

Abstract:
Play and Embodied Media
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Although play may be a difficult thing to quantify; scientists, theorists, artists and designers have explored the territories that play has cut across society, as well as across species. No longer is play confined to the endeavor of children or the creative experimentation of artists. Play has hit the mainstream, not only from entertainment, but in terms of physical and cognitive health, as well as education, across all ages. Brain science plays up the importance of “exercising” the brain, creative play is important for health and happiness from children to adults and playful practices are used in cognitive and physical therapy. From discipline to discipline, humans are conceived as enacted beings with an embodied mind in ever more highly creative, playful and socially mediated realms. Exactly how do we play at being? Communication and media become key in the observations from this question. How do we move from beings whose modes of expression exponentially change from static, fixed media to interactive work and dynamic personal work in shared social contexts? Play and embodied media lead us to investigate creativity, imagination and play in the human being with a focus on media from a different perspective.

Recent thinking regarding cognition situates human experience in an embodied mind. This places cognitive activity not just in headspace, but highlights the importance of a human experience that includes such things as bodily movement, gesture and physiology, as well as the environmental context of experience. New media, such as games, socially interactive websites, virtual worlds and live A/V performance practices are situated in an embodied experience of momentary, time-pressured relational processes. These new mediated contexts support the presence, engagement, interaction and participation of persons and environments in complex ways quite different from more traditional, representational mass scale media and art practices. The body as a means of play becomes a site for exploring cognition beyond mere thought and emotion. The relevance of this can be seen in mainstream media and technologies, such as the Nintendo Wii Mote and Wii Fit, which incorporate sensors that factor in new kinds of movement and gesture into game play. The increasing availability and low cost of microprocessors, such as the Arduino and sensors also encourages designers, technologists, composers, sound artists, artists and audio-visual performers to explore extended interfaces that consider an embodied experience.

Work that challenges notions of consumer/producer transgress the boundaries of what is media and content. This heralds a shift in the media toward production that not only breaks with the consumer/producer dichotomy, but content that considers the body and physiology, as well as time, environment (space), creativity and affordances that support participation in a meta-design systems for the *making* of media. This piece will explore play and embodied media by looking at play in new media through the lenses of situated or embodied cognition and multi-sensory perception in both mass scale media and the creative work of artists and experimenters. This will be accomplished with a focus on new media created to assist in physical and cognitive health and therapy, the support for disabilities and education across all ages.