GAME BODY VS. LIVED BODY:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF MOTION BASED VIDEO GAMES

by
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This thesis seeks to analyze how video games are modes of technological embodiment and sensual identity. What is the point of intersection between the games’ objectives and how they engage visuality and the senses? Video games, particularly those of a motion based nature, and the human experience of playing and physically performing the part, are juxtaposed to allow for a contextualized critical framework about the medium. The study underlines Vivian Sobchack’s media phenomenology as a theoretical framework and emphasizes two very particular video games which express sensual stimulation and make demands of human experience: 1) Just Dance and 2) Food Network’s Cook or Be Cooked. Exploring and theorizing video games in this way places the body at the forefront of analysis, in subjective terms; understanding gaming worlds as more than moving images and settings designed for a spectator, but rather as ones controlled and consumed by moving beings is essential in evaluating them phenomenologically.

In Chapter 1, I introduce Vivian Sobchack’s concepts of the human interaction with technology and put her into intense dialogue with Alexander Galloway over his axis of algorithmic cultural objects, with Ian Bogost’s critical approach and definition of game formats in general, and with Jesper Juul’s analysis of the mimetic interface of video games, particularly those displayed in the Nintendo Wii game console. In Chapters 2 and 3, I reflect and expand on the concepts of perception, virtual performance, and affective response in Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked respectively. In a way, we are both controlled and in control of the technology, and locating that junction requires some unambiguous critical analysis. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the limitations of electronic sensory modalities and suggest further opportunities for motion-based video game research and the impending prospect of simulated reality.
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For the other three quarters of my whole...

Fatima and all those hours spent creating our very own Sims world,

Hoomie, who introduced me to Age of Empires and Battle for Middle Earth,

And Layla, who danced and virtually cooked right along with me.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A. Tactility as Central to the Human Experience and Extension of Game Play

When Ian Bogost (2015) writes that there is a certain “ludicrousness of all physical interactions in all modern video games,” (p. 116) he raises several questions concerning our assumptions about abstraction and representation of the somatic sphere as we are immersed in a simulated experience. There is an obvious inclination that such a technologically motivated medium as motion based video games envelopes an even greater inquiry into our sensory selves and the human experience of the activity. Even as new ways of looking and moving are being foregrounded, there is a fluidity of intended and inadvertent means of locomotion. Great potential lies in studying gamic systems of interplay, because the fact of the matter is: it is an ever-changing, ever-evolving, sphere that’s showing no signs of decelerating. One of my professors once said something about video games and the manner in which they are debated among scholars and academics of the social sciences, and it was something that I continuously came across in my protracted assessment of gaming literature. He said that they are ubiquitous, and yet, somehow, games are very often snubbed as less valuable research topics because of their bigoted reputation as violence-promoting, obesity-causing, and anti-social means of laziness that have dominated the topic for decades. The argument surrounding gaming experience must be taken further.

My unit of analysis is motion based video games, which are embedded in cultural
specificity and obligate players to stand up and control their movements in accordance with gameplay guidelines. The critical interventions that I have undertaken in this thesis are not bound to just cultural algorithms and the phenomenological implications of them, nor are they strictly narrowed down to cinematic aspects of video games, although all of those are embedded. Rather, this research is concerned with the innate sensory relationship that comes with movement as a primary source of pleasure in motion-based video games specifically. I chose the Nintendo Wii console as a means of understanding the phenomenology of immersion into a virtual arena, as it captures the pleasure of movement and directs a consistent concentration of brain activity throughout game play. My own physiological experience was measured based on how well I could scrutinize one cultural form from other lenses of technology. I conducted my research notes during the heat of the moment, so I could analyze each smaller component before stepping back and looking at the big picture. In this way, I danced the choreography to one song at a time in the Just Dance 2016 Unlimited Sweat Mode, concisely wrote a passage on what I felt, smelled, heard, saw, tasted, and afterwards was able to reflect in earnest what the exercise session meant to me. Similarly, I took my notes during Cook or Be Cooked at nearly each instance of the “cooking” process, whereby I acknowledged in ink my impressions of each individual recipe with its various components and side dishes. It became apparent after playing through the game fully for pure pleasure that the best way to highlight the challenges my body succumbed to the second time around was to be simultaneously immersed in the activity.

The first time I played this particular video game, I didn’t know what to expect, other than be prompted to do exactly as the title demanded: Just Dance (Ubisoft 2015). The
on-screen dancer wore a bright neon-blue and green ripped t-shirt and a pink glove on her left hand, mirroring that I was to hold the motion sensor remote in my right. The model started slow, moving one hand in a recurring motion and stopping periodically as her second hand did the same on her opposite side. Party songs and those reminiscent of flashy nightclubs, by such artists as Ke$ha, Katy Perry, and Taio Cruz certainly raised my adrenaline level. I distinctly remember that each time I became accustomed to a repetitive move, the on-screen dancer switched to the next step in choreography, making it almost impossible for me to keep up. I also began to notice small stick figures warning me of the next move so that I could prepare my body and anticipate the fast-paced shift in rhythm. My heart pounded, beads of sweat appeared on my forehead, and I became aware that even as I mis-stepped, I was still partaking in a physical ritual practice that was steadily retraining my body to move in unconventional ways. My leg muscles developed the necessary strength to carry out the accompanying gestures of the hands, shoulders, hips, and neck, moving all of these joints in tandem with each other. My everyday movement was, to some extent, reformed, as these new modes were filtered and integrated into my routine, altering it drastically. No longer was I a simple corporeal being moving about in the world; now I was transformed into the very embodiment of a mediated being, giving shape and form to the virtual dancer through my own physical movements, simultaneously being impinged upon to dance one way and one way only. No compromising the choreography or I would pay the price in points.

There seems an almost enlightenment-like feeling that comes with dance as a general practice, in the sense that the ritualistic premise of dance is not so much an instinctual behavior as a kind of interaction that forms belief systems and reality (Turner
1969). The question here is how long consciousness can remain sustainable in such an environment as *Just Dance*? In my experience playing the game, an analysis of the choreography was very relevant because it looks across time on plurality, cohesion, conflicts, and separation that were prominent when each featured song sounded for the first time. Turner explains that he found meanings of whole peoples in their settings, which emphasized agency and identity. The *Just Dance* video game can be approached in much the same way: I find an identity in the ritual itself. From an ethnographic standpoint of this game, I can’t help but wonder what it is about social structure that endures and continues to bring gendered and hierarchic divisions amongst players? Being quite familiar and learned in the choreography of each edition of *Just Dance*, I interpret symbols, rigid relationships, and repetitions, all of which have glossiness, or an ambiguity mixed with ambivalence. There is certain potential for coherence and contestation. Society itself reveals its deepest values through its rituals, and all rites in the liminal zone require absorbing sound, which levels off a spontaneous and anonymous emotion brought on by a virtual setting.

Another video game that not only moved me physically and brought up my adrenaline level, but also exposed all other forms of sensory modes of human experience, was one that blurred the boundaries of my very senses. Again, telling me straight up to *Cook or Be Cooked* (Bandai Namco Games 2009), this video game set me up to become a virtual version of a world-renowned chef in a format that invited a fast-paced and exhilarating cooking competition. Boil the water, peel and chop the potatoes, pour them into the hot water, turn the heat down, wait for the timer, drain the water, add salt, pepper, cream, and butter, mash them until they have a creamy consistency. This was the first recipe I prepared on the game. Using the Wii console, I actually moved my arm in the
direction I was to stir, punched the Wii remote down as I mashed the potatoes, and twitched my wrist to sprinkle the seasoning. I saw the steamy essence of the finished mashed potatoes, practically smelled the creamy butter, and could taste the salt on my tongue. My taste buds erupted in sensation and my heart raced to get the dish done within the time constraints. I even noticed the danger of too much heat and learned new cooking techniques that I was able to apply later in reality.

Desire is another very key part to both the Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked video games, because it mobilizes and connects corporeal beings in much the same way as emotions do; there is a sort of prevalence of passion over power, as Biehl and Lock (2010) state. These authors are concerned with desire and entertainment as a subjective power and territorialization. The pleasure of movement as an intervention in our material being is conceptualized as an escape from normality. There is a sort of cartography of our relationship with the technological embellishment. Listening indifferently to the songs or the professional chef judges inevitably causes us to see differently; this could, perhaps, contribute to the enjoyment of making mistakes in the games, because as we get accustomed to a move, it swiftly changes and we must get readjusted all over again. Memory can act on us positively, because dance is largely an expression of memory, and desires are projects of nonsense. We are, in a way, narrating our sentient selves through dance and movement.

There is an inherent red line between the motion sensors as mechanical representation and a premature system of simulated reality that circles back from the pleasure of moving to what happens in our bodies at that precise moment and why. Initially, I aimed to address the human experience of such games, paying particular attention to how
we relate and embody the forms on-screen. What importance does our relationship with video games hold in the grand scheme of things and how has this unit of analysis, my experience playing the game, shaped my mode of reflection? How, for instance, does a meal become an entity of experience? A set of songs and choreographies an approach to thoughtful conception and emotion? This is one of the more confounding inquiries, because it’s an ever-changing terrain, and I allowed myself to interrogate my methodology, to redirect and meditate on my data in terms of how the practice influenced my note-taking.

How are our senses hierarchized and rearticulated through technical mediation? As children, we are always told by our parents not to come too close to a hot stovetop because we will burn our hands or scorch our faces. Touch prevents us from being numb to our surroundings, heightens our awareness of fatal afflictions, both exterior and interior. The sensory receptor of the skin communicates with our nervous and muscular systems, which, while not necessarily reducible to touch alone, are perceptive to our tactile sense (Raisamo & Raisamo 2011). Although an exploration of the sense of touch and how it exerts pressure on the rest of our senses would require a diligent look into the physiological and scientific anatomy, there is an undeniable relationship which allows touch to be the breeding ground, so to speak, for the rest of our senses. It is beyond the scope of this research to delve too deeply into the scientific discipline, but there is an inherent requisite within the study of phenomenology to explore the technical and bodily systems of mediated touch, particularly when we talk about video games. This becomes even more apparent when we talk about *motion based* video games, in which the pleasure of movement, or proprioception, becomes a sixth sense, enveloping varying degrees of discomfort and desire. Proprioception, while bound up within movement, is more specific to the neurological explanation of how and
why it goes awry, its organization within our bodies, motor learning and memory, conscious and non-conscious movement interactions, and how our concentration of movement facilitates learning of motor programs (Cole & Montero 2007).

There has been a growing collection of studies focused on how humans interact with technology through mediated touch. David Parisi (2014) cites historical forms of computer interfaces in which touch has been dramatically absent. The drive to make these interfaces more efficient and effortless has overpowered video game designers to consider new techniques of manipulation and transmission. Enter, the haptic feedback of tactile functioning. This ultimately complements traditional audiovisual data schemes. “Using machines and corresponding algorithms capable of generating convincing ‘haptic illusions’ of virtual space,” Parisi says, “interface designers attempt to rectify this situation; in doing so, they understand themselves to be activating a sensory channel left dormant by the visualist paradigm” (p. 228-229). He suggests that embedding complex haptic feedback into computer-generated modes of communication entails an accessible spatiotemporal field for touch receptors, but also a redefining of touch itself as a core facet of the human experience in mediated environments. I diligently reflect on this notion of mediated touch when talking about motion-based video games.

In both of the aforementioned video games, there is investigative and political potential for exploring these mediated spheres of engagement. This thesis takes on a phenomenological approach to investigating *Just Dance* and Food Network’s *Cook or Be Cooked* in respective chapters. I chose these examples for their inherent nature of actual movement involved in game play, considering that they are designed for the Nintendo Wii, a console that foregrounds how media phenomenology lends itself to the experience of text
and technology, and does so through bodily connotation and motion sensors. I elaborate on how motion-based games are unique cultural forms that hold potential links to the sensual appeal encompassing them, as well as compare them to the previous systems from which they stem, like exercise videos, photographic cookbooks/recipes, and cooking networks. This essentially links the aesthetic and sensual appeal of video games and enables a deeper individual perception of our relationship to technology.

B. The Rhetoric, Science and Roots of a Medium: Do the Action, Play the Game

On an exercise video, we are encouraged and motivated to copy the on-screen coach, told over and over again to keep pushing forward, to feel the burn, to not give up. The *Just Dance* video game motivates dancers through the point system and the vibrantly illuminated words that accompany each step: “Good!,” “Perfect!,” “Awesome!” These words flash across the screen as the points in a color-coordinated progress bar steadily climb higher, signifying how well we’re doing and how many points we’ve earned. On the other hand, if we are to take cookbooks and recipe cards as an original medium of learning to cook, the pleasure is distinct in the work, as each of our senses is brought to the forefront. We feel the burn of the hot steam on our flesh, cry from the sting of raw onion stench, hear the crisp sound of vegetables sautéing, and set our senses on a rampage through each step of the process. Playing *Cook or Be Cooked*, which undeniably evokes memories of real cooking and the stress of time and heat control, can be described as all the work without any of the pleasure. Simulated activities, such as dancing in *Just Dance* or preparing an elegant dish as in *Cook or Be Cooked*, highlight the audiovisual, and perhaps the corporeal reproduction of an action through the competitive nature of the games. The
specified games underline a desire in players to participate in an incomplete and fragmented version of popular culture while offering a channel for the senses to explore without touching, constructing notions of speed, eloquence and values of high-class dining.

Bolter and Grusin, in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999) explain that culture aims to “multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation…in the very act of multiplying them” (p. 5). Older version of media are reproduced and upgraded to meet post-modern standards by coalescing immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation. The logic of immediacy dictates that we should be more concerned with the presence of what is being represented, rather than concentrate on the medium itself, which is the deliberate essence of hypermediacy. The authors claim that immediacy and hypermediacy are interdependent, and I would agree. From computer games, digital photography and art, film, mediated internet spaces, television, and virtual realities, we remediate ourselves, both through a fundamental physical sensorium as well as our virtual selves. Old television shows depicting classic kitchens with a host of a bright, bubbly and enthusiastic demeanor explaining traditional cooking procedures is rebound and proliferated again as a video game medium, turning our sense of self on its head; our fingers, nerves, and muscles are now the determining factors of who we are meant to be. Moreover, those immediate and now almost ancient video cassettes, which were then transformed into hypermediated Youtube videos, and again remediated into video game models of exercise and dance rituals, yield an obtrusive understanding of our experiences and previous media forms of activity.

