Cinesthetic Play, or Gaming in the Flesh: Grasping *Celeste* by Adapting the Cinesthetic Subject Into a Phenomenology of Videogaming

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Abstract

This paper adapts Vivian Sobchack's (2004) concept of the cinesthetic subject, which addresses the corporeality of the cinematic experience, to the medium of videogaming. I thus develop the concept of cinesthetic play by translating the three components constitutive of Sobchack's cinesthetic subject: cinema, kinesthesia, and synesthesia. The mediality of cinema is translated with recourse to another of Sobchack's concepts, the film body, which has previously been translated into the game body (Crick, 2011). I then illustrate synesthetic sense-making of game-worlds and discuss how the notion of kinesthetic empathy figures in videogaming. These three components together mitigate some limitations of previous phenomenological models of gaming, which do not similarly integrate the human sensorium's different modalities. I conceive of cinesthetic play as hybrid real-and-virtual embodiment, in which players corporeally understand a game through a perception that is informed by commutating senses and their tacit understanding of the movements of and within the game-world. Additionally, throughout the paper I contend that, although scholarship on videogame phenomenology generally focuses on three-dimensionally navigable games, this embodied experience holds for two-dimensional games as well. I illustrate this point with the game *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018), which I use to demonstrate the value of the notion of cinesthetic play for an analysis of the embodied playing and sense-making of videogames.

Keywords

Videogaming; cinesthetic play; *Celeste*; digital embodiment; phenomenology; game body; kinesthetic empathy; Sobchack.

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Introduction

In the videogame *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018), while playing as the protagonist Madeline, I am able to perform a dash: bolting forward, leaving imprints of Madeline's silhouette in her wake while wind-marks form from the sheer speed of her movement (see Figure 1). In my regular life, it goes without saying, I cannot perform a dash and rush through the air at such high speeds. Nonetheless, to an extent, I do experience what it is like to dash: I feel Madeline's acceleration and a brief flight through the air. To explicate this real-and-virtual experience, in this paper I offer a phenomenological account of videogaming by adapting Vivian Sobchack's (2004) notion of the cinesthetic subject, combining her framework with previous work on videogaming to synthesize a concept of cinesthetic play. Perhaps counter-intuitively, I preserve the prefix "cine-"; I do so because the cinesthetic subject encompasses more than just cinema. This wordplay incorporates kinesthesia and synesthesia alongside cinema, which is why I rather alter the other term involved (from "subject" to "play"), to denote the digital play of videogames. While other scholars have previously developed phenomenological accounts of videogaming (I provide an overview below), and Sobchack's other works have variously been incorporated into a perspective on gaming (e.g., Black, 2017; Keogh, 2018), her concept of the cinesthetic subject has not yet been adapted to this medium. Timothy Crick, for instance, brings her notion of the film body into videogaming. However, I argue that adapting the cinesthetic subject may provide additional insight into the gaming experience, because it integrates multiple bodily faculties and modalities into a coherent framework that can mitigate some of the limitations of other accounts. For example, different theories of digital embodiment invoke kinesthesia, but synesthesia is generally overlooked—an experiential component crucial to cinema, as Sobchack emphasizes—and is similarly crucial to gaming (a notable exception is Jan-Hendrik Bakels's (2020) work, addressed below). Furthermore, I seek to contribute to an understanding of the phenomenology of videogaming by specifically addressing two-dimensional games. Prior accounts usually concentrate on the phenomenology of three-dimensionally navigable game-worlds, whereas I contend that the phenomenological framework proposed here applies to two-dimensional games as well.

Figure 1. Dashing in *Celeste*. Screenshot by the author.

Below, I first provide a brief survey of the literature on the embodiment of videogames. Some of these works will be incorporated into my formulation of cinesthetic play. Then, to start adapting Sobchack's (2004) cinesthetic subject, I delineate this concept in more detail, after which I discuss how its three constitutive components—cinema, kinesthesia, and synesthesia—can be adapted to videogames. First comes cinema, which is translated by using Sobchack's concept of the film body and its videogame equivalent, the game body. Then follows a discussion on synesthesia in videogames, after which I turn to kinesthesia and previous theorizations of kinesthetic empathy in videogames. Synthesizing these components, I offer a definition of cinesthetic play, which comes to describe how videogaming establishes a corporeal interpenetration of reality and virtuality, in which players carnally experience and comprehend a game through a vision that is informed by other, commutating sensory modalities and their tacit kinesthetic understanding of the movements of both the in-game avatar and their perspective on the game-world. Finally, I demonstrate the concept's use by applying it to *Celeste* and conclude with a defense of its validity.

