

Magic Disguised as Technology: Microsoft's Kinect, Gender, and Domestic Space

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Kinect is a camera peripheral for the Xbox 360 game console that allows players to interact with video games and other media using only their bodies and voices, making Kinect part of the category of motion gaming popularized by Nintendo's Wii console. Using a combination of three cameras, the Kinect sensor bar generates a three-dimensional map of the immediate six to ten foot area in its view, recognizes human bodies, and assigns nodes for key areas such as hands, joints, and the head so the device can track movement and respond to gestures and actions. The Kinect also responds to voice commands. The experience is novel enough that Microsoft has called the Kinect "magic disguised as technology," a phrase that attempts to mute the technology behind the Kinect while emphasizing the more "miraculous" attributes of the device.¹ Having sold over 25 million units as of February 2013, according to Microsoft, and with Kinect 2.0 shipping alongside every next generation Xbox One console (launched in November 2013), it is worth exploring how Kinect is imagined to fit into the domestic space of the living room increasingly defined by digital technologies.²

The historic gendering of the home can be linked to the mapping of the public sphere as masculine and the private sphere as feminine during the Victorian era, a mapping that helped immobilize and restrict the movements and freedoms of women in Western society. That the domestic space of the home has long been gendered feminine has been documented by media scholars like Lynn Spigel, who considers this gendering while exploring the introduction of the television into the home in postwar America along with the anxieties and gendered negotiations that introduction reveals.³ Part of this negotiation involves the question of where to best place the television to harmonize with existing family dynamics and practices. Cecelia Tichi adopts the term “electronic hearth” to describe the central place of the television within the home formerly occupied by the radio and, before that, the fireplace.⁴ More recently, Bernadette Flynn has tracked the migration of the video game console from the public arcade to the private home, where, after a brief history of occupying dens and bedrooms, the console now resides uncomfortably within what she renames the “digital hearth.”⁵ Drawing on this idea of the digital hearth, Ben Aslinger uses Nintendo’s Wii to discuss the problematics of the game console in a domestic space usually centered on the television before examining the problem of global product flows and video game hardware distribution.⁶ While Aslinger deftly moves from the domestically local to the transnationally global, my discussion here is more modest and contributes to scholarship on domestication, technology, gender, and space by exploring the marketing discourse around the introduction of Microsoft’s Kinect technology to the family home while hinting at the theoretically destabilizing potential of that technology in practice.

Following Nintendo’s success with the Wii between 2006 and 2010, Microsoft positioned the Kinect camera peripheral and the Xbox 360 as a domestic object that fits into normal family life in an attempt to capture the same non-traditional market, including middle-aged and female players. Yet because of Kinect’s unique spatial requirements, the integration of the device into the family room results in an intriguing reordering and disrupting of existing spatial dynamics and interior design. Microsoft marketed Kinect at

its launch through a promotional campaign consisting of televisual and print advertisements that I suggest construct an ideal, affluent play space, deemphasizing the technology while highlighting player bodies. In this way, the Kinect advertising discourse hails the middle-class family unit, including the sizeable market of mothers and female game players, trading in the masculinized, military-themed and individuated hero narratives typical of video game advertising for a feminized, inclusive marketing approach that focuses on familial connection and contact.⁷ However, when Kinect is actually brought into the home and users are asked to rearrange furniture to clear a play area, this fantasy gives way to spatial and gendered tensions.

You are the Controller

With an aggressive advertising campaign targeting the nuclear family, Microsoft adopted Nintendo's "blue ocean" marketing strategy in order to sell its camera hardware to new consumers and expand the video game market beyond the "standard" player, the 14 to 34-year-old male. Rather than market to this audience, Microsoft purposefully addressed the now significant market of players not normally associated with the hobby, specifically the mom market. For the launch of the Kinect peripheral, Microsoft partnered with popular daytime talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres. Oprah gave away the Xbox 360 console and Kinect to her audience, and Ellen demoed the best-selling Kinect game *Dance Central* for her audience before also giving away the console, camera, and game.⁸ Additionally, Microsoft paid for commercials during popular television shows such as *Glee*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *X-Factor*, and *Extreme Makeover: Home Addition*. At the time in 2010, Fox claimed *Glee* was the number one show among women in the 18–49 year-old demographic.⁹ Microsoft also placed Kinect print ads in magazines with large female readerships such as *People*, *InStyle*, *Real Simple*, and *Health*.¹⁰

With its ideal demographic targeted, Microsoft crafted a campaign to "naturalize" the idea of video game playing. The initial "You are the

