

Jane Fonda's *Wii Fit*: Continuity, Contingency, and Concordance in Fitness Gaming

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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the implications of new gaming technologies, this paper turns to an unlikely source of parallels in comparing *Wii Fit* with *Jane Fonda's Workout* video. This historical and discursive analysis complicates the relationship between consumer and producer with regard to emerging technologies, turning to Celeste Condit's concept of concordance to investigate the negotiations at stake in the adoption and promotion of these devices by a broad audience. Moreover, it examines the centrality of women in the adoption of supposedly male-oriented technologies, the impact of these devices on the social construction of the body, and questions the consequences of a reliance on novelty that has become embedded in the video game medium's focus on innovation.

Keywords

Fitness games, emerging technology, gender, marketing, body, concordance

INTRODUCTION

While there is no shortage of research on the potential health benefits of Nintendo's *Wii Fit* (2007) (e.g. Nitz et al 2010), the industrial strategies and sociocultural impact of this recent gaming phenomenon have been largely overlooked. To approach these issues, this paper looks to an unlikely source of parallels in the home video fitness craze surrounding *Jane Fonda's Workout* video (1982) to analyze the intersections of industry, technology, and culture in fitness entertainment.

At its most basic level this paper is concerned with continuity, using historical analysis to place *Wii Fit* into a context structured by previous exercise media and Nintendo's guiding corporate strategies. This approach strives to interrogate what exactly is “new” about this device (versus what merely appears to be novel) and analyze the significance of these developments. A key component of both *Wii Fit* and *Workout* is contingency, with both products providing potential methods of navigating the embedded reliance on novelty, innovation, and risk in new consumer technologies. This further informs the ways a variety of forces negotiate the adoption, use, and perception of these technologies in a concordant system. As such, this analysis complicates the relationship between consumers and producers during the struggle over the economic viability and cultural adoption of new media technologies.

CONTINUITY

When both *Wii Fit* and *Jane Fonda's Workout* tape arrived on the market, they were each riding a wave of established success. Nintendo released *Wii Fit* in 2007 in the midst of the Wii phenomenon, which saw the console in short supply through much of the year as it rose to market dominance over the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. However, peak sales

came in 2008 as *Wii Fit* set off a second wave of Wii mania, shifting from ubiquitous party device found in living rooms around the world to a health tool found in those same living rooms, but now also in hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers. Nintendo also used *Wii Fit* to ride dual technological waves as part the excitement surrounding the new console generation as well as capitalizing on the public's fascination with the more physical control device used by the Wii. Moreover, the concept and design of *Wii Fit* was not necessarily anything new, but part of a much longer tradition of exercise video games stretching back to the beginnings of the medium and including one remarkably similar device, the Joyboard for the Atari 2600 (see Bogost 2007 for a more exhaustive “prehistory” of exercise games).

Jane Fonda's Workout tape was released in 1982 under similar circumstances, arriving well into an established tradition of exercise books at least a decade old, and part of a much longer history of contested female exercise (see Hargreaves 1994). Video, however, was still relatively novel for the general public. The format wars were winding down and VHS had all but emerged victorious over the Betamax. Moreover, the *Workout* tape was only the newest version of Jane Fonda's sensation, beginning life as a studio exercise class program which was then translated into a bestselling book before ever reaching the screen.

In both cases, neither *Wii Fit* nor *Jane Fonda's Workout* video began their respective crazes, but were the crucial pieces that took the phenomenon to the next level, reaching a much broader audience, garnering increased cultural significance, and leading to unprecedented economic success. This adoption, however, required Nintendo and Fonda to convince consumers that their product was worth purchasing. For Fonda, the video market in the 1980s was defined by rentals. Many consumers still considered the machines prohibitively expensive and thus widely rented them (a majority in the UK), while cassette rentals were the device's primary use by the middle of the decade (Wasser 2001, 99). As such, despite the device's unique ability to record, hold onto, and replay video, people's relationship with the medium was mostly fleeting. *Jane Fonda's Workout* tape, however, played a key role in adjusting this relationship, as an exercise program meant to be performed on a regular basis. As Fonda herself claims, “it helped create the home video industry. Up until then people weren't buying videos, because they didn't own the necessary hardware – a VCR player, which was expensive – and there weren't any videos that people felt they had to have for repeat use that would justify the cost of the hardware.” (Fonda 2005, 394).