Certain scholarly studies of media argue that the competitive nature intrinsic in many video games is the driving factor that leads to their fundamental enjoyment (Kline, S., Dyer-Witherford, N. & Dep Peuter, G. 2005). Why is this? After all, understanding how
aesthetics and a realistic rivalry (Galloway 2006) interconnect is a captivating subject when speaking about video games. But how do these games appeal to players? Is it that all senses are awoken through the sound of a familiar song or the sight of a decadent meal on screen that cause hearts to flutter or taste buds to erupt in sensation? With such intriguing inquiries in mind, emphasis on Vivian Sobchack’s (2004) research on media phenomenology works in tandem with a theorization of video game aesthetics and concepts of mediated touch to act as a theoretical framework here. The purpose is to determine what sorts of sensorial agency, if any, are behind the popularization of these media practices.

Vivian Sobchack (2004), an American cinema and media theorist who is known for founding the concept of phenomenology with relation to mediated experience, contends that our sensate bodies correlate and resonate with the film experience. Sensory thought and emotional intelligence give cinema its value to consumers, who are stimulated by what they see. However, the relationship is not merely concerned with the screen, but also with how material elements on the screen stimulate one’s own material layers that manifest in their nerves, senses, and entire physiological substance (p. 55). By posing the question of whether all cinema is that of sensation and whether that is its very purpose, Sobchack ultimately alludes to the body’s placement in that scenario; bodies are particularly substantial when considering the act of playing a video game, as control models press in on our own frames of being. Sobchack claims that it is especially difficult to try and “separate the sense and meaning of vision and specularity from a body that, in experience, lives vision always in cooperation and significant exchange with other sensorial means of access to the world, a body that makes meaning before it makes conscious, reflective thought” (p. 59). This suggests that cinema is a subjective, rather than objective medium, as we are
being touched or moved. Similarly, and perhaps to a heightened extent, through video
games, our vision and hearing are informed and we feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and
movement in the world; the very surfaces of our skin are sensitized with musical layouts or
special graphic effects, and we comprehend physically what we see as reflective and
reflexive of our bodies. Another exceptional concept that Sobchack stresses is that our
capacities to touch, smell, and taste envelope us with involuntary experiences between the
senses. Stimulation of one sense causes perception in another- a term defined by Sobchack
as synesthesia- while our equally available senses become hierarchal in theory, as different
virtual experiences present themselves. This is also referred to as coenaesthesia; in short,
the boundaries between the senses are blurred, with both a real and an ‘as-if-real’ sensual
experience.

Expanding on this notion, Timothy Crick (2011) takes Sobchack’s concept of
phenomenology to electronic representation, examining her essay *The Scene of the Screen:
Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic Presence* (Sobchack 1994) in terms of digital
imagery and the activity that is video gaming. He asks, under no uncertain terms, “to what
extent do her views on digital imagery still seem applicable to our phenomenological
experiences of engaging with contemporary videogames?” (p. 260). Crick claims that, in
order to provide an adequate answer, digital technologies, like video games, must be
considered in the context of her studies on cinematic technologies. Electronic space,
therefore, merely disembodies, rather than inhabits a world of imagination in virtual worlds.
Contemporary video games are three-dimensionally experienced, thereby mimicking and
consolidating cinema’s aesthetic appeal through controlled movement. He highlights that
“whereas a film body’s motility does not depend on any action on the part of the
spectator…a game body may exist by itself, but it does not exist for itself” (p. 263). With this in mind, a film body is the subject of the film’s moving images that reenacts perception similarly to how we, as viewers, do by using “modes of ‘embodied existence’ as the vehicle of its language” (p. 260). Acts of seeing, hearing, and reflective movement in turn make the film body seen, heard, and reflexively felt, whereas a player’s action in a video game body is explicit in its motility. Citing Dovey and Kennedy, Crick explains that there is an “‘interdependency between the player and the game that signals a fundamental aspect of the specificity of games’” (p. 263). A game body, then, is a software-simulated camera that tracks a game character in a virtual world while also serving as a perceptive organ situated within the narrative world.

A frustrating reconciliation between computer software’s power over our physical world and our visual knowledge of our surroundings is something that Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2013) refers to as “a paradoxically fostered ‘visual culture’ and ‘transparency’” (p. 65). She argues that computer software bolsters notions of seeing as knowing and mimics both ideology and ideology critique, focusing on the aspects of software and computing that are not available to sense-perception. The materialization of the immaterial, in this case motion-based video games, syndicates symbolic language and programing with our perception of reality. Are we controlling the virtual worlds, or are they, in fact, controlling us? The implications of Hui Kyong Chun’s overall argument could be read as challenging the usefulness of media phenomenology, which does not concentrate on the visible and perceptible, but rather the expression of a lived body’s unified and differentiated experience of the senses. Material spaces and real places converge to form a tension at the heart of playing a video game, regardless of whether or not we are aware of this tension. We oblige,
simply because the overlapping stories and narratives invite us to. “A simulated world, entirely within the machine itself, does not depend on instrumental effectiveness,” (p. 76) so the sensations of power and control apply at an intrinsic and an extrinsic level. As it is, ideology is about being suspicious of media, taking that which is presented to us as the very thing that needs to be critiqued. Phenomenology is what frames the human condition and how our senses and bodies are formed with media encounters.

From this standpoint, our bodies are laterally controlled by the rhythmical demands of the on-screen dancer, as in *Just Dance*, while visual control mechanisms manifest in time restrictions and a simulation of heat variables, exemplified in *Cook or Be Cooked*. Allow me to clarify: we are given no profound choice but to follow the games’ objectives, simply because, as Cole and Montero (2007) explain, pleasure in and from movement, during and after, is affectively rewarding. They divide movement into those which are pleasing to see and those that are pleasing to do. I utilize this formula in this thesis by examining the appeal of watching dance and culinary aesthetics and then at that of actually doing it. I elaborate on the exploitation of these powerful images and interactions for the purpose of entertainment. More importantly, I draw from Sobchack’s phenomenological theory so as to attempt to *make sense* of the media through active reflection of my experiences; the sensual prefigures, configures, and informs the textual meaning itself. Many authors delve into the depths of virtual worlds dominated by how our senses are organized in video games. The following paragraphs outline a number of books, articles, and other literature which have assisted in my exploration of video games as a cultural and human experience.

A theoretical review of Vivian Sobchak’s (2004) field of phenomenological philosophy with relation to my own reading of *Just Dance* and *Cook or Be Cooked*,

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simultaneously likens the nature of these games to more fundamental mediations. I briefly examine how dancing in party settings, exerting energy while viewing exercise videos, watching cooking shows, or reading a recipe in a cookbook and preparing the meal in earnest relates to the experience of playing these motion-based video games. While Sobchack argues that it seems to be precisely because we feel the tension of a film within our very flesh, are moved by the subtle, yet powerful, background music, and salivate through our very real glands and taste buds at the sight of a realistic-looking dish, I suggest that such elements are ubiquitous in movement-based games of a dance and restaurant competition nature. In this manner, Alexander Galloway’s (2006) explanation that “games are actions…one plays a game” (p. 2) is quite central to my overall argument, as he gives video games the description of an action-based medium and generously cites Sobchack’s media phenomenology in his works.

We are encouraged to desire through what Galloway (2006) refers to as allegories of control, to reconsider what it is we are being trained to control. The games discussed here are a fraction of the many video games, over decades of historical significance, which retrain the senses to comply with a mediated cultural form. Video games are algorithmic cultural objects, a software that instructs a machine of rules, while the player/operator communicates with it through codified messages. Rather than fall prey to calling them “interactive” video games—a phrase which he seriously questions the legitimacy of—I follow his lead and refer to Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked as action-based mediums which are centered on authentic Wii remote mechanics. Video games involve material actions, because without them, they are simply reduced to static computer code. He states that “an active medium is one whose very materiality moves and restructures itself” (p. 3) through a
combination of machine actions and operator actions that exist in a unified phenomenon, both equally essential to a comprehensive analysis of the human experience. He underlines the chief concept of a diegetic space which encompasses a game’s total world of narrative action, such as the kitchen and realistic dimensions in *Cook or Be Cooked*, versus the non-diegetic play elements, which are external to the world of narrative action but just as key to successful gameplay. This could be clarified by the secondary layers on the screen which specify the timers, the recipe cards, the commentary subtitles, and the meter indicators of heat and pressure of application, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: An example of non-diegetic play elements in *Cook or Be Cooked*.

But it is not satisfactory to divide video games, especially those on which this thesis is grounded, into mere diegetic machine acts, which is what Galloway says is the moment
of pure process, and non-diegetic operator acts, or gamic actions of configuration as subjective algorithms. He takes it several phases onwards, which in relation to the research at hand, provides a strong upper hand. Galloway goes on to explain a third moment of gamic action: the diegetic operator act, which concerns players’ expression and actions like select, rotate, as well as actionable objects, such as the burners, knobs, microwave timers, evidenced in *Cook or Be Cooked* and *Just Dance*. Finally, non-diegetic machine acts are the play of the structure, the language and text, the audiovisual effects, subtitles, and commentary, if you will. In this manner, does the notion of play create order or does it, rather, deviate from it? I address this paradigm considerably in later chapters. We, as humans, not only experience the very spirit of gameplay by the blood running through our veins or the consolidation of our muscle capacities, but also significantly more. Our bodies are on the precipice of real and virtual, as play elements are suspended in sacred rituals of a performance or a contest. We can’t physically taste the food we prepare, nor can we touch the dancer on screen.

Vivian Sobchack and Alexander Galloway (2006) agree on the claim that “electronic presence has neither a point of view nor a visual situation” (p. 63), as the gamic vision along with its design, influences filmmaking and deviates from it in certain fundamental ways. For instance gamic cinema, or a subjective shot of the camera that jostles and tilts actively through a computerized space, is a term coined by Galloway. It envelopes us in a motion through space, in sequences more tactile than they are visual, as is the case with *Cook or Be Cooked*. Our gaze renders the technology as it plots physical space, while the complete game space must be rendered as such in advance. Therefore, cinematic interludes, or cut scenes, incorporate a montage wherein gameplay is basically
edit-free; it is fluid and continuous as “the stilted dialogue that permeates scenes references how textual and spoken dialogue is delivered” (p. 68). The first person perspective is not marginalized, but rather used to achieve an intuitive sense of affective motion.

I’d like to take a moment to magnify briefly one of Galloway’s concepts which he called the allegories of control, as it will prove to be a somewhat relevant tactic in examining the human experience of motion-based video games. He approached the evolution of video games by saying that it is “a type of beautifully undisturbed processing of contemporary life…a control is not a discipline…people can drive infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined, yet still be perfectly controlled. This is our future” (p. 86). This suggests that a spectrum exists of information technologies as part of a larger process of post-modernization, that control is premised on freedom and operates at the level of protocol. Games are allegories of control in that they play out the logic of control and embody the configuration of subjectivity in a post-Fordist condition. The politics of a film or TV show is essentially inverted into a game, whereby after discovering the rules of engagement and what is allowed, movement becomes intuitive, naturalized, fluid, as we become privy to a hidden logic. Video games seem to solve the problem of political control by making it borderline political transparency, while the ideological content is referred to as cultural rhetoric. Flexibility is the founding principle of global information control, which allows for a universal standardization of visual and spatial representation. Just as games can be treated like television and be decried for how they structure leisure, Ian Bogost clarifies this founding principle and makes a reasonable claim towards realism.

I have primarily been partial to practicing Bogost’s How to Talk About Video Games (2015) style, in which he approaches them as a critic rather than as a consumer,
using whimsical and sarcastic tones in discussing various games. He says that, even as we immerse ourselves into the game worlds, we risk descending into self-parody, where a “caricature is another means to a truth” (p. xiii). Familiar devices become unfamiliar so that we can appreciate them for what they are rather than what we wish them to be. Bogost would approve of Galloway’s stance that games are devices to be operated, ones that frustrate more than they titillate as they require minimal effort but loads of misery and repetition. He claims that it is not as common for video games as it is in literature, film, and painting to see creators’ work evolve from their native forms; a perception of creative progress is part of the pleasure of art, of which he regards video games to be the most obvious modern forms. He highlights the concept of flow, or the psychological feeling of being fully involved in the gaming experience. “Flow is a state of being, one in which a task’s difficulty is perfectly balanced against a performer’s skill, resulting in a feeling of intense, focused attention” (p. 13). Being in the zone or in the groove of a fast-paced choreography is a practice of awareness, so deep that it moves us beyond conscious decision. We embrace the reality of the experience instead of the mere theory of design, and are aroused by positive emotions. This is less about creating outcomes than it is about culturing a style, a defining aesthetic of ourselves.

There is an intrinsic message in certain games that our pleasure and success won’t last, that the winners are also the manipulators. I am reminded, at this point, of the seemingly random movement in *Just Dance* which, when done just right, causes the colored progress bar to explode in a firecracker-like fashion, even if the manner in which the gesture was executed was as mediocre as standing in place with my arms outstretched above my head. Neither *Just Dance* nor *Cook or Be Cooked* could be considered casual
play, because they both require our full attention and dedication using two hands, our feet, our spatial presence, and demands our time. This can be “maddening, infuriating, punctuated by small moments of pride” (p. 59), to borrow Bogost’s take. Such is the concept of transparency in human-computer interactions, suggesting a mirror for software metaphor and offering a new perspective on self and place in the world.

There are endless observations available about navigating through space and the centrality of game play often makes up the modern discourses on new media. A new socio-economic landscape is rising, in which flexibility, creativity, and immaterial labor overshadow traditional concepts of discipline; this is described in Galloway’s *The Interface Effect* (2012) as ludic capitalism, which is a key concept for me here. In the book, he aims to identify the interface itself as a historical premise, to question what form art and politics take. He says that an interface is no mere thing, but rather an effect. Ideology projects itself across the gap between individuals and their real conditions of existence. Ultimately, he offers a language of thresholds and transitions which illustrate the degree to which an interface evolves from flesh meeting metal or information moving between entities, as nodes within the system. These are explained as liminal transition moments, where the outside is evoked so that the inside may take place, or where the edge ends and the frame begins in an overarching enigma, a peculiarity threatening to collapse. There is a distinction between notions of visible, or typically specific to the faculty of optical sight, and visual, which implies a broader, more figurative stroke of cognitive contextualization, as in an image of a dream or viewed through the sensitivities of our bodies. Thus, the Nintendo Wii is brought to the forefront for analysis.

“Interfaces are not simply objects or boundary points. They are autonomous zones
of activity. Interfaces are not things, but rather processes that effect a result of whatever kind” (Galloway 2012, p. vii). Culture is history in representational form, as subject-centered inductions into parallel virtual world experiences mediate the thresholds of self and environment. Information, desire, and capital all yearn for freedom, just as digital technologies are poetic and aesthetic objects that describe basic ways of creating, storing, and rendering information intelligible. “Software…asks a question to which the political interpretation is the only coherent answer” (p. 75). Software and ideology are indelibly related. Through the many complexities and contradictions within ideology lies both a utopian and repressive instinct formed from the structure of the software, which is fundamentally functional and thereby ridicules its own tension between narrative and machinic layers. Desire, as I will attempt to highlight in the following parts, is the very stuff of ideology.

