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What is This?

Toward a (Kin)Aesthetic of Video Gaming

The Case of Dance Dance Revolution

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Against the hegemony of ocularcentrism currently pervading video game theory, the author situates the practice of video gaming for further inquiry by performance studies to account for it as a wholly embodied phenomenon. Personal narratives of players engaging in performances of the game Dance Dance Revolution indicate the necessity of accounting for both the intersubjective and interobjective elements of video game play. The performativity of video gaming insists on a consideration of its material and discursive dimensions that not only refuses to metonymically reduce the gamer's body to a pair of eyes but also complicates popular dualistic understandings of the player–game relationship.

Keywords: *video games; performance; performativity; aesthetics; embodiment; materiality; intersubjectivity; interobjectivity*

Not long ago, Espen Aarseth (2004) issued a challenge to others in the discipline of game studies. Aarseth notes that the fledgling field of video gaming risks colonization by other disciplines anxious to stake a claim in a still-emergent media form. Colonization jeopardizes the potential richness and variety possible in a theoretical space not fully developed. Specifically, Aarseth calls for attention to key aspects of the video game that set it apart from other visual media such as film and television—not least of which is a kinesthetic dimension so essential to characterizing the medium as a locus of symbol and action and of image and (embodied) motion.

In answer to this call, Atkins (2006) admits that, amid the "next-gen" console wars of flashier on-screen representations and graphic realism, "it is almost possible to forget that video games involve their players doing something and not just seeing something" (p. 129). The hegemony of ocularcentrism narrows thinking and theorizing about video games to cognitive, psychological, or quasi-cinematic concerns. Atkins's comment, then, can also be read as a critique of current academic work on video games and the practice of video gaming—a critique that can even be turned back on Atkins's article itself, for the discipline of game studies, too, exhibits a near-exclusive

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preoccupation with video games' relation to players' embodied sense of sight at the expense of exploring other powerfully carnal modes of player–game engagement. In accepting Aarseth's (2004) challenge to explore the heretofore largely unexplored dimensions of the video game, Atkins (2006) probes the medium's "aesthetic qualities" (p. 130). In doing so,

> We might well have to be prepared to at least question whether [the video game's] aesthetic is in any meaningful sense a visual aesthetic, or whether it might actually be counterproductive to evaluate video games as a primarily visual art, but we must at least acknowledge that the image is a central component of so many games that we study and play. (p. 130)

Such is the frustrating state of theorizing in this nascent discipline: recognition of constraints imposed by repeated emphasis on video games' visual dimension, hopeful glances at possibilities outside the hegemonic discursive structure of ocularcentrism, and eventual concession to the primacy of the image in the video game aesthetic. No wonder, then, that Atkins (2006) metonymically reduces—as is so common—the body of the video game player to a set of eyes fixed on a screen when trying to account for an extremely important phenomenon: the spatio-temporal situation of the video game player in her "dialogic" relationship with the video gaming apparatus (p. 135). For Atkins (2006), this relationship is bound up in a "game gaze" with a "focus, always, [. . .] not on what is before us or the 'what happens next' of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the 'what happens next if I' that places a player at the center of experience as its principle creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and always oriented toward the future" (p. 137). Although the player's future orientation is indeed worthy of further inquiry in video game studies, we might do well to jettison the notion of a unified, all-seeing, platonic subject as "principle creator" of experience in his or her relation to the video game. Instead, let us begin to adopt a more nuanced conceptualization of the player–game relationship—one that erodes the sovereignty of the "seeing subject" and reconsiders the practice of playing video games as a powerfully performative one with both intersubjective and interobjective dimensions.

The first step in this maneuver entails broadening the scope of inquiry and expanding the object of analysis in a refusal to reduce the video game player to a mere set of eyeballs. Such a move emphasizes what players are doing when they are playing video games, not merely what or how they are watching. Although we certainly cannot ignore the future orientation of the player's body, we cannot forget that this body also bears the weighty marks of the past—past encounters, past tradition, and past discipline—that materializes in its always-present performative reiteration at the site of engagement with the video game. In this article, I argue for situating the study of video game play within the lens of performance studies to foremost account for the practice as a fully embodied, carnal, and fleshy activity. To do so, I engage one particular

video game, Dance Dance Revolution (DDR), a game whose play necessitates (more overtly than traditional video games) a body in full motion. The personal narratives of DDR players indicate a spatio-temporal location that performatively materializes historically constituted conditions for action. At the same time, the narratives indicate DDR's location in a discursive and material space that complicates an understanding of a player's relations with video games couched in dualistic conceptualizations. The force of these narratives provides new trajectories for thinking about what I call a (kin)aesthetic of video gaming.