Embodying Games: An Overview

The question of players' embodiment of videogames has been variously addressed; here, I delineate some key issues of this subject. Not all these articulations of videogame phenomenology are incorporated into the notion of cinesthetic play, however: I only incorporate those more directly applicable to adapting Sobchack's (2004) framework. Deliberations on videogame embodiment frequently depart from the foundational phenomenological thought of philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl. Evoking Heideggerian phenomenology, for instance, James Ash (2013) extends

the concept of "attunement" to address the "somatic and sensory skills involved in videogame play" (p. 27). Nicolas de Warren (2014) builds on Husserl's phenomenology of the imagination to present an evocative analysis of digital fictions. He demonstrates how digital embodiment establishes a "virtualization of consciousness" (de Warren, 2014, p. 111), whereby we project our bodies into a game-world. Although such approaches are undeniably productive, I will predominantly address Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) phenomenology, for two reasons: firstly, because it seems to have found more take-up in the literature, and secondly, because it is the framework Sobchack also invokes. In order to translate Sobchack's cinesthetic subject, I therefore mainly stick with videogame-related theorizing that similarly builds on Merleau-Ponty, or Sobchack's own work. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, and especially his description of how our bodily schemas are extended through the tools we use, is addressed below in more detail.

To understand the embodiment of videogames, Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy (2006) contend that two critical components need to be taken into account: firstly, "the player's material, situated body that interfaces with the various technologies required to instantiate gameplay" (p. 107), and secondly "the ways in which we are re-embodied within the game world itself—critically what means are used by the game to feed back to us as players our actions, experiences and progress within the game world" (p. 107). Here, Dovey and Kennedy distinguish between the material means we use to access the game-world, and the feedback the game presents to us (in terms of represented contents). This relates to a central issue in discussions of the phenomenology of videogaming, namely the matter of perspective: how a game lets us perceive and act within its digital world shapes how we come to experience and embody the game.

With regards to the ways in which the game gives feedback, two related—but not equal—questions emerge: that of the two—or three-dimensionality of games, and that of the avatar. While I noted above that phenomenological inquiries tend to focus on three-dimensional games, two-dimensional games are hardly neglected (e.g., Giddings, 2017; Keogh, 2018, pp. 35–38; Klevjer, 2006, 2012). The question of the avatar, which I address more below, pertains to how we perceive within the game-world: first-person games align our perspective in the world with that of the avatar, whereas third-person games show the avatar we control. Below, I address this matter through Timothy Crick's (2011) discussion of the game body, a term he develops using Sobchack's (2004) notion of the film body. Discussions of this matter try to explain why, as Daniel Black (2017) asks, first-person games are not automatically more immersive than third-person games; this might be expected because in first-person games "the character's body seems to be one's own rather than a separate entity in the game space" (p. 179).

Jesper Juul and Rune Klevjer (2016) describe the discussion of videogame avatars as a question of whether they

> should be conceptualized as vehicles of agency rather than objects of representation—as *tools* rather than as characters in the traditional sense. Against this view some theorists argued that the dual nature of avatars, as sets of capabilities and visual representations combined, is essential to their distinctive appeal. (p. 2, emphasis in the original)

