



# PLAYABLE BODIES

Dance Games and Intimate Media

Kiri Miller

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(Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.)

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–1872)



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“Multisensory Musicality in *Dance Central*.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Interactive Audio*, ed. Karen Collins, Bill Kapralos, and Holly Tessler. Copyright © 2014 Oxford University Press.

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## ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

**[www.oup.com/us/playablebodies](http://www.oup.com/us/playablebodies)**

Oxford has created a website to accompany *Playable Bodies*. It includes links to auxiliary material related to the book's content along with screencaps from the book in full size and color. Using the site will allow readers to continue conversation on- and offline.

# Playable Bodies



# Introduction

## *Dance Games and Body Work*

What can machines teach us about ourselves? If we reveal ourselves to them, what can they see in us that no one else can see? We ask these questions as we embark on intimate relationships with other humans. Increasingly, we are cultivating similar kinds of intimacy with the machines in our lives. We carry phones and tablets with built-in user-facing cameras and voice-recognition software. We load them up with apps that track and analyze the number of steps we take, our GPS routes through the maps of our daily lives, the music we use to channel our emotions, the relationships we forge and maintain through social networks, our spending patterns and our sleeping patterns. We constantly generate parallel and intersecting streams of data. In return, we only ask: Tell me something I didn't know about myself. And we also worry: What might this machine know and not tell? What might it conceal from me, but sell to someone else? What if it isn't calibrated to recognize me properly—if it can't see me, am I invisible? On the other hand, that invisibility might be a human superpower: It could be deeply reassuring to discover there's something about oneself that a machine can't perceive or feed to its black-box algorithms.

This book is about machines that teach humans to dance, and how the game of learning choreography is also the labor of developing an intimate relationship with interactive surveillance technologies. Dance games took the video game industry by storm between 2009 and 2014, outselling established game franchises and driving sales of newly developed motion-sensing interfaces. Together, the leading dance game franchises *Just Dance*, *Dance Central*, and *Zumba Fitness* sold nearly 76 million game units over these five years (Lewis 2014, VGChartz 2016). In a period when many argued that digital games were moving out of living rooms and onto mobile phones and social media platforms, dance games demonstrated the

deep appeal of an entirely different kind of “casual” and “social” gaming (cf. Juul 2010, Jones and Thiruvathukal 2012). These games can be played in three-minute sessions, yet they offer an immersive multisensory experience. They are accessible to novice gamers, yet their full-body dance routines can be fiendishly challenging. They persuade players to move their bodies in new ways by promising a safe, private space for learning to dance, but they also capitalize on the complex pleasures of embarrassing oneself among trusted friends. While they rely on new interfaces and proprietary motion-capture and motion-tracking technologies, they are also built around already circulating popular music, and they offer players a transferable skill: When players learn a dance, they are *really dancing*, with their own bodies. They can leave the game console in the living room and take those moves to the club, the prom, the gym, YouTube, and Twitter—and they have. (See Figure I.1.)

I embarked on this project with two broad questions: What happens when players learn an embodied repertoire from a virtual instructor, and what can motion games tell us about the enculturation of new interfaces as technologies of the body? Dance games make it possible for players to learn a physically demanding, minutely codified repertoire without ever interacting with a physically present teacher. They also offer opportunities for players to experiment with movement styles that don't match their own sense of self. The dance styles in these games incorporate performative markers of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and able-bodied fitness, intertwined with received ideas about discipline, morality, virtuosity, natural talent versus learned skill, and creative agency versus compliant repetition. The private and public pleasures of digital dance games are bound up with their presentation of gendered and racialized kinesthetic repertoires; they invite players to imagine how it might feel to dance in someone else's body.



Figure I.1: A player-produced gameplay video created for YouTube (riffraff67 2012). (Screenshot by the author.)