About DDR

DDR is a dance video game. More specifically, the game is of a particular genre called Bemani, a type of rhythm/music video game produced by manufacturer Konami. These video games are typically located in public arcades, and their setting here is an important aspect of their popularity. Bemani machines "turn the body into a spectacle" (Smith, 2004, p. 66), as they might require players to dance, play the drums, or mimic disc jockey practices within a defined space and in conjunction with on-screen symbols or instructions. In this way, these machines "turn players into performers" (Chien, 2006, p. 22) by putting the moving body on display and hyperbolizing the relationship between player and technology. As video games, Bemani machines also contain elements that emphasize discipline and competency. Players are rewarded for precise movement in time with machinic instructions; failure to fulfill the instructions of the game incurs a "Game Over" and necessitates more quarters from the pocket. In this way, Bemani machines emphasize the player's situation as both performer and audience, as the video games persistently rate player performances while they unfold and typically confer on players a grade indicating overall achievement at the end of each performance.

Bemani video games are quite popular in Japanese arcades, and the phenomenon is amassing similar popularity in the United States. Of these games, DDR is arguably most familiar. It made its Japanese debut in 1998 and became a near-instant success. "Within eight months after the initial release of DDR, in May 1999, 3,500 arcade units had already been sold and by 2000, Konami saw [a] 260 percent increase to about $173.6 billion in net revenues, largely due to the popularity of Dance Dance Revolution" (Chan, 2004). In 2000, Konami released DDR in the United States, and to say the game was well received is an egregious understatement. In the beginning of 2005, "cumulative worldwide sales of the Dance Dance Revolution series had exceeded 7.5 million units" (Höysniemi, 2006, p. 2). Recently, the game has marshaled the attention of American media as an icon of "exergaming," a fusion of video gaming and exercising meant to appeal to adolescents and reduce the threat of childhood obesity (Associated Press, 2006). In this same spirit, public school districts in California and West Virginia are integrating the video game into physical education

curricula (Kohler, 2005). The University of South Florida has installed DDR in its brand new Interactive Fitness Lab alongside virtual reality biking machines and snowboarding simulators ("Welcome," 2006), while Konami has struck a deal with a national fitness chain and installed its game in more than 600 North American fitness locations (Careless, 2005).

The mechanics of DDR seem almost too simple to have spawned such a popular reception. To play the game, dancers stand on surfaces marked with arrow buttons, and step on these buttons when prompted by corresponding on-screen arrows. The arrows represent dance steps, and players move their bodies in time with a multitude of musical selections of varying difficulty levels (i.e., the higher the difficulty level, the more steps a player must perform, and with greater rapidity). The game ends if a player cannot keep in time with the music and misses too many steps. When a player completes a song, the game gives him or her a grade based on the performance; this grade represents the accuracy with which the player has managed to step in correct patterns. Players can dance alone or with a partner, each in his or her own dance area.

These mechanics are consistent in all versions of Konami's DDR, which, in addition to appearing in arcades, is available for play on home video game consoles such as Sony's *Playstation 2*, Microsoft's *XBox*, and Nintendo's *GameCube*. However, the arcade version of the game is of particular interest here because of its discursive and material situation. As Andrews (2006) notes, "The arcade fosters a performance dynamic which is simply not present in the home, where strangers are not likely to happen by and watch people play or try it out themselves" (p. 5). This is to say that the arcade version's placement in public spaces, as well as the gaming apparatus' material construction, are key components of its functionality as a site of performance.

The DDR arcade machine features a metal "dance floor" in which its foot pads are encased, and this platform is raised nearly 6 inches off the ground, clearly demarcating the game's space and showcasing the bodies moving atop it. The arcade machine features strobe lights that beat in time to the music and smaller lights embedded in the foot pads that illuminate when players touch them. The dance game also draws attention to itself and its players because its thudding rhythms—pumped from large speakers—are audible throughout any arcade in which the machine is installed. These specific hardware features aid in the constitution of the video game apparatus body, and several software features complete this construction. For instance, the male voice of a disembodied announcer typically comments on the player's performance during each song, offering insights such as "You move smoothly!" or "Wow, you're workin' up a sweat!" depending on how accurately the dancer is pressing the arrows in time to his or her song selection. Meanwhile, cheers and jeers from an invisible crowd of spectators are audible behind the music, encouraging or mocking the performer on the platform. The hardware and software components that constitute the body of the DDR video game apparatus are key components in the game's situation as a performative locus, to be discussed presently.