A final development in the phenomenology of videogaming to point out, and which helps to situate this effort, concerns posthumanist phenomenology. As Dovey and Kennedy (2006) point out, videogames—with their feedback loop between player and game—are paradigmatic examples of cybernetic technologies. In play, a cybernetic feedback loop is established wherein player and game are interdependent, as "both are part of a loop through which information and energy flows" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 109). Videogame play, thus conceived, literalizes "the ontology of the cyborg—a subjectivity that depends precisely on this collapse of boundary between the human and the machine" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 109). Dovey and Kennedy therefore cite the work of Donna Haraway (2016) on cyborgian subjectivity as being networked and collectively constructed. Other authors move even further beyond conventional notions of human-centered phenomenology and develop object-oriented ontologies and phenomenologies to address how videogames (and similar technologies) fit into and co-constitute the world (e.g., Bogost, 2012; Giddings, 2017; Janik 2021; McKeown, 2018, 2019). Nonetheless, here I retain a focus on human embodiment—an embodiment that occurs, to be sure, with and through technologies, but that remains, as Robert Farrow and Ionna Iacovides (2014) write, a "distinctively human [form] of embodiment" (p. 222). Or, as Brendan Keogh (2018) writes, my concerns are "more carnal," and rather address "how we both constitute and are constituted by a lived experience of the videogame as at once an actual activity and a virtual presence" (p. 8).

I argue that Sobchack's (2004) framework fits such a perspective, as it articulates embodiment as diffusely situated between the bodies of the film and viewer. Hence, as Keogh (2018) writes, I also consider the "embodied self as *emergent* from an amalgam of heterogeneous materialities" (p. 7, emphasis in the original). Keogh therefore denotes videogames as "audiovisual-haptic media" (2018, p. 23), that engender a hybridized embodiment and "require an *all-at-once* notion of embodied textuality that accounts for physicality and signification, form and content, as irreducible and inseparable" (2018, pp. 48–49, emphasis in the original). To further explore how such embodied textuality occurs, I develop the notion of cinesthetic play, which usefully integrates different structures of the human sensorium (which I take to mean here, simply, the whole of the human apparatus of sensory perception).

Vision in the Flesh and the Phenomenology of Film

Sobchack (2004) contends that "film theory has generally ignored or elided both cinema's sensual address and the viewer's 'corporeal-material being'" (pp. 55–56), and therefore sets out to theorize how "cinematic intelligibility, meaning and value emerge carnally through our senses" (p. 8). To account for the body in film-viewing, Sobchack devises the cinesthetic subject, incorporating alongside cinema two "structures and conditions of the human sensorium" (2004, p. 67): synesthesia and kinesthesia. Synesthesia, the "experience of 'cross-modal transfer' among our senses" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 68), contributes to how we make sense of the world. Our senses commutate all the time, such as when we almost taste a dish when reading its recipe. Kinesthesia is the "perception of one's whole sensorial being" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 68), an awareness of our bodies' position and movements (Reynolds & Reason, 2012, p. 18). Thus, the cinesthetic subject describes how viewers, "through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of the other senses, 'makes sense' of what it is to 'see' a movie" (Sobchack, 2004, pp. 70–71). We interpret a film simultaneously "as both a carnal matter and a conscious meaning from *the single system of flesh and consciousness that is the lived body*" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 73, emphasis in the original). Moreover, Sobchack argues that the various bodies involved in the film experience become diffusely situated between worlds. Though materially circumscribed, these bodies enmesh so that meaning "does not have a discrete origin in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 67). Despite this enmeshment of bodies, evidently spectators do not completely feel the events unfolding onscreen; for instance, we are not knocked over by onscreen explosions. However, Sobchack argues that we tangibly feel onscreen worlds through a sensual catachresis, wherein our bodies "[fill] in the gap in its sensual grasp of the figural world onscreen by turning back on itself to reciprocally (albeit it not sufficiently) 'flesh it out' into physicalized sense" (2004, p. 82). Our bodies supplement the distance from what we see, so that we carnally, palpably experience it.

