Review: *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, by Brendan Keogh. MIT Press. 2018. ISBN: 9780262037631

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Brendan Keogh's 2018 book *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* attempts to forward an understanding of the act of play as the activity of a body in encounter with a game's mechanics. Through the image of the feminist cyborg, Keogh aims to posit a phenomenology—a theory of the structure of conscious experience—of videogame play by interrogating the ambiguous boundary between the virtual and the actual, between videogames and their players, in the meeting of bodies and machines.

Keogh's main argument manifests through a sustained critique of a prevailing formalist discourse that understands videogames as a subset of traditional games, modest objects of study that are seemingly just systems of rules; an oversimplified mode of design and analytical thinking that sees itself as uncomplicated by anything outside of its formal characteristics, and which cannot theorize, let alone appreciate, the ambiguous hybrid quality of the cyborg emerging from the interplay of bodies and videogames. Similar to what N. Katherine Hayles argued about liberal subjectivity and information in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Keogh claims that within this formalist discourse about videogames, the significance of the playing body has been neglected or even diminished. As a result, critics and scholars, who are also players, have become habitually desensitized to the complex pleasures that the embodied experience of videogame play affords. Keogh reveals what some of these pleasures are in close readings of videogames such as *Audiosurf* (Fiterrer, 2008), *Slave of God* (Increpare Games, 2012), *Tearaway* (Media Molecule, 2013), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008), and *ZiGGURAT* (Action Button Entertainment, 2012), among many others.

Across its six chapters, *A Play of Bodies* draws attention to the many audiovisual, kinetic, and agential pleasures available to cyborg bodies

and suggests that videogames are more complex than the aforementioned formalism gives them credit for. Chapter 2, 4, and 5 include illustrative case studies that respectively detail the significance of attentive and inattentive styles of mobile videogame play, the non-passivity of engaging with videogames through sight and sound, and the construction of temporal experience in videogames with moments of duration and repetition akin to those that comprise rhythm in music. In combination with those illustrative chapters, the experiences they describe are accordingly theorized and clarified in Chapter 1, 3, and 6, where Keogh collates and expands on recent game studies scholarship about embodiment in order to trace the form of the cyborg assemblage of "player-and-videogame" (p. 9).

By applying a cybernetic update to Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2014) phenomenological theory about how the body incorporates external objects to enhance perception, Keogh describes in the first chapter a continuity of agency between actual bodies and virtual worlds. What emerges is a dispersed embodiment that enables players to affect and be affected by videogames, a kind of embodiment left undertheorized and underappreciated amid the idealistic fantasies of cyberspace that were ubiquitous in game studies scholarship during the 1990s. That embodiment, which Keogh describes as the "distributed-but-situated embodied perspective [through which] the videogame player encounters and entangles with the videogame's [specific design] to produce a carnal sort of meaning" (p. 42), provides the imminent ground for a compelling new theory about the elusive textuality of videogames. In an analysis of the experience that emerges from the circuitous motion of action and reaction happening across the player-and-videogame's cyborg body, Keogh's phenomenological theory of "embodied textuality" (p. 22) radically refutes notions of objectivity and affords a privileged position to the situated and partial perspective of the posthuman subject.

For any individual videogame, the notion of embodied textuality suggests a fruitful direction for analysis because it makes appreciable the unique, multi-sensory texture created and encountered during play. While reading Keogh's work, I could not help but think about a recent memory of using the Sightjack mechanic while playing *Siren* (Japan Studio, 2003). In the fiction of *Siren*, player characters are gifted with the psychic ability to see through the eyes of any character in the level, a vital talent for surviving in the game. To use the Sightjack ability, I had to press down on the Dualshock's L2 trigger, immobilizing the player character and transporting my point of view to a full-screen image of television static. From there, I could close the perceptual distance between myself and my enemies, hijack their vision, and see through their eyes, by radially scanning the area with the left analogue stick; a motion similar to sweeping past static in search of signal with a radio dial. Through the feeling of this movement, distance and proximity between myself and my enemies became an embodied knowledge I

could rely on. I felt as though I could look down at my hands upon the controller and follow the length of my thumb as it trailed into the socket of the analog stick, like the optic nerve of an eye peering inward at *Siren*'s virtual world. Keogh's work accurately describes this experience of ecstatic perception as the product of an encounter between a body and a videogame's specific design.

