

This Is Not a Dance

U.S. NEWS AND FAN MEDIA recently descended upon the debunking of a prevailing cultural icon: the lone video game player (chubby, pasty-faced, at home in a dark room, planted in front of the computer or television with his eyes locked on the glowing screen, totally immobile except for the furious button-punching and joystick-twisting of his fingers) was triumphantly supplanted in media accounts by pairs of teenage boys frenetically hopping in synchronized rhythm to techno music atop the lighted stage of an arcade game, in public space, while crowds gathered to gawk, cheer, and queue up so that they too could play.¹

Sustained by on- and offline fan communities, this “arcade craze” revolved around the dance simulation game *Dance Dance Revolution*, or DDR. *Dance Dance Revolution* was officially released to U.S. arcades in 2000 and quickly became the most successful of a genre of rhythm action games called Bemani.² Employing specialized input devices rather than the traditional joystick-based game controller, Bemani video games turn players into performers—requiring them to dance, shake maracas, scratch DJ turntables, beat drums, and strum guitars in synchronicity with the game machine.

The arcade version of *Dance Dance Revolution* works like this: as strobe lights flash and music thumps out of large, neon-lit speakers, each player follows a dance sequence, symbolized by a pattern of arrows scrolling up the game screen, by stepping on the corresponding quadrants of a raised dance platform. Scores are based on the accuracy and timing of the player’s steps. The game ends if the player misses too many steps.

Dance Dance Revolution has gone through multiple versions and modes of play since its original release as an arcade game in Japan in 1998, moving between a highly visible arcade-based “dance craze” in public leisure space and a home-console game experienced in private. Far-flung renditions of *Dance Dance Revolution* include versions that are played with your fingers on a handheld mini-dance pad, ones that allow live, networked gameplay in shared virtual space, and ones that integrate a digital camera so that players can see themselves dancing onscreen. Official full releases of the game mingle with song and character upgrades, as well as a profusion of region-specific, third-party, pirated, and hacked game hardware and software.³ Rather than each new release replacing the old in linear progression, all of the versions continue to circulate through both authorized and unauthorized global channels. Certainly,



dominant game versions and modes of playing have emerged, and this essay will focus mainly on *DDR* games played in arcades. However, as the shift between theatrical arcade performance to decentralized home-console playing has shown, gameplay configurations are neither stable nor pure. Even the relegation of home-console gameplay to “home” is problematic, since in addition to the remote spaces that the Internet opens up to them, home consoles are also set up at community and institutional social events for public play that borrows from the performative modes of the arcade. This heterogeneous flux of interactions between bodies and spaces not only foregrounds how the video



game as an object of study is a shifting target, but also suggests that attending to this very indeterminacy of the new media object—the object in motion across what cultural theorist Brian Massumi calls a “field of emergence”⁴—might be the appropriate way to theorize all media, not just the “new.”

Dance simulation games exist at the intersection of two under-theorized areas that might seem to have little to do with each other: dance and video games.⁵ While dance is traditionally privileged as fundamentally embodied, video-game playing is assumed to be consummately disembodied—it is the ultimate dissolution of flesh-bound “meatware” into infinitely transmissible bits of information. Thus, on the one hand, dance scholar Johannes Birringer is able to declare that “the medium of dance is the living human body, possessing the power to convey ideas inherent in its movements,”⁶ while on the other, film scholar Vivian Sobchack is able to assert that “electronic representation, by its very structure, phenomenologically diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body and the dimensions of that body’s material world,” arguing further that electronic presence is “so diffused as to belong to

no-body.”⁷ Dance is media and message condensed into the body. Video-game representations disperse and ultimately disappear the body.

In her book *Dancing Machines*, Felicia McCarren suggests that “dance offers ways of thinking both about the movement possible with machines and about machines moving themselves.”⁸ In this spirit, I would like to trace the body in and in front of the video game *DDR*, and the solicited and elicited online and offline game culture that surrounds it, to explore a technologically mediated experience of embodiment that unfolds through movement that is both dance and a simulation of dance. I am particularly interested in how dance enabled by the video game and its digitally composited characters allows for racial and sexual figurations that translate the assumed portability of the pixel into social configurations of imagined/desired identities. Like the expressive license furnished by temporarily becoming othered sexual and racial identities (e.g., drag and blackface), the mechanically activated, technologically interpenetrated, and bracketed-as-game body is given license to move in ways that are unavailable to it in non-mediated experiences of movement. The way that *DDR* moves you by making you move, compelling you to dance, is similar to the way film “body genres” such as horror, melodrama, comedy, and porn also inspire an externally registerable bodily performance, compelling you to scream, weep, laugh, or jerk off.⁹ The rhetoric of inappropriate, hyperbolic fascination also surrounds accounts of *DDR*, whose players are described and describe themselves as “in a daze,” “fanatic,” “zombie-like addicts,” “maniacs,” and “freaks” who have lost their minds and themselves to the visceral rush of the game.¹⁰ At the same time, this aerobic mode of video-game play has also been deployed as a wholesome antidote to traditional computer games, which have been similarly pathologized as addictive, but also

as physically and psychologically unhealthy. The assumed opposition between dance and video game, intersecting with prevailing distinctions between active/passive, passion/addiction, and embodied/disembodied, is exactly what generated the frisson of surprise captured by media accounts of *Dance Dance Revolution's* public spectacle.

