Play Don't Show—Video Game Companions
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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the phenomenon of companion characters and how these figures have been employed within single-player, quest-based videogames. It does so by looking at how designers incorporate the roles and relationships between player-character and companion into the structural components of the game. The article argues that the player’s ability to assert control over the companion figure through the assigned control scheme can be categorized into three different modes: direct, indirect, and linked control. In addition, it examines the haptic storytelling techniques that designers may use to convey the status and development of the relationship between the player-character and their companion(s), when the latter acts as a shared entity between the player and the game system. It concludes that by establishing the relationship between these characters on a haptic level, designers can introduce powerful emotional behaviours into a game’s interactive phases.

KEYWORDS: game characters, companions, narrative, haptic storytelling, control scheme

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“Right-hand Pixels”: Controlling Companions and Employing Haptic Storytelling Techniques in Single-Player Quest-Based Videogames

Ida Broni Christensen

Introduction

BT-7274: Pilot mode engaged. Watch our step.

—Titanfall 2 (Respawn Entertainment, 2016)

While companion characters have been a part of the videogame landscape for quite some time, they have within recent years become a particular topic of interest within game development, where acclaimed titles such as God of War (2018), BioShock Infinite (2013), The Last of Us (2013), and the Mass Effect (2007–2012) and Dragon Age (2009–2014) series by Bioware, have been lauded for their inclusion and portrayal of such characters. A common trait for the companion figures that feature in these games is that they exist not only as characters on the narrative layer but also often occupy a significant role during moment-to-moment gameplay. Given the recent interest that the companion figure has received not only within videogame development but game studies as well (Burgess and Jones), this article aims to further uncover the unique role that this character occupies as an entity shared between the player and the game system. By investigating the ways that players can assert control over companion character(s) in single-player, quest-based games, I will demonstrate how designers may use linked and unlinked modes of control to infuse the interactive phases of their games with powerful haptic storytelling that explore social and emotional concepts such as teamwork, absence, loss, and disobedience.

“What is a Companion?”: Examining the Existing Discourse

Within the field of videogame development (Abercrombie; Gifford; Yoshidome) and, by extension, videogame studies (Emmerich, Ring, and Masuch; Greer; Jørgensen), the term “companion character” has commonly been used to refer to a particular set of characters that exist within gameworlds employing a story-driven, quest-based structure, and which have been designed to accompany, and frequently to assist,
the player-character in achieving the goals set forth by the game. These characters can be construed as affecting the integral and predefined goals of the game on two different ontological layers: narrative and gameplay. However, while it is possible for some companions to exist solely on the narrative layer, this article will focus its investigation on the companions that occupy a functional role within gameplay, as it is these figures who provide the designer with the means for employing storytelling on a haptic level.

“Pseudo-Avatars”: Companions as Entities Shared between Player and System

While much research within game studies examines the relationship between players and their avatars, the literature that investigates the player’s relationship with “pseudo-avatar” entities such as the companion figure has hitherto been relatively scarce. In his influential essay on avatars in videogames, Klevjer has noted that the player’s avatar is not merely to be considered a prosthetic, in other words, an extension of the player’s own body within the gameworld, but also “a kind of re-location” into that world (5). Following this line of thought, we can consider the figure of the companion to serve as a kind of prosthetic to the avatar itself when functioning in a gameplay role. A few authors have touched briefly upon the prosthetic nature of the companion character. One is Vella, who introduces the term “hybrid ludic subject position” to account for games, such as Bioware’s Mass Effect (2007), in which the player’s affordances and limitations are “fundamentally embodied within a single playable figure” but where this figure is then “transcend[ed]” as the game allows the player to exert indirect control over multiple companion figures (225). Another scholar is Sorg, who, in his analysis of Yorda and Ico’s relationship in the game ICO (2001), likewise highlights how the two characters are ultimately in terms of game logic to be considered part of the same agential structure (103). We can correlate Sorg’s “agential structure” with Sartre’s notion of the instrumental complex as applied to the domain of videogames by Vella. According to Vella, the instrumental complex encompasses all the capabilities and limitations of an individual’s embodiment within the (game)world: it is what allows them to reach a certain platform and at the same time what prevents them from being able to swim. Both Vella and Sorg thus present the companion figure as an entity that is shared between player and system, and which lends its affordances (and sometimes limitations) to the player-character’s instrumental complex, thereby becoming an integral part of the way in which the player sees and traverses the gameworld. Unfortunately, neither of the authors go into further depth on the topic, and I will therefore strive to expand upon their research by investigating the ways in which the player can assume control over the companion figure and how these different modes of control may be used to encourage a variety of haptic storytelling techniques.
The Three Modes of Control

