

Flowing Forms, II: Virtual Bodies Position paper

Daniel Reynolds, Emory University

The question for the Flowing Forms roundtables refers to “how media and bodies affect one another.” I would propose that this relationship is more intimate and direct than it is generally credited with being, that media use is not a case of two discrete things coming into contact with and affecting one another, as if across a fundamental gap that separates them, but rather one way of describing local aspects of a wider, continuous system of which bodies and media are participant parts, and in which they have a co-constitutive relationship. To the degree in which they are ever separate things, they are defined as such only by their performative relationship to one another. We might speak instead of how media and bodies *effect* one another.

This perspective relates the ideas of “transaction” proposed by John Dewey in the middle 20th century and “intra-action” proposed by Karen Barad in the early 21st century. While these concepts are not identical, they have in common an assertion that things do not interact with one another from without, but transact or intra-act as aspects of a shared system of which they are constituent parts. For media studies, such a perspective has a leveling effect—not in the sense of reducing everything to a common baseline of irreality, but in the sense of elevating everything to shared continuity. To borrow a term from videogames, it is a “leveling up.”

The videogame company Nintendo, which produces both platforms and software, has historically been especially sensitive to transactional relationships among media and their users, a perspective that is built into how Nintendo conceives of its devices and is foregrounded in the ways that Nintendo frames those devices for potential consumers. Throughout its history as a platform manufacturer, the company has exhibited a particular fascination with hands. This can be observed in Nintendo’s advertisements, its product packaging, and its patent applications. I would argue that Nintendo’s characteristic paratextual image is an implied POV or near-POV shot of one’s “own” hands holding Nintendo products. (See images from Nintendo advertising, packaging, and patent below)

Nintendo’s transactional conception of game platforms is necessarily bidirectional. The devices extend toward the hands (and bodies) of users, and users’ hands and bodies extend toward the devices. The action of the bodies is given shape by their engagement with the devices, and the action of the devices is given shape by their engagement with bodies.

Especially with the release of the Wii console in 2006, with its motion-controlled input devices, scholars began to remark on how Nintendo had reconfigured the space “outside” of the virtual worlds of games. The working name for the Wii was the “Revolution.” While the Wii (along with other Nintendo systems like the 3DS, the Wii U, and the Switch) does call attention to the space of videogame use in new, or at least newly noticeable, ways, it is in fact less of a revolution than it is an extension of Nintendo’s longstanding transactional approach to the relationship of players and platforms.

The series of Nintendo Switch accessories in the Nintendo Labo line, in which players use cardboard cutouts, string, rubber bands, and so on to create dedicated controllers for toy-like minigames, extends this trajectory. In a typical Labo device, some aspect

of the Switch platform, such as the controllers or the screen, is encased in a cardboard model of an object such as a piano, a motorcycle, or a fishing pole. Special software then allows players to interact with the device and play games such as motorcycle racing or fishing. Labo games integrate the player's labor, and the labor of the Switch, into the transformation of flat cardboard material into representational models that become integral parts of transactions among players and the Switch console. The articulated cardboard of the Labo unites medium as "means" with medium as "substance between," illustrating the complementarity of these two senses of the word. The Labo is not an exception to, but an exemplar of, the transactional relations among Nintendo games, Nintendo platforms, and Nintendo players. These relations, in turn, are not exceptions, but exemplars, of how videogame play, and indeed all media use, works on a transactional model.

