

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

**Special Section: “Senses, emotions and artefacts: relational approaches”**  
**Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games**

**Juan F. Belmonte Avila**  
 Complutense University of Madrid

**Date of submission:** November 2018  
**Accepted in:** September 2019  
**Published in:** January 2020

**Recommended citation:**

BELMONTE AVILA, Juan F. (2020). “Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games”. In: SABIDO, Olga. “Senses, emotions and artifacts: relational approaches”. [online article]. Digithum, no. 25, pp. 1-10. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. <http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i25.3163>



The texts published in this journal are –unless otherwise indicated– covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

**Abstract**

Cultural Studies and Game Studies analyses of video games often pay attention to the rules that articulate these media texts, the computer code used to write these games, and the visual and aural components utilised to represent game worlds and, sometimes, tell stories. All of these elements have a definite impact on the ways ideology is produced and reproduced by video games and, yet, the tactile interactions required to play games are often forgotten. This article highlights the importance of tactility when analysing identity discourses present in video games and expands forms of understanding *representation* beyond visual and sound-based components.

**Keywords**

tactility, video games, gender, sexuality, identity

- \* The publication of this issue was funded by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) (Spain) and the Fund for Specialized Journals promoted by the Vice-President for Research of the University of Antioquia (Colombia)
- \* This work was supported by Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades [project number PGC2018-095393-B-100]

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

## Pulsar, presionar, ser: Tactilidad vinculada a la construcción de identidad en videojuegos

### Resumen

Los estudios realizados en videojuegos dentro del marco de estudios culturales y del juego a menudo prestan atención a las reglas que articulan estos textos multimedia, el código informático utilizado para estos juegos y los componentes visuales y sonoros utilizados para representar mundos virtuales y, a veces, contar historias. Todos estos elementos tienen un impacto definitivo en las formas en que los videojuegos producen y reproducen la ideología y, sin embargo, a menudo se olvidan las interacciones táctiles requeridas para jugar. Este artículo destaca la importancia de la tactilidad al analizar los discursos de identidad presentes en los videojuegos y amplía las formas de entender la representación más allá de los componentes visuales y sonoros.

### Palabras clave

tacto, videojuegos, género, sexualidad, identidad

## 1. Introduction

According to Anne Friedberg (Friedberg, 1991), the postmodern condition can be best described as the moment in which space and, more importantly, time, have been both displaced. Subjectivities are no longer exclusively rooted in the present, but are mobilised too through the gaze into a different space and time. Friedberg defines this displacement as a *mobilized gaze*; a way of looking in which past, such as the “recorded past” of the moving images in cinema, and present, the time media users inhabit, are merged. Friedberg’s ideas have been applied extensively to media that use visual images as the main ways of conveying meaning. With the rise of video games and, more specifically, with the arrival of formal Game Studies, new questions have emerged that are specific to this medium. From my point of view, video games also mobilise players into other spaces and times; the main difference with other media lies, however, in the way this mobilisation is triggered and functions as something that is tactile and corporeal, and not merely visual and aural.

This article analyses the central role tactility plays in the perception of most elements, visual and non-visual, in video games. As a result, my aim is not to ignore the relevant visual and aural aspects of video games, but to refocus their impact in a way that allows us to perceive tactility as being, at least, just as important. It is essential to note that I will be using the term “tactile” in a broad sense in order to describe both situations in which players are in direct contact with traditional controllers and touch screens, and also forms of control that use the player’s entire body (i.e. games that require peripherals such as Microsoft’s *Kinect*).

American new media scholar Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2004) has highlighted the relevance of space to video games by stating that game design is primarily based on the designing of virtual spaces and environments. For Jenkins, the potential of video games to tell stories is directly related to the ability of virtual spaces to house, tell, and be part of these stories. Storytelling in video games is, for this author, spatial. Following this idea, it would be reasonable to think that playing video games is, in turn, closely related to playing with, and navigating virtual space. Navigating and understanding space, however, are both visual and bodily-lived and corporeal experiences (tactile experiences as well as experiences involving bodily motions). Let us delve into this idea: In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, French philosopher Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, 1984) explained that individuals of any given society understand space by acting/living in it. As he explains, walking involves more than motion; it also allows individuals to experience the forces that shape society. Just as societies shape spaces, these societies can in turn be understood through bodily interactions with the spaces they create. Following this train of thought, mere visual approaches to space (de Certeau uses the example of looking at a map) only provide a limited amount of understanding of these social forces.