Both Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked are video games that simulate aesthetic activities. On the one hand, Just Dance primarily simulates modes of engagement in dance-offs, while Cook or Be Cooked contains a cooking competition show, a cookbook, and simulated kitchen tools all in one compact package. Movement in both cases is key to fully experiencing the games themselves, and the game console itself plays a major role; both video games are designed for the motion sensory based system, the Nintendo Wii, which is vital in analyzing them as phenomenological objects of play. We do the cooking of age-old food channels. The senses-olfactory, auditory, gustatory, optic, as well as the alluded sixth sense of proprioception—are captivated by the very real inability to experience the tactile.
C. Nintendo Wii: Motion Versus Virtual Motion

If I were to take myself as a case study in discussing how the Nintendo Wii became normalized and surfaced as a means to enjoyable social gatherings and solitary sanctuary, I would discover that a stereotype of gamers doesn’t truly exist. The first time I encountered a Nintendo Wii was when I slept over at my childhood friends’ house for Thanksgiving. Once the snack trays of carrot and celery sticks, the mashed potatoes and stuffing, lumpy cranberry sauce, pumpkin and almond pie, and the golden brown monster of a turkey had been consumed, we retreated down to the basement, the venue for a video game extravaganza. I initially harbored no previous inclination to partake in any such activity, as in my naïve, ignorant mind, video games provided no tangible advantage to boredom or escape. However, when Guitar Hero (Harmonix 2005) and its guitar-shaped instrument came out of hiding and I witnessed just how easy it was to coordinate with the interface through our eyes and fingers, I quickly began to see the appeal. This is something that Jesper Juul (2010) stresses is a casual revolution, what the Nintendo marketing material bills as a breakthrough in the history of video games. This was the moment that the simplicity in video games was revived and our appreciation of this technological art form was reconciled. In this way, ‘casual gaming’ could be described as a political economic strategy, a method of expanding the video game market and commodifying our freedom and flexibility in movement. The design of the remote itself resembles a futuristic television remote, enticing everyone to touch the controller (Jones & Thiruvathukal 2012).

“Accessibility and intuitive simplicity, and the implied comforts of the domestic space” (p. 54) was the core goal of the Wii platform at the point of its inauguration.

Jones and Thiruvathukal (2012) in their co-authored book Codename Revolution:
*The Nintendo Wii Platform* explain the significance of this platform that allows players to move their entire bodies and redefines what a social activity is, although these technologies existed much earlier, for instance, in electronic arcade games. Citing what Jesper Juul would refer to as a “mimetic interface” and a “casual revolution” (p. 2), they explained that the system echoes the player’s movements. Rather than concentrating on our thumb’s motor control, as a traditional joypad would have us do, the wireless motion sensitive controller, the Wii Remote obliges us to stand more often than sit on the couch and move our arms and bodies in gestures reminiscent of wielding a sword, swinging a tennis racket, and punching our fists like a real boxer. Moving the controller corresponds to moving the on-screen cursor. We learn to use space in a different way as it “shifts attention from the game world or what’s on the screen to the player’s body in physical space out in the living room” (p. 3). In short, the authors claim that engineering a social space of gameplay is the whole point.

The Wii, by design, communicates to the operator what the platform can and can’t perform, so we are left in no doubt that it is aimed at our physical and psychological experience of gameplay.

The Wii remote, as shown in Figure 2, has a rectangular shape that invites not only the novice game player, but even people who historically did not constitute gaming’s core demographic to become comfortable and eager to participate. It measures roughly 5.81 by 1.43 by 1.12 inches, so that it fits into the palm of your hand. Even the remote’s interface is quite manageable, as it is laden from top to bottom with: a power button on the top left corner, a cross-shaped directional pad, a large, protruding transparent A button that seems to be the universal ‘select’ or ‘enter’ key, a Home button adjoined by small plus (+) and minus (-) buttons on either sides, a small speaker grill, a vertical column of 1 and 2 buttons,
and a row of LED indicator lights forming the base; these are to specify which remote is being used, as the Wii system allows several individuals to play at one time. There is also a B trigger on the back of the remote, bringing the total number of buttons on this most basic form of an interface up to nine, including a wrist-strap to prevent flinging it across the room during active game play. Then, an extension peripheral called the Nunchuk, which plugs into the base of the wand-shaped remote on a three-foot chord, allows for two-handed gameplay. With its curvy grip-like exterior, the Nunchuk has Z and C buttons on its underside to be operated with our left forefinger and an analog stick to be controlled with our thumb.

The Nunchuk is necessary for game play in *Cook or Be Cooked*, but very rare in the *Just Dance* series. Using the Wii remote involves strapping a sensor bar to the television and pointing the remote at the bar or mimicking the hand gestures seen on the screen.

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To play a video game means, more often than not, to take on a roll where I am in control and given an alter ego. I am converted into a professional dancer, a renowned kitchen chef, what have you, as roles are folded over on one’s sense of self. A cadenced game design with a rhythm, a pattern that keeps the ideal narrative going, can be a type of sustainability. “The world of video games,” writes Bogost (2015), “is still imbued with indignity plagued by its own tendency to self-humiliation” (p. 181). Video games need not be necessarily mainstreamed to clash with our sense of reality and fragment the media ecosystem. I am both conscious of my own body and so enveloped by the graphics and the mission of a game, that I lose track of real time entirely. My fingers paradoxically become numb to everything but the console controller, I forget my hunger until I see a charming dish on-screen that awakens my taste buds, and the blood in my ears pumps audibly with each loud noise emanating from the system. My heart pounds with the intensity of every audiovisual component involved and old memories come into focus randomly as an image or message flits across the screen. Perhaps what animates so many video games and the underlying principles of entertainment lie in the thrill that comes with gaming as our very senses are set ablaze. Therefore, the study at hand is anchored by two questions which guide my proposed approach of inquiry. First, how do Just Dance 2016 and Food Network’s Cook or Be Cooked engage players’ senses? Secondly, how do those sensory models reconstruct, regulate, and translate players’ configurations of reality and entertainment?

In order to address the aforementioned questions, I have developed a detailed phenomenologically-informed reading of the two specified video games, both of which are
premised on virtual characters that act on their environment with impunity, with no real consequences if a dance round doesn’t project a satisfying score or the meat for the tacos is burnt from too much heat. I played each game extensively, paying special attention to the Sweat Mode of Just Dance 2016 and the play-by-play meal plan of Cook or Be Cooked, and took extensive notes on how my sensorial body responded to the games’ stimuli. With respect to the chapter on Just Dance, I specifically analyze how the dancing body crosses genre boundaries to become a performance art (Greiner 2007) in order to expand on that which we consider embodied knowledge. The music, the vibrancy of the virtual atmosphere, the various sounds emanating from the Wii system, the objects projected, associated movements of the player, the vibrations of the Wii controller in my hand, and of course, the images on the screen are all analyzed comprehensively. I chose this form of individualized analysis because the sensory modes of understanding video games ultimately helped me explain why I enjoy playing them so much.

With this in mind, a ludic system of space, or systems of experience “incorporating concepts of game or game play and related experiences” (Lindley 2005) is assessed in order to evaluate each game in terms of semiotic classes. These classes include proprioception, haptic feedback, and synesthesia, or the interactions between my senses. Actually playing the video games was essential in effective analysis. The interpretation of video game signs and symbols of meaning complement Steven Malliet’s (2007) complex selection of contemporary video games and his constructed scheme of analysis, which address the different shapes that competition takes in video games that have been adopted from previous forms of popular culture. Malliet draws off Siegfried Kracauer’s belief that it may be “equally important to investigate the latent meanings of a message: meanings that are not
explicitly formulated, but that are implied in the reader’s interpretation.” I chose these games because they exemplify not only a relationship with other forms of media, as I discussed above, but also a human connection with the senses, motion, and gaming in general. I evaluate five aspects of each game: audiovisual style, instruction, game objectives, character and object structure, and linguistic features. Alternative actions and consequences of the video games are also discussed somewhat.

The organization of this thesis is threefold. Thus far, I have put Sobchack into intense dialogue with Alexander Galloway over his axis of algorithmic cultural objects, with Ian Bogost’s critical approach and definition of game formats in general, and with Jesper Juul’s analysis of the mimetic interface of video games, particularly those displayed in the Nintendo Wii game console. In Chapters 2 and 3, I reflect and expand on the concepts of perception, virtual performance, and affective response in Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked respectively. In a way, we are both controlled and in control of the technology, and locating that junction requires some unambiguous critical analysis. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the limitations of electronic sensory modalities and suggest further opportunities for motion-based video game research. It is particularly important to pinpoint our place within platform gaming, not only in terms of how dominant structures of power are rearticulated, but also the extent to which such configurations of performance depend on competition and digital aesthetic attraction.
CHAPTER II

*Just Dance*: Retraining Our Sensate Bodies

Dance is an all-encompassing, embracing activity which stretches the limits of the physical self, and in so doing, emphasizes the senses in a myriad of ways. Various ambiguities surround the video game *Just Dance*, particularly those posed to users’ experiences in unexpected places, whether they are playing due to desire or a workout regime. After all, we typically think about ritual as a collective, public, and calendrical practice, but *Just Dance*’s chief objective proposes a private, individual and unscheduled event that is largely purposed for arbitrary leisure activity, although multiplayer modes are offered. But, there is a deeper, pre-conceived enabler of emotion and affect which stimulates our memories and senses not only through what we see and hear— and let’s face it, there is a pervasive audiovisual culture at play in *Just Dance*— but also by what the songs and lyrics represent to us. Are there existential elements inherent in motion-based games which contribute to the aesthetic appeal of dance as a ritual practice? Are virtual environments reconfiguring users’ real bodies and minds by demanding imitation, and thereby enjoyment?

The fact of the matter is that *Just Dance* represents a cultural form so complex that the only way to truly get to the heart of it is to play the game substantially. I immersed myself copiously with the predominant goal of acknowledging and digesting my body’s conscious, somatic capacity, through which the game’s design could then be said to engage. I attempt to expand on how dance and music shape each other in the gaming experience. The history and aesthetics of ritual dance, as well as pre-determined choreography arouse
emotion among players in front of the screen. A certain layer of re-training of the body’s movement is found to reconstruct itself on Just Dance players, as there are always new ways of exploring modes of looking and moving with the release of each sequel. No song, no beat, no rhythm, no step is ever quite the same, so our muscles and bodies are flexed and stretched to new limits. Body soreness here is a function of touch, felt both before and after playing Just Dance, to revive my argument about how the senses are interrelated and how touch forms the basis of experiencing pain and pleasure in video games. I define touch as a proximal sense, when considering the Wii remote’s vibrations and radiations of heat, and as a mediation of the somatosensory system when I think about the morning-after soreness, distinct in the calves, thighs, shoulders, neck…everywhere. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Stick figures rolling along the bottom right corner of the screen attempt to illustrate upcoming steps. However, I always found those to be more perplexing than helpful, because the arrows and positions are not perfectly accurate or to scale, so I tended to misstep and lose points with a block-lettered X if I followed them too religiously. The models of difficulty are also measured based on the complexity of the footwork and arm-work involved, while collective dance marathons or cross-global competitions are offered in later versions; this expands our perspective of how the game wants to be played and where: in a living room or in a party setting? All things considered, the relationship between human and technology is redefined, as we become near-professional dancers upon resonance, repetition, and mimicry of a screen figure. We act as we see, move as we see, all in regular synchrony with what we hear in the music, as Figure 3 illustrates.
Games are not merely watched, but played so that the action of phenomenon transpires. Reality thrives in this particular game, as its representation refers to the creation of meaning about the world through images. I would agree with Alexander Galloway’s (2006) debate over whether images are mimetic mirrors of reality or constructed mediums standing in the way. The kinetic, affective, and material dimensions in queries concerning meaning and representation divide video games into piles. In considering the politics of gaming, play becomes linked to the broad social structures of control. The political stakes of this game is that politics do not directly factor in, but are latent in the song lyrics, the demographics of dancers, and franchising and marketing. In playing Just Dance, I must become a realist. I must be subjugated in the doing, in the action; I have an intimate relationship with the apparatus and am compelled to perform the act of endless dancing routines.
This chapter first presents a brief overview of the *Just Dance* video game and its power over media capitalistic modes of production and franchising, its many sequels, and the various features that have evolved with each new edition. Next, I apply the experience to the literature in order to further my understanding of how ritual practice, emotion practice, aesthetic elements of the digitalized arena, and affective scholarship are rearticulated through the *Just Dance* video game. Finally, this leads me to explain in great detail my observations and personal dilemmas faced during game play, with relation to the notion of affective proprioception and synesthesia. I divide my own interpretations into the five categories laid out in my introduction: the purpose of the game, audiovisual patterns, textual factors, retraining operations, and character arrangement.

A. The *Just Dance* (R)evolution

Ubisoft’s *Just Dance* video game was first released in June 2009, avant-garde in nature because it did not require a dance mat, as many previous games had. Dance mats were, in my experience, cause for severe frustration if our feet did not land in precisely the right place at exactly the right angle to have the step “count.” The electronic addition had, for all intents and purposes, been designed as a portable extension of arcade dancing games, such as *Dance, Dance, Revolution!*, where the floor lit up under our feet to signify where we were meant to step in space and time. *Just Dance* is a more adequate game, as it is based on motion-sensory systems of movement, which I found to better complement my true body, although it is reconfigured in the process. Ian Bogost (2015) suggested that we take a video game specimen at face value rather than on a pedestal of realistic perfection, to compare games as mirrors of ourselves and our experiences. While such an assumption is
pertinent to my argument—that on-screen figures reveal not a window, but a reflection of an impalpable realm—I note that the screen rather illuminates the neon-clad professional dancers who come as part of the game’s design, and who I am then expected to copy step for step. Holding a Nintendo Wii remote in my right hand, and as I earn color coordinated points displayed on a designated bar (there may be multiple players to the game), my remote vibrates in my hand when I move the “correct way,” as the Wii console asserts. This implies an even greater mode of touching the virtual; it’s almost as though my soul is trying to touch the nonexistent soul of one of the Just Dance models, who express a different kind of technical entity than me.

