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Social Exclusion, Power, and Video Game Play

New Research in Digital Media and Technology

Edited by David G. Embrick, J. Talmadge Wright, and Andras Lukacs

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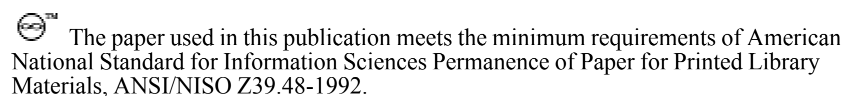
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Chapter Seven

Gendered Pleasures

The Wii, Embodiment and Technological Desire

Adrienne Massanari

Women have played videogames since their entry into our homes in the late 1970s and early 1980s, yet the majority of games and game consoles have been designed for young male audiences. Part of this is certainly due to the lack of women working within the gaming industry and the belief that females did not constitute a large enough market to warrant attention from large video game developers and publishers. However, the popularity of games such as *Myst* and *Tomb Raider* in the 1990s[1] and the rise of the casual game movement (as described by Jesper Juul and others)[2] in the late 2000s, attracted new players and demonstrated that men and young boys were not the only ones interested in video games—even if they were still considered the primary demographic for many game companies.

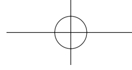
In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Nintendo's Wii console has been designed and marketed specifically for "non-gamers" or those interested in casual gameplay: that is, women and older adults. I explain the ways in which the Wii has been marketed and discursively positioned to configure the domestic sphere in particular ways. In addition, I examine the ways in which Nintendo's unique motion controller (the Wii remote) encourages players to use the Wii remote as prosthetic device that engages the body in play in new ways. I also explore Nintendo's fitness game, *Wii Fit*, and describe how both the game's marketing and the playing experience it offers, discursively reinscribes certain stereotypical gender politics and "disciplines" our bodies in new ways. I argue that *Wii Fit* proscribes a particular view of pleasure, one that focuses on a potentially problematic perspective of

what it means to be "fit." To start this exploration, I trace the ways in which scholars and popular culture have considered the body (particularly female bodies) as it relates to technology and games.

TECHNOLOGICAL DISCOURSES OF EMBODIMENT

Feminist scholars have long placed the body at the center of their inquiry, because "there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences."[3] Scholars in other fields have also wrestled with the "body problem." For example, those working within cyberculture and new media studies have struggled to define and describe what happens to the body when we go online. Early visions often lapsed into utopian fantasies wherein the physical body would be left behind for the seemingly pure world of cyberspace, where—like the famous MCI "Anthem" commercial suggests—we would communicate "mind to mind," free from "infirmity" and whatever had previously divided us.[4] Such was the fantasy expressed in both William Gibson's Neuromancer,[5] in which the term "cyberspace" was coined, and Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash,[6] which extolled the social freedom afforded by the "metaverse." Early academic discourse regarding these technologies also reinscribed the belief that the body, if not left behind entirely, could be expressed in a multitude of ways; and that we could transcend the gender, racial/ethnic, and social divides that had separated us in the past.[7] For example, Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg—a human-machine hybrid—emphasized the libratory potential of technology to dissolve or challenge gender binaries.[8] At the same time, the appearance of cyborgs in popular culture suggested another discourse in which the body (usually male) was an object of physical strength and emotional fortitude. Science-fiction films from the 1980s such as the *Terminator* series,[9] *Robocop*,[10] and *Total Recall*[11] directed the viewers' gaze towards the hypermasculinity of these half-men/half-machines. Cyborgs in these films were to be feared and respected.

Later, stories of technologically augmented bodies became more nuanced. In films like *The Matrix*[12] and *eXistenZ,*[13] the body/"real world" becomes a yoke to shrug off in favor of the virtual. In addition, the act of entering the virtual space is framed as both uncomfortable and yet pleasurable. In eXistenZ, for example, Ted Pikul (played by Jude Law) mentions his concern about having a "bio-port" placed in his lower back—that he is unsure about allowing himself to be penetrated by the organic, umbilical-like cord needed to play the game. In *The Matrix*, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) must connect to the virtual world through a port in the back of his neck. His first experience with "jacking in" elicits a sigh of surprise (and presumably pleas-



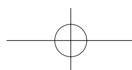
ure) as he experiences freedom from his corporeal body. The films cannot help but imply a kind of erotic pleasure in leaving physical realm for the virtual. As Claudia Springer notes in her interrogation of discourses about the cyborg, "computer technologies . . . occupy a contradictory discursive position where they represent both escape from the physical body and fulfillment of erotic desire."[14]

Around this time, new media scholars suggested the relationship between the "real world" and the virtual was far more nuanced than these early utopian discourses suggest. Race, gender, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability did not simply disappear when interacting online; rather, these realities of our everyday world shaped (and were shaped by) our entry into cyberspace.[15] Indeed, the very interface through which we engaged virtual/computerized environments often made us subjects to a complex network of power relations.[16] In cyberspace, identities could be more fluid than in non-virtual spaces; however, the social-cultural structures that shaped our experiences in the everyday world did not cease to shape them online. Instead, our interactions were shaped by the choices designers and producers make when creating a technological artifact—and these choices were further influenced by professional design practices, organizational politics, and economics.[17]

Video games and synthetic worlds[18] further complicate this complex relationship. By introducing another factor—the avatar, or, "an interactive, social representation of a user"[19] —questions of identity and representation are raised. As Adriano D'Aloia argues, the avatar "is an extension of the player's own body, and entertains a prosthetic relationship with it; it incorporates the player and disciplines his/her body. It is the embodied manifestation of the player's engagement with the game-world; it is, at the same time, a reflection of ourselves and an envoy of ours in the parallel world."[20] Through the avatar, we experience these spaces through a representation of our selves—one often not of our own choosing. T. L. Taylor suggests that avatars are important sites, "through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves."[21] These often graphical representations force us to consider complex questions regarding what it means to be present and autonomous in the game space.

