

# Dancing machines: ‘Dance Dance Revolution’, cybernetic dance, and musical taste

JOANNA DEMERS

*Department of Music History and Literature, Thornton School of Music, University of Southern California, 304 Waite Phillips Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0851, USA*  
E-mail: [jtdemers@usc.edu](mailto:jtdemers@usc.edu)

## Abstract

*In ‘Dance Dance Revolution’ (DDR), an arcade and home video game distributed by the Japanese entertainment corporation Konami, players move their feet in specific patterns set to electronic dance music. Only by achieving a high accuracy rate can a player advance from one level to the next. DDR enjoys worldwide popularity among teenagers and young adults, partially due to the marketing of the game’s ‘soundtracks’ as separate, purchasable collections of underground techno, house, and drum ‘n’ bass. This article considers the Internet communities of DDR fans and their debates concerning ‘mainstream’ culture and musical taste.*

Many of the popular music styles that emerged during the twentieth century were accompanied by dance crazes. The Charleston, the jitterbug, the twist, and the robot number among twentieth-century dance steps rendered momentarily fashionable by an equally transient pop style. These crazes united individuals on the basis of shared taste in music, wardrobe, courtship rites, and sometimes means of intoxication. The following case study highlights activities that may recall previous dance crazes, because the group under consideration consists primarily of adolescents and young adults with disposable income who make this particular dance the centre of their social interactions. Dance here allows participants to articulate their sexuality, gender identity, and physical grace, while also facilitating both camaraderie and competition. And, of course, the music to which these participants dance is itself important because it reflects the aesthetic cultivation of its listeners, a trait that Sarah Thornton has summed up as ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1996).

So far, these generalities could apply to any number of youth subcultures predicated on dance, from the burgeoning rock ‘n’ roll movement of the late 1950s to the house scenes of the 1980s. Yet the similarities stop here. This case study focuses on ‘Dance Dance Revolution’ (DDR), a video game manufactured by the Japanese entertainment corporation Konami. In this game, arrows pointing in cardinal directions scroll across a monitor screen in time with the beat of a song. Players must match the pattern and speed of the arrows by touching their feet to sensors located on the dance floor. Only by achieving a high accuracy rate can a player advance from one level to the next. For game developers, fans and promoters, the ‘revolution’ in ‘Dance Dance Revolution’ is its combination of dance, physical exercise, music, and sophisticated graphics technology, united for the first time in a video game. DDR was



Figure 1. Jean Reno Plays DDR.

released in Japan in October 1998, and made its way to arcades in Asia, Europe, and the United States by 1999 (Traiman 2001B). In that short span of time, the game has overhauled the dance experience for many young adults by establishing new norms for social interaction and even the status of dance itself. Figure 1 shows a still from the 2002 film *Wasabi* (starring French actor Jean Reno) of a typical DDR scene in Japan.

DDR has become an internationally popular means of celebrating and relaxing among the 10- to 30-year-old age group, and fulfils participants' desires for socialisation and courtship just as discos and raves did for previous generations. Fans of the arcade versions of DDR are known to spend as much as \$1,000 per year on game-play, while home versions of DDR have consistently sold well since their appearance in the late 1990s (Kirby 2002).

This article explores two contradictions posed by DDR: The interaction between an individual and a computer has rendered traditional human-oriented dance experience obsolete. And despite the fact that it is distributed globally by a leading video game company, DDR designers and players alike consider the game to be a localised subculture in which participants' enlightened musical taste resists 'mainstream' stagnation. DDR's music and images depict a cyber-dance club in which the player can choose songs from a variety of musical genres. The marketers of DDR have advertised the game as a sensitive response to fans' taste for fresh new underground music. This has proven to be a winning strategy, so much so that DDR cannot in any real sense be considered a subculture: it is part and parcel of the teenage experience in several industrialised countries. Yet the attraction of this game hinges upon players' beliefs that they are interacting in a selective musical subculture, one that exists through Web communities of informed music fans. I gathered data for this project through observing DDR participants at arcades in Honolulu, Los Angeles, Ottawa, and San Diego. In addition, I interviewed European and North American gamers through a discussion forum on the DDR-fan website, <http://www.ddrfreak.com>.