If the player can exert control over the companion figures during moment-to-moment gameplay, then any action pertaining to these shared entities, which is not managed by the system, must be mapped to the player’s input device. In the following, I have identified three different ways in which the player can use the control scheme of their input device to exert commands over their companion character(s), which I will call direct, indirect, and linked control. While I will touch briefly on the first two types, my focus will be on exploring the notion of linked control, as it relates strongly to the ways in which the emotional bond between player-character and companion can be expressed during moment-to-moment gameplay.

Direct Control: The “Borrowed” Playable Figure

Companion characters that can be directly controlled by the player are often seen in games that belong to the tactical role-playing genre, such as Bioware’s Dragon Age series (2009–2014). In these games, the player can switch to control their companion(s) by pressing a specific button or clicking on a portrait icon, an action which effectively transfers all gameplay affordances and limitations within the gameworld to this new figure. As the companion comes to function as a “borrowed” playable figure, whose instrumental complex temporarily serves as the player’s main mode of engaging with the world, the game must signal to the player, either through its narrative or gameplay sequences, that this figure continues to be subjacent to the principal player-character. This can be done, for example, by letting the player directly control the narrative decisions made by the player-character in dialogue, but only allowing them to indirectly influence the choices made by the characters that serve as companions.

Indirect Control: The “Right-Finger” Companion

In other games, the player cannot directly control the companion as a playable figure but is instead offered ways of exerting indirect control over them. For example, in BioShock Infinite (2013), the player uses a single button on their control scheme to interact with any given object within the gameworld, including the context-dependent prompts triggered by Elizabeth, the game’s designated companion character. Rather than allowing the player to switch to Elizabeth and control her as a playable figure, the game only lets the player exert control over her actions through the fixed instrumental complex of their principal player-character. Some games, such as ICO, further reinforce the haptic presence of the indirectly controlled companion by dedicating one or several buttons on the player’s control scheme to actions that are solely associated with this figure. Crucially, however, the actions associated with the companion never take up more than half of the player’s control scheme, which is characteristically asymmetrical, as most of the mapped actions remain attached to the player-character.
Finally, a state of linked control can exist between the player-character and their companion. This mode of control may in some cases appear similar to the notion of the “borrowed” playable figure but is in fact rather a type of indirect control that becomes direct through a symbiotic link that manifests itself between player-character and companion. In ICO, this link is established—quite literally—through the interlinking of hands. Throughout the game, the player may indirectly control Yorda's movement by beckoning her towards their location, but once they grab hold of her hand, she relinquishes all autonomy to the player, enabling them to assert complete and direct control over her movement within the gamespace. This link between player-character and companion need not be physical; instead, it can manifest as a more abstract connection shared between characters. An example of this can be seen in Titanfall 2, where the player-character Jack Cooper maintains a mental connection to his companion, a giant mechanical robot known as BT-7274, through an aptly named “neural link” that allows him to take full control of the companion's mech suit during gameplay. Once the player enters the mech suit, and control is transferred from one to the other, the relationship between player-character and companion approximates a state of linked control in which the two figures essentially come to function as one single entity. The relationship between the two might therefore here be said to represent a unification rather than a collaboration, as the player is the only one who is in control of the actions being performed on screen, while the companion steps back into a narrative role as diegetic game guide. However, even in the case of Titanfall 2, the characters do not exist exclusively in this linked constellation but will often have to break out of their symbiotic state to progress through the game. While these breaks tend to be initiated by the player, they may also be prompted by the companion as a representative of the game system. This can occur on the level of narrative, such as when BT-7274 forcibly expels the player-character from his suit in order to sacrifice himself, but the companion may also express these signs of autonomy during moment-to-moment gameplay. In ICO, this is experienced towards the end of the game when Yorda begins to trip and collapse from exhaustion, momentarily stopping the player in their tracks, and serving as a haptic reminder that she is not just an extension of their own body but a character with her own affordances and limitations.

