Out of Control: Introduction

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Loading…'s first theme issue invites a first-pass at theorizing and starting to come to terms with the change in controllers currently revolutionizing input devices used to play digital games. In the call for papers, we asked for submissions to *Loading…*'s first theme issue, namely, on the new varieties of controllers that have begun to revolutionize gameplay and game design. With amazing speed, relative to how long we have submitted to the constraints of the 'joystick' in its various mechanical and increasingly complex re-designs, we have moved from the joystick and a range of button-based controllers, to a plethora of alternative forms. The stylus for Nintendo's DS significantly altered handheld games and play, but these changes now seem relatively innocuous compared to the more 'embodied' controllers like the *Dance Dance Revolution* dance pad, the karaoke-type mikes of *Singstar* and its relations, the kinetic action elicited by the Wii or even the highly imitative play of *Rock Band* drumming.

The papers in this collection ask what are the new functions and forms of play enabled by this change in game hardware? Are new players, who have hitherto stayed away, now joining the fray? And do controllers that are body-based engage different populations, such as women and girls, more than their predecessors? What new game forms are now becoming imaginable? Can games of this kind advance new educational and training goals? Do "guitar heroes" learn something about music –reading a score, mastering rhythm or coordination, or performing - that has actual importance and significance beyond the game itself? Are these "alternative" controllers re-configuring what it means to *play*, in ways fundamentally different from old-school button mashing?

What this collection of papers has attempted to accomplish is two-fold: starting out by republishing Stephen Griffin's "Push.Play: An Examination of the Gameplay Button" establishes the theme and sets up the initial conditions for this volume's concentration on the radical shift in game input technologies, and how this alters some of our preconceptions about controllers and gameplay. We are indebted to Griffin for allowing us to reprint what we now see as a baseline for this emergent trajectory of inquiry. Jim Parker's paper, "Buttons, Simplicity, and Natural Interfaces," directly responds to Griffin's discussion, challenging what he sees as gaming's over-reliance on button-based interfaces. Parker urges that buttons be consigned to the scrap-heap of gaming history. Offering an overview of the functionality and technologies used in various alternative gaming inputs – speech, audio, gesture, and touch – Parker pushes for interfaces, such as the *Wiimote*, which feature naturalistic modes of user input that allow for more immersive play than buttons.

Secondly, and more broadly, in this issue we wanted to see if we could "drum up" and cultivate some early theorization: what does an initial pass at researching emerging user interface hardware look like, and how do we seriously and usefully theorize about what "game controllers" have and might become, and how this has emergently reconfigured play. What's the discussion so far, and what lines of thought and questions will work in this area entail? So we wanted here to see how people had begun to think about and study the play possibilities afforded by these changes. Dominic Arsenault's paper on *Guitar Hero* (*GH*) asks whether and how playing *GH* is like "playing a real guitar". His detailed analysis of this question explores both the

controller and the game interface in an effort to untangle similarities and differences. Henry Svec's paper takes a different approach to *GH* and another music game, *Rez*, arguing that they be viewed as "musical performance" titles, and as such are active in producing a very different kind of player, one who is very much invited to "perform, compose, or improvise musical works". He suggests this kind of music game is compelling as it offers an opportunity for those who play to literally create their own music, thereby participating in and through an economy of musical "labor". Turning to players and their interactions, de Castell & Boschman's "Controlling Play" offers an image-driven discussion of girl/machine relations in emerging forms of play. And, finally, Alexander Wong's paper, "A Visual-Inertial Hybrid Controller Approach to Improving Immersion in 3D Video Games" extends the discussion of new controller games to seeking ways of improving play in 3D space through the development of new hardware. He first provides an overview of input devices that have been used to control play in games, and ends with a rich description of how a vision-inertial system might work, including the development and implementation of a prototype.

This issue also brings two new features to the journal: a game review section which will invite submissions that take a distinctively *situated* rhetorical stance in their perspectives on the game or games reviewed. These explicitly "located" game reviews are intended to stimulate further discussion, provoke challenges, invite critical responses and engage both a deeper and broader commentary, either on the points of view presented, or simply by adding to what's being said by the game reviewer/s. In a first attempt at this, Milena Droumeva, herself engaged in developing a beat-based game right now, as well as researching acoustic ecology, and composing music, too, takes stock of recent music games and speculates on their "next gen" possibilities. (Look forward to the next installment in *Loading…*'s new game review section, when Magy Seif El-Nasr reviews "Assassin's Creed" from a very differently positioned "insider's" perspective.) The second section new to *Loading...* aims to take a "meta" view (i.e. a view about views) of the blogs on a given topic, and overview these, giving commentary and direction to the blogosphere's chatter around a proposed topic. The point in this piece is to give identify either the "mainstream", or most interesting, weirdest or mundane snippets of topics/discussions on the given subject, and link directly to the blogs and other sites where that kind of commentary is going on. The intent is to offer a by no means comprehensive, but at the very least provocative overview of what's being said about a particular topic within and across different gaming communities: hardcore gamers, industry folks, designers, theorists and researchers, artists, etc. In the first of such pieces, Nis Bojin pulls together the disparate threads of commentary on controllers, including the speculation about the Wii and its disapproval ratings by hardcore gamers. We enthusiastically invite your suggestions for possible gameblog themes for *Loading…*'s next issue.

What's "loading" in this issue, then, is a collection of "first steps" which we think, as more and more of us turn to playing and studying the new controller enabled games like *Rockband* or *Wii Fit* (May 19, 2008), might lead to greater opportunities for theorizing these developments. What we've sought to do here, and what these papers have accomplished is, we think, a kind of initial foray into what promises to be a revolution in gameplay and perhaps a very important emergent trajectory, indeed perhaps even a quite different picture, of how core aspects of play -- **location and locomotion, embodiment and imitation**-- matter very much to the advancement of research on games.