

# Queering the Controller

MIGUEL SICART

*To begin, I must acknowledge that Jess Marcotte (@jekagames) presented their research on queering game controls around the same time I presented this work. Had I known about it before, I would have engaged with and cited Marcotte's work, which is more interesting and better researched than my own. I recommend that readers read it before they read my piece: <http://tag.hexagram.ca/jekagames/cgsa-2017-queering-game-controls-slides-and-talk/>*

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I want to share some news about videogames. I have good news and bad news, but given the sorry state of the world, let's start with the good news: videogames are getting better.

We can start with the obvious. There are more and more sports games simulators, and darkly monochromatic war-games about white people shooting brown people. These may be the most commercially successful games, but they no longer exclusively define

videogame culture. We finally have videogames about poverty,<sup>1</sup> the beauty of the universe,<sup>2</sup> sex and intimacy,<sup>3</sup> and the challenges of being different in a world dominated by sameness.<sup>4</sup>

Videogames are exploring new expressive palettes. Mechanics and narratives are now instruments for exploring the many ways in which we can play. The pleasures of video games are now more expansive, more mature, and more inquisitive than ever before. We finally have mature games for mature players.

That was the good news. The bad news? No matter if the game is a poverty simulator, a meditation about wholeness and nothingness, or a walking simulator that explores memories and despair, most games are either controlled by fancy typewriters or impersonal pieces of plastic with protruding sticks and more buttons than one has fingers. While games mature into the future of creative expression, we still control them with technologies developed decades ago.<sup>5</sup> Building on the work of Naomi Clark, Merritt Kopas, Todd Harper, Jaakko Stenros, Kaho Abe, Bonnie Ruberg, and many of the others in the queer games movement who constantly challenge game scholars to think harder about the many heteronormative frames that guide the games industry, let me try to convince you that as video games develop new vocabularies of expression, they are weighed down by the conservative modes of control that we still use to design,

1. See *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2011). <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/cart-life/>.

2. See *Everything* (Double Fine, 2017). <http://www.everything-game.com>.

3. See *Ladykiller in a Bind* (Love Conquers All Games, 2016). <http://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/560000/>.

4. See *Mainichi* (Mattie Brice, 2012). <http://www.mattiebrice.com/mainichi/>.

5. And yes, I know what you are thinking: this is the age of ALT-CTRL at GDC, this is the age of Arduino and motion controllers. But I see no real development. See <http://www.gdconf.com/news/heres-lineup-games-playable-gdc-2017s-alt-ctrl-gdc-showcase/>.

develop, and play them. Let me argue that video game controllers have a very limited expression palette and that there's very little that controllers make us *feel*. Emotions such as desire, longing and arousal are always expressed through game mechanics and narrative; they are not embodied and felt viscerally, and this is a problem.

I am unsettled by the status quo that permeates how we think about games and controllers, and the culture of "alternative controllers" like those showcased at [alt.ctrl.gdc](http://alt.ctrl.gdc)<sup>6</sup> does little to reassure me. We don't need alternative controllers, we need controllers for the alternative emotions, alternative bodies, and alternative experiences that games now foster. We must explore the possibilities of game interfaces, and embrace the traditions that analyze<sup>7</sup> and encourage<sup>8</sup> alternative ways of engaging with controllers. It's time to push things beyond what is understood and established, and to think of controllers as the embodied part of the game experience, as the way of exploring the uncertainties of the body-player.<sup>9</sup> I want to explore game controllers from the perspective of erotic Human-Computer Interaction and consider sex toys. What better way of challenging the controller as a

6. See <http://www.gdconf.com/events/altctrlgdc.html>.

7. David Parisi. "Shocking Grasps: An Archaeology of Electrotactile Game Mechanics." *Game Studies* 13.2 (2013). <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/parisi>; David Parisi. "Game Interfaces as Disabling Infrastructures." *Analog Game Studies*, 4.3 (2017). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2017/05/compatibility-test-videogames-as-disabling-infrastructures/>; Claus Pias. "The Game Player's Duty: The User as a Gestalt of the Ports." In *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Application, and Implications*. Edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 164-183.

8. Academically, see Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Artistically, see the Copenhagen Game Collective. <http://www.copenhagengamecollective.org>.

9. Gregory L. Bagnall. "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies. Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware." In *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

paradigm of interaction than to think about it through this intimate lens?

