A Play of Bodies. How We Perceive Videogames by Brendan Keogh

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Sixteen years after James Newman had recognized that videogame experience is always kinesthetic, Brendan Keogh took upon himself to elaborate on the complex physical relationship between the game and its player, revealing it to be much more complicated than initially believed. In contrast to the experience of watching a film, which Sobchack described as a "play of images", Keogh describes the interaction with a videogame as a "play of bodies", acknowledging the importance of interactivity.

The descriptive, almost enthusiastic style of A Play of Bodies makes for an easy and compelling read, revealing the author's substantial amount of research and the extensive knowledge of game titles analyzed. That diversity of the source material is one of the strengths of the book, offering a wide range of examples and showing the importance of senses in the game experience regardless of the genre.

The author emphasizes the significance of analyzing the player's involvement with the game not only through their emotional and cognitive

engagement but also through their actions as embodied, corporeal beings. The book offers a close reading of a number of games through the way in which they engage the player not only in the broadest, kinesthetic meaning, but also, specifically, through how they are seen, heard, and felt. Although the role of senses in a videogame experience is often acknowledged and mentioned, in A Play of Bodies they are brought to the foreground: where the sight is essential in order to enjoy videogames, the hearing is often omitted apart from the rhythm or dancing games. However, as it is argued in the book, the senses are engaged during the entirety of the game experience – regardless of the game type – and allow one to feel the game world as one's own.

Among the mentioned philosophers and scholars, no one is as important to Keogh's approach as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose embodied phenomenology and the concept of the phenomenal body become crucial to understanding the player-and-videogame interaction and the cyborgian, hybrid body-at-the-videogame. In the act of playing the body merges with the console – be it a computer, PlayStation, or a mobile device – and it becomes impossible not only to see which has a bigger influence on the other, but also to decide which of them came first. As Keogh argues, that embodiment is an active, ongoing process which happens at the many layers at the same time. Only the creation of that new posthuman player-and-game hybrid allows one to experience the game not just cognitively but as fully as anything in the "real", that is, non-virtual world. Keogh blatantly insists that when the player sees, touches, and perceives the game, at the same time it sees, touches, and perceives him, changing that relationship further. In that, the videogame becomes a living, almost conscious subject.

Hence, the first chapter offers the first step towards formulating the phenomenology of videogames, drawing initially from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's fundamental book Phenomenology of Perception, which concerns the embodiment as the means of spatial, temporal, and sensorial perception of the world. The concept of the phenomenal body broadens the definitions of the body in such a way as to incorporate into it objects and instruments one uses to experience and interact with the world. Just as Merleau-Ponty gives the example of a blind man's walking stick, the controller, keyboard, mouse, the computer and the console, and,

eventually, the game itself, can become parts of the human body. Although aware of his debt towards the philosopher, Keogh leans more towards the feminist phenomenological critique of Merleau-Ponty's works, which accounts for the socially embedded nature of the embodied experience that makes it impossible to distinguish the human body from the tools it uses and the context in which it is used. The hybridization of the player's body becomes more literal in the use of the technology and game equipment: then the human is, always, a posthuman and a postphenomenological, in Ihde's words, being.

The consequences of this reach much further, though. The blurring of the difference between the virtual and the actual transfers also onto the worlds, for the game and the player are never contextless; as they merge, the two worlds cease to be as inseparable as one might think. This becomes even clearer in the second chapter, during the analysis of what happens when the videogame play leaves the domestic context and enters the public spaces through mobile videogames. Designed to be played in short intervals of time, often at public transport rather than in the comfort of one's home, they gradually changed the way games are played, further influencing the immersion. Where both the computer and most of the stationary consoles allow the player to easily distinguish between virtual and actual worlds, mobile devices challenge that dichotomy, further complicating the relationship between human and technology. Where the previous chapter explored the hybridization of the player's body, here it is the hybridisation of the player's worlds that is being scrutinized.

