



Cyberdancing: brave new space or disembodiment?

This article, written by Elizabeth Collier, focuses on the debate around the value of using computer based technologies to create and view dance. This discussion supports the *Virtual Body* option in the *Major Study Dance and Technology* area in Stage 6. Sections of the article could also be used as stimulus for a debate for students in Stage 5 about the artform of dance in a contemporary context.

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Cyberdance or virtual dancing has created many new possibilities and posed many challenges for dancers, choreographers and audiences. The ever expanding use of new media and computer technology and software (such as *Lifeforms*, *Danceforms*, *Motion Capture*, *Biped* and electrodes) explore the body and discover new ways to create movement. However, this raises several questions.

- Does this new performance space disembody the dancer?
- Does this new medium challenge dance makers to see movement from a perspective that focuses on the visual design of movement?
- In creating virtual dance are we abandoning emotional expression and narrative?
- Does this interrupt the process of making meaningful art?

Through the use of computer software, such as *Lifeforms*, choreography is not restricted by any anatomical limitations but there is a separation between emotion and body that perhaps distances the performing body from its audience.

Dance in cyberspace can be created in many ways, for example, animation, motion capture and virtual reality. Using these tools, choreographers are able to compose movement on a virtual body that has no limitations, a body that will not get injured or fatigued. This allows a choreographer freedom to seek new shapes and lines of movement endlessly. Because there are no limitations as to what can be created, much is left to chance promising exciting possibilities. Using an animated body as in *Lifeforms*,

body parts can be isolated and manipulated into shapes previously unimaginable. It is like working on a blank canvas where the choreographer's work is not influenced by the individual style of the dancers, but is purely the work of the choreographer. Multiple viewing angles can be explored freely. Dance exists both within and beyond reality. The possibilities are vast in cyberspace, as reality and fantasy can be interchanged or combined. For example, the computer generated image of Gollum in *Lord of the Rings* brought a fantastical character to life. Gollum did not move the way humans do in reality, but he was made believable through new media. It is through cyberdancing that new discoveries can be made, broadening the dance world along with expanding the audience it reaches. Cyberspace allows dance to depend on the visual experience. It displays a feast for the eyes that can be appreciated by a vast audience.

While cyberspace creates new possibilities for bodily movement, its lack of emotional depth can distance an audience from the work. A piece based on movement created on a non emotional body may not engage the audience the way a piece inspired by a narrative or political issue would, as there is not as much for the audience to connect with. What is the point of the dance if it has no drama or theme? A dance that is purely a kinaesthetic exploration may only appeal to those with a knowledge of dance, while important issues communicated through the artform, if well done, can affect anyone. Choreography in cyberspace may use the body as an object without much more purpose than to make interesting shapes and movement combinations that appeal to the eye. If this is true, and the dance content is beyond that created in reality, the figure is disembodied. On the other hand, this is where dance becomes exciting. To create what was never thought possible, to defy the odds and go beyond the expected is how discoveries are made and artistic revolutions occur, broadening our minds and challenging the next generations to go even further.

Sentimental themes, issues and narratives, as inspiration for dance, help engage an audience and express and comment on the human condition and society. Cyberspace provides a new space where kinaesthetic and perhaps, one day, emotional discoveries are waiting to be made. Its space is as unlimited as the movement made within it. Interspersing reality with unreality, dance is opened up to a wider audience and choreographers are challenged to forge a unique personal style through the endless possibilities of the brave new space of cyberdance.