This is a manifesto, but also hopefully the first step of a research program that considers how to design controllers for other intimacies of interaction in videogame play. This is a project about queering the video game controller. As Naomi Clark puts it, “it is the refusal to obey orthodox conventions about games, and [the] willingness to embrace bare systems, that makes it easier for queer games to achieve striking new forms of interplay and consonance between the experiences and the aspects of queer existence they represent and the structures of interaction that players encounter.”<sup>10</sup> This logic can be applied to videogame controllers, which endure as gaming’s most orthodox convention. As Gregory L. Bagnall asserts, “material gaming technologies mediate and influence our experiences with games [...] [G]aming technologies are informed by the very same dominant, hegemonic, heterosexist paradigms that game scholars, critics, and developers have identified in games themselves.”<sup>11</sup> It is time to question controllers, to expand our vocabulary so we can design and analyze intimate embodied experiences that explore the full potential of videogame controllers.

## **F is for Feeling**

10. “What is Queerness in Games, Anyway?” In *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, Kindle loc. 698.
11. Gregory L. Bagnall. “Queer(ing) Game Technologies: Thinking of Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware”. In *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, Kindle loc. 2769–2776.

Mainstream videogames—especially shooters—are the pinnacle of reactionary videogame design and videogame culture. It feels very unfair to mock *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (Activision, 2014) for its lack of subtlety—after all, it is another Michael Bay-esque shooter that glorifies a particular superheroic understanding of the military—but for such a serious game, it can sometimes be so, so silly. Like when it commands players via an onscreen prompt to “Press F to pay respects.” The structure of cybernetic play is so beautifully simple—*Call of Duty* translates emotions to button presses and quick time events.

When we press F to feel something, the controller translates what we feel into a clear input that the game can process. This is magic! We press a button, and the game reacts to our minute action. We move a stick, and *that thing* on screen reacts. We shake it, it moves. And vice versa, we can sometimes *feel* the game world vibrating in our hands. Although this cybernetic loop helps to make great, enjoyable, videogames, it is also a profound flaw.

This cybernetic process happens through controllers: keyboards and mice, touch screens, and dedicated gamepads. I am aware of the scarce but poignant work done on the history of game controllers,<sup>12</sup> but my project is slightly different. I want to take the side of cabinets of wonders and truck stop games rather than the dominant, established history of the controller, the console and the computer. The genealogy of the questioning I propose aligns videogame

12. William Lu. *Evolution of Video Game Controllers: How Simple Switches Lead to the Development of the Joystick and the Directional Pad*. 2003. [http://www.stanford.edu/group/htgg/sts145papers/wlu\\_2003\\_1.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/htgg/sts145papers/wlu_2003_1.pdf); Nicolas Nova and Laurent Bolli. *Joy pads! : The Design of Game Controllers*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

controllers not with *Pong* and mainframes, but with love tester machines<sup>13</sup> and other props for play.



Love tester machines. (Image by Cuppysfriend on Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA.)

Essentially, game controllers are two things: physical interfaces, and systems of control.<sup>14</sup> Game controllers provide a means to provide input to the game system, in order to interact with it and wait for its feedback. They are machines designed specifically to allow users to give instructions to a computer to process.

We press X to jump, R3 to check the map, left stick to walk. We

13. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love\\_tester\\_machine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_tester_machine).

14. David Parisi. "A Counterrevolution in the Hands: The Console Controller as an Ergonomic Branding Mechanism." *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2.1 (2015), pp. 1-23. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51f9aac5e4b080ed4b441ba7/t/54fa6875e4b07e462fd5cf14/1425696885139/Parisi-2-1.pdf>.

do so obediently, knowing that these virtual worlds are all reacting to these minute gestures. And it feels good. We experience a sense of power when we affect a game's world just by pushing a button, pushing a stick, squeezing a trigger. It is a dream of agency, a mediating magical machine that makes us fast, strong, able and powerful. Controllers are, or can be, devices of liberation.

But controllers are also systems of control. All games, however complex, must be controllable. We need to press X to jump, and we can only jump if we press X. The controller tells us what to do, *controls* what can be done, and captures us within its definition of agency. Powerful, yes, but also limited to a very specific architecture of control.<sup>15</sup>

The architecture of control is one of limits, of predesigned possible actions. Our hands are limited to the prehensile capacities of the fingers. Controllers provide input, but it is the eye that processes the feedback.<sup>16</sup> In everything else, the controller provides input for the eye to understand. The body becomes a provider of instructions, an instrument for the mind, which is the executor of actions and the processor of results. The body is but an appendix to the controller, a medium between the mind and the machine.<sup>17</sup>

15. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin, 1977.

