

MY DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION

by Charlie Engman for Plank Magazine

The smell always preceded it. The gleaming machine—my beautiful obelisk—flashing through the dank cloud of B.O. that clung to it like radiation. I took a deep inhale, stepped onto the platform, and slammed the start button. A hot pink glow splashed across my pimpled face as a cutscene of computer graphic club kids raved across the screen. The title card faded into view, and the digital MC, whose baritone voice eerily resembled my dad's, shouted the three words that would define my adolescence:

Dance Dance Revolution.

From the ages of 12 to 15, DDR was my life. Every Saturday, Mom drove me the 45 minutes to Northbrook to play at the strip mall arcade. I don't remember my first encounter with the game. I don't remember learning technique. I only remember my almost supernatural affinity for it, as if the game was a gift given specifically to me. When I ascended the platform I knew this thing was mine. I was a king claiming my throne.

The rules are deceptively simple: stomp the arrows on the platform as their counterparts hit the top of the screen. At the highest levels this is aerobic warfare—the arrows fling themselves forward in relentless succession as the tracks soar to a shin-splinting 800 BPM. I once saw a player spray Windex on the bottom of his shoes in order to slide across the platform in time. We were subject to the machine's intensity, forced to sync our entire bodies to the over-caffeinated rhythms of Eurobeat tracks like "Gentle Stress," "PARANOiA," and "Little Bitch" (for which I hold a perfect score).

The reward system is equally simple and ruthless: a yellow PERFECT!!! for every successful step; a red MISS for every failure, accompanied by jeers from the MC ("Have you eaten breakfast today??"). Too many misses and the machine ejects you from the game mid-song—a digital gate slams shut and the MC's "Oh nooooooooooooo" trails off into a damning silence. But when you find the rhythm, when you and the machine are truly in sync, the MC lavishes you with near-religious praise. "I can see a dream in your dance! I can see TOMORROW in your dance!! We can call it...our hope!!!" Dad's voice once shouted at me after a particularly good game.

Perhaps it was inevitable that I gravitated toward a game that saw hope in me, that told me what to do with my body and that I was perfect for doing it. In 1999, when DDR first made its way from Japan to suburban Chicago, I was in middle school, and my body and mind were entering a turbulent stage of hormonal antagonism. For the first time, I felt that I understood very little about myself. I still had the raw intuition of a child—I was

still low to the ground, both metaphysically and literally (an asset for DDR)—but an unsolicited adulthood was beginning to envelop me, like a fog of B.O.

In this period, I began to take forty-five minute showers, in which I would sit cross-legged under scalding hot water and rake my older sister's plastic razor across the straggly pubes that had just started to sprout from the flesh above my penis. The angry red welts the razor left behind were better than whatever my hateful enemy body was trying to do to me down there in that genital abyss.

Pubes were not my only body problem. I was a stick-like kid; *skinny* was the first adjective anyone would have picked to describe me, followed closely by *sullen* and *sensitive*. My parents had indulged my young fascination with zoology by allowing an undisciplined but tenacious vegetarianism. I loved animals—I preferred them to people—and I could not bear to eat them. I subsisted on white bread, and for many years my body resembled just that: thin and pasty, strangely soft, vaguely porous.

Except for my legs. Around the time I started playing DDR, my legs began to thicken. As I stomped on the platform in the arcade and soaked the song catalog into my muscle memory at home with tracks ripped from Napster, my legs grew and grew. The harder the levels, the more they swelled. I didn't make the connection until it was too late. In my long existential showers, as I blasted *Little Boy (Boy on Boy Mix)* from a burned CD and discovered the pleasures and perils of my newly mustachioed member, I began to notice the change. My calves now sagged low and heavy from my shins like nipple-less udders. I jiggled them in dismay, feeling awkwardly off balance.

Many years later, my DDR legs would be one of the few physical attributes the men I fucked routinely singled out. Many tolerated or fetishized my stubborn gauntness, but my legs were almost universally coveted by other men. A cruel kind of bodily validation, an ill-fitting access route to conventional masculine desire seemed to be gestating in my distended calves.

