

INVESTIGATING THE RELEVANCE OF SHUSTERMAN'S SOMAESTHETICS TO MOTION-CONTROLLED GAMING

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ABSTRACT: *In Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman cultivates his pragmatic theory of aesthetics and notes: "A more discerning awareness of our somatic medium can improve its use in deploying all our other tools and media; for they all require some form of bodily performance, even if it is the mere pushing of a button or blinking of an eye." Shusterman's description of minimally-noticeable bodily actions is appropriate to an emerging medium: video games. But what happens when traditional controller-based video gaming is abandoned for a bodily-centered control scheme? A peripheral called Kinect was released for the Xbox 360 game system in 2010. Kinect is an accessory that requires no controller to be held in to play. This paper will argue that Kinect's games, when properly designed, open possibilities for somatic awareness and aesthetic experience and provide interesting consequences for the discipline of somaesthetics.*

Introduction

In the works *Performing Live* and *Body Consciousness*, Richard Shusterman cultivates his pragmatic theory of aesthetics by stressing an awareness of the human body. Shusterman's seminal work *Pragmatist Aesthetics* introduced John Dewey's aesthetic theory to a new generation and advanced Dewey's notion that the aesthetic, or art, is experience. Shusterman takes this one step further in *Body Consciousness* by emphasizing that all experience must be embodied and that by cultivating an awareness of our embodied existence we open possibilities for more satisfactory aesthetic experiences. As Shusterman notes: "A more discerning awareness of our somatic medium can improve its use in deploying all our other tools and media; for they all require some form of bodily performance, even if it is the mere pushing of a button or blinking of an eye."¹

¹ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

Shusterman's above description of the minimally-noticeable bodily actions of seeing and button-pushing is an eerily appropriate description of an emerging medium in contemporary culture: video games. The traditional video game consists just in this hand-eye coordination between the player holding a controller and the visuals displayed on a screen. Yet even here, the somatic participation of the individual is still necessary, and an awareness of this relationship can be achieved. Shusterman agrees: "The most advanced technologies of virtual reality are still experienced through the body's perceptual equipment and affective sounding board—our sensory organs, brain, and nervous system."²

But what happens when traditional controller-based video gaming is abandoned for a more immersive, bodily-centered control scheme? A peripheral called "Kinect," released for the Xbox 360 game system, is notable for being a video game accessory that requires no tangible controller to be held in order to play. This paper will argue that Kinect's games, when properly designed, can open possibilities for the kind of somatic awareness experience that Shusterman emphasizes. At the same time, these Kinect titles present several challenges to the discipline of somaesthetics. Three representative games will be discussed: the action/arcade title *Fruit Ninja Kinect*, the comedy-western epic *The Gunstringer*, and the exercise simulation *EA Sports Active 2*.

Kinect and Its Place Within Somaesthetics

The Kinect accessory was released for Microsoft's Xbox 360 video game system in November 2010 and became the fastest-moving consumer electronics device of all time, with 8 million units purchased within its first sixty days.³ Kinect differs from other gaming accessories in that no controller whatsoever is held by the player.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ Leigh Alexander, "Microsoft Kinect Hits 10 Million Units, 10 Million Games," *Gamasutra: The Art and Business of Making Games*, last modified March 9, 2011, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/33430/Microsoft_Kinect_Hits_10_Million_Units_10_Million_Games.php.

Kinect consists of cameras, microphones, and infrared sensors that track a player's movements and allows games to be played directly with the arms and legs. Many varieties of video games are represented within the growing Kinect library, including family-friendly mini-game collections, dance games, exercise and weight-loss themed games, and games from traditional video game genres such as action and horror.