*Playable Bodies* explores five major thematic areas: surveillance and control; performativity and embodied difference; kinesthetic listening; the virtual transmission of embodied practice; and choreographic labor. Each of these themes affords different insights into how dance games function as intimate media—that is, how they configure intimate relationships among humans, interfaces, musical and dance repertoires, and social media platforms. In this book, “intimate media” refers not to media texts that present intimate material or media platforms that allow for discussion of intimate subject matter, but to media that choreograph the gradual accrual of intimacy over time, through practice.<sup>1</sup> I proceed from the premise that intimacy is a relational quality, generated by dynamics of recognition and reciprocity as well as control and consent. It is not instant mutual knowledge but rather a form of cumulative understanding that entails deferred agency, vulnerability, and struggles to communicate.

As we will see, dance offers a powerful model for thinking about intimacy in terms of multisensory experience and the materiality of human bodies. Dance games link those sensing, material bodies to interactive technologies that cultivate new techniques of moving, listening, seeing, and being seen. They teach players to regard their own bodies as both interfaces and avatars, a radical change from the established gaming paradigm of using a game controller to direct the actions of an on-screen avatar. Dance games offer object lessons on the affinities of choreography and programming code—as interactive and archival media, as technical practices, and as metaphors that people use to make sense of relationships among humans and machines (Bench 2009, Chun 2011, Galloway 2012). They also continually reassure players that choreography does not function like code, and that playable bodies are not automata. It’s easy to deploy choreography as a metaphor as though it were synonymous with puppetry, ventriloquism, programming, or other forms of direct control, but any dance technique class or rehearsal will demonstrate that choreography doesn’t actually work that way. Learning someone else’s choreography requires active participation, mobilizes cumulative technique, and engages dancers in interpretive work over the course of repeated practice.

Dance games and their player communities illustrate new possibilities for the transmission of performance practice, for converting virtual social connections into visceral common knowledge, and for creating deeply engaging play experiences that bind together sound and physical movement. They offer new channels for teaching and learning embodied knowledge, and for indexing that knowledge through popular music. They make players’ living rooms into the staging ground for emergent forms of digital performance and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). At the same time, they raise questions about “the body as a laboring instrument, a force of production that is actively being displaced, recreated, and reimaged by digital technologies” (Burrill and Blanco Borelli 2014:439), and they draw attention to neoliberal capital investments in methods to measure “the human body and ‘life itself’ in terms of their informational substrate, such that equivalencies might be found to value one form of life against another, one vital capacity against another”

(Clough 2010:221). Through my research with players and designers, as well as my own gameplay experiences, I have learned that performing this choreography can feel natural or transgressive, liberating or compulsory, playful or laborious.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DANCE GAMES

*Just Dance* and *Dance Central*, the two game franchises I discuss in this book, were originally designed for two different motion-sensing game systems: the Nintendo Wii console, purpose-built for motion gaming, and the Xbox Kinect, a peripheral device for the existing Xbox console. As Jones and Thiruvathukal write in their book about the Wii, gaming platforms

span *multiple* materialities—from microchips to social institutions. . . . As a platform, a video game console is a computing-based foundation for running games, but it's also an example of industrial design, a consumer product, a generator of expectations as well as a media system that mediates between the various layers of hardware, code, interface, game, the screen, the player's body, the peripherals, the living room, the invisible networks of communication technologies and the larger network, and the world. (2012:159–60)

When the Wii came on the market in 2006, it was positioned to compete with existing game consoles across these multiple materialities, in technical, social, and economic terms. The Wii promised an innovative yet accessible gestural interface, an emphasis on casual social gameplay in domestic spaces, and a significantly lower price point than the market-dominating PlayStation and Xbox systems. These other consoles had been engaged in a graphics/processing-power arms race to better support increasingly high-intensity, immersive, rapid-response, action-oriented, long-session gaming. The Wii was intended to support a different kind of gameplay, one that would particularly appeal to casual/social gamers and the all-important and hitherto underexploited “consumer mom” demographic—women who might appreciate the invitation to become players themselves, as well as purchasing games for their children (Jones and Thiruvathukal 2012:31).