Adapting Sobchack's (2004) framework to videogames requires translating its three constitutive components: cinema, synesthesia, and kinesthesia. I firstly address cinema. We might reductively postulate that this warrants little transformation, since cinema and videogames are both audiovisual media, but their phenomenological differences necessitate closer inspection. It is useful, first, to ground this discussion in Sobchack's broader work on film phenomenology and her contentions around digital media: She argues that cinematic representation offers insight into the "structure and process of subjective, embodied vision" (2004, p. 149), whereas electronic representation "phenomenologically diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body [and] tends to marginalize or trivialize the human body" (2004, p. 161)—the ideal of the "dominant logic of cybernetic[s]" is a transcendent, disembodied

subjectivity (2004, p. 160). However, her claims have since been contested by scholars such as Crick (2011), who asks:

> as digital imaging technologies and techniques strive closer to replicating the moving image, to what extent do [Sobchack's] views on digital imagery still seem applicable to our phenomenological experiences of engaging with contemporary videogames? (p. 260)

He relays this question while using Sobchack's concept of the film body to develop a notion of the game body, a discussion to which I return below. First, I begin from Crick's inquiry to consider how we may experience synesthesia in videogames.

Synesthesia and the Game Body

As contemporary videogames increasingly approach photorealistic appearances, we might wonder: Why would we *not* experience a sense of synesthesia? More boldly, I would argue that cross-modal sensing occurs not only in photorealist games. Even *Celeste*, a two-dimensional game with a pixel-art retro aesthetic, is experienced—and understood—through synesthetic processes. To further explain this, a passage from phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), which Sobchack also cites, is particularly illuminating. He describes how we, perceiving cross-modally, grasp the nature of objects: Objects "[appeal] to all our other senses as well as sight," and so we can, for example, "in the jerk of the twig from which a bird has just flown, [read] its flexibility or elasticity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 267).

An example Sobchack (2004) gives of synesthesia within film phenomenology is of seeing, in the first two shots of Jane Campion's *The Piano*, an unrecognizably blurred depiction of fingers struck by sunlight (p. 63). Despite the lack of visual clarity, Sobchack writes that her "fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation" (2004, p. 63, emphasis in the original). Vision translates into carnal sense, and the sensation of touch. With regards to synesthesia in videogames, Bakels (2020) argues that in gaming, such a "synesthetic surplus is not so much based on visual perception of surfaces but rather on a synesthetic expansion of [kinesthetic] perception" (p. 82). Kinesthetic responsiveness (which I detail more below) denotes the ways that we, sometimes involuntarily, move-along-with onscreen action. Bakels thus argues for an entwinement of kinesthesia and synesthesia in the experience of gaming—through onscreen movements, we acquire a sense of touch. While this usefully underlines the import of movement to a synesthetic experience of videogames, this articulation of kinesthetic responsiveness risks eliding what Keogh (2018) describes as "the fundamental significance *of* the visual (and indeed the aural) in *producing* the digitally [kinesthetic]" (p. 12, emphasis in the original), hence Keogh's description of videogames as audiovisual-haptic media.

In sum, sensory cross-modal interpreting of the world happens constantly, including in game-worlds. A striking example in *Celeste* is Chapter 2's so-called "dream blocks" (see Figure 2). Floating in mid-air with fluid outlines, these blocks become especially palpable when Madeline dashes through them, and they emit a gelatinous, watery sound. Though we cannot touch them (and they cannot exist in our world), from that sound we understand these blocks' tactility, we hear their spongy materiality. Game-worlds thus become intelligible through sensory cross-modal sense-making, even in games far removed from photorealism.

Figure 2. Madeline faces a dream block. Screenshot by the author.

To return, then, to the translation of the mediality of cinema, Crick (2011) contests Sobchack's (2004) claims about electronic representation when developing the concept of the game body. Sobchack's film body designates how cinema objectifies subjective visual experience, as viewers experience a film through a "functionally embodied . . ., quasi-subjective and embodied 'eye'" with a discrete existence (Sobchack, 2004, p. 66). Cinematic vision thus becomes intelligible as a human-equivalent body enacting perception. Crick argues against Sobchack's claims that electronic representation engenders a disembodied, dispersive and fragmented presence. Similarly to film, videogames implicate an invisible game body from whose perspective we perceive the game-world—a perspective we often also control (Crick, 2011). This game body often overlaps with the avatar, most evidently in first-person games, where the perspectives of the game body and the avatar completely coincide, but also in games where the camera moves along with the avatar (as in *Celeste*). In sum, the imagery of videogames "suggests a corporeal presence, and through the interventions of a player, the game experiences a world from a subjective viewpoint" (Crick, 2011, p. 262). Though elements such as a visible avatar and displays like health bars might appear distracting (producing the fragmentation that Sobchack criticizes), Crick notes that

experienced players barely observe such supposed hindrances, and thus videogaming is not a dispersed, fragmented experience. Moreover, Crick argues that players experience a bodily engagement with game-worlds, building on Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) writings on our adaptability to tools: Using tools "is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into . . . our own body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 166). Applying this to videogames, Crick posits that

