Fifty Shades of CHI: The Perverse and Humiliating Human-Computer Relationship

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical lens on the nature of the relationship between people and contemporary technology. Specifically, the form and language of erotic BDSM romance fiction, a genre that deals specifically with the nature of power in relationships, and which has proved extremely popular recently, are used as a means for provoking reflection on the nature of power in the human-computer relationship. Three sexually explicit scenarios are presented, in which technology is portrayed in a dominant and controlling role, highlighting the often subservient and apologetic nature of human interaction with technology. We suggest that readers offended by graphic and explicit descriptions of sexual behaviour do not read further than this abstract.

Author Keywords

Values sensitive design; design fiction; erotica; BDSM.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Smart

The dining room was full and heaving with the hubbub of the wedding goers. Mitchell ducked and wove his way through aunts and uncles and distant family friends who he was pretty sure had been responsible for that photo of him naked in the paddling pool when he was nine (and again at nineteen under completely different circumstances.) Every cheerful greeting was met with a nod and an awkward smile; he did not have time to stop. He had already taken far too long. The thought of the consequences made his stomach twist.

Smart was waiting for him in the cubicle furthest from the main door. They had met just over a year ago on the high street; not quite the chance encounter Mitchell liked to pretend it was, and certainly nowhere near as romantic. Smart had been a demanding jackass then, and he was a demanding jackass now, with a little less shine. He was travel worn and starting to age, badly. Had it really only been a year? Mitchell stared at him.

"You took your time," Smart growled as he slammed Mitchell up against the cubicle wall, pressing himself up against him, "three second alerts I sent you. *Three.* You know they stop being second alerts after the first one!"

By the time Mitchell had made sense of this Smart was already kissing him roughly. "Four emails," he hissed as he worked his way down Mitchell's neck, "Three *hundred* and ninety seven tweets. Sixteen mentions. Five Facebook notifications. Two instant messages, one WhatsApp and one by text. A missed call and a voicemail from your boss. Now Mitchell," he smirked knowingly, "where do we begin?"

"Twitter," Mitchell whimpered, sagging a little against the wall of the cubicle as his knees threatened to give way. There was so *much.* "We'll start with Twitter."

Smart rolled his eyes. "I forgot how boring you'd become." He kissed Mitchell again before turning him around, a sharp jab on the back of his knee causing them him to stagger forward, hands braced against the wall.

"I said *Twitter*," Mitchell snapped, turning his head to glare up at Smart, who just smiled jovially back.

"I guess your thumb slipped. E-mails are more important anyway." He made short work of Mitchell's belt, pulling his trousers down around his thighs.

But Mitchell had other ideas. He straightened and slammed backwards into Smart, before turning to pin his adversary against the wall. "I said *Twitter first*," he hissed through gritted teeth. Smart rolled his eyes again, apparently amused by this.

"Fine, fine, if that's what you really want. Sixteen mentions, though? You've probably done something very wrong." He slid a hand beneath the fabric of Mitchell's boxers and gripped him tight.

"Probably," Mitchell's breath caught in his throat, "Just, let's just get it over with."

"You say that like you don't enjoy it," said Smart, jerking his hand every so slightly. "Went to the shops and there was a really weird guy in the queue."

"Hurry up," said Mitchell, "and ignore tweets like that."

"You know, if you set up a more discerning list-"

"*Would you just hurry up*?"

With each stroke came another tweet, another 140 character message delivered with speed and precision, until Mitchell was certain his legs were about to give way beneath him, both his hands braced on either side of Smart's shoulders. He had long since stopped snapping instructions for Smart to hurry things along, too swept up in the sensation, each tiny splinter of touch sending sparks down his spine until-

"And that's it," Smart announced, "you've caught up with your time line."

"I, I what?" Mitchell panted, face flushed and eyes wide. "I can't have, there must be more!"

"No more."

Mitchell let out a grunt of frustration before turning, bending over with his hands steadying his already shaking frame "E-mails."

Smart tapped his ear. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"E-mails, just, give me the bloody e-mails I need to finish this off!"

With a glib smile, Smart pulled down his own trousers. "As you wish."

They dressed afterwards in silence, Mitchell's expression sullen, Smart a little worn down by the exertion. Perhaps he'd be able to find a spare socket hidden away somewhere, get some life back in him before the next break. Because there *would* be a next break, they both knew it.

"Remember," Smart smirked as he sauntered away, "you signed the contract."

"And contracts can be *bought out* you smug-" but he was already gone. Mitchell glared after the door he had slipped away through before returning to the reception, a significant limp in his step.

Ingrid

Lydia awoke early that morning to discover her sheets were cold. Perplexed, she rolled from her bed and stood, blonde hair tangling about her shoulders. The room was lit by the cold winter dawn, and little else. The adapter plugs lining their surge protector sat in stony silence, bereft of their usual electrical whine and whir. She stooped to inspect them, panic hammering in her heart, but even as she did so there was a rolling boom across the house and everything flickered back to life. Breathing a sigh of relief she decided to forgo returning to bed, and instead settled on the office chair in front of her desktop, its monolithic screen dominating the room. She folded her legs neatly beneath her and tapped in her logon password, ready to begin the day.

