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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MANIPULATION OF A TOY MARIONETTE**

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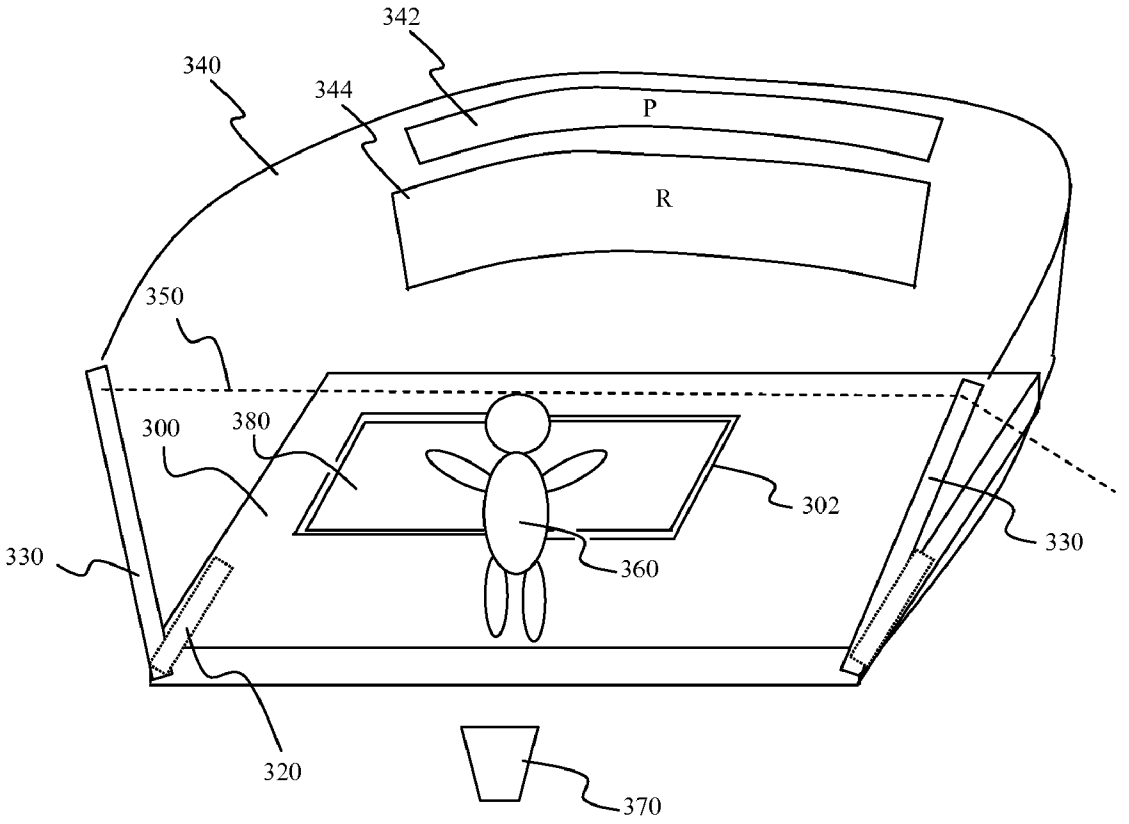
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A marionette toy kit is provided where the container forms a portion of a performing stage that is easily assembled by the player and where the marionette is supported by a near-invisible tether. The kit may be further configured to integrate consumer electronics that permit the player to incorporate programmed special effects or electronic media into their play in an interactive fashion, and/or to integrate personalized items with at least one component of the toy kit.



