

## By Design: Material Historiographies of Media Interfaces and Cultures

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I've been thinking a lot about remote controls recently. Of the five remotes in my living room, the DIRECTV remote is the largest and most button-laden; it is also the most typical of twenty-first century remote control design. A slightly tapered monolith, it is bottom weighted for ergonomic comfort, and the direction buttons for navigating DIRECTV menus are conveniently located right under my thumb. Although it is capable of working as a multifunction universal remote, this device was designed with the requirements and affordances of DIRECTV in mind. It's design reveals a lot about how DIRECTV expects us to live with digital video records and what it thinks our fears of digital video might be.



Remote control is both a technology and a cultural fantasy. Remotes are the dominant interface for communicating with media electronics today, but 'remote control' is also an historically evolving and contingent idea about how audiences might interact with the mass media, how they might maintain control as the media occupies ever more time in their lives and space in their homes. In 1929, advertisers represented the first remote controls for radio receivers as luxury items in order to make radio listening seem more sophisticated and appealing to high-income audiences. Ads for these devices depicted black tie parties entertained by radio and made possible by remote control.



These early radio receiver remotes were all wired devices, typically the size of “a two-pound box of chocolates,” as one ad put it. The ribbon cables connecting these remotes to their consoles were typically an inch across and fifteen to twenty feet long; users had to hide them under carpets or fasten them to baseboards to avoid tripping guests. The first television remotes also used wires to transmit signals to their receivers; although these cords were thinner and more flexible, they too represented a tripping hazard. So while wired remotes made it possible for users to change stations at a distance, they limited mobility of both their users and nearby humans and animals. By tethering its user and/or tripping non-users, the remote control effectively took control of the room it was in, conquering it on behalf of the media.

Nevertheless, many households still embraced the “luxury” of sedentary media consumption that early remotes provided, because between the 1920s and the 1950s, *sedentary* was exactly what media consumers hoped to be. Multiple tuning dials on early radios and television sets required constant adjustment, making laziness the dream of many early radio listeners and television watchers. Wired remotes did not begin to carry negative associations until remote controls (and cable television) made possible channel surfing and couch potatoes in the early 1980s. In the mid-1980s (and with the help of infrared LED technology), remote controls uniformly became wireless handheld devices. Twenty-first century remote controls are designed to be portable; they encourage fantasies of mobility precisely to disguise the fact that their users aren’t going anywhere.

Consider a recent advertisement from DIRECTV, the maker of the biggest, most button-laden, and least ergonomic remote in my living room (<http://youtu.be/hLmP73eAHB8>). In it, a wife (played by a life-size marionette) asks her husband whether he still finds her pretty, given his recent complaints about “ugly wires.” Although her husband was referring to the HDMI cables connecting his DIRECTV boxes to their respective television sets, the marionette worries that he might object to her wires. Design and

media historian might also hear references to remote control wires and to viewers' fears that the media are just "pulling our strings."

Once reassured that her husband still thinks she's pretty, that the media supports (rather than detracts from) traditional gender roles and norms, the marionette starts to dance suggestively, asking "so you like what you see?" When she begins an awkward Charleston, her husband sits up a little on their bed, but he basically never moves. His passivity connotes the alleged power of remote control while the marionette's vigorous movements seem to manifest the freedom that DIRECTV, its wireless Genies and remotes, allegedly grant. Of course, the viewer knows that someone is pulling her strings, but in watching the marionette jerk and flail, watching her character give in to the sexual insecurities foisted on wives (on all women, really), the viewer can overlook how DIRECTV is pulling his strings, encouraging him to equate wirelessness with power. If one actually looks at the DIRECTV remote, at the prominent location of its D-PAD and menu buttons, its emphasis on video playback over numerical channel selection, it's clear that the remote control is pulling our strings, that it's guiding us to perform specific actions just like the marionette's control bar does for her.

Despite all DIRECTV's assurances to the contrary then, it appears that wires aren't the only means of remote control. Product design can be equally effective.