Embodied textuality is a concept with the potential for larger-scale applications as well. When Keogh examines the narrow bandwidth of pleasures afforded by mainstream videogames—which have historically privileged fantasies of disembodied control and expansion beyond any corporeal limit—what becomes apparent is a normative cyborg body implicit to the design of videogames and videogame hardware. This topic is explored in depth throughout Chapter 3, in which Keogh frames console gamepads as expressive and sensual protrusions of the body, a "gestural signification of the videogame in the hands" of the videogame playing cyborg (p. 106). Through the analysis of the co-evolution of console gamepad design and the competencies expected of players to perform successfully, Keogh illustrates how videogame designers develop and routinely evoke as conventional knowledge an "embodied literacy," a learned repertoire of gestural expressions and kinetic pleasures (p. 77). These conventions inform what Keogh calls "a hegemony of input" (p. 80), an aesthetics of controller design that brings to bear upon a player's experience a set of normative pleasures which are reproduced through notions of good taste and best practices in videogame design. Within this hegemony, certain styles of input—and thus the specific sensations associated with them—are emphasized while others are deemphasized because the alternative pleasures they inspire are seen as less optimal, unresponsive, or overly complicated. Keogh's argument that certain skillsets and bodily capabilities are privileged by the design of these controllers is a compelling one. It highlights the exclusionary principle by which such standards have created a normative videogame playing body at the expense of the plurality of actual bodies that play videogames.

If becoming proficiently literate in play is key to appreciating the embodied textuality of videogames, the construction of a normative cyborg body and an authentic way of encountering videogame textuality suggest the existence of counter-hegemonic playstyles and non-normative bodies. Unfortunately, Keogh does not explore the implications of such inauthentic encounters for his theory of embodied textuality, nor does he explore the radical potential of such styles against the context of the conventional videogame design that he depicts as generally regressive. This seems like a missed opportunity to add scholarship from the rich discussion about what constitutes an authentic encounter with videogames to the book's diverse bibliography (e.g., Carbó-Mascarell, 2016; Leino, 2012; Scully-Blaker, 2014), either to complicate its formulation or to bolster it with a defense as Keogh

willingly does in other parts of the book. Chapter 6, for instance, clearly demonstrates with a selection of non-mainstream titles how much diversity of experience is elided when white, able-bodied, heterosexual men are the presumed default players of videogames. Even so, an exploration of othered experiences such as those of disabled bodies or queered styles of play is scarcely afforded room in Keogh's book. Relegated to a handful of sentences throughout, mostly contained within a brief section in Chapter 6, the rarity of engagements with queer and disability discourses in this book about bodies is at times conspicuous. Perhaps the minimal attention that *A Play of Bodies* pays to such experiences appropriately reflects that the work required to truly do them justice exceeds the scope of this slight 199-page book, which is otherwise an accommodating study of how players perceive videogames. Nevertheless, scholars interested in queer and disability studies may identify several directions for further developing videogame phenomenology based on this book.

The relative absence of such bodies and playstyles in *A Play of Bodies*, and in the cyborg pleasures of conventional videogame design, should provoke scholars and critics to describe what previously was so difficult for us to appreciate. Brendan Keogh's phenomenology can help with such a project, as it renders a crucial correction to a discourse about videogames that once perceived itself to be objective and without a body. Giving description to the situated perspective of the player dispersed across actual bodies and virtual worlds, as Keogh accomplishes with this book, permits one to speak about specific bodies and specific pleasures. Without such consideration, all mentioning of "the player" remains an abstraction without referent. Keogh's book renders a necessary recalibration by reminding us that, as scholars and critics creating a shared body of knowledge, we could manage only the sorriest image of who we are and what we have accomplished if nobody ever seriously considered, and then attempted to describe, how it feels to play videogames. *A Play of Bodies* should therefore prove vital for adopting that posthuman perspective so we may recognize our intimate involvement within the act of play.

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