With this much variety in Kinect titles, it would be hard to paint in broad strokes what the overall purpose of Kinect gaming is and how well each game practically fulfills this aim. However, Shusterman's somaesthetics give a good framework for beginning to classify the types and telos of Kinect games. Shusterman briefly defines somaesthetics as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthetics) and creative self-fashioning."⁴ The discipline of somaesthetics covers both practical and theoretical concerns and focuses on the body as the living body (soma) and its capacities for aesthetic cultivation and appreciation.⁵

Shusterman goes into further depth on the nature of somaesthetics by stating that it has three branches, and distinctions within these branches, though he is careful not to draw hard and fast dichotomies or inflexible categorizations. Shusterman calls the first branch "analytic somaesthetics," which "describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality."⁶ He notes that great theories of analytic somaesthetics are found in the works of Dewey and Foucault, and this branch largely is concerned with theory: epistemological and ontological issues of the body, and sociopolitical

definitions of sex and gender.⁷ This paper is not particularly concerned with the wider-scale epistemological, ontological, or sociopolitical ramifications of a popular video game device; thus, I shall just mention the analytic branch then set it aside.

However, the second branch of somaesthetics, called "pragmatic somaesthetics," is directly useful for my topic. Shusterman notes that the pragmatic branch may have a basis in theory, but its primary concern is improvement of somatic experience: "it transcends mere analysis, not simply by evaluating the facts that analysis describes, but by proposing various methods to improve certain facts by remaking the body."⁸ Within this branch, Shusterman distinguishes two main methodologies: the representational and the experiential. The distinction is: "representational somaesthetics emphasizes the body's external appearance while experiential disciplines focus not on how the body looks from the outside but on the aesthetic quality of its experience."⁹ While experiential methods focus on producing more satisfying and acute somatic experiences, and representational methods center on remaking the soma to be pleasing on the outside, Shusterman acknowledges the complementarity of both as two sides of a single coin.¹⁰ Yet this distinction is a particularly useful one to apply in investigating the intended purposes of Kinect games: are they primarily used to give satisfying somatic experiences, or to exercise and reshape the body, or both?

The final branch of the tree of somaesthetics is called "practical somaesthetics." Shusterman stresses that its concern is neither the theory nor methodology of the previous branches but instead practice and action. Hence, "this practical branch is about physically engaging in such care, not by pushing words but by moving limbs, that is, in reflective, disciplined, demanding corporeal

⁴ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁶ Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 142–3.

practice aimed at somatic self-improvement.”¹¹ Shusterman notes the practical, active side of living, “not of saying but of doing” is something that philosophers are particularly bad at, and, for this reason, “[a]bout practical somaesthetics, the less said the better, *if* this means the more done.”¹² In the realm of video games, this practical aspect manifests itself in how well a game plays or controls: if done well, the game plays seamlessly and not much needs to be said. Thus the practical somaesthetic dimension of Kinect games concerns how well they fulfill their experiential or representational purposes through their actual use. As I consider three tests cases of Kinect games, I shall first investigate whether their purposes are primarily experiential or representational, to open possibilities for somatic experience or to reshape the body. Secondly, I shall evaluate how well they practically achieve these aims through their use of Kinect’s motion controls. And thirdly, I shall discuss each game’s wider consequences for somaesthetics by showing how they present new challenges to the discipline. Ultimately, these challenges may leave some unanswered questions that call for further study in applying somaesthetics to this newly emerging medium of motion-controlled video games.

Fruit Ninja Kinect: A Step in the Right Direction

I begin with the simplest of the three games, whose simplicity perhaps belies its potential for satisfying somatic experiences. *Fruit Ninja Kinect* (Halfbrick Studios, 2011) was one of the first downloadable titles for Kinect that was available for purchase on Xbox Live Arcade. Before coming to the Kinect, the game became widely popular on smart phones as simply *Fruit Ninja*. The premise of the game is very simple on either the phone or Kinect: swipe at fruit as they cross the screen, score points for hitting them, get a “game over” for letting too many fruit drop, or hitting a bomb, or letting time run out.

The Kinect version of *Fruit Ninja* changes the controls slightly from its smart phone predecessor. Whereas the phone game allowed a player to slice fruit merely by swiping a finger across a touch screen, *Fruit Ninja Kinect* requires the player slice by making quick movements with either arm. The sense of “being in the game” is also heightened as Kinect’s cameras track the player’s body and project the player’s frame onscreen as a silhouetted avatar. Hence, not only is the game more demanding of the player by requiring the full use of both arms and not just the fingers, but also the game makes one more aware of one’s somatic presence by inserting a shadow of the body within the game’s playing field.

