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## Let's Talk About It

by Joseph 'Jofish' Kaye, Johanna Brewer, & Amanda Williams

The theme of this issue of *Ambidextrous* has an unusual origin. It started back at CHI 2006 when the authors, along with our colleague Susan Wyche, proposed hosting a workshop to discuss the role of sex in HCI. We were initially surprised at how uneasy some of the community members were with our proposal and their tendency to dismiss this body of work as not being valid academic research. For example, one of our reviewers wrote: "I'd feel a whole lot better if some of them had...signed statements from their psychotherapists attesting to their motives in promoting the workshop."

In the end, we were able to host the workshop as planned and had an excellent response with thoughtful contributions from a myriad of people, all of whom took our call seriously. We left feeling the discussion was far from finished. After pursuing different avenues for further dialogue, we proposed to *Ambidextrous* "sex" as an issue theme.

Sex is clearly a topic that enflames passions—in more ways than one. At the same time, sex is fundamental to who we are as human beings. Some biologists argue that life is merely about sex and passing on genes, even to the exclusion of free will. Anthropologists study mating rituals the world over; health educators view sex education

as essential; sex fuels the narratives of theater, television, cinema, and books. Why do all these people spend time focusing on sex? Should they, too, require signed statements from psychotherapists attesting to their motives?

Sex, intimacy, relationships, and other topics encompassed within our

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theme, *Getting it On*, are remarkably complex areas of discourse. This is strongly evident in design where multiple disciplines and their distinct problem-solving approaches come together to think about and engages in new challenges and processes. Designing for sex involves the full force of humanity: the biology, physics, art, and sociology of everyday life. In our home discipline of human-computer interaction, we draw from a legacy rooted in a technical and industrial approach that must, by definition, see problems as definable and solvable. A new algorithm crunches data twice as fast; a new interface enables the user to complete a task twice as fast. Twice as fast is rarely what one wishes from a new sexual experience.

Designing for sex changes our metrics. How do we define success when

designing not just to fit but also to flatter different sizes and forms? What happens when we think of designing not for a single user but for both members of a couple? One reason sex may be so taboo for our community is not that it is naughty, but rather that it is so complex that it challenges and tests the

limits of the tenuously rigorous design methods that we hold so dear. The resoundingly personal nature of sex pushes user-centered design to new heights—what's fabulously sexy to one person is somewhat

kinky to another, entirely reprehensible for a third, and completely illegal to a fourth. Design for sexual and intimate relations crosses boundaries of geography, culture, and aesthetics.

*Getting it On* both asks and begins to answer some important questions about sex and design. What role does design play in sex and sex play in design? If design can entirely change the market for MP3 players, to what degree can the same process alter the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases? What assumptions about sex, intimacy, and relationships are built into contemporary design, and what would it mean to design for different social pairings as societies change? Sex is an integral part of who we are as people and communities. So let's celebrate the richness that is design for *Getting it On*. 