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Cuphead as Playable Animation: Authorship, Aesthetics, and Visual Language in the Indie Video Game

Elisabet Fonts
Polytechnic University of Catalonia (Spain)

This article explores Cuphead *(Maddigan, 2020) as a paradigmatic example of aesthetic authorship in the independent video game scene. Rather than treating animation as a decorative or narrative supplement,* Cuphead *integrates traditional animation techniques, such as frame-by-frame drawing, watercolour backgrounds, and analogue visual effects, as the core language that structures the game's visual identity, mechanics, and emotional experience. From this perspective, the game is not merely a video game that features animation, but an animated work that comes to life through interaction.*

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology combining animation studies, game theory, and cultural analysis. Through an examination of characters, visual style, musical composition, and gameplay rhythm, the article demonstrates that Cuphead *operates as a "playable cartoon" in which animation, sound, and mechanics form an inseparable expressive system. The paper further discusses the role of authorship within the indie production model, highlight-*

Este artículo analiza Cuphead *(Maddigan, 2020) como un caso paradigmático de autoría estética en el contexto del videojuego independiente. Lejos de emplear la animación como un recurso decorativo o narrativo, el juego integra técnicas tradicionales, como la animación cuadro por cuadro, los fondos acuarelados y los efectos visuales analógicos, como núcleo estructural de su identidad visual, mecánica y expresiva. Desde esta perspectiva,* Cuphead *no es simplemente un videojuego que contiene animación, sino una animación tradicional que cobra vida mediante la interacción.*

El estudio adopta una metodología cualitativa e interdisciplinar que combina teoría de la animación, estudios del videojuego y análisis cultural. A través del análisis de personajes, estilo visual, música y jugabilidad, se demuestra que Cuphead *funciona como un "cartoon jugable" en el que animación, sonido y mecánicas forman un sistema expresivo integrado. Además, se examina el papel de la autoría en el modelo de producción indie, subrayando cómo la dirección creativa de los hermanos Moldenhauer configura una firma es-*

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ing how the creative direction of the Moldenhauer brothers contributes to a coherent aesthetic signature. Ultimately, Cuphead *is proposed as an auteur game that reinterprets early animation languages through a contemporary, interactive lens.*

Keywords: Cuphead*, playable animation, indie video games, authorship, visual aesthetics.*

tética coherente. En suma, el artículo propone que Cuphead *puede ser leído como una obra de autor que reinterpreta el legado de la animación clásica desde una lógica interactiva y contemporánea.*

Palabras clave: Cuphead*, animación jugable, videojuego independiente, autoría, estética visual.*

In recent years, the independent video game sector has fostered a notable proliferation of projects that break away from the dominant aesthetic and narrative conventions of the industry. In contrast to the hyperrealist logic and large-scale productions of so-called AAA titles, indie developments have established a space for creative freedom, formal experimentation, and authorial expression (Anthropy, 2012; Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2020). Within this context, *Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) stands out as a paradigmatic case, both for its critical and commercial reception and for its uniquely distinctive visual proposal, rooted in the visual languages of early 20th-century traditional animation.

The game is notable for its use of classical techniques such as frame-by-frame animation, hand-painted backgrounds, and analog visual effects[1] that directly reference animated shorts from the 1930s, particularly the work of studios like Fleischer and the early productions of Walt Disney (Criado, 2019; Finch, 2011). This aesthetic revival is not merely driven by nostalgia or pastiche but rather emerges as a deliberate expressive strategy capable of generating new forms of meaning within the language of video games. The recurrent use of inherited styles in contemporary media should not be understood as a lack of innovation, but rather as a form of cultural recontextualization that can enable critical or affective readings (Tosca, 2023). Within this context, *Cuphead* reimagines traditional animation through an interactive logic, transforming visual nostalgia into a ludic and aesthetic experience.

While *The art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) provides an extensive account of the game's visual production process, this study differs from it by adopting an academic perspective grounded in animation theory, authorship studies, and

1 Analog visual effects: This term is used here to describe digitally simulated imperfections such as film grain, flicker, or cel irregularities that emulate the texture of pre-digital animation.

visual analysis. Rather than describing the making of the game, our approach seeks to interpret how *Cuphead* reconfigures the language of traditional animation through interactive design and aesthetic authorship.

Unlike other titles that use animation as a decorative, narrative, or aesthetic resource, *Cuphead* inverts the traditional model: it is not a video game that contains animation, but a playable animation, a piece of traditional animation that comes to life and gains meaning only through interaction. As will be further detailed in the following sections, unlike other titles that use animation merely as a decorative, narrative, or aesthetic resource, *Cuphead* inverts the traditional model: it is not a video game that contains animation, but a playable animation, a piece of traditional animation that comes to life and gains meaning only through interaction. This article's primary objective is to analyse *Cuphead* as a work in which animation does not serve a merely ornamental function, but a structural one. To this end, three specific objectives are proposed: to position *Cuphead* within the theoretical framework of authorship in independent video games, recognizing its aesthetic dimension as a potential authorial signature; to examine the visual and expressive resources that define the game's aesthetics; and to analyse the role of animation as the central language shaping both narrative and gameplay mechanics. The article proceeds from the premise that traditional animation in *Cuphead* functions as the backbone of the gaming experience: it defines its visual identity, guides the narrative through character expressiveness, and directly influences the mechanics and rhythms of interaction.

