

# Dancing with the Hands: Frictions with Videogames, Dance and Gender

Timothy Snowdon

RMIT University  
124 La Trobe St  
3000 Melbourne  
s3435278@student.rmit.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Dance has a long history within game studies and occupies a very literal niche within game design. When applied to more conventional videogame play, dance has provided a way of re-interpreting player performance, with the feminine cultural coding of dance used to challenge the masculinity of contemporary videogame culture. Exploring conceptions of choreography, dancing, and gender as understood through dance studies, this paper questions the applicability and efficacy of dance as a force of change. By examining alternative ways of running dance studios and making games, we see that it is not dance or play that produces new ways of exploring gender but rather the structures that surround them. In this light, dance emerges as a latent potentiality within game performances, but one that is still subject to pervasive and rigid ideas of gender.

## Keywords

dance, play, choreography, gender, masculinity

## INTRODUCTION

Within game studies, dance is occasionally called upon as an evocative metaphor for the physical experience of play (Huizinga 1949; Keogh 2018; Murray 2001). In Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (2011), Kirkpatrick extends the relationship between dance and games by asserting that all videogame play is a literal form of dance. He argues that players dance with their hands when they interact with the videogame object (2011, 7), and through that dance they come to understand the aesthetic properties of the videogame. While this concept of movement-as-understanding might emerge in many physical contexts (Thrift 2008, 139), Kirkpatrick suggests that videogames are uniquely prepared to stage this experience as dance: "The connection with dance is not one-sided; it is not simply that players dance with the game object in order to gain knowledge of it. Exploring a game also involves being scripted, or choreographed by the game" (2011, 133). Here, videogames take on more than a metaphoric relationship with dance performance, they offer an experience similar to dance as an artform; a relationship Kirkpatrick emphasizes when suggesting that contemporary dance practice and videogames are aesthetically aligned (148-150).

While this paper focuses on Graeme Kirkpatrick's idea of dancing with the hands, it aims to speak towards how game studies broadly assembles a cultural understanding of dance as an artform. As such, dancing with the hands initiates a more nuanced conversation about the ways dance could be contextualised or authored within videogame performances, and functions as a bridging piece between videogames, dance and gender. Since dance continues to appear as a relevant aspect of game studies, it is important to consider how that relationship is deployed and for what

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

© 2019 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

purpose. For Kirkpatrick, the alignment of dance and videogames enables a potential subversion of videogame masculinity (119). Suggesting that feminist critique has largely focused on the visual and narrative elements of videogames, Kirkpatrick hopes to uproot the entire conversation by focusing on the performed aesthetic, the dance with the hands, instead of the traditional media elements. This is the core of Kirkpatrick's videogames-as-dance argument. Dance, which is culturally viewed as a feminine practice, introduces a gendered ambiguity to the act playing of videogames (152-153), one that has largely been ignored:

A generation of young men have grown up dancing with their hands and the importance of this to gender politics has yet to be registered, still less explored. (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154)

Dance is frequently spoken of as a force and site for social change (Banes 1987; Cooper Albright 1997; Dempster 1988; Franko 1995). One such example of dance's transformative power is the legacy of Isadora Duncan: a dancer whose influence through early modern dance is considered instrumental to — or at least reflective of — the women's emancipation movement (Dempster 1988, 23). Kirkpatrick (2011, 153) explains how Duncan's rejection of dancing opportunities and the social roles available to women in the early 1900s was not a "rejection of the feminine but an attempt to stage it on equal terms to the public activities of men"; to elevate a less constrained, "real female body" (Dempster 1988, 23) out from the "confines of domesticity" (Franko 1995, 2) and onto the stage; directly challenging the diminished, idolised and disempowered body of the ballerina. The mythologised version of Duncan's dances suggests that it was the dance that carved new space, new roles, and a new attention towards feminine subjectivity (Franko 1995, 4).

To examine the potential of a similar subversion within videogames, we need to look out how dance may be composed within videogame play. As noted by Kirkpatrick, the relationship is twofold (2011, 133): manifesting within the art of *choreography* and the act of *dancing*. These two facets of dance as an artform have their own frictions with videogames and their own gendered dynamics. Their interrelationship, as it operates within dance culture, is defined by gender; as such, dance is subject to the same binaries it attempts to dismantle.