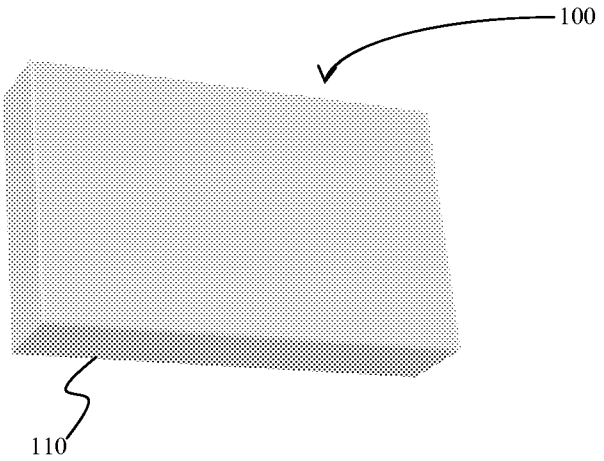


Figure 1

Figure 2

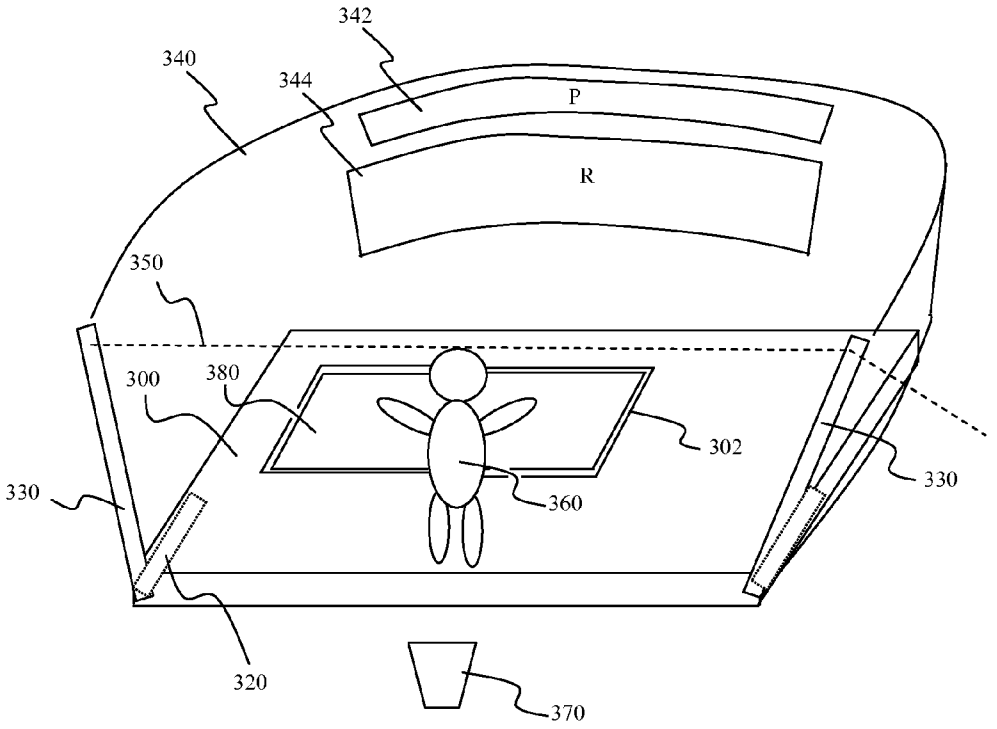


Figure 3

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MANIPULATION OF A TOY MARIONETTE

[0001] This application claims priority to U.S. provisional applications with the Ser. No. 61/425459, which was filed Dec. 21, 2010, and 61/547572, which was filed Oct. 14, 2011, both of which are incorporated by reference herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The field of the invention is toys, and especially toy kits with a marionette and a stage.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Numerous puppet toys are known in the art and, among other puppets, marionettes have long enjoyed particular popularity. The design of the marionette is such that its movements originate from one or more visible strings, wires, or other tethers, which act as control features. These strings or wires support the marionette, or portions thereof, from above and are further attached to a controller. This device is traditionally held by an individual that generates the marionette's movements through manipulation of a control handle. This design distinguishes marionettes from other forms of puppetry, such as finger, glove, rod, and shadow puppetry. More recent designs, such as those found in EP2085129A1, incorporate automated mechanisms for manipulating the marionette while retaining suspension of the figure from above. With such designs, however, unless concealment measures are taken the person or mechanism operating the marionette will often be within the line of sight of an audience member who is observing the performance.

