

Plug & Play: The Intersections of Television Studies and Game Studies

The Spatial and Body Politics of Plugging In

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Setting up an Xbox 360/One Kinect in a living room provides a refresher in geometry, a dabble in furniture arrangement, and the possible need for a trusty tape measure. At times, criticized for its embrace of body surveillance, the Kinect, a motion control device, allows players to capture and move their full body for in-game platform control and interaction. During set up and game play, the Kinect web camera makes bodies visible on the television screen, but only those recognized within the allocated sensory space. The relationship among the television set, the Xbox 360/One console, the Kinect sensor, and player visualizes and dictates the literal field of play within the home. In concrete spatial terms, the space of play can be physically measured and imagined. For instance, Microsoft recommends that players position the Kinect sensor between two to six feet from the floor to ensure the device registers their full bodies. Among other tips, the Kinect sensor should be within 6 inches of the actual television but not within 1 foot of stereo speakers. For the Kinect to work well, the spatial distance in front of the television/Kinect sensor should range from six feet (one player) to eight feet (two players), but not more than twelve feet wide. Lastly, to avoid injury, Kinect users must be sure to clear away any stray furniture from a well lit, 6 feet area of play.ⁱ

The Kinect and its spatial recommendations are perhaps the clearest, recent examples of what video game players have experienced for some time: video game consoles and controllers orient and order bodies within the home and around the television set. Even wireless designs have “dead zones” where the controllers become unreadable by the consoles, revealing the invisible boundaries of WIFI signals. Beyond dancing or music games like the Konami’s *Dance Dance Revolution* franchise (1999-2013) or Harmonix/MTV Games’s *Rock Band* franchise (2007-2012), there is always some degree of physicality and range of motion during game play. Not only do these hardware designs presume a great deal about interior home spaces, they create designated spaces of play and movement that may be in conflict with interior home design. Often, the ease of play and optimal game viewing dictate living or bedroom arrangements. In a dialogue between television and game studies, the domestic space becomes a rich site where we might trace the physical intersections among the television set, game console, and the player body.

Drawing attention to the material and spatial imaginaries of the home entertainment space, we might approach the study of media as an investigation of technologized spaces that intersect with histories of design, materiality, and technologies more broadly. Television scholarship like Lynn Spigel’s seminal *Make Room for TV* (1992) explores the cultural and ideological domestication of television. Of particular concern are the ways in which the American home underwent spatial and design rearrangements to fit—and feature—this new technology. Concerns about game hardware, specifically how they reveal industrial imprints and formal limitations, remain

central to platform studies scholarship such as Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's exploration of the Atari Video Computer System in *Racing the Beam* (2009). Considering these areas of inquiry, we might shift these conversations around television and video gaming through their complimentary and, at times, antagonistic spatial relationship.

Though the response begins with a discussion of the Kinect, these issues of space and body placement appear concurrent with televisual and ludic histories. Scouring over past game advertisements and manuals, we can trace the entry of video games into the domestic space through its hardware design and (dis)similitude with the television apparatus. The space age design of the Magnavox Odyssey (1972) or the attractive wood paneling of the Atari 2600 (1977) speak to deeper aesthetics of form and design integration. At the same time, we might interrogate how manufacturers visually imagined the home space as a gaming space for consumers. An early ad for the Odyssey features a happy family of four within a dark set without walls, but models an ideal sofa and love seat arrangement around the game console and television. Other ads for the Atari 2600 and ColecoVision (1982) collapse the space between the game console and players so that they are inches from the television screen—forget the popular axiom about sitting too close to the television set.

Whether 8-bit or HD, game hardware constructs both literal and figurative closeness to the television set. In addition to researching how we can play *within* a game (rules, achievements, levels), thinking about *how* and *where* we are able to play broaden the scope of what constitutes player interaction.

ⁱ Recommended measurements can be found on Kinect support page at <http://support.xbox.com/xbox-360/kinect/kinect-sensor-setup>