> By becoming accustomed to the movements of the control device—enabling a fluent engagement with the virtual world—the avatar's (and virtual camera's) movement is incorporated within [the] corporeal schema and, as such, becomes an extension of [the] bodily basis of consciousness. (2011, p. 267)

It should be noted, however, that Crick (2011) discusses three-dimensional games, which seemingly complicates the application of his notion of the game body to two-dimensional games: The functionally embodied, human-equivalent game body that enacts perception in a two-dimensional game does not move in a way that corresponds with the movement abilities of an able-bodied person—especially the ability to change one's perspective by moving around and repositioning oneself. The player of a two-dimensional game cannot, for instance, turn around to look at what is behind their backs as they would in a three-dimensionally navigable world: There is no such "behind" a camera that shows us a two-dimensional, side-scrolling world. Nonetheless, I argue that Crick's assertions hold: In *Celeste*, we may perceive Madeline from the side, but we still experience the game through the vision of a functionally embodied, quasi-subjective perspective (the game body) that moves along with her, scrolling to the side as we progress in the game. Moreover, it has been shown that players bodily extend into two-dimensional worlds similarly to how they embody three-dimensional worlds (Schultze, 2010, p. 437). Hence, it appears that the recreation of a three-dimensionally orientable, human-like visual apparatus is not a prerequisite for a serious embodied engagement with videogames. Finally, even though Crick argues that gaming is "a fully embodied, sensuous, carnal activity" (2011, p. 259), he indicates a limitation of the film body model he departs from: an apprehension regarding "the extent to which this phenomenological method might generalize visuality as the essential mode of cinematic reception" (2011, p. 267). This shortcoming is mitigated by the cinesthetic subject's (and cinesthetic play's) synesthesia, which attends more completely to the human sensorium.

Feeling-Along With an Arduous Climb: Kinesthesia and Digital Embodiment

The notion of virtual presence brings us to the third component of cinesthetic play: kinesthesia, which similarly describes how we sense and experience onscreen bodies. Let us return, first, to Sobchack (2004). Describing our sensual experiences of movies, she argues that

we experience "mimetic sympathy with . . . what [we] see and hear" onscreen (Sobchack, 2004, p. 76). What Sobchack here describes as mimetic sympathy is more commonly characterized as kinesthetic empathy, which Gabriel Chin (2017) describes as "an embodied interpretive response to observed movement with relation to the observing body's own imaginative and performative experience and social understanding of that movement" (p. 207). Internally mimicking what we see, we understand and feel the movements of other bodies through our familiarity with such movements. Before proceeding, an illustration of kinesthesia in gaming is useful. We can think of, as Melanie Swalwell (2008) writes, those "puzzling moments of kinesthetic responsiveness when [we *move*] *with* an avatar" (p. 74, emphasis in the original). We reflexively duck as something attacks our avatar, or when we push a button harder, hoping that this will give us an advantage—as I do constantly in *Celeste* when straining winds keep blowing Madeline backwards.

To productively apply kinesthetic empathy to videogames, I turn to Chin (2017), whose discussion resembles Crick's (2011) assertions. Chin similarly uses Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) work to argue that videogames engender bodily tool-extensions into digital worlds, but his focus on kinesthetic empathy emphasizes other aspects of digital embodiment. The avatar is, for Chin, a prop in the game-world through which the player enters that world, and which informs the player's affordances and capacities to act within that game-world. Moreover, the avatar remains an independent character in the diegesis, which the player at once perceives as they would a character in a film and controls in order to participate in the game-world. This holds for both first-person and third-person games, though these modes do entail phenomenological differences. While third-person avatars establish a tool-extended body schema and a kinesthetically empathetic relationship between avatar and player, because the player both operates and observes the avatar's body, first-person avatars establish less kinesthetic empathy and tend "much more towards being tool alone, since the only observation that occurs does so through the avatar's eyes"; not seeing the avatar hinders the player's feeling-along (Chin, 2017, p. 218). Chin's and Crick's accounts have different foci, but they can be productively brought together by applying a kinesthetic empathy to the game body. Focusing only on the avatar does not account for the kinesthetic empathy we experience with the game body (our visual perspective on the game-world), whose movements we similarly comprehend from our familiarity with such movements.[1] Klevjer (2012) similarly describes our feeling-along with the game body when arguing that we do not look at the screen or through it, onto a game-world, but