WOMEN, TECHNOLOGY, AND GAMING

Gender is a complex social and cultural construct and fully interrogating the interplay between gender and technology completely is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth briefly exploring what theoretical grounds guide my work in this area. My thoughts about the relationship between gender and technology are shaped by Teresa de Lauretis' argument that, "the



sex-gender system . . . is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society. . . . The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation."[22] Judith Butler suggests a complex interplay between the body and biological sex, such that,

> "Sex" is an idealized construct which is forcibly materialized through time. . . . Once "sex" itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of the regulatory norm. "Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural ineligibility.[23]

As with gender, technology is a socially constructed object that both shapes and fits into existing social practices. Early scholarship grounded in this perspective—the social-construction of technology, or SCOT[24] approach—explored the relationship between women and technology often focused on the role of domestic technologies in women's lives, and how it reinforced clear delineations between the "domestic" (feminine) and the "public" (masculine) spheres. Later investigations of gender and technology using this theoretical framework interrogated specific technologies and the social practices surrounding them.[25]

As with many other new technologies, early popular discourse about video games suggested that games and gameplay were a masculine pastime, one of little interest to women or girls.[26] In the mid-to-late 1990s, the "girl games" movement questioned this assumption, and argued that it was imperative to encourage gameplay among girls as such formative experiences could pique their interest in technology, science, and math generally, and ensure they would gain important technological literacy skills.[27] As Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell note in a follow-up volume to their influential *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, there were several competing goals that drove the girl games movement: economic (as young male players were already well-served by current crop of games and consoles); political (as females were lagging behind males in science and technology fields, which was attributed to the fact that fewer young girls engaged with computers the way that their male counterparts did); technological (as multimedia CD-ROM drives became standard on PCs, which meant that families did not need to purchase a separate console for their children to play games); entrepreneurial (as more women were starting female-focused gaming companies); and aesthetic (as their was an increasing desire for richer stories and different interfaces that might appeal to a broader spectrum of gamers.[28] Proponents of the movement, such as Purple Moon's founder Brenda Laurel, suggested that girls were interested in different types of stories and challenges than boys

were.[29] In particular, designers were encouraged to incorporate more social and less violent activities in their games.[30] While the suggestion that girls and boys differed in their approach to gameplay may have been accurate, suggesting that "pink games" should be designed around girl-centric content (like shopping, socializing, and domesticity), perpetuated an unfortunate binary where girls who preferred *Halo* to *Barbie Fashion Designer* were perceived as exceptional cases or outside the norm.[31]

While females' interest in games is finally being publically acknowledged within the mainstream press, the discourse around gaming still relies on outmoded binaries to describe the pleasures that men and women take when playing video games. For the most part, the media and popular culture still employ the term "gamer" (or "hardcore gamer") to refer to the core demographic for which many games are designed: young males (under 30), who have a substantial amount of time to master a game's content, money to spend on game consoles and new games, and are (presumably) interested in militaristic, competitive games in which females are either passive objects of sexual desire or absent from the game's narrative altogether.[32] This is despite evidence to the contrary that suggests the average "gamer" is as likely to be female as male, and that numerous players are over the age of 30.[33]

In their research into the ways in which games might be designed to better facilitate girls' wants/desires, Cornelia Brunner, Dorothy Bennett, and Margaret Honey suggest that men and women differ in their technological fantasies.[34] They argue that women view technologies as something to fit into their already-existing surroundings and relationships, in opposition to men who typically view technology as a tool for efficiency and power.[35] While the reductionist nature of these desires may be problematic (as noted by T. L. Taylor),[36] the notion of "technological desire" is a fruitful way to examine the relationship between women and gameplay.

One of the criticisms leveled at much of the early research into female gameplaying is that it conflated the needs and desires of girls with those of women. As Pam Royse and her coauthors note, rarely do studies problematize this approach.[37] More recent research has focused on adult female players, and suggested that much of the notion that women are most interested in aspects of "identity play" while gaming reifies and reinforces the idea that women are somehow viewed as "intruders" into presumably male-dominated gaming cultures.[38] As Elisabeth Hayes suggests, while gender should not be ignored when thinking about games and the practices of game players, simply categorizing games based on their likelihood to appeal to males or females is problematic. "Female" gaming practices are highly individual, and are influenced by prior experiences with games, individual identity and self-formation (especially when it comes to more "gendered" gaming experiences or genres like fighting or first-person shooters), and evolve as players become more practiced.[39]