The launch games for the Wii emphasized physically co-present social gameplay and vigorous physical activity, handily addressing potential consumers' anxieties about screen time, childhood obesity, how to create opportunities for active play in safely monitored spaces, and how to make consumer choices that properly demonstrate parental fitness (Bozon 2016). As Jones and Thiruvathukal observe, all gaming is social, but “the Wii was the first home video game platform consciously designed as a whole—from initial concept to prototype to shipped product—to first and foremost promote social gameplay out in physical space. . . . Engineering the social space of gameplay is its whole point” (2012:4–5). With its mimetic interface and range of “prop” peripherals—a hand-held remote that can be a tennis

racket, sword, or conductor's baton, a balance-board platform that draws attention to the shifting weight of the player's body—the Wii frames the play space as “the center of the action, the place where gaming is meaningfully experienced, where the player's body encounters the materiality of the platform” (Jones and Thiruvathukal 2012:23). *Wii Sports*, the Nintendo-developed launch title that came bundled with the Wii in most countries and was featured in television advertising for the new console, particularly emphasized these affordances. Sports-oriented titles also established a strong link between the Wii and physical fitness, suggesting that the Wii could be a platform for guilt-free productive play, or labor-made-fun.

The *Just Dance* series has its roots in *Rayman Raving Rabbids* (Ubisoft 2006), a Wii launch title comprising a set of mini-games that explored the potential of the Wii Remote as a gestural mimetic interface. A subcategory of dance mini-games was entitled “Shake Your Booty!”—an enthusiastic imperative that tells us a lot about the kind of social dance experience that *Raving Rabbids* aimed to evoke and that indexes a long history of global commercial circulation of African American popular culture. Notably, the Wii could not actually detect booty-shaking in *Raving Rabbids*; it tracked the handheld Wii Remote, not hip or torso movements.<sup>2</sup> Gameplay involved using arm movements to knock out an advancing cavalcade of bunnies in time to the music on a disco dance floor, reframing a boxing game as dance. Two years later, *Rayman Raving Rabbids: TV Party* continued to develop the dancing mini-game category by challenging players to mirror a stream of freeze-frame poses modeled by stick-figure icons. *Just Dance*, released by Ubisoft in 2009, built an entire game around this streaming-icon system and a 32-track playlist of licensed popular songs. Artists ranged from the Beach Boys and Anita Ward to Fatboy Slim and Katy Perry, with song selections evincing a mix of nostalgia, silliness, and anthemic bravura that became a signature of the franchise—the same bring-everyone-to-the-floor strategy that drives the work of successful wedding DJs.

As Harmony Bench observes, media formats choreograph bodies in highly specific ways: “Media represent bodily motion according to their protocols and parameters, and then compel dancers to fit themselves into the bodies that have been imagined for them” (2009:279). At the same time, “in the process of adapting and conforming to media formats, [dancing bodies] make new movement strategies available, render choreographies apparent, and reveal cultural assumptions regarding motion, labor, and corporeality” (6). Judging by its commercial success, *Just Dance* offered players compelling corporeal experiences and imaginative possibilities. Developed by Ubisoft's flagship Paris studio, its built-in cultural assumptions derive partly from contemporary Europe's robust and diverse dance-club cultures and warm embrace of dance-pop musical genres, ritually marked as public culture through the nationalist spectacle of the annual Eurovision song contest (see, e.g., McRobbie 1993, Thornton 1996, Redhead et al. 1997, Raykoff and Tobin 2007, Garcia 2011). *Just Dance* was initially marketed with the expectation of greater sales in Europe than the United States; despite lukewarm critical reviews that dubbed it “technically and graphically crude,” the game was the top-selling title in the United

Kingdom within a month of its holiday 2009 release (MacDonald 2014). In the United States, *Just Dance 2* was the seventh-best-selling game across all platforms in 2010, and took second place among Wii titles (Reilly 2011a). By the fall of 2014, the series had sold over 50 million copies worldwide (Lewis 2014).