Controller” marketing campaign deemphasizes the technology behind Kinect, often by not even showing the device until the end of the commercial, in order to focus on the movements of the body and the relationships among families, a choice that attempts to naturalize, by way of the imagined “naturalness” of the body, the potentially intimidating technology driving Kinect.¹¹ In *How Television Invented New Media*, Sheila Murphy takes up this discursive and technological shift toward the “embodied subject” in her discussion of game controllers, interactivity, and player agency.¹² Taking the position that televisual space actually spills over into the living room and indeed onto the body itself, Murphy argues that motion controls like Kinect muddle the mind/body split that maps the virtual onto the mind and the physical onto the body. Contributing to this shift toward the body as central agent of televisual experience and control, the Kinect campaign’s main tagline, “You are the Controller,” attempts to assuage the perceived consumer anxiety over complicated input devices usually associated with today’s game consoles. Going one step further than the Wii, which used a wand-like controller similar to a TV remote, the Kinect offers the unfamiliar player a gestural mode of input that mimics kicking a ball, playing catch, or waving hello. Interestingly, whereas Murphy focuses on force feedback technologies as some of the first to encourage a full-bodied gaming experience, Microsoft touts Kinect as a hands-free experience, a shift which frees up movement while sacrificing tactile feedback altogether. The advertisements remind us, “You don’t need to know anything you don’t already know or do anything you don’t already do. All you have to be is you.” Of course, the “you” implied here is an able-bodied, economically-stable person able to perform the kinds of actions Kinect recognizes in a room big enough to accommodate Kinect’s spatial requirements



Kinect Sports Commercial, 2010

A series of commercials for the initial batch of Kinect games emphasize the familial, classed, colorblind address that characterizes the marketing campaign. The artificial, antiseptic, non-descript family rooms in these promotional videos display carefully arranged feng shui, including plants, picture frames, and furniture. Each spot begins with a title card announcing the game that will be featured before we are introduced to the players from the Kinect's point of view. Starting each spot with a shot of the player rather than the game encourages identification with the active body and smiling face instead of the game or technology itself. For instance, a commercial for *Kinect Sports*, a collection of sports-related games, focuses on a middle-class, Latino family taking turns playing together before ultimately challenging another family via the Xbox Live online service. Here the commercial's camera position switches again and again from showing the family from the perspective of the Kinect and depicting the television's game action from the family's perspective, a visual strategy that deemphasizes the action onscreen in favor of the action in the physical play space of the living room. This back and forth perspective shift highlights player bodies and movements, even

going so far as to use slow motion in two shots to extend our time with the active body and dramatize its movements. In another shot, the camera lingers on the feet of the mother and daughter as they run in place, an action that propels their virtual avatars down the track in an in-game hurdle race. This short commercial marries corporeal and virtual elements of movement, touch, and connection. The mother gives her daughter a high-five after their race. The mother and father touch as she sits down and he stands up to play. The father of the online rival family pats his son's shoulder supportively before the boy attempts to block a penalty kick. The two families connect over Microsoft's online service.



Kinectimals Commercial, 2010

In stark contrast to traditional video game input, which Bernadette Flynn describes as a means of escaping domesticity and the body, Kinect's marketing discourse grounds the experience of play directly within the body.¹³ Rather than escaping their corporeal form, players are encouraged to associate the comfort of the living room space with the comfort of playing Kinect, a comfort found in the simplicity of gesture and movement. In the *Kinectimals* commercial, a young black girl smiles at the TV, the camera again looking out from the off-screen entertainment console. She pets the air in

front of her, her virtual hands caressing the face of the cartoonish tiger, or she falls down along with her virtual, clumsy pet. Her mother gleefully watches from the couch along with the girl's Asian friend before joining in briefly, choosing a pet of her own and reluctantly feeding the digital cat.¹⁴ Although the marketing for Kinect encourages mothers to join in the fun, it also invites them to revel in the joy of their children engaging in physical activity, something digital games are often criticized for discouraging in children. This commercial positions Kinect as an experience akin to playing with a beloved family pet, with players hopping in and out of the game at their leisure. Notably, the feminized, post-racial space in this commercial is devoid of any males, crafting a play space vastly different than the majority of video game advertising.