This approach aligns with the ongoing debate on authorship in indie video games, where creative control and aesthetic coherence allow for the recognition of an authorial voice (Baecque, 2003; Parker, 2014). In *Cuphead's* case, the direct involvement of the Moldenhauer brothers in its design strengthens this interpretation, placing the game within an aesthetic tradition defined by the critical reappropriation of past visual languages (Thomas and Johnston, 1995). Based on this foundation, the article argues that *Cuphead* can be understood as an auteur work that reinterprets classical animation through an interactive lens. Its analysis reveals how animation, far from being a decorative element, constitutes the aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical core of the game.

AESTHETICS AND AUTHORSHIP IN INDIE VIDEO GAMES

Over the past two decades, independent video games have emerged as fertile ground for aesthetic experimentation and authorial expression. Unlike titles produced by major studios, typically subject to industrial logics, large budgets, and hierarchical production chains, indie games have allowed small teams (sometimes even a single individual) to develop visual, narrative, and gameplay proposals that diverge from mainstream market conventions. This relative freedom has made indie games a privileged platform for exploring new forms of digital authorship and distinctive expressive languages (Juul, 2019; Perron, 2018).

Cuphead stands out strongly within this scene. Developed by Studio MDHR, a small team led by brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer, its creation is notable

not only for its scale but for its bold aesthetic vision. In contrast to the dominant models of digital realism or the vector minimalism common in other indie games, *Cuphead* embraces traditional animation inspired by 1930s cartoons. This choice is not merely a visual homage, but an aesthetic and cultural statement that positions the game within an alternative genealogy of video games, one that values visual craftsmanship, animated expressiveness, and organic integration between form and function.

Within this framework, it is important to consider how authorship in indie games is manifested through a recognizable aesthetic coherence. Authorship can persist even in collaborative media, provided there is clear creative direction, a stylistic signature, and a unifying vision (Baecque, 2003; Parker, 2014). In *Cuphead*, this authorship is reflected in a highly identifiable aesthetic, where every visual element, from character design to background texture and musical rhythm, follows a deliberate compositional logic. The result is a game where form is not decorative but structural, and where aesthetics become language.

In this context, traditional animation functions as a visual authorial signature: it is not merely a representational medium, but a system of thought. Animation can be understood as "a form of non-mimetic visual writing, capable of expressing concepts, emotions, and narrative structures through plastic movement" (Wells, 1998). In *Cuphead*, this translates into animation that does not aim to imitate reality, but to construct its own universe with unique visual, physical, and emotional rules. The choice of "rubber hose"[2] style is not just an homage; it is an expressive strategy that enables narrative and ludic elasticity rarely attainable through other visual means.

This link between aesthetics and authorship becomes even more relevant when examining the current state of indie game studies. Numerous works have highlighted the importance of visuality as a distinguishing feature of indie games in contrast to mainstream titles (Finch, 2011; Ruffino, 2020). Within this line of research, recent studies have focused on how aesthetics not only shape a game's identity but can also be understood as a narrative, emotional, and even mechanical device. In this sense, visual style ceases to be mere container and becomes content: a way of communicating, engaging the player, and constructing meaning.

The use of analogue and labour-intensive techniques, over 50,000 hand-drawn frames, watercolour-painted backgrounds, and 24-frames-per-second animation, reinforces this authorial conception. In a medium where digital technologies have standardized aesthetic norms, the choice of an "obsolete" style is not regressive, but radically creative. It represents a critical recovery of the past, in the sense of creative repetition: the reappropriation of old languages not as imitation but as a strategy of difference, as an artistic and cultural gesture (Tosca, 2023).

2 Rubber hose style: refers to the elastic, highly flexible animation typical of the 1920s and 1930s, characterized by exaggerated, fluid movement and simplified anatomy.

Furthermore, traditional animation operates in *Cuphead* as the cohesive core across all aspects of the game. There is no separation between the visual and the mechanical: everything is animated to be played. Mechanics respond to the rhythm of the animation; attacks are foreshadowed through expressive gestures; the backgrounds breathe, deform, and participate. This total integration recalls the logic of animated musicals, where music, action, and image are synchronized as a unified entity (Finch, 2011; Pastor, 2017). In *Cuphead*, animation organizes space, time, and tone, defining the game's identity as a whole.

Cuphead occupies an intersection between art, animation, and game design, which suggests that it can be interpreted as an auteur work. Here, animation is not a secondary channel but the central device through which the interactive experience is constructed. In contrast to the hyper productive logic of AAA games, *Cuphead* embraces slowness, craftsmanship, visual attention, and animated precision. Its aesthetics are not an effect, they are its structural and narrative core.

