
Of Mice and Pants

Queering the Conventional Gamer Mouse for Cooperative Play

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ABSTRACT

Withing the fields of HCI and game design, conventional design practices have been criticised for perpetuating the status quo and marginalising users beyond the norm [11],[1], e.g. through genderized assumptions about user interaction [13]. To solve this problem of conservatism in HCI, one recommended strategy has been *queering*; the use of mischievous, spaceful, and oblique design principles [13]. This contribution focuses on the conventional computer mouse within videogames as an example for a conventional input device optimised for a limited set of interactions. The article first reviews HCI discourses on the mouse within technology studies, game culture, and queer game studies. In these three domains, the mouse has been consistently reduced to its functionality as high-precision point-and-click device, constructing it as conservative seemingly hard-wired to cater to male-centred pleasures. We then discuss three experimental game design strategies to queer the mouse controller

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in *The Undie Game*, a cooperative wearable mouse-based installation game by the Copenhagen Game Collective. The *Undie Game* speculates about ways to confront and disrupt conventional expectations about gaming by fa“silly”tating interaction for two players who wear a mouse controller in their panties and collectively steer a 3D high definition tongue on screen to achieve a mutual highscore. By creating a social, silly, and potentially daunting play experience, *The Undie Game* reinterprets the affordances of the computer mouse to bring subjects like consent, failure, and ambiguity into the picture.

KEYWORDS

Computer mouse; wearables; game design; intersectionality; queer game studies

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INTRODUCTION

This contribution responds to the problem of design conservatism, e.g. the fact that technology design tends to stay close to established industry interests, inferentially inscribing conservative values into digital tools [13]. This critique extends to videogame technologies, where conservative game design values have created an encrusted status quo; a "hegemony of play" [8]. This means that design standards for playful technologies and interactions have advantaged some forms of play while marginalising others [1], "ignoring the needs and desires of "minority" players who are in fact the majority of the population" [8]. This raises the stakes for speculative game design - game design which not only conservatively reflects existing values but which imagines new applications. *The Undie Game* is an experimental cooperative installation game which uses two standard mouse controllers to facilitate an intimate gaming experience. Worn inside custom-made pants, the mice are mapped directly to the human players' anatomy, functioning as a de facto representation of the crotch. Within the context of *The Undie Game*, the mouse controller is framed as the genital area which needs to be manipulated in order to move a highly polished, protruding 3D-tongue across the screen. When it comes to control, both players navigate the same tongue by simultaneously pressing down the two mouse buttons with one hand and scrolling the mouse wheel with the remaining hand. Within a time-window of two minutes, the players must navigate the tongue towards as many of the splashing spots emerging on the screen as possible. This is made more difficult by the game withholding information about each player's impact on the tongue; one player directs the tongue vertically, one horizontally. Verbal communication is beneficial towards achieving a collective high

score which is displayed once time is up. The control scheme championed by The Undie Game contradicts three dominant ideas about the mouse within HCI and related design discourses (1) the mouse as high-precision point-and-click device, (2) the mouse as hyper-masculine fetish object, and (3) the mouse as hegemonic standard controller to be dismissed.

THREE DISCOURSES ON THE MOUSE

The mouse as high-precision device

First, within early mouse-studies in the field of HCI, the mouse has been studied primarily in regard to its quantifiable performance [7, 19]. A special focus has been put on factors of movement time and accuracy [7]. One indicator pointing to the quantification discourse in these mouse studies is the reference to Fitts law [4, 7, 19], a model used to quantify the information capacity of human responses. Viewed through the lens of Fitts law, the mouse can be reduced to its quantifiable features [12], generating value merely by its capacity to point and click optimally. Unsurprisingly, many mouse studies have coupled this point-and-click fetish with a competitive angle on various input devices, e.g., by staging an artificial conflict between mice, JoySticks, and keyboards [3]. The mouse is often declared the winner in these artificial conflicts [ibid.] a fact which distracts from the mouse's subjugation to the limited paradigm of efficiency. This paradigm, alive in HCI mouse science, predicts that the mouse must be no more than a performance instrument serving the improvement of information processing rather than becoming a creative agent for human self-discovery.