[1] Even *unfamiliar* movements, as Swalwell (2011) argues, are experienceable through our kinesthetic responsiveness. She argues that such "responsiveness to the unfamiliar" lets us experiment, for instance, with unfamiliar spatial relations (Swalwell, 2011, p. 1).

rather *with* the screen (p. 21). Thus, we feel-along not just with the avatar, but simultaneously with the game body and understand the game also through those movements.

In order to validate this understanding of kinesthetic empathy as a translation of Sobchack's (2004) framework, it is useful to address Chin's (2017) ontology of digital embodiment. Chin argues, building on Mark Hansen's (2006) work, that using technologies such as avatars ontologically constitutes "an extension of sensation" (2017, p. 212). This resembles Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) remarks on tool-extension, but Hansen goes further and demonstrates how interfacing technologies push Merleau-Ponty's extended body schema "to the point of its dissolution," dissolving the body's interiority to rather "mark its ontological interpenetration with the flesh of the world" (2006, p. 87). Chin thus delineates an ontological interpenetration with fictional game-worlds, that we are corporeally enmeshed with (p. 213). Sobchack's writing parallels this understanding: The carnal experience of cinema "subverts the very notions of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites" (2004, p. 67, emphasis in the original), as the bodies involved—those of the viewer, the onscreen bodies, and the film body—become diffusely situated through the cinematic experience. Keogh (2018) usefully describes this diffusion of embodiment, using the example of the avatar of Iota in the videogame *Tearaway* (Media Molecule, 2013), as follows: It is not just that I "play 'as' Iota in *Tearaway*; we must comprehend how my embodiment as me-and-Iota is constituted across bodies and worlds" (p. 8). Or, in the case of *Celeste*, I play as me-and-Madeline, producing a hybridized embodiment dispersed across bodies and worlds—although I would add, to this amalgam, the movements of the game body: me-and-Madeline-and-the-game-body. As I show below, the game body's movements additionally inform me as to the affordances for action in *Celeste*. Altogether, this understanding of kinesthetic empathy—which thus involves the game body, the avatar's body, and the player's body—provides a fitting translation of Sobchack's cinematic kinesthesia.

Finally, to direct cinesthetic play towards an understanding of meaning-making, I find Yotam Shibolet's (2018, 2019) framework particularly instructive. As Keogh (2018) indicates, the question of embodiment is central to the meaning-making processes of videogames: "How videogames mean and how bodies engage with videogames are not, it seems, unrelated questions at all or even just related questions—they are the same question" (pp. 5–6). Or, as Sobchack (2004) notes with regards to film: "the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*" (p. 60, emphasis in the original). Shibolet's notion of enactive narrative focalization provides a useful articulation of how bodily meaning-making occurs. He applies ideas from the field of embodied cognition to videogaming, thereby explaining how narrative is enacted and understood through games' movement

dynamics, which we kinesthetically comprehend from our tacit bodily knowledge of them. Shibolet (2019) summarizes:

> The concept [of enactive narrative focalization] is shorthand for the framework through which embodied knowledge of movement dynamics actively enacts the experience of narrative events and sequences. We tangibly grasp the environment we inhabit through accumulated skillful understanding of the relationalities and potentialities of movement within it. Any narrative comprehension we acquire . . . is informed by this embodied grasp. (p. 90)