By hyperbolizing the player's physical interaction with the computer game, rhythm action games such as



Dance Dance Revolution certainly provoke a rethinking of new media critiques that cast digitality as profoundly disembodied and disembodiment.¹¹ But rather than giving the digital back its body by drawing on the bodily agency and expressivity “essential” to dance movement, this essay aims to seek out the computational in dance as well as the corporeal in new media. I will argue that the phenomenological encounter between the human body and digital technology takes sensible shape only through subtending cultural designations of sexual, racial, and national difference that are too often sidelined in critical studies of new media. To frame my exploration of the body fastened to, moved by, and becoming a computerized motion machine, I will enlist the irrepressibly enthusiastic comments barked by *Dance Dance Revolution's* invisible announcer. At turns commanding, derisive, and sycophantic, its remarks compose a running commentary on the player's performance during the game. The announcer's voice positions the game machine as a spectator who can “see,” although the machine is actually “blind” to the dancer's movements except as they coincide with the buttons that make up the quadrants on the dance pad. Earlier versions of *DDR* consistently cast a masculine voice in the role, while the newer Xbox *Ultramix* version introduces the option of choosing male, female, both, or none.¹² Like a parodic Turing Machine performing

human presence in ostentatious excess of the game play, the voice emanating from the computer game is simultaneously audience, competitor, and master of ceremonies—both giving the game machine a body and making it acoustically unlocalizable to any particular body.

“LET ME SEE YOU MOVE!”

New media theorist Lev Manovich's critique of the traditional relationship between body and screen focuses on the immobility of the body in real life versus the mobility of the body in the fictive screen world. He posits virtual reality as a fundamental break with previous human-screen interfaces because even though it imprisons the body within an encumbering apparatus, “the spectator actually has to move in physical space in order to experience movement in virtual space.”¹³ *Dance Dance Revolution* also simultaneously fastens the body to a machine and requires that it move. But unlike virtual reality, *DDR* does not figure movement as an exploration of an expanding space, but as the movement-rich occupation of a predefined, restricted space vis-à-vis another intending body: the



body on screen, the body of another player, or the bodies of a spectating audience. Counter to Donna Haraway's famous statement that “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves are frighteningly inert,”¹⁴ *DDR* demands outright that we keep up with its disturbing liveliness.

Like Manovich's, most analyses of the immobile body before the screen focus on how the screen allows the spectator to journey through visually rendered spaces otherwise forbidden or impossible. Significantly, the example Manovich offers of a VR project that synchronizes the virtual and physical worlds at the cost of clamping down the body is the Super Cockpit applica-

tion developed by the U.S. Air Force.¹⁵ In an essay about dance movement assisted by the low-technology instruments of crutches, cane, and prosthetic leg, Vivian Sobchack exposes the privileged relationship to space that dominant video-game modes of conquering territory and traveling over expanses presume: “I was never one to plunge into space as if it were an open and hospitable field of possible experience. . . . I tended to tip-toe or edge into unknown places (however ordinary) with a certain tentativeness born of anxiety, sometimes even of fear.”¹⁶ Dance in *DDR*, however, is movement with neither forward motion nor immersion in a boundless, exotic, external space. Rather than concentrate only on the space opened up on or through the screen, players inhabit the off-screen space around their own bodies as well. What does it mean to be “immobilized” in this sense, where your actions are restricted to the area within reach of the dance pad, but are opened up to the contingencies of jumps, gestures, and motions that pulsate between your body, the scrolling arrows, the sound waves shuddering through your organs, and the animated dancer(s) onscreen?

The movements of a player’s body in the game inevitably exceed the requirements for touching foot to grid at the signaled time; therefore much of *DDR*’s energy is outside of the game system. The most elaborate dance flourishes of the player are imperceptible to the game itself: the dance pad records only contact or no-contact with specific quadrants at specific times. It does not register that the player has spun around, dropped his elbow to one square and then leaped up without missing a beat to continue dancing on his feet, nor that his heart is pounding and his muscles ache.¹⁷ Rather than asserting that the dance steps that are measured by the game system are technologically mandated and thus artificial, whereas the superlative actions



added by the dancers through their own interpretive movements are where the true dancing happens, I would suggest that the interplay of movement both prescribed and enabled by the game is precisely the point—or, as Brian Massumi would argue, the passage across all points.

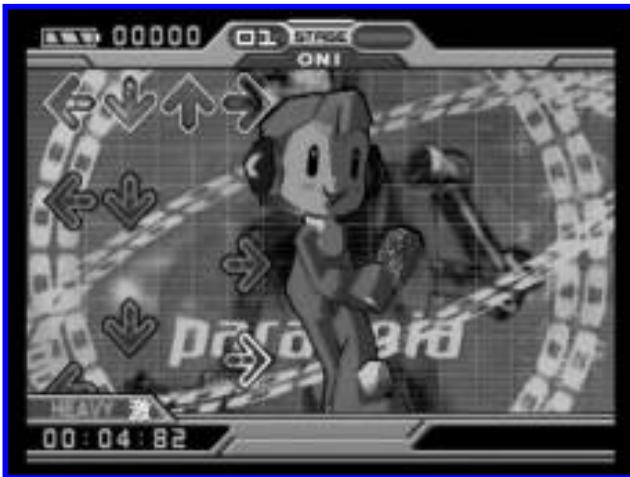
According to Massumi, “when we think of space as ‘extensive,’ as being measurable, divisible, and composed of points plotting possible positions that objects may occupy, we are stopping the world in thought. We are thinking away its dynamic unity, the continuity of its movements.”¹⁸ For Massumi, position emerges from movement rather than the other way around. In other words, the arrows on the screen hitting their targets are not plotting out a series of points for the player to respond to one after another, moving from quadrant to quadrant. Rather, they are folded into and out of the continuous experience of the whole dance as moments accenting movements that flow immediately into another movement. “Never present in position, only ever in passing,”¹⁹ the experience of playing *DDR* is not a series of isolated responses to targets on the screen. It is



instead a dynamic unity of “reciprocal variation” that encompasses the arrows hitting their targets, as if they were punctuations of a dance that you were already performing, that your body, with the help of the music, is already carrying you through, making a cause-effect relationship between your movements and the arrows impossible to isolate.