## A genealogy of DDR

The imagery in DDR draws from two sources: dance club culture and cybernetic science fiction. Dance culture since the 1960s has revolved around the discothèque or

club, spaces where groups of people socialise and share common musical taste. A ubiquitous theme with cybernetic toys, films and novels is anxiety over the definition of humanity, and whether impending technological innovation threatens society. DDR's popularity is due to its successful integration of these seemingly unrelated spheres into a cohesive cyber-punk environment where dance, musical connoisseurship, and cybernetic futurism coexist.

Modern dance club culture is best understood as a reaction to earlier social dances, which in Europe and North America during the first half of the twentieth century were typically structured around the interaction of a couple: an assertive man leading a compliant woman through a set of ritualised steps (Bryson 1997, pp. 55–80). This practice continued in many industrialised countries through the rock 'n' roll era of the 1950s, but gradually dissolved as newer forms of popular music such as rock and soul involved *freestyle* or extemporised dancing by groups of varying number not necessarily organised into couples. Will Straw notes that by the late 1960s, dancing among whites in particular 'had broken down into a rather formless kind of personal expression, and no longer followed prescribed dance steps' (Straw 2001, p. 165). Just as dance lyrics of the 1940s or 1950s espoused conservative views of courtship and sexual roles, late 1960s dancing embodied the chaos and rebellion that contemporary songs championed.

Disco's rise in the 1970s introduced a new dynamic to social dancing. The gay clientele of many discos rendered traditional male–female coupling irrelevant, and with it, conventionally gendered designations of assertiveness and passivity.<sup>1</sup> On a crowded dance floor, dance groupings could instantaneously shift from isolated individuals to couples to larger groups in line formations. Freestyle dancing dominated the early years of disco, although formalised steps were later adopted as disco travelled from outside urban gay nightclubs into smaller towns in the United States and Europe (Gilbert and Pearson 1999, pp. 12–14). Depending on the music and the mood of the DJ and crowd, a single dancer could command the attention of the entire club, or alternatively, the floor could be taken up by numerous persons dancing as a synchronised whole. With disco, the individual could define him- or herself in relation to the whole, without obligatory recourse to a partner. By the 1980s, disco had nominally disappeared but left both musical and social traces in house and rave cultures, dance environments that foregrounded individual experiences within large groups (Fikentscher 2000, pp. 19–32). Unlike disco, today's post-HIV dance etiquette minimises physical contact while prioritising individual sexuality, sometimes enhanced by the drug Ecstasy (Reynolds 1998, pp. 80–91; Pini 2001, pp. 34–5, 164–5).

In DDR, graphical displays of flashing neon colours recreate a contemporary dance club experience. But it is the player and not the arcade game who determines the musical content of each level. Before the game begins, the player picks a character from a panel of several male and female dancers of differing ethnicities and attire. The player must also choose the type of music (e.g. disco, house, funk, or drum 'n' bass) and difficulty level ranging from 1 (the easiest) to 10 (the hardest). Although the putative centre of attention is the ongoing barrage of arrows, the player's character becomes a riveting virtual dance partner, a comic book-like, sexy doppelgänger who enacts the movements that the real player executes on the dance pad.

As the player progresses through a level, the screen and speakers emit encouragements such as 'Perfect', 'Great!', or 'I was moved!' if the player successfully performs the choreography. Errors prompt exclamations like 'Almost!' or 'Boo!'. The sheer magnitude of flashing colours, moving images, spoken commentary, and music



Figure 2. Sample DDR Characters.

can confuse and distract the player from her goal of completing a level. Concentration is crucial to keep up with the arrows that move quickly across the screen, and missing a step could cause the player to lose the beat, and ultimately, the whole game.

In terms of its song repertoire, DDR is rooted in disco and post-disco forms such as techno and house. But DDR can be read as the ultimate postmodern dance experience because the game displays various forms of dance imagery without stylistic or historical continuity (Harvey 1990, p. 62; Jameson 1991, p. ix). While the lights and dance styles of DDR allude to recent pop dance history, the arrows that indicate where to place the feet are themselves an iconic reference to earlier dance manuals that featured ichnography, or diagrams of foot positions for various dance steps.<sup>2</sup>

Most DDR participants are in their late teens or early twenties, so it is unlikely that many of them recognise allusions to dances that were popular before they were born. Many players do, however, catch the game's references to forms of cybernetic science fiction from the past two decades. DDR recalls 1980s' futuristic games like *Simon* (manufactured by Milton Bradley), a handheld disc divided into four different-coloured, depressible panels. The object of *Simon* was to repeat the pattern of flashing lights by pressing panels in the correct sequence. This was effectively a form of 'Concentration', a game pitting the memory of a human against that of a machine.