Although *Cuphead* remains the only title developed by Studio MDHR to date, its aesthetic project reveals a consolidated authorial signature. The direct involvement of Chad and Jared Moldenhauer in the artistic design, creative direction, and supervision of every aspect of development ensures an internal cohesion reflected at all levels of the game, from visual design to narrative rhythm and mechanical decisions.

Earlier examples such as *Dragon's Lair* (1983) and *Space Ace* (1984), both directed by former Disney animator Don Bluth, already explored the idea of animation as the core structure of gameplay. Although mechanically limited, these titles transformed the player's experience into an interactive cartoon. *Cuphead* reclaims that lineage but reimagines it through full player agency and contemporary animation craft, thus bridging historical and ludic traditions. In an environment where authorship is often diluted in collaborative structures, *Cuphead* manages to maintain a unified aesthetic and conceptual voice. While it is more difficult to establish an "authorial signature" without a comparative trajectory, as might be seen, for example, in Conrad Roset's work on *Gris* and *Neva*, the strength of *Cuphead's* visual proposal and its ability to extend beyond the game itself reinforce its value as an auteur work.

The expansion of *Cuphead* through comics, merchandise, and especially *The Cuphead Show!* (Netflix, 2022) demonstrates how the original aesthetics have functioned as the core identity of a recognizable intellectual property (Deke, 2024; MDHR Studios, 2024). A transmedia IP does not merely multiply content across formats; it organizes a coherent narrative universe in which each medium amplifies and re-signifies the original work (Scolari, 2013). Along these lines, *Cuphead's* retro-animated aesthetic acts as the guiding thread that enables the transfer of its identity to new platforms without losing cohesion. This dimension does not dilute the authorial proposal, it amplifies it. Transmedia expansion can strengthen the figure of the author as a world-builder, capable of projecting a sustained aesthetic vision across multiple formats (Jenkins, 2006).

The construction of a singular aesthetic universe, based on a critical re-reading of classical animation languages, is therefore not a nostalgic operation. It implies the projection of a creative vision across diverse cultural formats. From

this perspective, *Cuphead* can be understood not only as playable animation, but also as an auteur work that reconfigures the traditional boundaries between video game, animation, and interactive spectacle.

For all these reasons, it is fitting to consider *Cuphead* not as a video game with animation, but as playable animation, a piece that only comes to life through interaction. Rather than representing retro aesthetics, the game proposes a critical reactivation of classical animation languages from a contemporary, authorial, and ludic perspective (Criado, 2019).

Within this framework, *Cuphead* becomes a paradigmatic case, not only for its reinterpretation of a traditional visual language, but for doing so through a logic of authorship that permeates every aspect of its design (Juul, 2019). Its retro aesthetic is not a superficial nostalgic gesture, but an expressive strategy that places animation at the centre of the ludic experience. From this perspective, the game should not be analysed merely as a visually attractive product, but as a cohesive aesthetic proposal where authorship is manifested through style, form, and movement (Wells, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

While *Cuphead* draws inspiration from early animation aesthetics, its integration of these visual principles into the game's mechanics distinguishes it from earlier examples, where animation served primarily as spectacle rather than as a structural system of play. This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, focused on the textual, visual, and ludic analysis of the video game *Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020). The research follows an interpretive analytical model, combining tools from animation studies, game theory, and cultural studies. The aim is to understand how traditional animation functions as a structural language within the gaming experience, articulating aesthetics, narrative, and interactivity.

The methodological procedure was structured into three phases. First, a visual and stylistic analysis of the game was conducted, with particular attention to character design, settings, and animated elements. This analysis was based on classical principles of animation, with special emphasis on squash and stretch, anticipation, timing, and exaggeration as expressive and functional mechanisms (Crafton, 1993; Thomas and Johnston, 1995).

Second, the visual expressiveness of the characters, both protagonists and enemies, was analysed. The study focused on animated design, gestures, and deformations, as well as the stylistic references to 1920s and 1930s classic animation, including figures such as Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop, and Cab Calloway. Screenshots and graphic comparisons were used to examine how animation generates narrative agency, emotion, and player engagement (Maddigan, 2020)

This qualitative approach follows a hermeneutic and semiotic framework, drawing from (Echo, 1989) notion of the *open work*, where meaning emerges through the interaction between text and reader in this case, between animation

and player. The analysis of visual language also integrates (McLuhan, 1964) media theory, which conceives animation as an extension of human perception, and (Barthes, 1977) concept of visual codes as applied to movement and gesture. These theoretical foundations provide a rigorous basis for interpreting *Cuphead*'s aesthetic and ludic dimensions, integrating visual, sonic, and interactive components into a unified interpretive framework. Similar methodological approaches can be found in Fernández-Vara's (2015) model of textual analysis for games and (Garin, 2019) study of visual gags in interactive media, both of which validate the use of aesthetic and semiotic analysis as legitimate tools within game studies.

Third, the musical dimension was addressed as a rhythmic extension of the visual language. The soundtrack composed by Kristofer Maddigan was studied in relation to its synchronization with animated action, articulating rhythm, tension, and expressiveness. This analysis was grounded in theoretical frameworks on narrative music (Gorbman, 1987; Tagg, 2013) and the historical references of classic animated musicals. This methodological approach allows us to frame *Cuphead* not only as a case study in visual design, but as an example of *playable animation*, where the principles of movement and rhythm define both aesthetics and interaction.