Of mice and men: the mouse in toxic gamer culture

The scientific reduction of the mouse as an efficient input tool for pointing and clicking can be related to discourses within gaming spaces. Especially within hardware sales, the mouse is dominantly staged as a hyper masculine performance equipment, sold under such names as "Razer DeathAdder Elite", "HyperX Pulsefire Surge", and "Creative Sound BlasterX Siege M04", e.g. [18]. These heavily gendered monikers suggest that mice are still marketed to a cis-male gamer demography, reinforcing a persistent stereotype. Another prime example for this discourse is E-sports, where equipment fact sheets link the mouse to a successful gamer persona. On the website prosettings.net [17], Counterstrike pro-gamer Oleksandr Kostylyev proudly poses next to a model called "Zowie FK1+ Divina Edition". Like his username "s1mple", the mouse settings are quantifiable aspects of his personality, reinforcing gaming and hypermasculinity at once. s1mple is part of a larger complex of "toxic gamer culture", which frames gaming as a male-gendered, potentially violent space [6].



Figure 1: Wearable variations of *The Undie Game*

Hegemonic hardware: the mouse in queer game studies

Thirdly, problems related to toxic gamer culture, including hardware, have recently been addressed in queer game scholarship [2, 14–16, 21]. One strategy to resist hegemonic design culture hailing at a white cis-male audience has been to reject standard input devices and turn to custom hardware design instead [14]. The idea is that by innovating input technology, queer creators can carve out a space of their own without confronting toxic gamer culture. The potential of alternative controllers has been seen in their speculative nature and the new play styles they engender.

While this is a viable strategy for marginalised creators who do not wish to take additional battles, it also dismisses the queer potential of existing technologies. It is a discourse which categorically rejects standard input devices as hegemonic tools and asks creators to “reinvent the mouse wheel” so to speak.

Summary: The gamer mouse beyond repair?

The three mouse discourses illustrate assumptions about technology, gender, and play, which construct a limited image of the mouse as a game design resource. Dominant associations are performance- and efficiency-centred, defining the mouse as functional tool to assist information processing and precise action. This restricts design space to a limited set of preferred interactions, e.g. performance-based pointing and clicking, which in games often translates into male-dominated violence simulations [1]. In short, the computer mouse has been coopted for a “hegemony of play” [8], which caters to conservative, male-dominated discourse. Furthermore, due to its seemingly intrinsic hegemonic nature, the mouse has had little success in queer design spaces either, pushing it to the margin of queer design attention. This leaves the mouse in an awkward rhetorical space where it is neither allowed to be viewed beyond precision and performance, nor is it subverted for a new purpose.

REINVENTING THE MOUSE WHEEL: QUEER DESIGN FACTORS IN *THE UNDIE GAME*

This raises the question how the computer mouse can be reinterpreted ‘against the grain’ to make it available for new, speculative uses. We propose that by queering the mouse, game designers can both resist established game design patterns and challenge the conventional status of the mouse. This suggestion is informed by Ann Light’s understanding of queering as a tactic of problematising seemingly essential aspects of the status quo, often through the use of mischief, clowning, and serious critique [13].

In what follows, we sketch out three queer design tactics *The Undie Game* applies to the gamer mouse. These tactics are informed by the first author’s experience as white non-binary person, and the second and third authors’ history with the Copenhagen Game Collective’s (CphGC) subversive game design practice. The CphGC has a strong track record in game controller design, both in the



Figure 2: Gameplay session of *The Undie Game* in trunks (left) and feminine panties (right)

area of alternative controllers (Babycade, Lovebirds), and in the subversion of conventional controllers (Dark Room Sex Game, Jelly Stomp, Cunt Touch This). This history of provocative hardware design has impacted material decisions in *The Undie Game*, e.g. the use of wearables for queer commentary.

Factor 1: Mischievous wearable design: Introducing consent

A central design decision has been to articulate the mouse controller to the human crotch area, proposing a queered, mischievous interpretation of “play”. Articulation here can be understood in terms of its double meaning; to denote both connecting and uttering a message [5]. By articulating the mouse to the lingerie, it is removed from its conventional hegemonic context of toxic gaming and associated with a new environment of human-computer interaction. The intimacy of this interaction, which couples the act of touching gaming hardware with the act of touching one’s own body, introduces consent as a central concern.

We designed this articulation to accommodate various gender expressions and body shapes, with lingerie ranging from trunks to conventionally feminine panties to strap-ons (Figure 1). The connection between mouse and lingerie is managed through Velcro and buttons; materials which allow the players to change their preferences at any time.