16. There is rumble, yes, but the vocabulary of shaking and vibration has not evolved beyond the bygone days of *Rez* (SEGA, 2001).

17. Peter-Paul Verbeek. "Cyborg Intentionality: Rethinking the Phenomenology of Human-technology Relations." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7.3 (2008), pp: 387-395: doi:10.1007/s11097-008-9099-x.

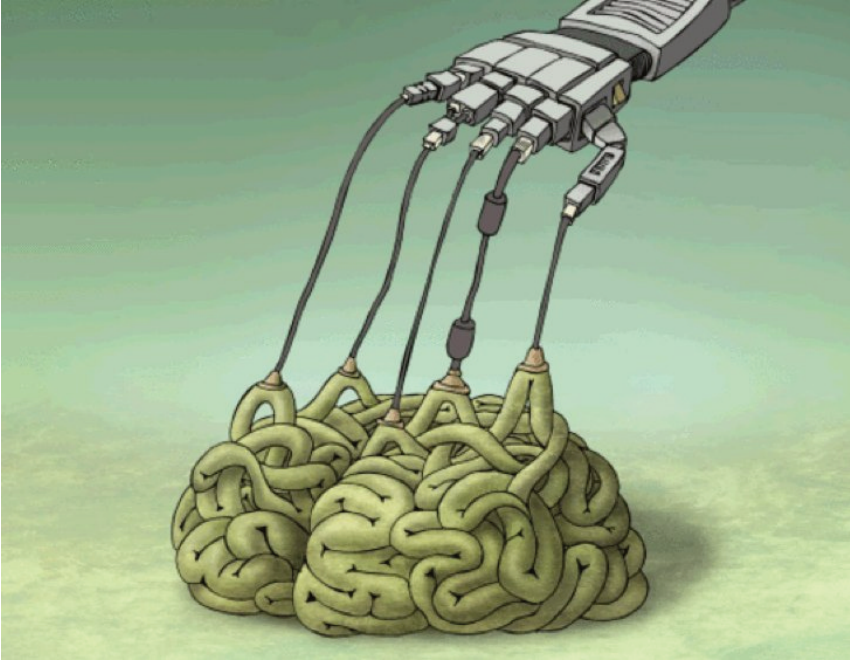


Image by Amber Case on Flickr, CC BY-NC.

Game controllers are Cartesian prisons. They trap the body and turn it into an instrument for the audiovisual animal. Our body does things, but only our mind is allowed to understand them. Even games with “motion controllers” are just gymnastics of conflict, ignoring the multiple other ways in which bodies can play. Physical games are for the body what puzzle games are for the mind: tests on particular configurations (of bodies, or intellects) that leave out as much (appendages, individuals, and groups) as they include.

It is in the controller based feedback loops where the power of videogames lies. Videogames provide agency beyond bodies that can be limited or limiting, socially, biologically, or culturally. But this is also a great Cartesian lie, one that denies the pleasures of the body *doing* things and *feeling* things. We press F to feel. It is time to



imagine controllers that open the body to the pleasures of the mind. Controllers are a starting point for thinking about games and the body.

## Toys

You may be thinking: all this sounds interesting, but what alternatives are there? Controllers are what they are, games are what they are! That might be true, but only when we game design scholars think as isolationists. We bind ourselves to understanding how the industry does things, or should do things. Which is fine, but oh so limiting.

