

# Kinaesthetic Pleasure Permeating the Sense of Play: Vicarious Kinaesthesia and the Body-as- Interface

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

One of the earliest play occurrences that the author has experienced – and arguably most people would relate to – was participation in make-belief games; imaginary swordfights and martial arts moves supplemented with playable props (e.g. broomsticks as weapons), all that attest to a kid’s fantasy acted out in a physical and highly bodily manner. Kinaesthesia in that context, can be presumed to function as a bridge between the actual and the fictional – between a child holding a stick in his backyard and a decorated knight brandishing his sword in a mythical land.

Accordingly, in a digital gaming situation the player exercises kinaesthetic effort through her body and fingers, in order to actualize the game’s text, usually via controlling a playable figure’s<sup>1</sup> movement within the game world. Thus, by appreciating the player in its physicality of controlling the figure, while also experiencing a vicarious sense of movement<sup>2</sup>, we can understand how play is permeated by our kinaesthetic experience as performers in a Digital game.

This study will forward a theoretical analysis of such inquiries within the field of Game studies, while trying to examine cases in Digital games, in which the player’s vicarious body, can possibly affect how we make sense of our physical body and how it can also function as a mediating interface where the actual and the virtual can convene.

Kirkpatrick urges as that in order to understand Digital games as cultural forms, we need to classify them with reference to the demands they make on the human body (2009), while Bench observes that new media formats “make new movement strategies available” (2009, 279). In McLuhan’s spirit, if the medium is the message (1964), then we can argue that media forms such as Digital games can shape new understandings about ourselves, revealing how a virtual entity – as a fantasized ‘other’ – can affect the way we kinaesthetically perceive and move our bodies.

Kiri Miller in her analysis of Dance games – e.g. *Just Dance* (Ubisoft, 2009) – discusses how the player’s body can be regarded as a playable interface (2017). She points out that while virtuosic players of e.g. first-person shooter games must demonstrate their shooting skills within the game’s virtual space, they don’t need to actually perform the

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avatar's corporeal actions (85). However, Dance game players have to act both as dancers and as gamers, pointing out to a conflation between their dual role as in-game and also actual performers, mainly using their bodies as playable interfaces.

Conversely, in figure-based Digital games<sup>3</sup>, the controlling of the player's avatar shapes the player's kinaesthetic body and the primary means for exerting this control, are mainly achieved through a controller – usually a gamepad. I argue that the persistence of the gamepad's design (Keogh, 2015), can lead to a learned, embodied literacy and introduce to the body of players the “game's notation”: a cultivated literacy that presumably forms a collective sense of touch for the player-as-performer. The game's notation, arguably structures an objective, codified plane for the gaming community and thus shaping a new kinaesthetic economy, through the internalization of a game's control-input schematics; it is through achieving and mastering the game's “kinaesthetic form”<sup>4</sup> (Karhulahti, 2013), that the player comes to experience kinaesthetic pleasure, analogous to a dancer that achieves mastery of physical pose and posture.

Respectively, in Dance games this kinaesthetic form is shaped and structured around the “player-as-interface”; the player has to perform physically via a process dubbed as “kinaesthetic vision” (Miller, 2017), whereas she needs to observe the game's virtual tutor, while trying to mirror and imitate the appropriate dancing moves. For Miller, Dance games “invite players to explore how listening can inform proprioception, and vice versa” (2017, 102), because in such gaming instances the challenge consists of enacting matching motor responses to the objects of music and choreography, all through the medium of the player's physical body.

These above considerations bring us to the matter of how a specific technique, that is required for achieving the game's “kinaesthetic form”, is accordingly attained either in moving the player's vicarious in-game body with a controller, or via the “body-as-interface”. In order for a player to activate the Digital game's cybertext, she needs to apply “ergodic effort” (Aarseth, 1997) and this effort is translated as the player's movement of fingers on the gamepad's buttons and thumbsticks, her physically learned literacy of her body at the input device and thus, the Digital game “becomes textually legible to players” (Keogh, 2015, 130). The player is introduced to the gamepad's control schematics, which are persistent and through the repetition of these physical inputs – as a different form of notation – adapts an “available repertoire of bodily behaviours and aptitudes” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, 111). This kinaesthetic internalization is described by Calleja as a situation where “the controls are learned to such a degree that the on-screen movement of avatars and miniatures feels unmediated” (2011, 68) whereas Miller attests to that, arguing that when the required body technique recedes from explicit consciousness, the body's interface (analogous to the gamepad) also fades out with it (2017, 117).

Therefore, the player's virtual kinaesthetic experience in Dance games can be parallelized with the vicarious kinaesthetic experience in controlling an avatar. The “body-as-controller” functions at the same time similarly and also differently than an actual controller, however the player's engagement in either instance can shape a distinct kinaesthesia, that presumably persists in her motor repertoire, expanding the appreciation of her physical body in the actual world.

Digital games can provide such a possibility space, where a kinaesthetic pleasurable play experience, can affect and shape the novel ways in which we appreciate our bodies. The player, given a virtual extension of her body through the avatar, enters a digital world where she can form her own intentions based on the available repertoire of moves, she is afforded. Perhaps we can claim that in that digital space she can form a

new reading of herself, that can expand her appreciation of the ‘real’, non-technologically mediated world.

## Endnotes

1. The playable figure is used in accordance with Vella’s framing (2015), to denote the entity in a Digital game that is assumed by the player as both an *avatar* – a game component under the player’s direct control and a *character* – the representation of an individual within the game’s fictional setting.

2. By vicarious sense of movement, I specifically designate such cases where the kinaesthetic experience of the player is affected by and through the avatar’s virtual, ‘vicarious’ body and by the way she relates to it subjectively, with regards to her in-game performance.

3. Figure-based Digital games are hereto referring to specific cases that involve the player’s exertion of control in the game’s world, through the inhabitation of one (or multiple) playable figure(s).

4. Kinaesthetic form is used here in accordance with Karhulahti’s framing (2013), whereas it denotes the form of action in Digital games that persists and connects the player with the intended pattern of action, regardless of the control schematics she utilizes.

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