A state of linked control can thus be established if the companion relinquishes their autonomy and allows the player-character to take direct control over their actions during gameplay. However, the state can also emerge when the companion, rather than stepping back and allowing the player to take complete control, is perceived to work “in tandem” with the player's wishes. When discussing the player's kinaesthetic involvement with videogames, Gordon Calleja, citing Sue Morris, notes that mastering this type of involvement can contribute to a sensation of flow, in the sense that the player “feels like an extension of the game” and the game “feels like an extension of the player” (68). The link between player-character and companion may thus be metaphorical in the sense that some companions who are being indirectly controlled by the player may come to be so tightly incorporated into the player's kinaesthetic involvement with the game that the lines between the two figures start
to blur. It is thus possible for indirect control to naturally evolve into a state of linked control once the player achieves a state of flow where the actions performed by the companion feel like an extension of their own will. While not necessarily unachievable, this effect is arguably less pronounced in cases that employ direct control, as the player must here temporarily disrupt their own flow by switching and adapting to the instrumental complexes of different playable figures. In the final two sections of this article, I will therefore be focusing on cases of indirect control as I discuss how the player's control scheme and this dance between linking and unlinking, between being one and being separate, can be used by designers to create powerful moments of haptic storytelling.

**Build ’em Up: Establishing and Strengthening the Link**

In order to take advantage of haptic storytelling as it relates to emotions of teamwork and care, designers must first and foremost encourage the player to utilize the companion figure as an important part of their kinaesthetic involvement with the game. Games that employ companion figures that are integral to progression of gameplay will often have a control scheme that slowly increases the number of commands available to the player for directing their companion. In terms of gameplay, this gradual reveal of affordances has the practical purpose of establishing a continual learning curve: as the player becomes more proficient with the controls and mechanics of the game, the designers can increase the complexity of gameplay without overwhelming the player with too many options. However, in addition to this functional aspect, it is furthermore possible for developers to tie the development of these mechanics to the game's pre-scripted narrative by using the gradual increase in affordances to illustrate a growing bond between characters. That is, as a result of increased trust between in-game entities, control is gradually transferred from the system to the player. This type of development is seen in *The Last Guardian* (2016), where it is used to underscore a tale of growing trust and understanding between a young boy and a giant mythical beast named Trico. The game offers the player indirect control over their companion by allowing them to call Trico towards their position and direct the creature's attention towards certain objects within the world. At first, these instructions are very minimal in nature but, as the game progresses and the relationship between the two figures develops, the player begins to approximate a gratifying state of linked control with their companion as they gain access to an increasingly varied range of instructive actions and learn how to most efficiently guide Trico in executing these commands. While games like Titanfall 2 seek to convey a feeling of unconditional trust between its characters and are quick to grant the player full control over their companion's agency within the gameworld, the method used in *The Last Guardian* is much more tentative. The slow but steady transfer of control between the game's player-character and companion can be used to grant players a sense of personal accomplishment, as they have not simply earned this coefficient relationship between the characters by default but have achieved it by working diligently to master the challenges of the game's communication system.
Break ‘em Down: Removing or Subverting the Link

