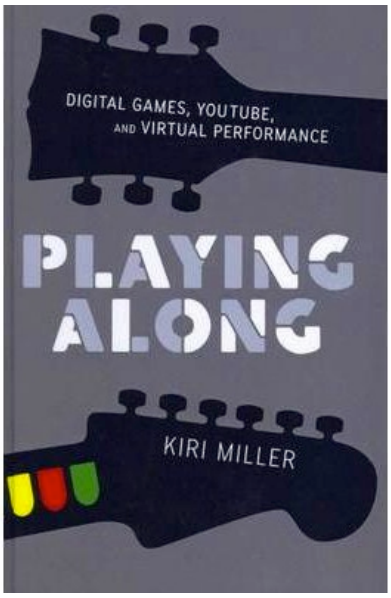
Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance

Reviewed by Mike D'Errico



In his 2005 essay, “Games, the New Lively Art,” media scholar Henry Jenkins reflects on the increasing ubiquity of video gaming as a form of digital entertainment, as he writes: "Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible" (177). At the time of this essay’s publication, the Entertainment Software Association estimated the Video Game Industry to be a seven billion dollar enterprise, a figure that has since nearly quadrupled (Entertainment Software Association [1]). With the rise of smartphones, tablets, and other digital formats, gaming has attained a heightened status as convergence media, as evidenced by video game billboard advertisements, the presence of game trailers at big screen movie previews, as well as the increased presence of rhythm games such as Guitar Hero, Rock Band, and Rocksmith, among many others. Running alongside this trend in gaming itself is an increasingly pervasive body of scholarship on video game related topics across disciplines, from media studies to musicology, performance studies, psychology, and sociology. In her recent book, Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance, Kiri Miller takes her cue from all of these disciplines, presenting the reader with clear, concise, and engaging case studies centered around the topics of music, video games, and the concept of virtual performance.

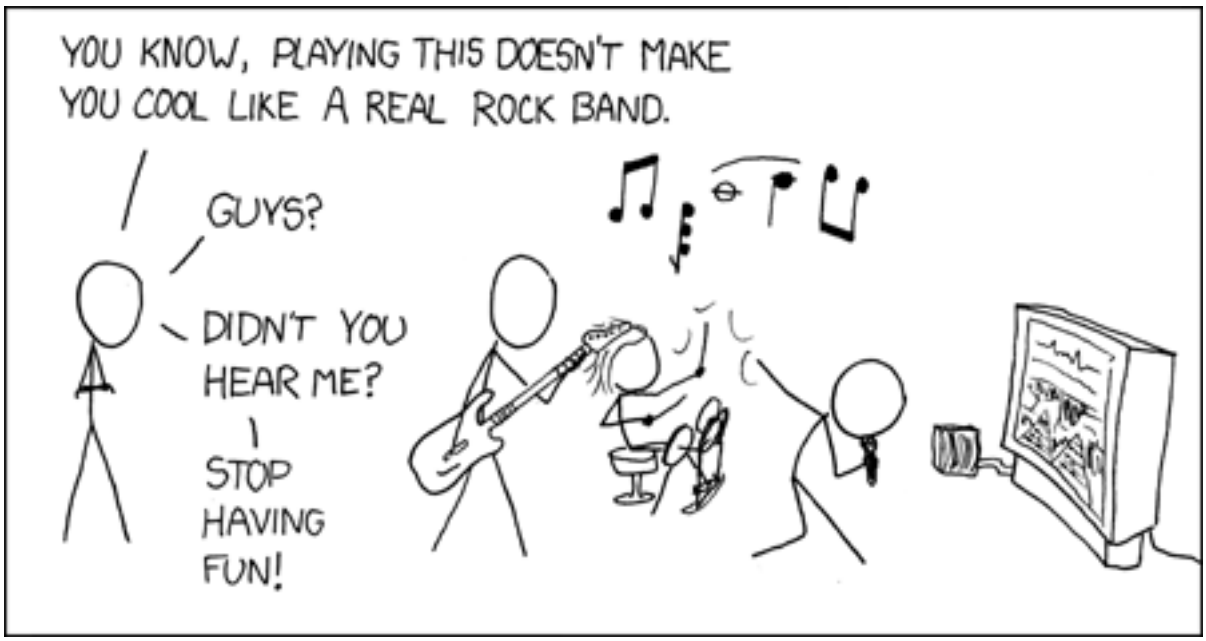
Organized into three disparate case studies, the book deals primarily with the “players” involved in the burgeoning fields of “participatory culture” (a term borrowed from Henry Jenkins): sandbox video games, digital music games, and Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube. In contrast to what she sees as an overly theoretical and practical body of scholarship within the emerging field of Game Studies, Miller focuses on a more “performance-oriented” approach, employing extensive ethnographic research in the form of participant observation, field notes, interviews, and surveys. Readers familiar with Miller’s work will recognize this book as a comprehensive extension of previously published essays, and the vast amount of fieldwork contained within its pages reflect the years she spent as both scholar and practitioner across multiple demographics and virtual communities.