In video games a similar phenomenon can be detected: navigating and acting within virtual space provides a different experience from mere visual analyses of this medium. Walking by a precipice in *Tales of Graces F* (Namco, 2012) plays out very differently from the navigation of the distorted urban spaces of *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2009) and *DmC: Devil May Cry* (Ninja Theory, 2013). While these examples all manage to create a sense of danger through visual means, the way players understand space by playing is quite different in each of these three games. While

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

*Tales of Graces F* uses invisible walls<sup>1</sup> to delimit traversable areas (removing in the process any danger of falling from precipices), players of the other two games have to continuously act on the danger of falling. A precipice in the first example is little more than a visual prop players may walk against indefinitely should they desire to. Precipices in *Bayonetta* and *DmC*, however, are obstacles that must be overcome through tactile input (i.e. by staying away from them, jumping over them, using camera angles to gauge distances, etc.). In these examples, the forms players have to tactilely respond to virtual space (i.e. by touching certain buttons to respond to the needs presented by these spatial designs) alters the very perception of it. Space, in this sense, is not only something players look at, but it is also something they understand and experiment with through tactile means.

In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander R. Galloway (Galloway, 2006) states that the two main defining elements of video games are action and acting. For this scholar, while the images in cinema and photography depict actions that “transpire before or during the fabrication of the work” (ibid: 2), video games have to necessarily be played to run. This means that video games depend on the cooperation of two actors: a machine executing a pre-existing code and a user playing the game. In fact, according to Galloway, “the operator and the machine play the video games together, step by step, move by move” (ibid: 2). Galloway also insists, however, on not equating the widely used concept of interactivity with his idea of video games as a medium based on action. Instead, he invites us to focus on the need for action of this medium to unfold. Independently of whether video games could be subsumed under the concept of interactivity or not, Galloway’s ideas do correctly point at some crucial specificities of this medium while also providing a useful framework for an ideological and critical analysis of video games beyond visual representation. By combining Galloway’s ideas with de Certeau’s approach to space one could claim that looking is not enough if one wants to understand the virtual space of video games; acting on this space is also required. This might sound simple at first, but my idea does not merely imply that in order to play players need to act, but that in order to see, players also need to act. And, ultimately, the more space is understood through these actions, the better ideological discourses embedded in the game through spatial design can be analysed. The following section will focus on how acting on virtual spaces allows for a better understanding of them, to then pay a closer look in the last two sections at the ways these expanded, both audiovisual and tactile-informed, analyses of space allow for a deeper study of gender and sexual discourses in video games.

## 2. Space, tactility and expanded perception

When playing a video game, *acting* is frequently linked to tactility. This means pushing/pressing/touching specific parts of a screen or, more frequently, of a controller in order to make an impact on the designed virtual space of a video game. Before developing any gaming skills, and prior to the ability to visually interpret the space of a game, there exists a stage at which looking and seeing while playing are determined by the ways players respond tactilely to games. This is more complex than just stating that in order to play a game players simply need to learn its controls. Instead, the claim is that in order to perceive what really happens while playing, players have to become involved at a tactile level with games. From my view, when playing a game, visual elements and prompts for action are not only mapped with the eyes, but also through the physically absorbed potential actions that can be executed through tactile and bodily inputs.

This idea has already been discussed in the study of other human activities involving visual inputs that demand some form of corporeal or tactile response, such as driving. Studies on hazard perception when driving connect experience with a better capacity to identify and detect potential dangers. The authors of “Alternative methods of measuring hazard perception: Sensitivity to driving experience” (Michelle I. Whelan et al, 2002) suggest that experience is what determines the general area drivers pay attention to while driving as well as which objects are identified as being relevant for the activity. According to the study, the attention of amateur drivers shifts more often to lines on the road more experienced drivers tend to largely ignore. Comparatively, novice drivers also tend to pay more attention to non-moving objects. In “Visual search of driving situations: Danger and experience” cognitive psychologists Peter R. Chapman and Geoffrey Underwood (Chapman & Underwood, 1998) present an analysis of the eye movement of amateur and seasoned drivers. These authors found an inverse relation between the drivers’ experience and the amount of time their eyes look at any given element.

Driving, however, is not the only human activity where experience and perception seem to be linked. In *Inattentional Blindness* (Mack & Rock, 1998), Arien Mack and Irvin Rock show proof that “there is no conscious perception without attention” (ibid: 14). For these two authors, what is perceived first and foremost is difference. Differences in texture, colour or shape are foregrounded and paid attention to while homogeneity serves as a background. According to Mack and Rock, the ability to

1. These invisible walls prevent avatars from continuing walking past certain areas of the spaces represented in a game. Players are protected from falling by these walls. These barriers are also commonly used in video games in order to prevent players from entering areas of the map they are supposed to visit later (in which case, a message is displayed stating something close to “We don’t really have time to go there now”).