Unfortunately, game designers often rely on out-dated or over-simplified dichotomies when thinking about women's play and pleasure when gaming. For example, Jesse Schell's *The Art of Game Design*[40] wisely suggests thinking about the audience who will be playing the game while designing it. This potentially represents some progress within the gaming industry, which, like other fields populated by technically adept individuals (such as computer programming), tends to look inward as a guide for what others might like to play. Unfortunately, Schell offers only broad stereotypes when describing what women find attractive in games. He suggests they prefer "experiences that explore the richness of human emotion," "entertainment that connects meaningfully to the real world," "nurturing," "dialog and verbal puzzles," and "learning by example."[41] Further, he suggests that men, "enjoy mastering things," "competing against others," "destroying things," "spatial puzzles," and "trial and error."[42] Such simplified taxonomies of difference may serve to further disenfranchise both women and men from many mainstream video games, especially if these are the only exposure the would-be game designer has to the complexities of player desire. In addition, if game developers continue to simply reproduce the kinds of games they themselves would like to play, and the industry continues to be dominated by mostly white males in their late 20s and early 30s, most games will continue to reinscribe male, heteronormative, white, and middle class ideologies.[43]

YOU AND MII = WII

Nintendo released the Wii console in 2006 as a follow-up to the relatively disappointing sales of their GameCube. By March 2009, Nintendo had sold almost 26 million Wiis worldwide.[44] One of the differences between the Wii and other next-generation consoles is that the Wii lacks many of the high-end graphics capability of the Xbox 360 or PS3. While the same game might be released on each console, video game enthusiasts inevitably decry the Wii's graphics as a "watered down port of the original."[45] In its original review of the console, gaming blog "Ars Technica" argued that the "graphical prowess" of the Xbox 360 and the PS3 were their primary draws, suggesting that the Wii's main attraction was its "innovative control scheme."[46] Thus, the Wii was (and is) positioned as the "family console"—one that, like Nintendo's earlier handheld (DS), might draw new players who do not view themselves as "gamers."

The most unique aspect of the Wii is its use of a wireless motion-sensing game controller. The Wii remote (or "Wiimote") uses a mimetic interface, where avatar movements correspond to the movements that the player makes using the device. It encourages intuitive physical action in lieu of complex

button sequences to move the player's character. For example, to bowl in WiiSports[47] a player holds the Wiimote as if she is holding a bowling ball and releases the button on the back of the controller as she swings her arm forward. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues, physical movement (like that enabled by the Wiimote) often encourages individuals to lose their sense of self-consciousness and enter what he terms a "flow state," heightening their pleasure and enjoyment.[48] Additionally, mimetic interfaces like these encourage interactions in the player space—that is, we focus on the interplay between the physical gaming environment and the screen.[49] The Wiimote takes on various roles depending on the game, becoming a tennis racket in WiiSports, a guitar in Guitar Hero, or a steering wheel in MarioKart Wii. While marketing campaigns for the Wii show players standing up, swinging their arms like they are serving a real ball on a tennis court, players quickly figure out that flicking one's wrist in the same downwards motion, while sitting on the couch, can have the same effect.[50] Therefore, the Wii offers an imperfect simulation of what it means to play tennis (or play guitar or race cars). Jesper Juul argues that it is precisely this imprecision that allows novice players to feel competent and engaged, and encourages participation from individuals who are unlikely to have owned or played other next-generation consoles. At the same time, the imperfect simulation provided by the Wiimote may frustrate expert tennis (or guitar) players, as it does not allow for the kind of fine-grained control to which they are accustomed.[51] However, the Wiimote's easy-to-use interface encourages most individuals to feel competent while playing—and likely attracts players who may feel overwhelmed by the numerous button combinations required to play most Xbox 360 and Playstation 2 and 3 games.

This duality—the Wiimote's ability to allow novices and non-traditional game players feel competent when they play, and the "imperfect" simulation it offers—may also explain the conflicted relationship "hardcore" gamers have with the Wii. Initial press coverage of the Wii by the gaming press was positive.[52] However, there were a number of individuals who felt the Wii was not worthy of the "next-generation" title. For example, Chris Hecker, a developer working at *Maxis*, ranted at the 2007 Game Developers' Conference, arguing that "the Wii is nothing more than two GameCubes stuck together with duct tape."[53] Gaming magazine *Edge* noticed that game review scores for those released for the Wii console tend to be lower than the Xbox360 or PS3, suggesting that it might have something to do with the lower quality graphics and hardware which might lower the barrier to entry and encourage many more sub-par games to be released for the console. At the same time, they also noted that the innovative interface the console allows might be more difficult for game designers to work with. As the

author notes, the Wii is "innovative but low-tech; it's accessible for gamers, but difficult to nail from a game design perspective; it has a large install base, but one that has proven tough for third-parties to crack."[54]

Besides the innovative Wiimote controller, other aspects of the Wii were designed to appeal to a larger audience. Before playing any games on the Wii, players are encouraged to create an avatar, called a "Mii," to represent themselves in various games.[55] Miis are broad, non-realistic caricatures. Mii heads are big, with eyes that borrow heavily from the Japanese anime traditions, whereas their bodies are small and relatively shapeless. Instead of hands, Miis have round knobs, and their clothing is limited to a simple shirt and pants—the only exception is that in some games, special outfits can be unlocked.[56] Miis can be male or female (gender is specified on the first screen of the Mii creation process), but this does not preclude the player from creating a relatively androgynous-looking Mii, as hairstyles, facial shapes, and other attributes are not limited based on the gender choice. Optionally, Miis can travel across connected Wii consoles, which means that individual players can access and play games using Miis created by their friends or family. In addition, Mii characters are often present in many different Wii games. For example, in Wii Sports, Miis appear as spectators, cheering on the player's Mii. In Wii Fit, Miis serve as backdrop characters—alternatively tossing hula-hoops to the player, jogging beside them, or kicking soccer balls for the player to hit. In this way, the Wii encourages some sense of belonging to a social, collective sphere even if the player is physically alone.