Throughout each case study, the theme of “playing along” provides a strong conceptual framework. In part one, Miller examines the role of player and avatar in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas—an action-adventure video game vaguely set in South Central, Los Angeles circa 1992. While discussions around the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series almost universally denounce the games for their depictions of violence, carjacking, drug-use, and prostitution, Miller avoids this top-down approach by detailing the ways in which gamers are encouraged to cycle between an immersive gameplay environment and a critically detached position as a viewer. To do this, she utilizes theoretical frameworks from ethnomusicology, folklore, and tourism studies, arguing that GTA actually influences players to adopt tourist, ethnographic, and colonialist orientations to game world exploration, resulting in the feeling of “distanced immersion” definitive of the fieldwork experience.

As a critically self-reflexive investigation into the nature of virtual ethnography—in contrast to traditional accounts of "direct" human communication—chapter one is particularly useful for ethnographers and anthropologists who deal with the nature of fieldwork on a regular basis. Simultaneously, on an interdisciplinary level, Miller engages in the long-held ludology (gameplay-based gaming) versus narratology (story-based gaming) debate within game studies, positing the GTA game as a mass-produced "text," the playing of which offers the gamer a critical social perspective on his or her actions within the game. As a primary example, she focuses on the race and class implications of navigating a black, gang member avatar through the seemingly threatening environment of South Central LA. While her ethnographic data reveals an ambiguous relationship to this aspect of the game, Miller ultimately utilizes Henry Louis Gates's notion of "signifyin(g)" to explain the ways in which GTA is actually criticizing the culture of violence it is so often accused of celebrating. Unfortunately, this turn to a text-based, literary theory framework ends up downplaying her emphasis on player performance. In the end, her skills at telling the reader an engaging story of her experiences in digital folklore partly remove the legitimacy of those people she seems to care about most: the players. If the notion of "playing along" with GTA involves positing oneself between actual and virtual worlds, Miller's theoretical conclusion makes it unclear how the virtual world can have any affect on the "real" world.

This issue is resolved in chapter two, as she looks to popular music studies in an effort to deal with the role of music within the video game. Similar to the ways in which the player is simultaneously limited and free to choose how their avatar looks, after stealing a car in GTA the player is also allowed to choose from a set list of radio stations playing specific musical styles. Here, the concept of "betweenness" inherent to "playing along" carries much more weight, as Miller deals with both the player's choice of music as emblematic of a desire to immerse themselves in a particular social milieu, as well as the game designer's choice of radio station styles as contributing to the formation of musical taste and canonization within popular music. In this chapter, quotes from other gamers serve to problematize common assumptions regarding hip-hop music, emphasizing the ways in which GTA both essentializes and critiques the commodification of blackness. Experimenting with these relationships in the form of gameplay both allows game designers to transmit social history through popular music, while also enriching the gamer's critical experience of virtual worlds.

While part one of Playing Along deals with the gaming experience as involving a certain performance of identity, part two takes up the challenging issue of virtual music performance itself, examining the ways in which reception around music games such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band is steeped in debates concerning authentic musicality, authentic skill, and authentic masculinity. Tackling the oft-repeated question directed toward Guitar Hero players, "Why don't you just pick up a real guitar?" Miller presents a wealth of ethnographic data from online forums, gamer interviews, and gaming competitions. Her thesis acknowledges the unsubstantial nature of this question, revealing that not only have Guitar Hero and Rock Band influenced players to pick up "real" instruments (if they were not already musicians), but that the gaming experience should actually be valued as a new musical experience altogether, one that enhances and complements other aspects of music-making and listening.



Miller's theoretical framework is particularly intriguing here, as she engages discussions surrounding virtual music

performance and the body, issues related to the oft-rejected concept of authenticity, as well as the idea of music gaming as a form of musica practica—everyday amateur music-making. Indeed, the theme of "playing along" begins to really make sense throughout this section, as it is made clear that the space of the "virtual" exists neither in the realm of complete embodiment (in ourselves) nor complete immersion (in the game), but rather in the betweenness of "human" and "machine" that defines all technological interfaces. In light of this, it would have been nice for Miller to expand the scope of this section to include a few passages on virtual performance within electronic dance music (EDM). While not directly related to her case study, EDM performers often receive similar accusations of inauthenticity as their Guitar Hero and Rock Band counterparts, often charged with "just pushing buttons," or worse, checking their e-mail while on stage (Montano 2010: 408). Despite growing concerns among performers and audiences, the number of academic discussions related to virtual music performance—particularly in popular idioms—remains rather small, thus it would be a positive step for Miller (and others interested in these topics) to reach out to the EDM crowd.

