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Bringing the body back into play

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ABSTRACT

This paper is interested in the physical leakage that takes place in front of the screen during gameplay, in how our bodies escape from the fixed focus of the game. This paper presents anecdotal experiences of play observations in order to look at some physical responses to the phenomena of digital gameplay. The intention of the work is to argue that our physical bodies are actively involved in the game act. My argument treads a path around a range of theoretical concerns that explore notions of the body as relates to a gameplay experience. This paper is not about in-game bodies but the effects the gameplay moment has on our physical bodies. In focusing on our physical inclination for movement a core area of interest in this work is experiential modality – tactility, proprioception and internal kinesthesia – all senses proper to the body. By focusing this argument on the visceral experience of gameplay rather than looking to the aesthetic of a particular game style I hope to offer an introductory look at the ways in which games confuse and delight our flesh.

KEYWORDS: physical body, game, phenomenology, flesh, gameplay experience, movement

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> "…new media has a surprisingly long history, a history as old as modernity itself. The "new" in new media might therefore best be sought, not in the formal qualities of its "language," but in that language's contemporary reception and meanings. This would shift our history from a concern with how images are technically made and transmitted, to political and social questions about their past and current contexts of production, dissemination and interpretation." (Batchen, 2006. 39)

As the digital generation mature into middle age our technology has settled into normative day-to-day experience. Games are mainstream and the fiercely protected territory of the hardcore is crumbling away. We are party to a cultural adoption that has moved us beyond techno-fetishism into an era of common use. Digital technology and her killer application, gaming, is simply another channel for a particular flavour of media.

The visual culture of today's electronic media has bred a particular context. Spectacular images flicker on our screens whilst our anxiety keeps us tapping away at our keyboards late into the night. These anxieties build around the drive for contact in the nonspace of the digital networks. Given the technological capacity to respond the pressure to do so is increasingly culturally widespread. A counter-balance to this is offered by the clearly delineated space of gameplay, where the rules are clear and progression is not expected to be productive in any wider context.

I am interested in the physical leakage that takes place in front of the screen during gameplay, in how our bodies escape from the fixed focus of the game. This paper presents anecdotal experiences of play observations in order to look at some physical responses to the phenomena of digital gameplay. The intention of the work is to argue that our physical bodies are actively involved in the game act.

Batchen and Manovich have presented varying histories of new media prioritizing different origin myths. Manovich chooses to use a theory and history of cinema as his "key conceptual lens" to present his thinking on new media. Batchen argues that the interaction of photography, telegraphy and computing demonstrates a common trajectory that points to older initiation rites

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for new media, he concludes his discussion with a call to look to a wider Foucaultian network of connections in order to investigate the contexts of interpretation of new media form.

One argument presented by Manovich is that the screen fixes the viewer's body in space; whether it is the gallery, cinema seat or sofa that a physically fixed viewpoint is necessary to engage with the image/s offered. Whilst acknowledging that areas such as Virtual Reality break the hegemony of the screen to a degree he points to the restrictive equipment of engagement as a constraint to restrain the physical body.

> "..classical cinema positions the spectator in terms of the best viewpoint of each shot, inside the virtual space.
>
> This situation is usually conceptualized in terms of the spectator's identification with the camera eye. The body of the spectator remains in her seat while her eye is coupled with a mobile camera." (Manovich 2002, 108)

This statement returns us to Cartesian notions of a fundamental body/mind split simply shifting the binary to one between the lived experience (the static body) and consumption (through the roving eye). This paper is interested in how the played experience diverges from Manovich's notion of the fixed body by investigating slippages in physical player response. I extend Batchen's critique of Manovich to show how players move in front of the constraints of the screen to engage in gameplay experience. My argument treads a path around a range of theoretical concepts that explore notions of the body as relates to a gameplay experience. This paper is not about in-game bodies but the effects the gameplay moment has on our physical bodies. By focusing this argument on the visceral experience of gameplay rather than looking to the aesthetic of a particular game style I hope to offer an introductory look at the ways in which games confuse and delight our flesh.