## EXPLICIT DANCE GAMES

To better understand how a hypothetical dance may operate within a gameplay context, we need to look at how dance operates explicitly in videogames now. What I will term "explicit dance games" — games like *Just Dance* (Ubisoft 2009), *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami 2006), *Dance Central* (Harmonix 2010), or *Bounden* (Game Oven 2014) — express a connection with dance through their gameplay, design process, visual imagery and marketing; presented in totality as a part of popular or artistic dance culture. While it is through such games that the relationship between dance and play becomes obvious (Kirkpatrick 2011, 120), they retain a textual difference from other games that do not preface dance thematically. If we understand dance not through its content but its context (Blades 2014, 6; Banes 1987), these games cannot be more dance-like than *dancing with our hands* just because they engage the whole body; the difference must be grounded elsewhere.

Exploring the differences between *Dance Central* (Harmonix 2010) and *Just Dance* (Ubisoft 2009), Kiri Miller (2017, 54) notes that "*Dance Central* promises that it can teach you to dance well; *Just Dance* instead promises that it can teach you that it's okay to dance badly." Explicit dance games offer a conception of a dance knowledge — an idea of what it means to dance — and often develop this knowledge in collaboration with professional dancers and choreographers (Game Oven 2014;

Harmonix 2013; Miller 2017, 149). These lessons or conceptions of dance are embedded in the choreography itself, providing a choreographed intent that can be thoughtfully embodied by its players; constructing intimate reflections on what it means to dance in and with a game. This kind of introspection is becoming an increasingly more important part of contemporary dance practice:

Today's dance is governed by the axiom that performance is necessarily self-reflexive. Spectacle cannot escape its essential duplicity unless it thematizes onstage its own operations, unless it becomes its own object. (Pouillaude 2017, 298)

Dance games actively engage with and conceptualise the dance of their players. They do not simply provoke or contextualise movement into dance, nor do they just provide a spectacle. Dance games engage with player dance on a thematic level: *Just Dance* is about dancing badly and through that it demonstrates that it is perhaps “more fun, satisfying, and praiseworthy” to dance badly (Miller 2017, 54).

The dance produced by each player is thematized by the game, and, as such, is reflected upon in a way that the *dance of the hands* is not. Dance games focus their attention, and the attention of the suggested audience, on the player actions they encourage. Most videogames must confirm that the input was sufficient (Kirkpatrick 2011, 133), whereas many dance games also grant that qualification to the audience and players alike (Miller 2017, 54). When we consider how much a videogame foregrounds player behaviour, and question how much value we should place upon it (Kirkpatrick 2011, 129), the game itself provides much of that answer; as do the individual actions and perceptions of each player.

Intention being evident within the choreographed movement, however, does not mean that intention will be realised in the performed dance. In his study of *Dance Dance Revolution* players, Bryan Behrenshausen (2007) discovered that players often had mixed interpretations of their own play. These players did not uniformly see their performance as part of a dance or a videogame (Behrenshausen 2007, 347-351); from their perspective, adhering to the “specifications” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 133) of the choreography did not feel like real dancing. Similarly, adherence to the required input does not require full cooperation with dance context. Kiri Miller (2017, 41) recounts the story of one *Just Dance* player who, instead of standing up and attempting the choreography, shook the Wii Remote until the song ended, much to the annoyance of his friends. “He refused to be coerced into dancing” (Miller 2017, 41), and instead found a way to satisfy the surveilling system without engaging the with dancing itself.

While videogames are something that players *do* (Behrenshausen 2007, 353), the nature of that *doing* is completely variable from the player's perspective. The dance or play needs to be negotiated in a way that is more complex than to simply *follow its instructions*. Players can reject a game's performance pretense while still functionally participating with the game; in our pursuit of a game's end, as Kirkpatrick himself says, “there are a variety of means we can use to get there” (2011, 58).

The two examples above show how players cannot be tricked or coerced into dancing; players retain authorial control over how their individual performance is constructed and presented (Miller 2017, 57-58; Murray 2001, 143). Since dance is not a guaranteed product of play, the dance context provided by explicit dance games is simultaneously a suggested method of engagement and part of the game's fiction. In his comparison of videogame versions of existing games or sports, Kirkpatrick (2011, 57) suggests that “in aesthetic terms it might be more accurate to say that the resemblances of a video game to some real-world counterpart are part of its charm,

they do not touch on its substance.” Even when players are not outwardly rejecting the dance, dancing is not a guaranteed sensation within dance games. To borrow Kirkpatrick’s phrasing, dancing is the charm of dance games, not its substance.