A more recent video game predecessor of DDR was Sony's 'PaRappa the Rapper', a 1997 Japanese arcade game that challenged players to re-perform a basic pattern in much the same way as *Simon*. But while *Simon*'s simple game board and



Figure 3. A Typical DDR Screen.

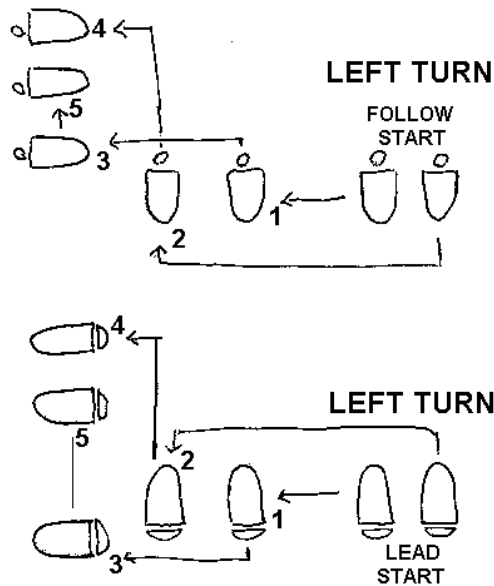


Figure 4. Social Dance Ichnography.



Figure 5. The 'Simon' Game.

rudimentary electronic sounds epitomised minimalism, PaRappa provided an elaborate multimedia experience whose main attraction involved music. And where Simon required only a correct repetition of a sequence of colours, PaRappa also challenged the player to replicate whole rhythms, including both attacks *and* durations. The game 'plot' centres around the character PaRappa who must rap in order to impress his girlfriend Sunny Funny. PaRappa the Rapper was a curious development in the intensely competitive video game industry of the late 1990s. The market was dominated on the one hand by violent 'first-person shooter' games such as *Doom*, and on the other by non-violent but slow-paced puzzlers such as *Myst* (Kline, Dyer-Witheyford and De Peuter 2003, pp. 146–7). Despite the commercial appeal of first-person shooters, many criticised their graphic violence and lack of socially redeeming messages. PaRappa the Rapper was in many ways the perfect blend of fast-paced arcade action and New Age positivity: competition here consisted not of blowing one's enemy away, but dazzling them with a superior display of moves and music. PaRappa was marketed towards younger children which explains its non-violence, but the premise of a game based on rhythm and music made PaRappa popular among older players as well. Other computer game companies seized upon the market opened by PaRappa, releasing a slew of so-called 'rhythm-music' games involving players imitating musicians. *Samba De Amigo*, released by Sega, asks the player to move maracas in time to the Latin rhythms. Other titles include *Taikono-Tatsujin* (by Namco), a drumming game, *Beatmania* (by Konami), a DJ turntabling game, and *FreQuency* (by Harmonix), in which players mix and remix as many as twenty different pre-recorded songs. Konami's success with DDR led it to create an entire sub-division devoted to rhythm-music games, known as Bemani (short for Beat Mania).

Humans had been imitating machines long before the 1980s. As Theo Cateforis points out, there is a rich history of twentieth-century dance crazes in which humans replicated the jerky mechanised motions of a robot (Cateforis 2004, p. 566). From the Italian Futurists of the 1920s to the robot dances of punks, b-boys, and the New Wave, musicians and dancers have returned to the robot as a foil to the smooth movements of a natural human. The gestures required to play DDR recall robot dancing popularised during the 1970s, but they also reference the figure of the *cyborg*, an amalgam of human and machine or computer parts. Cyborgs are the latest chapter in the West's preoccupation with automatons and human-manufactured chimera, a fascination that culminated famously with the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Science-fiction perennially features cyborgs, from the villainous man-machine Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* saga to human-machine synergies in Japanese manga (comic books) and anime (animated television and feature films). In rhythm-music games and other



such pastimes, the player must touch the computer console in order to reproduce the gestures of her machine-opponent; this physical contact, in effect, turns the player into a cyborg whose physical actions are amplified by a computer.

