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Playing Unbound: Towards a Radically Intersectional HCI

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ABSTRACT

This short essay is a call to action for digital games researchers to positively transform the future of HCI by meaningfully adopting an explicitly intersectional approach to our work as a scholarly community.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models**.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality; representation; race; gender; sexuality; disability; indigeneity

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As digital games research continues to grow it becomes more foundational to the study of human-computer interaction. But as this once emergent subfield matures, its scholars must reckon with the legacy of mainstream HCI which has historically marginalized the perspectives of women, people of color, disabled, and LGBTQIA+ folks. The CHI community has long been resistant to open discussion of gender and sexuality, with detractors arguing it is an irrelevant distraction to the field [5]. Though several scholars have made inroads with their explicitly feminist (e.g. [3]), queer (e.g. [34]), and trans contributions (e.g. [11]), research on these topics remains an unspoken taboo. Likewise, matters of race have frequently been overlooked and unaddressed by many privileged white members of the community, but recently scholars of color have been calling attention to the pressing need to center BIPOC perspectives and account for intersectional experiences in HCI [7, 23]. Participatory designers too have begun recognizing the urgency of reevaluating their practice to account for the inherent structural dynamics of their research methodology that, despite earnest intentions, still often perpetuates the exploitation of marginalized folks (especially Black, indigenous, disabled, and low-income participants) in a way that benefits members of powerful academic institutions [13, 26, 27].

The CHI Play community has both an opportunity and a responsibility to shape itself into a more diverse and inclusive field than its older computer science progenitors. One of the best ways of doing so is to keep pace with the other discipline that CHI Play originates from, game studies, by fully committing to a fundamentally intersectional approach to scholarship. Notably, the call to embrace intersectionality within game studies predates both the similar discourse at CHI [32], and the first convening of CHI Play, by a decade [18]. Since that time, ludology has grown to encompass rich areas of focus that fill edited volumes and convention halls to discuss queer game studies [12, 20, 30], Black game studies [10], and trans game studies [29]. And now under the heading of American game studies, researchers are collaborating to deepen the inclusion of perspectives from Asian, indigenous, Latinx, and disabled folks [15].

In tandem with game studies, CHI Play has, since its inception, been advancing significant work to explore issues of gender [2, 8, 16, 22, 28], race [6, 21, 24, 25, 37], and disability [4, 9, 14] in the landscape of interactive gaming technology. However, apart from an important keynote speech [17], the community has yet to meaningfully engage with the experiences of queer, trans, Latinx, or indigenous gamers. To decisively rebalance the problematic power dynamics inherited from HCI proper, CHI Play would do well to structurally prioritize the intersectional approach of game studies that some have begun adopt [31, 36]. If we as scholars of digital games want to reimagine who is considered the default human in those interactions with computers we study—if we want to change the status quo so that cis, white, hetero, able, and male are just some options among many, rather than the default setting of personhood—then we must be explicit in our effort to rewrite that stifling narrative. I offer that one important method to do so is by radically centering intersectional voices that break binary boundaries and decolonize racial hierarchies.

We find ourselves at a point in history when technology is being used to harass and oppress individuals in unforeseen and unprecedented ways, and trans folks of color are among those most likely to be targeted both online and in real life. Transness is often painted as a new phenomenon in certain mainstream cissexist gaming and technology circles, but gender non-conforming folks, and the absence of a rigid gender binary, are defining features of many indigenous cultures [19]. From the hijra of India, the muxe of Mexico, the kathoey of Thailand, the mudoko dako of Uganda, or the twospirits of North America, we can learn how BIPOC folks around the world have long embraced an expansive view of gender. Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that white supremacy drew much

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of its historic power from the notion that non-white "savages" were too androgynous, and only civilized white people could exhibit binary sex differentiation. As Schuller explains, "Within the logic of civilization, the two sexes represented a unique achievement of the civilized race. Evolutionists, anthropologists, and many others from across the life sciences and beyond determined that only the civilized had reached the stage of sexual dimorphism and that all other peoples had only one sex" [33].

The echoes of such Euro-supremacist logics still reverberate within our modern perceptions of the creation of knowledge and identification of truth. For example, much work on race and gender presentation in games involves close reads of primary sources (i.e. games themselves), marketing materials, and declarations from studio heads and developers regarding canon lore of characters and plot point clarifications. Yet, games studies scholars have demonstrated how traits like androgyneity are often used by designers to "reinforce rather than challenge the strictures of gender" [1]. Researchers, then, can do important work to rebalance the power between game creators and consumers by going beyond an analysis of how a studio intends a character to function and instead addressing how that character is perceived by the public (e.g. [35]). However, relatively little work has been conducted in our field thus far that explicitly explores, for example, the perceptions of trans folks of color regarding gender diverse representation in AAA titles.

What role do we want the experiences of gamers with intersectional identities to play in the CHI community? Are their play styles, artistic expressions, or lore interpretations less true or less valid than those of the cishet white men who are the oft imagined creator-consumers of game technology? Do we want our research to reflect the rapidly changing world we study or to uncritically reenergize outmoded inequities? Disproportionately focusing on the dominant opinions of straight white men reinforces a colonial logic of control, but we can halt the perpetuation of that harmful pattern by explicitly shifting our attention to those who are challenging the rigid gender binary and racial hierarchy that act as backstops for today's technology-fueled capitalist exploitation. CHI Play has an opportunity to usher in a 21st century HCI that meets a long overdue moment by emphasizing the innumerable interpretations that diverse folks bring to their exploration of gaming. If our community can do one thing to support positive change then, it would be to shine a light on the seeds of transformation that have already been planted. To achieve a more perfect form of representation, we would do well to embrace the multitudes speaking from the margins and amplify their experiences. Unbound by the impulses of our predecessors to be disciplinary gatekeepers, we have an opportunity to use the growing importance of digital games research to position our collective work as a welcoming beacon of progress for HCI, one that is an intersectional prism through which the perspectives of all marginalized genders and races may shine.

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