And yet, dance games do not cease to be dance games when a player’s cultural or personal view of dance does not align with their performance. The context supplied by the game, the accumulation of dance imagery, music, terminology, persists and provides a lens to view the gameplay that cannot be totally undone through interpretation or disobedience (Behrenshausen 2012, 884). Since dance does not mean the same thing to every person (Moen 2006, 21), its identity is better understood as “dependent upon context and authorship” (Blades 2014, 6): where explicit dance games are authored and contextualised as dance, their identity is not undone through a lack of *dancing*. This is where the difference between dance, dancing and choreography become important. Dance, as an artform, can be contextualised and authored within and upon kinetic forms and is not simultaneously dependant upon choreography and the act of dancing. Viewed as separate entities, choreography and dancing individually provide a more malleable space for dance to occupy within videogames.

## **DANCE AND CHOREOGRAPHY**

The ways that videogames structure our play around specific actions, even when those actions are not contextualised as dance, still appears choreographic; those games have written — or *graphed* — our action prior and, through our play, we instantiate the form of the videogame. Both “dance and gameplay involve bodily actions that are scripted by a choreographer or a program. In both cases, success is a matter of adhering our actions to these specifications – if you want the rush you have to move” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 133). In reference to players actions being scripted, or prescribed, Kirkpatrick turns to Janet Murray (2001), who has questioned how dance and a sense of agency interact in videogame space. Kirkpatrick suggests that scripted play actions present the same kind of agency as choreographed dance, arguing that Murray’s “rejection of dance as a way of understanding gameplay because it (dance) does not accommodate agency is somewhat fallacious” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 133). This, however, does not paint an accurate picture of Murray’s position:

Within the world of the computer, however, when the right file opens, when our spread-sheet formulas function correctly, or when the simulated frogs flourish in the model pond, it can feel as if the entire dance hall is at our command. When things are going right on the computer, we can be both the dancer and the caller of the dance. This is the feeling of agency. (Murray 2001, 124)

For Murray, agency is developed as the role of dancer melds with the caller of the dance. The suggestion here is not that dancers do not have agency, but rather the kind of agency fostered in videogame play is not the same as that of the dancer. The videogame space contains its own digital performers (Miller 2017, 57), who respond to and are choreographed by our interaction. It is the dance of the digital objects that occasionally refigure our role in gameplay; when we watch and are watched, we can step outside the “dance” and become performer, audience and choreographer alike.

Reinforcing this idea of dancer agency, Kirkpatrick turns to Colleen Dunagan (2005), noting that the way a dancer learns a new movement and the way a player “masters a new sequence” shows clear parallels (Kirkpatrick 2011, 133). When describing her own experience of the process, Dunagan states that:

Frequently, in order to learn a new dance movement, I find myself having to translate or transform the whole into a series of smaller actions that are familiar to me. Often in doing this, as I watch a demonstration of the movement, I assess the action in terms of what it feels like in my head. Developing a mental “image” of the physical sensations assists me in analysing the step in terms of its similarity to other actions within my repertoire of physical possibilities. (Dunagan 2005, 31)

Those parallels end, however, when we begin to interrogate the authorial intention of the moving player. As shown above within explicit dance games, the intent or perception of dancing within movement is a matter of interpretation, not simply mechanical adherence. Neither the exacting dexterity of a player or dancer tells us anything about the aesthetics of the game or dance (Birringer 2006, 47): moving towards virtual goals or towards a technical proficiency do not match the internal, self-sustaining movements of a dancer moving for the explicit purpose of *dancing* (Pouillaude 2017, 22). Dancers, when dancing familiar movement, need to do more than replicate it (Morris 2013, 145), their performance requires interpretation that is “knowledgeable and considered,” more than the realisation of “steps and positions.” It precisely such a relationship to dance that Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1966, 3) is alluding to when she argues that dancers “are not agents of the form, but its moving center.” Describing the processes that dancers go through, Sheets-Johnstone continues on to say that:

Because they are themselves immersed in what they are creating, because they are not going through specified movements as one would go through a series of technical maneuvers, what is created and what appears is a unique interplay of fluid, ever-changing forces, a dynamic and cohesive flow of energy, not in the sense that the dancers continually change relationships and positions, but because the dancers and the dance are one. (Sheets-Johnstone 1966, 3)

This unison of dancer and dance speaks to a knowledgeable integration of movement and body for a purpose beyond *technical maneuver*. While the process of learning new gameplay movements might resonate with the idea of a dancer leaning in a studio context (Dunagan 2005, 31), “academic dance” is explicitly meaningless compared to knowingly performing choreographic intention (Morris 2013, 145).