Cyborg-fixated entertainment is often tinged with futuristic moodiness and anxiety. Set to a backdrop of ecological catastrophe, signature anime films like *Ghost In The Shell* problematise the definition of humanity by making their most sympathetic characters cyborgs forced to labour for their effete human subjugators. Cybernetic heroes are often androgynous females and are frequently non-white, fighting against oppressive regimes that are inevitably headed by white males. DDR mirrors this championing of the disenfranchised by allowing players to choose from a large selection of characters, most of whom are female and non-Caucasian. In surveys, respondents commented that the majority of DDR participants were teenage girls, while the players of most other arcade games are almost exclusively adolescent boys. Male DDR players, however, did not suffer ridicule when seen dancing in public; to the contrary, DDR prowess almost always seemed to make boys more popular among friends and potential romantic partners.

DDR is successful not only because it is an amusing pastime, but because its combination of cybernetic science fiction and post-disco dance history 'works'. In both cyborg sci-fi and in dance clubs, society's outsiders (e.g. females, gays, people of colour) take the centre stage. This sense of community and inclusion functions as a backdrop to DDR's explicit appeals to underground music connoisseurs.

### **Subcultural feel; multinational focus**

On the basis of their graphics alone, DDR and other rhythm-music video games might seem to be no more than the latest trend in videogame technology. But the DDR phenomenon is an important step in the recent development of popular music because it has created communities of fans who discuss and debate musical taste, and whose consumption of underground music stems from their exposure to the game. The definition of community here includes both 'real' face-to-face congregations and 'virtual' Internet groups. In both Japan and abroad, DDR was first released to video arcades where teenagers and young adults gather to play games and socialise. Some versions of DDR feature two dance pads placed side-by-side, such that players can compete with each other while dancing to the same song.

Like most successful arcade games, DDR was quickly marketed for home use in Windows, PlayStation and PlayStation 2, and Xbox versions. Some of these variants feature real-time Internet connections with e-mail, chat, and live audio/video streaming capabilities, allowing geographically distant players to compete with each other. Despite (or because of) the fact that DDR is essentially a solitary experience between one person and the video game, the DDR phenomenon has launched several Internet sites containing 'forums', or discussion websites where fans converse about strategy, dance steps, and musical preferences. DDR forums have expanded to serve as sounding boards not only for issues pertaining to the game, but for broader topics such as musical and sartorial taste, gender, sexuality, politics and friendship.

DDR website-based efforts to maintain a sense of community parallel similar concerns among participants in underground dance subcultures where modern technology figures prominently. In writing on Goa/psy trance events in New York, Timothy Taylor notes that '[p]eople involved in throwing these parties are very mindful of keeping the vibe going. Whatever social aspect might be lost in the