How would *Fruit Ninja Kinect* fit within Shusterman’s somaesthetic stipulations? The game makes no pretense of having a representational somatic purpose. The game only tracks score based on how many virtual fruit sliced, not how many calories burned or pounds lost. The game’s tone is one of humorous, lightweight, non-violent violence upon splattering colorful fruit. And by having the player’s body appear on-screen and requiring intricate use of the arms in slicing, the game opens possibilities for new somatic experiences. Clearly, this game would fall within the experiential camp of pragmatic somaesthetics, as its aims are to provoke satisfying experiences for those participating in its play.

The game fulfills its experiential aims well. The control of the game by the player through Kinect works fine. Fruit are generally sliced if the player is quick enough to react to them before they leave the screen. If the player misses a fruit or accidentally hits a bomb, it is more often the case that it is his fault and not the fault of the controls. Granted, *Fruit Ninja* is limited to one basic game, with three variations on the theme. And other than competing for high scores, comparing scores between online friends on the leaderboards, and unlocking a few bonus items, there is not much more depth or long-term purpose for coming back to the game. But *Fruit Ninja Kinect* thrives as a simple-to-play but hard-to-master

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, 143.

game and provides an interesting somatic experience complete with responsive controls.

The consequences of a game like *Fruit Ninja Kinect* for the field of somaesthetics are subtle yet important. The slicing of colorful fruit with the waving of a player's hands is indeed a pleasing and satisfying *somatic* experience. But would that be enough to call this an *aesthetic* experience? The origin of the pragmatic notion of aesthetic experience is, of course, found in John Dewey's concept of "an experience" in *Art as Experience*. Shusterman gives a nice summary of this concept:

But what constitutes the core of Dewey's aesthetic experience is another common sense of "experience"—that which refers to a memorable and ultimately satisfying episode of living, one that stands out from the humdrum flow of life as "an experience" by its "internal integration and fulfillment" reached through a developing organization of meanings and energies which affords "a satisfying emotional quality" of some sort. Distinctively aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is simply when the satisfying factors and qualities of "an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception" and appreciated "for their own sake."¹³

In the playing of *Fruit Ninja Kinect*, there is definitely the somatic satisfaction of using one's body in new ways to accomplish video gaming goals. However, the emotional quality of the experience and the sense of internal integration may not be present. The game is often played in short bursts for a few minutes at a time, and hence, it is more like a simple diversion from daily life or serious gaming than the singular, standout "an experience" of Dewey. *Fruit Ninja Kinect* then challenges somaesthetics with two interesting questions: can there be satisfactory somatic experience that does not reach the level of aesthetic experience? And, if a merely somatic experience could become an aesthetic experience, what more would be required from the medium or the participant?

¹³ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 27.

Ea Sports Active 2: Two Steps Backwards

Ea Sports Active 2 (Electronic Arts, 2010) aims to be a complete workout package without requiring a gym membership. The game features dozens of different exercises: running events, aerobics, strength training, stretching, and even a few events for fun, such as kicking virtual soccer balls or avoiding dodge balls. The game comes packaged with an elastic resistance band to aid in the strength training events and a pulse rate monitor the player can attach to the arm. A personal trainer (male or female, by the player's choice) guides each exercise by instructing the player how to perform the actions and encouraging or scolding the player based on the results. The game has set workout schedules for three- or nine-week programs and tracks the player's performance in terms of calories burnt and estimated weight lost. The stats within the game could be tracked online on EA's website, but the company discontinued all of the game's online features in April 2012, less than a year and a half after the game was released.

With the emphasis in *Ea Sports Active 2* on exercising, weight loss, and counting calories, the game would clearly be situated within the representational strand of pragmatic somaesthetics. The game's purpose and methodology is not necessarily to incite a satisfactory somatic experience in itself, but rather to promote fitness and reshaping the body's physical appearance. However, the game has many methodological flaws in its construction. Examples of these include not requiring the player to use the provided resistance band and pulse monitor and not tracking any exercises that are performed while on the floor, such as pushups, sit ups, stretching, et cetera. The title also suffers in its practical implementation of Kinect controls. The game often has difficulty in recognizing a player's precise movements, such as during running events that use the Kinect to track the player's legs and even at the first log-in screen where the player must wave a hand to start the game.