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

detect difference is irremediably proportional to the experience one has at detecting difference. These ideas can too be applied to video games.

In his influential analysis of incorporation, Game Studies scholar Gordon Calleja (Calleja, 2011) uses the idea of “imageability” discussed by urban planner Kevin Lynch (Lynch, 1960). This idea was described as the quality spaces have to invite “the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation” (Lynch in Calleja, 2011: 88). Calleja states that imageability in virtual spaces results from “the absorption of spatial characteristics into consciousness” (Calleja, 2011: 89). The ways players perceive virtual worlds depend on interpretations of external stimuli that in turn rely on pre-existing *gestalts of experience*. Calleja connects together the players’ capacity to perceive the world, how experienced they are at perceiving, and ultimately, incorporation. Calleja’s incorporation is therefore directly related to perception and experience. For this author, perception is directly related to experience, and the more players perceive the easier they feel as if they were part of the game. Despite the visual connotations of a word like imageability, it is crucial to note that both the formation of *gestalts of experience* and the absorption of spatial characteristics into consciousness depend on both visual and tactile inputs and outputs. That is, perception when playing is not solely based on visual difference (Mack and Rock). Instead, the perception of relevant difference comes from the player’s experience at discerning which, and when, visual elements need some form of tactile response. This phenomenon is especially evident when observing novice players as well as players who lack familiarity with the game mechanics of particular titles or genres. Other games, celebrated by fans for their difficulty, such as *Cuphead* (MDHR Studio, 2017), or many of the games developed by FromSoftware, such as *Demon’s Souls* (2009), the *Dark Souls* trilogy (2011; 2014; 2016), *Bloodborne* (2015) or the more recent *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), all demand very specific actions, executed tactilely, to quickly respond to potentially lethal visual cues. Success at these games largely depends on the memorisation of tactile responses to counter in very precise ways the many cadences of patterns used by environmental traps and enemies when attacking.

Being aware of and mastering the potential actions mapped to different bodily and tactile gestures, (such as tapping specific of buttons in a fighting game or raising one’s limb when using Microsoft’s *Kinect*) allow players to analyse and understand the virtual spaces of the video games they are playing based on what can and cannot be done within them. In “The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame”, James Newman (Newman, 2002) states that characters in video games can be better understood

as a “suite of characteristics or equipment utilized and embodied by the controlling player”. For Newman, characters are relevant for what they allow players to do; everything else, such as the avatar’s appearance, is an accessory that tends to fade and become irrelevant during gameplay. In fact, something similar happens with the visual elements of virtual space that are not relevant to gameplay, like some of the elements that belong to the background scenery. Despite the fact that they can be observed and even admired at certain points, most visual elements<sup>2</sup> that are not relevant to gameplay are ignored in favor of the elements players have learned to identify as important. What oftentimes determines the importance of a visual element is not its appearance, but the actions players perform in relation to it. We can expand Newman’s idea with Sheila C. Murphy’s (Murphy, 2004) article “Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of Video Game Identity”. According to Murphy, “control within a game and the controllers used to play a game are actually quite crucial factors in facilitating a player’s identification with an avatar and establishing a connection between the physical body of the gamer in front of the television or computer screen and one’s identity with the narrative world of the game” (ibid: 230). Murphy identifies a link between the tactile aspects of video games and processes of player-avatar identification and players’ identity formation when playing.

In “Controller, Hand, Screen” (Kirkpatrick, 2009), media scholar Graeme Kirkpatrick emphasises the relevance of controllers, the manual gestures done when using them, and the impact of both controllers and gestures on the player. Kirkpatrick’s text is relevant for us for two main reasons: First, he stresses the connection between how experienced players are and their capacity to assimilate the skills associated with the use of the controller. Secondly, Kirkpatrick describes the actual use of the controller as something that results from fluctuating states of *tension*. Here, tension is understood as both a set of bodily states players adopt while they play (e.g. tensing some muscles in the hand to press a button) and the dynamic relation between what is being shown on the screen at the level of visual representation and ideological encoding. My use of the term *encoding* is absolutely intentional here.

Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter’s analysis (Crawford & Rutter, 2006) of The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies completes in interesting ways Murphy’s idea on the connection between screens, bodies, and players’ identities. As Crawford and Rutter explain, The Birmingham School borrows from the ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to defend the idea that “the shared values and the culture of society are those based largely

2. It is very tempting to claim that all background visual elements that are not relevant to gameplay eventually disappear from the players’ eyes. We should, however, consider what Henry Jenkins (2004) describes as the enactive potential of game environments to instill certain tendencies in players. These tendencies do not always elicit specific and direct tactile responses but contribute in the creation of concrete states of mind in players that, eventually, may lead to actions and ways of approaching games connected to the design of these spaces.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

on dominant (that is, ruling class) values and ideologies" (ibid: 152). Crawford and Rutter then explain Stuart Hall's use of the terms *encoding* and *decoding*. For Hall, cultural products are *encoded* within dominant beliefs and discourses. Users/consumers of cultural products engage in processes of decoding in which the *encoded* ideas are not automatically assimilated as they are, but are instead negotiated depending on each individual's own identifications, needs, and desires.

Kirkpatrick, however, does not accept traditional analyses of video games that present this medium as interpellating<sup>3</sup> players into specific identities that result from processes of production, re-modification and contestation of social discourses. For Kirkpatrick, video games are not texts that should be interpreted and contextualised following traditional means. Instead, their "real sociological significance lies in the dynamics of their corporeal appropriation by players" (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 195). Following this logic, *encoding* and *decoding* would not depend exclusively on audio-visual elements, but would result and would be the result of the instances of *tension* established between games, players and controllers. In this regard, the bodily actions players have to repeat while playing have a strong ideological significance attached to them. The ideological importance of the relation between repetition and bodily actions is something I will analyse in the last section of this article. At this point I am expanding the idea defended at the beginning of this article (i.e. perception and understanding in video games are not only based on audio-visual cues but also depend on bodily gestures, experience and repetition) to include another kind of perception and understanding; the perception of identity discourses and ideologies that are not only produced and reproduced through the audio-visual design of games, but also through the tactile and bodily actions players make when playing. It might seem here that I am defending two different ideas simultaneously. However, the position defended in this article is just one: Both visual and ideological perception in video games depend on the tactile relations players establish (and are invited to establish through the ways the games they play are designed) with the medium; both kinds of perception are all part of the same process. The following section will shed light on this idea.

### 3. Dying as a witch, killing as a male

*Bayonetta* is a hack 'n' slash game in which players control a powerful witch who is also called Bayonetta. As in most hack 'n'

slash games, players control the main character in a 3D world as she traverses the virtual space of the game and fights enemies. Weapons that tend to be present in the genre (such as bladed weapons and a variety of guns) also make an appearance as part of the protagonist's arsenal, but with a twist. As she attacks, Bayonetta complements the use of her weapons by shapeshifting her hair to create additional sources of damage such as an overgrown foot on heels made of hair that stomps her enemies or a demonic, hairy bird that devours her enemies' entrails. As she uses her hair to create these attacks, areas of her clothing (a leather suit created with her own living hair) also disappear, leaving Bayonetta in a state of semi-nudity. This character can also access some additional finishers inspired in medieval tools of torture that Bayonetta uses to kill and sexually mock her opponents. By combining Bayonetta's sexualised body with instances when she acts with a male-castrating agency<sup>4</sup>, the game becomes difficult to pin down in terms of its relationship with discourses of gender and sexual identity.

While semi-nudities and sexualised torture and mockery are being described here as if they were solely visual, most segments of the game (including the elements mentioned above) are not, however, designed to be only watched. Even during cutscenes, *Bayonetta* players are forced to remain tactilely involved as they have to pay attention to very concrete visual prompts that take place in the midst of chaotic, action-packed scenes. These visual prompts require players to quickly press specific buttons should they wish to avoid death. This happens not only during action sections, in which players can fully control Bayonetta, but also during cutscenes, which most games traditionally use as something players watch passively. Additionally, boss fights also include frequent Quick Time Events [QTEs], which force players to constantly respond tactilely to visual cues. And, even during more traditionally looking cutscenes (e.g. cutscenes that apparently exist to advance the plot of the game) QTEs also frequently appear, forcing players back from a more spectatorial position into a more tactilely active one. As a result of all this, *Bayonetta* continuously blurs the division between moments of play where players really play (what Newman, 2002, 2002b] calls *on-line states of engagement*) and passive moments with no active player input (Newman's *offline*). With *Bayonetta* players have to remain focused tactilely at all times as QTEs may pop up at any point during the game, abruptly interrupting a cutscene or being the culmination of a platforming section.

