Interactivity as Embodied Pleasure:

A Media-Phenomenological Reframing through "Interactive" Short Videos

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Interactivity has long been treated as foundational to game studies and interactive media research, yet its dominant definitions remain constrained by a technical-operational paradigm. Traditional human–computer interaction frameworks, cybertext theory, and agency-focused models define interaction primarily through system recognition of user inputs and measurable changes in computational state (Laurel 1991; Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009). These perspectives assume that interaction is fundamentally a property of **systems**—enabled through programmed responsiveness and external verification—rather than a phenomenon emerging from **experience**. This system-centered ontology leaves little conceptual room for contemporary playful practices that lack sensing and feedback capabilities yet nevertheless produce rich forms of engagement.

A rapidly growing genre on short-video platforms such as Douyin/TikTok provides a compelling challenge to this assumption: so-called "finger-interactive videos". These videos imitate simple game mechanics—characters dodging obstacles, objects needing to be tapped, pathways to be followed—and explicitly invite users to place and move their fingers directly on the screen surface in coordination with visual cues. Importantly, **no input is detected by the system.** There is no algorithmic adaptation to users' actions, no branching outcome, and no incremental change in game state. From a functional perspective, these videos are as non-interactive as traditional linear media.

Yet users routinely report pleasure, successful performance, and a palpable sense of participation—they feel as if they are playing. Such media, although technically constrained, activate precisely the kind of embodied engagement that game studies has long considered central to ludic experience: focused attention, micro-coordination of perception and movement, rhythm-based challenge, and the joy of "making it through." These examples thus expose a theoretical blind spot in prevailing definitions of interactivity: **How can interaction occur when the system does not**

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recognize interaction? What is the status of pleasure derived from non-recognized action?

To address this question, the present study offers a reconceptualization of interactivity grounded in media phenomenology and embodied cognition. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied intentionality (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and Ihde's post-phenomenology of human–technology relations (Ihde 1990), I argue that the core of interactivity lies not in computational feedback but in the pleasurable appearance of agency within embodied experience. I define this experiential foundation as the **Participation Illusion**—a phenomenon in which users sense their actions as affecting the mediated environment despite the absence of system acknowledgment. Crucially, this illusion does not denote deception or cognitive error; rather, it illuminates the minimal experiential conditions under which interaction becomes possible.

I identify three such conditions:

(1) **Action intentionality**—the body orients itself toward media objects with purpose and direction. Unlike the diffuse attention of passive viewing, the user's finger is directed toward a specific on-screen target with spatial precision and temporal urgency, transforming the screen into a field of action.

(2) **Coupled expectation**—the perceptual anticipation that media and movement should align. Users do not simply move randomly; they anticipate that their gesture will "fit" the media's rhythm—tapping when the beat drops, swiping when the path curves—creating a felt synchrony between self and screen.

(3) **Affective confirmation**—emotionally felt validation such as rhythmic satisfaction, kinetic harmony, or playful success. The body feels correctness when movement synchronizes with media rhythm (a perfectly timed tap), or when narrative progress seems causally linked to one's action (the character survives "because I helped"). Pleasure here is not a cognitive judgment but an embodied sense of successful participation.

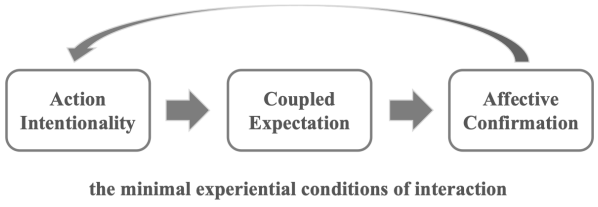

Figure 1: the minimal experiential conditions of interaction

When these elements form a self-sustaining loop, interactivity emerges phenomenologically—even without system responsiveness. Accordingly, interaction is reconceived not as a technical capability but as a lived accomplishment of embodied agency, constituted through the pleasure of action itself.

This reframing has substantial implications for game studies. First, it expands the ontological scope of interactivity to include weak, pseudo-, and imaginative forms traditionally dismissed as "not really interactive." Finger-interactive videos demonstrate that spectatorship can become a site of ludic action, blurring the distinctions between playing and watching. Second, it repositions the user as

an experiential actor whose agency is enacted rather than granted by computational algorithms. If action is felt as efficacious, then it is efficacious at the experiential level where play operates. Third, it situates pleasure at the heart of interactivity: interaction is recognized as such because it is enjoyed. Rather than being a by-product of successful input recognition, pleasure is the phenomenological engine that makes agency salient.

This shift further indicates that future developments in interactive media may not be defined solely by higher-precision sensing or algorithmic adaptivity, but by designing stronger appearances of agency—experiences wherein **users feel invited, acknowledged, and needed by media systems**. The value of interactivity may thus be better measured by the intensity and stability of pleasurable embodied agency, not exclusively by the complexity of computation or feedback loops. The emergence of playful participation beyond system response suggests that game logic is increasingly migrating into broader media ecologies, reorganizing everyday screens into spaces of kinaesthetic imagination and play-as-perception.

Ultimately, interaction is here redefined as the pleasurable manifestation of embodied intentionality within mediated environments, exceeding the technical detectability that historically grounded the concept. This perspective highlights finger-interactive short videos not as peripheral curiosities but as significant sites for understanding how interactivity evolves when the capacity for play surpasses the capacity for computation. The proposed theoretical model thus contributes to strengthening the conceptual foundations of interactivity at a moment when global platforms are transforming spectatorship into action-oriented media participation. It invites game and media scholars to attend closely to how future systems will cultivate the perception of agency, co-action, and bodily pleasure—signaling a disciplinary shift from designing interactivity as computation toward designing interactivity as lived experience.

SUPPLEMENTARY MEDIA

https://v.douyin.com/P1KMe_Rze6E/ OKW:/ 09/28 W@M.JI

https://v.douyin.com/aiwU9QM2Xvg/ 12/27 O@k.PX OkC:/

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