Once the player has come to rely on the companion as an integral part of their kinaesthetic involvement with the game, designers can then utilize this dependency to effectively stir up feelings of loss and betrayal by creating moments in which the player becomes disjointed or separated from this figure. Such moments can occur when a button associated with the companion no longer triggers the expected (re)action, but instead leaves the player with an eerie or frustrating silence to a call that was never answered. This technique is used to great effect in God of War (2018). Here, the player controls Kratos, the war-worn protagonist of the franchise, and issues commands to his son and companion Atreus by pressing the square (□) button on the DualShock controller. By default, this action will prompt Atreus to fire an arrow at the point where the player’s reticle is currently aimed. This mimetic link between the characters is established early in the game’s tutorial when Kratos teaches Atreus to hunt. As they approach a deer in the woods, the player is prompted to aim the reticle at the point where Atreus should shoot his arrow, guiding his gaze towards the most opportune part of the animal’s body. Meanwhile, letting go of the controls will cause the reticle to drift further away from the target. The scene epitomizes the “matryoshka doll” effect that exists between the player, their avatar, and the indirectly controlled companion: the player is using the input device to control their in-game avatar, who is then, in turn, conceptually framed as controlling the companion character (see figure 1). The scene, while doubling as a tutorial for the player, also underscores the teacher/student dynamic between Kratos and Atreus, and serves to firmly establish the respective social roles of each character. It thereby sets up expectations, which are later used to heighten the emotional impact of the events following in the wake of Atreus’s growing independence.

Figure 1. Kratos assists his son Atreus with firing an arrow during the tutorial mission of God of War (2018).
Absence and Loss

As the game progresses, Atreus becomes increasingly proficient with his bow and gradually becomes an indispensable tool in the player’s arsenal of affordances. However, he is eventually left incapacitated by a supernatural sickness and made temporarily unavailable as a companion. As the player enters their first combat encounter following Atreus’s disappearance, the consequences of his absence are felt on an increasingly haptic level. Throughout the game, players have been encouraged to utilize Atreus’ arrows on many occasions (for example, to distract and/or stun enemies), and have therefore integrated his actions into their own kinaesthetic array of movements. As such, they may find themselves, as I did, instinctively pressing the companion button to no avail during these first combat encounters. The lack of response to the player’s button presses invokes a strong feeling of suddenly having been severed from a body part that was once tightly integrated into one’s traversal of the world. What remains is an odd sensation of having a phantom limb, a limb that no longer exists on a purely systematic level, but which has been so integral to the play experience that it yet remains in the mind of the player as part of their instrumental complex. The sudden absence of Atreus’s response to the player’s haptic input forces them to re-evaluate their kinaesthetic involvement with the game. Since this re-evaluation temporarily disrupts their mental flow state, the player is likely to experience feelings of frustration and loss, as they, not unlike Kratos himself, must learn to cope without the abilities of a beloved figure that they have come to rely on.

Misalignment and Rebellion

Finally, the control scheme can be used to convey a sense of disobedience or disconnect between characters by making the companion flat out ignore the player’s haptic commands during gameplay. God of War provides an example of such a disagreement as it occurs in the relationship between Kratos and Atreus. After recovering from his illness, Atreus is once again able to accompany the player, but grows increasingly arrogant and careless upon learning of his own godhood. His disobedience towards Kratos manifests in various ways throughout the narrative, but, crucially, the game decides to integrate the rebellion of son against father into the structural elements of the game. For example, at times, Atreus may suddenly charge recklessly into battle without waiting for the player to trigger the encounter. During these fights, his behaviour cannot be managed by the player, whose haptic button presses are promptly ignored. While Atreus is technically still working towards the player’s goals by defeating enemies and moving towards the next stop on their journey, his methods for doing so are not necessarily in alignment with the ones intended by the player, and certainly not in alignment with the wishes of Kratos. Furthermore, by acting independently, Atreus greatly upsets the power dynamic that was presented at the beginning of the game, as he sharply breaks the linked control that was established through the conjoined gaze between the two characters. As such, one might say that, as a result of father and son no longer seeing eye to eye, a sense of disconnect is created.
through the lack of response to the player’s haptic input to a character that is shown to be visibly acting on screen.