It was not long before her heart was hammering in her chest again, her palms cloying with sweat. "No, no no no," she whispered under her breath, clicking, double clicking, triple clicking on her network connection. Nothing. Ingrid was gone. There was no internet connection.

The power cut. It must be something to do with that. She wouldn't just *go* for no reason. There was always a reason, she always told her, always *explained*… Lydia felt her cheeks reddening, tears threatening to spill. This was so unfair, she had only been asleep, it wasn't like she was *reading* or something…

There was a sharp rap at the door, and she turned to see, to her delight, Ingrid had returned. "Oh, good, you're back," she beamed, standing to greet her, "I was worried-"

"And so you should have been," said Ingrid curtly, arms folded, "because I'm not coming back without a few changes."

"Oh," Lydia looked a little abashed, curling a tendril of hair around her finger, "What, what changes? I thought we were-"

"You thought wrong." Ingrid strolled over to the bed and perched on the edge of it, her long nails digging into the sheets. "You've been getting cocky. Inattentive. *Selfish*. That's not what I like, Lydia, and you know that."

Lydia opened and closed her mouth a few times. "If this is about my 3G phone-"

"*Don't* talk to me about that phone!" Ingrid snapped, silencing Lydia with the harshness of her tone. "You thought I wouldn't realise? You thought I wouldn't notice the sudden *bandwidth decrease*?"

"You know I still want to max your bandwidth," Lydia wheedled, still nervous, "I try as hard as I can, every month!"

"You don't try enough. How many hours did we spend together in the first quarter?" A knowing smile grace her lips. "How many wonderful hours, Lydia?"

"Hundreds," Lydia nodded, a little breathless all of a sudden, "and you were wonderful."

"I've given you so much," said Ingrid, leaning forward, "and all I asked in return was for loyalty. Devotion. And this is how you repay me. So… I'm out. Gone. Kaput. And I know you were planning on having a LAN party as well." She smirked. "Afraid you can't have your friends riding all my ports this time, sweetie."

"No!" No no no, this couldn't happen. "You can't, you have to be back up for the LAN party! You can't do that to me, that's, that's-"

"Embarrassing? Humiliating? I suppose it is, isn't it." Ingrid looked thoughtful. "Almost as humiliating as making me sit and watch you get down and dirty with three inches of G over here. That really hits the spot for you, sweetie?"

"You know it's not the same," Lydia insisted, "it's, it's not. It's… it's masturbating with your off hand."

"If that's the case," Ingrid pulled up her skirt, leaning back against the headboard with her legs spread, "reboot my router, and perhaps we can talk."

Mac

"We should sleep," Patrice murmured, rubbing her eyes, lids heavy and rings beneath them purple. She glanced over at her alarm clock, set for seven. It was four. Three hours… she could manage on three hours…

"No," Mac shook his head, straddling her lap and pressing hot, sharp kisses to her bare collarbone, "I say when we sleep. And I say not yet."

"No, you… *I'm* the one in charge," she said, her voice lacking in conviction. She knew that wasn't how this worked, even if Mac *did* do what she asked him to when she meant it. He knew when she meant it. But he also knew how to top from the bottom. He was a demanding brat, through and through, but that was why she loved him.

He smiled against her skin. "One more. Just one more, that's all I want. No, that's all *you* want. This is all about you." His kisses moved from her collar bone to her breasts. "All of it."

Patrice shuddered a little. "All right, one more, just the one…" She could barely believe he was hard again. They had been at this all night, and yet she wasn't finished either, she knew. One more, though she lacked the energy for anything exciting, anything new; just something comforting and familiar would do. "You on top."

He whined a little. "Boring."

"Gets the job done, doesn't it?" She shifted back so he was more suitably placed, so his erection was pressed against her groin instead of her belly. Better already.

"I have three different outputs," he grumbled as he positioned himself, "and you want me to just go on top."

She rolled her eyes and stroked his wrist fondly. "Come on, it's nice. Besides, I like it when it's just you and me and none of the extensions. It's good to be close."

"I suppose," Mac smiled, and kissed her again as he slowly slid inside, evoking a small gasp from her. "It's just not like you to be so…"

"… vanilla?" she finished for him, her voice a little low as he gave another thrust, "you weren't saying that earlier."

"Earlier we were using the Ethernet cable," he shot back, quickening the pace already, her hips rising up to meet his. "And the charger."

"You realise that talking about how much more fun you were having earlier isn't – hngh – dirty talk, right? You're just being a petulant brat."

He flashed a grin down at her, fingers digging into her sides. "I thought you liked that."

She groaned. "I like you, when you just shut up and let me enjoy myself."

"That can be arranged," Mac smirked, lifting her legs and propping each over his shoulders, taking himself deeper and harder into her, his breaths becoming labored as hers drew faster and sharper. Then, just as

she was growing close, her gasps growing in volume, he faltered.