Although these material conditions are important considerations for an analysis of DDR from the perspective of performance studies, conditions that result from the arcade machine's discursive and social situation are likewise key. Research regarding DDR is relatively sparse; however, existing scholarship has productively explicated various facets of the video game's intertextual location within global and local flows of culture, capital, and dance, whereas others have identified the game as a site of various overlapping discourses (Andrews, 2006; Smith, 2004). According to Smith (2004), DDR is an important site:

> For the investigation of some key issues in pop music and cultural studies: the global flow of musical cultures and identities, the interaction of sound and image in new media, the role of sound and music in the creation of interactive digital environments, and the nature of fan engagement with media texts. (p. 58)

Researchers have only just begun to explore the implications of DDR identified here. For instance, Smith's (2004) study alone recognizes four discourses manifest at the site of DDR: discourses of masculinity (and homophobia), of athleticism, of bodily fitness, and of regional identity. Although the game indeed offers a space for the performance of identity (Smith, 2004), a study of more than 500 players indicates that public DDR performance is marked by gendered power inequities (Höysniemi, 2006). And all discourses operate within a vibrant, transnational fan community mapped by Andrews (2006). DDR players have established their own Web forums, their own styles of play, their own etiquette, and their own dance moves specific to the game (Andrews, 2006). By following fan activity and the flow of DDR across and throughout global circuits, Andrews (2006) is able to illustrate the ways in which various styles of dance are translated by participants worldwide, while these intertextual constructions are "made visible on their bodies" (p. 1) in the productive act of performance. Transnational community constituted by DDR play is possible in part because "dance—movement of the body—moves easily across linguistic and cultural boundaries [. . .]" (Condry, 2001, as cited in Smith, 2004, p. 62). These are the historical and material conditions in which the bodies of DDR players materialize; global flows of capital, dance, and fandom coalesce in their stylized, local movements (Bell & Blauer, 2006) as part of a game text with no overarching narrative and no ultimate end-state—a game whose object is simply to perform, and perform well.

DDR and Performance Studies

The performativity of DDR is palpable in players' repetitive and highly stylized movement in DDR's space—a space both material (clearly demarcated by the body of the gaming apparatus) and discursive (situated within the pervasive flows of culture and capital outlined above). To say that playing DDR is performative is to recognize the action as both a doing and a thing done (Pollock, 1998b), both a citation of

historically codified bodily conventions and a kinetic maneuver powerful enough to not only draw attention to these conventions by materializing them in specific circumstances but also to invert, supplant, displace, or resignify them (Butler, 1993). Pollock (1998a) stresses performance's necessarily embodied dimension when she says performance is "primarily something *done*, rather than something *seen*. It is less the product of theatrical invention or the object of spectatorship than the process by which meanings, selves, and other effects are produced" (p. 20). Understanding performance situates DDR (and video game play in general) within a more robust, nuanced framework from which we might come to understand and appreciate its aesthetic dimensions. Player performances re-collect and challenge various dualisms structuring discourse about video games and the practice of video gaming, forcing "inside and outside distinctions, like genres, [to] blur and wobble" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 184). Namely, notions of embodied/disembodied, material/ephemeral, player/video game and dance/not-dance are contested by the performative act of playing DDR.

DDR can be viewed as a space of mixed reality that folds the ephemerality of digital representation and the concrete materiality of physical, embodied presence into a unique hybrid space (Cheok, Yang, Ying, Billinghurst, & Kato, 2002). Real-izing the imperatives of the machine becomes an obsession whose fulfillment can be located not in an ephemeral and transcendental no-where of cyberutopian rhetoric but rather in the sensuous and tactile pleasures of the immanent now-here (as feet and dance pads touch and rebound from one another). Notions of in-/out-game are ultimately rendered useless in this otherwise hybrid or augmented reality of movement across an interface. Articulating dance with game play similarly explodes discourse of video gaming as a disembodied activity; the stereotypical image of the video gamer slouching sedentary on a sofa is completely undone by the notion of a video game that instead requires players to engage it with a locomotive, kinesthetic, rhythmic, and wholly corporeal whirlwind of movement. As Chien (2006) notes, "While dance is traditionally privileged as fundamentally embodied, video-game [sic] playing is assumed to be consummately disembodied—it is the ultimate dissolution of flesh-bound 'meatware' into infinitely transmissible bits of information" (p. 23).

DDR's introduction to spaces not traditionally associated with video gaming (i.e., the fitness center) highlights the game's ability to challenge presuppositions fixing the practice of video gaming in tightly regulated cultural spheres:

> The assumed opposition between dance and video game, intersecting with prevailing distinctions between active/passive, passion/addiction, and embodied/disembodied, is exactly what generated the frisson of surprise captured by media accounts of Dance Dance Revolution's public spectacle." (Chien, 2006, p. 24)

Situating play of DDR for examination from a performance perspective recognizes the conditions by which playing DDR is made both possible and meaningful—conditions materializing in the performative act. To do so, says Conquergood (1991), is to privilege

"the body as a site of knowing" (p. 180). It also provides a new space for theorizing a (kin)aesthetic of video gaming that erodes the shackles of ocularcentrism. Specifically, interviews with DDR players point to the inhabitance of a spatio-temporal location thrown open by their dance—a location whose embodiment needs to be interrogated in the development of a disciplinary orientation that speaks about the meaningful practice of video gaming on its own terms. Player narratives are negotiations of various interlocking discursive formations materially manifest in performance at the site of DDR. Accounting for DDR play as performance provides insight into the ways in which players negotiate complex networks of meaning in their movements across an interface—movements that simultaneously challenge and (re)signify these systems.