The relationship between consumers and the Wii was similarly fleeting, as the device was widely brought out for social gatherings then rarely used until the next gathering. The specificities of exercise embedded in *Wii Fit*, like those of *Workout*, shifted this relationship to a regular routine outside of the unpredictable, purely social realm, demanding a purchase. In both cases then, the structures of exercise played a crucial role in economic success, cultural adoption, and altered consumer-technology relationships.

Beyond these basic structures, exercise entertainment in general and these two products in particular are also typically aimed at a primarily female audience than other entertainment associated with each medium. As such, women played a key role in

establishing the increasingly broad appeal necessary for these new technologies to reach market penetration and cultural saturation.

Ann Gray (1992) argues that gendered distinctions, the division of labor, and viewing context are crucial in understanding the social and cultural roles of television and video in the household. While women (at least in the 1980s) were more likely to be at home during the day and in a position to use the VCR than men, in Gray's study, domestic obligations encroach on women's potential to enjoy "the apparent male right to spare time" (126), which is only magnified during the working hours, leading to daytime video and television viewing being "bound up with feelings of guilt" (77).

Exercise, then, provides an important function in convincing women that video viewing can be used productively, which itself raises a number of questions about what is socially acceptable and what is considered "useless." While women working in the home may feel guilty putting on an entertainment program instead of doing chores, this guilt may be lessened when it is strenuous and produces (potentially) visible effects. Moreover, it suggests that exercise is crucially linked to women's position in society.

Fonda also connects her workout to women's labor, explicitly positioning her *Workout* within a historical (and ideological) trajectory of strong American women, stretching all the way back to "pioneer women who worked shoulder-to-shoulder with their men to push back the wilderness," through the changes in gendered work surrounding World War II, and culminating in "the new female consciousness" emerging out of the Feminist movement. Doing her *Workout* is not just a way to get fit, but a woman's "right to physical as well as economic, political and social equality" (1981, 44-47). Thus, for women who subscribe to this vision, a home video tape is nothing to be guilty about, but a potentially liberating act.

While Nintendo's rhetoric surrounding the Wii is somewhat more restrained, the goal of spreading a new, male-dominated technology to female markets is the same, as is the product's emergence out of the conditions of labor. One of designer Shigeru Miyamoto's infamous designs derived from his personal experiences, the story of *Wii Fit's* conception is one of the ravages of the workplace on the body. He describes it as follows: "When I graduated from university and joined the company, I ended up putting on weight. We were so busy back then... I started regularly going to the swimming hall...I started thinking that getting fit could actually be fun." Then, working with Takao Sawano's development team, he translated his daily weighing ritual on the bathroom scale into the on-screen weight tracking on the *Wii Fit* Balance Board (Sloan 2011, 166).

For *Wii Fit*, however, this is not an isolated pursuit, but part of Nintendo's more general approach to a more general audience with the entire Wii console, which is in sharp contrast to their earlier exclusionary advertising tactics like those for the Game Boy Advance SP as outlined by Schott and Thomas (2008). This in turn is part of an even broader shift in gaming audiences in what Jesper Juul (2010) has called the "casual revolution." Gender is at the center of this shift, with Nintendo specifically targeting women in their advertisements for *Wii Fit* and promoting the device on television during what they consider "female-oriented programs" (Sloan 2011, 168). Thus, despite the

reputation of video games as a male-oriented medium, it was a product specifically aimed at women that played a significant role in establishing the most economically successful console this generation.