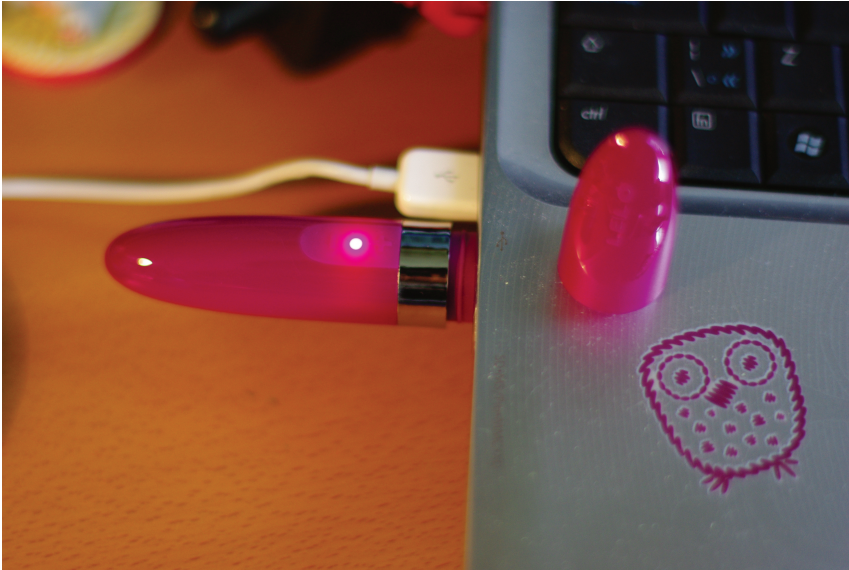
We have a problem in game design, a lack of a vocabulary and inspiration to create intimate embodied experiences that use controllers as part of that experience, rather than as interfaces to a visual world. We need knowledge about how people share embodied emotions mediated by technologies. And not just any emotional technology, but those that invoke forms of pleasure and intimacy, as those are still largely unexplored areas in games. And while game design might not have this knowledge, other areas of interaction design do. Why seek inspiration in “maker culture” interfaces, or in movies and other fictions when there are already intimate controllers out there? Controllers that foreground bodies and pleasure in their design. Let’s look at sex toys.<sup>18</sup>

The history of technologically augmenting human bodies for sexual

18. Anna Eaglin and Shaowen Bardzell. "Sex Toys and Designing for Sexual Wellness." In *CHI'11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2011, pp. 1837-1842. doi:10.1145/1979742.1979879.

pleasure is long, so I want to limit my scope to motorized pleasure devices (dildos and vibrators but also rings and other similar devices).<sup>19</sup> In fact, I want to focus on modern sex toys, created in cooperation between sexologists and interaction/industrial designers. These toys leverage new materials with computational interfaces, making them arguably one of the most successful (yet puritanically overlooked) examples of Third Wave HCI.<sup>20</sup>

19. Rachel P. Maines. *The Technology of Orgasm. "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. See also Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell. "Pleasure Is Your Birthright: Digitally Enabled Designer Sex Toys As a Case of Third-wave HCI." In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2011.
20. Johanna Brewer, Joseph Kaye, Amanda Williams, and Susan Wyche. "Sexual Interactions: Why We Should Talk About Sex in HCI." In *CHI '06 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. CHI EA '06. ACM, 2006. <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1125451.1125765>; Jeremy Birnholtz, Irina Shklovski, Mark Handel, and Eran Toch. "Let's Talk About Sex (Apps), CSCW." In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference Companion on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 2015.



A vibrator charging through a computer USB port. (Image by Kimli on Flickr, CC BY-NC.)

In their landmark study on sex toys, Shaowen and Jeffrey Bardzell explain how the design of modern sex toys is always a critical process.<sup>21</sup> Designers set off with the goal of creating pleasurable, embodied experiences, and they do so by asking users, materials, and contexts, key questions about how these devices would be used, what their users are looking for, and how can they satisfy those needs.

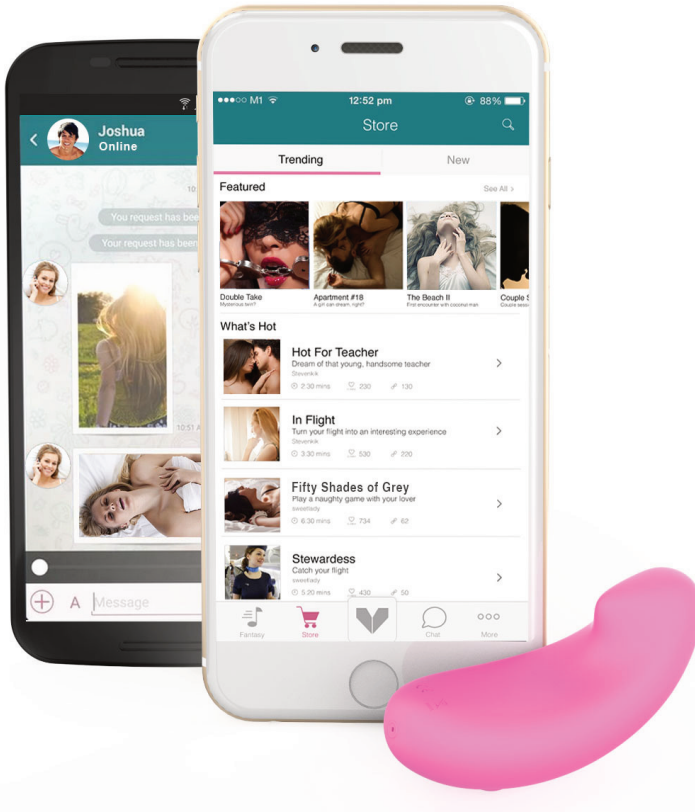
I am not claiming here that we need to design game controllers *as* sex toys, but that we should approach the design of game interactions as sex toy designers approach the design of their products: by critically questioning the role of bodies and pleasure in the experience of a game.

