PC Discourse

Avatar-as-Object

Player-PC relationships characterized by viewing the avatar as an object or tool are marked by a lack of pronouns in referring to the avatar (Banks, p. 8). There is a lack of emotional intimacy felt with the PC and the player is more likely to prioritize combat and competition over other aspects of gaming (Banks, p. 5). This type of relationship often forms when a player's engagement is goal-related, guiding the player's actions and biasing the player's choices (Lankoski, p. 297).

The player may still be very engaged with the game without identifying with the avatar. In their 2012 article "Real Feelings for Virtual People," Coulson *et al.* explain that, as with real world interpersonal relationships, characters are often liked as a result of having physical, social, or task attractiveness to the player. Task attractiveness consists of being helpful in achieving player goals. This is why, as former host Cam Robinson of the online show *Reality Check* elaborates during an interview with Coulson, non-relatable avatars may not be aesthetically or socially attractive but still retain task attractiveness. Therefore, a character may still be enjoyable and engaging to play while being considered a tool to achieve an end. Despite avatar-as-object player-PC relationships being the second most prevalent relationship found among the *WoW* players interviewed by Banks and Bowman, game critics who analyze this classification of relationship are divided on whether or not this relationship indicates player preference, game design failure, or a mixture of the two.

Avatar-as-Me

Banks and Bowman classify the player's sensation of *being* the avatar or the avatar *being* the player as indicating the middle ground on the spectrum of emotional intimacy and mixed agency with the avatar (2014, p. 5). Discourse about the avatar-as-me player-PC relationship falls into two categories. The first avatar-as-me relationship occurs with characters not designed by the players and the second occurs with

avatars customized and created by the player, particularly in massively-multiplayer role playing games (MMORPGs) and in 'god simulators.'

When discussing player-character relationships, Newman argues that immersion comes from the interactive connection the player has with the game's interface, independent of camera or narrative viewpoint. He quotes the many players who refer to 'being' rather than controlling or playing, arguing that the player-PC relationship is fundamentally altered through this sensation of participation. The sensation of unification can render games that might disinterest viewers as fascinating to players. In this way, goal driven experiences can be an "I" experience (Lankoski, p. 306). Although it is tempting to argue that empathy is more likely to lead to an avatar-as-social-other relationship, even the avatar-as-me relationship requires empathy. This empathy combines with projection through control, resulting in the opposite of identification. Instead, the player's identity flows into the avatar regardless of whether or not the avatar reflects or is intended to reflect the player (Papale, 2014). This type of relationship is also most common in social simulation games where the main goal of the game is to interact with others.

The avatar-as-me social relationship Banks and Bowman describe has numerous applications beyond mere enjoyment of the game. Game designers and scholars aware of this player-PC relationship type can design and use games for beneficial real-world results. Players project their 'self,' their beliefs, values, and thoughts, consciously and subconsciously into *The Sims* in a manner that could be useful to psychologists for projective testing, as an alternative to tests such as the Rorschach test (Griebel, 2006). The exploration of multiple internal identities and the development of second selves through multiplayer or online social games have been found to be especially beneficial for adolescents, with the games functioning as useful tools for educators to encourage their students' developmental growth (Kafai, 2010).

Conversely, avatars are a way to create first an idealized self then to inspire the player through identification to reinvent the actual self. Aligning player motion with the virtual slimming down of an avatar-as-me model has inspired real weight-loss and physical exercise in players (O'Brien, 2011). Scholars such as Jane McGonigal have hopes that such games can take advantage of the avatar-as-me relationship to improve the daily lives of game players and better the world. In *Reality Is Broken* McGonigal describes how the motivation to keep a virtual version of yourself, such as the "mini" you avatar in the Nike+ running social MMO, happy comes from the emotional connection forged between player and avatar (2011, p. 162). The avatar-as-me relationship, especially in conjunction with the avatar-as-social other relationship, holds many possibilities for encouraging engagement with the game and helping real-world internal and physical growth.

