

Wii are out of Control: Bodies, Game Screens and the Production of Gestural Excess¹

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways that the Nintendo Wii might shift the locus of game analysis away from the screen and towards players' corporeal relationship to the screen. The Wii hardware and software, the television screen, the physical space and players' bodies constitute an intriguing form of kinaesthetic play that borrows from cultural fantasies about virtual reality. This play, while conditioned by the goal-driven and control logics of gameplay, nevertheless leads to a production of 'gestural excess' as bodies twist, contort and perform in ways that the game as such neither demands nor necessarily accommodates.

Author Keywords

Digital games; screen culture; gesture; control; play

If the Nintendo Wii is a revolution in anything at all, it is a revolution in terms of marketing. With the Wii, selling the console and its games, indeed selling gaming, has shifted from the promise of virtual world experiences on the screen to the promise of the experience of players in the living room. The object of consumption is no longer just the spectacle of the game on a screen but rather players' corporeal engagement and kinaesthetic involvement in that spectacle. This is immediately evident in most of the advertising for the Wii to date. Suddenly the bodies of players and their involvement are visible and one is invited to purchase the promise or the fantasy of a specific kinaesthetic experience rather than the fantasy of disembodied immersion portrayed in most conventional video game advertising.² Compare, for instance, the marketing imagery of Ninja Theory's *Heavenly Sword* for the Sony Playstation 3 and a typical ad for the Wii.



Figure 1. Nariko in Heavenly Sword

<http://www.us.playstation.com/heavenlysword/images/media/v3.jpg>



Figure 2. woman in Wii ad

<http://healthbolt.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/hwd-wii.jpg>

As befits a game licensed and developed solely for the most graphically powerful video game consoles on the market, the ads for Heavenly Sword emphasize state of the art graphics and motion capture animation in a kind of cinematic realism that has been the *sin qua non* of computer graphics innovation. The promise of the ad is an unprecedented cinematic spectacle enabled by the coupling of the PS3's powerful graphics hardware and the game's innovative remediation of martial arts films, "mortal combat"-style fighting games, and linear or "on-the-

rails” style adventure games. This is all in stark contrast to ads for the Wii which, while certainly providing images from games, focus more on images of people playing the games. This focus on the player also means that in the Wii ads we also see the play space: a living room, a couch, family members or friends, and sometimes the TV set and the gleaming white Wii console.

The game on the screen is not absent, but it must be inferred with some help from the emotionally intense faces and actions of players using the wiimote and nunchuk controllers, sometimes for swinging a baseball bat or tennis racquet and other times for shooting a gun, slashing with a sword or turning the wheel on a car. Some video ads, such as one for Rockstar’s *Wii Table Tennis*, play on this shift of focus to the player’s body by jump-cutting between two professional table tennis players working up a sweat in intense competition. The camera then pans back to show each player looking at two screens placed back to back on a table tennis table.³

Indeed, if it were not for the fact that the player (and usually others around her) are obviously staring at a screen, one might think the player was fighting imaginary foes in the manner of the “Star Wars Kid.”⁴ Indeed, numerous YouTube videos of people moving and thrashing about incongruently while playing Wii games display a remarkable visual continuity with this infamous video of a youth so thoroughly enjoying the performance of his awkward body in the imaginary space of his Jedi battle. If the *Heavenly Sword* ad is about eye-candy, our obsession with the spectacle of images on the screen, then the Wii ad must be more about body-candy, a kind of fascination with what we can do with our bodies in the physical space in front of the screen. The focus is not on the game but on the players, or more suggestively perhaps, the focus is on the players as the game.

Let us first be pragmatic about this. The marketing for the Wii is targeted precisely on constructing its difference from the other game consoles (especially the Sony PS3) and indeed in a war of screen images alone Nintendo would lose.⁵ The appeal of the console is therefore not in what the players see, but what they can do and how that makes them feel. Fundamentally, this is a simple matter of clever market differentiation. I am, however, less interested in the contrast with the PS3 from a marketing perspective and more interested in what the shift in perspective represents in terms of understanding what happens when we play digital games. As the advertising and YouTube cameras turn away from the game screen and towards the body of the player, so does our analytical attention and concern. Let us call this an unanticipated epistemological consequence of market differentiation. It is not that media and digital game scholars have never been concerned with the bodies of spectators, users or players, it is just that the Wii makes the arguments of this line of scholarship more readily visible, while at the same time suggesting new ways of thinking about the relationship between spectators/players and the images they watch and play with.⁶

The argument of this paper develops this point along three trajectories. The first is to situate the marketing of the Wii and its public perception in terms of a certain cultural nostalgia for a form of familial play and a virtual reality we never quite had. The second is to look at how the motion and location sensing technology of the Wii controllers (the wiimote) help to alter the locus of attention away from the screen towards a corporeally-situated relationship with the screen. This, in turn, brings us to a closer consideration of the cultural significance of gestural interfaces in

gaming, following some of the work of Jean Baudrillard. Finally, I consider the tension between a kind of “gestural minimalism” and “gestural excess” engendered by some of the more popular games like Wii Sports.

The overall argument of the paper can be summarized by looking once more at the advertisement for the Wii. Despite the focus on players’ bodies, the ad appears to us, of course, on a screen (or at least as an image on a page). We could reasonably suggest then that the ad itself is not about body-candy but rather body-candy as eye-candy. It is about the fantasy of what we might do with the Wii rather than what we can actually do. The players (implied “real” people) are rendered, via the screen, as just another virtual world illusion, no more and no less than the sword-fighting babe Nariko. The images here are certainly mundane compared to *Heavenly Sword*’s sweeping outdoor vistas, Asian temple motifs and gorgeous half-dressed protagonist. The images may be mundane but no less fantastic, since the players are stereotypically beautiful, their living rooms are impossibly spacious and free from clutter, and the furnishings are lavishly contemporary. In this way, the image of the ad captures an essential tension implicit in nearly all screen cultures. We are always caught between the fantasy of what we might do (or who we might be) and what we can actually do (who we actually are). The crucial difference in the case of the Wii is that actual bodies and actual play spaces are integrated into the production of these game-based fantasies. The cultural critical stakes in all this have not changed much, but we are now forced to engage our critique at another, less purely representational, level.

Nostalgia for the Virtual Family

Let us consider, in more detail, the layers of fantasy implicit in the marketing of the Nintendo Wii. There is a kind of double-sided nostalgia at work in these ads that plays with great success on prominent cultural desires in the industrialized west (the success of the Wii in Japan and Asia is an altogether different story). On the one hand, the Wii brings families and friends together in a form of representation reminiscent of the marketing for television sets in the 1950s (and indeed of the earliest Nintendo consoles) (Williams 2006, Young 2007). On the other hand, this return to family togetherness is enabled by a resurrection of the failed promise of the virtual reality machines of the 1980s.

The first form of nostalgia is clear from the “my wii” stories on the Nintendo Wii website. In one testimonial on the website, accompanied by pictures of the family playing together, a woman named Tracy Clarke writes:

*“Wii is game night for our family. When we first got Wii, I knew our nine year old would love it, but I was afraid our youngest was going to feel left out. Well, I couldn’t have been more wrong. She picked up the controller and started bowling right away, and we all cheered her on. She loves it. We all do. The games are so easy to learn, it really is for everyone. Last fall my mom and my grandma came to visit, and we all decided to play. Now keep in mind my grandma’s eighty, but there we all were bowling against each other, laughing and having a blast. I think that’s my all-time-favorite Wii moment. Four generations of my family playing together. It sounds unbelievable, but that’s just Wii”.*⁷

Similar sentiments are expressed by other testimonials and further represented in a set of videos of people playing the Wii in the “global Wii experience” gallery.⁸ Of course only certain, “family friendly” games are featured but the design and marketing strategy has been a success as the Wii ranked first in total console sales in 2007, far exceeding initial post-launch sales of the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 (Kohler 2007).

There is much to analyze in the commercial success of the Wii to date, but at some level it seems likely that the idea of the Wii as a nostalgic family-making machine resonates with certain cultural realities, at least in North America and Europe (Williams 2003). Across these societies screen-based media have always been viewed with fear and suspicion, and the steady increase in the number of television sets per household, the use of VCR and DVD players and the popularity of video game consoles only heightened the perception of familial disintegration. Families no longer shared media experiences (in ways they never did) but instead became individuated by them as each viewer pursued her own channels, films, or games on her own screens or else engaged in the often fraught family politics of media time-sharing of the communal screen. Video games have arguably only exacerbated matters, but as the cultural concern for the disintegration of the family along with the problems of social isolation and alienation gain momentum, the Wii is poised to become an excellent technical fix for an imaginary social problem.

It is the nature of this technical fix that I turn to next. There is no mistaking that the Nintendo Wii is positioned as a family-making machine. It is more than this actually, it is a sociability-making machine modeled on notions of shared experience and intimacy tied to the idea of the family as the most basic social unit of society. The console is meant to be played in the living room or the recreation room as the central space for the constitution of family togetherness and, at least for most of the games overtly marketed by Nintendo, the games are meant to be played together minimally as a dyadic unit (parent-child, couples, siblings, friends) and maximally as an extended family unit (extended families, house parties, groups of friends).