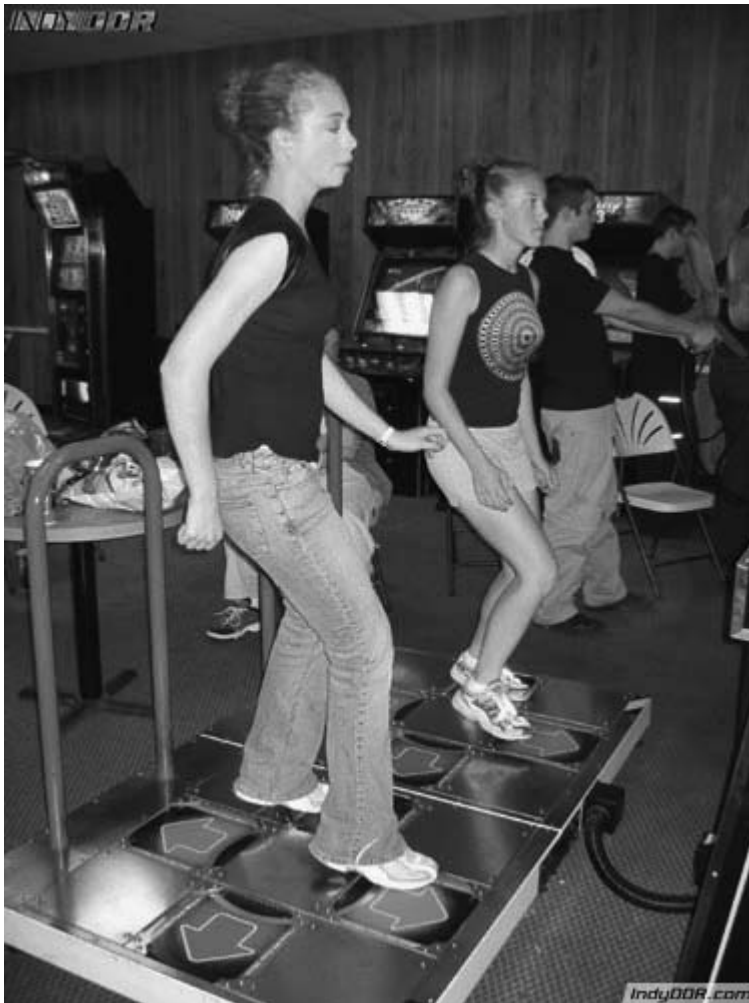


Figure 6. Side-by-side DDR Arcade Modules.

technological/computerised making of the music is compensated for in many ways in clubs' (Taylor 2001, p. 199). DDR participants flock to Internet groups as a means of counterbalancing what could otherwise be a sterile, computerised experience.<sup>3</sup> Among the most popular DDR Internet sites in North America are <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, <http://www.ddrfever.net> and <http://www.ddrei.com>. These three sites contain press releases, news concerning music, competitions, and equipment development, as well as an impressive assortment of discussion forums. The subjects covered in these forums include upcoming DDR competitions, merchandising of game paraphernalia, and non-DDR related topics like romance and fashion. Contributors routinely weigh in on how best to foster an enjoyable DDR experience for both participants and spectators. In interviews conducted for this article on <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, respondents stated that they have played both on home consoles and in the arcade, but unanimously preferred the arcade because the dance pad is easier to use and the arcade provides a better choice of songs. The arcade experience entails certain drawbacks, however, like the poor quality of speakers and



an intrusive 'trick bar', a rail preventing dancers from falling off the floor pad. The greatest advantage to arcade play seems to be the chance to attract onlookers and to socialise with friends.

In March 2001, Konami of America released a PlayStation version of DDR.<sup>4</sup> This game featured twenty-seven new techno, hip-hop, Latin, drum 'n' bass, and disco tracks. DDR had already become an internationally popular form of entertainment with an audience that extended beyond game connoisseurs to include the general public. Konami therefore pursued the unorthodox marketing strategy of promoting the game's music as much as the actual game itself. The PlayStation DDR version was advertised on North American radio stations broadcasting dance and hip-hop music (Traiman 2001B). This was a risky move considering that videogames usually rely on their visual appeal to attract buyers. But DDR audiences are broader than those for other videogames, attracting gaming enthusiasts as well as young adults who dance and listen to music as their primary leisure activities. Not surprisingly, PlayStation DDR was publicised over the Internet. However, these Internet advertisements offered images from the game as well as free downloads of some of the game's featured songs and links to the websites of their musicians. This marketing strategy was not isolated to PlayStation versions of DDR. In Japan, Konami has released soundtrack albums of its DDR arcade formats for separate purchase, much in the same way that soundtracks are sold independently from the films in which they appear (Smith 1998, pp. 45–68). Diversifying its merchandising allowed Konami to attract new gamers through the soundtrack, as well as creating a new audience of music consumers who already knew of the game. On Konami's Bemani rhythm-music game website, customers can purchase both the game components and their accompanying soundtracks.

DDR's musical mixes have enabled the game to transcend its initial status as simple arcade play, and Konami promotions boast that the soundtracks offer players a direct pipeline to the freshest underground dance sounds. This marketing strategy has worked so well that DDR website forums have circulated petitions lobbying Konami to release more Bemani games in North America, and to increase the variety of music featured on these games. The following is taken from a 2003 petition that was advertised via links on several DDR Internet sites. This petition was addressed to the management of Konami International:

*The current selection of songs in the mixes is great, and we love the fact that you have signed on many unknown artists (Naoki, TaQ, DJ Taka, Captain Jack, RE-VENGE, SMiLE.dk, DE-SIRE, etc.). Electronic dance music is wonderful, but we would also like to see the addition of new artists and new styles of music in future mixes. Continue finding unknown artists, but also talk to the Bemani community for their input on future mixes. The current selection of 11–30 songs is not enough, as we would like 120+ as seen in the Japanese versions.<sup>5</sup>*

Such customer feedback is the logical result of an entertainment activity that hinges upon player participation. While Konami exerts final control over DDR's content, the game purports to exist through the interaction of several individuals: the players who choose which songs to dance to, the independent artists who maintain the game's 'cutting edge' vibe, and the Internet communities who share opinions and advice about strategy.<sup>6</sup> Konami's decision to frame DDR as a 'hip' means of consuming popular music was motivated by the fact that many young people consider their musical taste to be a reflection of their personality and identity. Thus, Konami designed DDR so that players feel as though their choices and taste not only matter but actually determine the selection of music and the gaming experience.

