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In *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Kiri Miller effectively reveals the participatory value of video games and social media. The author challenges the reader to evaluate critically the various virtual experiences prominent in popular culture. Miller divides the book into three parts, totaling 226 pages. The first section, “Playing Along with Grand Theft Auto,” analyzes the journey of playing as a preset avatar—a black gang-member—in the virtual interpretations of American cities. In part two, “Playing Along with Guitar Hero and Rock Band,” Miller’s concept of “schizophonic performance” is the primary focus for analyzing the nature of experience in virtual performance. In the final section, “Playing Along with Communities of Practice,” Miller dissects online virtual pedagogy, particularly on YouTube, weighing both positive and negative aspects of learning music through amateur-to-amateur online interaction.

Overall, by “Playing Along” with social media and video games, Miller suggests preconceived notions of reality are an oversimplification of the divide between virtual and visceral worlds. The book targets an open-minded, inquisitive, and technologically aware audience. The three-part format of the book makes for an easily digestible and comprehensive argument that offers extensive research on the subject matter, while posing a number of provocative philosophical questions about reality.

In part one, Miller investigates the virtually created environment of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*—a fully functional (or dysfunctional) landscape inspired...
by American culture—through a variety of analytical frameworks. The author takes a different approach than the popular, top-bottom analyses of the GTA franchise that have effectively labeled the game as an ultraviolent, sexually charged, and widely inappropriate virtual experience. Instead, Miller analyzes the game as a tourist destination, a pop-culture interpretation of late-twentieth-century Los Angeles’ societal ideologies, and a fully equipped virtual museum. Miller suggests the primary function of San Andreas is to serve as an agent for living vicariously through the avatar. The author investigates game world exploration from various viewpoints, primarily through those of ethnography and touristic lenses that shed light on the personal experience of the player.

Despite its immersive independent gameplay, the player’s relationship to the preset avatar—a black gang member struggling through treacherous rival gang territory—is complex in nature because while playing the gamer finds themselves interacting within the boundaries of the virtual setting, identifying themselves with their avatar, and in turn vicariously experiencing life within the confines of San Andreas. By “playing along,” gamers gain a type of first-hand experience in the shoes of a virtual avatar, seeing through his eyes and hearing through his ears. Furthermore, while these experiences feel unique and dissociated from the real world, the illusion of synchronicity is false, because this acquaintance with another domain is shared among all players of San Andreas as a result of playing as the same preset avatar. An avatar whose background, values, goals, and aspirations are entirely preset allows for zero customization, and in turn, the same experience is shared, creating a sort of artificial community among gamers.

This lack of customization also emphasizes a subconscious relationship created between the gamer and the creators of the game, as suggested by Lakshmanan Chidambaram and Ilze Zigurs in their book *Our Virtual World: The Transformation of Work, Play and Life via Technology*. Miller points out that with this in mind, the line that divides what is real and what is not real is unclear and that the experiences we share through both virtual and visceral realms are both valid. She goes on to emphasize the ambiguity of the nature of participatory culture because of the dynamic environment in which we interact.

In relation to musical experience, the creators of San Andreas offer the player control of an integrated radio, tapping into the emotional experience of the game through the emotional capacity of music. This integrated radio serves as a series of playlists organized by genre, featuring an extensive collection of

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music that makes up the GTA soundtrack. Jamie Sexton’s book, *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, is an excellent reference that supports Kiri Miller’s findings regarding the *Grand Theft Auto* in-game radio in discussing the emotional capacity of music in video games. The music in San Andreas mirrors the cultural landscape in which it exists, and the player’s conception of situational experiences within the game is affected. The stereotypical music that glorifies gang activity such as hip-hop serves as a bridge between virtual and visceral worlds that further renders questions of authenticity of virtual experience redundant by making the game feel even more real.

The second part of *Playing Along* focuses on *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* as new methods of interaction with popular music. As opposed to just playing through a two-dimensional video game, Miller highlights the participatory value of performance in *Guitar Hero* style games. To say that playing *Guitar Hero* is a legitimate musical experience is highly controversial, but Miller forces the reader to compare the experience of playing *Guitar Hero*—essentially the act of mimicking guitar performance using a simplified guitar-shaped game controller, and playing along with music or a band—and playing music using a traditional instrument. Miller points out that the gamer is still necessary for the music to be heard, because if the gamer stops strumming, the guitar track disappears from the prerecorded song. Heated discussion of the musicianship inherent in these virtual performance-oriented games is not Miller’s primary concern, however. Instead, she focuses on investigating the participatory value of the gameplay, and deduces the musical experience of *Guitar Hero* is comparable to that of playing music, because the player is responsible for activating the recording through simultaneous “strumming” and “fretting.” The author reiterates that the experience of playing *Guitar Hero* and other games of the same genre is unique in that the player isn’t idly listening to music nor are they playing traditional instruments.

This interstitial space is an intriguing part of Miller’s focus, and much of her argument situates itself in this ambiguous state of reality. The social experience in playing games like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* at a bar or a party has ethno-musicological implications, as it is unclear what performing pre-recorded music live really means to society. Miller identifies the ambiguous nature of these experiences as something shared among fellow gamers as well as

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the collaboration between game developers, the recorded musicians, and the player.