THE WII AND DOMESTIC PLEASURES

The Wii's small and light design is a radical departure from the dark and hulking forms of the Xbox and Playstation. In an interview on Nintendo's corporate site, designer Kenichiro Ashida suggests that the Wii was envisioned as being able to seamlessly integrate into any household's living room. He notes,

> We came up with "A Design for Everyone," a concept created in order to allow as many people to use Wii as possible. Making Wii into a device that everyone likes is more important to us than a having fiercely individualistic design. Indeed, we wanted to make Wii into something that would be treated more like a piece of interior design, rather than a toy or a piece of AV equipment.[57]

In their attempt to create a console that is for "everyone," Nintendo's team implicitly references a familiar criticism leveled at the gaming industry—that consoles (and games) are most often created and marketed to young males

who enjoy photorealistic graphics and exciting (read: violent) gameplay. In some ways, the use of the term "everyone" is really coded way to suggest that the Wii will fix the industry's supposed inability to attract female and older gamers.[58] Additionally, the notion that the console is an addition to a living room's interior design plays on stereotypical notions of femininity and female control of the domestic sphere. However, such a statement suggests somehow that women are not already playing games—a point that has been debunked by a number of different scholars.[59] Bonnie Ruberg, writing for the popular gaming blog "Joystiq," argues that while Nintendo's interest in women is admirable, their marketing campaigns often go too far:

> On the one hand, it's refreshing to see a major player like Nintendo thinking about women—not just in terms of one game, but a whole console, and with it a slew of "non-girly" titles. It's also encouraging to see female players linked with innovation, something the video game industry as a whole needs desperately. Women have finally made it onto the larger marketing map. . . . At the same time, some female gamers are understandable bothered by claims [that the Wii is attracting new players—females and older adults] like the ones [President of Nintendo America Reggie Fils-Aimé] made. . . . First off, women players already do exist; we're right here. It's just that, until we bring in the big bucks, we don't seem to matter. Second, women are people, full grown adults who can make decisions for themselves about what they like or dislike—video games included. Telling them what they'll play, so the argument goes, is insulting to their ability to make choices.[60]

Ruberg continues by noting how Nintendo's advertising campaign, while showing many women playing the console, are surrounded by other people—family members, partners, children, etc. Thus, it configures what constitutes "appropriate" female gameplay as a social activity.

The Wii penetrates the domestic sphere in unique ways. Unlike the Xbox 360 or Playstation 2 or 3 which might be relegated to the teen boy's bedroom, the Wii is imagined as a part of the family room space. As Bernadette Flynn argues, game consoles have been "domesticated"—entering into the living room space in the ways that older technologies, such as the radio and television have in eras past.[61] Still, she notes that there is an inherent contradiction between the ways in which Sony and Microsoft discuss their consoles' centrality in the living room and the ways in which these consoles are advertised. She writes,

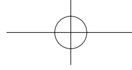
> There is little attempt by video console manufacturers and distributors to present the video-game console as a domesticated object. Instead, commercial advertisements emphasize the game console as a futuristic dream machine in opposition to the place of its location—suburbia and, specifically, the living room. . . . Advertisements for video games draw on these modernist notions of the home where the monotony of media consumption is transformed into the

> fantasy of an electronic portal to a virtual exterior. The digital hearth with its flow of data transforming play into work and work into play evokes images of a fun palace away from the mess and routine of digital life in the home.[62]

Other scholars note that the sociable play encouraged by consoles, and the Wii particular, encourages its positioning within the home's shared living spaces.[63] It is also important to note, that part of what encourages the console's position in the home has much to do with the audio-visual equipment that these devices require to play, which are often located in the living room or other shared spaces.[64]

As the game console enters the domestic sphere and becomes a primary part of many central living spaces, a corresponding set of social practices arises. These practices often suggest a conflicted relationship between pleasure, play, and sociability. In a study in which she examines how men and women "rationalize" gaming to themselves and others, Helen Thornham argues that there is a certain stigma of taking pleasure in the game for the game's sake.[65] Instead, games are "placed into defining parameters of the social (only in a social situation can you enjoy and take pleasure from gaming), where the pleasure of gaming is less about the games themselves and more to do with the presence of friends in a social environment."[66] Further, she argues that social gaming was often equated with "normal" gaming, whereas solo gaming was perceived as a "geeky" pursuit.[67] It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Thornham discovered that women are far more likely to engage in socializing behaviors during gameplay.[68] For example, she observed that female game players may actually downplay their expertise when playing games with males, which may have more to do with their socialization as females than their actual experience playing games. Recent observational research with Wii players suggests that at least some women often only play console games with others. Gaming, in their minds, was a purely a social activity to be enjoyed when others were physically present.[69] Other studies have found that women very rarely play games with same-sex friends; rather, they are far more likely to play with opposite-sex friends or partners.[70] This suggests that females have a complex and often contradictory relationship with the pleasures of gameplay, especially as it is inseparable from the network of social relationships and gender politics that define and are often reinforced through the domestic space of the living room.