Less than seven years after its inception, the franchise expanded into 17 variations of the game, all of which seem to me relatively similar in principle and practice. Just Dance 2, 3, and 4 followed their predecessor in each consecutive year, but in between each release was a plethora of expansion packs, such as Dance on Broadway, Just Dance Kids, Just Dance Summer Party, Just Dance Kids 2, Just Dance Greatest Hits, and Just Dance Disney Party (Gamespot 2015). As if this weren’t enough, each and every adaptation included an overwhelmingly diverse song selection. This song selection implies that freedom of choice—if we can even call it freedom, as it is still only a fraction of the millions of songs that have been ritualistically danced to throughout history—is the one aspect that challenges the idea of reconfiguration. Furthermore, a variety of enhanced digital features and modes of play, as well as the adoption of a multitude of game consoles and motion-sense-detection systems suggest compatibility with the game’s unique, albeit exploited, techniques of dance choreography and retraining of a real body through a machine.

The concept is simple. Players choose from over 40 songs, each of which provides a
myriad of choreographic moves designed to match the mood of the lyrics, rhythm, and graphical design setting. On-screen dancers, lit up by neon-colored, full-bodied halos and embellished by retroactive and virtual surroundings perform the musical numbers with absolute precision and skill. Small stick-like figures roll in from the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, prompting players to prepare for the next move and follow the lead with their own arms, legs, feet, torso, head—basically, every body part—in time with the beat. Because there is a sensor bar glued to the television set, it predicts based on the correspondence with the position by which we are holding the Wii remote how meticulously our non-controller parts are moving. As I said earlier, I find the small rolling figures to be quite vague and difficult to read—the lowest common denominator of humanity. The characters are merely there as a secondary instructor’s tool; it makes more sense-pun intended—to simply follow the acted out choreography, even if the pace of the movements is too fast and complicated to get right on the first try. The “eclectically dressed silhouettes” (Nichols 2012) come in elaborate costumes ranging from any number of culturally specific characters. Disney’s Little Mermaid, Grease characters in poodle skirts and leather jackets, robots, provocative strippers, Japanese anime girls, ushanka-clad Russian folk dancers, Rocky-like boxers/wrestlers, private school girls in plaid uniforms, and blinged-out hip hop and pop artists, to name a few.
Originally intended for Nintendo’s Wii, which the entirety of this paper concentrates on, *Just Dance* later adapted with each installment to work on all motion-control gaming platforms, including Playstation 3 and 4, Wii U, Xbox One, Xbox 360, Microsoft Kinect and even on a mobile phone application with an internet streaming system (Brian 2015).

The Xbox Kinect console exhibits many similarities with the Nintendo Wii, except that the Kinect sensor is receptive to both motion-capture and video capture of the space itself. The interface is deliberately attuned to the player’s body shape; an illuminated, opaque, and faceless outline of the player is displayed on the screen in the colored progress bars so that they can watch themselves as they carry out the movements. On the other hand, the free *Just Dance* controller mobile application removes the necessity for any peripherals or additional motion sensors, acting upon the mobile phone itself as a secondary navigational
tool. The versions also gradually accumulated a set of extensive digital features that allow dancers to switch from solo modes of play to multiple players, or from single songs to playlists in which calories are counted and the dancing acts as a thorough work-out regime (Boyle 2015). Of course, the most prominent aspect through which to analyze a video game based on movement is through the aesthetics of the audiovisual countenance, which formulates a visuality that ultimately begs to be seen and, by extension, heard, felt, and smelled.

*Just Dance* considers space, technology, and above all, players’ attitudes and feelings, when developing the newest segment (Ellison 2013). In a way, it renegotiates our personal space by accommodating multiple player options, as we attempt to accurately do what the “eye-searingly fluorescent mirror image on screen” is doing, making it nearly impossible for us not to respond. Movement is key. The tracks featured in the game are narrowed down to about 43 songs per game. They propose another way to discover the music through the body, whereas the theme associated with the record at its original release is tweaked and refined. The studio iterates and epitomizes an entirely different instance of mainstream pop culture by making it an enjoyable, colorful, and socially explicit toe tapping experience. The design of costumes and masks is courtesy of professional engineers and stylists who match the dancers with the wacky themes. Performers dress up extravagantly and are filmed in front of a giant green screen to give them an organic feel; a character is created to tell a story through body and sound, as graphic backgrounds and the distinct special light effects are added afterwards to accentuate that narrative. In this way, the pedestal on which this human experience rests is completed.
B. Controlled Movement as a Sixth Sense

The first time I became privy to *Just Dance*’s incontrovertible appeal was during student teaching of my undergraduate studies. An hour of free video game time was given as a reward system for a group of 6th grade girls who had won a competition against the boys in their class for respectful behavior. I instantly caught on to what I was supposed to do, although it took some time to memorize, both cognitively and physically, the required movements to acquire high scores and points. Basically, it took many reiterations to get it right. This is particularly relevant, given that *Just Dance* acts as a re-training strategy for our corporeal beings, rearticulating what we already know about our bodies and ways of moving and transforming that knowledge into something virtual and, oftentimes, intangible without a system of control.

Prior to truly scrutinizing in earnest the unique and oddly satisfying video game *Just Dance*, I considered where I stood on the consciousness of gameplay after several years’ hiatus. Although it calls itself a game, there is no denying that it resembles more of an individualized dance class, an application of body-building and exercise. *Just Dance* provokes this comparison to other social practices, cultural forms, and media genres in that it instructs us on how to move and react to the so-called visual, auditory, and tactile amphetamines of its design, but without the uttered words of an exercise coach. I felt the movement of sound through my very veins, which is assumedly held accountable for the adrenaline rush and the desire to keep moving, regardless of fatigue. Oftentimes, the vibrations of the Wii remote in hand motivated me to dance harder, to keep pushing myself. The game itself is visually confusing, an perplexity of color, lightness and darkness, with its vibrant and extravagantly dressed on-screen dancers and the boundless twists and turns of
their bodies’ outlines.

The most vivid memories I had of playing this game were of the sweat dripping from my forehead, my heartbeat pounding in my chest, the heat of my muscles and my aching joints charging. This is where a phenomenological perspective on gaming most obviously suggested itself. All of this was proof that I embodied the on-screen character who I was meant to imitate, tearing down the barrier of virtual versus real as I gave her or him physical form. However, it also occurred to me that those same on-screen dancers always had the upper hand, simply because it is pre-determined choreography and it is expected that I make mistakes during gameplay; I couldn’t undo those errors because of the fast-paced nature of the game, so I had to move onto the next step un-phased.

Particular attention is given here for *Just Dance 2016 Unlimited*’s Sweat Mode, in which I created a playlist to dance to as the system predicted the number of calories I would burn and approximately how long the session would take. I compiled 10 songs per playlist in a manner which would gradually bring my heart rate up and slowly let it down in the cooldown portion. The calorie counter accumulated after every song as I followed the neon colored glove adorning the on-screen dancer. The glove signified in which hand I was to hold the remote (the right hand). Because I had played so often before, I anticipated the repetition of moves in the various songs to cause stiff shoulder muscles as I attempted to move my feet and legs all at once. Consequently, I braced myself for the forthcoming pain.

The cultural positioning of these songs and choreographies must be accounted for and theorized in order to appropriate media phenomenology, so rather than universalize these cultural tendencies, not only in the particular song list that I followed, but in the video game generally, I specify such routines as Western formats of entertainment. Most, if not
all, of the songs featured in *Just Dance* stem from a shared collection that lies within the sphere of popular culture. Although there are certainly song numbers with roots in Korean anime, jangling and colorful Bollywood scenes, or African tribal dances, as Figure 5 displays, the majority of the songs featured seem to appeal to a Western audience.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 5: Screengrab of the Bollywood song “Katti Kalandal” on Just Dance 2.**

Ten songs to a Sweat Mode playlist, ten virtual characters dressed in every exotic, exaggerated, eclectic, whimsical wardrobe imaginable, and ten glowing gloves weaving through the simulated universe. Ten sets of unique and unmitigated choreography. Because *Just Dance 2016 Unlimited* includes a comprehensive list of songs from previous versions of the game, creating a playlist involved choosing from a selection of over 200 songs. The playlist examined in this chapter includes:
My model for notetaking took several tries to perfect, as it didn’t seem natural to stop and write incrementally. Initially, I attempted to record the dictation of my voice on a mobile device after every song in the Sweat Mode session, but I found it much more challenging than initially anticipated. My voice didn’t seem to want to make any extra effort, given everything else that was going on with my body. I felt overwhelmed, frustrated and finally submitted to writing short, concise summaries of my experience in each song and what struck me most prominently about the graphics and progression. This simultaneous notetaking technique allowed me to conjure up my emotions and interpretations as I was immersed in the game. As my heart rate slowed ever so mildly, I noticed that my leg shook uncontrollably under my pen and notepad as I wrote hurriedly and haphazardly; it was a signal to the rest of my nervous system that my blood was still flowing and begging to be roused.
Key themes, illustrated concepts, and issues that emerged in relation to the game as a whole and my experience playing it are highlighted in the coming sub-sections. I attempt to demarcate the characteristics and positions of the on-screen dancers from what players are visually and audibly susceptible to. By underlining the phenomenological and synesthetic aspects of game play, the goals that Just Dance players hope to achieve by imitation are questioned in relation to the overall experience. I then explore how the etymological conditions of the game, like the subtitles of songs and the rating of accuracy for movement, interplay with players’ performance. The physical exertions lead me to the final section of analysis, retraining operations, in which I consider the multitude of ways my body is moved, strained, and flexed in bizarre ways through the dance choreographies to the ten songs in my playlist.

1. Visible Acoustics

Just Dance is a game, as Ian Bogost (2015) would have it, about looking and moving in unfamiliar, but familiar, ways, feeling powerful when we reject conventional ways of looking; each flash of neon light and movement of color implores the player to learn new ways of stretching the body. It is a mirror of oneself, if you will, of one turning against the other in effortless continuity, which is exactly what makes it so beautiful to watch, and thereby so gratifying to do. It is a game about rapid, fluid human movement which allows us to take it at face value rather than put it on a pedestal of realistic perfection. Just Dance gives the player an embodied experience of negotiating the dynamics of learning theories and endorsed messages of the subject. Furthermore, “a music visualizer...makes music visible by transforming an audio input’s frequency spectrum into
the parameters for a moving image” (p. 127). We become a subliminal professional in performance failures so that we can “respect the space it creates merely by virtue of existing” (p. 148).

Haloed dancers behaved just as they would in the original music videos. The layout for the video game setting of “Disturbia” by Rihanna, for example, was just as creepy and, well, disturbing as the music video had been, with demons and creatures of the night rattling the bars of their cages. This relationship that was potentially created by the memory of the music video and the game mirrors another tier of remediation, one that transcends audiovisual elements and underlines the aesthetic beauty of the movements. Dressed in what appeared to be a birdlike garb with purple and teal feathers and a thick leather belt holding it in place on her waist, even the dancer moved in a manner reminiscent of scratching fingernails across a chalkboard. Although it is not the predominant factor of the game, in the back of my mind, I was listening to the lyrics and reading the subtitles running along the left-hand corner. “A disease of the mind, it can control you…” The voice singing mildly resembled that of Rihanna, but it was an acoustically altered version, making her sound more like a robot, which ironically is precisely what some of the moves denoted.

Kiri Miller (2012) in her book Playing Along offers some insight into this pace in video games whose sole purpose is to musically diversify play, performance, and embodied practice. She cites a comparison between the virtual and visceral, digital media and participatory culture. Miller discusses how the landscape of space and time in a game, such as Just Dance is bridged as we connect dispersed and diverse human experiences in a real performance. The words ‘playing along’ implies a collaboration of practices between dancers, performers, and audiences, especially considering that a motion sensor, and by
extension, movement, is programed into the soul of the game. Virtual virtuosity allows us to reproduce recorded performances in a domestic setting through our own amateur physical techniques and certifies a sort of fragmented authenticity of visual and audio artefacts. Just Dance links “the physical gestures of live musical performance with the reproduction of recorded song,” (p. 85) by aesthetically and virtually altering the choreography.

As each song concluded or faded away into the background and the dancer skipped off into the limbo on the right side of the screen or walked off with attitude or rode an imaginary horse off into the invisible sunset off the side of the scenario setting, Galloway’s Interface Effect (2012), as I discussed in my introduction, was clearly demonstrated. He writes that “digital media are exceptionally good at artifice and often the challenge comes in maintaining the distinction between edge and center, a distinction that threatens to collapse at any point like a house of cards” (p. 33). There is a state of being within the boundaries of the screen, and once the human figures depart, the translation between interface material and physical material is distinguished.

2. Move as They Move, Look as They Look

Players are concentrated on and immersed in the choreography and competition of the video game in question, which is a concept that has come to be called the Game Transfer Theory. Ortiz de Gortari, Aronsson, and Griffiths (2011) conducted an interview study, in which they found that many players tended to integrate elements of video game playing into their real lives, either as intentional or automatic experiences. Such elements were associated with certain thoughts, sensations, or actions—in other words, rituals,
emotions, and performances. When it comes to *Just Dance*, any degree of familiarity with the songs involved, whether they are classic 80s hits or more modern top numbers, trigger a condition whereby my mind doesn’t seem to belong to me anymore. The body is trained and retrained to move in different ways by removing the self from familiar routines of movement, like dancing in a step aerobics class or jogging on a treadmill, to utilizing hand-eye coordination, as well as foot-eye coordination, to reorganize the relationship between our senses and our own physiology. In so doing, identification with media and technology is also restructured. This plays in tandem, to some degree, with the notion of affective proprioception (Cole & Montero 2007), which is highly relevant to understanding the aesthetic appeal of *Just Dance*.

Allow me to highlight some context with relation to this key concept in making sense of this unorthodox set of raw data. Affective proprioception could be defined as the awareness of our body’s movement and spatial orientation. Human experience itself lies in a gap between perception and control. For instance, *Just Dance* involves some dance moves that resemble clapping, wherein if our hands were Wii remote-free, our palms would easily smack against each other, creating a distinct sharp noise. However, it is integral to control the applied pressure in the space between both hands by constricting our shoulders ever so slightly so that the electronic device is not destroyed and our fists don’t smash into our skull. The result is more like swinging a player’s hands above their heads closer and further apart in succinct motion. The remote and the left hand may touch gently, but the clapping motion is cut short and accurate. In other songs, the clapping motion is still present, but if I were to trace the invisible lines my hands draw, the movements form an x shape. Up above my head to the left, down by my knees to the right, up again by my head to the right, and
then finally back down by my left knee, in the same controlled clapping motion. The game rewards players for establishing control over their bodies, making proprioception coincide with what is happening with the game.