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Figure 1 - Engrossed in gameplay, the action//perception loop

Digital games are one, amongst a plethora of modern leisure media that can be differentiated by the active nature of their consumption. Games demand a high level of active commitment. The cybernetic loop of play requires a response from the player body to drive the experience forward (see Figure 1). Gaming always adds the tactility of touch to the screen experience. This simple and somewhat obvious statement points to ways in which a game keeps the body in play. Action is core to the seduction of the game.

> "According to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely through the body that we have access to the world. Action and perception are intertwined. In this notion, the concept of "flesh" becomes relevant. Merleau-Ponty uses the word 'flesh', as the domain in which experiences exist. Experiences are the mode of functioning by which we, inevitably, participate in the flesh. In terms of "the flesh" we are able to have direct, immediate contact with others and the world. My body is not able to forget its flesh. Although not always consciously, my body is always present and is involved in every

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action I undertake." (Hermans, 2004)

The feedback loop between player and game is tightly coupled. The game offers her pleasures through audio-visual-kinetic feedback on screen, speaker and, occasionally game controller. Much player response is precognitive, and I argue physically felt, in terms of how game feedback is read to allow for the player's subsequent gameplay act. In most gaming situations the feedback loop to player takes place faster than the player's ability to consciously contemplate her position and options for progression. The response she makes consists of a mixture of skill, experience and speculation in a visceral reaction.

In game form the screen and the game controller consist the boundary points between our physical and game bodies. Our flesh is the connective tissue that watches and reads the screen spectacle to respond in rapid touch through a game controller. The playing of games is a multi-sensory experience that, importantly, connects our vision with our touch in a sequence of gameplay moments. Hansen's (2006, 71) work offers an extended discussion of the gaps between vision and touch as aspects of the being of the flesh. In other words, it is only by being embodied human beings that we are able to connect the divergent worlds of the tactile and the visual.

The act of playing games is mediated and constrained through the specifics of the game controller, the on screen game interface and the game state in any particular moment of play. These layers of complexity have to be mastered to allow the player to experience the pleasure of progression in the game. The initial orientation ritual of gameplay, in which these elements are explored, takes less time as the proficiency of the player grows. However most games contain training levels to allow the player time to become familiar with the game interface before engaging in the play act. The design problem of both the physical controller and the screen interface rests in the tension between the need for a simple intuitive artifact that is easy to use whilst allowing for complex and emergent gameplay behaviour. Another aspect of this challenge is how to best map, and thereby connect, the physical device with the in-game action. The understanding that a key press will translate to a specific series of in game actions does not

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bear any relation to physical causality. Our bodies have evolved to proprioceptively[1] understand our physical environment and the disorientation created by the flattening of a 3D object (the game controller) to effects visible on a 2D object (the game screen) confuse our flesh and cause our bodies to react inappropriately.

One of the historical curiosities of digital gaming is the tendency towards ornate and multi-layered control mechanisms that prioritise complexity over usability. The functional metaphors of game devices become normalized in an ongoing commitment to the form. As the industry matures more effort and resource is spent on extending the options around game control (most notably recently in the Nintendo DS and Wii) and reducing the constraints inherent in the artifice of complex game interfaces.

Figure 2 - Flickr Wii Motion Group Images, Skill mapping

The ongoing sense of becoming roughly sketched above, the learning to play, is one cause of the physical slippage we witness in the player body (see Figure 2 above). As players we often lose ourselves in a gameplay moment. As we learn a particular game context, the effort expended in achieving a competency can cause gaps and exaggerations in our mapping of physical control mechanics. The exaggerated twisting of game controller, in response to a

[1] Proprioception stands for our awareness of our own limbs and body and is regarded as a specific mode of perception. Often argued as the sixth sense proprioceptive skill is key to day-to-day function in our physical world. One of the interesting aspects of proprioception in the context of this discussion is its largely subconscious nature, if we kept all physical awareness in mind whilst pursuing a goal we would not be able to successfully achieve our ends.