In order to analyze the co-attentiveness demanded by mobile videogames, the author chose two games: the blockbuster Angry Birds series and the niche game Ziggurat. In the chapter, it is argued that, contrary to popular belief, there is no substantial difference between how the player interacts with games at home and in public spaces, namely public transportation where mobile games are often played. This becomes more clear in the latter example. There, Hjorth's term "copresence" is used to describe the phenomenon of being present in and being aware of both worlds at once by incorporating both the mobile phone into the day-to-day life and the day-to-day life into the mobile phone use. The example discussed is familiar to most readers and it includes the

experience of playing a turn-based game, such as Angry Birds, on the bus – while engrossed in the gameplay one is simultaneously paying attention to the world outside the window. The hybrid form of attention (and distraction) manifests in this peculiar ability to both continue and succeed at the game and to be able to respond to real-world stimuli and information, and, in practice, not to miss the bus stop. This constitutes a new, particular type of immersion as distraction where this co-attentiveness can be perceived as a state of balance between the perception of two worlds. Interestingly and crucially, Keogh emphasizes that although it is easier to observe this type of perception in the context of mobile games, all videogames engage the player's attentiveness in the similar way, albeit to a different degree.

The third and fourth chapters are where the author develops further his understanding of kinesthetic embodiment through the way the play incorporates specific senses: touch, sight, hearing. By analyzing what the body does during the time where the play is seemingly the least active and interactive – that is, while the player is seated on the couch in front of a screen – the author tries to deny the assumption that some gameplay experiences are more "embodied" than the other. Furthermore, the third chapter explores the "embodied literacy", following the notion of the "embodied textuality", which signals that playing a game is not intuitional nor natural, but just like one needs to first learn how to read to fully appreciate a novel, a player has to learn how to play a game first. That requires, among other things, mastering the controllers: for example, the QWERTY keyboard which, although intuitional for many computer-users, actually has nothing natural about it. If a tool is to be used, it has to become ready-at-hand, to use Heideggerian terminology, one needs to learn how to use it first through repetitive use and conventions.

The fourth chapter offers a closer look at the audiovisual components of videogames, first through Dylan Fitterer's Audiosurf, a rhythm videogame which shows how sensorial, somatic experience can be created through tuning the player's skill to the music. While both the soundtrack music and the sound-based feedback are commonly used in games, this game genre demands each its player to pay more careful attention to what is usually omitted as less important. The second analyzed game, Slave

of God, ponders the question how to convey the synesthetic feeling of being in the nightclub without employing realistic visuals, offering an interesting take on how games make us feel, as the game operates on impressions rather than representations. The chapter starts with a brief summary of the theories concerning those games that require bodily movement, like dance games or Kinect sports games. Just like the movement is in those games a core gameplay mechanic – the player's body is almost literally equated with a controller – the music becomes a similarly defining element of rhythm games, whose audiovisual design is not just an aesthetic addition, but, in fact, a core feature making games meaningful.

The fifth chapter further analyses rhythm in play but pays more attention to the moments of disruption, to the space between the actual and virtual time to which Jesper Juul refers as "incoherent time". Keogh analyses the nonlinearity of videogame time and its difference from the real time, arguing that due to its discrepancies and fluctuations "time travel is a banal feature of videogame play". The chapter goes on to analyze how the paradox of the characters' multiple deaths and the possibility of multiple lives are not only central to most videogames, but also how they are explored the most through those titles that clearly threaten the "sanctity of the saved game". Repeated failures encourage multiple retries and conclusions, and, with synchronic experiences, this allows the player to experiment with the various rhythms of the game. Diachronic alternatives let the author raise the question of the authentic and inauthentic performances of the player and the character they control.

Finally, the sixth and the last chapter once again returns to the concept of Haraway's cyborg, which, together with the metaphor of the "hacker", is often used in popular culture to construct the "gamer" as masculine and hegemonic. Tracing the mythos of the gamer back to the early hacker myth, Keogh once again makes the comparison between Haraway's feminist cyborg and the player. Then, the author explores how the rise in casual and avant-garde videogames allows for the exploration of marginalized videogame identities. Those games can be seen as exploring the constraints, limiting movement rather than enabling it in order to draw attention to the hardships of the non-normative.

Brendan Keogh offers an exhaustive overview of the literature and theories relating to the player's body in the videogame play experience, at the same time pointing to the need in videogame studies for deeper, more detailed concentration on the physical aspects of play. By embedding his research in phenomenology, he underlines the relationship between the machine and the human, showing the directions in which further research is the most needed.

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