The fact that gameplay is not comparable to *dancing* choreographed movement does not undermine that a game is (or can be) choreographic. Games do embed a series of movements; the sense of script or score is there. It is just that the engagement with that script is more malleable than the instantiation of set choreography (Murray 2001, 121), and any adherence to prescribed movements or structures within gameplay is not accommodated by the necessary thinking processes that transform practiced movement into performed movement (Morris 2013, 145).

The leap here is that choreography, as an artform, is inherently linked with dancing; that the choreographic produces dancing and that dancing is dependant upon the choreographic. While there are examples of dancing that refute this integral link — i.e., improvisational dance — the idea that choreography can be presented without dancers (of any sort) is a more recent concept. William Forsythe’s *Choreographic Objects* (2008a) presents choreographic thought within an ongoing series of sculptures and installation. On his work, Forsythe suggests:

Choreography and dancing are two distinct and very different practices. In the case that choreography and dance coincide, choreography often serves as

a channel for the desire to dance. One could easily assume that the substance of choreographic thought resided exclusively in the body. But is it possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, a choreographic object, without the body? (Forsythe 2008b, para. 4)

The argument within these *Choreographic Objects* (Forsythe 2008a) is that, *yes*, it is possible to create dance without a dancing body. As such, it is possible to conceptualise games as choreographic *without* requiring a knowledgeable performance from its players. Players may introduce, inhabit and embody any number of complex thinking processes that shift and alter the form of videogame play, but this specific dance quality of videogames — the choreographic nature — is not contingent upon explicit dancerly thinking through an informed dancing body. When players do not engage gameplay with the explicit purpose of embodying choreography they are still “agents of form” (Sheets-Johnstone 1966, 3); they are still able to be provoked by form, interact with form, without inhabiting and displaying the observable choreographic thought that understands, embodies and reiterates the meaning (Carr 2013, 70). As Murray points out, there is a tension between being called by and calling the “dance”, where players may lapse into and out of any number of performance modes, while some performances may never be realised at all.

## **DANCE AND DANCING**

Videogame players may not knowingly perform choreography, but dancing is not limited to the instantiation of a choreographic text. There are modes of dance, such as improvisational dance, that do not concern themselves with prior composition (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 29). The crucial element in these dances are the ever cascading “moments” between performer and audience; constructing a shifting, interpersonal virtual-world that never existed before and will never exist again.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s description of dance as a “formed and performed art” (1966, 24) highlights the interwoven importance of dancer and audience subjectivity in the understanding of a dance work. The relationship between the two perspectives, however, is not fixed (Carr 2013, 67), and the weight of the dancers perspective in understanding a work will always depend on the work itself. To this end, Graham McFee (2013, 36) suggests that as an audience, if we become better observers it will enable us to “give due weight to the contributions of individual performers.”

When we look beyond the dancer as object, we are able to see how a dance is necessarily composed of dancing subjects. Not only does a dancer instantiate the dance, their instantiation is marked by interpretation, personalization (McFee 2013, 35-36) and a vibration between “self/other, nature/culture, body/mind, and private/public” identities (Cooper Albright 1997, 27). Failures to accommodate the dancer and their individuated dancing into discussions of dance produces an image of the dancer as a thoughtless entity, sublimated to the choreographic text (Avital 2017, 120). The dance artform here is exclusively *choreographic*, not the *dancing* itself (Gardner 2011, 152).

As Sally Gardner writes (2008, 60): “[a] concept of dance as choreography rather than as dancing may be more amenable to academic, theoretical (spectating) critical discourses.” These spectator discourses have historically had trouble accounting for dance’s temporality and the personhood of the dancer. Kirkpatrick acknowledges these issues within dance studies (2008, 121), yet incidentally reinforces them himself:

Like dance, video games are caught up in a paradoxical refusal of textual or discursive meaning, although anyone who has attended a dance performance knows that something does get communicated. (Kirkpatrick 2011, 120)

Brendan Keogh (2018, 122) critiques this particular phasing, noting that playing a videogame is not like watching a dance, but perhaps more like participating within one. In fairness, Kirkpatrick is not solely interested in dance from the perspective of an audience member; his understanding is structured around player experience (2011, 133). This understanding of dance that Kirkpatrick has applied was not developed in relation to *dancing*. When Kirkpatrick speaks to the playing of games, he is speaking from a position of watching dance. This misalignment between performer and audience from one form to another dislocates the meaning forged intentionally between dancer and audience; asserting choreography as the dominant art of dance *and* the videogame.