Playable Animation: A Unified Language of Aesthetics and Mechanics

One of *Cuphead's* most distinctive proposals is its conception of animation not as a decorative resource, but as a fundamental mechanical dimension of the game. Unlike other titles where visuals serve a secondary aesthetic function, in *Cuphead*, animation shapes the ludic experience on all levels: it anticipates actions, signals threat, sets rhythms, and structures interaction. The player doesn't just watch an animation, they play with it, interpreting gestures and patterns to make strategic decisions; they play within it, immersed in a visual choreography that organizes the space and timing of combat; and they play through it, deciphering visual transformations that guide their real-time actions. Thus, a true form of playable animation is configured, where aesthetics and mechanics merge into a single language.

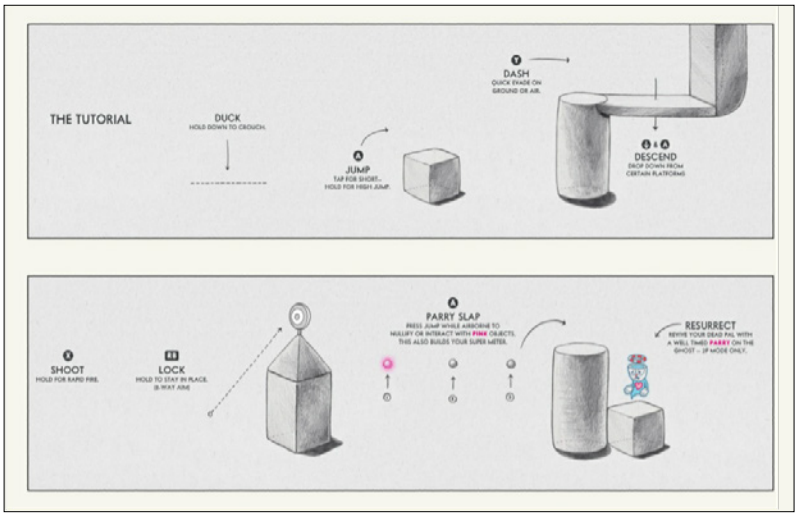
A particularly revealing example of this logic appears in the initial training screen, where the player learns the game's fundamental mechanics. This tutorial goes beyond merely explaining commands, it acts as a visual introduction to *Cuphead's* animated language. Jumping, shooting, parrying, and dodging are represented through exaggerated, clear movements within a graphic environment reminiscent of classic technical design. According to its creators, this sequence was conceived as a tribute to traditional animation art materials: they were inspired by technical drawings on blue paper, and photographed parchment using techniques that emulate stop-motion aesthetics, evoking the handmade, artisanal rhythm of 1930s animated shorts. This mise-en-scène, built with Bristol board and photographed outdoors using homemade methods, creates an effect that replicates the visual logic of early cartoons while introducing the player to the system of animated reading that defines the entire game (Maddigan, 2020).

Thus, the tutorial does more than teach how to play, it trains the player to read animation, establishing from the outset an aesthetic pedagogy based on gesture, rhythm, and anticipation.

One of the most revealing aspects of this integration between animation and gameplay is the choreography of gameplay itself: the way animated movements of enemies and protagonists function as precise visual signals that the player must read and interpret in real time. Each boss is presented as an animated sequence constructed through rhythm, anticipation, and transformation, which not only conveys expressiveness but organizes the phases of the battle (Cooper, 2019; Kalmanlehto, 2024).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the first image highlights the confrontation between characters through opposing lines of action (in red), which mark scenic tension. In the second image, one can observe the parabolic movement of the enemy character (in light purple) and its progressive deformation (in dark purple), exemplifying the use of the squash and stretch principle. The final two images clearly demonstrate the principle of anticipation: the enemy adopts an extended and rigid posture that signals an imminent attack on the protagonist, establishing a direct link between animation and mechanics (Williams, 2009).

Figure 1. Frame from the initial Cuphead tutorial, introducing the game's basic mechanics



Source: *The Art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2019).

In this sense, the classical principles of animation, anticipation, squash and stretch, timing, and exaggeration not only enhance expressiveness but function as the operative language through which the game communicates its rules (Thomas and Johnston, 1995). Gesture clarity allows the player to anticipate attacks, identify weak points, and react strategically. Thus, animation does not merely accompany gameplay: it structures, defines, and renders it legible.

Figure 2. Cinematic references for the main characters (Studio MDHR, 2017)

Source: Author's elaboration.

Moreover, this visual interaction is not limited to bosses or main characters. Environmental elements, far from being decorative, are also animated with mechanical intent. Moving platforms, objects that come to life, backgrounds that transform or generate active threats (such as hands emerging from the scene or collapsing structures) turn the setting into a dynamic component of the gameplay experience. This environmental animation, which in other games might serve as passive atmosphere, here becomes an active part of the challenge, contributing to the game's rhythm, difficulty, and expressive load (Cooper, 2019).