Talking About Play

Before proceeding further with a discussion of method, I should at this point indicate that I am a DDR player. Although I may not meet the criteria for identification as a "DDR Freak" (Smith, 2004, p. 69), I do play the video game in a public arcade multiple times per week, both individually and socially. My experience with DDR (and love of the game) spurred my initial interest in pursuing its examination, and my history with the game undoubtedly informs both the shape of interview data as well as the larger axiological contours of this study.

To explore the performativity of DDR, I engaged in group conversations with players from a public university in New England to obtain personal narratives that speak to the richness of DDR experience. Personal narrative is important for understanding the lived experience of playing DDR, because, according to Langellier (1999), "Performing and studying personal narrative is a way of grasping the world" (p. 140). In addition, I engaged in a DDR play session with my informants because I agree with Conquergood (1991) that "the ethnographer must be a co-performer in order to understand those embodied meanings" (p. 187).

To locate DDR players with whom I could speak, I posted on a DDR arcade machine a flyer detailing my research interests and inviting players to talk with me about their experiences with the video game. Response to my inquiry was immediate and enthusiastic. More players responded than I had time and resources to meet; however, one group of five players in particular engaged with me in insightful and heuristic dialogue. A group of five friends—two women and three men—who play DDR together multiple times each week contacted me personally and asked to talk with me about their experience playing the video game. Two (one man and one woman) were 4th-year students and three (two men and one woman) were 1st-year students. One woman and one man (both 1st-year students) were romantic partners. The data emergent from these conversations are not necessarily meant to represent generalizable categories as much as they indicate the forceful trajectory of alternate modes of conceptualizing embodied game play. I hope the players' voices can provide a point of entry for this endeavor.

When talking with the group, I tape-recorded the emerging dialogue, later transcribing the players' personal narratives regarding DDR (with special attention to their rhythmic qualities). All five informants (henceforth identified by pseudonyms) were self-proclaimed video gamers and were extremely reflexive about the role of DDR in their lives. Implicit in almost every aspect of their coproduced narratives was recognition that playing DDR constituted, in some way, a performance. As a result, various themes emerged cogently from their narratives: The players spoke about the politics of public play when juxtaposed against in-home play, etiquette that has arisen from repeated performances, reasons new players are attracted to the game, gender differences in perceiving competition and goals in the game, and the perceived benefits of playing DDR. Of interest in the present analysis are narrative performances that work to "flesh out" DDR's situation as both (not) dance and (not) video game. Specifically, players' narrative performances articulate and (re)constitute discursive and material conditions manifest in play—the intersubjective and interobjective relations materialized in the act of playing DDR that complicate an understanding of video gaming focused sheerly on a player's enraptured gaze. For instance, two players speak directly about the performative dimensions of DDR:

Steph

That's another great thing about DDR
Is 'cause
Tim and I
We go to the arcade
In the mall
And all these old ladies are standing there
And we're dancing and they're like
[In a high voice] "You're so good!"

Tim

Yea
One good thing about DDR
Is the fact that I
Show off
You know
I mean I'm not
I'm not
I'm not an amazing player
I'm a mid-level standard player
But you know
I go to the mall and
You know
We
I have like

Elderly tourists and
You know
Just people who
Have never seen something like that before
With their jaws hanging slack watching me play
And
That's a really good feeling

Both Steph and Tim articulate and negotiate complex networks in their joint narrative about public performance of DDR. For both players, playing is a way of performing and negotiating an identity, specifically a generational one. Steph describes the "old ladies" that can watch her and appreciate her especially because they cannot participate in DDR, while Tim describes the thrill of "showing off" to "elderly tourists"—making a spectacle of his body for people who are just visiting this space, who are just "standing there," left outside the sphere of play, their "jaws hanging slack." Both players indicate the enjoyment they derive from performances that mark them and situate them in a space that excludes others. It's a "great thing," a "good thing" that emerges from the clear delineation of performers and audience members. Indeed, the "really good feeling" of playing DDR would not be possible without both. The intersubjective elements of DDR emerge continually throughout players' narrative performances that (re)constitute their experiences of play.