[0004] Due to this need for concealment, film and television formats have proven to be a popular media for distribution of marionette entertainment, as the puppeteers (traditionally referred to as operators) may simply be kept off camera. In live performances marionettes are well suited for performances that take place on an enclosed theatre-like stage where the operator can be concealed. Such stages, an example of which can be seen in U.S. Pat. No. 5,261,849A, can be relatively large and complex in design in order to afford a place of concealment for the operator that does not impinge on the performance area where the marionettes are observed. Unfortunately, the desirability of such concealment limits the use of marionettes as toys in home settings. U.S. Pat. No. 3,812,611A and U.S. Pat. No. 4,137,665A describe smaller, simplified stages more suitable for use by children, however these rely on the use of small, concealed mechanisms to manipulate the marionette that can relegate the child to the role of a passive observer of the performance. An alternative approach is disclosed in GB587621A, in which a composite control string having both elastic and nonelastic components is inserted through one wall of the stage and attached to the opposing wall, thereby being oriented roughly parallel to the stage floor. Stretching and releasing this control string allows limited movement of an attached figure by an operator that is not directly behind or above the stage.

[0005] The audience in most instances is, of course, well aware that the movements of the marionette are controlled by an operator. While visible strings or wires are not necessarily detrimental to enjoyment of the performance their presence requires a certain willingness on the part of audience members to disregard these reminders of the presence of the operator, in order to focus on and fully engage in the performance. Young members of the audience can find it difficult to disregard such visible control features and fully immerse themselves in the entertainment thus presented. As a result integration of marionettes into children's creative play is difficult relative to other forms of puppetry.

[0006] Use of marionettes in creative play may also be enhanced by providing the user with the ability to easily customize the appearance of the figure and the stage on which it appears. The use of a photograph to produce a customized doll figure is described in U.S. Pat. No. 6,491,565B1. Similarly, U.S. Pat. No. 6,945,841B2 discloses a doll figure that can display the likenesses of different individuals through affixing their likenesses to a support surface. JP2002306857A, JP2002309202A, JP2004261620A, and JP2006035562A describe printing such likenesses onto films or stickers and applying these likenesses to the figure. Proper formatting, cropping, and other such manipulations of photographs necessary to prepare them as such films or stickers are, however, beyond the capabilities of young children and are a significant barrier to the introduction of desirable customization to creative play with toy marionettes.

[0007] It is thus apparent that current means and methods for manipulating marionettes and stages have significant disadvantages that limit their utility in creative play. There is, therefore, a need to have a marionette or marionette-like puppet that is controllable by an operator using a tether that does not provide a significant distraction. There is also a need for a simple manner of customizing the appearance of a marionette and a marionette stage that is accessible to young children. Finally, there is a need for a stage arrangement that can incorporate such a marionette or marionette-like puppet and that can be assembled by a child.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The inventive subject matter provides apparatus, systems, and methods in which a small marionette is coupled to a near-invisible tether that is in turn coupled to two posts and a user, such that the marionette can be easily and inconspicuously moved on or even across the length of the stage by the user. In one embodiment of the invention, a marionette kit is provided in a box that serves as a container wherein the box is additionally configured to form a stage. The box preferably also includes posts, a marionette, and a tether. The kit may further include an element, such as, for example, a pocket, that can hold a portable display device. Such portable display devices include, but are not limited to, cellular telephones, smart telephones, digital music players, tablet computers, laptop computers, and portable video players. In some embodiments the kit can further include additional game elements, including lighting, decorative materials for the stage, special effects devices, and electronic devices for storing and playing music.