If *DDR*’s movement is not about swooping into space or about hopping from point to point, how exactly does *Dance Dance Revolution* move us? Evaluated mainly by its ability to impel people to dance, to accelerate their heartbeats and urge their bodies into motion, dance music itself might provide a clue. Music critic Simon Reynolds describes techno music in terms

of its convulsive repetition, calling it “an intransitive acceleration, an intensity without object” offering “no narrative, no destination.”²⁰ Thinking through video-game experiences in terms of “the mechanics of motion and emotion” rather than of story, character, and architecture, Henry Jenkins writes, “Game play becomes memorable when . . . it makes you want to move . . . when the computer seems to be totally responsive . . . when the computer does something that follows logically from your actions, yet doesn’t feel like it was pre-scripted or preprogrammed.”²¹ *Dance Dance Revolution* offers a space-motion empowerment fantasy that is predicated not on projecting forward to conquer visible



objects, master territory, or hit a target, but on the sensations of the body occupying the kinesphere around it. In *DDR*, action and perception are in reciprocal relation, surging and receding into each other in the same movement, creating a space that you wholly inhabit rather than one that you fly through or tour. This is not an inchoate, touchy-feely, or expressive dance, but one based on a body that is simultaneously carnal *and* abstract, that pushes the body’s muscles to make sense of and fulfill the computer’s mathematical predictability and precision, that is pre-programmed yet experienced as potential. The game does not force us to conform our naturally expressive bodily rhythms to the algorithms of the computer, nor does it celebrate the mechanized intensity of computer-accurate movement. Rather, it reveals to us the mathematical discipline and abstraction of our fleshly bodies in motion.

“YOU ARE A PERFECT DANCING MACHINE!”

If the player’s actions in *Dance Dance Revolution* are not the directed, intentional movement of subjective expression or projection into space—if they say nothing and go nowhere—how can they be meaningful?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that intentionality is not just linear, purposeful movement when he affirms that “among my movements, there are some that go nowhere.”²² Dance in *DDR* stays in one place but is always in motion, like a never-ending loop. The idea of the loop is useful here, because it stands for both perpetual motion and non-progression. Although moving in space, the loop never advances forward or evolves into signification; it is suspended in an infinite hypnotic trance—immobilized, catatonic, and offering nothing but innumerable iterations of itself.

Thus the loop has both pathological and generative possibilities—the schizophrenia of continuous return and the dynamic freedom of continuous becoming. On the one hand, *DDR* is like a computerized version of the shiny red shoes in the fairy tale that force the young heroine to dance without rest—regardless of natural cycles like day and night—until she chops off her feet.²³ Even after amputation, the shoes grotesquely continue to twirl about on their own. The red shoes are a signifier that refuses stillness, an overwhelmingly vivid signifier that is set in motion by the subject, but that relentlessly reconstitutes itself, outside of any organic logic, and ultimately exceeds and annihilates her. Evacuating the subject of personal expressive agency, the red shoes no longer signify dance as meaningful expression; instead it becomes pure, inexhaustible motion.



On the other hand, Vivian Sobchack suggests that the loop is subversive because it bridges the perceived disjuncture between body and representation, literal and figural. For Sobchack, all bodies in the cinematic experience, both onscreen and offscreen, have the potential “to subvert their own fixity from within, commingling flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in

either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction."²⁴ This cooperative meaning-making streams between bodies and images in what she calls "rebound." "The cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* . . . able to experience both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of experience as on-screen or off screen."²⁵ Sobchack insists that this reciprocal and reflexive sensual experience of both real and as-if-real is unique to cinema. For her, only cinema has a subjective and intentional presence that projects back to us our lived-body experience of representation,



whereas "insubstantial" digital presence "randomly disperses its being across a network, its kinetic gestures describing and lighting on the surface of the screen rather than inscribing it with bodily dimension."²⁶ But Sobchack underestimates the body's capacity for both abstraction and materialization in its encounter with the digital through "kinetic gestures." It is this bodily motion, reciprocally generated between player and computer, that productively expands her concept of rebound for a video game like *Dance Dance Revolution*. The corporeal form that the mimetically dancing body gives to the bits of information generated by the game program re-invests the body with a powerful modality. The dancer's active yielding to the shimmering ones and zeros entails a subjectivity-dispersing submission to abstract motion. This process is in constant oscillation with the inverse process of incarnating data into concrete spatio-temporal form.