Is It Dance? The Intersubjectivity of DDR

Players' attempts at situating DDR as a form of dance pointed to various intersubjective elements of game play. I use *intersubjectivity* here as did Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as "a structure of engagement with the *intentional behavior* of other body-objects from which we recognize *what it objectively feels like to be subjective*" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 316, emphasis in original). To say playing video games is necessarily an intersubjective practice is to acknowledge the myriad of ways in which the practice serves as a nexus of various systems of meaning.

Although only one player, Mike, acknowledged having professional history and training in dance, all players unanimously agreed that playing DDR constitutes dancing. Mike, however, was most specific about his feelings on the nature of the game, in part because his playful embodiment of DDR is not without disciplinary history.

Mike

When I'm doing it my mind's like
"Technique, technique
If you turn your feet in
I will smack you"

Mike is not able to perform in DDR without acknowledging the game's power to recall the history that traditional dance has inscribed on his body. His "mind," the name he gives to the voice of past interactions, reprimands and disciplines his movements. The force of institutionalized insistence on "technique, technique" is powerfully and even violently emergent in his fear of getting "smacked" for sloppy movement. Mike eventually spoke even more technically about DDR, but his invocation of a formal definition of dance was quickly challenged by another player, Joan.

Mike

Dance is
Technically
The movement of the body in organized and logical manner
And that's what DDR is
I would classify DDR as a sub-class of modern

Joan

I don't know
I don't feel very organized sometimes when I'm doing new songs on DDR
[laughter]
[. . .]
I'm always keeping hands out like
At like
Forty-five degree angles from my body
I'm like
I'm keeping my balance
I look over at Mike
He's like
[Sits up straight, mimics Mike's dancing, performs Mike's style]
"I'm putting my arms up"
"I'm doing this"
"La la la la"
"I'm makin' it fancy"
And I just wanna be like "Stop it!"

Mike's attempt at conflating DDR play with traditional notions of dance is quickly challenged by Joan, who instead notes embodied incongruities between perfor- mances of the two acts. Joan doesn't feel like she's doing Mike's definition of a dance. She critiques her own performance, noting the awkward and precarious posi- tion of her arms while playing—movements prereflectively enacted to help her "keep her balance" and simply comply with the machine's instructions. She is not "makin' it fancy," not performing in line with cultural definitions of *dance* that she feels would somehow legitimate her practice. Her interpretation of the game is not, she says, congruent with the "technical" definition of dance embodied in Mike's

play. She wishes he would "stop it!"—stop forcing unnecessarily cumbersome cultural frameworks onto movements in a space she continually negotiates as partially her own. She experiences her performative movements always in relation to cultural imperatives. Many other narratives from players offer additional qualifiers to the initial unanimous proclamation that playing DDR is dance.

Tim

I mean, it's not
It's not
Ballet, you know?
There is very little upper body movement
There is
You know
A lot of dance is
Usually involved in symbolism
Stuff like that
And
It doesn't get as deep as that
But it's more casual
Fun kinda dance that you would be doing with your friends in the living room
Not the kind of dance that people think of when they think of fancy dance schools with the
Russian teacher who'll
Like
Whack you over the head if you miss steps

Tim's narrative attempts to circumscribe for DDR a space still within the realm of dance yet outside those "fancy," institutionalized forms of dance, such as ballet. He sets this "kinda dance" apart from others because DDR is "fun" and "casual," not something that operating within excessively disciplinary institutions such as "dance schools." Instead, he indicates a lack of expressive capacity in this type of movement, which isn't as "deep" or "involved in symbolism" as other kinds. However, Tim and other players are quick to note that expression is vital to the overall experience of DDR.

Tim

You see some people who
You know
Play on the highest difficulties and they have this look on their face like
Like
"Grrr, raarrr"
You know
When they're playing
And I mean
You can tell

They're
Hard to tell if they're having fun or not anymore
You know what I mean?

Joan

Yea
I can understand being focused and being like
"Oh my god, yes, I'm getting so close to the end and"
You know
"I've got 400 count and I'm on heavy and it looks like I'm gonna get an A"
And
This
You know
There's a separation between being focused
And then getting done with it and being like
"Yes, man! Did you see that? I totally nailed that spot that I couldn't get last time!"
Or
Being like
"Okay. Next song."
[Makes the machine's "song select" sound effects] Pshh! Pshh! Pshh!

Here, Tim and Joan work together to chastise players who, in their opinion, take the game too seriously. They mark their play as having a high level of excitement and enthusiasm, not "Grrr, raarr" aggressive tenacity stripped of playful enjoyment. Playing DDR requires focus and a drive to "get an A" by refining the precision of movements to "totally nail" difficult dances; however, players should never become robotic in their attempts to do this—they should never lose the humanity that these players feel is so essential to the experience of DDR. When playing DDR, in other words, one should never need to question "if they're having fun any more," should never share the machine's same terse linguistic binary syntax: "Okay. Next song." When playing DDR, these players are conscious of their relationships with bodies other than that of the machine; indeed, this consciousness helps them retain something essential to the perpetual enjoyment of play.