The third and final section of the book deals with the value of online music pedagogy, with particular focus on David Taub and Nate Brown’s online curricula for guitar and drum instruction. Both programs have been highly successful in attracting international attention and garnering students from across the globe, communicating with them virtually and in turn effectively destabilizing the traditional relationship between teacher and student. Miller outlines the differences both structurally and practically inherent in traditional pedagogical methods and the ways in which Taub and Brown have adapted them. It is through this adaptation to virtually transmitted lessons that Miller suggests the relationship between the student and teacher is redefined. Miller challenges the reader to question and judge the legitimacy of both the lessons and the teachers themselves as well as the ramifications of destabilizing the core relationship between teacher and student.

Moreover, Miller’s take on the student-teacher relationship as it pertains to YouTube music instruction parallels that of author Nicole Biamonte, who outlines the endless accessibility of material on YouTube.4 With this teaching tool, lessons can transcend the relationship between space and time, allowing students to learn using virtual music lessons at any time without the physical presence of a teacher. In addition, students can use the playback functions of standard video embedded applications to rewind, slow down, and speed up lessons, revolutionizing music pedagogy.5

Thanks to the popularization of online music lessons and the constant demand for tutorials, amateur-to-amateur (A2A) pedagogy has become increasingly common.6 These online teachings are entirely comprised of kinesthetically transmitted knowledge without physical presence or shared sensorium. Miller touches on the limitations inherent in current media platforms, but seems in favor of the development of web-based social media such as YouTube and blogs for instructional purposes. The author continuously emphasizes the benefits of this recent shift in pedagogical practices, and states that as a result of digital media, participation has widely increased, embodying social practice of real-world experience through virtual transmission.


6 Ibid, 15.
From early on, it is clear this book is aimed at proving human experiences can be shared through virtual experience in digital media, transcending limitations such as space and time. Miller aims at bridging the perceived gap between virtual and visceral worlds and suggests that experience is participatory in nature, and despite preconceived notions of what is real, virtual experience is equally legitimate and should be weighed as such in studies on participatory culture. The author uses various methodologies, such as participant observation, interviews, and surveys, to back up her arguments. Using the theme of “playing along” in digital media, Miller manages to create a well-rounded case for digital media in participatory culture. Miller is effective due in part to her extensive fieldwork that she employs to properly explain theoretical concepts previously unfounded. In a vast and rapidly expanding field, Miller manages to adequately introduce these concepts with relative ease, and through her book, effectively raises awareness for the legitimacy of virtual experience and its relationship to what we traditionally refer to as real.

In Playing Along, Kiri Miller both effectively summarizes previous findings by fellow experts in the field and breaks new ground with exciting research. Research in digital games and media is a growing field, particularly after the turn of the twenty-first century, due in part to the rapidly expanding and constantly changing nature of the topic. Miller borrows from concepts such as “participatory culture,” a term coined by Henry Jenkins, to discuss her own exciting research in virtual experience. What makes this book so interesting is Miller’s commitment to using a large variety of research methods to both adequately support her claims and to keep the discourse of the book fresh for casual readers and scholars alike.

Although it is apparent Miller has made an effort to make connections and keep things interesting in Playing Along, much of her research and writing in the second part of the book with regards to Guitar Hero and schizophrenic performance—the process of the performer linking the physical gestures inherent in live music performance while simultaneously activating prerecorded musical material—is a repetition of her article, “Schizophrenic Performance: Guitar Hero, Rock Band, and Virtual Virtuosity.” In Miller’s defense, her research is recent and entirely relevant to the second part of this book, and Miller uses her previous research to solidify the reader’s understanding of the concept she herself coined

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before elaborating on it. Still, if you are familiar with her previous work, the concept is essentially unchanged.

Moreover, Miller’s strong opinions inevitably clash with other scholars. Most of Miller’s divergences from widely accepted societal opinions are a result of her desire to validate virtual experiences in controversial games such as **Grand Theft Auto** and **Guitar Hero**. Given the subjective nature of the field, perspective is incredibly relevant in studies of virtual experience and participatory culture. Much of Miller’s research relates to seminal work conducted by Karen Collins, whom Miller cites frequently. In Collins’ most notable work, **Game Sound**, she traces the digital narrative of video games since their beginning, and outlines the exponential growth of the importance of audio in video games with regards to the actual experience.

**Playing Along** sets out to challenge the status quo and force the reader to rethink his/her positions on the validity of the digital experience. The book successfully conveys new concepts and backs them up with a wide range of relevant research. Miller gives the reader the knowledge to build his or her own opinions on the subject matter, while provoking critical thought by asking the right questions. Her curiosity and thirst for knowledge in the field is both contagious and exciting given the ever-expanding virtual universe. While reading **Playing Along**, I felt Miller managed to convey her message with clarity, strategically citing sources to support her arguments, while maintaining an authoritative tone throughout the book. Over the course of each of the case studies, however, I felt that Miller went off on unclear tangents that made reading feel like sifting through irrelevant information in hopes of regaining the train of thought that had me hooked from the first chapter. This lack of efficiency unfortunately took away from the book’s underlying points and flow.

Overall, I believe Miller has contributed considerably to scholarship in her respective field. She has both shed new light on the value of virtual performance, and organized her findings in a manner that is accessible to anyone who is culturally aware and technologically inclined. More than anything, while still satisfying the reader with answers and introspective insight, Miller answers every question with another question, which can only lead to more ground-breaking research. Her desire to discover and break the social-ideologies surrounding the value of digital media is highly contagious, and leaves the reader wanting more.

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9 ibid.

For Further Reading:


