

# Questioning alternative and standard game controllers through hegemonic models

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Often, introductions to alternative game controllers (and games made around them, both referred to here as altctrls as a shorthand) position them in contrast with standard or traditional controllers. A list of input devices (usually mouse, keyboard, and gamepad, sometimes joysticks and touchscreens) are presented as standard and then contrasted with what is “other” to that (Alt Ctrl Game Jam 2017; Ey, Pietruch, and Schwartz 2010; Granzotto Llagostera 2019; Marcotte 2018; Schwartz 2011; Corbinais 2020). “Alternative” acts, then, as a “not” operator. This contrast contouring implies a focus on input devices as a metonymy for differentiation in relation to a loosely described standard. I argue that hegemony-informed models can help to unpack this contouring of alternative and standard in order to engage with the politics of altctrl practices. This approach, reviewed here, aims to support the ongoing elaboration of an analytical framework for altctrls production and circulation.

Videogames are experienced as player-and-game amalgams (Keogh 2018; Nicoll 2016), sustained and enveloped by interface arrangements comprising objects and people (Ash 2015). In altctrls, changes in input devices exist in synergy with multiple changes in action mapping, display, metaphor, and a variety of aspects of interfacing processes (Vilela dos Santos 2018). However, the centering of input devices in altctrls activates a model where, as critiqued by media artist and game designer Ida Toft<sup>1</sup>, “the game is behind the interface and then you can add an alternative interface, like skinning”, affirming a surface relationship to technology (Ida Toft, interview, January 21 2021). As Anable notes, the interface is not a surface, but the site of “the everyday intimate encounter where code, images, and subjectivity collide” (2018, 62).

De-centering the role of input devices in the alterity of altctrls is necessary when interrogating how they articulate difference. This effort involves multiplicity, tracing the varied sites and effects of difference and how they matter, as in Haraway’s concept of diffraction mapping (2004). Crucially, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, specifically in its articulation by Williams (2009), helps unpack the political implications of the patterns that emerge in this process.

Cultural hegemony is not fixed, total, nor exhaustive (Gramsci 1971). It comprises processes and forces in tension, sustaining and resisting dominant forms, and emphasizes multiple scales of tradition, convention, institutions, and formations

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(Williams 2009, 112–17). Hegemony-informed approaches attend to how the emergent is selectively incorporated, particularly in proportion to its disturbance of dominant formations (Williams 2009, 124–27). Concepts such as residual and emergent formations help to account for continuity, remediation, and adaptation (Williams 2009, 126; Acland 2007).

A growing body of research supports hegemony-informed analysis of the games industry (Cassar 2013; Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Fron et al. 2007; Hammar et al. 2021) and also of altctrls and game interfaces. Marcotte’s discussion of queering practices around game controls leverages hegemony to link dominant game design conventions to heteronormativity, control, and ableism (Marcotte 2018). Their work centers intersectional feminist and queering strategies as counterhegemonic efforts to trouble the dominant status quo of games (Marcotte 2018). Game controls are presented as sites of intervention around effective values of immersion, control literacy, materiality, and agency (Marcotte 2018).

Keogh’s concept of the hegemony of input connects the conventions of dominant input devices to a normative habitus and naturalized sense of competency (Keogh 2018, 87). The concept of hegemony here helps to link the historical stabilization of input devices to its implications in producing an exclusionary status quo (Keogh 2018, ch.3). The process of stabilizing dominant input devices in games is also tied to the sensory marketing and ergonomic branding of corporations, and points to consumer-brand self-identification as a component of hegemonic gamer identity (Parisi 2015).

Analyzing altctrls and their alterity is entangled with efforts to complicate stabilization processes around interfacing, in particular connecting demands around bodies in videogames and in computing at large. Nooney’s investigation on computer pain and the consolidation of personal computers highlights how such pressures and negotiations around bodies and computing are crucial to how interface arrangements circulate (2021). Parisi connects dominant game controllers (characteristic of the hegemony of input) to “particular notions of what constitutes the ideal, and non-ideal, gaming body” (2015, 17). The hegemonic production of a universalized and normative body is also taken on by Boluk and LeMieux (2017). They present alternative controllers as breaking with the normativity of an abstracted body, centering disability and the non-standardized conditions of actual play and players (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 40).

Boluk and LeMieux’s discussion is based on alternative controllers as a practice troubling the standard metagame: the conflation of play and the conditions of capitalist production and consumption of games (2017, 35–41). Altctrls relations to such capitalist circuits shape their alternative or oppositional qualities, particularly as the distancing from manufacturers is a key element of some definitions of altctrls (see Corbinais 2020; Vilela dos Santos 2020). Bulut’s concept of ludopolitics of game production is useful here as it links “the complex assemblage of multidimensional, uneven power relations at the local and global level” that organizes the unequal character of work in game production (2020, 36). Adapting Bulut’s ludopolitical question: considering game interface arrangements, alternative or dominant, who can playfully make them? And who has to work at making them? How do such conditions shape notions of “alternative” and “standard”?

The insights of the above research raise questions and help delineate criteria for interpreting patterns around altctrls as practices. This supports the ongoing construction of a framework to analyze alternative game controllers that is not restricted to input device- or game-centric framings. The framework spans aspects from production and circulation to interfacing conventions. In doing so it attends to the contingencies of alternative and standard by tracing continuities, disruptions, and their

political implications. Such a hegemony-informed framework can contribute to future research and practice that engages critically with the politics of altctrls' production and circulation.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Ida Toft is a media artist, game designer, and researcher. Their works include *Promises* (2018) and *Analogue Analogies* (2018). More information about Toft's work is available on <http://idatoft.com>.

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