When we consider the enormous and sustained commercial success of the *Just Dance* series, we would do well to step back and ask some basic questions about the nature of dance. *What is dance for?* Some will immediately protest that it doesn't have to be for anything; it is an art form, intrinsically valuable on aesthetic grounds, without recourse to utility. Dance has nothing to prove. Others might nimbly sidestep the question by explaining some special capacities of dance, without explicitly stating what ends these capacities might serve: Dance is a mode of expressive communication, of "corporeal orature" (DeFrantz 2004:67), of narrating, remembering, and archiving bodily experiences. It is a way of being in the world with one's own body and other bodies, a way of structuring one's sensorium, a way of seeing and being seen, feeling and being touched, whether skin-to-skin or at a distance bridged by kinesthetic empathy (Foster 2011). When we dance to music, we make sense of sound through the pattern and flow of gesture. When we listen to the sound of feet striking the floor, joints creaking, breath quickening in counterpoint with heart rate, we make sense of bodily structure through the pattern and flow of sound. Dance mediates sensory relations and social relations. With these principles in mind, the question might take a new form: If we have some idea of what dance can do, then what do we want it to do? What is dance *good for*?

If you wanted to design a successful commercial videogame about dance, you would have to engage with these questions. You would be in the business of persuading people that dance is good for something and that your game can bring out those qualities. You would have to make a game that offers pleasure and challenge, delivered through a dance experience. So you would have to ask yourself: What are the specific pleasures and challenges of various kinds of dance? How can we map them onto the structure of a game, with rules and rewards? And who are our players? Do they have experience as dancers, as gamers, both or neither? How will we teach them to dance, and to regard dance as play? What kinds of dance will they be willing to do? How will we convince them to engage with their bodies as the latest playable interface, easily plugged into a game system? How do we harness our dance game to other domains that matter to players: their music, their social networks, their self-image, even their physical fitness? And how do we stay in business? How do we make dance work as a consumable product that players can keep consuming, spending money on new games, dances, or songs? How do we tie our game to existing systems of production and consumption: celebrity, fashion, lifestyle products? Players need to know what this game is for: They have to recognize and accept its invitation to the dance floor.

The developers of the games I discuss in this book took different approaches to these questions while working at the same cultural moment and targeting the same consumers. *Just Dance* posits joyful disinhibition as the core function of social

dance. *Dance Central*'s central value is authenticity, generated through cycles of mastery-oriented rehearsal and performance undertaken in culturally specific dance contexts. Both also follow the lead of the Zumba dance-fitness craze by conjoining exoticist pleasure with responsible self-care: Discipline your body by freeing your hips. (The *Zumba Fitness* game series has also been enormously popular; it is not a focus of this book because it falls squarely in the tradition of home aerobics videos, with a light overlay of interactive game elements and minimal motion-tracking capacities [Pipeworks Software 2010].) Dance games are part of a broader trend in which popular music circulates in connection with both moving images and specific kinesthetic practices—that is, music is not something you absorb through your ears but something you encounter in connection with a playable interface that cultivates multisensory engagement. In recent years the *Guitar Hero* series offered a highly visible example of this phenomenon in the gaming world, but we could also look to YouTube dance crazes, karaoke, remix practices, and online music lessons (see Miller 2012).

In terms of core gameplay mechanics and game design lineage, dance games generally fall into the “rhythm game” genre: They involve haptic/kinetic interaction with an interface in time with audiovisual cues. This description also applies to the vast majority of video games across all genres; as Karen Collins argues, game audio design typically relies on “kinesonic synchresis,” or the binding of action and sound (2013:27). Collins’s term combines “kinesonic”—a portmanteau of “kinesthetic” and “sonic” that describes “the mapping of sound to bodily movements” (Wilson-Bokowiec and Bokowiec 2006:47)—with Michel Chion’s “synchresis,” referring to the perceptual phenomena generated by co-occurring sound and image in film (1994). In rhythm games, kinesonic synchresis is the main event: Gameplay explicitly revolves around forging haptic/audio/visual relationships and generating novel perceptual experiences through multisensory integration.