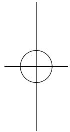
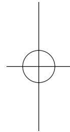
Such findings are supported by many decades of work within cultural studies of the media, which attempt to understand and link texts and audiences and how they are both influenced by economic power and ideology. While the concept of "pleasure" has been invoked in many of these studies, scholars suggest that it remains under-theorized.[71] Certainly, part of the pleasure of engaging with the media is our ability to make meaning, as John Fiske has argued.[72] But just how this kind of "meaning making" shapes and



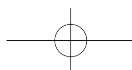
is shaped by the social world is far more difficult to unpack. Especially complex is the notion of "women's pleasures" and their relationship to media texts, as Barbara O'Connor and Elisabeth Klaus argue. They note two overarching trends within most media/cultural studies scholarship of women's media pleasures: such pleasures are positioned as overwhelmingly positive and potentially resistive (especially given the frequency by which media directed towards women are derided in popular culture), and most often, studies of these pleasures do not fully unpack the relationship between pleasure, politics, and ideology.[73] Contemporary studies of digital media suggest our pleasure using these new forms is highly individual, but that they involve some enjoyment of the key elements of new media: interactivity, intertexuality, and control.[74]

CASE STUDY: WII FIT AND WII FIT PLUS

In 2008, Nintendo released Wii Fit, an exercise game bundled with a "balance board" that used the Wii's motion-sensing technology to determine the player's position.[75] The white balance board is about 20 inches long, 12 inches wide, and around 2 inches thick and wireless connects via Bluetooth to the Wii. The balance board can calculate the mass of a person standing on it and uses four sensors to determine to what direction that person is leaning.[76] Much like the Wii itself, the balance board was conceived as a platform that would be useable with many different games. As of this writing, a number of games have been developed specifically for the balance board (such as *EA Sports Active* and *Jillian Michaels' Fitness Ultimatum*), or can be played using the balance-board instead of the Wiimote (*Mario* and *Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games*, *We Ski*, and *Punch-Out*, among others).[77] The bundled game, *Wii Fit*, includes yoga poses, strength and aerobic exercises, and balance games. Supervising your progress throughout the game is a male or female personal trainer (your choice), whose encouragements ("Great job!") and admonitions ("You're wobbling . . . ") change based on your performance as the screen displays an image of them completing the exercise/pose with you. Although the game starts with only a few poses and exercises available, time spent playing eventually unlocks additional strength workouts, balance games, and aerobic activities.

Wii Fit Plus was introduced in 2009. Like *Wii Fit*, the game is bundled with a balance board, or can be purchased alone for those who already own the original software. *Wii Fit Plus* updates the original *Wii Fit* game, including new multiplayer games, fitness tracking for pets and young children, and a customized workout routine.[78] Before beginning either version (*Wii Fit* or *Wii Fit Plus*), players are asked their age and height, and are encouraged to



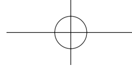
complete a test to evaluate their fitness level. While standing on the balance board, the player is weighed and tested on their balance and posture. *Wii Fit* then calculates the player's body-mass index (BMI) and unveils, with much fanfare, her "Wii Fit Age." In addition, players can set a goal weight loss and a date by which they would like to achieve their goal. This information, along with the player's "Wii Fit Age" is tracked over multiple sessions.

WII FIT AS A CASUAL GAME

Casual games are "video games developed for the mass consumer, even those who would not normally regard themselves as a 'gamer.'"[79] Traditionally, casual games have attracted many players who would not otherwise play games—that is, they are older and more likely female than other kinds of video game players. Casual games are often contrasted with so-called hardcore games, require less time to play and typically a less-intensive learning curve.

Jesper Juul argues that casual games typically share five elements of design: a positive fiction, a highly usable interface requiring little instruction to begin playing, gameplay that allows for or assumes interruptions, game progression that challenges players but does not force them to replay levels, and positive feedback, which he terms "juiciness."[80] Using Juul's taxonomy, it is clear that *Wii Fit* is intended to be viewed as a casual game, but there are elements that suggest it defies easy classification as such. In terms of the game's story or fiction, it takes place in the same cartoonish world of "Wii Sports." Many of the games take place in brightly lit, social environments—for example, the aerobic running game allows players to run their Mii in a park, surrounded by other Miis representing family members and friends. However, the overall purpose of the game, getting fit, may not be viewed as entirely fun or friendly, especially as the "Wii Fit Age" and use of BMI and balance as fitness indicators (mentioned above) may inadvertently disenfranchise certain players. *Wii Fit* is designed for interruptibility. The game's activities are short—ranging from a minute to ten, suggesting that players can easily stop and start gameplay as necessary. However, the game is also predicated upon regular, consistent play. Players receive negative feedback from the game if they do not play for a number of days, or play only for short periods. This is considerably different from other casual games, where the game does not refer to the last gameplay session, other than to preserve high scores over time.