How then does this family-making machine work? Look again at the Wii ads. We see the player’s body holding the gestural interfaces of the wiimote and nunchuks, moving them around and looking intently into a space in front of them. We may be reminded in this manner of the popular virtual reality (VR) machines of the late 1980’s in which spectators looked on as individuals in bulky headgear and gloves moved about awkwardly. These machines promised a kind of liberation from predominantly televisual screen culture, and as with the Wii, since the graphics in these early systems were so poor, it was often more fun watching people play than actually playing games like *Dactyl Nightmare*.⁹

For a brief time commercial entertainment VR machines saw a measure of popularity in arcade-like settings, and pundits waxed on the possibility of generating more meaningful and intimate social relationships through the sharing of virtual reality fantasies. These relatively costly machines allowed a player to don a bulky headset and gloves to interact alone or with others in a graphically simple game world. Ken Hillis (1999) has written persuasively about the enlightenment imperative underwriting the VR culture of the 80’s with its promises of freedom through the sensation of displacement and escape. The marketing of the Wii, like all video game

marketing, promises this as well, but here we have the promise made through the body rather than through the screen. Immersion, displacement, and indeed enjoyment are ensured here through the promise of what the body will experience rather than what the eye will see. Wii bodies, as opposed to 1980's VR bodies, are bodies in "free" motion. This was always the promise of consumer VR, and with the Wii we have returned to this fantasy in the form of a displaced family-like togetherness.

The Wii experience is wrapped in the prospect of a kind of sensually immersive bubble in which the living room becomes a tennis court, a bowling alley or a shooting gallery. The living room in this sense becomes a virtual world in which this nostalgia for family togetherness can take shape. That is, the ideal-typical family is made possible only with the virtualization of the living room enabled by the Wii. What is interesting is that this virtualization is not made literal as it is in the marketing for the PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360, in which the fantastic world on the screen spills out or takes over the mundane world of the player. In these ads, the virtual takes over the real in a fantasy of pure escape. In the Wii ads, the mundane world of the player is doubled and preserved as a fantasy of itself complete with beautiful (and healthy and able) bodies, happy, loving family members and friends, and designer savvy furnishings. What the player is actually doing to generate all this is beyond us as viewers. Perhaps it is time to see what happens when we actually play rather than let the argument rest with this analytical spectatorship.

The Screen Returns

Let us recall that the point of all that virtual reality gear was the attempt by technological means to dissolve the boundary of the screen as the limit point of immersion in a represented space. The logic of this enterprise has not changed and has given rise to two prominent trajectories in the development of VR technologies. The first is to expand the size of the screen and wrap it around the viewer so that there is no discernable outside, and the second is to work towards superimposing the screen onto the eye itself as a kind of lens. Both technologies have their science fiction corollaries: the latter has the CAVE-like expansive space of the Star Trek Holodeck,¹⁰ while the former has the body immobilized in the mental VR of *The Matrix*. In either case, the key to VR immersion is the inability to perceive the frame of the screen as the condition for the production of the immersive experience. VR is meant to be frameless and therefore context-less: a view from nowhere because its point of origin is indiscernible (Friedberg 2006).

We know, however, that video games as immersive media have been wildly more successful and lucrative than VR machines, but curiously they have always fallen back on the limit of the screen (even as designers have toyed with VR type peripherals). I am going to suggest that for the most part gamers are screen watchers and no amount of button mashing is likely to change that. By its physical presence, the screen both signals and forces a break with the reality of the player. Like a window, it physically cuts the space between the physical place of the player, his console, his controllers, his room, his TV (his mom shouting at him from downstairs) and the "virtualized" space represented on the screen. The player can certainly be "tricked" or lured into a suspension of disbelief through the craft of game design (but note that any traditional media form from a

static artwork, to a good book, to a phone call can do this), but the immersive effect of the illusion is lost every time the player looks away from the screen.

In either the Holodeck or *The Matrix* VR fantasies you cannot look away. If you turn your head you see more of the same. There is no escape and, in principle, no limit to immersion. The world is seamlessly closed upon itself which gives rise, of course, to the science fiction fear of being trapped forever in a *paradis artificial*. So conventional screen-based gaming (if we can call it that) cannot sustain the immersive promise (or fear) of VR. The best it can do is engage the player's attention so completely that he will not want to look away.