The electronic memory game *Simon*, first released by Milton Bradley in 1978, is one important antecedent for contemporary rhythm games (Knoblauch 2016). The original *Simon* was a round device about the size of a dinner plate, with its face divided into sectors by four large colored buttons. It integrated audio and visual cues by pairing these four buttons with distinctive sounds. *Simon* presented players with a series of audio tones, visually reinforced by flashing lights in each button. Players repeated the series by pressing the buttons; *Simon* then presented a longer series, gradually building up the difficulty level. The game thus bound together interface-specific motor skills, audiovisual engagement, and challenges to memory and attention span. In a broad sense these are common features of virtually all videogames—as Torben Grodal puts it, they are “stories for eye, ear and muscles” based on “learning processes and rehearsals” (2003:147). However, *Simon*'s explicit emphasis on listening, repetition, and linking button presses to audio outputs makes it a distinctly musical game. *Simon* engages players in the cognitive process of organizing sounds into meaningful units, while also cultivating motor-kinetic skills

that highlight the affinities of haptic computing interfaces and musical instruments (Blaine 2005, Miller 2012).

The many rhythm games released over the next 35 years continued to build on this model. As game sound technology developed beyond the domain of 8-bit synthesis, rhythm-game designers increasingly integrated contemporary popular music and dance styles into their games. These direct connections to popular culture helped make rhythm games both more conceptually accessible and more affectively complex, linking them to other domains of players' everyday lives (see Collins 2008b, 2013; Austin 2016). Three major game franchises released over a 10-year period exemplify these developments: *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami Corporation 1998), *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix Music Systems 2005), and *Rock Band* (Harmonix Music Systems 2007). All three clearly influenced the design and reception of *Just Dance* and *Dance Central*.

*Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*) was the dominant dance game series of its era. Historical accounts of game development circulating in academic and industry circles often highlight three “revolutionary” qualities of *DDR*: its use of an alternate interface, its reliance on popular music as a driver of affective experience, and its staging of digital gameplay as a competitive performance genre that could attract an audience (Smith 2004, Demers 2006). *DDR* was initially released as an arcade game in Japan in 1998, where it integrated some of the public performance conventions of arcade culture and karaoke culture (Konami Corporation 1998). The first home version of *DDR* was released for the PlayStation in Japan in 1999, with additional home versions released around the world starting in 2001. Whether on a large arcade machine with a metal stage area or on a foam dance pad at home, *DDR*'s dance gameplay revolves around footwork: Players are pressing buttons with their feet. As with the *Simon* game, both audio and visual cues play a role in directing their movements. A continuous stream of multidirectional arrows scrolling up the screen corresponds to arrows printed on the floor pad. Players move to the rhythms of a wide selection of pop electronica tracks, many of which were produced specifically for the game series and attracted a cult following. As is the case with many music/rhythm games, it might be technically possible for a player to earn high scores at *DDR* with the sound turned off, but that does not mean music is incidental to the satisfactions of gameplay. As Joanna Demers observes, “Playing these games can feel like a genuinely musical experience: The controller is no longer a trigger but a percussion instrument, and the player stops thinking in terms of locking on targets and instead tries to feel the groove” (2006:65).

*DDR* engages players in spectacular full-body performances for both machinic and human audiences. It stages tightly framed episodes of “mixed reality” gaming, “fold[ing] the ephemerality of digital representation and the concrete materiality of physical, embodied presence into a unique hybrid space” (Behrenshausen 2007:340). The game offers encouraging exhortations and playfully insulting feedback on players' dancing in both screen-text and voiceover forms, though it can only assess the accuracy of players' inputs on the floor pad. Human audiences

play a key role in arcade and tournament contexts and in social gameplay at home. Demers addresses *DDR*'s "tendency to draw crowds and hence turn game-play into a public performance" (59); following work by karaoke scholar Johan Fornäs, she observes that *DDR* gameplay, like karaoke, "leaves a gap in which the performer . . . restructures the surrounding layers of media. . . . That the gap is filled by a dancing body allows for a particular kind of diverse and global fan culture, while also creating tensions within it" (69). In the *DDR* context this "gap" is partly constituted by the limits of the floor pad interface; many human players and audiences became interested in performances that exceed what the game demands or can evaluate, such as acrobatic moves and feats of agility inserted between the required button presses (Smith 2004).