Kinect Joy Ride Commercial, 2010

Kinect's marketing draws on Western ideological continuity, framing the device as one that does not challenge the imagined domestic space but rather reinforces and reinvigorates the traditional family structure and notion of togetherness, a familiar tactic in the discursive domestication of new technology.¹⁵ In a spot dedicated to the stunt driving game *Joy Ride*, we are

introduced to a white family through a traditional shallow-focus close-up shot of what appears to be a generic nuclear family on a road trip, but we soon notice the steering wheel the father holds onto is not actually there. The mother gives him a look of loving doubt before the commercial cuts to a shot that reveals the father is playing a driving game, and his passengers are really just cheerful observers along for the virtual ride. Like the other commercials in the series, family members take turns playing, again touching each other as they exchange positions in front of the Kinect camera. Although the father figure does take control of the virtual wheel first, thus reiterating the patriarchal imperative that fathers are the head of the family, he quickly passes the wheel to his wife and children, and takes a backseat on the couch, just another observer.



Kinect Your Shape Fitness Evolved Commercial, 2010

While most of the commercials in the campaign share characteristics, the *Kinect Your Shape* commercial differs from the other spots in important ways, notably that it begins in the street, a public place, as a fit white woman stretches before a workout.¹⁶ As she stretches, a blue ring forms around her

feet, and when she stands, an arrow measures and indicates her height. Digital nodes appear around her mid-section, measuring her hips and waist. Here we cut to a black man in an urban setting jumping an imaginary digital rope as displays appear all around him, measuring his progress and allowing him to switch exercises. While each character is problematically established in a racialized space (white suburbia, black urbanity), in the end the commercial reveals that the two characters are actually working out together in front of the television using *Kinect Your Shape* in a sprawling and spotless house with an open floor plan, a dining room table in the background and a shimmering pool visible through the floor to ceiling windows. Through Kinect, space (and race) is collapsed into the ideal play space of aspirational consumer affluence.

These Kinect commercials present the race of players as unremarkable, a choice which contributes to a pattern of a post-racial, colorblind, consumer discourse that promotes pluralism and diversity while still maintaining a distinctly classist address.¹⁷ In other words, presenting a multicultural, “diverse” cast of players, an implicitly racially colorblind one, these commercials evacuate any signs of difference in favor of a homogenized understanding of class and social values. Yet such values are couched in culturally feminized interior designs and gestural gameplay that extends the space of play from the television to the living room, implicating the body and the imagination.

This multiplication of play spaces—virtual space, lived space, and imagined space—begs the critical approach Michael Nitsche puts forward with his five planes for analyzing space in video game culture.¹⁸ To play a Kinect game is both to be grounded in a familiar space with familiar people and to be transported to and to interact with other spaces. This accentuates the slippage between public and private spaces in an always-connected, technological culture that has merged the two previously cloistered spheres—or revealed them to have been always already blurred. Nitsche’s five spaces become imbricated, discrete but inseparable: mediated (virtual),

fictional (imagined), play (physical environment), social (human interactions) and rule-based (code and algorithm). The Kinect commercials suggest these spaces are indeed always working in conjunction with one another, transforming perceived, lived, and projected play spaces. However, regardless of virtual and imagined spaces, these commercials overwhelmingly begin and end in the home family room, reminding consumers that while Kinect transcends the barrier between public and private, or virtuality and actuality, the camera ultimately belongs, along with the family unit, in the aspirational middle-class living room.

Setting Up, Breaking Down

Unlike the viewing of television or even the playing of traditional, controller-based video games, the Kinect's play space has to be assembled in most homes, and part of this assemblage is the disruption of the established living room space, which often adheres to culturally feminized interior design choices. Spigel points out that the problem of integrating new media technology into the home has always been a spatial problem.¹⁹ Moreover, the recent integration of HDTV into many homes over the last ten years has signaled a similar dilemma. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that the massive size of contemporary HDTVs requires a rethinking of the domestic space of the living room that reveals the gendered tension present when masculinized technologies are brought into the domestic space structured by feminized interior design aesthetics.²⁰



Kinect Living Room Set-up

If there are legitimate worries in the feminized discourse of interior design over the appearance and arrangement of the domestic space, then the construction of a play space for Kinect potentially ruptures this feminized, classed attention to interior space and design. Indeed, as Murphy points out, most contemporary family rooms, with their glut of media technologies, fail to achieve the ideal looks of interior design magazines.²¹ Since most people do not have the 8–10 feet of open space in front of their entertainment centers, the experience of playing Kinect more often than not involves moving furniture. The kinetic in Kinect holds the potential to mean not just the kinetic movement of bodies in play, nor only the unintentional joke of having to move furniture to achieve the ideal play space, but also the potential for discursive movement in the construction of gendered spaces, such as the feminization of the domestic or the masculinization of the technology running Kinect, or in broader terms, the gendering of intimacy and care, science and technology. The practice of playing Kinect, including the important set-up process, not only keeps gendered tensions alive in the space of the home but also highlights the continual construction and deconstruction of gendered space.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the Kinect represents some kind of liberatory technology of play that rewrites the gendered history of the domestic space, and I certainly admit the domestic is a space that is always contested and transforming anyway. Instead, I want to introduce the possibility that Kinect's use requires a temporary destabilizing and transformation of the domestic space, similar to the way an important event like a party might briefly alter the uses and meanings of a household space. This may not necessarily break down existing hegemonic structures or discursive constructions, but instead theoretically allows for shifts, for play within these constraints. If nothing else, such actions remind us that gendered constructions are tenuous and subject to play.