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particular game situation is common across most player experience as the flesh wrestles with the mapping of cause and effect and regresses to physical world response. During play the player often remains unaware of her excessive physical convulsions and it is in the moments post play that the results of her exertions become apparent in the form of sweaty palms, stiff shoulders and sore thumbs.

Wii play is a fascinating phenomena deserving study in its own right, but for the aims of this paper I will look briefly at some of the ways it brings the body back into play. The Wii explicitly creates a performance space in our living rooms in which comfortable and familiar metaphors[2] are introduced to engage the player in gameplay. Nintendo's main focus has been to attract new players to digital gaming, and from the experience of multiple conversations the Wii appears to have seeped into mass consciousness as the acceptable face of modern gaming. It would seem that parents are indeed happy for their children to spend hours playing games, as long as they can see the physical exertion reflected in the glow on their faces.

By predicating all on the appeal of a very specific interface mechanism Nintendo have interrupted the repetitive cycles of console evolution to create a revolution in game culture, the Wii has made the player stand up in the living room. The physical metaphor offered by early Wii games are adopted by their players to engage in play, in an attempt to mirror in game movements Wii players stand and wave their controllers around in a full 360 degree sphere of movement, at least some of the movement falling outside of range of the infrared receiver. What is fascinating about this tendency is that this very literal interpretation of game mechanics, although 'impossible'[3] in the sense of the technology that enables it, feels effective and pleasurable in terms of the played experience. Another key aspect is the redundancy of this type

[2] There is a wide range of games now available for the Wii but the launch focused on games that both introduced the controller, in terms of showing of how it worked in game, and that had physical world metaphors, most notably *WiiSports* (2006) (the game being played in most of the photos in Figure 2).

[3] If the Wii controller is not pointed at the infrared receiver then the game controller is not communicating with the game and therefore does not have any effect on game progression.

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of movement as it relates to actual game progression; the Wii infrared controller/receiver is both robust and receptive to small changes in movement to trigger gameplay activity. It is entirely unnecessary in game progression terms to either stand or to mirror in-game motion in order to play Wii.

Although I have argued that exaggerated physical responses to gaming can often be understood as indicator to the level of experience the player has with the particular game, indeed part of the opening ritual to gaming, some players retain the physical slippage as their experience grows. Particular gaming moments retain their visceral impact both in terms of the craft of their audio-visual execution and in the player's sense of anticipation and expectation, Atkins (2006) discussion of the future orientation of the game gaze explores the temporal experience of game play in depth.

In her argument for gamic realism defined by an embodied experience of play, Sommerseth (2007) points to the notion of game controller as tool, thereby keying into Merleau-Ponty's theories around tools as extensions of the human body. Her work does not rest on the connections and gaps between the game controller as physical artifact and the player character (the representation of player agency in-game) as game body. Any discussion of this boundary space needs to acknowledge the fundamental question in game studies on how, and indeed if, we extend ourselves into our game spaces. Whilst remaining resolutely this side of the screen for the purposes of this paper it is worth pointing to thesis work by Klevjer (2006) that accepts the game controller as tool yet points to some unique aspects of the player as expressed within the context of a game world.

> "While the tool is an instrumental extension, the avatar is a reflexive extension. We can say – following Merleau-Ponty and Gibson – that it 'inhabits' an environment because it belongs to it and lives in it. The avatar is not just acting upon, but also being acted upon and affected by; it is submitted to and exposed to its environment. In contrast, tools do not belong to the environment; what we are interested in is their capacity to alter the environment, not their capacity to become altered by it."