This practice of affective proprioception could be exemplified at any number of instances during Just Dance game play. For example, “California Gurls,” by Katy Perry, allowed me to gradually deliver the gestures and get my blood pumping faster, just as a regular exercise video would have me do, so that I didn’t overexert myself too quickly. In this way, I played my own body twice, by choosing the songs first and then dancing to them. My right arm began cramping up from a particular movement in which I was required to extend my arms slowly and meticulously and release them to the right and left sides of my neck consecutively. I unremittingly coiled my hands so hard in the air above my head that the muscles in my shoulders also tensed up. The dancer moved flirtatiously and exasperatedly, twirling her hair and trotting delicately in place, and I in turn mimicked her actions. Such movements counted against me, so I too had to twirl my hair and figuratively primp my face. I moved as she moved. Twirled my hair with my remote as she twirled her curls. I could taste the sweat on my upper lip, my shoulders warmed up as the rhythm took hold and I diligently controlled my entire body’s foreign movements.

In the case of “Cotton Eye Joe,” there were five specific signs which reflected real-time movement and pointed directly towards an exact understanding of phenomenology. The first was of the dancer, and by extension the operator, placing and adjusting a cowboy hat on her head. She wore denim shorts, a Sheriff’s badge, and had a braided pigtails hair style. Every movement deliberated the stereotypical brands of working on a ranch, with the background conjuring a sandy desert in Arizona. She worked an
imaginary saw on invisible wood, played an imperceptible violin, drawing the bow across the would-be strings, lassoed with a fictional rope, and pocketed a handgun. These movements were all made in quick succession, similar to a traditional Western square dance, as I imitated her stomping foot and punched my arms down hard and fast laboriously.

The high of endorphins is evident throughout game play, as players’ throats become oddly dry and every inch of their body is drenched in sweat. I felt strangely as though I were being transported through each designated setting of the theme; I felt virtually present and visualized those surroundings in my lived body as I became oblivious to my living room. A nightclub, a ranch, a beach, what have you. Something incoherent is also activated in our minds in which memories are evoked during game play, such as in the song, “Can’t Touch This,” where I was reminded of the giant guitar-playing mice and rodents dressed up on a stage at Chuck E. Cheese as a child. In this way, I was transformed in memory into the programmer and the animatronic robot.

Cole and Montero (2007) clarify that proprioception, traditionally thought of in terms of neuroscience, is meant to divulge a sixth sense, of sorts, that is indicated by the pleasure and control of movement, which is what Just Dance is all about. During gameplay, there is certainly a very distinct joy in rendering our arms, legs, hips, and shoulders in ways that are not typically moved throughout our day to day activities, while our eyes remain glued to the screen to capture the next step in due accordance. The sweat and fatigue that come afterwards also offer an indulgent and sensually pleasurable feeling, both phenomenologically and neuroscientifically. “Movement is not always a means to an end, but may contain its end within it,” (p. 300), the authors say. They make a very essential
distinction between aesthetically pleasing movements—that is, our external appearance—and our lived experience. Affective touch and sensory systems are together responsible for the intrinsic pleasure in moving our bodies so methodically to a pre-determined rhythm.

3. **Underlying Principles of Just Dance: Why Do We Play?**

An inherent ludicrousness is rampant, as players see and do simultaneously, while the reward system of points, stars, and textual incentives seem, at first step, somewhat unrelated to the human experience; in cardio videos, trainers call for a “burn,” a “no pain, no gain” mentality, which serves as the reward, whereas in *Just Dance*, the words “Great!” and “Okay!” and “Perfect!” work as encouragement as a hollow bar steadily fills with color upon each correct step taken. There is an obvious difference, also, between solo play—which is the object of study in this chapter—and duets, or group routines; coordinating moves is no easy task. Each player is required to follow a different avatar donning diverse colored gloves—magenta, crimson, neon blue or green—on their right hands, all of whom exert varying foot and arm gestures and standing positions. Many dances would originally require players to have a partner, such as tango or salsa choreographies, but *Just Dance* simply offers the option to have a partner; solo dance works just as well, though the spatial placement of the body’s aesthetics is altered somewhat. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) would have it, the boundaries between the body and the world and the body and technology are redrawn by contemporary culture. In terms of bodybuilding and exercise regimes, they write that:

The body itself is reconstructed to take on a new shape and identity, and this reconstruction entails high technology, employing elaborate machines and regimens of exercise and diet. The reconstructed body may then become the subject of
presentations in popular media, such as film, television, and print advertising. (p. 237)

Vivian Sobchack (2004) would say that this relationship between movement and the technology begging us to make this exchange is central to the concept of synesthesia, or our involuntary experiences that link the senses together, and coenaesthesia, or the hierarchy of the senses. There is no question that such a clear violation of the senses is at work in Just Dance, and that a technology so disconnected from reality can manifest itself in a living body. Just as instrumentalism challenged what is or isn’t human about writing and communicating, the video game in question has revolutionized our method of correcting mistakes. We simply don’t right them until we perfect the choreography with recurrence. Our personalities are overshadowed in the game, not only because the game is dependent on our feeling of foolishness, but also because Just Dance has made way for a collective way of movement, one in which we are expected to move a certain way and are chastised by loss of points if we don’t. Our physical substance is grounded in the bodily action; the fundamental value of dancing is the flesh experience, and we control that physicality so that we can acquire an ideal mode predetermined by the makers.

In this same way, our vision and hearing are informed by our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world. Sobchack explains that sensation is there for a reason, that we should appreciate our own affectations. We are implored not to take virtual cyberspace and technology at face value, but rather to recognize and embrace their physical limitations. The technical and human body associated with Just Dance feed off one another, after all. Technology should be viewed subjectively, not objectively, and the notion of embodying it in any form and relying too heavily on its offerings is a sad excuse for living
in the real world (p. 178). She urges us to accept our human selves as we are without the aid of technology, which is, after all, an extension of our bodies; it cannot exist without human invention and agency. There is an exaggerated performative language in *Just Dance*, in which metaphors and images of avatars are dislocated from the real world and trigger an out-of-body experience. This ultimately makes the act of dance all the more appealing.

4. **A Play on Words**

The practice of emotion manifests the body as independent from our mind, ego, and subject, exemplified by the immersiveness that is a core quality of gaming experience. *Just Dance* is an intentional emotion practice because the objectives of the game are executed in dance, registered in song, and responded to by accuracy and precision (Scheer 2012). While affect does not always require an outcome, structured links are, in turn, not always effective. Power, social, political and economic structures have faces that do not address the phenomenological and performative impact of the change that they strive for. Likewise, how we learn to consider things as rational is an inherent emotion practice; words in a song, whether native to our tongue or foreign, don’t necessarily have to have meaning, but we give them meaning through our movement. We train ourselves to dance to the specified music resonating from the system so that we can adhere to the computer-generated repertoires. Does “real” preexist the utterance? In the case of *Just Dance*, even as we hear a tune, we don’t genuinely feel the lyrics themselves but rather the rhythm that accompanies the words. I’ve always found that the lyrics, while important to the overall experience of playing the game, are secondary to understanding how the program attunes to our very gestures.
“Let It Go,” the main theme from the popular Disney movie Frozen was a slow paced song that illustrated through the steady, rhythmic movements of my arms a passion for internal struggle. The routine came in the form of a duet, but I chose to play the role of Elsa, who wore a bright blue glove on her right hand and dressed in her glimmering, sparkly silver dress resembling a graceful silhouetted snowflake. I was reminded of the movie’s visual graphics, and through my body’s undertaking, I moved exactly as I remembered Elsa moving, as though I were pleading with some unseen force to set me free from society’s shackles and judgmental glares. I recognized that this recreation of a movie’s theme song was yet another example of Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation, because the computerized illustrations in the movie complement the dancers’ garbs. At one point, and this is actually a very common instance within Just Dance, panic struck when I had to twirl in place, because my eyes were taken off the screen for a fraction of a moment; I was not keen on missing the next step.

The estimated 40 minute dance workout also included the classic Brittany Spears song “Baby One More Time,” which was one that offered a four-person multiplayer option, and the most difficult part of this ritual was moving around the others while following one’s own avatar, a dizzying practice. My shoulders were the most difficult to move because those seemed to have been the most recurrently stirred. To further my dissection of the Just Dance series, I ventured to understand the degree to which such multiplayer choreographies, such as “Baby One More Time,” created identification crises through collaboration. In so doing, I was required, briefly, and perhaps at my own peril and integrity of this research, to engage with three other players during the dance number. What I found was that the whole of the routine created a relationship between players which focused on a
chasm separating them as human beings. I drew the edges of my companions’ gestures and signals in a shared experience. If anything, this multiplayer mode rather highlighted our solitude and self-sufficiency, although it demanded collaboration amongst ourselves. We assumed a unique form of communication through body language, a parade of affectation and interjections, themselves culturally specific mechanisms.

The encouraging point system pushed me on without adding to the already exceptional sounds emanating. Instead, the non-diegetic layer of this game was more or less skewed by an overindulgence of stuff. Not only were the lyrics and the stick figures rolling and scrolling along on the bottom of the screen, but the progress bar effected another distraction for my level of immersion. The pulsating music visualizer beat with the beat, filled with color with each of my “Perfect!”s and “Good”s and “Okay”s. Even though I could feel my muscles protesting and very nearly hear the blood pumping against my very eardrums, the words themselves seemed to encourage me to go forth and feel the burn. Checking my own biometric data on the screen was also important here because this was the very purpose of analyzing a Sweat Mode: to reflect on how immediate forms of exercise are remediated in a motion-based video game. Between each song interval, the calorie counter climbed—from 0 to 15.6 to 34.2 and finally to 183.45. For all intents and purposes these numbers were approximations of actual chemical reactions in my body as I burned energy and turned fat cells into muscle cells, but the numbers allegedly provided me with a concrete-albeit intangible-method of measuring the game’s effectiveness in a dance regime. At the end of each song, I noted my average heart rate, which after the fourth song was about 190 per minute, offering me further solid proof that my body had moved significantly and done what the game demanded of it.
5. *How to Retrain My Body’s Dynamics and Displace My Lived Self*

I return, now, to an earlier comment I made in the introduction to this paper: an interface is no thing, but rather an effect. Alexander Galloway (2012) explains this notion in his book *The Interface Effect*. He exemplifies objects of address through his explanation of Norman Rockwell’s “Triple Self Portrait” (p. 35), a meditation on the interface itself. In short, the photo showed Rockwell sitting on a stool, looking at a reflection of himself in a mirror, and drawing a more attractive profile onto a large canvas projected in front of him. I compare this to how I viewed the many facets of myself and the on-screen dancer in *Just Dance*. On the one hand, there is the portrait of me in my physical form, the dancer in a living room setting that gives way to the second aspect, that of the reflected dancer on-screen. The half-finished choreography is the third, with its additional overlay. In addition, there exists on the interface a prototype of the early sketches, or in this case, the stick figures as malfunctioned image production. The lyrics elucidate the history of the artwork, while the background sceneries and locales illustrate the embedded real dancer inside an image, inside another image (p. 34-36).

This, at its core, puts the focal point on the moral and spiritual discrepancies between the images; the one on-screen is a perfected, special version with artificial desires. *Just Dance* possesses a poetic regime of signification in that the “stakes are…the semiautonomous ‘physics’ of art, that is, the techniques that contribute to success or failure within a mimetic representation” (p. 49). Addressing the viewer comes in various forms of ideological interrelation, where the interface is a zone of indecision, juggling the edge and the center of the artwork. Again, the diegetic space in the *Just Dance* video game world is
exemplified by the dancer on-screen, whereas the non-diegetic is the thin, two-dimensional overlay of text, icons, progress bars, and numbers (p. 42). The interface is awash with information, a formula of belief, enactment, and commitment to the rules of the game.

Boney M.’s “Rasputin” illustrated, to a great extent, how my body was and my very being was incomplete, ordinary. Because the song’s choreography came in the form of a sort of Russian folk dance, remediation at its very core, the body’s entire weight was concentrated on one foot at a time as players attempt to coordinate their arms and hands. A foreign move in and of itself. Jumping and switching between legs in quick succession was a prominent theme, not only in this song, but in Just Dance generally. Prolonged and delayed muscle soreness the morning after and following a significant resting period is a noteworthy reflection. I found that I could not walk easily without experiencing an apparent tear in my hamstrings. Bending over or reaching across the table was a chore, as my strength proved minimal and every surface of my flesh was sensitive to touch. The unexpected and deliberate movements which exercise wields causes some muscle fiber damage, also known as delayed onset muscle soreness, or DOMS (Braun & Sforzo 2011). Just Dance can, and has been, used as an alternative to examples of more sedentary games, because of its innate exercise component; whether it is our intention or not, breaking a sweat while playing this game is inevitable. I was always so drawn to it because it mitigated the issues I saw as the bane of sedate video games, where the only true movement was in the twiddle of our thumbs or the flick of a switch. While the stimulation does oftentimes seem reminiscent of that of film, the hours ticked by numbly and unflinchingly, as human and computer based interaction offered minimal physical exertion, contrary to that which this chapter dictates.
Motion-based video games, like *Just Dance* and other games that require movement, like tennis, basketball, boxing, and so on, is what Ilung, Altamimi, and Skinner (2014) address in their article, coining the word ‘exertainment’ as a motivational tool for active lifestyle. This concept of exertainment is a play on words to juxtapose exercise and entertainment; the exercise element of *Just Dance* provides a means to improve livelihood and enhance how we understand the ways our bodies work and function. Foucault (1976) would say that this is less concerned with a question about what a dominant strategy of exercise wants, and more to do with what happens in the procedure that subjugates bodies and regulates gestures and behaviors. Our thoughts, energies, desires, are gradually and materially constituted as subjects. I felt as though I were a mere extension of the technology, while simultaneously embodying the image on screen. If I had wanted, I could have easily just marginally moved my controller ever so slightly to get a fraction of a point—or even just sat down on the couch and watched the mesmerizing movements of the dancers with fascination—but the essence of the game would be null and void if I didn’t actually use my limbs and control my body’s actions; a hypothetical assertion of why the game is so popular may be that exercise can so often be a chore, but *Just Dance* offers such a pleasurable escape from reality that it’s worth the energy.