Avatar-as-Symbiote

Perhaps the least common and most ambiguously defined of the four Banks-Bowman social player-PC categories, the avatar-as-symbiote connection blurs the boundaries between the three other classifications. The avatar-as-symbiote relationship is one in which players engage avatars "as digital problem-solving partners" that are both tools and self-reflections (2014, p. 10). Such players tend to use avatars or PCs as "somewhat-differentiated personas kept at a distance so that their characteristics may be rejected or assimilated" (Banks, 2014, p. 10).

This type of connection with the avatars can increase player confidence within the game and without. In that way, those prone to entering an avatar-as-symbiote player-avatar relationship can use their avatars to work through internal stress in a fun environment without real-world consequences. Players can toy with expressing different or conflicting aspects of their personalities through cathartic or constructive activities.

Avatar-as-Social-Other

Player-avatar relationships marked by self-differentiation from the avatar, high emotional intimacy, and the use of third-person pronouns in reference to the avatar are associated with the classification of the avatar as an "other" (Banks, 2014, pp. 5, 10). Banks and Bowman use "social other" to refer to entities or actors outside of the player credited with having their own agency. The best indicator of a player-PC relationship in which the avatar functions as a social other occurs when a player ascribes agency to the avatar.

Avatars perceived as functioning independently with the ability to act fulfil the criteria necessary to engage in a social, interactive relationship (Banks, 2014, p. 3). Empathy, one of the major methods of relating to a fictional character such as a game avatar, is in essence a reaction to an 'other'; humans understand social others with the use of empathy, affective mimicry, and internal simulation of the experiences of outside actors (Lankoski, 2011). As a result, player reactions characterized by empathy with PCs are similar to player reactions to real people. Perceiving the avatar as a social other deserving of care and happiness can serve to instil in the player both the desire and drive to protect the avatar's well-being (McGonigal, 2011). This drive can increase engagement with the game and the emotional intensity felt by the player.

Coulson *et al.* explain in "Real Feelings for Virtual People" that players grow to care about fictional game characters because of their ability to perceive meaning and emotion in the inanimate, particularly when characters appear to have lives of their own. If seen by a viewer to be moving with purpose, even something known to be inanimate can be treated with agency and empathy. Discussing "Real Feelings" on *Reality Check*, Coulson elaborates that this phenomenon is independent of the realism of the PC, instead depending upon having a favorable

combination of physical or aesthetic attractiveness, social relatability, and task attractiveness. Robinson adds that the game *Thomas Was Alone* is an excellent example of a game achieving physical, social, and task attractiveness in its characters (2013). Indeed, I would extend this claim in light of the Banks-Bowman classifications to argue that *TWA* provides a strong example of the avatar-as-social-other relationship through its emotionally compelling characters, their developed independent personalities, and the simultaneous feeling of control of and distance from the avatars induced in the player.

Banks-Bowman Social Player-PC Relationships in *Thomas Was Alone*

The tendency of player and *TWA* alike to ascribe agency to the PCs directs this relationship into the Banks-Bowman social classifications, while also contributing to the intense emotional response experienced by the player. *TWA*, developed by Mike Bithell, was expanded into its 2012 PC release from a 2010 flash-based browser game. The gameplay and objectives in *Thomas Was Alone* are simple: control a series of small, colored rectangles with the arrow keys, using space to jump, and guide the rectangles to their appropriate end-of-level portals. When multiple rectangular artificial intelligences, or AIs, are present in a level, they must all reach their portals to proceed. Control can be freely switched among all AIs present in a level. While the player guides the rectangles, a gentle but elegant soundtrack matching the story's mood plays in the background and, though no character ever speaks directly, voiceover narration performed by comedian Danny Wallace provides insight into character personalities and state of being.