The game's very structure reinforces this logic. *Cuphead* adopts a boss rush format, a series of boss fights with minimal narrative transitions. This choice accentuates the rhythmic and visual dimension of the game: each battle functions

as a closed animated sequence, with its own tempo, visual transformation, and mechanical evolution. The player must constantly adapt to changes in rhythm and form, generating an intensely visual experience marked by emotional tension and temporal precision. This structure also enables visual learning: repeated patterns encourage the player to observe carefully, decipher gestures, and anticipate movements (Manovich, 2002).

Far from being a superficial stylistic layer, animation in *Cuphead* functions as a true visual game system. It operates as an autonomous language that informs, organizes, and sustains interaction through aesthetics. The player does not merely execute commands, they interpret and perform an animated score, where each gesture, transformation, or pause carries ludic implications. This integration makes the game a paradigmatic example of how animation can simultaneously function as an expressive device and a mechanical tool, blurring traditional boundaries between visual form and interactive function (Buchan, 2007).

VISUAL LANGUAGE, CHARACTERIZATION, AND ANIMATED MUSICALITY: AN EXPRESSIVE ANALYSIS OF 'CUPHEAD'S' CHARACTERS

Analysing the characters in *Cuphead* requires a dual approach: on the one hand, recognizing their roots in the visual archetypes of 1920s and 1930s animation, and on the other, examining their aesthetic, emotional, and mechanical roles within the game's overall design (Blair, 1994; Finch, 2011). In this context, characters operate not only as narrative or mechanical devices, but as symbolic nodes that concentrate cultural, affective, and ludic meanings. This section addresses how these three dimensions are constructed in both the protagonists and the main antagonists of the game.

One of the foundational pillars of *Cuphead's* aesthetic proposition lies in the design and animation of its characters. Far from functioning as mere playable avatars or mechanical enemies, these characters constitute a visual and expressive corpus that anchors the game in the tradition of classical animation, while simultaneously updating its conventions through interactivity. The game does not merely evoke past figures, it reinterprets them through a contemporary logic, integrating them into an experience defined by action, humor, and constant transformation. The following analysis explores how *Cuphead* builds its universe through the design of its heroes and villains, and how these characters embody formal, narrative, and mechanical principles that place them at the very core of the gameplay experience (Newman, 2008; Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Expressiveness, Design, and Visual References in 'Cuphead's' Characters

The universe of *Cuphead* is defined by the presence of characters that synthesize the heritage of classic animation with a contemporary interactive focus. Both heroes and villains are constructed through an animated logic that privileges

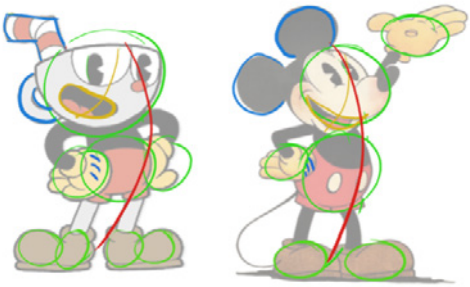
visual expressiveness, narrative economy, and formal iconicity. In this sense, characters are not just playable entities but aesthetic figures that function as carriers of meaning within the game's visual experience.

Animated Heroes: Between Homage and Agency

Cuphead and Mugman embody archetypes from 1920s and 1930s American cartoons. Their references are evident: Mickey Mouse, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Felix the Cat, and Bimbo. Their elastic bodies, "pie-eyed" cutouts, rubber hose limbs, and rounded proportions place them squarely within the visual imagination of *Silly Symphonies* (1939), or the early *Looney Tunes*. Their design emphasizes charm and approachability, reinforced by constant, bouncy, and rhythmic animation that transmits energy to the player (Kothenschulte, 2021b; Maddigan, 2020).

Cuphead, in particular reflects a rebellious and optimistic personality, inheriting the spirit of Mickey Mouse's resilience during the Great Depression (Finch, 2011). He is described as "a headstrong optimist whose confidence and love for adventure may come off as reckless, but who ultimately means well" (Bergen, 2018; Corse, 2018; Maddigan, 2020). His silhouette is designed to be recognizable: the handles on his head function as ears, an explicit homage to Mickey, and his line of action conveys dynamism and balance. The use of red in his outfit not only distinguishes him from his brother but also provides strong visual contrast with backgrounds and enemies.