Overall, the frenzy of colors, texts, and links of aesthetic data overwhelm the eye and the human sensorium with a galvanization of detail. It does not convey a hindered sense of reality so much as a high level of technicality. The data in *Just Dance* have phenomenological claims, whereas the computer platform supersedes the data. If the data were to open a door into the empirical and ontological levels of being, the information would subsequently open a window to the realm of aesthetics. Although data have no visual
form or necessary information, there is a repetition of visualizations in the information network. The sense is redistributed into different arrangements, which then engage us physically. Not only does this game provide an outlook on visual culture, but it also gives rise to a contradiction of sensual mobility. As we move of our own accord and are gravitated by controlled movement, we are also explicitly dancing to conform to the game’s promises and partake in performance rituals and emotion practices. By reconfiguring their pre-determined choreography and reflexivity on players, the game nostalgically arouses us through audiovisual aesthetics, proprioception, and an emotional exertion, thereby stimulating our already sensate bodies.
CHAPTER III
Food Network’s *Cook or Be Cooked*: A Juxtaposition of the Senses

Taste is the most sensual of the senses, an enigma that draws parallels between all five. Vivian Sobchack’s (2004) classification of synesthesia underlies this definition of taste as she explains that while experiencing a movie, her “lived body enacts this reversibility in perception and subverts the very notion of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites” (p. 67). Synesthesia is an involuntary experience that regulates perceptions of shapes as tastes, that transfers a volitional use of metaphors and terms relating to one sense impression which are then used to describe a sense impression of another kind. The lived body is the source of language, which is central to understanding video game intelligibility and how we are moved and touched by playing. There’s no easy way to describe what it means to cook a meal without having had the luxury of actually poking a fork and carving a knife into whatever substance lies on a white porcelain dish, feeling the juices oozing and textures flowing graciously off the sides, the aromas wafting betwixt and between air particles, teasing our taste buds with impalpability. This is the case with Food Network’s video game *Cook or Be Cooked*, in which a two-dimensional simulation acts as a cross between an instruction tool for new culinary techniques and recipes and a race against time. A purgatory of cuisine, in which I neither simply watch the cooking take place nor do I actually do it. Complete with hosts, judges, commentary, subtitles and all realms of audiovisual aesthetics, I am given incentive to have a competition with myself, to exceed my own expectations, to move along, play along, as I progress through each meal.

This is so much more than a simple “beat-the-clock” scenario game, because
throughout the chaos and scrambling I perform during the game, I am overly criticized by the judges. It involves full immersion, as the time administration must be executed diligently and strategically; while we are not able to actually taste or physically smell the food, the game does simulate adopted exercises through the instrument of our handy Wii remote, or in colloquial terms, the Wiimote. In this way, I developed a simple, yet time-consuming notetaking methodology through which to evaluate gameplay in *Cook or Be Cooked*. The Wii remote possesses a “Home” button, which ultimately pauses the game, giving me time in between recipe steps to document my experience. I played each round, cooked each virtual dish, and then went back and attempted to document the specific steps of the experience to develop a more detailed perspective. An enigma arose when the intensity of the experience became what my methodology tried to both capture and interrupt; I utilized the standby mode as I took notes and reflected on the experience. A meal couldn’t stand alone as a unit of analysis without the extreme circumstances of time control and multitasking; the smaller elements were what made the whole of the game.

It is essential to note here that when I use a verb to describe a movement of my arm in relation to the Wii remote, such as chop, slice, flip, retrieve, shake, pour, stir, mash, etc., I am in reality executing the Wiimote version of that movement. I do not exaggerate, but may embellish on my recordings of the ways in which I could compare each gesture in a real kitchen setting. Without having done each meal in earnest, paying close attention to each and every step, the conscious experience would have been null and void. I recognized when my muscles tensed up from continuous motion, felt my panic rise when an item nearly burned because I wasn’t quick enough; this is the thrill that comes with the box. Watching each component and side dish come together cohesively, witnessing the colors on
the final plating provided a sense of accomplishment in and of itself. My salivary enzymes were particularly active in those moments, as I sniffed for a scent that wasn’t materially present. A meal is prepared by a novice chef, but rather than reap the rewards of physical pleasure, I accumulate gold medals and points, which motivate me to continue playing and trying to excel.

The research questions provided in my introduction chapter inquire what sensory modes of interaction these games present and how such representations encroach on our realities. These representations must also be considered in terms of their cultural implications, which in the case of *Cook or Be Cooked*, are widespread in the names and origins of each meal. While it is apparent that the food selection is diversified in fundamental ways, the game’s tendencies greatly target a westernized modification of culinary choice. Sure, the game offers meals with a background in such exotic corners of the world as Mexico, China, Japan, and Italy, but the game itself would not lend itself to appeal to consumers in those areas because Food Network does not make itself available anywhere but the United States. Therefore, one could conclude that the human experience, phenomenologically speaking, would be partial to an Anglo-American participant. The cultural accountability and tone of this game is subjective and this is a key notion to be mindful of.

Games are meant to be played, but it’s not always purposed for enjoyment, per se. In fact, frustration, anger, panic, and exhaustion all play a major role in truly experiencing not only motion-based video games, but games in general. Getting to the heart of how these means of human experience act upon and reflect on themselves and their media siblings is central to the inclusive argument of this thesis. In this chapter, I build an extensive
subjective framework for my solo phenomenological reading of *Cook or Be Cooked* after having played the game all the way through. The meals presented in this game come to a grand total of 12, including:

- Weekday Breakfast of Fried Eggs, Bacon, and Coffee
- Taco Stand with Cheese Quesadillas, Guacamole and Salsa
- Dinner Style Grilled Cheese and Cherry Tomato Salad
- Sunday Brunch Buttermilk Pancakes and Fruit Salad
- Burger Joint and Red-Skin Potato Salad
- Chinese Take-In with Steamed Broccoli, Chicken, and Sticky Rice
- Japanese Grill (Pan-seared Salmon and Radish/Cucumber Salad)
- Bistro Night (Pan-Roasted Chicken, Couscous, and Mustard Sauce)
- Catch of the Day (Tuna Steak with Mojo, Green Beans, and Roast Potatoes)
- Tuscan Feast (Lasagna)
- Steakhouse at Your House with Asparagus and Mashed Potatoes
- Homestyle Italian (Penne Pasta with Marinara Sauce and Turkey Meatballs)

This particular section offers in large part, the methodology with which I investigate the game body’s sensorium, which conditions sensation in the player’s lived body through shapes, textures, colors, and sounds. Weaved throughout are echoes of the many voices who have attempted to define video games and their cinematic systems of engagement through scientific algorithms and bodily symptoms of pleasure. Just as I did with *Just Dance*, I analyze the aims of the game, its correspondence with our senses, my bodily positioning on opposite sides of the screen-i.e. my lived experience and that of my virtual
self-the role of the hosts’ verbal comments and the recipe cards’ instruction. A section dedicated to the memory of food and food smells is also built in order to broaden our understanding of the gaming experience.

A. Play-through and the Extrapolations of Simulated Chef-Mongering

The sensation of aiming a Wii remote at a motion sensor was similar to hosting a sort of out-of-body experience. I witnessed an arbitrary existence where vibrations were key. Holding the Wiimote, the palm must feel the rectangular plastic box enveloped in a squishy, jelly-like protective case pulsate, as the hand-pointer “mouse” meets its virtual target on-screen, which sets up a dichotomy between the player and the game. Its setup resembles a real cooking competition show, with hosts Susie Fogelson and Mory Thomas. Listening to their commentary is as important to succeeding in the game as anything, as they emphasize their desire to find “home-cooking potential.” The player (me) perceives the hosts as tiny figures on the screen, but this game proposes an even greater paradox: after introducing themselves and the concept of the game, the judges literally step out of their metaphorical zone, through an allegorical television screen-snowy fuzz engulfing their figures and hypnotizing spirals absorbing their cartoonish outlines into what is supposedly my own physical world, except that it is only a computer-generated duplication of a fully-equipped kitchen. Throughout game play, they are vaguely visible in the background, but their voices are loud and clear, as though they are hovering right behind me. In this sense, *Cook or Be Cooked* reproduces three different meditations on the interface: a television setting, an even greater metaphorical virtual world, and a portrait of myself in my own living room, foolishly holding a Wii remote (Galloway 2012). Susie and Mory express
their excitement that the plates of food will be much too big for scale, because they are supposedly sitting at a tiny table in my virtual kitchen, watching my every move.

Figure 6: Screengrab of Susie and Mory teleporting from one screen image to another screen image in *Cook or Be Cooked*.

Figure 7: Screengrab of Susie and Mory overseeing player progress from their pedestal in *Cook or Be Cooked*.
At the outset, even the still image at the beginning of each meal sequence set me on edge as the page loaded. The giant words “READY…Cook!” in big block lettering caused butterflies to flutter in my stomach in eagerness. The first meal I performed was a simple English breakfast, and the steam, the shiny oils of the bacon, and the sheen of the fried egg evoked a salivation as I remembered tasting the savory meat before I swore off meat and became a vegetarian. In observing this, I succumbed to imagining hash browns, which weren’t even present on the plate, sitting adjacent the bacon on-screen. I felt the runny, slightly gooey egg yolk roll over my tongue, the grains of salt dissolving amidst my salivary enzymes, and a very subtle, yet pungent kicking hint of cracked black pepper burning my nostrils and itching my sub-consciousness to sneeze.

Navigating the kitchen is made easier with recipe cards available at the top left corner of the screen; there are typically several recipes per meal, as each component requires a different step and various levels of concentration. The cutting board was already prepared with a carton of eggs, a package of raw bacon, salt, pepper, and a pot of water. The hosts advised me to get ready to move a lot, as cooking is a hands-on experience. Furthermore, I was cautioned to pay particular attention to heat by noting that the knobs for the stovetop and oven glowed red, yellow, and green in alternating colors. A red arrow directs players on whether the heat should be low, medium, or high, and it needed to match up with its mark perfectly. In order to perform the action of turning the heat up, I twisted my wrist to the right while holding down the A button on my remote until the arrow turned green and exploded in small victorious sparkles. A cooking timer underneath the recipe card appeared to measure the precise time needed to cook the various elements; if I got impatient, I could speed up the time by pressing and holding down the Z button on the back
of the Nunchuk with my left index finger, and stand idly by.

The remote vibrated and my fingertips tingled with anticipation. I clicked on the recipe box to remove a pot of water for coffee when the timer rang loudly, illustrated by a small alarm clock engulfed by firecrackers. Susie informed me that while it was perfect at the designated time, “it won’t stay perfect for long,” because we must coordinate all other parts of the meal in due course so that everything stays hot for the final plating. I was reminded to always turn the burners off by twisting my wrist to the left, just as I would in reality. My virtual mug of hot coffee was ready to figuratively drink; Susie and Mory made a big show of how delicious and perfect the coffee tasted, almost teasing me with my own powerlessness. They advised players in an overly rehearsed dialogue on how to make simple home cooked meals, just as one of the many shows on Food Network would do. I used my eyes and my ears to ensure that both components of the meal finished at roughly the same time, so it was best to start with the one that would take a longer amount of time, which in the case of this first meal, were the eggs.

The pan hit the stovetop with a loud clink. I shook my Nunchuk to retrieve any ingredient from some unknown location outside the range of my on-screen vision; the Nunchuk simply works as a magic wand to summon these objects from out of nowhere. I tipped my hand to pour the oil. Very similarly as when I actually fry up eggs, I spread the oil evenly around the pan by twirling my wrist (remote) and lifting my arm to scatter it; my Wii remote was transformed into every kitchen utensil and instrument I needed. The oil had to be spread in a timely manner so it didn’t burn, as I watched the little circle of light brown grease branch out to the crevices and soil the clean spots of the pan. Doing this process virtually made it feel almost as though the oil was a solid, rather than a liquid, the way it
resisted dispersal. To crack an egg into the hot pan, the Wii remote was angled slightly to the left on a vertical axis and gently, but hard enough to make a dent in the shell, cracked on the rim of the pan. This part required the application of exactly the right amount of pressure for the systematic movement so that the egg didn’t break, which I will admit, happened numerous times. The eggs sizzled as the Wiimote was overturned and they were seasoned with salt and pepper. As I shook the remote to sprinkle the spices, little captions appeared near the tiny puffs of powder residue telling me to shake “Harder!” or “Softer!” and to notify me when I was doing it “Just Right!” As the hosts chattered away in the background about transforming eggs from bland to salty and spicy, without even realizing, my taste buds suddenly responded with an explosion of saliva.

As the eggs cooked, I started working on the bacon by shaking my Nunchuk to neatly place one strip of bacon at a time in a skillet while keeping one eye on the timer. I noted the commands and feedback that the judges recited occasionally, such as using a cold skillet for bacon and cooking it on medium heat so as to melt the fat away without burning it. Although my carnivorous tendencies can be summarized within my consumption of fish and dairy, I actually inhaled the imaginary aroma of sweet and smokiness and tasted the fatty excess in the back of my throat from when my mother cooked turkey bacon for me as a child. From a phenomenological perspective, this inadvertent gasp stems from my engagement with a technology within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are dynamic and reversible.

While these memories and senses were being triggered, the eggs’ heat needed to be lowered slightly and covered so that the tops could cook through evenly before the bottom turned brown. I considered the reality and visualized the bright white and bursting gold
color of a fried egg, sunny-side-up and its aesthetic appeal. I sped up the time for them to cook, being intimately bound up in a centerless electronic sense of presence, a desire to accomplish the goal but an even more powerful longing to finish it quickly and effortlessly, although I couldn’t substantially enjoy it anyways. Flipping the bacon, I used my remote as a fictional pair of tongs to scrape, flip, and toss the strips and double the crisp factor.

Upon inspection of the final product, I was rated on balance, presentation and whether everything was hot, as a tiny reddish-orange thermometer measured the heat and visual steam wafted from the food. Cold food reduced my score, so I was always cultivating and aware of my time management skills. Some recipes consisted of three, four, or even five parts, so it was immediately evident that this game involved a fair amount of divided attention. All of these stages signified that multitasking was key to the incentive of the game, as the judges kept score throughout each meal based on how well I cooked and ironically, how good the food tasted. At the end of every challenge, the judges rated in several categories: cooking, seasoning, temperature, technique, and multitasking. A gold medal was awarded for each successful meal prepared.

1. The Way My Fingers Savored, Sniffed, Reverberated

In this section, I highlight the concepts of synaesthesia and conaesthesia, which I touched on and defined in my introduction. Now, by reflecting on my experience playing Cook or Be Cooked, I recognize the ways in which my five senses interplayed based on what I saw and heard on-screen, not only in terms of heat variables and time constraints, but also on how a visualization evoked a longing in my fingers, a prickling of my neural receptors of taste and smell simply by an acoustical event or an abstract idea. I
acknowledge that as I played the game, I constantly felt as though my head was spinning and my fingers cramped up from holding the remote so tensely.

The sensation of heat and color is essential to a phenomenological analysis. For example, at one instance when the chicken for a Bistro Night meal was being prepared, pouring in wine to make a mustard sauce was required. This created a flambé effect, by which I was prompted to shake the pan with my remote to put out the flames from the flare up. Perhaps because of the perceived proximity of the flames on-screen, my flesh felt instantly ignited by the heat of impact. This is what Sobchack (2004) would call coenaesthesia, or “a nonhierarchical unity of the senses achieved through cultural immersion and practice” (p. 69). In a crisscrossing of the senses, this visual event reproduced itself in the realm of touch and restructured my physical being, oftentimes absent of my awareness. I could almost feel steam smacking into my pores, making me believe that I was meant to be doused in scalding evaporating moisture. Tiny beads of sweat aerated from my forehead. The sizzling noise always tingled and excited my nervous system, as though fearful that something was on the precipice of burning.