### **DANCE, MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY**

Because of dance's alleged transformative power, as demonstrated through the mythology of Duncan's dance, videogames could be interpreted as a potential site for a gendered overhaul; a rethinking of what it means to engage with videogames (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154) within a body enabled by and enabling "social and political liberation" (Dempster 1988, 23). An act that will not only liberate the player, but also liberate videogame technology from the domain of men:

Rather than consolidating the appropriation of computer technology by men, the video game is a site where the relationship of technology and gender is explored and renegotiated in performances that can plausibly be described as dance, with all the gender ambiguity that term entails. (Kirkpatrick 2011, 122)

While dancing might enable some ambiguously gendered experiences (Dempster 1988, 24; Miller 2017, 58), that does not make dance a site of radical gender expression. There are conventions within Western dance, much of it inherited from ballet, that organise dancers into strict gender binaries, dictate what those dancers should look like and what they are allowed to do.

This is no more obvious than we compare dance in its two halves: the twin arts of *dancing* and *choreography*. While the act of dancing might be considered feminine (Kirkpatrick 2011, 153), choreography is seen as more masculine (Dempster 1988, 15). The dancing half is frequently diminished in power, suggesting that the body alone is "precognitive, illiterate" (Forsythe 2008b, para. 5); it is only worth listening to when it speaks towards the choreographic art. As Kirkpatrick (2011, 148) says himself, a dancer is perceived as a "finely tuned, balanced machine", a conception of dance which ignores the intellectual and very human labour performed by dancers (Roche 2015, 135). Dancers are not machines, they do not just do something, but know something; "the knowledge involved in dancing is not just somatic, but mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values, and feelings" (Sklar 1991, 6).

The art of dancing is particularly vulnerable to discrediting because the view that it is diversionary or mindless is it pervasive within dance criticism, dance training (Dempster 1988, 15-16), wider culture (Dumas 1988, 34-35) and is embedded within conceptions of choreography itself. While McFee (2013) might not think that dancers within specific choreographed works are artists in their own right, Tsion Avital (2017, 120) does not think dance is itself an artform. In Avital's view, dance is choreography and as such is a process of design in which the actions of individual dancers do not

factor at all. This mirrors André Lepecki's (2006, 53) exaggerated view of the dancer as "a faithful executor of the designs of the absent, remote, perhaps dead, yet haunting power of the master's will." What the dancing body does is only important in that we have to look through it towards a will or thought that exists outside of the body.

The gendered divide between dancing and choreography means that when dancing is diminished or forgotten as an artform, it is the work of women and art of women that is forgotten. It is the bodies of women that are read as precognitive and illiterate. The idea that women may "own" dancing, since it is considered a feminine practice, does not enable women to own the dance. They are the body of the work, while the men are the mind (Dempster 1988, 15). Any attendance to the individuation, experience or emotion of that dancer is "a distraction to the artistic process" (Lakes 2005, 5).

Within the feminine practice of dancing, gender roles fragment further. Culturally viewing dancing as a "feminized space" only calls on other male dancers to "prove their masculinity" (Broomfield 2018, para.14). When embedded in a balletic dance context, men are required "traditional male virtuosity" (Burt 2010, 221), to be technical and powerful; to contrast the female traits of "passivity, dependence and frailty" (Dempster 1989, 17). There are many ways in which these roles are challenged through balletic, modern and post-modern dance (21) but, more often, potential within strictly gendered roles may only be subtly expanded; albeit at a cost.

Here, I turn to Vaslav Nijinsky as a corollary to Isadora Duncan; one who has left a similar legacy within dance culture. Discussing the representations of masculinity within Nijinsky's balletic performances in the early 20th century, Ramsay Burt (2010) determines that Nijinsky was only able to explore his gender, and by extension his sexuality, by simultaneously conforming to expectations of the male dancer; by proving his masculinity.

In ballets choreographed by Michel Fokine, Nijinsky's strength, musicality and domination of space all demonstrated the required "male virtuosity", coupled with a "female sensuousness" found in his expression and costume (Burt 2010, 221-223).