CONTINGENCY

The issue of continuity extends to Nintendo's corporate strategies, within which *Wii Fit* is just the most recent product in an established tradition of attempted novelty. Nintendo structures itself around multiple research and development groups that constantly develop new products, some of which go on to become huge economic successes or industry standards (Wii Remote, Rumble Pak) while others do not (Virtual Boy, Vitality Sensor). *Wii Fit* definitely falls into the former category, and has inspired a resurgence of fitness games aided by new user input devices (like Microsoft's Kinect and Sony's PlayStation Move, the latter itself inspired by the Wii Remote).

The early era of video was similarly concerned with novelty, with Fredrick Wasser suggesting that unlike music or still visual art, filmmaking was a primarily single-viewing medium until video provided wide audiences with the tools for repeat viewings (2001, 98). This simple change proved to be a crisis for the film industry, precipitating the current dual-emphasis on both opening weekend box-office numbers and the infinitely expanding profits imagined by Chris Anderson's "long tail" (2004). For Fonda, however, the novelty of the medium paralleled the exercise tape's insistence on repeat viewings, with new video adopters finding in *Workout* the perfect product to indulge their newfound desire for repetition.

However, just as box office numbers may be misleading, I've argued elsewhere (Boyer 2009) that declaring the success or failure of game devices based solely on sales numbers ignores the social and cultural value of even those products that don't perform well in the marketplace. Moreover, it elides the industry's over-reliance on technological innovation and the shift towards huge risk-reward blockbusters that governs the console market today. EA's current strategy of "fewer, better, bigger," (Orland 2011) which is shared by most of the major console game publishers, means more chances for huge economic success, but also increased risk if a single title does not perform. And while Sony's meteoric success with the PlayStation and the PlayStation 2 may on the surface seem carefully plotted, Alvisi and Zamarian (2003) suggest that much of this success was out of their direct control.

This framework is governed by contingency, with Nintendo operating within a system of constant uncertainty and unable to predict either success or failure. The meteoric rise of the Wii and *Wii Fit* has quickly given way to lagging sales and unexpected competitors, demanding yet another unproven and unusual product attain blockbuster status. At the moment, despite the DS's established dominance in the handheld gaming market, Nintendo is taking drastic measures in an attempt to find success with the Nintendo 3DS. Similarly, the successor to the Wii, the Wii U, is yet another enormous gamble on unique user input device and a mysterious technological advance (this time, supposed latency-free, wirelessly transmitted video).

This conditional uncertainty extends beyond market viability and into the actual production of games, structuring the lives of game producers and game players alike as unfamiliar and unproven technologies increasingly hold significant positions in today's world. Much of this conforms to Mark Deuze's depiction of media work as representative of "liquid life," problematizing any separation of professional and personal identity within a system defined by precarity (2007).

The initial conception and production of *Jane Fonda's Workout* tape follow a similarly unexpected and unpredictable trajectory, beginning with Fonda's initial ignorance and then skepticism about video. Moreover, Fonda's personal life and professional identity (both as celebrity and fitness mogul) were deeply intertwined from the start, with *Workout* emerging out of a desire to fund her then-husband's political ambitions, yet ultimately driving them apart (Fonda 2005).

Both *Wii Fit* and *Workout*, then, emerge out of and thrive on a system of novelty and uncertainty that is simultaneously immensely profitable, yet implicitly unsustainable. While Fonda's was able to continue her successful production of exercise videos for many years, it's unclear that this could be repeated in today's even more highly fragmented and precarious digital media landscape. Furthermore, while her production costs were likely relatively stable (or even decreasing) over the years, Nintendo (and the rest of the games industry) faces ballooning production costs as a medium currently still relying heavily on technological innovation.