The Body and the Screen

Enter the wiimote, and if the marketing is to be believed at all, the focus of the player suddenly shifts from what is happening on the screen to what is happening in front of the screen. Suddenly it is cool to watch players play. Indeed it is often more interesting to watch the players than the game, and a multitude of YouTube videos featuring Wii parties is a testament to this. The suggestion is that a game like *Wii Bowling* is not on the screen, instead, it is in the room that the screen occupies and the screen itself, in a powerful sense, simply becomes a peripheral device that players monitor in order to gauge their next action.

Is this really back to the virtual reality of the 1980s? As I have indicated, the marketing seems to take us in that direction, but designers and players know better. No matter what you wish you were doing with the Wii, you are still tied to a relationship with the screen. The screen may be off-camera, but it is still there. As with all other video games, if you turn away from the screen the immersive experience and even the capacity to play the game collapses, but something has changed. With the Wii (indeed with a number of other interface technologies before it... the Dance Dance Revolution or DDR mat, the Sony Eyetoy), your orientation to the screen is no longer just visual, it is kinaesthetic.¹¹ It is a matter of the orientation of your body and not just your eyes. Keep your eyes on the screen but turn your body away in a game of Wii tennis or boxing and it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to play. The effect of this may be revolutionary from a market standpoint, but it is not virtual reality, and yet is not reducible to the visual logic of purely screen-based spectacle either.

Much of this has to do with how the gestural interface system of the Wii mediates the player's interaction with representations on the screen. A brief summary of the main technical elements of this system will help develop this argument. The main components of the gestural interface of the Wii are the Wii controller or wiimote (which looks much like a slim TV remote control) and an infrared LED "sensor bar" which sits horizontally atop or below the TV screen. The wiimote has an internal accelerometer (an ADXL 330) that allows for the measurement of motion in a three dimensional space, and this information is communicated to the console wirelessly via a Bluetooth radio chip. This alone would be enough to measure horizontal, vertical and forward motion, as well as rotation, but the measurements produced by the accelerometer alone are not accurate enough to correctly correlate the motion with what is happening on the screen. For this, Nintendo developed the infrared LED "sensor bar" which is actually not a sensor at all. The bar contains infrared LEDs at either end that emit light which is detected by a simple IR camera in

the tip of the wiimote. Position calibration is made possible then by triangulating the position of the controller relative to the light emitting diodes. As several hackers have already demonstrated, it is possible to use the wiimote without the “sensor bar” since any two sources of infrared light will do (including two candles it appears)¹² but obtaining a workable correspondence between the movement of the controller and movement on screen depends very much on one’s orientation to these sources of light.

The effect of this combination of motion and location detection is a recognition and articulation of the material place of the player in the game. A quote from video game designer Will Wright in 2008 makes this technical mediation of body and screen clear.

“What I don’t like is that the way the Wii controller works depends a lot on how close you are to your TV. If you are five feet away it feels one way. If you are ten feet away, it feels completely different.”¹³

The kinaesthetic orientation of Wii play makes it difficult to forget where you are when you play and this works against traditional ways of thinking about, and designing for, immersion in video games. When you play you must, at some level, always be gauging your body’s relationship to the screen and other objects and bodies around it. Are you too far from the screen (or rather the infrared emitter bar), or too close? Are you holding the wiimote correctly? Is it pointing in the right direction? Indeed we might say that Nintendo’s post-launch worry about being sued for Wii-related injury and damage stems from a culture clash in which eye-based gaming so dependant on forgetting/ignoring the body runs into the body full force.

In order to use the wiimote, players have to learn a new form of body awareness almost from scratch and designers have to worry about bodies and play spaces in ways they never had to before. The material spaces of play and the capacities of the bodies that play there suddenly matter. Note that this argument runs counter to the idea of the wiimote as an intuitive interface (Parker 2008; Turner 2008). The idea that one can simply pick up the wiimote and play belies a certain ability and degree of skill in manipulating the controller and a certain material configuration of the space. The need for skill and a proper material configuration increases in fact as the demand for greater precision detection increases in various games.

In addition, the physical play space becomes more important. The technical specifications of the wiimote, unlike a computer keyboard or traditional controllers, turn the space in front of the screen into an interface. The LED bar generates a field of infrared light in front of the screen that can be obstructed and interfered with. Moreover, the motion of the player’s body is correlated with movements on the screen, but the relationship is not one of correspondence. A hand movement of five centimetres in the living room does not correspond to a movement of five centimetres by the player’s avatar on screen. This is true even as one expands the size of the screen so that the scale of game environment matches the scale of play space. It may be easier to play on larger screens, but the specific relationship between the movement of the wiimote and a specific screen effect has to be learned by trial and error, and it varies from game to game.