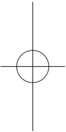
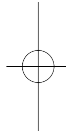
Unlike some other casual games, players have much more control over the individual challenges—as they are able to choose the difficulty and number of repetitions of certain exercises in the game. At the same time, players



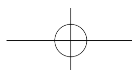
are encouraged to repeat the games and exercises both for intrinsic rewards (for example, to move up in the "high score" list for each game and to unlock new activities), and extrinsic ones, as presumably their fitness levels improve if they consistently complete the exercises. In this way, *Wii Fit* differs from other casual games.

Positive feedback, or "juiciness," abounds in *Wii Fit*. The player's personal trainer offers positive reinforcement during the strength exercises and yoga poses. In the balance and aerobic mini-games, players are ranked at the end of their session and musical fanfare accompanies this announcement. However, unlike many games that demonstrate juiciness, *Wii Fit* is not always positive about the player's performance. For example, performing badly on a particular exercise leaves one's Mii hanging her head in shame.

HOW *WII FIT* DISCIPLINES THE BODY

Both *Wii Fit* and *Wii Fit Plus* fit into the "exergaming" (exercise gaming) genre, most famously represented by Konami's *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR) series. While not designed as health games per se, these kinds of games are seen as a possible solution to the increasing rates of obesity, particularly among young people.[81] Ian Bogost traces the roots of the exergaming genre to the original cabinet video games of the 1980s such as *Ms. Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*, which required standing up to play, Atari 2600's "Foot Craz" controller released in 1987 that had five buttons that players could use in lieu of the joystick/button controller in certain games, and Ninetendo's NES "Power Pad," released in 1988, which could be used with games like *World Class Track Meet* in which players completed track-and-field sporting events.[82] He suggests that most exergaming games use several different rhetorical appeals and tactics to encourage continued play and retain the player's interest the physical activity enabled by these games. Typically, these appeals are made through different play styles: sprinting (through games that require players to physically run in place—mimicking track racing); agility (in which players quickly change between running in place and jumping to mimic hurdle jumping, for example); reflex (activities in which players have to mimic certain movements); training (activities that mimic physical workout training and the player's progress is tracked over time); and impulsion (represented by games such as DDR, where exercise is "emergent" and a secondary goal of play).[83] In addition to these rhetorical appeals, researchers have argued that design choices also make a difference as to the effectiveness of these kinds of physical fitness technologies. These include: ensuring that individuals receive credit for the activities they do, as



well as giving them a clear sense of how they are performing; encouraging social influence through pressure and support; and enabling customization or consideration for each individual's particular lifestyle.[84]

Especially during its initial release, many health professionals praised *Wii Fit* for its potential benefits, and that its fun approach might appeal to individuals who would be reluctant to exercise on their own.[85] However, there are several potential issues with the ways the game assesses fitness. First, the "Wii Fit Age" is based predominately on the results of the initial balance test (according to the instruction manual packaged with the game). Since part of the balance test requires being familiar with the balance board's unique control scheme, it is likely that first-time players will find themselves being marked as older than they actually are, which can be frustrating and a bit shocking (as the author can attest). Interestingly, balance is not included in either the fitness tests offered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports[86] or the U.S. Army.[87] Both these tests focus instead on an individual's performance of a number of aerobic activities such as push-ups and running. Second, the game requires you to weigh in to receive a "stamp" (as a mark of completing your fitness activities for that day) regularly. Studies with young women have shown that daily weigh-ins can actually encourage obsessive behavior, and may lead to unhealthy weight-management practices (like taking laxatives or skipping meals).[88]

Another potential issue with *Wii Fit* is its use of the BMI to assess the player's body fat. This scale measures the ratio of a person's weight to their height and the resultant number indicates whether the individual is considered underweight, normal weight, overweight or obese.[89] [9] However, the BMI has been criticized for incorrectly categorizing individuals who are more athletic into the overweight category, as muscle weighs more than fat.[90] In addition, individuals with BMIs that suggest they are overweight may actually be at a lower risk for heart disease than those who fall into the "normal" category.[91] Some feminists have also suggested that the BMI is an inaccurate measurement of health and perpetuates a negative body image[92] —one blogger has gone so far as to solicit pictures from women with their height, weight, and BMI, which she then posted to Flickr to challenge how the BMI categorizes real women's bodies.[93] *Wii Fit's* use of BMI as the primary way to assess fitness, therefore, is problematic.

Despite positive initial reactions from those who thought *Wii Fit* might encourage sedentary individuals to become more active, more comprehensive testing of the game suggested that it burns fewer calories than the *Wii Sports* game that comes bundled with consoles sold in the U.S.[94] The American Council on Exercise (ACE) suggests that *Wii Fit* yields "underwhelming" caloric expenditure and involves less intense exercise than ex-

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pected—even if players are engaging in the most aerobically challenging activities the game offered (the running, stepping, and hula-hooping activities).[95]

Michel Foucault's work on how power is enacted through discourse is particularly salient when examining how the body is experienced/configured when playing *Wii Fit*. Foucault argues that scientific power (enacted through technologies) creates "docile bodies" which are far easier for social institutions and individuals holding power to control.[96] Certain choices made by the designers of *Wii Fit* necessarily discipline the body in particular ways. Consider, for example, the *Wii Fit* fitness test players are encouraged to participate in before starting to work out. One of the more stunning ways that the game "disciplines" players' bodies occurs when they receive their BMI score. If the player's BMI falls into the upper-level categories (overweight or obese), their Mii is distorted and morphed as the game tells the player that they need to lose a certain number of pounds before their Mii will return to its original shape. Thus, the player's self-representation/avatar is no longer under her own control. While these changes do not persist across games on the Wii console, the experience of having one's Mii "fattened up" without permission is disconcerting.