3. Kirkpatrick makes use of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. According to the French philosopher, cultural practices are the product and the catalysts of ideology. In their portrayal of dominant discourses, cultural products do not only show users' specific modes of behaviour, but also, invite them to behave according to the shown models. By doing this, users are interpellated into being subjects of the discourses they consume.
4. In this game, apart from two exceptions, Bayonetta's enemies are presented as being male and not human. They are angels that often take some animalistic traits. Their bodily features, design and voice actors are most of the time male. The game thus creates a division between a female group of witches (that of the protagonist and her now destroyed clan) and the forces of heaven who try to impose their own order led by male figures of power.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

*Bayonetta's* vision of the hack 'n' slash genre finds a curious counterpart in *DmC: Devil May Cry*. *DmC* is a reinterpretation of the *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008) saga originally created, just like *Bayonetta*, by Hideki Kamiya. In *DmC*, players take control of Dante, a nephilim (the son of an angel and a demon) on his attempt to defeat the Demon King, and world banker, Mundus. As a result of his heritage, Dante can access to both demonic and angelic-themed weapons to dispatch his foes. Dante's enemies are, unlike *Bayonetta's* male angels, demons that range from genderless puppet-like abominations, to female harpies or hulking, presumably male, demon brutes. Also, just as *Bayonetta* showed a very particular approach to female sexuality, Dante's role as a male protagonist is also made to be rather unambiguous. This becomes particularly obvious right at the start of the first mission: Just as Dante wakes up naked from a night of three-way sex with two female dancers, he is attacked by a gigantic demon hunter who uses a grapple hook to grab and hurl Dante's caravan at him. Just as the caravan is about to hit him, Dante jumps inside as the caravan as it continues its collision course, grabs his clothes in mid-air, puts them on, exits the caravan and lands outside unharmed. This entire sequence shows a close-up of the protagonist's slow-motivated nudity. His penis, however, is hidden by a baseball bat (a metaphor of Dante's virility?), and then the crust of a pizza slice that, for an instant, resembles a flaccid virile organ. This sequence shows a playful attitude towards what a close-up can (and cannot) show while still retaining a PEGI +12 rating for the game. The presence of the baseball bat as a substitute of his penis, Dante's naked, muscular build, together with his success with women, all seem to point at the protagonist's unchallenged masculinity. But, unlike *Bayonetta's*, Dante's treatment of his enemies is mostly void of sexual insinuations or references. Instead of being a hypersexualised male hero Dante is rather a young punk rebel with authority issues. If *Bayonetta* was a hypersexualised heroine destroying hordes of male angels, Dante is a young hero fighting against a social system that is ruled from the shadows by demons through debt, will-controlling soft drinks, and manipulative and messianic news reporters. Mass-monitoring technologies such as demon-controlled data bases and security cameras play an important role in the story of the game, both as a thread but also as something that can be subverted and taken advantage of. In addition, it is important to note that controlling Dante is a comparatively less challenging experience than the one offered by *Bayonetta*<sup>5</sup>. With Dante, it is easier to start and maintain combos, enemies are not as aggressive, and failing some sections, such as platforming sequences, is less punishing. *DmC* also lacks QTEs in the traditional sense. Video

sequences are transitions used by the game to advance the story and they do not put players in a position of fearing death because of a failed button press.

Analysing these two games together allows us to ask some interesting questions about them. Does *Bayonetta's* behaviour and looks transform her into an object of desire to be consumed by the player's gaze? Are Dante's male individuality and rebelliousness sanctioned by his own phallic power? Are *Bayonetta* players exposed to innovative ways of conceptualising gender and sexual conventions by continuously smashing, slashing, and chastising hordes of Patriarchy-aligned enemies? From my point of view, these questions would be irrelevant if we paid exclusive attention to the visual elements of these games (i.e. Dante's metaphorical hard, long, phallus or *Bayonetta's* insinuating poses). What confirms or refutes the ideological content in a video game is largely dependent of what players tactilely do with the game.

In *Bayonetta*, the main character's arguable role as an object of desire that is put in front of a theoretical male gaze is challenged by the compulsory level of attention to other visual prompts the game demands from players. The risk of having every cinematic scene interrupted by QTEs forces players to quickly shift their attention away from *Bayonetta* to focus instead on the areas of the screen where QTEs usually appear. With QTEs, the arcade and the flâneur that have been commonly used to think about traditional cinematic sequences are placed in the middle of speedy traffic that constantly interrupts the viewing process. Dante, on the other hand, despite being presented as an empowered individual, lets himself be treated as something to be consumed by the spectatorial gaze as cinematic scenes are designed to be watched without interruptions from QTEs. Just as in the relation between experience and perception discussed in the previous section, the experience of consuming cinematic scenes in *DmC* and *Bayonetta* teaches players what to pay attention to. This attention is not only visual, but tactile too. This tactile focus is in fact central to the ways players consume the ideological discourses in games.