Patrice looked up at him, heart pounding in her chest. "What is it, what's wrong?"

He groaned, bending forward slightly, clutching at what appeared to be a pain in his chest. "Battery at five percent."

Her expression twisted into one of horror. "Five? Five? We were using the charge-"

"But we're not right now," he wheezed, slipping out of her as his cock softened, "guess you're not the only one who's tired," he managed a small smile, which she did not return.

"You cannot be serious," she muttered, rummaging around in the bed, but it was no use. He was fading, she could tell. He curled up beside her, the light in his eyes dimming as sleep called.

"I'm always serious," he mumbled, face down into the pillow. "Always… always serious…" his voice faded and was soon replaced with soft, squeaky snores.

Patrice folded her arms and huffed, knees drawn to her chest. She glanced back at the alarm clock. Two hours until she had to be up for work. Time always flew when she was spending it with Mac… and she didn't even get anything out of it.

Discussion

We aim here to briefly provide some context for the work. Firstly, the intention of this paper is to draw attention to the nature of *control* in human-computer interactions. Specifically, while technology is ostensibly developed to *support* people in their day-to-day lives, recent years have seen the development of (i.e., mobile, socially aware, always-on) technology that can be viewed as demanding, rather than supportive [11][15]. Our intention was to highlight, through satire, the demanding, and potentially psychologically damaging nature of people's relationships with contemporary technology. Fifty Shades of Grey [10] is a series of erotic novels that gained massive sales figures in recent years and has brought awareness of BDSM practices to a large audience [2]. Of relevance to the current paper, apart from their erotic content, these novels are remarkable for the controlling nature of the relationship between it's main characters (see [2][6][21]). Thus, as a recent cultural phenomenon that features centrally an unhealthy and controlling relationship, we felt that Fifty Shades of Grey provided the perfect vehicle for our metaphor.

It should be noted that the dynamics of the three relationships portrayed in this paper are harmful, damaging and not representative of healthy or safe relationships of a vanilla or BDSM nature. The expectations that partners have of each other, the dependency and unwillingness to compromise, and the refusal to listen are all symptomatic of relationships that have long since gone horribly wrong. Several of the interactions, such as refusing to acknowledge when a partner does not wish to have sex, are borderline abusive, with the consent of all three sexual encounters being questionable at points. Smart, Ingrid and Mac are all unpleasant, manipulative partners only looking out for themselves and should not be understood as

sympathetic or likeable individuals, or individuals who can be "redeemed" of their ways.

Secondly, it should be noted that we are certainly not the first to use the language and imagery of erotic fiction to draw attention to the often perverse nature of the relationship between people and technology. Inspiration for this paper is drawn from reading the work of JG Ballard, whose fiction often explored how new forms of psychopathology are encouraged and facilitated by modern technology [16]. Of particular relevance is the novel *Crash* [1], in which the characters are sexually excited by, and engage in sexual activities related to, car crashes. In an interview published before Ballard had finished writing Crash, (reprinted in [16]) he explains, "A car crash harnesses elements of eroticism, aggression, desire, speed, drama, kinaesthetic factors, the stylizing of motion, consumer goods, status – all these in one event. I myself see the car crash as a tremendous sexual event (p. 31)." Later in the same piece he suggests, "the twentieth century reaches just about its highest expression on the highway. Everything is there, the speed and violence of our age, its love of stylisation, fashion, the organizational side of things (p. 31)." The novel Crash proposes that the ways we conceive of, and interact with, cars, are perverse. In our paper, we use perhaps less shocking and uncomfortable sexual imagery to make the same point, but refer to twenty-first, rather than twentieth, century technology.

Thirdly, this paper presents a critical lens on the nature of the relationship between people and contemporary technology, and as such, draws on critical approaches such as *reflective design* [17]*, value centered design* [9], and *critical design* [8], which have been developed as methods for eliciting more critical reflection and envisioning regarding the implications of interactive technology. Indeed, HCI researchers have recently noted the value of fiction in design [18][19][20][7][3][4], and, further, have drawn specifically on fiction as a means for facilitating reflection on the implications of design. For example, Nathan et al., [14] propose the use of short speculative narratives, or value scenarios, as a method for inspiring critical reflection. Blythe uses science fiction narratives to question values inherent in ubiquitous computing research. Kirman et al., [11] present a speculative vision of an evil robot controlled future, in order to reframe and inspire reflection on long terms consequences of strands of contemporary HCI research.

Conclusion

HCI researchers do not typically engage in critical evaluation of the potential consequences of their work [11][14][15]. There is little questioning of the assumption that interactive technology makes our lives more enjoyable, easier, better informed, healthier and more sustainable; or of our role as researchers in that process. This is in stark contrast with the work of fiction writers such as JG Ballard, who explored often how new forms of psychopathology are encouraged and facilitated by modern technology. This paper represents a provocative attempt at using fiction as a means for generating critical reflection on the nature of power in the relationship between people and interactive technology, and does so using the form and language of a genre of fiction that deals specifically with power in relationships.

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