What can we learn from sex toys, then? First of all, sex toys are

21. Eaglin and Bardzell.

technologies that an eminently visual animal will use in non-visual ways, so they are designed to be perceived and felt through touch and sound. Sex toys understand how the body acts and learns, where the body is and how to extend that knowledge into technologies. Game design needs to understand how to design for embodied experiences that are not subordinate to the eye, and the haptic design of sex toys is a step forward in that direction.

Sex toys are also examples of ergonomic designs that use limited feedback mechanisms in creative ways. Essentially, a DualShock controller is an awkwardly held dildo. There is no good reason not to be inspired by the palette of expressions that a sex toy can achieve with the same mechanisms. And the same goes for all the computational connectivity of modern sex toys. These devices have Bluetooth, which they use to connect to apps that adjust tactile feedback based on sensor input. These same sensors are widely available in most game controllers. How can we reimagine these inputs and outputs in a way that provides pleasure in the interaction, beyond the mind-driven mastery of the system?



A modern vibrator controlled via a smartphone app. (Image by Hollenderek on Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA.)

Perhaps the biggest inspiration that we can take from sex toys is that of the design of and for a context. Dildos, rings, and other sex toys are designed for the embodied experience of sexual pleasure. Their designers understand context and work to enhance it. They are designed to be a part of a broader embodied experience that happens in a situation, in a particular context.

Sex toys are designed to be one part of a larger experience, within a larger setting. They are toys because they help us play. They liberate

because they don't gatekeep play as controllers do, they only aid in its pleasures. And so, game controllers should take that liberating function too. They should liberate us from the Cartesian prison of the gaze and logics that take the form of a game. Sex toys help people create, structure, and enjoy a pleasurable play experience, and videogame controllers should do the same. They should forget being *about* the game, and refocus on the player as an embodied, emotional being seeking pleasures.

Game controllers must follow the lead of sex toy design. Because controllers are not just a gateway to the simulated environment on a screen. They are not just the input mechanisms for algorithms dressed up as worlds. Controllers are elements of bodies in motion that seek pleasure in playing. Until controllers are designed to facilitate embodied forms of pleasure, they will jail us within the Cartesian trap of mind and body. Sex toys, as things we play with, show us how tools augment and mediate the human experience of pleasure.

### **Queering the Controller**

There remains a cultural obstacle to this radical new ethic of controller design. Controllers have been designed and used as simple input (and occasionally rumble) devices since they were first developed. Changing this paradigm requires deep rethinking of games as forms of pleasure.

Interestingly, we already have examples of this alternative way of thinking in new types of interfaces. Tablets and phones, with their touch interfaces, have shown how creators are ready to explore the

ways the body plays with games. *Fingle*<sup>22</sup> playfully encourages us to touch others, and *Chicanery*<sup>23</sup> uses physical proximity for rougher forms of physical play. *Luxuria Superbia*<sup>24</sup> *Cunt Touch This*<sup>25</sup> and *La Petite Mort*<sup>26</sup> redefine touch as a form of embodied experience.

The fact that most of these examples are found on touch devices juxtaposes the frontier of controller design against its orthodoxy. The relative newness of touch interfaces, combined with their obvious physicality, has already inspired many developers to design more playfully. What we need is that same spirit for all game controllers, for all those plastic horns and head-mounted bricks. We need to queer those controllers.