Citing Merlau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Sobchack refers to the notion of magic to explain perception-altering drugs, such as mescaline. If someone under the influence of such a drug were to strike a piece of iron against a windowsill, their physical world would be seemingly boosted by brightness of colors, reverberations of sounds, and attraction to indescribable light. Similarly, the very center of gravity of my experience was exploited and shifted by the technological knowledge. The final plating of each virtual meal became a spectacle on its own as I “unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce…what we are to see, hear and feel” (p. 70).
realistic crunch of the garlic’s outer film appealed to the eardrums. The sound of the various vegetables being chopped on the cutting board was quick and bold. The bubbling, blooping of the potatoes, the sizzle of the shallots, and the very soft clink of a wooden spoon scraping against the cast-iron of the pan is trance-like.

“Don’t overcook this sauce…it will turn brown, and remember: you eat with your eyes first!” This quote by Susie is particularly relevant to the circumstance at hand. Cooking is not and never will be a purely visual exercise because it arouses the gesticulatory and olfactory senses, despite being nowhere near the actual materials. Sobchack mentions this phenomenon of being unaware of synaesthetic perception because we are so habituated in the cross-model translations of our sensory experiences that they are rendered invisible to an extent. She explains that we taste a recipe as we read it. The subversive force of the lived body is demonstrated by its capacity to function both figuratively and literally, which attests to why “my eyes read and comprehend the recipe cognitively, but they are not abstracted from my body, which can…in a transformed and somewhat diffused act…taste the meal” (p. 70). We participate even more intensely when we describe the meals in *Cook or Be Cooked* as a “feast for the eyes.”

As opposed to merely witnessing a still-life version of the intro-images at the beginning of each meal, the eyes and fingers are engaged, which consequently arouse all five of the senses. The olfactory area of the brain also involves vision, especially when it comes to digesting color schemes. The matter of the pixelated textures bounce off the sensible-sentient lived body. I, as the subject, both touch the remote and am touched by the screen as my “senses translate each other without need of an interpreter, and they are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea” (Sobchack 2004, p. 71).
Vision is prevalently objectified, for instance, in the colorful Catch of the Day plate: the vibrancy of the greens, the half brown, half red tuna steak with gorgeous char marks, and skin-on baby russet potatoes with a shiny edge from the grease, little specks of green herbs and garlic immersed. My teeth, far from lacking in a nervous system, yearned to bite in to the tough, flavorful skins and taste the butter and salt explode as my tongue absorbed them. I, in turn, submitted to the now familiar, but phantom taste of sushi tuna rolls in my mouth, as the vibrancy of the green beans popped out at me from the screen.

Furthermore, I felt the not-so-subtle effects of the game and was sensually inclined towards the sheets of wavy noodles, the creamy sauce, the seething cheese, and the sautéed vegetables interspersed in the many layers of the Tuscan Feast lasagna. The heat of the parmesan, sausage, and marinara almost radiated out to me, just as my not-so-favorite faces of Susie and Mory swam into view and began their usual conversation. This time, they spoke about ideas for favorite family dinners. Nurturing my time and patience with this cheesy mediation of tips and guidance is central to the cooperation of our sensual knowledge. They also, at times, foster a separate discipline on memory and how each element of a meal plays off of what we already knew about cooking and food.

2. *A Reminiscence of the Oral-Olfactory*

There is a certain blurring of the line between the game experience and memory, as exemplified by the prospect of crunchy corn chips sitting gracefully next to spicy cilantro infused salsa, creamy guacamole, and quesadillas with the cheese melting off the sides of the virtual tortilla wrapping in the Taco Stand meal. Upon first glimpse of the golden brown spots of flavor on the surface, my tongue became particularly sensitive to the oral receptors
of salivation. My fingers itched as though they could reach into the screen and excitedly grab a portion of the tacos. Interestingly, upon sight of an onion on-screen, the biting, pungent scent of raw onion could almost be sniffed from underneath my fingernails, remembering having to struggle to remove the outer layer of the root vegetable. The burn at my naval from the strong scent of the onions nearly brushed against my flesh in sheer anticipation of pain, but no actual tears were shed; the onions couldn’t hurt me if they weren’t real. They existed to me, in that moment of game play, under the surface as a result of activated memories of painful crying in the kitchen. Sobchack (2004) writes that “these ambivalent articulations of the sensual experience of the lived body in relation to” (p. 73) the gaming experience mark a rule about metaphor and memory, in a phenomenological structure that is “grounded in a nonhierarchical reciprocity…of ‘having sense’ and ‘making sense’” (p. 73). Beholding the multitude of colors exploding off the final plate, I was suddenly and inextricably overcome with a strong craving of Mexican food at the local restaurants I used to dine at with my family in Wyoming; this constitutes both corporeal matter and conscious meaning.

Numerous instances within the gaming experience of Cook or Be Cooked demonstrate Sobchack’s (2004) notion of real and as-if real in terms of flesh memory. The imagined poignant scent of melting butter, for example, absorbing itself into soft, lithe bread as the elements sizzled and smoked in a hot skillet nearly punched me in the face with the impact of powerful enunciations and descriptions by Susie and Mory of the food. I actually leaned back and locked my tongue on the roof of my mouth. Then, again, the mere sound of foil crinkling as it was ripped off and placed on a baking sheet incited a flesh memory of the smooth, paper-thin material between my fingers; I yearned to crush the foil
in my fist, to depress it into a wrinkly, solid deformed ball.

I employ Sobchack’s ideas of photographs as “memory banks” (p. 143), which in this case referred to the actions of my arms and the moving pictures on the screen as I navigated the kitchen. I noticed that my hand-eye coordination was implemented on a whole other level as I attempted to concentrate on so many things at once. Mashing potatoes was an especially foreign experience, but very reminiscent of the real thing. I held the Nunchuk and fiddled with the joystick while concurrently holding the remote straight up and jabbing it up and down in the motion of a masher. In fact, I felt as though I were playing that childhood game of trying to rub my tummy with one hand and pat my head with the other; I was never able to do it, because my cognitive attention couldn’t be split so copiously.

My fingertips were not the only part of my lived body that experienced flesh memory, but also my olfactory and gustatory senses. I chopped the celery leaves and parsley and was instantly transported in memory to the tart, tanginess followed by a flat and watery taste of raw celery stalks. Furthermore, when heating and stirring milk on the stovetop, I was instructed to turn the heat down to low so as not to scold it; this image actually disgusted me and I almost gagged, simply because I remembered the revolting skin that forms on the surface of hot milk and the chunkiness it develops if it is heated too quickly. Moreover, when I added penne pasta to water and stirred intermittently, this went in line with the typical instructions on a box of pasta to “stir occasionally.” And when I completed my Japanese Grill segment, my mind flew to when I would in reality drizzle a concoction of honey glaze on my pinkish wild salmon for an extra flavor layer to the omega 3 fatty acids. I paused the game to prepare my very own Japanese Grilled Salmon in
earnest, rather than taunt my senses with their own insufficiency to reach through a screened operating system. I translated the as-if real into my own lived experience.

3. **If She Stood Where I Stood**

The overarching theme of this subdivision is the relationship between where I stood in the living room and where my virtual self was located on-screen. My experience is not reducible to a mere real versus unreal scenario. Rather, the *Cook or Be Cooked* game is experienced as both here and there, as both on-screen and off-screen. The movements involved in the game echo those performed in reality, and just as with *Just Dance*, small guiding remote motion indicator images appeared near the bottom right corner of the screen, directing me on how to use my remote to peel, scoop, fold. To make guacamole, for instance, I was prompted to jerk the remote forward and back horizontally as though I was running a paring knife through in order to separate the two halves of the dark green, warty fruit; similarly, I used the remote to very sharply wrench the pit out. I scooped out the buttery avocado from the skins by using my remote as a figurative spoon to twirl my wrist in the same circular motion. Mashing the guacamole in a slow, stirring motion allowed me to keep the texture a little chunky, similar to that of traditional salsa. My hands felt as though they were suspended in a void as I attempted to touch what wasn’t really there, whereas my neck muscles began to cramp up from holding it so tensely during each movement.

Although my physical hands exist only in my own three-dimensional world, the movements they carried out worked as invisible motor tools in the game. My movements became second nature; I knew exactly when to use the Nunchuk and how to hold the
remote, almost as though my body was no longer my own, but rather the acquired property of the Nintendo Wii console. I used a very specific wrist movement to spread yellow pixelated butter on bread; my remote worked as a knife, the motion sensor end being moved gently back and forth on its side. I grated a tough tomato skin, and then an onion by holding the Wii remote upright and moving it up and down in a deliberate fashion. Layers began to spread outward to form a fan-like fixture and the realistic scraping noise issued from the interface. I crushed garlic cloves with my remote knife motion sensor targeted at the screen; my biceps contracted as I punch down hard, palm-up. I “chopped” a lime and squeezed it into a bowl by pressing the A and B buttons together.

Then it became apparent that, while I had previously thought I had memorized and internalized every motion available, more advanced gestures in the later dishes surfaced that disproved my earlier claims. The variations of movement involved opening a can of diced tomatoes for a marinara sauce in my Italian recipes by rotating my remote on its side in a circular motion, as though I were turning a lever or a crank on a can opener. It was taken even further when I was then prompted to take a pair of scissors and repeatedly click the B button on the back of the remote to trim the tomatoes in the can; the shape my hand took resembled almost exactly how it would when I hold a pair of scissors.

I participated in yet another innovative movement: squeezing the excess moisture out of frozen spinach by simultaneously pressing on the A and B buttons, similarly to when I squeezed a citrus fruit. Were this being performed in reality, my biceps would be fulfilling my daily exercise, but this is a virtual game, and the struggle is limited to the variables that the system can control. Also, when forming the meatballs for a Homestyle Italian cuisine, I would, in reality, use my arm power to squish the meat and incorporate all of the
ingredients using my hands, but in the video game, I used my remote wooden spoon to stir gently so as to avoid creating a basis for “tough meatballs.” I tossed and molded the meatballs by switching between my Nunchuk and my remote, working in a motion as though I were throwing the balls from hand to hand to form ball shapes.

In addition, while Cook or Be Cooked did an adequate job of attempting to simulate real human experience of cooking, there was a definite disconnect between the movements that one performs in actual cooking and the twitches of a thumb and the rolling of an analog stick. A part of the game that is least like real-life cooking and more like a “right time, right place” box-matching game occurred during the assemblage of the grilled cheese sandwiches, the hamburgers, and the lasagna. To assemble the grilled cheese sandwiches, the bread, cheese, bacon, and chives fell from the top of either the right or left sides of the screen into a green illuminated box on each designated side. When an item reached the right side box, the A button on the remote was pressed, and when one reached the left side, the joystick on my Nunchuk was twiddled. This is an instance in which concentration was solely on the timing of the moment, because items oftentimes fell simultaneously right and left. Assembling the burgers was much the same, as condiments, meat patties, buns, lettuce, and tomatoes fell into the little boxes at the bottom of the screen. Simultaneously, the items fell directly onto plates laid out on the diegetic layer of the counter. Finally, all of the completed fundamentals of the lasagna dish were placed side by side as the noodles appeared miraculously in the pan upon each hit of the designated button; a spoon generously ladled on béchamel sauce, marinara, sausage, and cheese in successive intervals so that the layers were thick and full, as shown in Figure 8.
This game eliminates certain obstructions or setbacks that come with the territory of cooking but simulates them in different ways and at different instances. There is a certain lack of frustration, because it is pre-programmed and the system’s operation is designed to predict and measure exactly the time allotment. Not to mention, the food doesn’t really cook through, as it exists solely inside the Nintendo Wii platform. Likewise, the many instances in the game when I was required to crack an egg into a bowl by holding the remote horizontally straight at the screen and gently punching it down was maddening; on continuous tries, I punched down too hard and broke the shells, which in turn, sets off the booing and the awing of a fictitious crowd in the background, rather than the usual cheers. In reality, as I imagined while playing, I have to be careful not to get shell bits in the bowl, which are infuriatingly difficult to fish out. This dilemma is nonexistent in the game, as I simply moved on to the next egg and the debris from my previous debacle vanished.
instantly. I stirred gently before pouring in my milk, all the while attempting to stay under the green line on a on-screen meter to avoid adding too much; I had to tilt my hand back up at just the right moment so as not to spill. A meter line with a green safe zone in the middle and yellow and red segments accompanies this step. This was the method of measuring liquid ingredients instead of the customary tablespoon, teaspoon, and cup of traditional cooking.

4. The Language of Judgment and Guidance

The hosts begin each new challenge by having a dialogue about the ethnicity and diversity of food, reading a letter from a boy complaining about his mom’s pancakes always being “burnt on the outside and runny in the middle” and pleading for help, or offering brief and slightly pointless history lessons about the meals’ origins in the Caribbean. The soft, calming piano music playing as the judges hold a negotiation at the beginning instantly alters to a faster-paced drumming and special effects instrumentation to demonstrate that a meal consisting of many variables is about to kick off. This music is nothing new—it’s been playing all along throughout each meal segment—but it’s interesting to note that the contextual tune has an instant effect of disturbing the peace and affecting a panic mode.

These introductions provided an outline for what was to come. They were reminiscent of a classic Food Network television show, because the main objective was to help home cooks make better food in less steps and guide them towards improved culinary techniques. Another alleged existential value of Food Network is money-saving meals that are still crowd pleasers, exemplified in the game’s stir-fry steamed broccoli and bits of
chicken set on a bed of sticky rice with sesame seeds and soy sauce as garnish—a meal which the hosts say is easy to make at home, rather than pay three times the amount of money for take-out. There is a line of intersection between television and video games’ tendency to enthrall viewers/players in the setting, which traces back to Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) concept of remediation.

I kept one eye peeled to the recipe boxes’ times and texts, as they signified each step of the process and estimated how long each part would take to complete. Simultaneously, the judges spoke to me in narrative and instructive tones. Susie, for example, told me (the player) that the butter must be room temperature so it doesn’t tear the bread, while Mory recited that I shouldn’t “store the tomatoes in the fridge…it makes them grainy and kills the flavor.” These tidbits of advice actually allowed me to visualize in my mind’s eye what “grainy” actually feels like in my mouth and imagine how a fresh, ripe tomato tastes. This wordplay, as Sobchack would say, describes my literal body as “matter that means” and our figural bodies as “meaning that matters” (p. 73) accomplished in and through language.

