

## Panel G1

Auditorium

### Death, Life, and (Re)Animation

Jason Kennedy

#### The Protean Double: Critiquing the Screen Presence of Synthespian Counterparts



In his influential book *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects and the Virtual Actor*, film theorist Dan North asks whether there is “any use for synthespians in lead acting roles other than for the technological novelty value” (2008, 155). Animation theorists and mainstream film critics often denounce the pursuit of photorealistic animated humans as unattainable, undesirable, and spectacle for its own sake. In her critique of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Sakakibara, 2001), Vivian Sobchack churns up the following anonymous review of the movie from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com): “If computer animation could ever get to the point of creating an entirely believable human representation (and this is a dubious possibility), then, as animation, it will have entirely missed the point” (2006, 178-179). The ensuing generations of technological improvements since 2001 now make a photoreal synthespian a more tangible possibility, but even some industry veterans remain skeptical. Business development director Greg Philyaw (formerly of Giant Studios and Rhythm & Hues) admonishes: “stay away from photo-real with a human” (Nakashima, 2011). However, there is legitimate financial and artistic encouragement for achieving verisimilar digital doubles of extant and posthumous actors beyond spectacle alone. These reasons include, but are not limited to: actor safety when dangerous stunts are required; replacing an actor who dies during a film’s production; extending, rewriting, and extracting further value from a posthumous film star’s persona; providing performer continuity when revisiting older film properties; enabling a single actor to play multiple ages and physiologies (e.g.: weight-gain or weight-loss) of him/herself within the same movie, as well as across movies produced many years apart; providing opportunities for improvements to the visual quality of a digital double in future releases as VFX technology advances; assurance for the director and producers that a single long take featuring the best acting moments can be constructed from a performance capture session; greater focus on acting with fewer concerns about lighting and staging during each take.

This paper attempts to elucidate these reasons by examining synthespians since 2010 that inhabit the very edge of believability within the Uncanny Valley. Foremost among these are the doubles of Paul Walker in *Furious 7* (James Wan, 2015) and Peter Cushing in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Gareth Edwards, 2016). The former is a digital recreation designed to seamlessly occupy the same screen space as Walker after the actor’s death midway through filming the movie; the latter revisits an iconic character through reanimating a long-dead actor expressly to remedy problematic plot holes in the original *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977). In both cases, the performances of the doubles are created by the combined efforts of digital artists and other actors (whose true likenesses we never see on screen). This is wholly different from many previous human synthespian roles, such as those in *The Polar Express* (Robert Zemeckis, 2004), *Beowulf* (Zemeckis, 2007), and *A Christmas Carol* (Zemeckis, 2009), where the referent actors create the performances for their digital doubles.

In this paper I frame my practical experience of producing 3D animated virtual actors against the film and animation theories of Dan North (2008), Lisa Bode (2010), Barry King

(2011), and Birgitta Hosea (2012). In so doing, this paper seeks to provide a more holistic critique of the effectiveness of recent synthespian digital doubles at producing performances that are physically and emotionally indistinguishable from their referents. This critique is extended to my own animations featuring photoreal incarnations of deceased actors, with advice to animators and theorists about how to create and interpret such intimate performances.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Biography**

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Jason Kennedy is a Senior Lecturer and Animation Pathway Leader in the Digital Design Department, School of Art & Design, Auckland University of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. He is a practicing artist with work in 3D animation, 3D Fine Art, video projection, and fine jewellery.

Jason entered the fine art world circuitously through his initial ambition to become a palaeontologist. He enrolled in Albion College's geology programme (in Albion, Michigan, USA), only to discover that while he still loved dinosaurs, he liked the idea of animating them more than digging them up. Jason graduated from Albion in 2004 with a major in studio art (drawing) and minors in geology and mathematics. He completed a MFA in electronic art from the University of Cincinnati in 2007. His Masters research focused on the role of identity and immortality vis-à-vis digital representations of self. Jason is currently working on his PhD, which examines how our understanding of what is acting must change in light of modern animation and performance capture practices. In addition to being an animator, Jason is also an actor, and he draws on these two areas of experience in his research.