In chapter four, Miller continues her discussion of Guitar Hero and Rock Band, examining the public performance of these games as carried out at tournaments, bar nights, and on YouTube. Her concept of "schizophonic performance"—when a performer links the physical gestures of "live" musical performance with the reproduction of recorded songs—is addressed first through the lens of popular music studies, relating the physicality of Guitar Hero and Rock Band performances to that of the rock music "guitar hero" as outlined by Simon Frith and Steve Waksman, among others. Here, Miller once again engages discussions around rock music authenticity, ultimately viewing the intense physicality of many Guitar Hero performances as parodying their rock counterparts. This section of the chapter is intellectually stimulating as well as a lot of fun to read, if not solely for the hilarious pictures and the amazing YouTube video clips of virtual guitarists and their gear (both of which can be found at Miller's web blog [2].

Yet, as the chapter progresses, Miller falls into the same theoretical trap that we came across in chapter two, overwhelming the reader by presenting a conglomeration of theories and methodological approaches. Performance studies topics such as queer theory, liveness, and cyborg identity are mashed with historical studies of music and technology, both of which combine with her own wealth of ethnographic data. While this approach offers the reader a helpful grab bag of ideas, it is easy to lose sight of her argument as it swims through such a vast interdisciplinary pool of thoughts. That being said, part two of the book is a thoroughly engaging read, dealing with highly pertinent topics to both practitioners and scholars.

As we reach the third and final section of Playing Along, Miller introduces us to the ubiquitous yet vastly understudied realm of Web 2.0 and virtual pedagogy. Chapter five deals with YouTube music lessons, weighing the basic advantages of online instruction—convenience, repeatability, and affordability—against the restrictions of the virtual lesson interface, most particularly the inability to offer student-specific feedback. As is the case throughout this book, Miller offers extensive amounts of interview data on the topic, but her most crucial insights are generated from her own experiences with the online lessons, combined with her resulting field notes. While this chapter is perhaps less useful to the music or media scholar interested in theoretical issues, the pedagogical processes that Miller details here offer a great first-hand account of music instruction in the digital age, particularly for practical music educators. Indeed, one of the primary strengths of Playing Along lay in its emphasis on virtual performance—of various sorts—not as something to replace its "actual" counterpart, but as a mode of engagement which offers different perspectives altogether.

In the final chapter of the book, Miller continues her engagement with Web 2.0 discourse by introducing the reader to a concept she calls "amateur-to-amateur" (A2A) online interaction. While the concept of "peer-to-peer" web-based communication practices has been lauded as one of the major advances of digital networks, Miller notes that these practices typically involve individuals sharing digital files across computers, without necessarily interacting with other users. Through an examination of even more outlets for virtual instruction (conga, piano, and yoga lessons), Miller characterizes A2A pedagogy as being focused on the sharing of kinesthetic knowledge, by users who take pleasure in using their skills to help others, not necessarily assured of material compensation. As is the case throughout Playing Along, Miller's vast experience as a virtual fieldworker shines here as she details the ways in which virtual teachers provide users with a glimpse into everyday music making. She deals with the dangerous territory of YouTube comments, revealing complex debates and dialogues among online communities, as well as the ways in which virtual teachers navigate these issues. Once again, the question arises as to how one communicates his or her kinesthetic experiences without bodily presence and a shared sensorium. Furthermore, in the case of the virtual transmission of traditional practices such as conga drumming and Ashtanga yoga, who has

the right to represent a traditional practice, particularly when many respected practitioners cannot claim authority based on ethnicity or cultural heritage? Miller concludes that one of the core traits of A2A learning is its ability to destabilize conventional relationships; between teacher and student, the individual and his or her relationship to an established canon, as well as the relationship between competing forms of media.

These tensions lead Miller into her epilogue, in which she states that although interactive digital media has without a doubt helped break down many barriers of access (of time, money, geography, gender, age, class, race, etc.), these barriers remain, defining the field of virtual performance as one of constant negotiation between the "actual" user and the "virtual" space. As a result of this constant interplay, traditional narratives, musical canons, embodied performance techniques, and cultural ideologies are both reinforced and broken down, creating unique spaces of performance that ultimately work to transform our core understandings of musicality, creativity, play, and participation. In the end, it is Millers' sensitivity and knowledge of this aspect of virtual performance that makes Playing Along such an engaging and necessary read for scholars across disciplines.

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