But as I pickled in the shower, I hated that I was becoming a man. Men were my adversaries. I was consumed by elaborate plots to draw myself closer to them so I could plunge my dagger into their hairy flesh. My disdain was directly proportionate to my desire, for which I felt an unplaceable sense of animosity, alienation, and shame. Desire marked my sudden acquaintance with otherness. Only, the otherness I desired was also the otherness I was becoming, and I was sure I was doing the becoming wrong. The caterpillar of my envy sloshed around with the butterfly of my lust inside the ectoplasmic cocoon of my pubescent body. Did I want this thing, did I hate this thing, was I this thing?

As the saying goes, I didn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member. Riding both the Eurobeat wave and the Japanese bubble economy (Pokémon had taken my generation by storm just a few years earlier), DDR was an immediate, meteoric success, and I would often have to wait half an hour or more—an eternity for a preteen—to take my turn. DDR quickly developed its own subculture, which I couldn't abide. I felt deep contempt for the people who wore DDR merch and stood around the machine talking shop. They, like me, were hopelessly subordinated to the machine, and seeing that subordination manifest in others filled me with a self-loathing I was too young to bear. I turned the loathing outward in self defense. The other men and boys—and it was almost always men and boys—who loitered around the machine appeared as hostile animals, dogs chained to their metal post, slavering ominously.

I couldn't relate. The look of that period was distinctly skater-coded: long sleeves layered under oversized graphic tees, swooping cargoes cascading over puffy sneakers, a backward cap smooshed over cheek-length hair. This was the uniform and I didn't have it. I wasn't ready to look like a boy, but I didn't want to look like a girl, either. I settled on a mealy-mouthed in-between—a department store Aaliyah: thrifted crop tops over bootcut jeans made for people who wanted their legs to disappear. I looked, in fact, remarkably like the polygon ravers in the DDR intro, stick figure-ish and blunt.

If I could not or would not join their ranks, I would beat them, and there was ample opportunity to do so. In response to the DDR demand, the arcade began hosting monthly competitions, which I won consistently and decisively. There was prize money and an opening gambit of \$15—my entire monthly allowance—so the majority of competitors were adults, or at least what I took to be adults: bigger, taller men with facial hair. It was thrilling to crush these older bearded men, to drag my metaphorical razor across their smug man-faces. I took pitiless satisfaction in being an assassin whose adolescent agility could not be matched, even with Windex.

There were two categories at the competition: Technical—also known as Perfect Attack, or PA to the nerds—and Freestyle. Technical was about numerical score. Freestyle was about...style. Freestylers played at lower difficulties so they could hit the arrows while throwing in their own choreography: handstands, fist-pumps, backflips. Some turned away from the screen entirely, dancing to the audience from memory.

I reserved my harshest side-eye for Freestylers. The flamboyance of their devotion to the game made me clench my teeth in loathing. I couldn't accept that we were even playing the same game. When a Freestyler got on the machine, I would go to the bathroom and sulk in the stalls until I heard the muffled cheers that signified the end of the round. Only much later, after years of confusing encounters on Grindr, did I come to

respect the honest power-bottoming of these players. Perhaps the best response to being fucked by rules is to fuck them back.

But 12-year-old me believed in absolutes. I aspired to objective, regulated perfection, even as I festered in the margins. I was a Perfect Attacker. The DDR platform was the one place where I did not care about style or how I looked. PA players looked patently bizarre—leaning back on the machine’s safety bar for balance, craning their necks toward the screen while their feet flailed beneath them in a cartoon whirlwind. I didn’t care if I flailed. I only cared about collecting PERFECT!!!s—hitting every arrow at exactly the right time. I blistered my feet and rolled my ankles and sweated abjectly through my crop tops, shoving quarter after precious quarter into the machine’s thirsty slot to elicit its fatherly praise. Tell me I’m perfect, Dad. Tell me I’m perfect, perfect, PERFECT!!!

This was the mastery that would redeem me. These were rules I could follow. I might be a loser in every other way, but I would be a prize winner at this. If a man required a sport, this would be mine—a half-sport for a half-man. This was my proving ground where I could contest the measly status life had meted out to me: a faggot, challenged but undefeated.