Figure 3. Comparative visual analysis between Cuphead and Mickey Mouse



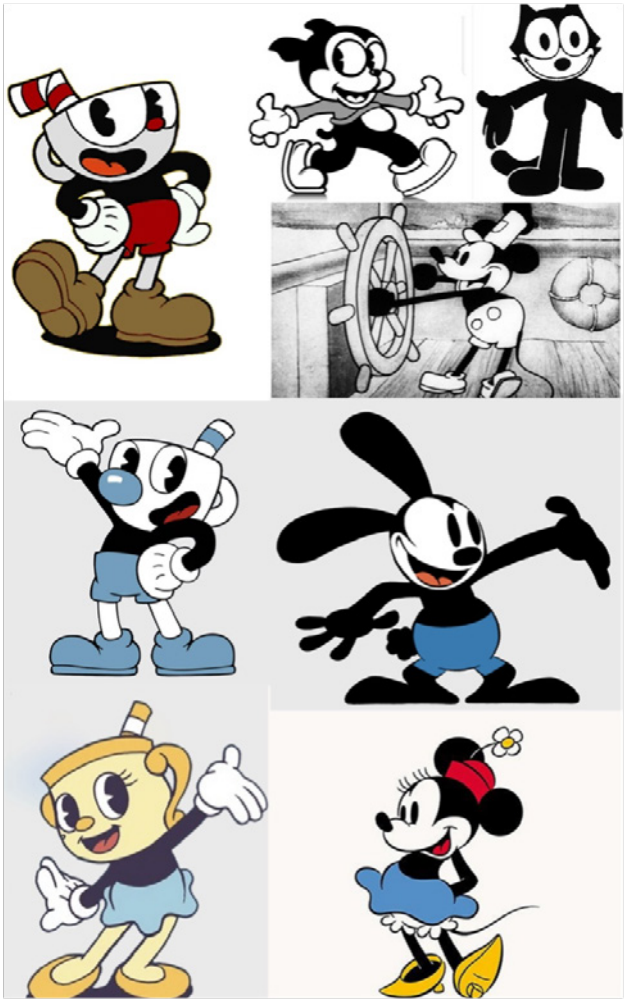
Source: Author's elaboration.

Mugman, by contrast, serves as a more cautious and gentler counterpart. His blue colouring, traditionally assigned to the second player, establishes a complementary visual dynamic with *Cuphead*. Although the differences between them are subtle (a slightly larger nose, for example), the chromatic, attitudinal, and gestural contrast helps reinforce his identity. His design evokes characters like Oswald, accentuating a more innocent, even childlike, aura.

Ms. Chalice, introduced as a playable character in the expansion *The Delicious Last Course* (2022), represents a significant evolution within the *Cuphead*

universe. Although she first appears as a secondary character in the base game, it is in the DLC that she assumes narrative and mechanical protagonism. Inspired by characters such as Minnie Mouse (Bergen, 2018; Corse, 2018; MDHR Studios, 2024), Ms. Chalice draws from classic cartoon elements while subverting them through a contemporary lens. Her visual design departs from the traditional chromatic canon: the combination of soft yellow, sky blue, and white details avoids colours typically associated with femininity in historical animation. Her rounded shape, amplified facial expressiveness, and simple yet distinctive costume gives her a clear and recognizable silhouette, designed both for visual distinction and to emphasize her character.

Figura 4. Cinematic references for King Dice, The Devil and Cala Maria



Source: Author's elaboration.

Narratively, Ms. Chalice marks a paradigm shift: no longer relegated to the passive or secondary roles traditionally occupied by female figures in 1930s cartoons (Smoodin, 1993), she emerges as an active, autonomous heroine with her own narrative arc. Her presence drives the DLC's storyline, and her actions directly affect the original protagonists, *Cuphead* and Mugman. Mechanically, she introduces a new set of abilities, double jump, aerial dodge, and roll attack, that transform the gameplay experience. These mechanics not only broaden the player's options but are articulated through an agile, dance-like animated gesturalism that aligns with her energetic and curious personality.

From an emotional and expressive perspective, Ms. Chalice elicits an ambivalent player response: she blends tenderness, charisma, and strength. She is not a simple homage but a critical reinterpretation of the female role in the animation tradition. In this sense, her inclusion in *Cuphead* not only diversifies the cast but enriches the visual universe with a character who embodies, aesthetically, kinetically, and ludically a form of animated emancipation (Ryan, 2015; Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Theatrical Villains: Animation as Performance

The bosses in *Cuphead* are not merely functional enemies; each one is a theatrical piece with its own visual and narrative identity. Their design draws on overlapping references from classic animation, vaudeville, 1930s musicals, and comic horror cinema.

King Dice is perhaps the most iconic. Inspired by Cab Calloway, Clark Gable, Dick Tracy villains, and characters such as the Coachman from *Pinocchio (1940)*, King Dice combines elegance and menace (Maddigan, 2020). His design revives the archetype of the vaudeville villain with an angular silhouette, syncopated jazz movements, and theatrically arrogant expressions (Crafton, 1993). The scene in which he appears is visually inspired by Gunstar Heroes' Dice Palace, reimagined through a 1930s aesthetic. More than just a villain, he also acts as a master of ceremonies. His visual identity is sustained by a sharp silhouette that conveys authority and sophistication (Bendazzi, 2017). His dice-shaped head functions as an immediate visual emblem, while his purple suit and white gloves consolidate his performative nature. His movements during combat are animated with extreme fluidity, as if he were dancing jazz. This not only emphasizes his flamboyant style but introduces a visual rhythm the player must follow to anticipate his attacks. The character subverts the traditional final boss role: he is not the ultimate villain, but certainly the most theatrical and arguably the most memorable, due to his stylistic impact.

