

# Who/What's in Control? Videogames, Sex, Gender and (Sub/Dom)verting the Dominant Narrative

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When first exploring the idea that videogames and their respective "controllers" I was convinced there was a highly gendered relationship between the two. I presumed there was a kind of clear narrative link between both the "gender" of connections between devices and the underlying understandings of software/code. It fit into a clean kind of understanding of the affordances of software/hardware. So too did I see these kinds of terminological and predispositions rendered in the very design patterns within software. All of these elements encourage a kind of cisgendered / heterosexual reading. Which isn't to say that this reading is "wrong." Rather, I think, read from another possible perspective, we might take the vision of the "angry white male gamer," and the vision of absolute control and turn it on its head. I seek to do that by asking the relatively simple question, "Who or what's in control of the game?" As such, in this essay I explore the kind of software / hardware / code roots of the heteronormative vision and question the very foundations of that argument.

Computers, game consoles, and most electronics have drawn heavily on the descriptive use of "male" and "female" connectors. Jacking and plugging in are ubiquitous terms used for connecting various devices, yet, when you look more closely, plugs and jacks are used quite differently depending upon particular geographic locations and kinds of uses. And yet, there is quite clearly a general use of the "where the pin enters the receptacle" that indicates a kind of phallic imaginary. Even in circuit diagrams, the male arrow and female "V" are used to denote coupling points. Everything about this narrative lends itself to a kind of vulgar heteronormative story.

It would be quite possible then, to imagine videogame "controllers," as a kind of similar extension. They are the things that plug into or connect to the videogame console (particularly as most are wireless devices now). Even from a software studies perspective, games will frequently leverage the widely used "Model/View/Controller" or MVC design pattern.

"MVC consists of three kinds of objects. The Model is the application object, the View is its screen presentation, and the Controller defines the way the user interface reacts to user input.

...

A view uses an instance of a Controller subclass to implement a particular response strategy; to implement a different strategy, simply replace the instance with a different kind of controller." (Gamma et al., 1995)

The controller is "in charge." Dictating the direction of the gameplay through manipulation of the game's underlying state or "Model." Certainly this is how most players feel about the situation. Games are often about powerful fantasy narratives where the player is in charge and the action is dictated by the actions of the player. Digital games, by definition, are just waiting for players to play with them (O'Donnell, 2014). They're waiting to see what we want them to do.

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And yet, what if we instead saw the relationship as more complicated than this? While we're already leveraging a kind of heteronormative imagery, what if instead we asked questions about power? Why not possibly view the relationship as bidirectionally consensual? The player is in charge, because the game allows the player to be in charge. The "sub" / "dom" relationship, however, is much more complex than such a simplistic reading. Only in the most extreme cases is there no "safeword" used in these relationships. The dom is allowed to be in charge, and yet, that power can be revoked at any time by the sub. There is a kind of complex interchange of power. So to, often, players of games like this also engage "switch" where the power relationship is inverted.

Further, "gender changing" conventions are quite common in electronics design as well. There is nothing that explicitly demands one form or another. Most electronics designers will indicate that it has more to do with safety, durability, reliability and a host of other aspects of design. Which is precisely the point. It is quite possible for a game to not provide the player with their desired options. Isn't this precisely what angered players so deeply about the subversion of the game *Mass Effect's* final ending? Their wishes were not actually the most important aspect of the game. The writer's invoked their safe word. Suddenly the players were not in control. In fact, the game revoked power from them at the final climactic moment of the game.

While, for the most part, this relationship has resulted in many games that alienate players outside of the dominant discursive field where the player ("male") is in charge and the game is there to be plugged into and enjoyed ("female"). By the same token seeing this not as a "vanilla" relationship, but rather a dom/sub relationship, we can subvert this narrative. This of course is precisely what #GamerGate players fear, being forced into a situation, unaware, where the power dynamics are reversed. Perhaps put another way, #GamerGaters are not interested in playing switch. Yet, that is precisely the game that they've entered into by accepting the rules of the game. Which, is why they are particularly opposed to games being created by people that may ask them to experience alternative understandings of power relationships and experiences that might otherwise be uncomfortable for them, but not necessarily everyone.

## References

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