Here, exchanges between perception and bodily movement—between symbols on the screen and the body incorporating and making sense of them—stream in a continuous circuit spurred by the vibrations of the music's beat. The player carnally translates signs into



meaning and realigns his/her body in response, already propelled by the body's movement toward the next step, indistinguishably before or after he/she makes a conscious, reflective reading of those signs, through a reversible transubstantiation of subjective feeling and objective knowledge. The concept of mimetic rebound suggests that we take literally comments made by players in which they say that getting good at *DDR* requires you to get into a "zone" where you "become" the music and thus "become" the game.

Merleau-Ponty also frames this experience of becoming in terms of acquiescing to the always incipient action-perception of music:

We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us. The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must "dash on the bow" to follow it.²⁷

As in reading music to play a musical instrument, the experience of playing *DDR* well is not a unidirectional process where symbols on the page or screen are consciously translated into an appropriate bodily response. Rather, playing manifests the vacillating, ambivalent, nonhierarchical relationship between information and body. Although the structure of the game presupposes that the player's feet follow the arrows on the screen and that movement is determined by the sequence of arrows, the lived experience of playing makes it clear that to play the game as if parsing a list of random instructions results in inevitable failure. Players find an overall rhythm that flows across movements in a dynamic synthesis, so that each subsequent step emerges



out of the movement already started and already contains within it the accumulation of previous steps and the incipient press of all potential following steps. Some players choreograph, memorize, and perform dance sequences that use the *DDR* game as a backdrop to their virtuosic exhibition before an audience. But players who eschew the traditional expressivity of this type of “freestyle” play for the score-based precision of “tech” play also manifest the same perception-action “flow,” and in fact deliberately tweak it to make the relationship between symbol and body even more arbitrarily complex. In Stealth mode, arrows disappear before aligning with their targets so that the moment the arrow passes through the target it is invisible and indeterminate, producing a temporal gap between when you see the arrow and when you are supposed to hit the step. Mirror, Left, Right, and Shuffle modes each confound sedimented patterns of exchange between body and information by reorienting the symbols so that the player is counter-intuitively required to step in a direction different from what each arrow signifies.

DDR's highly mechanized human-computer interface and the machine's relentlessly precise translation of body movement into high and low scores demands that the body conform to its ceaseless, mechanized rhythm. Sweaty, out-of-breath, and exhausted, players eventually submit to time, gravity, and the loss of energy. Handlebars provided in the arcade version are clutched as supports, and players substitute into games when another player is too tired to continue. However, the game also imagines its ideal player as a perpetual motion machine, atomizing movement into machine-logical step sequences and featuring songs accelerated to a heart-bursting maximum of 320 beats per minute.²⁸ Circumventing the scoring and “game over” concept, *DDR*'s Endless mode cycles repeatedly and nonstop through every song the player has unlocked

until he/she is unable to play any longer and has to turn off the game to end it. The bodily struggle to become machine is rewarded with the amplification of motion and sensation, but without the strain of sustaining personal expressivity and self-identity, in what is both a material condensation and an abstract dispersal of presence into euphoric intensity.

“ARE YOU A MONKEY?”

My account of the *DDR* game experience as a feedback loop between player and game machine suggests a relationship of coherence and immersion, where the spectator exists in a physical space that is continuous with



the space onscreen. However, it is also important to think of the game-player relationship in terms of what anthropologist Michael Taussig, re-reading Walter Benjamin, calls “the mimetic faculty,” where the very desire to become the (computerized) Other by copying and yielding to it is joined with the compulsion to find distance from the imitated.²⁹ This attraction-repulsion dynamic can be mapped to racial, sexual, and national differences modeled in the game play. To account for how technology moves us, we must consider the cultural identifications from which the computer-activated body in motion draws its affective force, as well as how these identifications are magnified or transformed in the process. Consider the fact that the first rhythm-based video game to be released in the U.S. in 1997 was *Parappa the Rappa*, in which players control a shy cartoon dog who attempts to impress a beautiful flower with the rapping skills that he learns by repeating the stylings of his teachers, including a kung-fu fighting onion and a Rastafarian frog; that the Japanese-imported arcade version of *DDR* first became immensely popular with Asian-American youth cultures in California, most visibly teenage boys; and that

the only two characters available on the *Ultramix* version are a blonde white woman named “Lady” and a black man sporting an afro named “Afro,” a couple that is reiterated in the *Extreme* version’s white female “Rhythm” and black male “Blues” characters. It becomes clear that the game taps into racial and sexual imaginaries that are transmuted by the ostensibly impersonal, abstract, dispersed non-presence of the computer and the player’s physically mimetic connection to it. Becoming-machine is not a neutral abolition of self-identity into the blank energy of electric pulses and mechanized movement; it is articulated through pre-existing racial and sexual schemas of technology and dance that make this corporeal becoming both intelligible and irresistible.

A vital question that *Dance Dance Revolution* makes difficult to answer is “With whom are you dancing?” Most versions of *DDR* allow you to choose an animated character from a pre-programmed assortment that ranges from robots, princesses, and racialized icons like those described above, to more extravagant amalgamations such as the blue-mohawked, S&M-attired “Mr. Spanky” and the vacuum-toting, cat-eared “Maid Zukiin.” But is the player’s relationship to the onscreen character “I am you,” “I want to be you,” or “I want you?” The game never makes this clear, sliding between suggesting that you are the character, soliciting you to



aspire to the character’s more perfect dancing, and inviting you to desire the character through a voyeuristic gaze. The selected character dances onscreen in its own specific style as you play, ignoring the pattern of arrows superimposed over it. Its fluent dance moves are spotlighted by a floating virtual camera that ceaselessly zooms and swoops around it, competing with the arrows for your visual attention, and with your own dancing body for the spectator’s attention. But the

