

An embodied turn: game studies across worlds and bodies

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Perspectival rendering, first person perspective, ray tracing, and virtual reality: the graphic technologies and ocularcentric ideologies surrounding the production and consumption of contemporary videogames often celebrate fantasies of escapism, dematerialization, and disembodiment (Mitchell 1992). Art historian Martin Jay (1988) has described this entanglement perspective and consciousness as the “scopic regime of modernity,” a way of thinking that stretches from the Italian Renaissance to the VR Renaissance. From the dogged pursuit of the increased resolutions and quickening frame rates of contemporary graphics technologies (Nideffer 2007), to the commitment to head mounted displays and augmented reality eyepieces (Carmack 2011, Abrash 2017), to the render farms turned Bitcoin mines that operate as a backend for financial play (Golumbia 2016, Ensmenger Forthcoming), videogames and videogame technologies participate in this ocularcentric and disembodied regime. In *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin (1999) called it the “dream of immediacy.” In *Rules of Play*, Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman (2004) called it the “immersive fallacy.” In contrast to these utopian visions, the goal of this panel is to examine both the material, historical, and embodied practices of play and the broader “embodied turn” occurring in game studies and game making in the twenty first century.

Of course, the body and its relation to media is an enduring concern. From Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to Pliny’s Myths of Mimesis, the body always figures in image-making. In the twentieth century, Siegfried Kracauer’s (1995) notes on the “mass ornament” registered in mass culture a Taylorist rationalisation of the body and Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) notion of the “extensions of man” continues this engagement into televisual and electronic media. Formative works for contemporary cinema studies also take up this question, such as Laura Mulvey’s (1975) idea of “visual pleasure” and Tom Gunning’s (1986) notion of the “cinema of attractions”--both of which, albeit in very different ways, pushed back against understandings of film that prioritised narrative or semiotic frameworks. Following both Bernard Stiegler’s (1998) philosophical expansion of Andre Leroi-Gourhan’s (1993) anthropological work and the relationship between McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler’s (1999) media theory, thinkers like N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Mark B. N. Hansen (2004) articulate the deeply material and embodied aspects of even the most fragmented, informatic, networked, and ubiquitous digital media. Following this work and given the ways in which games both celebrate and disavow the body of the player, videogames operate as a paradigmatic site for problematizing, performing, playing with embodiment.

Bodies have always mattered in videogames: fingers flicking buttons or tapping keys, wrists wriggling mice or twisting joysticks, chords tangled around table legs and winding through rooms, heat emanating from hardware and dust settling on internal components--bodies at play. Whether human or nonhuman, without these players there is no play. Over the last decade, and especially since 2008, there has been a dramatic rise in research methods and game design practices focused on or starting from the body of the player to understand the videogame experience as played. There are studies that engage the materiality of games and effort (Aarseth 1997, Connor 2007), games and art (Galloway 2004, Flanagan 2007), games and processes (Wardrip-Fruin 2009, Bogost 2006), games and platforms (Montfort and Bogost 2009), games and gender (Flanagan 2007, Chess 2017), games and sexuality (Shaw 2014, Ruberg and Shaw 2017), games and history (Guins 2014, Nooney 2013), games and sport (Taylor 2012, Witkowski 2017).

Engaging specifically with the relation between bodies and games, early works like David Sudnow's (1979) *Pilgrim in the Microworld* offer an intimate story of how personal biography and phenomenology come into play even with seemingly straightforward games like *Breakout*. More recently, Steve Swink's (2009) *Game Feel* articulates the relationship between those microtemporal processes at stake in both computation and cognition. Videogame developers, too, are increasingly having these conversations around topics like game feel, and experimenting with new genres focused less on narrative or mechanical pleasures and more the experiential and phenomenal site of play. For example, based on Emily Short's (2008) short post on making Interactive Fiction "juicy," the popular talk by Martin Jonasson and Petri Purho (2012) called "Juice it or Lose it"--also featuring *Breakout*--demonstrated the ways in which visual and sonic responses to even trivial input can produce intense bodily reactions.

Following this historical trajectory, this panel will examine game and media studies' conceptualisations of embodiment, placing these discourses in relation to the wider "embodied turn" in design towards haptics, tactility, and the body that is perhaps most clearly legible in technologies and platforms such as VR, AR and locative gaming. Exploring the performativity, phenomenology, and practices of gameplay and game making, panelists will attempt to update the concept of game feel, consider concepts of performativity in virtual reality, and think through forms of nonhuman embodiment and entropy in esports and economics.

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