The Devil, the game's primary antagonist, is constructed as a synthesis of multiple animated demons: *Hell's Bells* (1929), *Red Hot Mamma* (1934), *Fantasia* (1940), and the designs of *Ghouls 'n Ghosts* (1988). His animation shifts from caricatured gestures to grotesque deformations, evoking Lucifer, Mephistopheles, and the great final bosses of classic video games. His facial expressiveness is inspired by *Night on Bald Mountain* (1940), and his multiple transformations, goat, snake, insect, render him a multiform, symbolically unstable entity. As the final antagonist, he represents the visual and symbolic culmination of animated

fears from the past. His design leans more toward the mischievous demon archetype than the embodiment of absolute evil: pointy ears, exaggerated grin, thin mustache. However, the animation that shapes him is unstable, constantly changing form, expression, and size. This fluidity turns him into a shifting threat that challenges the player's visual reading. The references to *Fantasia* and *Hell's Bells* (1929) not only provide an aesthetic genealogy but place the Devil within a tradition of antagonists that combine spectacle and disturbance. Each transformation during the fight is not merely a mechanical phase, but a visual mutation that alters the rhythm of combat and demands strategic recalibration.

Figura 5. Cinematic references for King Dice, The Devil, and Cala Maria

Source: Author's elaboration.

As discussed in *The Art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) Cala Maria's design draws inspiration from "famous fun-loving female characters from classic animation, including Betty Boop and Popeye's Olive Oyl", as well as references such as *Moth and the Flame* (Disney, 1938) and Madame Medusa from *The Rescuers* (1977), paying homage to Milt Kahl and other expressive animators of Disney's classical era. She articulates an ambiguous femininity that blends animated eroticism with grotesque horror. Her design is built around soft curves, large eyes, and flirtatious gestures, but her metamorphosis into a sea monster reveals a sinister underside that subverts the player's expectations. Her expressiveness is enhanced through undulating animation and seductive pauses that contrast with visually complex attacks, such as the petrifying gaze or the appearance of aquatic creatures. Cala Maria embodies animated hybridity: she is a sexualized figure, a visual threat, and a fantastical creature. The sophistication of her animation reinforces the unease she provokes, as her initial beauty gives way to aesthetic and mechanical dissonance.

In all cases, *Cuphead's* villains are constructed as dramatic figures. Their animation relies on squash and stretch, anticipation, and rhythmic exaggeration (Thomas and Johnston, 1995), granting them both imposing stage presence and functional clarity. Their gestures inform the player about combat mechanics: animation communicates the imminence of danger, transitions between phases, or moments of vulnerability. Each boss becomes a ludic choreography were visual aesthetics guide strategy. Each boss becomes a ludic choreography where visual aesthetics guide strategy. Beyond the characters explicitly discussed in *The Art of Cuphead*, additional visual affinities can be traced to figures such as Madame Medusa from *The Rescuers* (Disney, 1977) or the demonic iconography of *Night on Bald Mountain* in *Fantasia* (1940), which further reinforce the game's dialogue with the expressive and theatrical heritage of classical animation.

What unites heroes and villains in *Cuphead* is their ability to express themselves without words. Animation produces "living matter": bodies that do not imitate reality but instead create the symbolic, the affective, and the rhythmic. This expressiveness not only builds atmosphere it shapes the player's experience (Wells, 1998). The emotions these characters elicit, tension, tenderness, unease, admiration, arise from their animated behaviour. The game does not require complex psychological development: the characters are endearing because they deform, shrink, panic, or celebrate in every frame. In *Cuphead*, animation does not represent it acts. And that visual action is simultaneously narrative, mechanical, and emotional.

MUSIC AS PART OF THE INTERACTIVE ANIMATED LANGUAGE

The music in *Cuphead*, composed by Kristofer Maddigan, serves as a central axis of the game's expressive system. Far from fulfilling a merely ornamental or atmospheric function, the soundtrack is deeply integrated into the design logic and the player's sensory experience. It is animated music in the literal sense: it accompanies movement, emphasizes it, translates it into rhythm, and transforms it into gameplay structure (Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Performed by a live jazz orchestra, the soundtrack is composed of a wide variety of styles linked to the musical traditions of the 1920s and 1930s, including swing, ragtime, big band, and symphonic jazz (Gorbman, 1987). This selection is not solely driven by a retro aesthetic ambition it aligns with the broader artistic project: just as the animation emulates past techniques through frame-by-frame drawing and watercolour backgrounds, the music revives the sound codes of the golden age of animation to construct a coherent and multisensory experience (Kothenschulte, 2021).

Each level features an original composition tailored to its visual setting, combat rhythm, and the personality of the corresponding boss. The music acts as an anticipatory system, signalling phase changes, intensifying tension, or modulating the speed and emotional tone of the encounter. In this sense, it fulfils an informative, emotional, and mechanical function. Players learn to interpret musical variations as cues that accompany or foreshadow, key transformations in the game's narrative (Dixon, 2008).