Together, these narrative performances make manifest an element of intersubjective embodiment present in the both the act of playing DDR and the practice of articulating experience of the game (a practice by which players literally make sense of their movement). Playing DDR is inextricably bound up in a pervasive matrix of cultural codes and imperatives, audience negotiation, identity formation, bodily competition, and meaning making. These elements are interwoven at the site of game play and are manifest of the narrative performances of players who literally invoke and vocalize the bodies and discursive systems always, already structuring the act of play. These disciplinary systems are in-corporated[1]—negotiated at, inscribed upon, reproduced by—the site of the body as it moves within and throughout them

(Foucault, 1977). DDR players continually negotiate these systems with performance that is on one hand a matter of exactitude and mechanical mastery and on the other hand a "play-ful" and generative force (Howe, 2007). These intersubjective elements are complimented by interobjective ones.

Is It a Video Game? The Interobjectivity of DDR

Intrigued by the group's fervor in grappling with the theme of "dance/not-dance," I encouraged them to pursue its implications by asking about DDR's situation as a video game. The narratives that coalesced around this theme point to the interobjective dimension of video gaming, a dimension that serves as a necessary correlate to the intersubjective dimension, as it names "a structure of engagement with the *materiality* of other body-objects on which we project our sense of *what it subjectively feels like to be objective*" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 316, emphasis in original)[2]. The reversible yet differentiated relation between embodied player-subjects and video game body-objects is possible because of the pair's grounding in a common "element" that Merleau-Ponty (1968) calls "the flesh."[3] Player and game are passionately entwined in this fleshy communion, the body of each figuring from a general mode of existence (Sobchack, 2004). The material commingling of bodies at the site of video game play facilitates the experience of passionate suffering and active devotion (Sobchack, 2004), and the latter modality of passion (detailed below) is of concern in this analysis (the former is detailed in Behrenshausen, 2007).

When asked "So, is it a video game, then?" the group answered "yes" with the same level of unanimity and enthusiasm it afforded the question "Is it dance?" These questions sparked a new round of narrative constituting a group effort to describe the nature of DDR. In one instance, Joan and Steph worked together to articulate the limits of the phenomenon.

Joan

I think DDR
I think that's exactly it
I mean
DDR isn't exactly a video game
It
Isn't exactly you know
A dance class

Steph [cutting in]

It isn't exactly an exercise machine

Joan

I know
It isn't exactly an aerobics video that you would watch at home
But it's this nice little merging of all three of those
As well as some other things
Into this little package that is brightly colored and very noisy and very reassuring
And it says
"Hey, you can pick me up and play me any time you like"

Joan and Steph work together in outlining the video game apparatus body. Such an activity is a key experiential aspect of interobjective and (kin)aesthetic relation with the body-object of the DDR gaming machine, as it is bodily comportment that constitutes our

> passionate devotion to the world, acting on and enfolding its and our own materiality through our *senses* and with *feeling*, intimately [engaging] us with our primordial, prereflective, and material *sense-ability*—the general understanding of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in consciousness as that particular *aesthetic* concept we call *sensibility*. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 290, emphasis in original)

The body of the video game is interobjectively in-corporated as part of the experience of playing DDR, as the gaming apparatus is imbued with a quasi-subjectivity—a particular *for-itself*—whose materiality demands care-ful attention from players engaging it. Such attention should not be confused with a player's passion for the material (i.e., commodity fetishism or fandom, though these are inevitably part of the video gaming experience), nor should it be misconstrued as sheer anthropomorhism. Sobchack (2004) is explicit on both these accounts. Joan and Steph note that DDR "isn't exactly" other types of material objects or practices with which they're familiar; instead, the video game demands attention on its own terms as a novel alterity for players' eventual enfolding. They acknowledge the apparatus's alterity and autonomy. Joan gives voice to the machine, performing its desire to be "picked up" (even though this is impossible, given the size of the machine)—enfolded and in-corporated. It is poised to entwine with the flesh of the player "any time you like." Defining the DDR machine's body continued in further narrative performances by Joan and Steph:

Joan

The other great thing about it though is, you know
If you're doing really good that voice pops out of the speakers all of a sudden in the
Middle of the song
Just
Cheering you on

Steph

[In the masculine voice of the game]
"You've got the smoothest moves!"

Joan

And even if you're not doin' well
It's not like
[Switching to loud, low, condescending tone]
"Oh my god, you suck!"
"Get off the dance pad!"
"Stop wasting your quarters!"