It is nothing for a good gamer to go from house to house, keyboard to keyboard and play equally well. But the adjustment is significant for a Wii player as one moves from small screen to large

screen with his body closer or further away, in a crowded space or an empty one. The physical context of play suddenly becomes more important and gamers are called upon to fine-tune their play to suit the location. This physical contextual character of Wii play means that a gamer's awareness must at some level be on the screen, but also outside the screen, on their body's relation to the screen. The *Wii Tennis* match is on the court that is represented on the screen but also very much in the living room. You swing your wiimote and you must avoid the lamp beside you as much as you are trying to keep the ball in bounds. That is, the lamp is as much a part of the game as the boundary lines and net represented on the screen.¹⁴ Note that this is not the same as the doubling of the living room as virtual space in the Wii ad. As the numerous stories on wiihaveaproblem.com illustrate, actual Wii play spaces are somewhat less than perfect.

Wii play and the Return of Effort

It is too bad that Jean Baudrillard did not have access to video games when he wrote *Le System des Objets* in 1968. Baudrillard's deft analysis of modernization as the institution of a "functional gestural system of control" over a "traditional gestural system of effort" fits the story of video game interface design to a tee. Baudrillard (1996) writes, "so long as the energy applied was muscular in character, and hence immediate and contingent, the tool remained embedded in human relations, rich symbolically speaking but not particularly well designed structurally" (48). Speaking somewhat less romantically than Heidegger about human beings' traditional relationship with technology, Baudrillard makes note of a particular gestural relationship we once had with objects like simple tools. Baudrillard calls our attention to the significant physical effort of using plows, scythes, etc... that gave objects such a rich symbolic existence in human societies. Modernization attenuated this gestural relationship to objects so that what once required muscular effort is enabled with the most minimal gestures.

"Often a slight motion of hand or eye suffices; no dexterity is called for – at most, reflexes. The domestic world, almost as much as the world of work, is governed by regular gestures of control and remote control. Buttons, levers, handles, pedals... have thus replaced pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body, the intensity and distribution of force, and the abilities of the hand."

(Baudrillard, 1996, 49)

Let us consider the development of video game interfaces in light of Baudrillard's provocative argument. To be sure, the domestic technologies Baudrillard was most concerned with analyzing in the late 1960s were simple in comparison to today's machines. Televisions, refrigerators, washing machines were simple multi-button affairs and at that time the shift between washing clothes by hand and washing by machine might have seemed monumental, therefore justifying the bold distinction between "effort" and "control." Baudrillard's argument does, in any case, lend itself to a thesis of 'control creep' as partly constitutive of the process of modernity itself, and numerous philosophers of technology have both prefigured and echoed the sentiment. At the very least, the thesis speaks of a fundamental condition of alienation in which users are no longer able to understand the consequences of their actions. Human action under a functional gestural system of control is purely rationalized and empty of meaning.

Ironically, Baudrillard reserves a special place for the “gestural system of play” under this regime in a footnote.

“Ignored by modern praxis, but nonetheless freed from its old constraints, the body finds genuine expression in sports and physical leisure activities – or at any rate, these supply it with a compensatory release, for we may well ask whether the splitting of into two of the gestural system of effort institutes any real freedom of the body, or whether it merely establishes a binomial whose second term (in this case, games and sports) does no more than compensate for the first.”

(Baudrillard, 1996, 49)

Clearly, things have gone from bad to worse. How can video game controllers be anything but the colonization of sports, play and leisure through a functional system of control? The argument works at its simplest with sports games where the gestural efforts of kicking, swinging, running, etc., are replaced by the mashing of buttons and the pushing of a joystick where “a prehension of objects involving the whole body has given way to simple contact (of hand or foot) and simple surveillance (by the eye or, occasionally, by the ear)” (49). This is fine for a start, but of course the gestural system of control hits its Baudrillardian peak when the button press no longer has any referent at all to anything our bodies might actually do.

With this simple thesis in place then, the Wii comes as something of an anomaly in the form of a seeming return to traditional gestural system of effort. Could we read the surprising popularity of the Wii as a kind of reaction against the functional system of control and a cultural desire to “free” our bodies? Is this a return to a traditional gestural system of effort? Of course not, and we might easily anticipate the Baudrillardian reply: the return to effort is, in effect effortless. The gestural demands of the Wii, as I have explained, are minimal. This minimum effort stands in for, indeed replaces, actual effort in the sense Baudrillard describes. The movement of the wiimote becomes a simulacrum or pretence of effort in a way that a button press on a traditional controller could never be. What we find here is a kind of economics of effort which suggests that in deference to the instrumental goals of gameplay (i.e., the best way to win the game), a functional gestural system of control overrides any implied gestural system of effort. Not only do producers and designers need to limit the detection of effort for purposes of efficient and cost effective game design, but players learn to economize on their effort to meet the instrumental ends of the game.¹⁵