CONCORDANCE

In order to navigate this precarious system, both industry and players enter into a framework governed by concordance in which struggles over new technologies take place. Concordance itself is a contentious term (see Condit 1996, Cloud 1997), but here follows Condit's reformulation of hegemony that retains a focus on negotiation, accommodation, and struggle, but with a heavily discursive approach dedicated to a "preference for judgment over opposition" and equal attention to all relevant interests to acknowledge "the polyvocality of the rhetoric" (211-212). For both *Wii Fit* and *Jane Fonda's Workout* tape, a critique of concord offers a way to investigate how new technologies are made palatable for a broad segment of society, the negotiations at play in accommodating existing users, and the impact of these technologies on people's bodies.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main discursive struggles for any new technology is in overcoming early perceptions of technology as "useless" or even "frightening." The technologies discussed here also had to contend with their associations with uncomfortable "body" genre content, namely pornographic (home video) or violent (video game) material. The body itself, then, became the site of struggle in both of these cases, with the benefits of exercise on the body offered as a positive use for these technologies. Jane Fonda chose to invoke a political rhetoric that equates physical strength with political strength, and included calls to action concerning chemicals, cancer, and pollution in her *Workout* book (1981). For *Wii Fit*, Nintendo mobilized the discourse of health, publicly promoting the device's health benefits, providing units for hospitals and nursing homes, and even funding a study by the American Heart Association and circulating the positive results (Sloan 2011, 170). Moreover, the game's construction of

exercise corresponds with Ian Bogost's "rhetoric of training," offering a variety of training modules that include both "direct remediation[s] of traditional workout methods in videogame form" and activities that instead "operationalize the core properties of the trainer" to encourage exercise actions in other formats (2007, 305-314). This dual approach accommodates appeals to players seeking health benefits as well as the established gaming audience.

In both cases, however, these discourses are structured by ideology and disavow significant concerns arising from these new technologies. Brad Millington suggests that the Wii and *Wii Fit* offer a merging of technology and the body, appealing to users in its seemingly "natural" coordination, but opening a new avenue of "the disciplining of corporeality" (2009, 629). Hilary Radner offers a similar Foucauldian argument with regard to *Jane Fonda's Workout*, suggesting that exercise books and videos construct a relationship in which "a woman may aspire to a limited sense of 'control' over the troubled terrain of her own body" that is accomplished through the ideologically imposed self-discipline of exercise rooted in repetitive mimicry (1997, 116-117). This identification with an on-screen persona is further complicated with the introduction of video game avatars. While *Wii Fit* visually adjusts the appearance of one's avatar to reflect exercise progress, this may actually discourage identification (Jin 2010) and instead encourage a sense of bodily shame, the avoidance of which is one of the main benefits of home-based exercise programs (both videos and games).

This dis-identification is also complicated when considering the role of celebrity in the adoption of both of these technologies. While Jane Fonda clearly used her established Hollywood celebrity status to promote her video tapes, even putting her name in the title, *Wii Fit* offers an altered variant on celebrity in postmodern society. This array of excessive and contradictory points of identification corresponds to much of Bob Rehak's description of digital celebrity as "a conjunction of industrial and representational forces promoting certain types of reception and consumption" that complicate distinctions between player, producer, and technology (2003, 478).

Instead of using a traditional "star," *Wii Fit* relies on the resonance of the brand, leveraging Nintendo's industry ubiquity as well as following the strategy of including the popular console's name in nearly every first-party title. At the same time, the previously mentioned personalized story of conception from game legend Shigeru Miyamoto provides appeal to established gamers who value insider industry knowledge. Despite these shifts away from the traditional idea of the celebrity, *Wii Fit* still involved a highly-sexualized female body in its rise to phenomenon status – the "*Wii Fit* Girl" Youtube sensation. Emblematic of the trend towards viral celebrity, this video emerged from the bottom up, yet ended up finding wide circulation through established and heavily controlled media channels (such as morning talk shows). While sexualized celebrity bodies may offer a source of exercise aspiration, their centrality to technological adoption is concerning.

The incorporation of the body into these new technologies lies at the heart of this usefulness, with the specificities of each medium (including home video's replayability and gaming's interactive feedback and user tracking) providing clear benefits to the vast

numbers of people who want to work out in the privacy of their own homes. Regardless of their actual fitness efficiency, both *Wii Fit* and *Jane Fonda's Workout* convinced huge numbers of people, including many who otherwise would not have been interested, to adopt a new technology and engage with it in a very personal way. As such, these fitness programs are windows into the sociocultural roles of all emerging media and valuable sources of information concerning the ways people incorporate technology into their lives.

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