characters dance autonomously, not bound like you are to the movements dictated by the arrows and the dance grid, and irrespective of your movements. Like the disembodied commentator, the status of these mute onscreen bodies—avatar or partner, instrument or playmate, figure or ground—remains ambiguous and unstable. Embodying these various conflicting subject positions through sounds, images, and actions that do not consistently parallel each other, the game-machine body engages the player in a disorienting recursive rebound that both determines and diffuses potential subjectivities. Rave and club dancers who share a dance space pick up moves from one another, making bodily



sense of other bodies by copying and absorbing attitudes and personas through mimetic movement. What body does the *DDR* player encounter and assimilate? *Dance Dance Revolution* allows players to perform a bodily mirroring of racial and sexual otherness by submitting to an ambiguously embodied computerized Other, with all the passivity-activity, sameness-difference, proximity-distance, and incorporation-separation that this bodily mirroring entails, complicated by the arbitrarily rendered identities assumed to be made possible by the game’s status not just as machine but as computer.

Marked as a Japanese import by its anime-like characters, kanji letters, and Japanese brand, character, and song names, as well as by the extra-textual fan communities that circulate Japanese popular culture imports, *DDR* is positioned in a relationship of alterity to American culture. Regardless of the game’s global market, the racial figures it offers are perceived in the U.S. as coming from a Japanese imaginary removed from our own. So in the U.S., these figures become an imitation of an imitation, affording us the opportunity to simultaneously yield to the allure of the stereotypically

othered representations onscreen *and* the othered culture that created them. In other words, we do not just enjoy the pleasure of temporarily embodying the Other as represented in and by the game. We also get to embody the Other's embodiment of the Other, embodying "Japanese" embodiments of Asianness, whiteness, blackness, etc., that fascinate and repel to the extent that they mirror our own. The kinetic vertigo of recognizing both oneself and one's mimicking of others in those mimetic representations produced by an Other that one is miming is what Taussig, in his discussion of dance-focused ethnographic film, would call "mimesis of mimesis, self-reflexive mimesis, mimesis made aware



of itself as through fusion of the mimetically capacious machine with the mimetically capacious dancing body."³⁰ In imitating the representation-machine, we become a re-presentation of the digitalized process of representation.

To rephrase Taussig, alterity in *Dance Dance Revolution* is not a stable thing in itself, but an actively mediated relationship meeting contradictory and conflicting expectations of what constitutes racial identities. The racial homogeneity and patriarchal hegemony associated with Japanese culture allows American *DDR* players to disavow the game's racist and sexist caricatures through the racist caricaturization of the Japanese as racist, sexist, and unsophisticated about contemporary American race and gender relations. This refraction of racial imaginaries also enables us to see whiteness through the eyes of the Other, in a move that produces white masculinity itself as hyperreal fantasy. Thus the racial and sexual identity of the blond, enormously pompadoured, and blue-jeaned character Johnny is denaturalized by an over-saturation of American white male signifiers. Yet this unsettling recognition of self in other is complicated and at least partially



recuperated by the racist conception of the Japanese as derivative mimics whose attempts to imitate Western culture are comically and exotically naïve. Similarly, hybrid composites of multiple racial and sexual signifiers intermixed with nonhuman animal and robot features stress discernable identities at the same time that they make actual coherence of identity impossible. The fantastical reduction of all identity markers to an infinitely malleable, mix-and-match polygon aesthetic registers both difference *and* sameness. This is the uncontained circulation of mimesis in alterity that Taussig calls "mimetic excess": "a magnificent excessiveness over and beyond the fact that mimesis implies alterity."³¹ However superlative, the characters onscreen are only the most obvious manifestation of the racialized and sexualized bodies imagined by *Dance Dance Revolution*, and their significance varies between players and game versions. While some *DDR* console players turn them off to focus on the arrows, others elaborately costume themselves as their favorite characters to attend anime fan conventions.³²

At the locus of dance and technology, rave culture gathers up racialized signs, inflects them with the sexy cool of technophilia, and drops them onto African and Asian bodies, which are activated by and contained in the eroticized figure of the dancing machine. The mechanized dancer's driving energy has been historically connected to "African possession," primitivism, and "primordial energy" in an imagined linking of the mechanized and the primitive jazz body. As Felicia McCarren points out in her reading of Josephine Baker and the dancing machine, the modernist fascination with the technological paralleled the fascination with the pre-technological "primitive" or "tribal,"³³ a relationship that has been transposed to hip-hop as a

desired figure of both new urban culture and raw sexuality and savagery. Similarly, techno-orientalism casts Asianness as both technologically superior and inhumanly robotic, so that Asians are simultaneously idealized and demonized for their mysterious ability to harmonize and harness natural, cosmic forces, and for their compact, efficient bodies that are perfectly suited to the speed and rhythms of mechanical motion.³⁴ Thus the mimetic morphology of the player's body to the video game allows the player to embody a naturalized mastery of dance (black people have rhythm) and a technical mastery of machine movement (Asians are like robots).