In addition to the game's methodological and practical faults, the game's presentation and underlying body-image norms leave it open to criticism. The in-game personal trainers, either the man or woman, are presented as remarkably fit. They speak in the gym slang popular amongst exercise enthusiasts, such as referring to parts of the body as the "glutes," "quads," or "core" and chiding the player for not performing "reps" properly. But some of their words of encouragement are even more insidious, such as when telling the player that every exercise is a step forward in making "a better you." The implicit premise in this statement is that there already must be something wrong with the player's body, and conforming to the ideals displayed on-screen is the only right course of action. Shusterman is aware of the danger of somatic ideals:

Ideals of bodily appearance impossible for most people to achieve are cunningly promoted as the necessary norm, thus condemning vast populations to oppressive feelings of inadequacy that spur their buying of marketed remedies. Distracting us from our actual bodily feelings, pleasures, and capacities, such relentlessly advertised ideals also blind us to the diversity of ways of improving our embodied experience.¹⁴

Though *EA Sports Active's* pragmatic methodology seeks for the game to be a representational aid rather than an experiential tool, it runs the risk of making the player feel self-conscious about the body instead of raising beneficial somatic awareness.

Hence, the game presents some interesting consequences for representational somaesthetics to consider. This strain of somaesthetics would emphasize that looking good and feeling good are values important to humans. Yet, as Shusterman notes above, the challenge is to promote fitness and health without imposing unrealistic ideals upon people to con them into buying an endless array of quick-fix remedies. *EA Sports Active* fails on two accounts: not only does it emphasize hyper-idealized bodies in its depiction of ultra-svelte gym

trainers, but also its flaws in game mechanics nearly guaranteed that it would soon be shelved in favor of the next advertised "lose weight quick" product. But in showing its faults, the game poses crucial questions for somaesthetics: how would a fitness program promote health without didactically using skewed body images to induce guilt in those whose body types differ? And what qualities would make a representational aid useful as a long-term tool rather than a temporary, disposable remedy?

The Gunstringer: Getting Kinect Gaming Right

The final game I shall address integrates unique Kinect motion controls with familiar video game themes to provide for satisfying somatic experiences. *The Gunstringer* (Twisted Pixel Games, 2011) uses the western as the setting for a revenge epic: our hero has been betrayed and murdered by his posse of hooligans. This setting would sound unremarkable or even clichéd if it wasn't for a few more details. The game begins with the gunslinger rising from the dead, appearing now as a skeleton clad in cowboy getup. And he's a puppet: a marionette bent on revenge controlled by the player's hands.

The Gunstringer is an action title that involves moving a character on-screen and shooting enemies, and the game's use of Kinect controls and its irreverent sense of humor make for a unique experience. As a virtual marionette, the character of the Gunstringer is moved by the player with the left hand. The player moves the hand left or right to avoid obstacles and jerking the hand upwards to make the character jump. The right hand of the player controls the Gunstringer's weapon, moving a cursor on-screen to aim his shot and jerking the right forearm up to shoot, simulating recoil. The progression of the game's stages would be familiar to seasoned video gamers: several short stages of running and gunning lead to a dramatic encounter with a boss at the end of the level. But the presentation of the game is refreshingly unconventional. Not only is the Gunstringer a puppet,

¹⁴ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 6

but also the story is told from a stage, with a real-life audience of actors reacting to the puppet show. This is accompanied by a gruff cowboy narrator spitting out mixed metaphors and sepia-toned flashback sequences. The sense of humor is further realized in the Gunstringer's cast of enemies: paper cutouts of outlaws and ninjas, voodoo priestesses, a wavy tube man, and ducks that look suspiciously like those of Nintendo's *Duck Hunt*.