I would suggest that part of the reaction against the Wii by some hardcore gamers is that at this early stage in Wii game design the instrumental economy of gameplay is too simple to be enjoyable.¹⁶ Traditional gamers, especially when competing with one another, are enculturated to “grok” gameplay patterns to the point of deconstructing underlying lines of code (Koster 2005). They do this to gain competitive advantage over an AI opponent or another player with the primary goal of winning the game. To do this in a game of *Wii Tennis*, for example, leads to very mundane gameplay indeed, since at its most economic level the game is no different than Atari’s 1975 console game *Pong*. The simplicity of the gestural economy of gameplay may be appealing to a broader base of casual gamers and non-gamers, but I would suggest there is more to it than this.

The Gestural Excess of Wii

Let us return now to the issue of the correspondence between the wiimote gestures of the player and their effect on the screen. I have noted already that the relationship between gesture and screen effect is not one of correspondence but of relationality, and that this relation needs to be learned by the player through trial and error for each Wii game that makes use of the motion sensing technology. As I argued at the start of this paper, one of the intriguing aspects of the marketing of the Wii is the way it makes the bodies of players an aspect of visual spectacle. In the ads we see players move their hands, arms, torsos and even their whole bodies in excited, broad and enthusiastic gestures. Crucially, these scenes are replicated in the numerous videos of Wii players on YouTube. In the majority of YouTube videos, the players are center screen. They are shown moving about,; thrashing wildly, laughing, jumping, jostling, ducking, etc... in rooms that diverge significantly from the marketing ideal. The rooms are typically crowded with stuff, eclectic furniture, older smaller TVs, books, magazines, toys and all manner of chatchkes. The YouTube videos, along with the first-hand accounts on the website wiihaveaproblem.com, certainly demonstrate the spatial sensitivity of Wii play, but something else becomes apparent as well.

It appears that in the vast majority of the YouTube videos the movement of the bodies of the players seems far in excess of the gestures required to play the game. There is a kind of ‘gestural excess’ that, as it turns out, has no effect on what happens on the game screen at all, and yet on the YouTube video screen this gestural excess is represented as the very source of fun and pleasure in the game. To understand this point, it helps to have an experience playing with the Wii. In North America, the Wii ships with a collection of games titled *Wii Sports*. This collection is overwhelmingly the most popular title for the Wii and in Japan, where it was not included with the console, *Wii Sports* remains a best selling title in early 2008. All the games in *Wii Sports* work to demonstrate the novelty of the motion sensing technology of the wiimote by using the controller to emulate a tennis racquet, a golf club, a baseball bat, a bowling bowl or boxing gloves (with the addition of the nunchuk controller).

The idea of intuitiveness is conveyed in the notion that if you swing your controller as you would normally swing a tennis racquet (or golf club, or baseball bat) you will be able to play the game (Parker 2008). The motion sensitivity of the wiimote measures the distance of your arm swing but also its intensity/speed, and it is even capable of calculating the rotation of the controller on a swing. Regular players of the sports emulated in the *Wii Sports* games discover quickly that not only is there a very weak correspondence between their arm motion and the screen effect but also that, understandably, the many nuances of bodily motion that go into performing better or worse swings cannot be captured by the wiimote. The implication then is that the wiimote captures some of the player’s bodily motion and not all. At the other end of the spectrum, it also becomes clear as one plays that the Wii console and the game software do not use all the positional information it captures. The game software only uses just what it needs, as it were, to produce a correlative screen effect.

In a game of *Wii Tennis* then, what we have is a controller which captures only some of the body’s motion which is transmitted to the console and which only uses some of the information

that is captured. Players learn this and they quickly discover that a full and “proper” follow-through motion in a *Wii tennis* swing is neither detected by the wiimote nor necessary for the game software to produce a viable screen effect. In fact, to generate a reasonable gameplay effect (i.e., to hit the ball), all that is needed in *Wii Tennis* is a simple flick of the wrist- a gesture that bares no resemblance to a tennis swing at all. The question arises then, if players do not need to swing their arms to hit the ball in *Wii Tennis*, then why do they do it?