[0009] In a preferred embodiment the small marionette can be personalized to the user. Personalization may be accomplished by modification of the marionette with adhesive elements carrying, for example, an image, holographic element, name, and/or other personal characteristics of the user. Similarly, additional stage elements such as backdrops and posts may be personalized by the user in some embodiments, incorporating, for example, images of settings or other decorative designs preferred by the user. Such personalization may be accomplished using adhesive elements generated from photographs, or by pre-printed materials. In some embodiments, personalization of stage elements may be provided by a portable display device. Such portable display devices include,

but are not limited to, cellular telephones, smart telephones, digital music players, tablet computers, laptop computers, and portable video players.

[0010] A further important element of the invention is that the system for manipulating the marionette is not readily visible to an audience, primarily through the use of a near-invisible tether. Such a near-invisible tether may have a small diameter, such a diameter being less then 500 microns. In some embodiments the diameter of the near-invisible tether may range from 5 microns to 50 microns. A near-invisible tether of the invention may be comprised of a single filament or multi-filament fiber having sufficient strength to support a marionette figure while having a small diameter. In some embodiments the near-invisible tether is comprised of a para-amid synthetic fiber, for example Kevlar (EI Dupont de Nemours, Inc,).

[0011] Various objects, features, aspects and advantages of the inventive subject matter will become more apparent from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments, along with the accompanying drawing figures in which like numerals represent like components.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0012] FIG. **1** depicts an exterior view of an exemplary kit of the invention, configured as a container suitable for storage of kit components.

[0013] FIG. **2** depicts exemplary retention elements of the invention.

[0014] FIG. **3** depicts an exemplary kit of the invention, configured as a marionette stage with a near-invisible tether arranged to allow controlled movement of a puppet.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0015] The inventor has discovered that marionette-type puppet toys can be made readily accessible to users that would otherwise be precluded from such devices by providing a kit that permits facile assembly, customization, and storage of a puppet and performing stage, and that includes a near-invisible control element that permits users to manipulate the puppet.

[0016] In one preferred aspect the invention may be configured so that at least a part of the inventive subject matter serves as a storage or transport container (also referred to as a box) for other components. Such a container may be comprised of any suitable lightweight rigid or semi-rigid material, including paper, cardboard, and/or plastic. Alternatively, or additionally, laminated materials and plastic materials are utilized. The container portion may be of any suitable shape, including those having polygonal, circular, or elliptical cross sections. In a preferred embodiment the container has a rectangular cross section that is consistent with its use as a component as a stage floor when configured for play. An example of this is shown in FIG. **1**, which shows a cardboard box **100** with a height of about 2 cm, a width of about 30 cm, and a depth of about 20 cm. The cardboard material is preferably resilient to mechanical deformation and has at least one flap **110** along the width of the box that operates as a flap that provides access to the interior of the box and a closure to retain and protect materials stored therein. Resilience to mechanical deformation may be accomplished by using cardboard of appropriate thickness, for example up to 2 mm, or by utilizing corrugated materials.

[0017] In order to support reconfiguration of the storage or transport container for play at least a portion of the container has one or more retention elements that provide support for other components. In one embodiment the retention element is constructed of the same materials used for the storage or transport container. In other embodiments the retention element may be constructed of different materials if such materials are more suitable for supporting other kit components. A preferred embodiment is shown in FIG. **2**, in which the container has flap **210** and two retention elements **220** that are configured to slidably receive and retain base elements of a post element (not shown). Of course, it should be appreciated that the particular nature of the retention element may vary considerably and all alternative retention elements are deemed suitable for use herein so long as they rigidly and releasably retain a base element of a post. For example, alternative retention elements may include plastic clamps, snaps, matingly and/or lockingly engaging corresponding surfaces between a portion of the post and a portion of the storage or transport container, etc.

