

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

Reviewed by Dennis Jansen

Early in his introduction, Brendan Keogh recalls the origins of the project that would become *A Play of Bodies*. Keogh grew up in the 1990s, “when the videogame console sat next to the VHS player” (5). For him, the ostensible normalcy of videogames raised some scepticism about how radically different that “new” medium really was from other “old” media. This scepticism prompted his initial question: how do videogames make meaning? The most typical approach in game studies is on what the mechanics, rules, and procedures of videogames mean in themselves, and which kinds of actions videogames allow their players to perform. This theoretical strand is exemplified by the works of Ian Bogost and Espen Aarseth, and might broadly be termed “ludology.” However, Keogh notes that this “focus on player ‘actions’ ... is ultimately *disembodying*, a historically constructed mythos coming at the expense of the fully embodied, sensorial experience of engaging with a videogame as sights, sounds, and haptics” (195; original emphasis).

The author seeks to alleviate precisely this danger of theorizing a disembodied videogame play experience. Across six chapters, Keogh combines the works of mainly Maurice Merleau-Ponty, N. Katherine Hayles, and Vivian Sobchack into a “phenomenology of videogame experience” (6). In contrast to some of his primary

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sources, Keogh builds his arguments in a clear style and takes care to repeat key points frequently and in different ways, ensuring that even those who are unfamiliar with fields like phenomenology and feminist technoscience are able to follow along. He crafts a framework that allows us to speak more holistically about what it means to play a videogame and ask questions such as: How is it possible that vehicles in one game can feel ‘heavy’ compared to those in another? How can *Angry Birds* capture a player’s attention without distracting them completely from actual reality? How does a music rhythm game make a Fatboy Slim song feel different from an acoustic ballad by Bon Iver?

The core of Keogh’s thesis is that videogame play creates a cybernetic, intercorporeal “assemblage that is the *player-and-videogame*” (22; original emphasis) in which the player engages with the videogame “through the synthesized work of hands-on-controllers, eyes-at-screens, and ears-at-speakers” (44). This idea is most thoroughly explored in the first, third and fourth chapters of the book, wherein he discusses such topics as the embodied textuality of the videogame medium, the embodied literacy required to operate game controllers effectively, and the role of audiovisual elements in *constructing* videogame experience rather than simply contextualizing it. Chapter Two initially seems to stand out somewhat, as it tackles casual mobile games and is concerned with notions of presence, co-attentiveness, and hybridity, concepts which are clearly related to the main argument but are drawn from slightly different bodies of literature. It is also no secret that both mainstream and academic discourses “have historically dismissed casual videogames ... as mere distractions that lack both the thematic and mechanical complexity of more traditional console and PC videogames” (62) and that the “casual” label also has gendered connotations, especially in opposition to ‘hardcore’ videogames.¹ Despite that, Keogh uses his case studies in this chapter to demonstrate that analysing them can certainly present us with insights which are applicable to our thinking about those more traditional videogames as well.

The second chapter moreover serves as leverage for his argument in Chapter Six, where the author remarks on the political implications of his theory for game studies and videogame culture. Drawing from Donna Haraway’s work on cyborgs and situated knowledges, as well as Hayles’s writings about the posthuman, he forms an

understanding of the ‘ideal’ videogame player not as a “hacker-gamer” but instead one that subsumes this type of player into the broader category of the “cyborg-player” (182). This entails a recognition of that videogame play is not necessarily about conducting a God-like configuration from above, but about a reflexive construction of reality between the actual and the virtual, the player and the videogame, in which the two worlds shape and influence one another. Keogh argues that this view not only subverts the historically exclusive, masculine hegemony that still reigns in videogame discourses today, but that it also acknowledges the already-present variety of videogames which radically differ from common notions of what videogames can or should be, such as those created by designers like Anna Anthropy (*Dys4ia*) and Mattie Brice (*Mainichi*).

An ambitious project such as this one cannot help but stumble at some point. In Chapter Five, Keogh presents the reader with a discussion on the influence of repetition, failure, and permanence on the player’s experience of time during videogame play. Across the chapter, he introduces numerous concepts, such as temporality and rhythm, but spends too little time with them to do justice to their theoretical depths. Keogh himself implicitly seems to acknowledge this when he mentions that “videogame time’s constitution across the actual and virtual worlds of the play circuit is intricate and malleable” and then makes a passing reference to Darshana Jayemanne’s 2017 monograph *Performativity in Art, Literature, and Videogames*, a “dedicated study” of the topic (141). Still, one might also read this chapter as a setup to exploring the embodied aspects of videogame temporality in subsequent research.

Keogh’s work comes at a time when academic discourse about videogames is gradually shifting away from that ludological strand of game studies which insists on finding meaning primarily in “mechanical interactions” (46), a trend that is evidenced by the recent publication of titles like Audrey Anable’s *Playing with Feelings* or Kishonna Gray and David J. Leonard’s *Woke Gaming*, both of which were also published in 2018. All of these recent publications take decidedly progressive approaches to videogames and pay explicit attention to the role of embodiment in the construction of the medium and its surrounding culture. Overall, *A Play of Bodies* thus stands as an exceptionally valuable and timely contribution to game studies and

to (new) media studies more broadly. Keogh calls for an understanding of the medium that refuses to reduce the experience of videogame play to rules, mechanics, or player agency and instead conceives of videogames as “audiovisual-haptic media” (12) that do not adhere to strict definitions or “narrow dreams of the possibilities of tomorrow’s technology” (198). His book is a celebration of diversity—in bodies, experiences, and videogames—and one that is very welcome.

DENNIS JANSEN is a first-year RMA student of Media, Art, and Performance Studies at Utrecht University. He holds a Master's degree in New Media and Digital Culture from the same university and serves as book review co-editor for *Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities* in Utrecht. His current research interests lie at the intersection of game, play, and fan studies, and he has published multiple papers on the *Elder Scrolls* games at *DiGRA*, *First Person Scholar*, and *Press Start*. Dennis has also written collaboratively about interactive narrative structures and the aporia-epiphany dialectic in digital games.

NOTES

¹ Michael Z. Newman and John Vanderhoef, “Masculinity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 384–85.