I have only very vague memories of the actual competitions—the smell of burnt popcorn mingling with sweat, the tepid applause when I won. I noticed that when I was up against someone who activated my confusing desire, my need to beat them became so strong that I lost my deadly aloofness and performed poorly, so I spent the majority of the competitions staring at my sneakers and waiting my turn in a Buddha-like state of blinkered anticipation. At the end of the tournament, I would leave with my plastic little trophy without speaking to anyone.

The individual matches were even more of a blur. The arrows would fly up, and I would stamp them out, same as always. There was only the vaguest sense that someone else was in the corner of my eye scrambling over their own arrows on the adjacent platform. In the one match I do remember, my opponent, a six-foot-three adult man, let out a soft grunt on every downbeat: *Unh step Unh step Unh*. His sweat rhythmically spattered the side of my face like an automatic lawn sprinkler. When the music stopped and the score revealed my victory, I finally turned to peer up at him. He looked like a giant, my Goliath. Below the hem of my crop top, my stomach tightened, then released. I looked back down at my feet and saw that a hole had ripped open where my big toe touched the front of my left shoe. A blood-soaked sock peeked through.

Inside the game there was nothing else, no one else, just the urgent command of the arrows, the animal pleasure of pushing a button and getting a reward. All the

disappointments of my body—my ball hair and bulbous calves, my volcanic acne and limp wrists—were superfluous to my body's ability to match the psychotic BPM. All these delinquent parts cohered into a sleek conduit of the machine. The rhythm and I were joined in an almost sexual union. I thrust my legs up and down on the platform, syncopated and breathless, as the game and I satisfied each other in a beautiful entanglement of goals. The entire world was focused on the exact moment when my foot hit the ground and connected with the rhythm, confirmed the rhythm, became the rhythm.

When you find the flow you have to go with it, you know? We spend our whole life sniffing around for that state. I could've found the flow anywhere else: in my endless showers, in the saxophone I honked on every morning at band practice, in the drives to the arcade where I tried to find the words to ask my mother why I couldn't relate to any other person, why I carried this heavy thing on my shoulders that seemed to come from nowhere and had no reason, why I was haunted in this way. But I found it in DDR.

And DDR not only gave me flow, it scored me on it. When the song ended and my thoughts reentered my awkward body, I received a letter grade—AAA, if the flow had been good. My ego, after momentarily transcending itself, got to come rushing back to enjoy the masochistic pleasures of judgment. How exhilarating to be both evaluated and erased.

Get you a game that does both.

God, I loved Dance Dance. It was my life.

And then, I entered high school. As suddenly and fervently as I had rushed to DDR, I abruptly, unceremoniously dropped it. One Saturday, as Mom idled in the driveway, I stood outside the car and shook my head no. That was it.

Perhaps I intuited that I had gotten everything I needed from Dance Dance—the revolution had finally taken place. I was a man now, whatever that was. Or perhaps this was yet another example of shameful self-abandonment. I don't know.

It would be more than two decades before I stepped onto a DDR platform again. My now-ex boyfriend had abruptly dropped me, and once again my desire and I were at odds. I both mourned and resented this man—his warmth, his apologetic smile, his muscular, six-foot-three body. I had lost my deadly aloofness and performed poorly, had been ejected from the game mid-song. I was back in a feral state of vengeful alienation. I was a loser in need of a win. I needed proof that, despite my estranged body and the

unwelcome person it housed, I was as good as—better than—men bigger and taller than me.

It was hard to find. While DDR remains as popular as ever in Asia, I knew of only one place with a machine in New York City, a tiny arcade in Chinatown. The machine, as always, was in the back, shrouded in musk. I walked across the sticky linoleum, passed the derelict prize counter, and stepped up on the platform. My knees creaked in anticipation. My body and I were in a new kind of antagonism. I glared competitively at the grown man with receding hair in the reflection of the screen in front of me.

I slammed the start button, the game flickered on.

“Give me everything you’ve GOT,” demanded Dad.

I selected a remix of *AGAINST ALL ODDS (TAKE A LOOK AT ME NOW)*. The opening bars sounded with a synthy trill. A flurry of neon arrows rushed up to blot out my reflection.

“So take a look at me now,” went the lyrics. “Oh, there’s just an empty space.”

I stomped down hard.

Perfect.