Clearly, the somaesthetic methodology of *The Gunstringer* would be on the side of the experiential. The game makes no pretense of being for the purposes of exercise, and even allows the player to sit while playing, unlike the majority of Kinect games which require the player to stand. The somatic experience, though, is enhanced in the game because the practical use of Kinect controls is very well done. The term "intuitive" gets thrown around too often when speaking of a video game's controls. Instead, let me phrase it as such: *The Gunstringer's* controls feel right, as they are nearly seamless and tap into the habits video gamers may have acquired from other games. The game has a setup for the use of the hands similar to video game controllers which feature a joystick on the left and action buttons on the right. The game simply works as it should: the player is more often fighting against the game's enemies than fighting with the game's controls. The game isn't perfect and has some faults, such as camera issues and a relatively short length. But it is a good example of the capabilities of Kinect games to integrate a familiar narrative with humor, satire, action, and somatic responsiveness.

In tapping into gamers' somatic habits and knowledge of other video games, *The Gunstringer* provides some interesting lines of thought for further somaesthetic study. In its default control scheme of movement with the left hand and attacking with the right, the game mimics video game controls which have been standard fare since *Super Mario Bros.* in the mid-1980s. Likewise,

the game's shout-out references to other games like *Duck Hunt* presuppose a basic background in video gaming knowledge in its players. Both emphasize the fact that no video game is played in a vacuum: games are inherently related to one another through similar control schemes and referential content. The somatic twist is that this is analogous to the body itself: no living body is an inert thing but is instead a locus of habits, behaviors, and knowledge which are acquired through relations and interactions with other bodies. The challenge, then, that a game like *The Gunstringer* poses toward a discipline like somaesthetics is a call to reemphasize the importance of habits in lived experience and to acknowledge the relational aspect of embodied existence.

Conclusions and Place Within Current Study

I have discussed three representative titles for Kinect to argue that the peripheral and its games, when properly implemented, can open new possibilities for somaesthetic experiences in video games. By tapping into Shusterman's distinctions of pragmatic and practical somaesthetics, I have provided a framework for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses Kinect games.

This paper not only seeks to add to the growing debate of on the art-status of video games but also to introduce pragmatic aesthetic theory into the discussion. Thoughtful articles on the aesthetic status of video games have been published in the last few years, such as Aaron Smuts's "Are Video Games Art?"¹⁵ and Grant Tavinor's "Videogames, Interactivity, and Art".¹⁶ Both cover several aesthetic theories but remain too analytic-philosophical in their approach, focusing on "art" as a fixed object. Shusterman's theory is a useful tool to add to the discussion as it moves toward experience and the

¹⁵ Aaron Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=299> (accessed December 17, 2012).

¹⁶ Grant Tavinor, "Videogames, Interactivity, and Art," *ASA Newsletter* (2009), http://www.aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles_id=44 (accessed December 17, 2012).

body as the center of the aesthetic. And with the advent of motion-controlled technology like Kinect, the realization that the aesthetic must come from and through the living body is all the more apparent.

In addition to expanding and revealing the aesthetic possibilities for video games, Kinect has the potential to challenge our preconceived notions of video gamers and to push the boundaries of the field of somaesthetics. "Hardcore gamer" can be a disparaging term, often evoking images of an inactive, immature young male hooking himself to a machine to enter a fantasy world in order to escape reality in a more or less voluntary version of *The Matrix*. But with the advent of Kinect, this notion of a gamer is becoming obsolete. No longer is a video game player required to be sitting in front of a screen while only pushing buttons or moving joysticks. Instead, the player's entire body may be actively engaged in gaming events which open possibilities for new somatic experiences and techniques. Similarly, motion-controlled gaming poses several challenges for a

body-centered discipline such as somaesthetics. I have discussed some of these challenges in sections above and purposely left a few questions unanswered. A final challenge for somaesthetics is to question and expand its scope. Somaesthetics can neatly encompass bodily practices that largely require only a participant, or a participant and a teacher/administrant. With the Kinect and other motion-controlled gaming, the soma is not alone in its active engagement as the games require an interaction between the living body and a technological device. It will be interesting to see how well somaesthetics adapts to this relation between body and device as the proliferation of technology continues in the twenty-first century.