[0018] A toy of the invention can incorporate the above described container and additional components by arranging them to provide a stage upon which a marionette performs. Such components include, but are not limited to, a tether, a marionette that is configured to couple to the tether, a stage backdrop, and one more posts that connect to the container and provide support for the tether and the stage backdrop. Additional components may include lights for illuminating the stage area and speakers. FIG. **3** depicts an exemplary kit configured as a stage upon which a marionette performs, showing a container **300** to which two posts **330** are coupled via the base elements of the posts and retention elements **320** of the container. Container **300** further comprises a recess **302** into which a digital media player or tablet computer **380** placed as a source for light and/or sound. A stage backdrop **340** having a personalized surface **342** and a reflective surface **344** is shown attached to the posts **330**, and a tether **350** is shown threaded through these posts such that a user (not shown) can grasp the tether and thereby move marionette **360**. A light **370** is shown illuminating the marionette **360**. The posts may be shaped in an angled configuration such that a base portion of the post can slidably engage with the retention element (that is preferably formed from the box material) while another portion of the post extends upwards so as to engage the stage backdrop and support the tether. The angle of this angled configuration can range from about 30 to about 90 degrees relative to the stage. It should be noted, however, that alternative modes of retention are also contemplated. For example, the posts may have a base element that releasably engages with the box to so retain the posts. Additional elements may be provided to increase the stability of the assembly. For example, supplementary angles and supports may be provided to support the posts and/or the backdrop. Such supplementary angles and supports may be made of plastic or other suitably rigid materials. In some embodiments the backdrop may be coupled to the container. Regardless of the particular arrangement, it is preferred that the stage and posts are of sufficient stability such that the tether can be moved vigorously without causing the posts, the backdrop, and/or the stage to move.

[0019] In preferred aspects of the inventive subject matter the container in which the components of the kit are provided also serves as the stage. In alternative embodiments, however, the stage may be provided as a separate element. In still other

embodiments the posts can be configured to allow positioning of the posts in a stable and stand-alone manner, without the use of a stage.

[0020] It should be appreciated that the post or posts may be configured in numerous manners, and that the specific manner of attachment is not critical so long as the post or posts will retain the tether and marionette, preferably in a manner that is sufficiently stable to allow movement of the marionette without causing the stage and backdrop to move. Thus, in alternative embodiments the post or posts may be replaced by sidewalls, arches, triangles, and other structures that provide sufficient stability. Indeed, all structures are deemed suitable that allow coupling of the tether to the stage in a manner that allows the marionette to be moved in a fixed position and/or any direction.

[0021] In some embodiments all of the components (the stage, the backdrop, the posts, the retention elements, and the marionette) are made from cardboard or otherwise fiber-based material, and may include printed subject matter in accordance with a particular theme (e.g., rock concert, ballet, etc.). In preferred embodiments at least some portion of the stage and/or backdrop comprises reflective material or holographic reflective foil, and in especially preferred embodiment, the stage and/or backdrop has holographic reflective foil and/or multiple mirroring surfaces that allow production of complex light patterns using only a limited number of light sources. In an exemplary arrangement, between one and four light sources, and four mirrored surfaces that reflect light could be arranged to produce a complex light pattern. Additionally, other materials, and especially reflective materials may be included to further enhance appearance of the backdrop, and/or marionette. Such reflective materials may be metallized, holographic, or otherwise scatter light towards the user. In a preferred embodiment the marionette may decorated or "dressed" with such a reflective or holographic material. Moreover, it is contemplated that reflective materials may also be configured on the stage and/or backdrop such that a viewed will not only see the marionette, but also multiple reflected images (e.g., 2, 4, 6, 8, or even more) of the marionette and/or lights pointing at the reflective materials. Such reflective materials may be multifaceted, folded, or otherwise angled to provide multiplication of images.