The story of *TWA* is set within a computer program, after an unspecified event in a program created by the Artificial Life Solutions company accidentally creates sentient AIs. The starting PC is the eponymous Thomas, who begins the game by realizing that he is alone. Other AIs spawned in the program become aware of their names and develop personalities. These others slowly join Thomas, with each character having a unique color, shape, size, jumping noise and capability, and, occasionally, special ability. While the player guides the AIs physically to solve the levels, the narrator describes their internal journeys and emotional development.

Coulson *et al.* argue that characters with physical, social, and task attractiveness encourage people to form "real and authentic emotional attachments to virtual characters" (2012, p. 176). A proper balance of the three types of attractiveness allows for maximized emotional investment in the character by the player. Although the characters of *TWA* are represented by nothing more than colored rectangles, these rectangles and their motion animations are aesthetically pleasing. The narration lends each of the characters individualized personality while the character-specific abilities each contribute in turn to the player's

ability to solve the levels. Together, the traits of the playable characters in *TWA* result in avatars that have a comfortable balance of aesthetic, social, and task attractiveness. Emotional investment towards these animate quadrilaterals is commonly referenced by reviewers who play *TWA*, including *Reality Check* host Robinson and *PBS Idea Channel* host Mike Rugnetta (Robinson, 2013; Rugnetta, 2013).

As Coulson *et al.* note, characters who balance this trifecta of attractive attributes become those characters the player feels are most real and the most likely to be ascribed agency. In *TWA*, where many PCs are controlled over the course of the story, even the least attractive character in a particular capacity comes across as a real entity, a true 'social other,' when experienced in conjunction with the group of PCs as a whole. The entire cast is collectively implied to consist of social others, having depth of character contingent upon progress through the game. The characters encourage a player-avatar relationship that seems to mix the avatar-as-social-other and avatar-as-symbiote relationships; the characters are expressive and come across as having agency of their own, but rely greatly on the player's participation in problem-solving to jointly progress.

Rather like certain participants in the Banks-Bowman study, while playing and discussing *TWA*, I found myself treating the characters as existing social entities, referring to the PCs by their ascribed genders but never as 'it.' This was true even during the very beginning of the game. The game itself challenges any inclination the player has towards viewing the avatars as objects through its masterful control of the lens of the narration. In game, the AIs were only ever intended to be tools in a program, non-thinking puzzle-solving objects completing tasks without awareness or agency. This story framing immediately dissuades the player from relating to the characters through the avatar-as-object relationship. Such a relationship would align the player with the negatively portrayed Artificial Life Solutions company. The strong gameplay push towards a player-avatar as-social-other relationship combined with the overall attractiveness of the cast of characters are likely the reason why even players who dislike a particular character tend to still refer to 'him' or 'her,' as if the character were a true existing personality the player had to work with in order to complete the game.

Game reviewer Adam Smith found the character Chris to be the least task attractive in *TWA*.

"Let's take a look at Chris, the most inept of the lot. He's a square square, squat and dumpy, with the agility of a damp towel ... If this were a utilitarian game, Chris is the one you would happily leave behind ... Chris can also be an obnoxious little blighter." (Smith, 2012)

Although Smith clearly despises having to aid the clumsy Chris through the levels of *TWA*, a description of the personality and intentions of Chris taken from Smith's article could easily be attributed to a real living person. Like Smith, I found myself describing the game avatars as if they were social others without cognitantly recognizing I was doing so. Yet, when encountering difficulty completing a puzzle, I rarely blamed the character. Instead, I experienced a blend of recognizing the characters as entities with agency and recognizing myself as their problem-solving partner, with responsibility to escort the avatars safely to the end. I would blame myself or the game control algorithms when I could not execute jumps properly, but never Thomas or his friends.

Players of *TWA* are encouraged to feel empathy for the characters but also to approach them as independently-existing sentient beings. This view is fortified through narration as well as through the particular system of game controls. The player feels a sense of responsibility for the characters, being necessary to help the PCs achieve their goals. Yet this relationship does more than fall into the parasocial spectrum of responsibility. Even the relationships that develop between various playable characters over the course of the game feel like genuine social relationships. The player is party to the individual and collective developmental growth the AIs experience, further enhancing player emotional investment and intensity. *TWA* encourages players to believe in the capabilities and choices of its characters, providing a strong push towards a social player-avatar relationship with Thomas and the others.