The concern for the body and its place in the game made possible by the wiimote is partly an extension of Baudrillard’s functional system of control as a simulacrum of effort, but it also has the consequence of producing what we might call ‘gestural excess’ in the movements of players that have no consequential screen effect. As a rule, it seems that the most minute movements will suffice, but what many Wii players also soon discover is that playing the game with minute motions is simply not as fun as playing with broader-than-necessary motions. In this way, the Wii game becomes an excuse for engaging in a different sort of bodily play, a kind of performative gestural excessiveness that the game-as-software neither demands nor acknowledges. The overhead smash in *Wii Tennis* is neither necessary, nor is it particularly efficient from a gameplay perspective, but it is, by most accounts, fun. And it is seemingly more fun when executed in the presence of others. Where does this excess of effort come from? Why do players do it when they don’t have to in order to play the game? The game design neither demands this excess nor can it accommodate it, and yet it has become a fundamental feature of Wii play, especially in social settings. In fact, we might follow up on the recent work of Melanie Swalwell (2008) and suggest that this kind of gestural excess is implicit in the kinaesthetic dimension of all digital gaming but that the Wii brings it firmly into the foreground.

As further illustration of this idea of gestural excess we can consider the gesture of bat ‘waggle’ in the Wii Baseball title *MLB 2K8*. This title makes more sophisticated use of the gestural information from the wiimote in both batting and pitching, but as anyone who has ever played at playing baseball knows, the movement of the bat over one’s shoulders before the pitch (a movement referred to as bat waggle) is a crucial element of the immersive feeling of being in the game. In terms of the game simulation however, bat waggle has no effect on gameplay (the degree of waggle neither affects hitting nor alters the trajectory of the pitch) and the designers’ decision to include a waggle effect must be seen as a matter of cosmetic immersion. In this sense, we might see bat waggle in *MLB 2K8* as an attempt to program the gestural excess of the act of hitting the ball.

However, the phenomenon of gestural excess that I want to refer to is the excess displayed that is in *excess* of the waggle accommodated by the game software. As with all wiimote gestures, only some bodily movement is captured and only some movement information is translated into the screen effect; in this case, the bat waggle of the avatar. So whether a player uses broad exaggerated waggle gestures or more minimal ones, the screen effect is the same. Whereas traditional modes of visual gameplay ask the player to train their gestures in accordance with specific screen effects (cosmetic or otherwise), with the Wii the more overt form of corporeal play leaves open the possibility that an excessive bat waggle might be fun not because of its screen effect, but simply for the pleasure of moving one’s body in emulation of Barry Bonds about to strike a game winning home run. The point here is that this form of gestural excess can not be programmed. It is, in essence, an excess that falls out in the movements of the body that

are remaindered by the technical constraints of the machine, the game software and the physical play space.

I will conclude by opening up a few more lines of inquiry as they relate to this idea of gestural excess. First, it is clear in the observation of Wii play that not all players engage in this excess. Some players play ‘to the rule’ so to speak and quickly discern the minimal gestural map to facilitate the most efficient gameplay. This is a kind of hardcore Wii play that arguably makes Wii Sports deathly boring. Some games, such as Rockstar’s *Wii Table Tennis*, attempt to accommodate both sorts of play by offering an advanced mode that makes use of the nunchuk controller for ball targeting, spin and other features of table tennis play. The increased complication and fast pace of the game arguably leaves less room for gestural excess as players’ gestures become increasingly enveloped by control imperative of the advanced simulation. In basic mode however, the game is more forgiving and as with *Wii Tennis*, close is good enough to produce a screen effect, and the result is a game with more excessive gesturing by the players.¹⁷

Second, it is not difficult to notice that expressions of gestural excess in Wii play tend to be heightened in larger groups and parties. In such contexts, Wii play can seem less like a game and more like a performance for an audience of spectators. This was already true of earlier games using gestural interfaces such as *Dance Dance Revolution* and even *Guitar Hero*. There is a kind of group-induced karaoke effect where the act of playing, singing or dancing becomes a performance for others that are as important as, or more important than, the gameplay as defined by the software. The enjoyment in such circumstances tends to derive from the performance of gestural excess in and of itself or else in the attempt to extend the simulation of the game in producing idealized versions of a grand slam baseball swing, a swashbuckling sword fight or even a tennis racquet thrown to the ground in disgust à la John McEnroe.

Third, following Melanie Swalwell (2008), we might suggest that gestural excess is present in all forms of digital gaming (and indeed in all digital culture), as players bob and weave with their controllers, bang their keyboards and engage in a variety of subtle and not so subtle gestures in the course of gameplay. Swalwell draws on Walter Benjamin’s ideas about art, play and mimesis to argue persuasively about these basic kinaesthetic pleasures as part and parcel of the mimetic impulse of digital play as a “partial becoming” (84). Swalwell’s more corporeal notion of becoming in the context of gameplay is a useful antidote to the more prevalent visual concept of immersion if only because attention to kinaesthetic pleasure signals the incompleteness of immersion and the impossibility of the enlightenment fantasy of virtual reality.