[0022] Additionally, it is contemplated that the kit may be adapted to incorporate one or more consumer items that will enhance the game experience. For example, the container may have a recess, pocket, or receptacle formed to allow placement of a portable display device, such that the display portion of the portable display device will impinge upon or illuminate the stage. Suitable portable display devices include, but are not limited to, cellular telephones, smart telephones, digital music players, tablet computers, laptop computers, and portable video players. For example, illumination of the stage could be achieved using a smart telephone running software that emulates a strobe light or "disco ball" effect. In yet another example, an animation file displayed using a suitably positioned tablet computer could serve as a moving background during a marionette performance. Where desirable, it should also be appreciated that the cardboard box may be entirely omitted, especially where the stage is the display surface of a portable display device. Thus, the stage backdrop and posts may be suitable configured to allow stable coupling of these elements to the portable display device.

[0023] As noted above, the kit may include one or more lights and other items. Suitable lights include miniature light bulbs, light emitting diodes, and even low wattage solid state lasers. In a preferred embodiment the kit includes light emitting diodes for illuminating the stage area. In some embodiments light sources may be configured to allow for change in light colors, to blink, to act as strobe light, and so on. In still other embodiments the kit may include light filters, beam splitters, or other optical devices that can be configured to simulate or provide laser-show effects. Additionally contemplated embodiments include smoke or mist generators (which may include small fans), one or more disco balls (preferably comprising reflective and/or holographic materials), and movable stage elements (which may move vertically, in a horizontal direction, or move in a pattern). The kit may also include a sound system, which may be functional or decorative. Such a sound system can include speakers and music storage devices. Suitable music storage devices include, but are not limited to, digital music players, compact disc players, and audio cassette players. Alternatively, the kit (and especially the stage) may be adapted to accommodate at least a portion of a digital media player for production of sound effects and/or to provide music. Where desirable, the kit may include low cost speakers that cooperate with an external media player.

[0024] Marionettes may be of any size that is suitable for the dimensions of the stage. In one embodiment, marionettes are less than about 10 cm in height. In another embodiment, marionettes are more less than about 7 cm in height. In a preferred embodiment marionettes are less than about 5 cm in height. Marionettes may be manufactured from any suitably rigid and lightweight materials, including but not limited to paper, cardboard, plastic, and metal foils. In a preferred embodiment the marionette is manufactured from paper or cardboard materials. The marionette can be provided as a pre-shaped figurine. Alternatively, the user may construct the final marionette by assembling parts or folding them into shape. Thus, the marionettes contemplated herein are lightweight and simple to use. While not limiting to the inventive subject matter, the marionette will preferably include limbs that are configured to allow at least some degree of articulation or other bending motion so as to simulate dancing movements. Such articulation can be achieved by joints, ring-shaped connectors, or by connection of the elements via a flexible material. Such flexible materials include paper, plastics, and string or cord. Secondary control features, for example additional tethers, may be connected to these limbs to permit articulation that is at least partially independent of that of the primary tether. In some embodiments the marionette is at least partially covered in a reflective and/or holographic material to enhance visual effect, especially where lighting is used.

[0025] In some embodiments of the invention the marionette is further personalized using one or more items that are specific to a user and that are provided in response to a user input. For example, a user may select one or more color schemes or specific items for the marionette that are complementary to the theme of a performance, for example the selection of a cowboy hat and an acoustic guitar, or mask-like make-up and an electric guitar. In a preferred embodiment the user may upload a personal picture (for example, a portrait of the user or a picture or the user's home) to a website that is programmed to process the uploaded picture to generate one or more printout patterns that are configured and dimensioned for use with the marionette or stage components. The so generated printout patterns may be sent to a printing unit that

produces printouts, or sent to the user for printing at home. Regardless of the printer location it is contemplated that the printouts are configured to allow for integration into the toy, and particularly for coupling to the marionette and/or stage. For example, the printout may be printed onto a material that is sized and shaped to match at least a portion of the marionette and. A user can thereby modify a marionette to have a face (and/or other body portion) that is derived from a photograph of the user's face (and/or other body portion). In one embodiment such a printout may be provided on an adhesive material, however numerous suitable alternatives such as papers, metallic foils, and textiles are contemplated. Similarly, such printouts may be affixed by means other than adhesion, including but not limited to hook and loop surfaces, clips, and static charge. In other embodiments a selection of pre-printed printouts may be provided with the kit so that the user may mix and match the printouts to so produce a individualized marionette.