Once again, Joan and Steph co-construct a narrative that materializes the body of the DDR arcade machine. They give voice to it, in one case imitating its praise, and in another performing the type of condescending body it is not. They express gratitude at its encouragement and are thankful for its role in nurturing their play, "even if you're not doin' well." The two players are sincere in their appreciation of the machine's *care-ful* conduct; they are *touched* by its gestures. The machine's voice "pops out"—cuts across the machinic instructions and electronic techno beats—and becomes something more than a hunk of metal silently issuing cybernetic commands.

Indeed, the language of cybernetics—couched as it is in a dualistic understanding of the separation between player as disembodied mind-thing and video game as inert mechanical mass—breaks down in the experience of playing DDR and the narrative performances (re)constituting that experience. This is to say that DDR blurs boundaries between player and video game that complicates any linear understanding of game play. As Chien (2006) says:

> The experience of playing DDR is not a unidirectional process where symbols on the page or screen are consciously translated into an appropriate bodily response. Rather, playing manifests in the vacillating, ambivalent, nonhierarchical relationship between information and body. (p. 27)

The relationship between bodies is nonhierarchical in a way that challenges Atkins's (2006) understanding of the video game player's "all-seeing" gaze. The notion of a discrete and unified subject is obliterated during game play, as bodies instead configure themselves through performance. Before a player can reflect on the passionate practice of play, "Your body [. . .] is already carrying you through" (Chien, 2006, p. 25):

> The player carnally translates signs into meaning and realigns his/her body in response, already propelled by the body's movement toward the next step, indistinguishably before or after he/she makes a conscious, reflective reading of those signs, through a reversible transubstantiation of subjective feeling and objective knowledge. (p. 27)

This "reversible transubstantiation of subjective feeling and objective knowledge" present in the performance of DDR provides an immanent material counterweight to the disciplinary matricies indicated by the narratives of players' dance experiences. Players, bearing the marks of tradition, discipline, history, (re)negotiate these structures in unique performances of DDR that subtend, undercut, or displace the conditions of their making. Steph indicates this propensity of performance when talking about her interpretations of the game's instructions.

> *Steph*
>
> It's
> It's not quite like we're being railroaded
> It's one of those
> [Speaking as the video game's body] "I'd like you to step here"
> "And if you wanna get a good score you'll step here"
> "But I don't care how you do it"

The continuous flow of instructive arrows streaming across the DDR screen do not necessarily "railroad" players into becoming mechanical automatons but rather offer coordinates to punctuate players' "propelled" (Chien, 2006, p. 27) movement through the song selection. Steph again gives voice to a body that "doesn't care" how players navigate these coordinates and translate them into unique performances. This attitude has given rise to various bodily interpretations of DDR songs; players occasionally choose to perform backward, not looking at the screen yet completing the steps; or perform with partners, switching pads in the middle of songs; or use various parts of the DDR machine's body in their dances, grabbing the support bar for leverage or jumping off the machine's screen for an added flourish. The machine's instructions are not executed; they are translated, negotiated, and interpreted as part of an aesthetic compulsion with the performative power to transform disciplinary structures and facilitate new embodied understandings of DDR play.

In other words, these performances produce an *ekstasis*, an embodied, expansive and revelatory "in-corporation" of bodies that manifests as an overwhelming desire from within (Sobchack, 2004, p. 290). It is

> A profane illumination of objective matter that, in its unrelenting "hereness" and "nowness" opens into an apprehension of something ultimately unfathomable, uncontained and uncontainable—not only in the thing on which we gaze but also in ourselves. (p. 298)

DDR performances real-ize this fleshy communion of bodies and produce the very *ekstasis* Sobchack describes. As Joan told me:

> *Joan*
>
> And one of the best things about
> Playing it over and over again is you learn the songs

And by learning the words of the song and singing with it
You dance better
And when you get it really in you
You zone
And you don't notice what's going on around you
It's just the screen and your feet

Having the game "in you" is a key part of Joan's experience; the in-corporation of the game's body results in an *ekstasis* that is not disembodied but emergent in actions such as singing—actions that keep them in a "zone," a prereflective state beyond stimulus-response conceptualizations of video gaming (a notion that Chien, 2006, explores further). The expansive movement toward fleshy communion with the body-apparatus of DDR is not transcendental but immanent; contact of screen and feet is *per-formative*, figuring and shaping various modes of conscious experience; a sensuous and passionate hapticity pervades each moment of embodied interaction. Such power is not merely a projection "in the thing on which we gaze" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 298); it arises between "the screen and your feet."