The tactile actions these games expect players to do during combat sequences also reinforce and modify the relation between players and specific discourses. *Bayonetta* forces players to understand and execute combos (combinations of buttons that make *Bayonetta* perform specific attacks), evading manoeuvres, and QTEs. Given the difficulty of the game, combos are interrupted frequently and the chances of dying are relatively high. Comparatively, *DmC* is easier. Performing combos is less complex as there exist safe zones players can utilise to act without interruptions. The different approaches to combat (as well as the way combat flows) in these games force players to make different hand gestures that in turn differentiate the tactile

5. One of the main critiques *DmC* has received from fans of the hack 'n' slash genre and the gaming press alike is its relative lack of challenge in its initial difficulty level when compared with other titles of the *Devil May Cry* saga and *Bayonetta*.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

experience of playing as a male nephilim from that of playing as a female witch. Following Newman's ideas, if we define what these protagonists are in these video games based on what they can do and allow players to do with them, they would be a free-flowing avatar (Dante) and an often interrupted and beaten character (Bayonetta). Due to offline moments of play, such as looking at the artwork of the game, what each character allows players to do becomes linked to other traits: Dante is a male angel-demon hybrid and Bayonetta is a female witch. This perception of Dante as male and Bayonetta as female is informed by both online and offline moments of play and is, therefore, necessarily dependent on tactility.

#### 4. Tactility and identity

Using analyses that take both the visual and the tactile components of video games enriches the study of the production and reproduction of identity discourses in this medium. From this perspective, the convergence of Game Studies and Gender Studies shows some great synergy. According to American philosopher Judith Butler (Butler, 1990), gender is not a predefined human trait with a constant value and character. Rather, the meanings given to gender depend on its performance; that is, how an individual "acts" gender. This concept can be expanded further to link it with perception. If gender is expressed and made real through actions, we could argue that it is perceived through actions as well. Performativity and action bring us back to our earlier claims about how Dante and Bayonetta are better understood at an ideological level by manually controlling them.

If gender is fluidly shaped and individuals can align themselves or defy pre-existing gender norms, individuals could then theoretically assume and step out of different gendered roles through their actions. However, we are faced with a challenge here: Video games are often discussed as an interactive medium that lets players act with different degrees of freedom. This idealised vision of free interaction could invite us to think that video games offer a magnificent space for free performance and identity expression. Following Alexander Galloway's ideas (Galloway, 2006), one of the defining traits of video games is the necessity for both the machine and the player to act simultaneously for the game to be played. This need of games for players to act could be seen as a direct invitation for players to perform, sometimes, freely. And, while all this is true to an extent, video games are also defined by sets of very concrete rules; properties that define virtual spaces; and sometimes, narratives that unfold in specific ways (which represents the *machine* in the machine/player combo discussed by Galloway). These limitations make it difficult to talk about gender performance in relation to video games as if they truly let players act on their own identities freely. Game Studies scholar

Miguel Sicart (Sicart, 2011, 2014) discusses the ways players can defy intended or even enforced forms of playing games in a way in which the act of play can exceed or go beyond the game itself in playful and unexpected ways. Players can also mod games and rewrite their code partially, creating new forms of playing. All these acts, however, still take place around and depend on pre-existing code. So, in a sense, all these performances (instances of both regular and *expanded* gaming) are still limited or determined to some extent by the original design of these games. This vision of performance, as something mechanically coded and controlled, is close to Kirkpatrick's concept of tension (the relation established by a game between its players, their bodily gestures and controllers) or even Ian Bogost's (Bogost, 2006) *unit operations* (specific elements in a game that elicit a response in the player and/or the machine). Both Kirkpatrick and Bogost discuss models of identity formation in which very concrete identity discourses and social messages are transmitted to players through the bodily actions they are invited to make by games when playing. If applied to video games, Butler's performance, with the mediation of an external machine, would not always be a liberating act that allows players to defy social norms. In fact, depending on the ways games are designed, they could be mimicking mainstream roles instead. However, before we unjustly condemn video games for their normalising force, let us explore further the ways in which video games defy, or yield to, social norms.

Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975) explains that commercial Hollywood cinema has historically satisfied a form of looking and desiring that has been always been assumed to be male. Images in cinema are designed to attract and be appealing to male spectators. Video games are often populated by boy-saves-girl narratives, girls with big boobs, muscled men, as well as notable examples of a gendered form of understanding clothing and armour (i.e. fighting games from the *Dead or Alive* and the *Soul Calibur* series). In many cases, a lot of the iconography and visual content in video games seems to be designed to address and please male audiences. Helen W. Kennedy (Kennedy, 2002), however, adds to this idea and claims that gameplay has an impact on whether women in video games can be analysed as objects of desire. For the author, the actions Lara Croft is designed to perform have the potential of empowering her; thus making her shed her status as an object of desire for a male-aligned gaze. Controlling a female character such as Lara poses for Kennedy another kind of problem: Controlling a female character might be a way to extend the reach of male players' desire by allowing these players to take control of the objects of their desire that, with other existing media forms such as cinema, could only be looked at before. This idea is central to our discussion of tactility and perception.

If we now go back to *Bayonetta*, it is true that players are in control of a representation of a female body whose actions are full of sexual connotations. During cutscenes and in artwork

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

of the game, the character is frequently shown in what could be described as sensuous positions. This could invite us to see Bayonetta as a visual object of desire designed to please male audiences. Yet, the player's actions when playing the game are directed at destroying the character's enemies, which are mainly male. In spite of Bayonetta's pin-up demeanor and looks, the player's tactile actions seek the destruction of male bodies. In this sense, assumptions about gender that originate from the images of the game are different from the ones we can analyse if attention is paid to the actions the avatar is designed to perform or the tactile inputs from players linked to said actions. Discourses absorbed through the player's eyes are altered by the player's actions and tactile manipulations. The perception of a character such as Bayonetta is not only informed by her looks, but also by the set of potential actions she can perform mapped in the player's hand. Thus, even when players look at conventionally gendered icons, they might also be participating in performances of gender transgression executed through tactile actions.

True, anyone may argue at this point that *Bayonetta* could be a prime example of *sadistic* and *masochistic* pleasure in a Freudian (Freud, 1905) way. After all, male players in control of Bayonetta would be participating in acts that can be seen as fulfilling masochistic and sadistic pleasure. This is because fighting against the, mostly male-identified, angels using a female avatar puts players into positions of both deliverers and receivers of punishment.<sup>6</sup> Bayonetta, after all, tortures and punishes enemies but, because of the difficulty of the game she is also punished in return. Completing the game without Bayonetta being hurt or killed several times, even if only as a result of a failed QTE, is really improbable. When failing, male players are removed from their positions of deliverers of masochistic pleasure to be placed closer to the receiving end of sadistic punishment. Game over screens act as another form of punishment that forces players back on onooo a masochistic seat. And, even if they are mainly visual in nature, they are highly descriptive of players' lack of manual skill. Also, if we follow Newman's ideas and accept that what truly defines avatars is not their looks but what they allow players to do, the pleasure players experience after having their avatars killed or hurt would always be masochistic in nature; a reflection of their own lack of skill in the game. By using *Bayonetta* as an example of how tactility complicates the analysis of identity discourses in video games I do not wish to suggest that every normative discourse presented in visual form is diluted due to the tactile involvement of players with games. The tactile actions of players in a game like *Bayonetta* vary between instances of gender defiance (i.e. punishing male enemies) and submission to gender norms (i.e. Bayonetta being punished).

Taking tactility into account allows us to escape from dualistic forms of understanding identities as well as processes of identity formation in video games. While Bayonetta could be a great example of an object of male heterosexual desire, she is also defined by the gender and sexual defying actions she does and allows players to do. She is not one or the other; instead, she is both one *and* the other. In this *both/and* relation, tactility allows us to both perceive the multilayered possibilities better and perform in relation to these possibilities. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Sedgwick, 2003) utilises the term *beside* to go beyond the logic of dualistic forms of thinking. *Beside* stands for "a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating..." (ibid: 8). In this sense, *beside* describes multiple relations along many rhizomic planes that escape from dichotomies and dualisms. It stands for a form of relationality and affect that simultaneously connects with and remains true in relation to many planes. While these different planes may oppose or complement each other, none of them takes preference over the others, working alongside/*beside* them. As a result, understanding any of these planes in isolation becomes impossible as their meaning depends on their interconnections. These interconnections cannot be perceived exclusively by relying on and studying visual clues. Instead, multi-faceted forms of studying identity need multi-faceted, visual and tactile, approaches. Sedgwick's *beside* allows us to think about tactility as working alongside the players' gaze, multiplying the number of meanings that any element in a game, regardless of whether it is visual or not, might have. A critical question would be whether these potential meanings expand the type of discourses players are exposed to or, if, instead, the visual and tactile elements work together to create situations in which existing identity discourses are doubly reinforced. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) argue that most commercial video games foster forms of desire and identity discourses aligned with those of the societies in which the games are designed, commercialised and played. However, by studying the players' tactile actions, this alignment with mainstream discourses and norms might be shown to be fluid; acting *beside* others. Tactility does not only determine what players learn to pay attention to when playing, it also maps ideology/ies onto their bodies. Just as different rhythms and cadences when pressing buttons result in execution of specific actions, the actions players are invited to perform by games also act as guides through a plurality of differently aligned, and differently performed, discourses.