Nijinsky's nonconforming dance was only possible because it was presented in such a way that it did not directly challenge conservative European gender ideologies, instead reaffirming the audience's expected views in three ways. First, Nijinsky demonstrating the required masculinity through strength and mastery over the dance. Second, the dances were set in places far away in time and place from the order of modern Europe. And third, Nijinsky's characters were punished in the ballets' climax, thereby asserting the natural order. Nijinsky's Narcissus in *Narcisse* (1911) and his Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade* (1910) are both made to suffer for their transgressions:

For transgressing social norms, Narcissus is punished. On another level he also has to be punished for being the erotic subject of the (male) spectator's gaze, as must the Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade*. (Burt 2010, 224)

In their time, Fokine and Nijinsky used male virtuosity as "a vehicle for expressing a transgressively sensual and eroticized male image, but in a context within which transgression was seen to be punished" (Burt 2010, 225). While such aggressive regimentation may have been broken down through modern and post-modern approaches to dance (Banes 1987; Dempster 1988; Gardner 2008), similar limitations persist through dance training (Dempster 1988, 23; Lakes 2005, 4) and wider culture (Dumas 1988, 34); impacting performed works outside of ballet.

In Stephanie Lake's *Colossus* (2018), a contemporary dance work developed and performed last year in Melbourne, Australia, the binary re-emerges. The work engaged with the overwhelming mass of the fifty young dancers involved and, through sheer numbers alone, reasserted the kind of 'natural sexual difference' between male and female roles, allowing little deviation. For the most part, men lift and women are lifted. When men dance together there is an explosion of energy; when women dance together it is intricate and sensitive. The one reprieve from these strict roles emerges when a young queer-presenting man is literally ousted by his peers. Amid verbal exchanges of "me" and "you" within the group, they begin to repeatedly shriek "you, you!" at the lone dancer, isolating him from the rest. While his departure from the group allows him a quiet, intimate solo; he is totally othered and dehumanised by the collective. There is a discomfort here in the similarity between this and Nijinsky's queer dance under Fokine: deviations to masculinity are permitted only if they are punished within the text of the work (Burt 2010, 225). When the lone dancer is allowed to return to the group, there is no acknowledgement of the misdeed; it is assumedly forgiven and forgotten.

In the contemporary dancing body, dance itself becomes the means of navigating and negotiating the ingrained performance of gender identity, yet this individual power is frequently challenged within specific dance practices (Lakes 2005, 3); when new permutations of gendered performance are reintegrated into or damaged by prescriptive binaries. While Kirkpatrick identifies Duncan's dance as disruptive to limiting ideas of womanhood, Duncan's "untainted naturalness" has "become in its own way as prescriptive as the system it originally sought to challenge" (Dempster 1988, 23): while Duncan was instrumental in theorising new dancing futures for women's bodies, that future has since been integrated into notions of "'natural' sexual difference". Similarly, Nijinsky's limited transgressions seem to be recycled within contemporary "masculine" dance performances; opportunities for sensitivity must be matched with strength, bravado and othering.

If the dance of videogames is not complicit in an internal challenging of norms, then it will inevitably reinforce them. The idea that "young men have been dancing with their hands" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154) is not subversive when that dance fits within current ideals of masculine dance performance. The dominant videogame experience of "shooting, blowing up, speeding or zapping" (Wajcman, via Kirkpatrick 2011, 119) can be reassembled as a violent, physical, technical "virtuosity" (Burt 2010, 221). Outside the problematised domain of male gamers and masculinity, the expectation for feminine dancers to display "passivity" and "frailty" (Dempster 1988, 17) aligns with and reinforces the false binaries that suggest feminine players prefer to avoid conflict and violence (Jenson & de Castell 2010, 61). As an *ambiguously gendered dance performance* (Kirkpatrick 2011, 122), these forms of play adhere to the rigid masculinities and femininities imposed through many forms of dance.

Dance is not a cure for conventional and limiting conceptions of gender; it only textually engages those limitations when it is enabled to be critical and self-reflexive, when it is permitted and cultivated through the convergent choreographic and dancing practices (Gardner 2011, 163; Lakes 2005, 16). An interpretation of dance that is explicitly unconscious and devalues the intellectual labour of dancing (feminine) bodies is not capable of such an engagement. Dancing with the hands, therefore, consolidates the appropriation of the videogame as a site of unquestioned gendered performances.

### **(CURRENT) ROUTES FORWARD**

A peculiar power is ascribed to dance within dance studies. It is shown to be transformative, transgressive, freeing and utopian. These images are alluring, but they

dislocate dancing from the reality that it inhabits. The “dancing body is a cultural production, dynamically interacting with the socio-cultural matrix” (Dempster 1988, 22); it can act upon the world, but it will always be acted upon in return. And while the spaces instantiated through dance may allude to alternate futures (15), dance alone is not capable of creating them.