For Atkins (2006), video games are appealing because of "the imminent possibility, always, that the player may intervene to manufacture his or her own aesthetic experience" (p. 137). I would argue, in light of video games' interobjective dimension, my experience playing DDR, and narratives from players regarding their experiences, that the "imminent" possibility of Atkins's conceptualization—the possibility that the player may just decide to take up the controls of a video game and master it from *without*—should instead be understood as an immanent possibility, one realized only from the always-already imbricated situation of player and game, where aesthetic experience is not manufactured by the player as much as it arises prereflectively from the looping performativity of actions in a fleshy communion between bodies at a liminal interface. This experience is not located in a transcendental cognitive realm or ephemeral *no-where* (implicit in models described by video game theorists such as Fisler, 2006; or Janz, 2005), but rather in a scintillating *now-here* as bodies stomp and spin through a vacillation of performance and performativity that emphasizes the carnal, sensuous, and embodied materiality foregrounding play as passionate and sublimely expansive—what we might call a (kin)aesthetic of video gaming.

Conclusion

This disclosure of an immanent or incipient significance in the living body extends [. . .]
to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our body, will
discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression. (Merleau-Ponty, 1981, p. 197)

In closing, I wish to return more directly to the article whose criticism launched this phenomenological investigation of DDR to stress the importance of a (kin)aesthetic

of video gaming, which challenges the hegemony of ocularcentrism presently pervading video game study. Quite simply, Atkins's (2006) assertion that video games are not just something players look at but also something they do is tantamount to our continued endeavor of making sense from this relatively new medium. To say that video gaming is a practice—something people do—is to automatically invoke a performative correlate, reminding us that video gaming is also a thing done. According to Atkins, "it is all too tempting for the critic of games to recognize the present of the playing, or the past of having played, but we also need to remember that these combine in the action of event only because of our anticipation of the future" (p. 138). Nothing could be truer; however, the spatio-temporal situation indicated here is not exclusive to the gamer's "gaze," (which Merleau-Ponty, in the quotation that began this section, notes is already "prompted by the experience of our body") and to insist on this overlooks the passion involved in video gaming. This is to say that past, present, and future are materialized in an embodied (kin)aesthetic that has to do with much more than "what we're really looking at" (Atkins, 2006). Instead, let us finally attend to the intersubjectivity inherent in the practice of video gaming: the interpersonal relations manifest in the experience of play, the disciplinary systems inscribed on and invoked by the body in its very movement, and the discursive power relations that "play out" in play. Let us realize the provocative *ekstatsis* of video gaming's interobjective dimensions: the ways in which bodies are literally given shape and configured in performances of video gaming, the practice's capacity to subvert dominant systems of meaning, and the insistence on new ways of meaning and mattering; the autonomy and power of the video game's material body, its complicity in shaping the game experience and facilitating passion. For the gaze of the gamer is already a wholly embodied sense. Merleau-Ponty (1964) reminds us:

> My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely, it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement? (p. 162)

If anything, the narrative performances of DDR players beg us to remember the role of the body in the practice of video gaming, to "go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 162), whether we be examining the hyperbolized bodily movement evident in DDR or the same (perhaps more subtle) bodily engagement necessary for engaging any video game. Steph described the importance of this project, saying:

Steph

It's something everyone does
Like
When I was learning to play Mario

Back on the NES
I would be holding down the button and he'd be running and he'd
And I'd hit the jump button and I'd go like this with my hands
[Makes her hands, holding an imaginary controller, "jump" upward, and others laugh]
Yes, exactly!
You bring yourself back into it
It's like
Teaching you to accept your instincts again

Video games are not something players look at; video games are something players do. Video game studies needs to accept its instincts—return "again" to a body that has been obfuscated by formalization and rationalization, bringing the body "back into it"—and further explore that wholly embodied, carnal, sensuous, and powerful (kin)aesthetic of video gaming.

Notes

1. Calleja (2007) likewise directs our attention to the notion of *incorporation*, as it is relevant to video gaming. However, several points of caution are warranted. Incorporation is most valuable when we grant it sufficient scope. This is to say that we must always attend the way corpor-reality is literally a matter of human, nonhuman, organic and/or inorganic life. In other words, incorporation is not exclusively the domain of a unified human subject (as it appears to be for Calleja). A performance perspective allows us to keep this unifying propensity in check by reminding us that bodies are configured by and in performance. Calleja's notion of *performance* is limited to the human player's physical execution of an already-established cerebral strategy on/in gamespace. Once again, performance is a way of knowing, as is clear to anyone who has subjected himself or herself to a video game without first reading the formal instruction manual.

2. Sobchack's (2004) work is profound and exceedingly useful in helping video game theorists remember the material dimensions of a player who is both a subjective object and objective subject (who has a body but also is a body), as well as the material dimensions of a video game that is not passive or inert but rather actively complicit in shaping the experience of its engagement.

3. Sobchack (2004) explains the importance of Merleau-Ponty's concept, saying it is the same flesh that "grounds us as body-subjects in a primordial reversibility with other body-subjects so as to allow our essential *intersubjectivity* and also makes it possible for us, in any objective sense, to 'have' a world" (p. 310, emphasis in original).

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