This close relationship between music and movement recalls the historical model of Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1939), or the Fleischer Studios' shorts, where music dictated the visual tempo of animation (Crafton, 1993; Merritt and Kaufman, 2016). *Cuphead* takes up this tradition and reformulates it in an interactive key: it is not just audiovisual synchronization but ludic integration. In certain levels, the syncopated rhythm marks the optimal moment to dodge, attack, or shift strategies, making the music an invisible guide for the gameplay choreography.

From both a technical and symbolic standpoint, the fact that all pieces were recorded with real instruments reinforces the artisanal nature of the project. This decision not only adds sonic richness but also establishes continuity with the handcrafted logic of traditional animation. *Cuphead's* music, like its visual aesthetics, appeals to an idea of authenticity that does not rely on historical fidelity but on the critical recovery of obsolete forms to give them new meaning within the interactive environment (Cohen, 1993).

Thus, music is not a supplement to animation, but a rhythmic extension of its language. Together, they configure a sensory reading system in which seeing, hearing, and playing intertwine to build a unique aesthetic experience. This convergence confirms that in *Cuphead*, each visual, sonic, and mechanical dimension is part of a shared choreography, where animation, like music, becomes the true language of the game (MDHR Studios, 2024).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Cuphead* is not simply a visually striking indie title, but an exemplary case of how classical animation can be reimagined as a foundational language for interactive experiences. Rather than serving as a stylistic embellishment, animation in *Cuphead* operates as a mechanical, narrative, and expressive system an axis around which the entire gaming experience revolves (Criado, 2019). This model challenges the conventional separation between form

and function, aesthetics and gameplay, inviting a redefinition of animation as a structural grammar within the language of video games.

Cuphead embodies a distinctive visual and conceptual signature, closely linked to the creative leadership of the Moldenhauer brothers. Their direct involvement in artistic direction, character design, and animation aesthetics ensures a stylistic coherence that resonates with auteur theory. Despite the collaborative nature of game development, the project reveals a clear creative voice grounded in aesthetic cohesion and formal consistency qualities that position it within the ongoing debate on independent game creation and creative authorship (Parker, 2014; Ruffino, 2020).

A key contribution of this article lies in its articulation of *Cuphead* as "playable animation" a concept that bridges animation studies, ludology, and digital aesthetics. The expressive capacity of animation in the game is not limited to visual flair but extends to the mechanical structure of gameplay. Classic animation principles such as anticipation, squash and stretch, and exaggeration become functional cues for interpreting timing, threat, and interaction. This expressive-functional integration also extends to the soundtrack: the jazz compositions of Kristofer Maddigan, performed by a live orchestra, do not merely accompany the visual experience but synchronize rhythm, guide decision-making, and sustain ludic tension.

In this sense, *Cuphead* is not just a stylistic homage to the past, it is a critical reactivation of obsolete forms that finds new meaning through interactivity. Its aesthetic choices are deliberate and interwoven with gameplay mechanics, reaffirming that creative innovation can arise not only from technological novelty but from cultural recontextualization and artisanal production (Juul, 2019; Tosca, 2023). The manual labour behind its visuals and music, frame-by-frame animation, watercolour backgrounds, live-recorded music, embodies a form of resistance to the standardization of digital aesthetics and reiterates the value of craft in an era of procedural generation and algorithmic design (Maddigan, 2020; Thomas and Johnston, 1995).

This integrated analysis also aligns with current concerns in indie game studies about the boundaries between media formats. *Cuphead* occupies a liminal space between animation, musical, and game, dissolving distinctions between the audiovisual and the interactive. Its expansion into other mediamost notably *The Cuphead Show!* illustrates how a coherent aesthetic vision can transcend formats without losing unity. This reinforces the creative potential of indie games as cultural works capable of shaping broader symbolic ecosystems (Deke, 2024).

Future research might explore how other contemporary indie titles employ similar strategies of aesthetic reappropriation, musical integration, or mechanical stylization. Equally relevant would be to study how retro animation techniques are being used today in resistance to digital uniformity, or how "playable animation" might become a distinct genre or design philosophy. *Cuphead*, in this light, offers both a model and a provocation: a model for interdisciplinary analysis and a provocation to reconsider where the limits of animation, authorship, and game design truly lie.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that animation in *Cuphead* is not a visual accessory, but a total language a convergence of sight, sound, and mechanics. Its success as an indie game underscores the creative potential of small-scale production, and its enduring impact confirms that artistic innovation in video games can emerge through the intelligent fusion of tradition and interactivity. By engaging the player not only visually and narratively but kinaesthetically and rhythmically, *Cuphead* redefines what animation can do and what games, at their most expressive, can become.

Elisabet Fonts. PhD in Science and New Technologies and a Bachelor's degree in Audiovisual Communication. She is the academic director of the postgraduate program in Technical Artist for Videogames and a lecturer at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (CITM). As a coordinator of final degree projects and researcher within the DiCode – Digital Culture and Creative Technologies group, her teaching focuses on 3D and 2D animation as well as digital art in various areas. She has also collaborated with the University of Barcelona, the University of Vic, and ESCAC. In addition, she provides audiovisual services for The Walt Disney Company on ESPN, the US sports channel. She is also a contributor at Cadena SER, where she participates in cultural and entertainment programs.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9412-181X

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