[0026] Additional toy elements may be personalized in a manner as described above. For example, the stage may have a stage banner carrying a personalized name, and other components (such as instruments, garments, etc.) may be personalized according to a user input. In a preferred embodiment such personalization includes color schemes, choice of items, inclusion of names or pictures (representative or caricaturized) of the user, and lyrics that allow the user to sing along a tune while the marionette performs a stage show. Likewise, it should be appreciated that a variety of pre-printed and/or preformed additional game elements may be provided with the marionette and that the user may then mix and match the toy elements to so produce a individualized marionette kit.

[0027] As noted above, the presence of visible strings and other wires can detract from a marionette performance. In some embodiments of this the tether that is utilized as a control feature may be fabricated from numerous materials and combinations and may have a relatively wide range of thickness so long as such a tether has sufficient tensile strength to carry the weight of the object without breaking, and so long as such the tether is near-invisible to the unaided eye. Used in conjunction with a tether, the terms "near-invisible" and "near-invisible to the unaided eye" are interchangeable. In some embodiments such a near-invisible tether can have a thickness of less than 300 microns. In other embodiments a near-invisible tether can have a thickness of less than 100 micron. In yet other embodiments a near-invisible tether can have a thickness of less than 50 microns. In a preferred embodiment the near-invisible tether has a thickness of between 5 microns and 50 microns. Visibility of the tether can also be reduced by using materials with dark colors. In some embodiments contemplated tethers can be black; in other embodiments the tether may be dark blue. A near-invisible tether may also have a surface with low reflectivity; suitable surfaces may reflect less than 20% of incident light.

[0028] While not limiting to the inventive subject matter, in a preferred embodiment the tether is a single filament. Alternatively, the tether may be a small filament bundle of less than 10 individual filaments. In other embodiments the tether can be a small filament bundle of less than 5 individual filaments. Suitable tethers are typically prepared from a larger yarn. For example, multifilament KEVLAR™ yarns (aramid yarn commercially available from EI Dupont de Nemours, Inc.) at 10 to 2000 Denier are suitable and can be separated into single filaments or small filament bundles. However, and where available, single filaments or small filament bundles may also be commercially obtained. Of course, it should be appreciated that the material is not limited to KEVLAR™, and numerous alternative materials, including but not limited to polyesters, polyamide, carbon fibers, nylon, glass, and naturally occurring polymers are also deemed appropriate.

[0029] In one embodiment of the invention, one end of the tether is coupled to a user while the other end of the tether is coupled to at least one of the posts. In an alternative embodiment, the user may hold both ends, while the tether is movably coupled to the posts. Such an arrangement advantageously allows side-to-side movement of the marionette across the stage. This arrangement, in conjunction with the horizontal orientation of the tether and the configuration of the posts, permits the user to not only remain out of the line of sight of the viewing audience, but also to view the performance as an audience member if so desired. As such, the invention as described herein is uniquely suited to both social and individual play. Note that as used herein, and unless the context dictates otherwise, the term "coupled to" is intended to include both direct coupling (in which two elements that are coupled are in physical contact) and indirect coupling (in which at least one additional element is situated between the two coupled elements). Therefore, the terms "coupled to" and "coupled with" are used synonymously. In a preferred embodiment the marionette is fixedly coupled to the tether, and all manners of such coupling are deemed suitable for use herein.