Nonetheless, we have to remember that after play, most people will likely move the furniture back into place, returning any interior design arrangements and any gendered meanings of these arrangements to status quo. Moreover, with the improved technology running the next generation of Kinect for the Xbox One, Microsoft has purportedly eliminated the need to clear such a large space in the living room. On the one hand, this development suggests the company understands the complaints of its audience about the difficulty of using the device. On the other hand, this speaks to Microsoft's desire to limit the disruption— spatial, gendered, or commercial—that damages its product's reputation, but more importantly, also allows its product to offer an unintentionally open gendered politics. Going forward, media scholars should continue to monitor the relationships between video game technologies, private and public spaces, and the body—the often-unrecognized hub of player experience and interactivity.

Notes

- 1 "What is Kinect: Magic Disguised as Technology," Microsoft, <http://www.xbox.com/en-GB/Kinect/GetStarted> (accessed 4 September 2013).
- 2 Tom Phillips, "Kinect sales equal the original Xbox, higher than GameCube," *Eurogamer*, 12 February 2013, www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-02-12-xbox-360-worldwide-sales-top-76-million. Xbox One refers to the successor to the Xbox 360 and will be released in the fall of 2013.
- 3 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 4 Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1991).

- 5 Bernadette Flynn, "Geography of the Digital Hearth," *Information, Communication & Society* 6, no. 4 (2003): 551–576. For more on the gendering of video games in relation to the gendering of the living room, see Ann Gray, *Video Playtime: The Gendering of Leisure Technology* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 6 Ben Aslinger, "Make Room for the Wii: Game Consoles and the Construction of Space," in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).
- 7 I use the terms "hail" and "interpellate" in an Althusserian manner to describe the way Kinect's marketing directly addresses a particularly feminized audience, imagined to include people not traditionally interested in the game products Microsoft emphasizes on their platforms, such as *Halo* and *Call of Duty*.
- 8 Countdown to Kinect, "Countdown to Kinect: 17 Controller-Free Games Launch in November," Microsoft, 18 October 2010, www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2010/oct10/10-18mskinectuspr.aspx.
- 9 Ann Donahue, "'Glee' Throws Lifeline to Music Industry," *Reuters*, 13 December 2010, www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/13/us-glee-idUSTRE6BC0LL20101213.
- 10 "Kinect Ads 'You are the Controller,'" Microsoft, 21 October 2010, www.microsoft.com/presspass/features/2010/oct10/10-21kinectads.aspx.

- 11Of course, many scholars, among them notably Judith Butler, have deconstructed the idea of the natural body, arguing that our understanding of the body itself is culturally constructed and contingent on discourse.
- 12Sheila Murphy, "ALT-CTRL: The Freedom of Remotes and Controls," in *How Television Invented New Media* (New York: Rutgers, 2011). For other work on remote controls and agency, see Robert V. Bellamy and James Walker, "Who's in Control?: Gender Differences and Family Viewing," *Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland* (Guilford, 1996); Robert V. Bellamy and James Walker, *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television* (Praeger, 1992); Ann Gray, *Video Playtime: The Gendering of Leisure Technology* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 13Flynn, "Geography of the Digital Hearth," 560.
- 14A static print advertisement for Kinectimals captures many of these same elements. See Kinectimals Advertisement, blog.seattlepi.com/microsoft/files/library/20101021kinectimals.jpg (accessed 30 May 2013). This particular print ad ran in *Real Simple* and *InStyle* magazines.
- 15Cecelia Tichi makes a similar argument pertaining to the introduction of television. See Tichi, *Electric Hearth*, 53.
- 16This is probably because this commercial is for a game published by Ubisoft, not Microsoft, although the various ways the companies characterize the Kinect with real and imagined spaces is worth exploring.
- 17Yvonne Tasker and Diane Degra, eds., *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

18Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

19Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.

20Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 111.

21Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 123.

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