Unruly Forces and Marginalized Pleasures: Exploring Glitch Aesthetics and Agency in Alternative Control Schemes

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ABSTRACT

This research challenges the dominant design paradigm that prioritizes seamless, precise control in digital games, arguing that moments of breakdown—glitches, input lag, erratic force feedback, and unconventional mappings—constitute a productive aesthetic and political terrain. Framed by DiGRA 2026's theme of "Intersectional Pleasures," the study investigates how these unruly forces generate distinct forms of pleasure and agency for players marginalized by mainstream design norms. Through a multi-modal qualitative approach combining digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and critical technical practice across communities such as disabled gamers, emulation subcultures, glitch artists, and low-bandwidth players, we analyze practices of custom controller use and intentional glitch exploitation. The study bridges accessibility discourse and critical aesthetics, theorizing pleasure rooted in struggle, re-appropriation, and the subversion of normative design. It concludes by advocating for game design that embraces openness, malleability, and creative misuse to foster a more diverse spectrum of playful engagement.

Keywords

glitch aesthetics, alternative control, disability, pleasure, agency, queer theory, game accessibility, intersectionality

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INTRODUCTION

This research interrogates the hegemonic design paradigm that privileges seamless, precise, and predictable control in digital games. In contrast, it posits that moments of breakdown — glitches, input lag, erratic force feedback, and unconventional mappings—constitute a productive aesthetic and political terrain. Framed by DiGRA 2026 ' s theme of "Intersectional Pleasures," this study investigates how these "unruly forces" generate distinct forms of pleasure and agency for players marginalized by mainstream design norms and cultural expectations. We argue that the friction inherent in non-standard control schemes is not merely noise to be eliminated but a source of creative expression, identity negotiation, and subversive enjoyment. By analyzing practices ranging from custom controller use to intentional glitch exploitation, this project challenges fundamental assumptions about mastery, accessibility, and the very nature of playful pleasure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis is grounded in a synthesis of critical game studies, disability studies, and queer theory. We draw from glitch aesthetics, which reframes errors as revelatory interventions that expose and destabilize standardized systems, and queer theory ' s affirmative revaluation of deviation and non-normativity. This allows us to conceptualize control malfunctions as a form of "queering" the polished, commercial game experience. Furthermore, we engage with critical perspectives on player agency, moving beyond simplistic notions of control-as-empowerment to consider agency as something negotiated within and often against designed systems. Central to our inquiry is Sara Ahmed's work on orientation, considering how pleasure can be found in following unexpected paths away from the "straight" line of intended use. This framework positions the pleasures found in alternative control not as compensatory but as inherently valuable, emerging from the struggle and creativity required to navigate or repurpose unruly systems.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a multi-modal qualitative approach centered on digital ethnography and critical technical practice. We engage in sustained ethnographic observation within communities whose practices revolve around alternative control, including accessibility-focused gaming groups, emulator and speedrunning subcultures, and glitch artists. This is complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with community members to understand the lived experience and subjective pleasures of these interactions. Simultaneously, we adopt a hands-on approach through critical technical practice, which involves modifying controllers, creating simple glitch mods, and simulating conditions like input lag. This practice-based dimension provides a phenomenological understanding of the interaction dynamics and serves as a material basis for analysis. The study culminates in a comparative analysis of case studies, juxtaposing mainstream AAA titles ' pursuit of polished control with intentionally "unstable" or "rough" control designs in independent and art games.

EXPERIMENTS & CASE STUDY

Our investigation focuses on several concrete domains. We examine the use of custom-configured controllers by disabled players, where the unique mapping between input and game response creates a novel tactile-kinesthetic language, fostering a sense of mastery and pleasure distinct from ableist design assumptions. The world of emulation provides another rich site, where differences in frame rates and input latency compared to original hardware generate new, community-specific challenges and techniques, redefining authenticity and skill. In the realm of artistic play, we analyze deliberate glitch exploitation in mods or performance art, where triggering physics engine failures becomes a curated aesthetic, transforming chaotic, unruly forces into a poetic medium. Finally, we consider the adaptive tactics developed by players in low-bandwidth environments, where high-latency multiplayer gaming necessitates a form of predictive, collaborative sociality, generating a resilient pleasure born from continuous negotiation with an imperfect system.

CONCLUSION

This study makes several key contributions. First, it bridges the gap between functionalist accessibility discourse and critical aesthetic inquiry, revealing the creative and political potency latent in alternative control schemes. Second, it expands the scholarly understanding of "intersectional pleasure" within game studies by theorizing a form of enjoyment rooted in struggle, re-appropriation, and the subversion of normative design — a pleasure often located at the margins of identity and ability. Finally, it offers a critical provocation to game design praxis, suggesting that the pursuit of seamless universality may inadvertently homogenize pleasure. We advocate instead for a design philosophy that embraces openness, malleability, and the right to creatively "misuse" or even "break" a system, thereby making room for a wider, more diverse spectrum of bodily and cognitive engagements. In doing so, this research underscores that pleasure in play can be profoundly found not only in compliance with a system's rules but in the beautiful, agential friction generated at its fraying edges.

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