Other choices made by the game designers discipline the body through surveillance. For example, if multiple people have registered their Miis with the game, and one logs in more regularly than the other, the game says, "You know, it's been a long time since I've seen [name]." If one has not completed any activities for a while, the game greets you with this fact, noting, "Nice to see you again! It's been [x] days since I saw you last!" While such reminders might help one stay motivated, it feels an awful lot like one big passive-aggressive guilt trip.

In addition, the game creates a sort of enforced sociability. Even when playing "alone" other Miis join in, tossing hula-hoops or soccer balls, or doing laps besides you while you run. They turn their heads when they pass you, and cheer and wave when you run by. At no time is a player "alone"—even when performing the yoga poses and completing the strength exercises, one's personal trainer appears on the screen to encourage or chastise.

If a player does not perform activities correctly, *Wii Fit* is quick to punish, and it does so most publically. Run too slow and you are encouraged to speed up. Run too fast, and your Mii humiliatingly trips and falls. Failing at a balance game causes your Mii to hang her head in shame. The top ten scores for all activities are shown at the end of each game and a triumphant fanfare or a much less enthusiastic few notes accompany this feedback. Again, these choices may motivate some individuals to exercise, but they also clearly discipline the player's body in particular ways.

ENVISIONING FEMININITY THROUGH ADVERTISING FOR THE *WII FIT PLUS*

Advertising often plays a key role in both educating the public about how to use new technologies and discursively constructing appropriate use of these technologies.[97] In contemporary media environment, however, advertising is less about selling a product and more about selling a lifestyle, and so, "ads do not focus on the argumentation and evidence of why the product is good but rather on creating situations in which a consumer is satisfied and happy when using the product."[98] As Althusser argues, advertising, like other ideological state apparatuses, interpellates viewers as subjects.[99] While audiences are not passive and resistive readings of media messages are possible,[100] advertising often highlights intended uses and audiences.[101] And, since advertising is often the first time audiences become aware of a product, it will likely influence on some level what they think the product is about and for whom it is intended.

Researchers have noted the gendered nature of most video gaming advertising, as it tends to focus on male fantasies of in-game violence and often stereotypical representations of women and men.[102] In contrast, Wii advertisements typically feature people, rather than focusing on the gameplay itself. As one scholar notes, "With the Wii, selling the console and its games, indeed selling gaming, has shifted from the promise of virtual world experiences on the screen to the promise of the experience of players in the living room. The object of consumption is no longer just the spectacle of the game on a screen but rather players' corporeal engagement and kinaesthetic involvement in that spectacle."[103] Therefore, examining marketing material for the *Wii Fit* and exploring the ways in which it represents pleasure and play is vital.

Two recent advertisements created by Goodby, Silverstein & Partners premiered in the US as part of Nintendo's 2009 holiday ad campaign promoting *Wii Fit Plus.*[104] Both commercials feature a side scrolling, single take of a "day in the life" of a white, presumably middle-class (but actually quite affluent) mother. The first, "Working Mom," starts with an alarm ringing, a woman getting out of bed as her husband rolls over. We then see her pick out an outfit from her closet, throw something in the hamper in her bathroom as she brushes her teeth, and move to the kitchen (dressed now in workout clothes), where she catches some toast that pops up, and tosses it to her daughter while saying, "Hey, sweetie!" She then blows a goodbye kiss to her husband (dressed in business attire) and moves to the living room, where the commercial slows down (and birds chirp happily in the background) as she performs a yoga pose in front of her television using *Wii Fit Plus*. We then hear an elevator ding as the commercial speeds up again, and now our work-

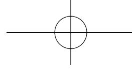
ing mother enters a chaotic office scene dressed in business wear, answering the phone with a stern, "Approved," and clicking the next slide of a presentation in front of a group of colleagues. The scene then changes briefly to a grocery store, where the working mom says a cheery, "Thank you" to the checkout person and grabs a bag of groceries, finally places them down on a chair in her living room, and sits down next to her husband as her young daughter plays *Wii Fit Plus*. The female announcer says, "Custom workouts and fun new games. Fit some fit in, with Wii Fit Plus" as the words, "Wii Fit Plus" overlay this bucolic scene. The commercial ends with a plug for the Wii console's new price of $199.[105]

The second commercial, "New Mom," is much like the first, featuring the same jaunty music and rapid pacing. Instead of an alarm, however, a baby's cries open this commercial, as our new mom jumps out of bed, crosses to the baby's room, turns on the light, and picks her up with a kiss. We then hear a telephone ring and she enters the light-filled kitchen to answer it, still holding her child in her arms. As she crosses the room, we see a plumber working on her sink, and she hands the baby over to her husband, who kisses her, while the woman leaves the scene with a "Bye" and a wave. She then appears clad in workout gear in her living room, as the commercial slows down, boxing to *Wii Fit Plus*. Then, a series of playing children enter the frame, and we see her (in casual clothing) greeting her husband with a kiss and taking a stroller from his hands, which she then pushes into a dry cleaner and receives a shirt with a "Thanks." The scene then changes—the stroller has now become a vacuum cleaner, and we see our new mom finally collapsing on the couch as her husband plays *Wii Fit Plus*. Again, the commercial ends with the same tagline, "fit some fit in," and a brief promotion of the Wii console's new low price.[106]