One commonality between this setup and more conventional gaming settings is that the mice in both cases are controlled by the human hand. However, while the motion towards a conventionally situated mouse is away from the body, turning outwards, *The Undie Game* frames the mouse as belonging to the players’ bodies, and affording an inwards motion.

This means that the game requires a re-orientation from disassociated towards associated actions. In order to play the game, the players are forced to also engage with their bodies. This action invokes the feminist core concept of consent [14–16] since it frames playful interaction as a social action with consequences. The individual players decide whether, and under what conditions interaction with technology is possible, or pleasurable. And it is the individual player, too who decides how they wish their body to be framed by technology. This stages the mouse as a technology with physical impacts, rather than an invisible accessory on the gaming desk.

Consent is even more important in a full playthrough of *The Undie Game*, where it is essential in three particular ways. First, the players commit to the game by selecting and putting on their controllers. The act of choosing how to be seen, thus, initiates the game ritual. Besides the choice between different lingerie styles, this includes the option not to wear the controllers on one’s body. We have seen players prefer to sit down and hold the panties in their lap instead. The second moment of consent concerns the action of navigating the tongue character on screen. Since this interaction is cooperative, it requires both players to move the tongue to a desired spot. Thirdly, there is an ongoing physical level of consent, since gameplay requires to touch one’s body. The *UndieGame* setup affords different ways of giving this consent by allowing players to use different finger and body poses, and,

e.g. to hide the controller under a shirt. The relatively short playing time of two minutes is intended to alleviate the pressure of commitment, and the fear of abandoning a co-player mid-session by revoking consent.

Factor 2: Shared control: Introducing failure

A second queer tactic in *The Undie Game* has been using the mouse to facilitate a shared experience of experimentation and playful failure. This has to do with the treatment of the mouse as a stationary input device. Fixed inside the underwear, interaction design focused on the mouse wheel as the primary means of manipulating the game character on screen. This character is a large digital tongue which can move along the horizontal and vertical axes of the screen.

Control over these axes is shared among the players, although part of the gameplay is finding out which axis is controlled by which player. Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to the delicate movements of the tongue character on screen. Rapid motion of the mouse wheel may disturb the tongue to get caught up in a procedural spasm, or push it towards the side of the screen, from which only the most skilled players have managed to return. This queers the mouse to resist the hegemonic paradigm of speediness and accuracy, introducing care and softness as priorities instead. There is an emphasis on communication, both between the human players, and their tongue companion. While performance can sometimes be improved through a constant flow of conversation, the tongue is not fully controllable, holds some agency of its own. Human speculation and failure are as much part the game experience as the attempt to play well. In short, successful playthroughs require an absolute disregard of Fitts law and an acceptance of temporary control loss. This control loss can be a powerful resource for queer enjoyment, since shared awkwardness in a safe space can facilitate intimate experiences [20]. In fact, “the art of failure” is a commonality between games and queer theory and can be cultivated by design [10].

Factor 3: Happy queers? Introducing ambiguity

A third factor which went into design is the celebration of ambiguity as a design resource [9]. To some players, it has been obvious that the mouse is a vulva, and in fact this has been a starting point for making *The Undie Game*. However, there are few limits towards how players may read and appropriate their new mouse companions, and whether they share our explicit intentions of making players touch digital crotches in public play sessions.

At the same time, players of *The Undie Game* are invited to celebrate the ambiguity of the hardware, even if in adolescent ways. In fact, the nomenclature of hegemonic gamer mice reminds us that the mouse has long been rooted in masculine adolescent spaces anyways. By celebrating the mouse as vulva, players are adding another angle to adolescent gamer culture which is potentially more

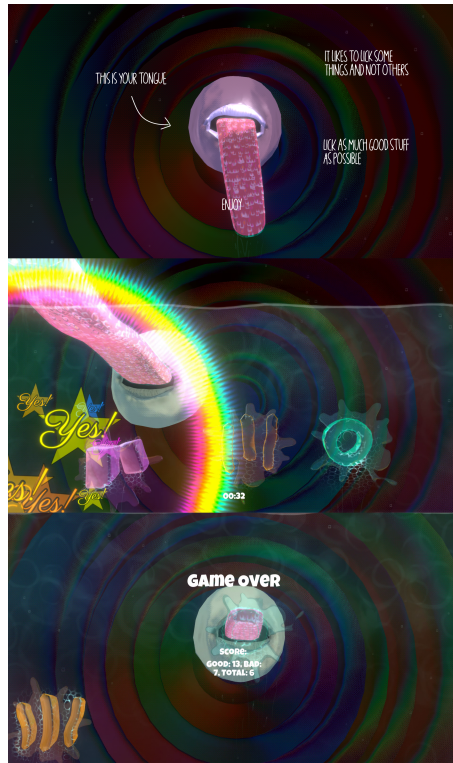


Figure 3: The Undie Game character inside the tutorial (top), and during gameplay (bottom).

joyful and less exclusive than toxic gamer culture [6]. The mouse crotch's ambiguity stays open to interpretation while provoking emotional responses.