Conclusion

By developing the control scheme of the companion character and making the relationship between this figure and the player-character be felt on a haptic level, designers can thus introduce powerful emotional behaviours into the game’s interactive phases and thereby avoid delegating such moments solely to scripted cutscenes. As such, in God of War, the game is not simply telling or showing the player that Atreus is rebelling against his father, but also making them feel it on a tangible and haptic level of moment-to-moment gameplay. We may compare this idea of expressing the personality and qualities of characters through gameplay to the classic “show, don’t tell” technique that is often advocated within non-ergodic media. In fact, within videogame development, this technique has been adopted to a new mantra of “play, don’t show.” This approach accommodates for the ergodic nature of games by encouraging designers to prompt players to enact certain scenarios instead of simply telling or showing these through non-interactive cutscenes and dialogue. When the companion character occupies a gameplay role, it can therefore, by virtue of being an entity that is so tightly connected to the primary player-character, be a particularly useful tool for this kind of haptic “play, don’t show” storytelling, especially when it comes to games that convey narratives about growing closer or drifting apart.

Works Cited


**Ludography**


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Companion Characters and Portal’s Companion Cube: A Response to Ida Broni Christensen

Kristine Jørgensen

In 2010 I published an article analysing companion characters as narrative devices in *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2* (Jørgensen). While companion characters were indeed not a novelty at the time, Bioware was using them in their role-playing games in ways that left little doubt about the potential of videogames to encompass interesting narratives. In her piece, Christensen shows that videogames have come a long way since then in using companions as storytelling tools. As she argues, videogame companions can have traits and affordances (we can call them companion mechanics) that give them a particular functional role in support of the avatar character, or they can be fictional characters with a narrative function in the game.

What strikes me when reading Christensen’s piece is that videogame companions are a sophisticated and powerful tool for combining gameplay and storytelling in videogames today. With Christensen’s paper as a point of departure, I will in this short response discuss what makes videogame characters powerful storytelling tools. Comparing Christensen’s observations with my own of 2010, it seems that Bioware roleplaying games of 2010 were using companions as micro-narratives in themselves: the companions carry an own inherent narrative that the player may activate through interacting with companions in a separate dialogue mode, but these roleplaying games do not really employ very interesting companion mechanics in other parts of gameplay. However, Christensen shows that modern videogames (and particularly relating to the broad action-adventure genre) are able to do so. In particular, what she calls linked control is particularly powerful when it comes to its potential for combining gameplay and storytelling because its ability to create an interdependency between avatar and companion that can be established and broken during the course of gameplay rather than through a separate mode, or mini-game. Christensen provides several excellent examples of this, including the relationship between Kratos and Atreus in *God of War*. This connection was established simultaneously as a functional and an emotional relationship through the training sessions that father and son undergo early in the game. When this relationship is broken, this is not only reflected in the narrative but also through the fact that affordances that the player has learn to rely upon are removed.

However, understanding why companions have such a powerful role lies in the idea of what a companion is—not only as videogame feature, but in terms of the general understanding of the word. Oxford English Dictionary refers to companion as “a person who often spends time with another; a person one chooses to socialize or
associate with,” including specifics such as a travelling partner, a comrade, a (sexual) partner, or a pet (“Companion”). This indicates that a companion is someone one has an established relationship with characterized either by time spent together, intimacy, or an emotional bond.

Take the example of Portal's Companion Cube. It is simply an inanimate cube used as an aid in simple but essential tasks such as keeping buttons pressurized in the game's puzzles; it doesn't afford more than being a weighted object that the player can carry with them and use for its physical properties to manipulate the environment around them. It does not have a personality and does not have behavior. However, when making it accessible to the player, the antagonist AI GLaDOS instructs the player that this cube “will accompany you through the test chamber—please take care of it,” and contrary to other cubes in the game, it has the symbol of a heart on it. Towards the end of the mission in which the player is first given the Companion Cube, GLaDOS tells the player that the cube has been a “faithful companion” but cannot join you further, but “would rather die in a fire than become a burden to you,” and then instructs the player to drop the cube into an incinerator. When the player does, GLaDOS dryly comments that the player “euthanized the companion cube quicker than any other test subject on record” (Valve Corporation) These prompts suggest that the cube is indeed something more than a random object and invites the player to handle it with a particular kind of care.