The 'soundtrack' for DDR consists of electronic dance music that is paired to specific dance-step routines. The player chooses the degree of difficulty as well as one of several song-titles listed onscreen. The selected song accompanies the player through the entire routine, and is encoded with its own preset dance steps. Each song effectively dictates the choreography that the player must copy. Although a player has a certain degree of freedom in terms of choosing whether to use the left or right foot to trigger a sensor, s/he is bound by the game rules to depress a particular sensor at the right time; substitutions and alterations to the routine are not permitted. DDR fans converse about their experiences with the game often by mentioning particular song-titles, because songs gain reputations according to the difficulty of their dance steps. In a discussion thread debating what it takes to be proficient in the game, one respondent wrote:

*Heh, go to Japan and AA 'So Deep' with five greats, and you'll be okay.<sup>7</sup>*

Translated from DDR forum parlance, the fan is saying that if one goes to Japan (regarded as the country with the most intense level of DDR competition), gets an 'AA' rating dancing to the track 'So Deep', and dances well enough that the computer responds by saying 'Great!' five times, one will be considered adequate but not fantastic. In other words, DDR songs have become measures of dance skill, and refer to the larger accomplishment of achieving a certain level of expertise with the game.

As in most contemporary popular music, the essential beat of a DDR song is 4/4, with the dancer stepping or moving on each quarter-note beat. For rhythmically complicated tracks, a dancer must be able to step on the eighth-note, or sometimes even sixteenth-note. This requires not only agility but advanced planning: without practice, it is easy to trip and fall. Many forum participants describe songs that appear on DDR in terms of the dance steps required to complete the level. In fact, few respondents to one forum discussion on music could differentiate their dance experiences from their opinions of a particular song. One player participant wrote:

*There are really no songs I just play because of the music [ . . . ] If it's a good song and has terrible steps then I won't play it. But luckily most of the 'good' songs have great steps. So far my favourite Song/Steps combo for right now is 'Song: Colours and Steps: Oni'. I think the steps and song go very well together.<sup>8</sup>*

In other words, DDR provides a composite experience in which songs are appreciated not only through listening, but through *dancing*. This is not to suggest, however, that players listen to these songs only when they play the videogame. DDR music itself is bought, sold, and illegally traded over the Internet, much like other commercially available recordings. In effect, most players decide which songs they like while playing DDR, and later may acquire the same songs to play outside the arcade on compact disc players or iPods.

Musical taste dominates the discussion forums of *ddrfever.com* and other Internet sites. This is not surprising, considering that DDR emphasises the role of the player in determining the musical output of the game. For instance, the Windows home version of DDR is programmed to respond to each of the player's choices with encouragement, and one preset response is the exclamation, 'You've got great musical taste!'. One very heated discussion forum debate involved the question, 'Should rap music be featured in DDR?' Responses to the thread included the following:<sup>9</sup>

*You don't dance to rap, and if you do, well, I'm sorry.*

*Hell yeah, you can dance to rap, well, hip-hop anyway, they always play it at school. I hated it first, but I'm starting to like it now.*

*You can't spell 'crap' without 'rap'.*

Most respondents to this forum discussion thread indicated that rap music suffered from a poor public image due to the tough personas of gangsta artists as well as mainstream artists who seem to demean the genre through crass commercialism. Hesitance to pair DDR with rap is understandable for another reason. The texture of many electronic dance songs is dominated by a reliable 4/4 metre that facilitates dancing. Lyrics, if they are present at all, are brief and function more as extensions of the auditory palette of the song rather than as vessels of meaning. Yet rap songs foreground words and verbal messages, which can make it harder for dancers to concentrate on their footwork. Interestingly, though, those who expressed reservations over rap indicated that it was too connected to the 'mainstream', and might dilute the independence of DDR soundtracks. The DDR/mainstream polemic also spills over into aspects of the game not pertaining directly to music. DDR gamers are proud that their passion is non-violent and encourages social rather than destructive behaviour. One discussion posting spoke in terms of an 'ethic' by which responsible gamers live, both inside and outside the arcade:

*You're good if you:*

*don't consider yourself to have passed a song if you need the bar  
don't consider yourself to have passed a song if you need speed mods  
have sportsmanship and respect  
are willing to take risks and improve  
that's what it's about<sup>10</sup>*

Again, underground dance communities provide a fruitful point of comparison. Incumbent in many of these groups is a desire to transcend individual differences to achieve a sort of utopian communion. As Reynolds, Thornton and others have reported, rave communities have relied on Ecstasy or other controlled substances to enhance this feeling of solidarity, which is sometimes referred to by the acronym PLUR, or 'Peace, Love, Unity and Respect' (Thornton 1996, pp. 87–91; Reynolds 1998; Taylor 2001, pp. 171–2). While my research has indicated no analogous reliance on drugs or alcohol among DDR participants, gamers describe the music itself in terms that echo discussions of the supposedly salutary effects of Ecstasy. For these participants, DDR music is 'positive' because it encourages constructive social behaviour, and also because it is produced largely by underground and/or independent artists who might otherwise go unheard.

Claims of superior musical taste; independence and separation from the mainstream; inclusion and tolerance: these are all tropes of subcultural theory and have been used to describe recent musical and dance subcultures such as rave, techno, trance, tribal, and New Age.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite myriad claims made on the part of DDR designers, promoters and players, DDR communities cannot count as 'subcultures' because the word suggests a cohesion that simply doesn't exist. In their critique of recent writing on dance club cultures, Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson remark,

[t]he assertion that dance music and its associated culture represents *a way of life* – the notion of its sufficiency as a complete horizontal system that expands to fill one's entire social and personal space – may be an act of overburdening on a massive scale, but it is one which Reynolds and a number of other writers are still tempted to invoke. The suggestion that youth subcultures, such as mod or punk, comprised complete and entire sets of activities, values and

participatory codes feeds the nostalgia which permeates the treatment of contemporary cultural movements (forever looking for the new punk or the new rock 'n' roll). (Gilbert and Pearson 1999, p. 22)

Postings on DDR forums show that some participants have themselves accepted the narrative of difference that subculture rhetoric implies. These players believe that they listen to music that is discernibly better than that consumed by the 'public', and that this superior music articulates their own individuality and uniqueness in a way that 'mainstream' music cannot. In a thread decrying the sudden appearance of DDR in movies, television programmes, and commercials, one commentator wrote:

*I am probably not the only one who has noticed that DDR heritage has been gradually whored out to MTV and Blockbuster. What was once a respectable culture is now just viewed as a marketing ploy. That being said, DDR's increasing popularity is bittersweet in my opinion. On one hand, you have the fact that DDR is becoming more popular, meaning that DDR players aren't viewed as freaks anymore. But on the other hand, the media's shallow investigations portray DDR players as health-nuts, bodybuilders, or just plain Atkins-freaks. And people are suddenly claiming that they like music they never even knew about a month ago. It's so fake!*<sup>12</sup>

Opinions like this seem to imply that DDR participants share some common musical preferences that continually elude the 'mainstream' public. Yet the actual degree of unanimity of musical taste among DDR players is quite low judging by forum postings that contain heated debates on the merits of particular songs and artists. Such controversy is in and of itself surprising, because DDR songs all share a 4/4 metre and a fast tempo, ranging from 120 beats per minute (bpm) to 180 bpm. The supposed breadth of musical genres in DDR is belied by the mechanics of a game that requires songs with a relatively homogeneous rhythmic profile. So despite the fact that DDR purports to respect the subtle gradations between different dance genres, the result is a flattening of musical boundaries for the sake of a streamlined gaming experience.