Conclusion

The debate concerned with the nature of player-avatar relationships is an important one because depending upon which relationships certain games emphasize or encourage, very different end results can be achieved. As Papale states, the player's relationship with the PC influences the choices the player makes during the game. Games inducing an avatar-as-me relationship can be fun and engaging, but can also be used to unsettle players by forcing them to make difficult moral decisions, as games such as the *The Walking Dead* use to great effect. Intelligent game designers who are aware of the impact of various player-PC relationships can use this connection with the avatar to induce moral dilemmas and inspire deeper contemplation about life and life choices.

The avatar-as-social other relationship can be useful in strengthening the player's empathy and broadening an understanding of and appreciation for the varied motives that exist in diverse society. As Banks and Bowman comment, parasocial and social relationships of different kinds influence the emotional intensity felt by players during gameplay. Knowledge of the possible benefits, internal or physical, that can result from strong player-avatar connections will continue to inspire game designers to create engaging ways for players to unite with their

digital counterparts. *Thomas Was Alone* provides a stand-out example of the investment a player can experience even during a relatively short game with characters that are designed to demonstrate their own purpose and agency. Ultimately, the Banks-Bowman classifications are an important new way to examine and re-examine past and future player-avatar relationships and consideration of the possible social nature of player-PC interaction can be a useful tool for game developers and scholars alike.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Santos and USF's Rhetoric and Gaming class of Fall 2014 for their encouragement towards the production of this article.

References

- Banks, J., & Bowman, N. D. (2014). Avatars are (sometimes) people too: Linguistic indicators of parasocial and social ties in player-avatar relationships. *New Media & Society*. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/10/16/1461444814554898.abstract>
- Bithell, M. (2012). *Thomas Was Alone* [PC Videogame]. London, UK: Mike Bithell.
- Coulson, M., Barnett, J., Ferguson, C. J., & Gould, R. L. (2012). Real feelings for virtual people: Emotional attachments and interpersonal attraction in video games. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 1(3), 176-184. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://psycnet.apa.org/?&fa=main.doiLanding&doi=10.1037/a0028192>
- Griebel, T. (2006). Self-portrayal in a simulated life: Projecting personality and values in *The Sims 2*. *Game Studies*, 6(1). Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/griebel>
- Horton, D., & Richard Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1521/00332747.1956.11023049?journalCode=upsy20#.VWUariFViko>
- Kafai, Y. B., Fields, D. A., & Cook, M. S. (2010). Your Second Selves Player-Designed Avatars. *Games and Culture*, 5(1), 23-42. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/5/1/23.refs>
- Lankoski, P. (2011). Player character engagement in computer games. *Games and Culture*, 6(4), 291-311. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/6/4/291.abstract>
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken*. Jonathan Cape, London.

Newman, J. (2002). The myth of the ergodic videogame. *Game Studies*, 2(1), 1-17. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>

O'Brien, M., & Kellan, A. (2011, January 24). Virtual Self. Web. *National Science Foundation*. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from http://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/science_nation/virtualself.jsp

Papale, L. (2014). Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships between Player and Avatar. *Journal of Games Criticism*, 1(2), 1-12. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/papale-1-2/>

Robinson, C. (2013, October 13). *Why Do We Care About Fictional Characters? – Reality Check* [Video File]. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmurTP3MF4Y>

Rugnetta, M. (2013, October 24). *Controlling vs 'Being' Your Video Game Avatar | Idea Channel | PBS Digital Studios* [Video File]. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLkyNzFmlHA>

Smith, A. (2012, June 28). Wot I Think: *Thomas Was Alone*. Retrieved 5 June 2015, from <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2012/06/28/wot-i-think-thomas-was-alone/>