Celeste elegantly illustrates this embodied narrative comprehension through the development of its movement affordances. Madeline suffers from mental illness and "believes that by scaling [Celeste Mountain] she'll gain some sense of control over her anxiety and depression" (Channel Cousin, 2019, section "Madeline's Side of the Mountain," para. 3). The game's difficulty, stemming from Madeline's limited movement dynamics (she can only dash once per jump, for instance), conveys to us the psychological—and physical—barriers Madeline is confronting. However, once Madeline stops fleeing from her problems, personified in a negative counter-image of Madeline whom fans have dubbed "Badeline" (Celeste Wiki, n.d.), and accepts them as a part of herself by merging with Badeline, the player acquires an additional movement possibility: the ability to dash twice while in the air, which feels liberating and makes traversing the mountain considerably easier.

Shibolet's (2019) account of embodied digital narrativity already encompasses various elements that I also address, but the notion of cinesthetic play still has additional, complementary uses. Sobchack's (2004) work provides a more complete understanding of the sensual, embodied, carnal experience of videogaming. Shibolet mainly addresses vision and touch, and urges future research to explore sound and other sense-modalities (p. 131), similar to Crick's (2011) remarks on the privileging of vision in phenomenologies of gaming. This narrow focus is mitigated, however, by the cinesthetic subject's attention to synesthesia, which more fully accommodates the human sensorium, and by incorporating Keogh's notion of videogames not as predominantly visual media, but rather as audiovisual-haptic media.

Reaching the Summit: Cinesthetic Play

Thus, we arrive at a point where we can synthesize these discussions into a notion of cinesthetic play. This framework entails more than a summation of the three components I have translated so far; it forms an integrated account in which these components connect and interact. Cinesthetic play then allows us to understand videogaming as a corporeal interpenetration with digital worlds wherein players sensually, carnally experience and comprehend a game through a vision that is informed by other, commutating sensory modalities and their tacit

kinesthetic understanding of the movements of both the in-game avatar and the game body. Similarly to film, in videogaming the involved bodies—the player's, the game's, and the avatar's—become diffusely situated. However, it should be noted that, in contrast to Sobchack's (2004) contentions about electronic media, videogames are not a fragmented and disembodied practice but emphatically sensual, carnal experiences that become intelligible and meaningful precisely through our embodied engagements with them. This account of cinesthetic play necessarily overlaps somewhat with previous phenomenologies of videogaming, though to the best of my knowledge, this concept newly addresses a wider range of human sense-modalities by its incorporation of two structures crucial to the human sensorium: kinesthesia and synesthesia. This enables a more holistic purview of videogaming as an embodied experience.

To demonstrate the use of the notion of cinesthetic play, I turn to some examples from *Celeste*. Its dream blocks again clearly illustrate how game-worlds become intelligible through carnal, cross-modal, kinesthetic sense-making. When we jump into them, we bounce back and hear a sort of dripping sound, something akin to the sound of a pudding when we slap it with a spoon. That sound synesthetically conveys the dream block's tangibility and suggests that we may be able to access it by crashing into it at a higher speed—we need to dash to penetrate its barriers. This hypothesis is additionally shaped by the fact that me-and-Madeline (and the game body) bounce back from the block after jumping into it, which indicates the block's gooey resistance. The dream block thus becomes intelligible to us because we simultaneously cross-modally and kinesthetic-empathetically feel-along with Madeline and the game body. And indeed, when me-and-Madeline dash into it, its barriers give way and we enter it. The tactile understanding we achieve of the dream block informs us of its gameplay affordances: Movement possibilities become clear through synesthetic perception and kinesthetic feeling-along with both Madeline and the game body (whose movements tangibly reinforce the affordances we have, or do not have). We *feel* what we can do with the dream block. Thus, we learn and understand the game's affordances through a kinesthetically and synesthetically embodied engagement with the game-world.