The mediation of mimetically performed identities through the game machine provides players both visceral contact with the Other and appropriate distance, a dynamic that is particularly significant when examining how male arcade players play *DDR* with and against each other. Taussig reminds us that mimesis “implies both copy and substantial connection, both visual replication and palpable, material transfer.”³⁵ Film scholar Steven Shaviro elaborates on both Taussig and Benjamin. For him, this visceral contact resonates with *contagion*, a term that aptly accommodates both the “dance fever” that overcomes *DDR*'s players and its implicit threat of homosexual infection. Shaping the body to the form of another's implies an intimate, sensuous contact that leaks one into the other. For Shaviro, “the subject is captivated and ‘distracted,’ made more fluid and indeterminate, in the process of sympathetic participation.”³⁶ *DDR* creates an open-ended social space where young men can dance with other young men—imitating one another, the animated bodies onscreen, and imagined dance personas. Moving together in time and place is a powerful force for affective bonding. Yet *Dance Dance Revolution* eludes the homophobia that

forbids men—particularly young Asian-American men whose virility is already in question according to dominant white masculinity—from dancing with each other in couples by displacing the eroticization of this homo-social experience to the video-game machine's sensational graphics and pulsating music. Like cinema spectators facing a movie screen, players move their bodies in unison, but they face the video-game screen rather than each other, dancing both together and apart. Eye contact with the screen rather than with the other player is key to containing the contagious reverberations between the pair's synchronously moving bodies. In his analysis of rave culture, music critic Simon Reynolds highlights the sublimation of sexuality that techno's machinic pulse affords:

Sex as the central metaphor of dancing seems remoter than ever. Rave dancing doesn't bump and grind from the hip; it's abandoned the model of genital sexuality altogether for a kind of polymorphously perverse frenzy. It's a dance of tics and twitches, jerks and spasms, the agitation of a body broken down into individual components, then re-integrated.³⁷

DDR players dance with each other through the video game, transporting themselves into each other's move-



ments through the purifying abstraction of the game commands, unburdened by the pressure of expressive agency that could be eroticized into sexual agency. The video game's atomization and abstraction of motion allows the dancers to re-embody that motion together—a mutually mimetic conjoining that effects bodily intimacy and contact.

“WOW! HOW COULD YOU MAKE UP A DANCE LIKE THIS?”

I would like to end with an exploration of the perplexing but common refrain amongst even the top players of *Dance Dance Revolution*—that they can't *really* dance. They can follow the steps in the game in a simulation of dancing skill, but throw them into a real dance club and they claim two left feet. Andrea Bowers, an artist who integrated *DDR* into a video installation piece, echoes the refrain by declaring “The games require no rhythm—nor, for that matter, any traditional dance skills.”³⁸

In a culture that insists on the reality of its mediated fictive experiences, from reality TV to docudrama to Web cams, why does *DDR*, which is marketed by Konami as a “dance simulation game,” insist that it is not “real” dance, and why do its players concur? Certainly, there is a bit of the marketing plug in this insistence, so as to not frighten away video-game players who are more comfortable with games that direct attention to the screen rather than to the body of the person playing. But when virtual surgery applications are used for both training simulations and actual surgery, virtual pilot applications are used for both flight simulations and actual piloting, and scientific studies set out to prove that hand-eye coordination developed through video-game play prepares soldiers for combat fighting, then the insistence that *Dance Dance Revolution* is not dance, but only a simulation of dance, seems out of place.

What exactly is being simulated, what bodily investments do players have in a dance simulation experience that is both real movement and as-if-real dance, and where does that leave the status of “real” or non-simulated dancing, particularly that which is technologically, prosthetically, or otherwise artificially enabled? And to come from the other direction, if hitting what are essentially big buttons on a big controller in *DDR* can be considered dance or “like dance,” what about other video-game playing experiences that require a synthesis of bodily reactions on a smaller scale? Is typing email, surfing the Web, or editing digital video with an internal rhythm carrying you from movement to movement also a form of dance? Rather than privileging rhythm and dance games as the most or the only embodied video games, I would like to acknowledge the embodied experience of all video-game play and all new media interactions, and the body's capacity to know and feel through mimetic movements both macro and micro. Henry Jenkins reminds us that rhythm action games:

build on the excess kinetic energy that has always surrounded gameplay. Watch children play games and they sway with the movement of the figures on the screen, bouncing with the action, totally engaged with the moment. It is even more interesting to observe the responses of people watching them play, since they also mimic the actions which are occurring on the screen, even though their actions have no consequences on the game play.³⁹

This returns us to assumptions about dance and video games that position dance as naturally embodied and video games as technologically disembodied, an opposition that makes it impossible to conceive of the bodily motion generated by a video game as dance. The distinction between simulated and real dance is not located in a particular movement itself, but in the discursive conventions that judge and define that movement as expressively, creatively generated by a human subject or hollowly, mechanically processed by an automaton. This distinction is mapped over dance's gender and race-inflected relationships to space, objects, and other bodies. Surgery, piloting, and warfare applications need to insist on the reality of a hostile, disorderly space occupied by malignant objects/bodies in order to produce a disembodied user that must be protected from this hostile world through the armor of a calibrated, better-than-real simulation. Dance simulation needs to insist on its non-real status as “only a game” in order to protect the clean, neutral space of computer-processed virtuality and the player's body-instrument from the seductive incursions of the authentically expressive body. Simulated dance contains the risk of feminine, racially other, and homoerotic self-contamination that the self-expressive dancing body would unleash. However, it is precisely the complexly mediated performance of a nonhuman, nonwhite, coded-as-other body that makes it possible to imagine the gameplay as a dance simulation rather than as real dancing. In other words, the technologically interpenetrated body's real experience of movement is made possible through an as-if-real experience of dancing through, as, and with a multiply-figured Other. It is this intertwining of technological alterity with racial, sexual, and national alterity, through the intensified motion and sensation of computer-driven dance, that fuses the pleasures and dangers of becoming-machine and becoming-data with those of becoming-Other. Contemporary new media studies that turn to the vital question of embodiment must therefore attend not only to the corporeal dimensions of digitality that challenge the “no-body” presumed by

earlier critical studies, but also to the embedded racial, sexual, and national identifications that historically shape the disappearance/reappearance, valorization/denigration of specific kinds of bodily presence.