6. Here, the game would assume a male player identifying with the (also male) angels.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

## References

Works cited

- BOGOST, I. (2006). *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6997.001.0001>.
- BUTLER, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- CALLEJA, G. (2011). *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8429.001.0001>.
- CHAPMAN, R. P. & UNDERWOOD, G. (1998). "Visual search of driving situations: Danger and experience". *Perception* 27: pp. 951-964. <https://doi.org/10.1068/p270951>.
- CRAWFORD, G. & RUTTER, J. (2006). "Digital games and cultural studies". In: JASON, R. & BRYCE, J. (ed.). *Understanding Digital Games*. London: Sage. pp. 148-165. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446211397.n9>.
- DE CERTEAU, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- DYER-WITHEFORD, N. & DE PEUTER, G. (2009). *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- FREUD, S. (1905). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, ed. 1975.
- FRIEDBERG, A. (1991). "Les Flâneurs du Mal(l): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition". *PMLA* 106 (3). pp. 419-31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462776>.
- GALLOWAY, A. R. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- JENKINS, H. (2004). "Game Design as Narrative Architecture". In: HARRINGTON E. & WARDROP-FRUIIN, N. (ed). *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. pp. 117-120.
- KENNEDY, H. W. (2002). "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" *Game Studies* 2 (2).
- KIRKPATRICK, G. (2009). "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game". *Games and Culture* 4 (2). pp. 127-143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325484>.
- KIRKPATRICK, G. (2011). *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- MACK, A. & ROCK, I. (2000). *Inattentive Blindness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- MULVEY, L. (1975). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16 (3), Autumn. pp. 6-18. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0\\_27](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_27).
- MURPHY, S. C. (2004) "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of Video Game Identity". *Journal of Visual Culture* 3. pp. 223-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412904044801>.
- NEWMAN, J. (2002a). "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame". *Game Studies* 2 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144480200400305>
- NEWMAN, J. (2002b). "In search of the videogame player". *New Media & Society* 4(3). pp. 405-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144480200400305>.
- NITSCHKE, M. (2009). *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262141017.001.0001>.
- SEDGWICK, E. K. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786>.
- SICART, M. (2011). "Against Procedurality". *Game Studies* 11 (3).
- SICART, M. (2014). *Play Matters*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10042.001.0001>.
- WHELAN, M. ET AL (2002). "Alternative methods of measuring hazard perception: Sensitivity to driving experience". *Road Safety: Research, Policing and Education. Conference Proceedings. Available at: Proce Proceedings*. Adelaide, South Australia: Causal Productions. pp. 81-86.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Push, Press, Become: Tactility Linked to Identity Configurations in Video Games

**Juan F. Belmonte Avila**

([juanfbel@uoc.es](mailto:juanfbel@uoc.es), [jfbelav@gmail.com](mailto:jfbelav@gmail.com))

Complutense University of Madrid

Juan Francisco Belmonte Avila is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Studies (Complutense University of Madrid). After completing his degree in English Studies and a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Murcia, he obtained a Fulbright Scholarship and spent two years at Indiana University as a PhD student. At the end of his time as a Fulbright scholar he obtained a government-funded grant (FPI) to complete his doctoral dissertation, titled "Corporeality, identity and digital culture: gender and sexuality in video games". He has been a visiting researcher at international institutions such as McGill University, the IT University of Copenhagen and the University of Essex, and has received a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholarship for the academic year 2019/20 to carry out research at the University of Utah. He is, and has been, a member of four national research projects on the areas of Queer Theory, Cinema Studies, and Game Studies. Professor Belmonte has also been a member of the organising committees of international conferences such as the 6th Linguaging Diversity International Conference, the 16th Culture + Power Conference, and the 6th International Conference on the Philosophy of Computer Games. He has published widely on Comparative Cultural Studies, Game Studies, American Studies, and Film Studies.



UNIVERSIDAD  
DE ANTIOQUIA