Dance may have the ability to destabilize the binaries that control our bodies (Dempster 1988, 24), but that ability can be enabled and disabled through other mechanisms of dance production (Lakes 2005, 3) and society (Dumas 1988, 35). Recognising that dance is itself controlled through gendered boundaries suggests that dance alone is not capable of overpowering the gender structures that enshrine videogames.

The spaces that enable critical dance practice are cultivated to explicitly subvert the problems within dance pedagogy. “Artisanal” dance practices, as described by Sally Gardner (2011), show how a different relationship between the choreographer and dancer can help resolve the issues of authority and objectivity. The traditional physical division between the two is broken down, and together they inhabit a less hierarchical, more intimate space (58-59). Modalities that subvert the power relationship between choreography and dancing aim to deconstruct the inherently gendered division of labour that occurs within dance and society (60); not through dance, but upon dance (Lakes 2005, 16). When we afford dance the power to exert these changes, we diminish the actions of artists who seek to dismantle dance hierarchies and binaries in every part of dance culture.

Similar proactive practices already exist within videogame making. Emma Westecott (2013) describes DIY, craft movements within independent games that supports a broader, more nuanced approach to gender, play and making. Easier access to technology, means and space enables the creation of a wide variety of personal games, across all sorts of themes and formats (85). The ability to produce personal games within familiar game structures complicates the “sexual difference” within play habits as determined by mainstream videogame culture and research (79): blurring the division between culturally coded “masculine” and “feminine” games and play habits. The undercurrent within craft, personal and DIY is ultimately political (81): one craft work participates within a history or craft work, cumulatively establishing that the people who play games are more diverse than mainstream culture would lead us to believe, as are the ways that they make them (89).

The exploration through theme or narrative visible in independent and DIY game practices raises the question of how traditional media elements interact with dance. The suggestion that dance refuses “textual or discursive meaning” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 120) is particularly reductive. Dance works are often fully composed of their costume, lighting, text; through their name and through their writing (Burrows 2010). The ways that dance artists conceptualise dance meaning are highly varied, and many turn to voice as they view the body’s expressivity as limited compared to other “more overtly discursive practices” (Dempster 1988, 14). These elements provide context that rewrites and is rewritten by the body. The inevitable punishment in *the narrative* of Nijinsky’s Narcissus or Golden Slave colours the nonconformity of his dance. The discursive threads that interweave a work and culture are crucial to a more nuanced understanding of gender in dance and videogames. The queer games of Robert Yang construct their subversions of videogame gender and sexuality through these more discursive traditional media elements. In *The Tearoom* (2017), which displays the hidden yet highly policed sex-lives of men in public toilets, parodies the masculinity and heteronormativity associated with guns and first-person videogames. Facing

censorship across Steam and Twitch, Yang replaced all the penises in *The Tearoom* with guns:

[T]o appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex, I have swapped out any pesky penises in my game for the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban – guns. Now there’s nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys’ guns, right? (Yang 2017)

The dance with the hands, while mechanically a simple swaying of mouse across desk, is transformed into the sexual stimulation of a flesh-like weaponry. The media elements are crucial in contextualising what is physically performed: the movement acquires new meaning through the concert of body and media.

## CONCLUSION

Interventions through play, through making, and through wider culture enable more diverse gendered experiences of videogames. The choreographic nature of stored and retrieved gameplay movements allude to a potential thoughtful dance performance, yet cannot be easily interpreted as an act of *dancing*. As the “charm” of play (Kirkpatrick 2011, 57), the experience of dancing exists at the precipice of every game experience: it is something that could be, at any moment, found by player or designer alike. Yet the nature of that dance — its politics, its expression, its sense of identity — is in flux.

Dance alone is not capable of liberating videogames from masculinity; but dance is not alone. There are a wide number of critics, researchers and artists participating in the “vibration” (Cooper Albright 1997, 27) of videogame gender. Any ambiguity found within the dance of the hands will not be by virtue of that act being dance, but through an act of willing exploration.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Avital, T. 2017. *The Confusion Between Art and Design: Brain-Tools Versus Body-Tools*. Translated by J. Kupferman. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press.
- Banes, S. 1987. *Terpischore in Sneakers*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Behrenshausen, B. 2007. “Toward a (Kin)Aesthetic of Video Gaming: The Case of Dance Dance Revolution.” *Games and Culture*. 2 (4). 335-354.
- Behrenshausen, B. 2012. “The active audience, again: Player centric studies and the problem of binarism.” *New Media & Society*. 15 (6). 872-889.
- Birringer, J. 2006. “Saira Virous: Game Choreography in Multiplayer Online Performance Spaces.” In *Performance and Technology* edited by S. Broadhurst & J. Machon. 43-59. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blades, H. 2014. “Instantiating Dance On Screen.” *American Society for Aesthetics*. 7 (1). 1-11.
- Broomfield, M. 2018. “Danced Out: When Passing for Almost Straight is Not Enough.” *Screen Dance Journal*. 9. <<http://screendancejournal.org/article/view/6047/4923#fn18>>.
- Burrows, J. 2010. *A Choreographer’s Handbook*. Oxon, England: Routledge.