Rather than “just” a vulva, the mouse panties are available for multiple queer interpretations. It can, in fact, be any organ, sexual or not, which the queer player wishes to own. A variety of readings - from a cyborg asexual body scenario to a hyperfeminine masturbation fantasy - are possible. Limitations to this ambiguous interpretation space are only given by the fact that the mouse has now become a part of the players' bodies.

These meanings become further complicated and abstracted if we take into consideration what is happening on screen (Figure 3). An unspecified 3D character simply called “your tongue” appears on screen. In a tutorial sequence, the players are told that the tongue can lick “good stuff” and “bad stuff” off the screen. These “kinks” cannot be known a priori, since they are procedurally generated at the beginning of each play session. Like the tongue's changing tastes, its appearance is ephemeral. Each play session matches a new pair of skin and lipstick colour from a limited palette. Visually speaking, the shader technology used in *The Undie Game* has been optimised to give the tongue a messy, lubricated appearance. An additional feedback mechanism has been included with a liquid timer; the water level, which indicates the time left in each session. These features speak differently to players, depending on their relationship to sensuality and sexuality. During a student discussion at Northeastern University, Boston, a white male student was certain the tongue was slowly drowning. He was swiftly corrected by his queer colleague, who remarked that the water pointed to the natural lubrication process induced through physical stimulations.

That the students are both correct indicates the interactivity of emotions around the wearable mouse controller. *The Undie Game* is an evocative experience which uses the mouse to “support human users in understanding, interpreting and experiencing emotion in its full complexity and ambiguity” [2]. Down users' pants, the mice have become a non-human organ, which humans are invited to play with, and make sense around to the best of their capacity.

CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS

This contribution addressed the critique of design conservatism, with the intention to design technologies which are oblique, resistant to the status quo, and which acknowledge diverse needs beyond established uses. Within game design, the mouse controller is one example for a conventional input device which has been normalised to support a limited set of game interactions [1], [8]. By queering this technology in *The Undie Game*, we have illustrated some tactics game designers can use to contribute to a more inclusive culture of play, introducing conversations around consent, playful failure, and ambiguity. We have observed that tactics of fa“silly”tation are suited to queer conventional gaming hardware, and would like to see their application in other game technologies in the future.

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Commentary

For alt.chi paper

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More seriously, when it comes to the game itself, the embedding into queer theory is a little weak, unfortunately. Honestly, it’s only the discussion, not the actual design. For example, the illustration of how consent is articulated through the Undie Game is one that I really welcome. It seems to be a wicked problem to fa’silly’tate consent with adult playthings, but, here, the discussion seems to reduce to the circumstance that people have to put on the pants. I don’t think that is sufficient. For valid consent, you need continuous checking in, you need to check whether the consent is enthusiastic and so on. I think that the setup affords precisely all this, but currently, its contribution to consensual discourses doesn’t go further than basically saying ‘well, to use a mouse, you need to consent to hold it’, which is not necessarily the case. I mean, the mouse can be inserted as a means to different ends, and that is ultimately the case here.

To radically queer the mouse, I feel we need to ask the question of where the mouse consents to participate in the game. This becomes particularly relevant as there is a line drawn within the paper (an uneasy one for me to see) is between the mouse as vulva and it being simultaneously subjugated as a tool to fulfil a human’s desires for pleasure. For future work, it might be promising to think about the potential ‘resistance’ of the mouse. This could also put failure into the centre as a mode of explicit troubling instead of a byproduct of awkwardness. I take this understanding of queering technology liberally from Light’s work (Ann Light; HCI as heterodoxy: Technologies of identity and the queering of interaction with computers, *Interacting with Computers*, Volume 23, Issue 5, 1 September 2011, Pages 430–438, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2011.02.002>). Similarly, reflection on what ‘pleasure’ means when it is somewhat normativised into a quantified high score to be achieved, could strengthen the paper further.

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