The Companion Cube poses some interesting questions about what a videogame companion really is. As an object for manipulation and with no explicit abilities apart from its basic physics, there is little that associates it with other human or animal videogame companions such as Yoshi in Super Mario Bros., Ellie in The Last of Us, or Kim Kitsuragi in Disco Elysium, who are characters that “accompany, and frequently assist, the player-character in achieving the goals set forth by the game” (Christensen). As the Companion Cube is clearly no character in the traditional sense, we must look at other characteristics to understand the assumed “companion-ness” of the Companion Cube. If we look at the cube through Christensen's lens, we see that it does not really fit into her modes of direct and indirect control. Since the cube has no degree of autonomy or agency but is completely dependent on the player's direct manipulation, it cannot really take control over its actions—although the player definitely takes charge of its fate. However, if we look beyond the cube's lack of agency, we can see that it does adhere to Christensen's mode of linked control in which there is a symbiotic link between avatar and companion and the two operate as one. As such, the cube can be understood in terms of “a thing that goes with or resembles another” (“Companion”); a counterpart to the player and a tool that is necessary for the player to progress in the game. Further, what Portal does in a simple but ingenious way is create a sense of attachment between the Companion Cube and the player through techniques similar to God of War. Through verbal anthropomorphisation, combined with the linked control of direct manipulation, the game establishes a link of intimacy between the two, and this intimacy is then again violently broken down when the player incinerates the cube. The incineration is important here because it effectively demonstrates that the cube has been given a particular status of intimacy. Incinerating the Companion Cube is likely to feel wrong in the light of GLaDOS'
anthropomorphisation of the object, but it is not something the player can refuse if they want to progress in the game.

In conclusion, even though the Companion Cube breaks with some of the basic ideas of what we associate with a companion character both in its representation and its game mechanic, it is an example of how a sense of companionship, and thus emotional attachment, can emerge from simple techniques.

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Ludography

"Portal" and the Minimalistic Companion: A Response to Kristine Jørgensen

Ida Broni Christensen

Back in 2019, when I wrote my initial master’s thesis on the topic of companion characters in videogames, I used Portal’s Companion Cube as a case example of what this type of character might look like when stripped down to its core components. While Jørgensen rightly argues that the Cube is “clearly no character in the traditional sense,” (2) primarily citing its lack of autonomy and agency as an inanimate object, the game undoubtedly seeks to frame it as a “quasi-person” to which the player may ascribe “thoughts and intentions” (Blom 124). In fact, the way in which GLaDOS presents the Cube to the player can serve as an allegory for how designers of all games featuring companion characters strive to encourage players to form an attachment to such figures. After all, Portal is a game that strips level design down to its basic components of cubes and buttons, with GLaDOS serving in the role of diegetic game designer and the Cube as an object that has seemingly been designed by the Aperture Science facility with the express purpose of eliciting feelings of teamwork, guilt, and grief from its test subjects.

Moreover, as Jørgensen points out, the player’s primary method of asserting control over their companion in Portal is through linked control. As an inanimate object, the Cube is wholly dependent on the player in order to move from A to B. In her response, Jørgensen therefore posits that the player’s relationship with the Cube “does not really fit into [the] modes of direct and indirect control” (2). While I would argue that the game does allow the player to indirectly control and manipulate the movement of the Cube by using the Portal Device (a tool that allows them to manipulate the game space itself), Jørgensen’s rejection of the player’s use of indirect control raises an interesting point regarding my original definition of the term. When defining the term in my article, I had primarily used games in which the player asserts indirect control over their companion through diegetic commands (verbalized or not). However, in the case of Portal, and other games where the player can manipulate the game space (whether it be through magic, technology, or mechanical switches), the player is able to indirectly control the companion’s movement without having to direct a command at them. An argument could therefore be made that indirect control can be framed as occurring in one of two ways. The first relies on a two-way communication between player and companion where the former makes a request to which the latter responds. The second does not always necessitate a response from the companion and thus tends to exemplify a more one-sided type of play experience. Even so, Portal’s framing of the Cube as a “quasi-person” and its use of basic interdependence mechanics can almost make players forget that the game is an inherently one-sided collaborative play experience, and is therefore, as Jørgensen concludes, a true testament to how even relatively “simple techniques” (2) can serve to make the player concerned about companion figures in games.
Works Cited


Ludography