Another example of cross-modal and kinesthetic comprehension is the clouds Madeline encounters in Chapter 4. When Madeline jumps on a white cloud, it initially sags a bit under her weight, before bouncing back upwards and launching Madeline into the air. Accompanying this up-and-down motion is a sound that, on a first encounter with a cloud, signals to us its bouncy effect even before we are lifted into the sky: a full, rounded sound that first falls a little in pitch, before it rises again with a longer, round, bouncy echo. The bouncy drop in the sound-effect's pitch already hints at a return, so that when me-and-Madeline jump onto a cloud and it sags, it is clear that this movement will return

upwards—and its rising pitch indicates that it might do so more forcefully than with just the force of our initial impacts. Hence, sound and vision commutatively inform our movement possibilities and let us look towards objects that we may reach with the added altitude the white cloud can give us. Pink clouds, however, do not have this same lift because they quickly disappear, which is also connoted in the sound: Their sound effects, in comparison with that of white clouds, are cut short. They give some lift, but the shortened sound rightly signals that me-and-Madeline have to jump off before the cloud disappears from under us. Hence, again, our sense-making of the game-world happens in simultaneously kinesthetic and synesthetic ways—sense-making through cinesthetic play. Narratively, this plays into a sense of precarity that exists at this point in the game. Madeline has been warned by an old woman who lives on Celeste Mountain that the path ahead is dangerous, but Madeline, both determined and annoyed by the woman, brushes off this warning. The clouds—especially the pink ones—feel like precarious ground for Madeline to tread, adding to a sense of danger and to the stubbornness of Madeline as a character. Hence, our movement possibilities—and movement precarities—inform the game narrative.

Finally, I would like to underline how the game body's kinesthetic empathy plays into this process. We palpably comprehend dream blocks, clouds, and other objects through synesthesia (their sounds and looks) and kinesthesia (the movements we make with them), and although the game body supports their intelligibility by moving along with Madeline as she engages with them, returning to the game's dashing mechanic further demonstrates the game body's importance to our carnal meaning-making. When we dash, we rapidly bolt forward in one of eight directions. We feel the dash's intense speed by kinesthetically and synesthetically processing Madeline's quick movements, and we hear the sounds of a gust of wind, but what crucially accentuates the dash is that the screen briefly shakes. Keogh (2018) describes this screenshake effect as an explicit remediation of "televisual media, selling the tangibility of the videogame events as though they were being captured by a physically grounded and imperfect camera rather than by an arbitrary virtual viewpoint" (p. 116). The screenshake carnally grounds the effect of the dash. To put it in terms of the game body, it entails a sudden movement of its vision, which drives home the dash's force: The game body constitutes a functionally embodied, quasi-subjective perception that we kinesthetically feel-along-with and understand. As the screen shakes, the embodied "eye" of the game body jolts, shaken by Madeline's dash, and we understand the intensity of her dash because we know what that movement is like.

Conclusion: Gaming in the Flesh and Further Research

Departing from Sobchack's (2004) notion of the cinesthetic subject and her related works on film phenomenology and the film body, I have

adapted her writings to the medium of videogames by translating the three components constitutive of the cinesthetic subject: cinema, synesthesia, and kinesthesia. Thus, I have developed an account of cinesthetic play, weaving together previous accounts of the game body, kinesthetic empathy, movement dynamics, and embodied narrativity, and arguing for the synesthetic intelligibility of game-worlds. The concept of cinesthetic play newly addresses how we are corporeally engaged in videogame play because it integrates different key structures of the human sensorium. Meaning and intelligibility emerge in a carnal, hybridly embodied fashion. Finally, I have demonstrated how the notion of cinesthetic play can be used to analyze the different bodily, cross-modal, and kinesthetic ways game-worlds become meaningful to us.

Needless to say, more theoretical work remains to be done regarding the phenomenology of videogaming. I cannot account for all prior work, and one concept will not be able to neatly explain the entirety of the experience for everybody (or every body). With the concept of cinesthetic play in hand, we can more comprehensively study the videogaming experience and how it engages our lived bodies during play. For future inquiries, it seems particularly useful to bring this notion into further discussion with Shibolet's (2018, 2019) framework of narratively enactive movement dynamics. Cinesthetic play holistically captures our embodied, synesthetic, and kinesthetic experiencing of game-worlds. This consequently allows us to understand how our cinesthetic playing contributes to higher-order narrative meaning-making. This holds, then, for both two-dimensional and three-dimensional games: Mountaineering in *Celeste* is as much an embodied, sensual experience as it would have been in a three-dimensional game.

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