If you watch a *DDR* video game run by itself, unactivated by a player, the game begins to look like a cross between a dance diagram in a “learn to cha-cha” book that notates dance steps and a “learn to breakdance” video that teaches hip-hop moves through images of expert dancers meant to be mimicked. The pleasures of masterful play emerge from the crucial tension between the “simulated” dancing of the abstract diagram and the “real” dancing of bodily memory and intuition, and the way this attenuation evokes the desired identities promised by digitality’s infinite transmutability. *Dance Dance Revolution* players reconcile these oppositions between self and other, language and body, perception and action, abstraction and corporeality, automaton and agent, folding them into each other. By doing so, they reveal that dancing by numbers is a necessarily carnal experience, encompassing movement and sensation that is both real and as-if-real.

NOTES

1. By touting *Dance Dance Revolution* as radically active gaming, these articles position other video games as passive, sedentary, and disembodied. See Khanh T. L. Tran, “Karaoke for Feet—In the Latest Arcade Craze, Players Show a Machine Their Fanciest Footwork,” *Wall Street Journal* (16 August 2000), Sec. B; Alice M. Lee, “Electric Boogie,” *Entertainment Weekly* (4 August 2000), 16; Marco R. della Cava, “Karaoke for Your Feet,” *USA Today* (21 August 2001), Sec. D. More recently, rhythm action games like *Dance Dance Revolution* have been hyped as “exergames” and “exertainment” that fight rather than contribute to the perceived crisis of childhood obesity. The Website Get Up and Move encourages people to lose weight by playing *DDR*; West Virginia’s state health insurance agency is researching *DDR* as a cost-effective way to improve cardiovascular health; and a school district in California is integrating *DDR* into physical education classes. See Get Up and Move, <http://www.getupmove.com>; Alison Barker, “Study Uses Video Games to Fight Obesity,” *USA Today* (4 April 2005); Selicia Kennedy-Ross, “PE to Wed with Video in Redlands,” *San Bernardino Sun* (16 June 2005).
2. “Bemani,” from the game *Beatmania* (1997), is actually the brand name of the rhythm action game line from the Japanese video game company Konami, creator of *Dance Dance Revolution*, which currently dominates the market in this genre. Other Konami Bemani games, listed with the year of the original U.S. version’s release, include *Guitar Freaks* (1999), *Pop ’n’ Music* (1999), *Para Para Paradise* (2000), *Drummania* (2002), *Mambo a Go Go* (2002), and *Karaoke Revolution* (2003). Bemani gameplay has its antecedents in the popular arcade game *Whac-a-Mole* (1976), which in turn evolved from carnival midway and amusement park games. Like early cinematic apparatuses, carnival games such as skeeball and shooting ranges involved the player’s active physical participation. In fact, Bemani has been credited with revitalizing an arcade culture that had been languishing since the 1980s, as well as with opening up the social space of the arcade to female players, who have been more willing to play rhythm-action games than the shooting and fighting games that formerly dominated video arcades. See Maggie McKee, “Interactive Arcade Game Starts a Dance Revolution,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (21 April 2000).
3. The Japanese-only *Game Boy* and *Game Boy 2* (both 2000), and *Game Boy 3*, *Game Boy Oha Sta*, and *Game Boy Disney Mix* (all 2001) releases are played on the portable, handheld Nintendo Game Boy. The Microsoft Xbox *Ultramix* (2003), *Ultramix 2* (2004), and *Ultramix 3* (2005) and Sony Playstation 2 *Extreme 2* (2005) versions support online play. The Sony Playstation 2 *Extreme* (2004) and *Extreme 2* versions support the EyeToy digital camera. The major releases of *Dance Dance Revolution* are as follows, in roughly chronological order: *DDR*, *DDR Disney Mix*, *DDR Game Boy*, *DDR Konamix*, *DDR Max*, *DDR Extreme*, *DDR Ultramix*, *DDR Mario Mix*, and *DDR SuperNOVA*.
4. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 9, 15.
5. In his book *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Don Ihde opposes video game play’s “reduced set of bodily actions” to the “healthy, implicitly athletic embodiment” (18) of Merleau-Ponty’s “free-flowing, active ‘sports body’” (15) in order to critique Merleau-Ponty’s secretly normative body. However, Ihde erases the possibility of conceiving of an active, intentional body in video-game play at the same time. Dance is used as a foil to the video game’s diminished embodiment: “The Nintendo phenomenon that emphasizes eye/hand actions has been seen to span bodies in technologies ranging from video games to surgery and is a new, if restricted, style of movement that is very far from bodily sports activity or dance, whether classical ballet or modern” (138).
6. Johannes Birringer, *Media & Performance Along the Border* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 39.
7. Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic and Electronic ‘Presence,’” *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 161, 152.
8. Felicia McCarren, *Dancing Machines* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.
9. See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Genre, Gender, Excess,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 141–59.
10. See Dawn Bryant, “Game Puts Twist on Dance,” *The Sun News*, Myrtle Beach, S.C. (19 June 2002); Susan Lieu, “DDR: The Young and the Agile,” *The San Francisco Examiner* (22 September 2002); Jimmy Magahern, “Dance Dance Fever: Valley Arcade Rats Find Fame on the DDR Dance Pad,” *The Phoenix New Times* (9 September 2004), Jason Ko, *DDR Freak*, <http://www.ddrfreak.com>.
11. See Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) for a valuable challenge to critical studies of new media technologies that focus on their capacity to transcend rather than re-invest the human body.
12. The female voice in *Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix* is credited to Audio Angel, also known as Rashida Clendening, an African-American actress and voice talent who is prominent in the San Francisco drum and bass music scene.

13. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 109.
14. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.
15. In the Super Cockpit virtual reality system, the Air Force pilot is securely strapped into a helmet-mounted display that blocks out sensory connections to the physical world and replaces them with three-dimensional projections that "exactly mimicked the world outside," except with information such as compass heading and flight path superimposed on the field of vision (Manovich, 111).
16. Vivian Sobchack, "'Choreography for One, Two, and Three Legs' (A Phenomenological Meditation in Movements)," *Topoi*, vol. 24, no. 1 (January 2005): 56.
17. Video games that capture dimensions of bodily movement beyond accurate hits to a punch-pad type of controller have recently emerged. In the *DDR* family, *Dance Dance Revolution Extreme* (2004) and *Extreme 2* (2005) integrate the EyeToy camera to capture the motion of players' hands and feet waving through the air, and *Karaoke Revolution Party* (2005) integrates the *DDR* dance pad with a microphone to capture both dance steps and singing. More extreme, although less widely played, is the video game *The Journey to the Wild Divine: The Passage* (2003). Promising a "reunion of mind, body, and spirit," *Wild Divine* is controlled by a biofeedback device that measures your heart rate and perspiration. Players must modulate their breathing and level of excitement to navigate a mystical fantasy world where they accomplish exercises such as levitating balls, shooting arrows, lighting fires, and controlling the flight patterns of birds.
18. Massumi, 6. Massumi's invocation of Henri Bergson's critique of Zeno's paradox of the arrow resonates provocatively with the streams of arrows in *Dance Dance Revolution*, which do not stop the game's movement as they pass through their targets, but flare in intensity and continue streaming until the song or the game ends. *DDR*'s flocks of arrows, however, never hit their target and stop. They never provide the cessation that enables the retrospective plotting of the positions that divide their trajectory, and therefore radically resist positioning: "Movement, in process, cannot be determinately indexed by anything outside of itself. It has withdrawn into an all-encompassing relation with what it will be. It is in becoming, absorbed in occupying its field of potential" (7).
19. *Ibid.*, 5.
20. Simon Reynolds, "Technical Ecstasy," *The Wire* 105 (November 1992): 36. Most of *DDR*'s dance tracks, such as "MaxX Unlimited," "Brilliant2U," and "Dynamite Rave" are songs composed specifically for the Konami Bemani series, but more recent versions of the game feature licensed songs and music-video clips in abridged form. The screen-faced orientation of the player's body in *DDR* may emerge as much from rave and electronic dance music culture as from the video-game convention of player-facing-screen. In her analysis of the bodily movements of disco dancing versus those of rave dancing, Helen Thomas observes that rave dancers do not shift eyes, focus, and direction, nor project their bodies into 360-degree space or across the dance floor: "In contrast to the older dancers whose front and eye focus changed through stepping and turning and whose gestures inhabited the space around the body, the younger people danced on the spot, with their feet . . . keeping a distinctive light (pulse-like) bounce . . . focusing to the front." See Helen Thomas, "Dancing the Night Away: Rave/Club Culture," in *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 203.
21. Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 180.
22. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 146.
23. See *The Red Shoes* (1948), directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, for a highly self-reflexive cinematic interpretation of the fairy tale.
24. Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts*, 67.
25. *Ibid.*, 71.
26. Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen," 159.
27. Merleau-Ponty, 151.
28. *DDR*'s "MaxX Unlimited" and "The Legend of MaxX" reach an arrow-scrolling speed as fast as 320 beats per minute. The human heart at rest averages 72 BPM and dance club music typically plays at 120-180 beats per minute.
29. See Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 333-36.
30. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 246.
31. *Ibid.*, 192.
32. These fans of anime, manga, and gaming call themselves cosplayers, or "costume players."
33. McCarren, 34.
34. As the mythic location of Western cyberpunk dystopias, Japan in particular "has become synonymous with the technologies of the future . . . a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity." See David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 167.
35. Taussig, 144.
36. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.
37. Reynolds, 36.
38. Andrea Bowers, "Top Ten," *Artforum*, vol. 39, no. 9 (May 2001): 38. Bowers' video installation is *Democracy's Body - Dance Dance Revolution* (2001).
39. Jenkins, 183.

IRENE CHIEN is a doctoral student in Film Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she works on race, gender, and new media.

ABSTRACT While dance has been theorized as consummately embodied, digitality has been charged with rendering flesh-bound "meatware" obsolete. This essay explores the body propelled into motion by the "dance simulation" video game *Dance Dance Revolution*, to show how racial and sexual identifications shape the encounter between human body and digital technology.