[0030] A plurality of such tethers may be used in conjunction with the invention. In one embodiment, a second and independent tether may be used to couple a second marionette to the stage (using the same or different posts). In another embodiment, the second tether may be used to control movement of the marionette in a second direction. In yet another embodiment, the second tether can be used to move articulated portions of the marionette at least partially independently from other movement of the marionette. Thus, it should be noted that multiple tethers and multiple marionettes are deemed suitable for use herein, wherein the tethers may be coupled to a single marionette, and may be used for separate movements of the marionette or portions thereof. In some embodiments tethers may also be used to move items other than the marionette. For example, one or more tethers may be used to move lighting, decorative items (for example, a disco ball), and/or special effects (for example, a smoke generator, holographic surface, etc.).

[0031] It should be apparent to those skilled in the art that many more modifications besides those already described are possible without departing from the inventive concepts herein. The inventive subject matter, therefore, is not to be restricted except in the spirit of the appended claims. Moreover, in interpreting both the specification and the claims, all terms should be interpreted in the broadest possible manner consistent with the context. In particular, the terms "comprises" and "comprising" should be interpreted as referring to elements, components, or steps in a non-exclusive manner, indicating that the referenced elements, components, or steps may be present, or utilized, or combined with other elements, components, or steps that are not expressly referenced. Furthermore, where a definition or use of a term in a reference, which is incorporated by reference herein is inconsistent or contrary to the definition of that term provided herein, the definition of that term provided herein applies and the definition of that term in the reference does not apply. Where the specification claims refers to at least one of something

selected from the group consisting of A, B, C . . . . and N, the text should be interpreted as requiring only one element from the group, not A plus N, or B plus N, etc.

What is claimed is:

1. A marionette toy kit comprising:

a box, at least two posts, a marionette, a backdrop, and a tether;

wherein the box and the posts are configured to allow rigid and releasable coupling of the posts to box, and releasable coupling of the posts to the tether;

wherein the backdrop is configured to allow coupling of the backdrop to at least one of the box and the posts;

wherein the marionette is configured to allow fixed coupling of the marionette to the tether; and

wherein the posts, the marionette, the backdrop, and the tether are configured to allow storage of the marionette, the backdrop, and the tether in the box.

2. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein at least one of the box, the marionette, the posts, and the backdrop comprise a personalized surface.

3. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein the personalized surface comprises an adhesive material upon which a user representation is printed.

4. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein the box is configured to receivingly engage a smart phone or tablet computer such that a display surface of the smart phone or tablet computer forms part of a stage.

5. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** further comprising a light.

6. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** further comprising an electronic sound source.

7. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein the box, the at least two posts, the marionette, and the backdrop are fabricated from cardboard or paper.

8. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein at least one of the box, the backdrop, and the posts include a reflective surface.

9. The marionette toy kit of claim **8** wherein the reflective surface is a mirror surface.

10. The marionette toy of claim **8** wherein the reflective surface is holographic material.

11. The marionette toy kit of claim **1** wherein the tether is a near-invisible tether.

12. The marionette toy kit of claim **11** wherein the near-invisible tether has a diameter of less than about 500 microns.

13. The marionette toy kit of claim **11** wherein the near-invisible tether has a diameter of less than about 100 microns.

14. The marionette toy kit of claim **11** wherein the near-invisible tether is comprised of a para-amid synthetic fiber.

15. A method of personalizing a marionette toy kit according to claim **1** comprising:

providing image or alphabetical information to a computer, and using the computer to generate a printout suitable for coupling to at least one of the posts, the box, the marionette, and the backdrop; and

coupling the printout to the at least one of the posts, the box, the marionette, and the backdrop.

16. The method of claim **15** wherein the printout is generated on a printer of the user.

17. The method of claim **15** wherein the printout is generated on an adhesive material.

18. A method of personalizing a marionette toy kit according to claim **1** comprising:

providing a portable display device;

affixing the portable display device to the at least one of the posts, the box, and the backdrop; and

displaying an image on said portable display device, such that the image is visible to a user of the marionette toy kit.

19. The method of claim **18**, wherein the portable display device is a smart phone.

20. The method of claim **18**, wherein the portable display device is a tablet computer.

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