These commercials suggest a number of things. They both leverage a highly stereotypical view of the modern woman. First and foremost, she is a mother—one who is overworked (either balancing family/home and work or serving as primary caretaker of a new child). We see her performing a majority of the domestic chores—be they grocery shopping, cleaning, or childrearing. In the "Working Mom" sequence, we see her in a position of power in the workplace (as evidenced by her stern, "Approved" into the phone), but she is still the one shopping and tending to her daughter's breakfast before she works out. In "New Mom," we see a slightly more equal sharing of the childcare routine—the husband takes her daughter out for a walk while she uses *Wii Fit Plus*, but she is then expected to pick up the dry cleaning and vacuum while he presumably plays with the Wii or works. Thus, both commercials posit an unequal sharing of domestic and child caring responsibilities. Second, in both sequences, there is a chronic sense of "busyness"—and playing *Wii Fit Plus* is presented as a remedy and a respite from the woman's everyday life. It is the only moment she is alone and presumably relaxed—as

evidenced by the fact that the camera's movement stops tracking the woman (albeit briefly). The room in which she uses *Wii Fit Plus* is brightly lit, simply but comfortably furnished, and seems as a sanctuary away from the rest of the home's chaos. Interestingly, in both commercials, this room is different then the living room we see in the final family *Wii Fit Plus* sequence—suggesting this is a "room of her own." Presumably, our harried mothers need to, "fit some fit in" otherwise they will not workout on their own or take time for themselves. Third, both commercials reflect on the sociable nature of play. In both, the mother's involvement with Wii Fit Plus occurs only when she is alone, as her daughter in "Working Mom" and husband in "New Mom," respectively, are the ones playing in the final sequence when the entire family is together. In the solo sequences, the mother is doing yoga or boxing—truly "working out." In the family sequences, the daughter and husband play *Wii Fit Plus'* balance minigames. Thus, these commercials reinscribe a stereotypical notion of pleasure and play. The mother is not "playing" when she is using the game alone—she's working out and taking time out from her busy life. She is actively working to achieve her fitness goals. At the end of both commercials, the mother moves from active participant to passive spectator, as she watches her husband (daughter) play the game. This suggests that pleasure in play (as opposed to working out) occurs in the company of others. Interestingly, also, is that this reinscribes the distinction Thornham makes between what constitutes "social" versus "hardcore" or "geeky" gameplay.[107] Additionally, the commercials suggest that it is the wife/mother who needs to be using *Wii Fit Plus* to get fit—not the husband or other household members.

What is particularly interesting about these two commercials is how limited a view they offer on the possibilities of *Wii Fit Plus*. In other, non-U.S. markets, a broader range of activities and individuals are shown using the game. For example, a spot aired in Spain shows a woman using playing the hula-hooping minigame and completing one of the strength exercises while a man (presumably, her partner) looks on.[108] This same couple is featured in other commercials that aired—in some, the woman looks on as her partner exercises (and they laugh as he completes some of the activities;[109] in others, she tells him about the game as she completes one of the yoga poses.[110] A Korean commercial features a rotating group of individuals boxing—first we see a woman playing while her two male friends look on, then two young men, then a mother plays while her son watches, then two young women play, then finally a man plays while his wife and daughter watch.[111] Interestingly, all of the spectators in this spot also perform the activity, even though only one person is actually controlling the game. In contrast, a commercial from Japan shows a woman playing one of the minigames alone—talking to herself and laughing about her performance.[112] Another Japanese spot features no people; instead, an unseen announcer explains different aspects of



the updated game while shots of the balance board and gameplay are shown.[113] These commercials offer a much more nuanced perspective on the possibilities of play, pleasure, and sociability—and reflect a more diverse group of potential players.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which the Wii, and specifically *Wii Fit*, disciplines the body and reinscribes stereotypical notions of gender, play, pleasure, and embodiment. I explained how *Wii Fit* conforms to and challenges Jesper Juul's casual game typology and explored how it fits into the exergaming genre. I also interrogated the ways in which the Wii console configures the domestic sphere, and encourages pleasure through sociable gameplay.

In its choice to emphasize intuitive, physical gameplay over photo-realistic graphics, Nintendo created a console that appeals to many female and casual players. In addition, other aspects of the Wii, such as the androgynous, cartoony Miis each player can create and share, reinforce the notion that these sorts of players prefer immersive and social gameplay over visual richness and competition. While the Wii (and *Wii Fit*) are likely to bring new players into the console gaming world, it is unclear if they will be equally interested in extending their play beyond exergames.

The exergaming genre is ripe for further explanation. In particular, further research into the social practices surrounding these games and whether they encourage long-term fitness changes is critical. Especially important is determining how to encourage individuals to engage in healthy behaviors while not patronizing or chastising them. It would also be worthwhile to know how individuals view these games—are they pleasurable, work, or some of both? And for game designers, continued understanding of the ways in which players make sense of and integrate these games into their lives could prove invaluable.

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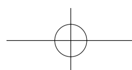

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