

# Unsweet Tea: Games As Bodies

Jack perse

University of Oregon

1585 E 13th Ave

Eugene, OR 97403

jhart10@uoregon.edu

## Keywords

Queer game studies, Bodies, Posthumanism, Trans studies, Experimental game design

## ABSTRACT

A weird thing about being an independent game creator is that when your games are shown at festivals, expos, community meetups, etc. you are expected to babysit your game. I have spent countless hours sitting behind a folding table, my laptop turned to face away from me while someone plays a game about me. There is then almost always an uncomfortable conversation about me, my games, and why I do what I do. I am never the one to start these conversations. I would much prefer to be left alone, to be far away from my game. One of the worst parts of these interactions is the comparison between their experience with my games (a raw honest reflection of me) and me (a very uncomfortable shuffling back of flesh). Through my games, players have a view into my soul that is otherwise off-limits to almost everyone. My games are in many ways, my body. They are representative assemblages that hold relationships with other people. And I often find that my games do a better job of being me than I do sometimes.

It becomes clear during these events that my lack of belonging causes a disruption and a queering of the space I take up. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed describes how “becoming oblique” is to queerly reorient yourself to objects around you which then leads to new meaning and knowledge of the objects (Ahmed 2006). It is not just me who is oblique though, it is also the games I make such as *Poke. Stroke. Grasp*. In her conclusion, Ahmed calls for a turn towards disorientation. To embrace a queer orientation that rejects the white cis-heteronormative culture so that we can re-envision the world and its objects around us.

It is through these combinations of events (art practice, scholarship, and uncomfortable lived experiences) that I come to the idea of *gamebodies*. That I do not make videogames. Videogames are a genre of digital games that are plagued by self-referential, rote aesthetics centered on maximizing player

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

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agency inside of digital worlds. Alternatively, gamebodies are a part of a growing list of alternative genres of digital games (Visual novels, Personal games, etc.) and may be a part of what Bo Ruberg refers to as the “Queer Games Avant-Garde” by emphasizing the personal/auto-biographical (Bonnie Ruberg 2020). Gamebodies are digital games that emphasize the surfaces and environment that surround gamebody and player(s) by highlighting the agency and affective engagement of itself.

Videogames by and large are understood as worlds, screens act as portals allowing us to inhabit worlds and lives beyond our own. This project, *Unsweet Tea* is a series of games that aim to explore a different mode of playing videogames. Through an artistic game practice, I explore notions of queer and trans embodiment by understanding videogames not as worlds, but as bodies. When games are bodies, then what does it mean to dance with a game? To hold or be held? When we engage with digital games, not as places to beat or conquer, but as partners in play we open our senses (our bodies) to an intimate relation that deconstructs and builds new understandings of technologies and our body.

The first game apart from *Unsweet Tea* is *Poke. Stroke. Grasp* a short experimental videogame about my fear that a cisgender man will come and take my body from me because it does not belong to me. Players interact with the game by rewinding and forwarding footage of me by mimicking the movements I make in the video, namely poking my eye, stroking my face, and grasping my cheeks and nose. While the players have agency in when I am poking, stroking, and grasping in the video I am ultimately in control of how it happens, and the narrative, a short story about trans dysphoria, plays in the background. The relationship with the player is an intimate collaboration in which their poking and prodding at the face of the controller is the only thing that allows me to poke and prod my own face in the videogame. *Poke. Stroke. Grasp.* queers both the relationship between player and videogame, and player and creator. *Poke. Stroke. Grasp.* is not a world for the player to inhabit but is instead a collection of bodies (player, game, me) that have to work together for play to happen. *Poke. Stroke. Grasp.* is a game about disorientation, both my experience as a trans non-binary person who suffers from body dysphoria and the disorientation of the players as they grapple with their relationship with the game.

*Poke. Stroke. Grasp.*'s transness, its refusal to engage with normative videogame play is an embodiment of queer failure. The rejection of winning, agency, and immersion is resonant with how queer and game scholars have described the importance of failure, both in life and games (Bonnie Ruberg 2019; Halberstam 2011; Anable 2018). The player cannot win the game or even alter the outcome. They must in the end admit some type of failure of not

being able to alter the narrative of my body and instead must embody a queer affect of failure. I ask the players to take up a queer finality with the game, “Rather than [resist] endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all our own inevitable fantastic failures.” (Halberstam 2011, 187)

*Poke. Stroke. Grasp.* is part of an in-progress series titled *Unsweet Tea*, a collection of videogames that interrogate how play can be apart of an ungendering process. Like unsweet tea, ungender is juxtaposed against its transformed sibling gender. Is there a way to ungender technology and bodies? What does ungendered technology look like? How can it ungender our relationships with our bodies? And how (or can) then do we rebuild it? I hope this project adds to the growing academic discipline of trans game studies by creating and exploring games that form new ways of play that are “a force of disruption and creation. (Bo Ruberg 2022, 205)”.

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