I understand how potentially problematic it is that I, a middle-aged, straight, tenured, white, cis male academic, use queer theory in an article. However, my work is deeply indebted to the field of queer game studies, from Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw to Coleen Macklin, Merrit Kopas, and Mattie Bryce. I want this article to be a very modest contribution to this field. Following Naomi Clark's application of the queer theory to game studies,<sup>27</sup> my goal is not to hijack the term or perform identity tourism, but to use the concept of queerness to push the discussion on game controllers. Queerness lends much to this discussion because it allows us to question the status quo of discourse and to think differently about bodies and

22. Game Oven, 2011. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/fingle/id490109661?mt=8>.

23. Anna Anthropy/Bennet Foddy, 2010. <http://auntiepixelante.com/?p=257>.

24. Tale of Tales, 2013. <http://luxuria-superbia.com>.

25. Copenhagen Game Collective, 2014. <http://www.copenhagengamecollective.org/projects/cunttouchthis/>.

26. Lovable Hat Cult, 2014. <http://lovablehatcult.dk/petite.html>.

27. Naomi Clark. "What is Queerness in Games, Anyway?" In *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3-14.

interaction. This intervention is precisely what is needed when considering controller design.<sup>28</sup> We need to break the norms so that a radical new approach to embodied experience becomes possible.

There is a deeply patriarchal, normative, male-centric discourse embedded in the Cartesian logic of the controller. The controller as we conceive it now is an instrument for the gaze, but it is a man's—wait, no—a boy's gaze. And that gaze determines everything else, in games as well as in the arts.<sup>29</sup> So by queering the controller not only do I want to change how we think about controllers, but I also want to highlight how much of the work in game studies, including mine, never challenged the deeply troubling assumptions that are primordial to the ways we interact with videogames. To queer the controller, we need to queer game studies, and thanks to the efforts of so many, we can now continue these lines of inquiry.

So, how can we queer the game controller? I think there are two main strategies that we can follow: thinking alternatively about how to use existing game controllers to convey embodied, non-visual experiences, or making new controllers that engage with the bodies that play. Thanks to the democratization of game-making tools, many creators are not necessarily the type of engineers/artists that can

28. See Anna Anthropy. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back An Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012. Derek A. Burrill also offers a great overview of the relation between queer theory and game studies in "Queer Theory, the Body, and Videogames." In *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, Kindle loc 997-1152.

29. Laura U. Marks, "What Can a Body Do? Answers from Trablus, Cairo, Beirut, and Algiers." *Paragraph* 38.1 (2015), pp. 118-135; Laura U. Marks. "Thinking Like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 7.1 (2014); pp. 7-20, doi:10.2478/ausfm-2014-0011; John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.



create new controllers. So we need to have strategies to queer existing controllers. We need to look at console controllers *as if* they were sex toys, from the lens of a body that seeks out pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

I cannot provide direct solutions, but inspirations. What if we rejigger the tactile elements in these controllers? What if caressing becomes a way of giving input, one that is followed by feedback from the rumble motors? What if squeezing the analog triggers was actually an analog way of providing input, a matter of careful degrees of sensation? What if shaking, balancing, vibrating were ways of touching the controller? The queer game controller is that which understands that input and feedback are non-visual, that they are related, but subordinate to the visual cybernetic loop. A queer controller gives meaning to the body at play, and turns that body into a source of pleasures.

The other main strategy is to create queer controllers from scratch. Following the success of the maker culture in games, more and more game exhibitions are accepting works with non-conventional controllers. However, many of these seem to shy away from the pleasures of the body. They are clever contraptions for some forms of pleasure, but they are not always exploring the full potential of the body as a source of pleasure. Why not think about controllers that leverage networking to create synchronized yet remote ways of *being* with another body? Or controllers that afford one-to-many pleasurable interactions? Or how about thinking about other forms of providing input? Not hard buttons, but moist controllers. Bodies have wide ranges of expression for which we can use sensors to

30. See also Aaron Trammell and Emma Leigh Waldron. "Playing for Intimacy: Love, Lust, and Desire in the Pursuit of Embodied Design". In *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*. Edited by Matthew Wysocki and Evan Luteria. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 177-193.

translate into input. But for queer controllers, we need to think not about providing input, but about creating sensual sensors.

All bodies play, yet videogames so often neglect that very simple fact. We have forgotten our bodies, we have limited them to being just a vessel for minds to enjoy games. It is time to bring all bodies to play. It is time to think about the embodied pleasures of play beyond the pleasures of the mind. It is time to queer controllers.

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