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A more detailed discussion of game bodies is beyond the stated scope of this paper so moving back to the meat side of the screen, much work has been done in film studies to express the sensate experience of the audio-visual. Game remediation of the audio-visual languages of film and animation allows for an inclusion of work on cinematic bodily affect in this study. Game form keys into techniques from film and animation most effectively in the construction of visual style and movement. Game design capitalizes on the kinesthetic language of the cinematic experience to immerse the player within the spectacle of play. Without recourse to a detailed discussion of the historical relationship and shared techniques of gaming, film and animation we can see that game's visualization of dramatic movement keys into notions of bodily affect from less interactive media form.

Sobchack (2004) traces theory that has built around the bodily experience of film. She uses notions of synaesthesia and coenaesthesia[4] to point to the interrelatedness of our senses in terms of her 'lived body' that connect subjective feeling and objective knowledge in the context of the cinematic experience. Sobchack coins the term 'cinesthetic' to talk to ways in which the cinema uses our dominant audio-visual senses to speak to our other senses.

> "As cinesthetic subjects, then, we possess an embodied intelligence that both opens our eyes far beyond their discrete capacity for vision, opens the film far beyond its visible containment by the screen, and opens language to a reflective knowledge of its specific carnal origins and limits." (Sobchack. 2004. 27)

Moving on from Sobchack's notion of a body's sensual response to the cinematic moment another area of interest to my observations is Youngblood's (1970) notion of expanded cinema in which he draws attention to a particular style of modern cinema. Synaesthetic cinema[5]

[4] Synaesthesia stands for a condition in which one sense involuntarily causes a perception in another, e.g. perceiving sound as colour whilst coenaesthesia names the perception of inhabiting one's body arising from multiple stimuli.

[5] A principle of cinema in which technological application operates as a decentralizing aspect of visual expression.

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abandons traditional narrative techniques due to a belief that real world events do not move in a linear fashion and prioritizes its depiction of force and energy. The visual techniques of this form of cinema are concerned with an exploration of metaphysical concepts and with the forces and energies that cause a physical and emotive response in the viewer.

Both of the above foci point to the construction of empathy between the viewer and screen in the moving image that can be seen in the bodily responses of the viewing subject.

Figure 3 - Kinetic empathy

One observable aspect of the kinesthetic affect of the moving image can be seen in Figure 3. above in which I am playing PSP with my daughter. Our experience of shared play moments often include physical movement in response to gameplay progress and in this sequence she jumps as she urges me to avoid a "spikey" in *LocoRoco* (2006). This reaction is not based in any tactile input to the game controller yet points to an experience of kinetic empathy with the gameplay moment.

From philosophy to film and dance theory, notions of empathy are invoked as glue in human emotional response and relationships.

> "Due to the 'immediacy' of bodies in live performance, audience members are sometimes said to respond through what is described as 'kinetic empathy' (Hanna, 1988a). This is caused by a particular physical sensation, often associated with the nervous system, in which the body empathizes

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with the distribution of energy produced by other bodies in motion." (Dodds, 2001. 35)

The cybernetic loop of play impacts the physical struggle to progress in game as well as the sensate response to the game sensorium. In essence we see a doubling of the sensate affect of games for the body, firstly in the visual presentation of movement and style and secondly in the physicality of engagement with the game experience in itself.

In an anecdotal journey through photography this paper has borne witness to some of the aspects of the journey of the player. From sensory engrossment in the action loop of digital gameplay, through proprioceptive responses to learning the game to the hint of a kinetic empathy with a game image the central theme has remained the body's need to act. In focusing on our physical inclination for movement a core area of interest in this work has been experiential modality – tactility, proprioception, and internal kinesthesia – all senses proper to the body.

In a broad sense I have looked to two human senses and their connective tissue; touch and vision as experienced in a moment of play to offer an argument for the explicit inclusion of the physical body in this digital act. By exploring some of the anomalies of player response in the context of digital gameplay I hope I have started to show how the physical body is always implied in the game act.

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