Fikentscher (2000), Taylor (2001) and Thornton (1996) have described underground dance subcultures as venue-specific, meaning that participants have to meet and interact in order to feel included in their group. DDR is perhaps the first community that gives the semblance of a subculture's local feel while actually uniting diverse listeners from across the industrialised world. Subcultures also imply sporadic and/or ephemeral participation on the part of marginalised groups. Yet DDR players are anything but marginalised. Within the United States the largest concentration of arcade DDR monitors is to be found in major metropolitan centres of the West and East coasts, and the fee for one arcade game (between \$1 and \$2 USD) is affordable for most income levels. Home versions are also relatively cheap and have permeated less populated areas. DDR music has become so popular that some US high schools have played the game's soundtracks at proms or other dance events (hardly an indication of a subaltern activity!). The most surprising impact of DDR's success may be the cultivation of interest in underground dance music among individuals who might not otherwise be so inclined. In other words, DDR is the antithesis of any self-respecting subculture because it has taken what was edgy and hip and has made it popular.

The marketing strategy of DDR has broader ramifications for the music industry at large, which is scrambling to develop new business models in the wake of online file-sharing and piracy. Young music consumers are less drawn to tangible products such as records or compact discs than they are to tracks that they can access simply through Internet downloading. Some music distributors have already responded by marketing multi-media packages containing songs, music videos, and interviews

with the artists. But DDR proposes an alternative strategy in presenting new tracks embedded within a game. And it is precisely this combination of music, dance and camaraderie that Jacob Smith argues may herald a new type of entertainment experience (Smith 2004, p. 81). Yet in order for such an optimistic prediction to pan out, game designers will have to decide whether their target consumers are gamers or music aficionados. For the latter group, it is not enough to group disparate genres of electronic dance music into one essentially uniform type of music, where the only variable is tempo. For DDR to maintain its credibility as a centre for underground electronic dance music, it must accurately represent its purported variety of styles, even those that do not facilitate game play.

It also remains to be seen what the implications of DDR are for conventional forms of social dance. While many forum participants indicate that they also enjoy going out to real clubs to dance, it is possible that future forms of rhythm-music games may become a surrogate for traditional courtship dancing. This is a trend that began in the 1980s when the rise of HIV and AIDS led to a chilling of physical contact and an increase in freestyle, individual dancing. The greatest allure behind arcade DDR gaming is the fact that it draws crowds of onlookers. So dancing in this sense retains its performative, exhibitionist nature, but is still safely couched within the framework of a 'game'. A person need not risk rejection from a human dance partner, and avoids the pressure to follow romantic dancing with sexual activities that may result in venereal disease. Future possibilities such as these suggest that DDR resembles more a global revolution rather than any subculture.

## Endnotes

1. John Badham's 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever* overlooks the black and Latino/gay roots of disco culture in detailing the exploits of an Italian-American working-class heterosexual played by John Travolta. He enters dance competitions with his girlfriend where they perform complex dances featuring both solo footwork and couple choreography. Badham's film was based on John Cohn's article, 'Another Saturday Night', appearing in the magazine *New York* on 7 June 1976 (Gilbert and Pearson 1999, pp. 7–9).
2. Social dance notation differs from more elaborate systems such as Labanotation because it displays only the placement of the feet, and usually does not indicate time or rhythm (Wright 1996; Beck and Reiser 1998).
3. DDR is by no means the only game to have spurned the creation of Internet discussion groups, and many games (e.g. *Ultima*) are themselves played online in real time (Kline, Dyer-Witheyford and De Peuter 2003, pp. 160–3).
4. PlayStation is a home video game console produced by the Sony Corporation (*ibid.*, pp. 151–2).
5. 'Konami: Please Support Bemani Games In Other Markets', online petition, available from <http://www.petitiononline.com/bemani/petition.html>, consulted 11 August 2003.
6. The rhythm-music game FreQuency (mentioned earlier in this paper) furnishes an even greater degree of player participation by allowing the gamer to create her own mixes from music by both obscure and successful independent artists such as Crystal Method, BT, June Reactor, DJ Qbert, and Dub Pistols (Traiman 2001a).
7. Posted on 26 January 2003, available from <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, DDR Freak Forum.
8. Posted on 5 March 2003, available from <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, DDR Freak Forum.
9. These three forum responses date from early 2003 and are available from <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, DDR Chit-Chat Forum.
10. Posted on 13 January 2003, available from <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, DDR Chit-Chat Forum.
11. For an explanation of the various definitions of 'subculture', see Thornton (1997), pp. 1–10.
12. Posted on 12 July 2004, available from <http://www.ddrfreak.com>, DDR Freak Forum.

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