It seems to be precisely the language itself that presents such a complex unit of etymological analysis, and the spoken words are not the only aspects of this. The signs of time constraints, symbolized heat variables, indicators of recipe completion, technique scores, and commentary all exist on the non-diegetic layer of the video game’s interface. Susie often had a bit of an attitude when she acknowledged my efforts, saying phrases like “Well…that’s interesting!” or “That’s alright, you’ll do better next time” or “Practice really does make perfect!” Is this a form of encouragement or condescension? Not to mention, the subtitles rolling along the bottom demand yet another way to read, interpret, and make sense of the experience. My signifier of completion—a giant orange checkmark—appeared by
my recipe box after every component of the meal was prepared in full.

5. **The Gold Medal Does Not a Reward Make**

The sense of motivation exhibited in this game is exemplified in a research study conducted by Pasch, Berthouze, Dijk, and Nijholt (2008), in which the scholars identified the various playing styles and movement patterns of Nintendo Wii gamers. By conducting in-depth interviews and observations of gamers, the study approached the motivations involved in playing a fabricated Boxing sports game on the console by pinpointing whether players were motivated to achieve an objective or to relax and escape the stress of reality, that is, to associate the game with entertainment. Both of these motivations were found to formulate an apparatus for a game or a simulation, which translates to the level on which the participants rated in terms of boxing realism. This involved detecting punch frequency, amplitude, and overall body movement, while consequently reporting the preliminary displacement of the hips and angle of the elbows. This example is relevant to the phenomenological analysis at hand concerning *Cook or Be Cooked* in that I was very careful to allow my elbows, my wrist movements, my shoulders, and the overall undertaking of my body to be enveloped. Even though the Wiimote only registers how it is moved, I actually moved my whole body in relation to the controller. I did not skimp on being subjected to the patterns and motivations of this game, so in this case, I played to achieve a goal. To execute each step lucidly and rationally so as to embrace my full alertness, the prevalence of kinesthetic mimicry, and the value of complete versus piecemeal movement.

*Cook or Be Cooked* is a precision game, above all else. At the end of each round,
Susie and Mory expressed their utmost satisfaction at the “perfect balance of taste and presentation.” All the elements were hot and cooked to cybernetic perfection. The syrup from pancakes dripped and pooled elegantly as a hardy Sunday Brunch was served to absolutely no one but the picky and tiresome judges. The objective was to set up quick and easy family meals which resonated with Grandma’s kitchen. By recognizing that each meal must be executed efficiently, I mentally calculated each minute to the dot how long each component would take. I was prompted to preheat the oven, season this, flip that with my remote tongs, stir this…all for the aim of achieving a gold medal and hearing the applause in my honor. While it was apparent that I must be meticulous, it is undeniably a disjointed version of cooking and the consequences are minimal to players’ actual state of being. However, motivation for playing is urged on less by an ambition for perfection than by a craving to see and hear the food being cooked, consequently burying our consciousness in illusory smells and flavors.

The beautiful, colorful plates with the dressing of a potato salad oozing every which way, the green garden lettuce peeping out of a burger, and the herbs mingling with the red skins let me “taste” the tangy mustard and caused me to lick my lips in anxiety to sink my teeth and feel that lovely crunch. Alas, it’s an overarching theme of this game to get our adrenaline going and set our senses on a rampage through the inevitable terrain of nothingness. Similarly, the final product of the grilled cheese, along with the dressed tomato salad, caused my tongue to move inadvertently behind my lips. I chewed my lip because I itched to bite into the on-screen image, to taste the distant subtle hint of perfectly browned and crunchy bread, to swallow the spicy chives, feel them roll to the back of my throat. But all I tasted was my own saliva, teasing me with impossible fulfillment, as a
hungry disappointment washed over me once more. All I got out of the experience was the approval of a previously calibrated panel to say whether I earned a gold, silver, or bronze medal.

The magnitude of what had been accomplished in virtual culinary expertise was far from overwhelming; once the Wii console was shut down, our lives continue unabated, our bodies experience ongoing sensations, and our minds fill with more substantial entries. However, it struck me how I had suddenly learned something via a video game, been educated in a fundamentally different way than I had from watching a television program. Simply viewing a cooking show and attempting to mimic the host has its advantages, but feeling my muscles contract and my heart rate increase as I personally tried to maintain my composure within the time constraints lies almost in the degree of hypnotical. Ian Bogost critiques this in his book *Persuasive Games* (2007), in which he not only takes a step back and explores the political and rhetorical realms of power in video games, but also the domain of education, how they are used as training tools to either divorce specific knowledge from context or separate abstract principles from knowledge. *Cook or Be Cooked*, which for all intents and purposes counterfeits educational and professional situations in a chef’s kitchen, is a “serious game” (p. 68), not exclusively concerned with primary amusement, but rather possesses a carefully-thought-out informative perseverance. “Serious games are created under the direct influence and guidance of external institutional goals,” in this case, a nationally-recognized cooking channel whose existing pedagogical goals are translated into video game format in order to uphold its established political, corporate, and social interests.

While *Cook or Be Cooked* may be viewed as a peripheral alternative to the actual
practice of working in a kitchen, there is no denying that it, like its *Just Dance* counterpart involves dissecting the games’ entryways into social and political ways of being and deciphering the intricate technicalities of each of our movements. This chapter has provided a broad and far-reaching indication of the power that somatosensory and olfactory tendencies can hold in advancing through an agonizing, yet oddly satisfying, limbo of computer-generated pleasure. The aesthetic and cultural appeal of the game is not restricted to its realistic portrayals of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but provides a boundless mode of interpretation into what culturally-motivated motion-based video games can *do* to our physical forms and how we identify with the complex tenacity of a simple rectangular white box held deftly in our right hands.
Conclusion & Discussion

It is with some trepidation that I confess and advocate for that which Jesper Juul (2013) described as the art of failure in a game setting: the human experience of game play inevitably displays, to a great degree, the bleak reality of our own deficiencies. But the technologies themselves also demonstrate just how far we have come in what was once believed to be magical and unimaginable vehicles of communication, not just between people, which they undoubtedly are, but also with our very selves. Juul expresses a deep-set loathing of failing at games, but an even greater and bittersweet contempt for failing to fail. We, myself included, are not content with a perfect score or a gold medal because we revel in the palpability that the frustration, panic, and fear deliver to our sensual states. This, he clarifies, is a “paradox of failure” (p. 2), an inexplicable desire to encounter and justify a more profound meaning of each of our five senses, a gap which I have attempted to bridge in this thesis.

What are motion-based video games if not codified extensions of our objective selves transforming into what Vivian Sobchack (2004) calls embodied subjects. My pervasive exploration into the human experiences of movement in Just Dance and Cook or Be Cooked rendered a conscious realization of my body’s spatial place in a strictly non-physical environment. Sobchack concedes that this is:

Relatively novel as materialities of human communication, photographic, cinematic, and electronic media have not only historically symbolized but also historically constituted a radical alteration of the forms of our culture’s previous temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of existential “presence” to the world, to ourselves, and to others. (p. 136)

I was not initially concerned with the concept of failure, foolishness, or
discontent inherent in these games, as I was primarily focused on how they worked, what their historical relationship with attested forms of media was, and how my body and senses responded to the many facets that they presented. However, the longer I was submerged and engrossed by the games’ aesthetic predicaments, the more apparent it became that it was precisely because I felt foolish mimicking an on-screen dancer, with their perfectly chiseled and toned muscles, their joints moving with such beautiful grace and joy, that I felt instantly inclined to do the same and strive for identical standards. I was overwhelmed, and rightly so, because each and every one of the senses were centralized and consolidated in the vast majority of movements I was subjected to. Through an embodied consciousness lay an even more powerful eagerness to see all ten of the songs in *Just Dance* through, regardless of my ludicrous dexterity. In the same way, acquiring a gold medal along with the judge’s praise at the end of every cooking challenge seemed less a catalyst agent than the actual process of getting there. As this became evident, a certain curiosity overcame me about what would happen if I actually neglected the rules and, horror of horrors, allowed a dish to burn or a sauce to possess a less than appetizing consistency to a point of almost poisoning the judges; in fact, while I felt disappointed, there were several instances in which the less-than-thrilled applause or the boos at the end of a challenge for cold food served as an alluring invitation to try again later. My failure was also my success and joy during gameplay in both cases.

In this thesis, I have analyzed the audiovisual aspects, movement and retraining techniques, game objectives, character and object positioning, and etymological features inherent in *Just Dance* and *Cook or Be Cooked*. As I delved
deeper into the phenomenological aspect of playing these games, the assumption I made at the beginning of my introduction about touch forming the base of our hierarchy of senses was quickly affirmed. My fingertips were sensitized and blistered as the Wii remote vibrated, the blood pumped audibly in my ears with the intensity of the volume, and I was distracted by the text subtitles scrolling along the bottom of the screen as the light rays slammed against my retinas. These elements tied together the insights that I have generated from an analysis about my experience and the phenomenological perspectives. Rather than simply describing it, I intentionally steered off-course to elucidate my triumphs and frustrations.

As Ian Bogost (2015), whose way of analyzing video games I have sought to emulate, said, physical realism is the goal that works in tandem with a graphical realism or high resolution technologies that capture and understand movement. He considers body language and human communication through nonverbal actions as transitive or intransitive motions, and ultimately questions whether simulated reality would make for more compelling games. In this regard, images are put together in a sort of alchemy, as they mediate a player’s relationship with the space, action, or theme through their own silence. I was overcome with an out-of-body experience while dancing with the conscious intention to follow the colorful moving glove in *Just Dance*. Similarly, the Wii remote was transformed into various kitchen tools, thereby evoking gestures which were performed in direct action and through which I altered my physical environment. Tilting my head or wiping sweat from my forehead telegraphs important attitudes about impatience, exhaustion, and in short, the senses, during game play.
Although this research endeavor has braved the expansive terrain of two examples of some of the most sensually invigorating motion-based games available on the Nintendo Wii, it in no way details the even greater cosmopolitan of possibilities of the gaming industry’s humanoid repertoire. Simulations “signal a disruption between the realism of commercial simulation and the abstraction of games” (Bogost 2015, p. 112). A flight simulator or a game involved with aviation, for example, is more of a ludic method of advancing a profession or career choice than a mere game, although it may be packaged as such. The same could be said about furthering the work of a farmer, a car mechanic, an architect, a surgeon…even a chef. I recall a cinematic heart surgery game which my older sister used to play on the Wii console, called Trauma Center: New Blood (Atlus 2008) which alluded to editing and jump cuts, images put together that muddled the continuity of the game sequence. It read like a bad spinoff of the 90’s television drama ER, but it had a central cinematic aesthetic that is not uncommon in video games. I have not been particularly partial to these forms of games, but it was the simulated surgery part that struck my interest. Just as Cook or Be Cooked does, it toed the line between a simulation and a game, lacking a mastery of the physical world. Bogost reflects on this phenomenon through his claims that “you are the pretend god of a manipulable world,” (p. 117) and without you, the game is halted, insignificant and disoriented. We have a bias towards visual culture such that our awareness of the sonic, auditory domains is compromised and neglected. It would be prudent to meditate and reset a dynamic energy of our vision through further prospects of research. There is a somewhat unexplored design space between simulators and
motion-based video games, and while I have dipped a limb or two into this territory, there is much more to investigate about the power of movement and control.

The study of motion-based video games and their phenomenological undertones provide a thriving and forever-advancing realm of possibilities. The games discussed in this thesis are limited to two-handed gameplay, where no extensions or peripheral tools of motion sensory are involved. However, if one ventures into an electronics store, they are sure to find several expansion packs and accessories that supposedly enhance the role of the motion sensors. For instance, the Mario Kart Wii and the Racing Wheel is made of a virgin silicon material that allows you to insert the Wii remote directly into the hand-held steering wheel. This peripheral tool is marketed as a technique to enhance precision control, adjust steering sensitivity, and an instrument that transforms the Wii remote into a natural-feeling steering wheel for Mario Kart veterans. However, what’s interesting is that Mario Kart can still be played regardless of whether or not you purchase this extension, by simply holding the Wii remote horizontally in both hands, signaling a driver-like scenario in the living room. The same goes for other similar accessories on the market, such as a balance board that accommodates the Wii Fit Plus, a Zapper Gun for animal hunting games, the Wii Bowling Ball, the CTA Digital Wii Grand Slam Sports Pack-which comes with a tennis racket, a golf club, a cricket bat, and a speed racer wheel-and a myriad of others that suggest further opportunities for phenomenological inquiry. Video games at home can be experienced and operated in ways unprecedented by past imaginations. Fantasies are invented and constructed, while reality is no longer what it once was, and this is something well worth exploring on a more exhaustive level.

Furthermore, throughout this thesis, I have utilized Alexander Galloway’s
(2006) definition of video games as algorithmic cultural objects, and this is a key concept in critically analyzing them. But is there, perhaps, a more fundamental and ideological rendition that mediated realities can take when we, for instance, address first person shooter games? I have avoided speaking about *Cook or Be Cooked* as a first person shot game, although it does bear numerous resemblances, especially the weapons of combat, i.e. our wooden spoons, whisks, and spatulas. There exists a certain naiveté surrounding this form of gamic action, which would require a much more comprehensive discussion, far beyond the scope of this research. Galloway said that FPS creates a “subjective perspective quite common and used to achieve an intuitive sense of motion and action in game play” (p. 40), but then went on to rectify that statement by demonstrating how tightly bound cinema and video gaming techniques are. An “eye” versus an “I,” if you will, to borrow his phrase. First person shooter games are seen from the character’s vantage point, who are rendered marginal, both materially and aesthetically. We watch and are being watched, see, and yet identify and learn through an action as image ideology.

I conclude by reiterating that technology is progress, where the senses lend themselves to a human-machine interaction and account for the spatial presence and specificity of these games in our movements and what we see. Considering the aesthetics and graphics of *Just Dance* and *Cook or Be Cooked*, humans’ range of power is expanding, even in intangible domains, which truly is a paradigm of spatiality and hegemony within and outside a mere human experience, but more broadly, a distinct human-computer interface technologically distributed to achieve motion tracking and representation (Carbonara, Popova & Shafer 2011). The point
of intersection between our real and virtual selves is a breeding ground for touch, sight, and sound, which ultimately disconnects us from prosperous capitalistic rewards of gold medals or the condescending tones of textual judgments. Just as we deliver a corporeal embodiment for on-screen characters, so too do they submit to a form of self-destruction, as we press the glowing button that leads to an apocalypse of unsuccessful virtual experiments.
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List of Video Games:


