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Conference abstract

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Bodies in Play

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INTRODUCTION

Games invite a spectrum of play, both productive and transgressive. We play games, play with games, and play against games. Play is a way we generate new knowledge. Bodies in Play (BiP) is a Canadian research project that brings together academic, cultural, and community practitioners to playfully co-create knowledge towards more inclusive embodied design practices for the creative technology sector. As feminist, black, and queer discourses have repeatedly emphasized, bodies matter, but have frustratingly been deprioritized in technology development and discourse. To address this, we need a more substantive focus on embodied experience, particularly within interaction design. How do approaches from wearable technology create novel contexts for embodied play? In what ways does virtual reality play require re-consideration of player bodies? How might equity seeking groups use these technologies to envision alternative forms of playful interactions which better reflect their embodied experience? This extended abstract outlines research underway in the connective tissue of academic and community spaces invested in equity work of this nature with the intent of describing emergent methods aimed at reaching multiple audiences.

This feminist research-creation study operates in the interstices of game studies, game design, wearable technology, and extended reality as a way to center the embodied experience of those most often left out of technological development. It situates material play as praxis to engage theoretical frameworks that have evolved from critical design and design justice. Feminist work of this nature is often multimethod and interdisciplinary to enable a strategy of responsiveness to a variety of voices and issues. Common feminist approaches include attention to relations of power, researcher reflexivity, advancement of social justice, and intersectional approaches that privilege disadvantaged groups. A key aspect of this work is a shared investment in creating, and sustaining, real change beyond the constraints of the academy and the slow careful work of building trust and reciprocity between collaborators and participants is foundational. This research leverages the strengths, resources, and shared values of partners to intervene in existing technology practices, to model and better articulate embodied material practices, and sustain meaningful networks. Drawing methods from Feminist Action Research (FAR) (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Reid 2004) informed by principles from design justice (Costanza-Chock 2018) and critical making (Rosner

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2018; Bardzell 2018; Höök 2018), this research aims to build a participatory framework, around which these challenges might be addressed.

This has been formalized in this study via three cycles of public game jams, delivered hybridly (combining in person and online delivery), connected to a residency program. The game jams focus on wearable technology and virtual reality making respectively, in order to envision embodied interactions. Using game sketches (Westecott 2020) - experimental game-making that explores the materials at hand - participants will build new interfaces and interface paradigms (both wearable and virtual) for a wide range of differing bodies and identities. The research-creation generated through this partnership envisions experiences for these interfaces that explore their expressive capacity for a diverse range of bodies, beyond existing conventions.

As ongoing research, Bodies in Play (BiP) uses games and play in a range of ways as a methodological scaffold to generate new approaches to the wicked problem of equity in the technological imaginary. From ideation games that prioritize bodies (played together on Discord using live illustration as a way to explore relevant themes) to skills workshops that allow persistent and responsive online learning resources for future jammers, our research methods continue to evolve to serve the multiple audiences we are invested in reaching and supporting. By reporting our progress to date to a game studies audience, we hope to contribute to new conversations that bring the periphery of embodied expressive interfaces into full sight in service of a more equitable future for all.

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