I think I am somewhat more sceptical than Swalwell however. In gestural excess and partial becoming, it is important to note that there is no a priori resistance to the “control society.” Players will chastise one another for sloppy, spastic and/or dangerous gestures, and gestural excess is gendered, raced and aged in all the ways we might expect. The body is not therefore free in the place enabled by the Wii and, crucially, there should be no sense in which gestural excess represents some kind of return to a traditional gestural system of effort. Quite the contrary, the performance of gestural excess is intimately and absolutely tied to the logic of functional gestural systems of control. It is precisely because the gesture of the overhead smash is not necessary given the system of control that it becomes meaningful.

The traditional VR fantasy is transcendental; it is about layering or superimposing another world over or beyond our living room, a world which masks our own mundane material reality. All video games try to promise this fantasy (this is the language of escape and immersion), but the Wii is different almost in spite of itself. Instead of masking the living room and the bodies that play there, it must incorporate them, indeed accommodate them. In the process, the Wii becomes an invitation for players and analysts alike to play with the idea of bodily excess against a background of the logic of control in a digitized society.

Whereas the gestural excess of the Star Wars Kid was rendered on YouTube as voyeuristic spectacle and therefore the subject of ridicule, the excesses of Wii players are permissible (indeed enjoyable) in the physical spaces of play rendered as such by motion and location sensing attributes of the machine. Wii games do not demand this form of play, but they do not preclude it either; screen based play will never be the same again.

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² As Bryan Mitchell Young (2007) points out, featuring players in game ads is not unique to the Wii but my reading of the Wii ads differs somewhat from the more ideological analysis of Young and also Jones (2008, chapter 5).

³ See the "Wii Video" at <http://www.rockstargames.com/tabletennis/> and compare with the "official trailer" video on the same website.

⁴ The Star Wars Kid is the title of an infamous YouTube video featuring a young boy swinging a broom stick in an imaginary battle as a Jedi knight from the Star Wars franchise. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPPj6viBmU>.

⁵ In understanding and explaining the recent market success of Nintendo we should not ignore the historical rivalry between Sony and Nintendo over entertainment markets in Japan and North America especially. See for instance Sheff (1994).

⁶ The literature on digital media, materiality and corporeality is vast but in game studies some important works include: Newman (2002), Lahti (2003), Grodal (2003), Swawell (2008), Kennedy and Giddings (2008).

⁷ See <http://www.mywiistory.com/> (quote retrieved 5 May 2008).

⁸ See http://us.wii.com/experience_gallery.jsp.

⁹ Dactyl Nightmare was one of the most popular games for the first generation of arcade based virtual reality games. See <http://www.arcade-history.com/?n=dactyl-nightmare&page=detail&id=12493>.

¹⁰ Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave_Automatic_Virtual_Environment.

¹¹ For a discussion of these kinds of interfaces see Bogost (2005) and Behrenshausen (2007).

¹² <http://www.joystiq.com/2006/11/27/joystiq-video-candles-can-replace-wii-sensor-bar/>.

¹³ See Jeremy Kopchak, "How The Wii™ Game Controller Works" online at <http://www.x-arcade.com/newsletter/Wii%20Dupe.shtml>.

¹⁴ VR researchers and artists have evolved a term for talking about this situation. The living room plus player plus Wii console and game constitutes a kind of augmented or mixed reality space. Mark Hansen (2006), in his summary of the mixed reality paradigm in VR research, neatly makes the point that establishes the relevance of the Wii as I have described it.

¹⁵ This argument has interesting implications thinking about the Wii as a potential fitness device. Game-like peripherals like the new WiiFit are intriguing in as much as physical effort is the goal of design rather than merely being a by-product of playing the game.

¹⁶ See for instance the discussion of the hardcore gamer reaction to the Wii in Bojin (2008), though this is already starting to change with add-on peripherals like the 'Wii motion plus' (See "Introducing Wii MotionPlus, Nintendo's upcoming accessory for the revolutionary Wii Remote". Nintendo 2008-07-14), http://www.nintendo.com/whatsnew/detail/eMMuRj_N6vntHPDycCJAKWhEO9zBvyPH.

¹⁷ It is worth making two additional observations here. First, it is possible to interpret gestural minimalism as a form of gestural excess in the sense I have described. In one Wii Tennis session I observed the players created a mini-game where the object was to see who could win without any discernable body movement. Second, it would be interesting to compare the designed gestural protocol of the advanced game with the excess gestures of the basic game. To what extent is the phenomenological effect the same? It remains to be seen whether attempts to design waggle into the game actually short-circuit forms of pleasurable gestural excess as players cue more to their avatar representations and less to their own bodily performance but this is a question for further study.