These deliberately excessive gameplay performances invoked standards for creativity, virtuosity, and authenticity that directly informed the design and reception of the *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* games. In pragmatic economic terms, *DDR*'s successful employment of an alternate controller—an extra piece of hardware that players had to be persuaded to purchase, learn how to use, and keep around the house—also provided a major impetus for the development of *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix Music Systems 2005). The game was commissioned by RedOctane, a maker of *DDR* dance pads, with the aim of selling guitar controllers. After Harmonix and RedOctane were acquired by separate parent companies in 2006, Harmonix went on to develop *Rock Band* (Harmonix Music Systems 2007), creating a long-running franchise rivalry driven by competing playlists of licensed popular music tracks, different approaches to balancing score-oriented versus rock-performance-oriented design elements, and related claims to musical and gaming authenticity—in many respects foreshadowing the competition between *Just Dance* and *Dance Central*. The *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* games were designed to evoke live rock performance experiences rather than simply functioning as instrument-playing simulators; this distinction drove decisions about how the guitar, bass, and drum controllers should replicate or diverge from traditional instruments in physical form and playing technique (Miller 2009). Similarly, *Just Dance* and *Dance Central* were each designed to evoke particular kinds of dance experience, rather than simply inculcating technical proficiency in controlling one's bodily motions.

In prior research, I showed how *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* engaged players in "schizophonic performance," forging a connection between the physical gestures of live musical performance and the reproduction of recorded songs (Miller 2009, 2012). These games proved to be highly effective platforms for schizophonic performance in large part due to some special characteristics of the rock genre. Canonical rock music features at least three distinctive instrumental lines (one or two guitars, bass, and drums), each of which could theoretically be performed live (Auslander 1999:82); each rock instrument also indexes a distinctive embodied performance style (Waksman 1999). With a few careful design cues, the games guided players in picking out one instrumental part from the mix and stitching it to their physical performance with an instrument-shaped game controller. There is

no straightforward way to apply these principles to electronic dance music genres (EDM). EDM tracks often feature layered samples that would be difficult to map to a single instrument interface. Even when there are distinctive individual instrumental parts, they might be physically impossible for a human to perform (as in the case of many sample-based drum parts), or they might be too repetitive to make for compelling gameplay. In EDM production, variation often comes in the form of shifting digital effects and the addition or subtraction of sampled layers, rather than showy instrumental solos that could be mapped to feats of manual dexterity on a controller. Activision, publishers of the *Guitar Hero* franchise since 2006, attempted to address these challenges and capitalize on EDM's soaring popularity with *DJ Hero* (FreeStyleGames 2009), a game that featured a controller modeled on a turntable. But players struggled to create a satisfying kinesthetic connection to the musical material using this interface, and the game sold very poorly (Miller 2013b). Dance games represent a different approach to this problem: They still guide players in mapping musical structures to embodied performance, but they do not revolve around virtual musicianship. They cultivate physically active, immersive, performance-oriented engagement with music without recourse to the idea that players are generating sound.