- Carr, J. 2013. "Embodiment and dance: puzzles of consciousness and agency." In *Thinking Through Dance: The Philosophy of Dance Performance and Practices* edited by J. Bunker, A. Pakes & B. Rowell, 63-81. Hampshire, England: Dance Books.
- Cooper Albright, A. 1997. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Dempster, E. 1988. "Women Writing the Body." *Writings on Dance*. 1. 13-25.
- Dumas, R. 1988. "Dislocated, Isolated, Seduced and Abandoned." *Writings on Dance*. 3. 28-37.
- Dunagan, C. 2005. "Dance, Knowledge, and Power." *Topoi*. 24. 29-41.
- Forsythe, W. 2008a. *Choreographic Objects*. Installation Series. 4 October 2018. <<https://www.williamforsythe.com/installations.html>>.
- Forsythe, W. 2008b. *Choreographic Objects Essay*. 4 October 2018. <<https://www.williamforsythe.com/essay.html>>.
- Franko, M. 1995. *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Game Oven. 2014. *Bounden*. Mobile Game. Game Oven.
- Gardner, S. 2008. "Notes on Choreography." *Performance Research*. 13 (1). 55-60.
- Gardner, S. 2011. "From Training to Artisanal Practice: Rethinking Choreographic Relationships in Modern Dance>" *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*. 2 (2). 151-165.
- Harmonix. 2010. *Dance Central*. Xbox Game. Harmonix.
- Harmonix. 2013. *Complete Dance Central Song/Choreographer List*. Harmonix Music Systems. 12 November. <<http://www.harmonixmusic.com/blog/complete-dance-central-songchoreographer-list>>.
- Huizinga, J. 1949. *Homo Ludens*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing.
- Jenson, J and de Castell, S. 2010. "Gender, Simulation and Gaming: Research Review and Redirections." *Simulation and Gaming*. 41 (1). 51-71.
- Keogh, B. 2018. *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kirkpatrick, G. 2011. *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press.
- Konami. 2006. *Dance Dance Revolution*. Arcade Game. Konami.
- Lakes, R. 2005. "The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy." *Arts Education Policy Review*. 106 (5). 3-18.
- Lepecki, A. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. London, England: Routledge.
- McFee, G. 2013. "Admirable legs: or, the dancer's importance for the dance." In *Thinking Through Dance: The Philosophy of Dance Performance and Practices* edited by J. Bunker, A. Pakes & B. Rowell, 22-45. Hampshire, England: Dance Books.
- Miller, K. 2017. *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Moen, J. 2006. "KinAesthetic Movement Interaction: Designing for the Pleasure of Motion." PhD Thesis. Stockholm, Sweden: KTH Royal Institute of Technology.
- Morris, G. 2013. "What should dancers think about when performing? Issues of interpretation and identity in ballet." In *Thinking Through Dance: The Philosophy of Dance Performance and Practices* edited by J. Bunker, A. Pakes & B. Rowell, 127-147. Hampshire, England: Dance Books.
- Murray, J. 2001. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pouillaude, F. 2017. *Unworking Choreography: The Notion of the Work in Dance*. Translated by A. Pakes. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Roche, J. 2015. *Multiplicity, Embodiment and the Contemporary Dancer: Moving Identities*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M. 1966. *The Phenomenology of Dance*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M. 2009. *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Exeter, England: Imprint Academic.
- Sklar, D. 1991. "II. On Dance Ethnography." *Dance Research Journal*. 23 (1). 6-10.
- Thrift, N. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory*. London, England: Routledge.
- Ubisoft. 2009. *Just Dance*. Wii Game. Ubisoft.
- Westcott, E. 2013. "Independent Game Development as Craft." *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*. 7(11). 78-91.
- Yang, R. 2017. *The Tearoom*. PC Game. Robert Yang (Radiator). <<https://radiatoryang.itch.io/the-tearoom>>.