Like *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, *Just Dance* was designed as a platform for selling value-added versions of familiar popular music tracks. Its screen dancers model choreography that kinesthetically amplifies the music, and players dance along in their living rooms (see Chapters 3 and 4). Given *Just Dance*'s simple graphics, limited motion-detection system, and dearth of game-progression elements, many industry reviewers and gamers questioned whether it was a legitimate game at all. The game industry was changing rapidly during this period, as "casual games" for the Nintendo Wii, mobile devices, and social media platforms attracted tens of millions of new players, sparking something of an identity crisis for game industry professionals and longtime players (Juul 2010). Many writers for game industry websites seemed to approach *Just Dance* with suspicion if not outright hostility, addressing it as a collection of cartoon music videos with interactive menus; in the comment threads unspooling below their reviews, players dismissed the game as "shovelware," a derisive term for cheaply produced, technically unsophisticated, and creatively uninspired games designed solely to maximize profit for a publisher (see, e.g., Parkin 2010 and comments).

But although some regarded it as a hoax perpetrated on the masses, *Just Dance* was a runaway commercial hit, and industry writers were duty-bound to review it—not only to solve the mystery of "What made a throwaway party game on Wii a *Modern Warfare*-beater?" (Parkin 2010), but also because coverage of chart-topping games drives page views that in turn drive advertising revenue for web-based publications. As I discuss in Chapter 1, these industry reviews of *Just Dance* and associated player discourse show how the series challenged fundamental assumptions about what counts as authentic interactivity and worthwhile gameplay. *Eurogamer* writer Ellie Gibson summed up the early debate in a review published just as *Just*

*Dance* was reaching #1 standing on the UK game charts: “Just Dance should be rubbish. It’s stupid, shallow, crude and not nearly as technically proficient as it pretends. . . . But despite all that, if you’re in the right company and the right frame of mind, it’s tremendous fun” (Gibson 2010).

The initial reception of *Just Dance* established some of the terms by which *Dance Central* and the Xbox Kinect interface would be assessed when they came on the market a year later. *Dance Central* was designed as one of the launch titles for the Kinect, the motion-sensing camera peripheral released by Microsoft in 2010 in an effort to upstage the Nintendo Wii (Jones and Thiruvathukal 2012). The advertising slogan for the Kinect, “You are the controller,” not only played directly to consumers’ anxieties about their agency over technology but also recast the Wii Remote as an outmoded encumbrance, something destined to become obsolete as motion games reached their full potential. But the Kinect also invoked players’ experiences with an established technology. Unlike the Wii, the Kinect looks very much like a camera—a fact that called for preemptive reassurance about who would be in control of this new system (see Chapter 1). Following Tarleton Gillespie’s work on “the politics of platforms,” I suggest that in examining the first-generation games for this newly domesticated interactive surveillance technology, we can see designers and players “making decisions about what that technology is, what it is for, what sociotechnical arrangements are best suited to achieve that and what it must not be allowed to become” (Gillespie 2010:355–56).

The Kinect sensor would sit unobtrusively on top of the TV, ready to facilitate interactive media experiences. It would be integrated into everyday social and domestic spaces, functioning like a mashup of a gaming interface and a domestic surveillance system (Staples 2014). We have grown accustomed to sitting in front of or carrying around devices equipped with user-facing cameras and microphones, but we are also used to activating those technologies for specific activities; we look for the green light, the video monitor window, or the pulsing audio level indicator. The Kinect is different: If it is turned on, its cameras and microphone are always live. Moreover, self-monitoring feedback mechanisms that might give a player insight into exactly what the Kinect is “seeing” or “hearing” are highly variable and idiosyncratic, depending on the particular game or program being used. Accepting the charge of “being the controller” requires learning new forms of bodily self-control and may also entail new forms of self-disclosure. It is difficult to fully understand the perceptual capabilities of devices like the Kinect. They tend to create “information asymmetry” between observer and observed (Staples 2014:4), due in part to the proprietary “black box” status of their layered technologies and in part to the analogous complexity and unknowability of human embodiment. A mass-produced hardware controller with a few buttons offers tremendous communicative clarity: Press X, and you will know that you have pressed X, and the software will generally keep up its side of the bargain by responding to this input in a predictable manner. But as dance games have demonstrated to millions of players, without the mediating constraints of a controller, our bodies move