

book review

Ruberg, Bonnie, and Shaw, Adrienne (eds.). **Queer Game Studies**. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

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Queer Game Studies is an edited collection of essays, personal reflections, and interviews from scholars, makers, and critics all interested in the intersection of queer theory, games, and play. Representation has long been a crucial area of inquiry in game studies, especially as conversations about the cultural ramifications of stereotypical or harmful representations have entered popular discourse. Accordingly, there are many individual articles and chapters analysing LGBTQ+ representation in games as well as the practices of queer game makers and gamer communities (for example, see Shaw 2009, Youngblood 2013, Harvey 2014, Clark and Kopas 2015, Ruberg 2015, Shaw 2015, Chang 2015, Shaw 2016, Chess 2016, Engel 2016, Chang 2017, Ruberg 2017a, Ruberg 2017b). However, so far there have been no edited collections dedicated specifically to the topic, meaning that *Queer Game Studies* is a foundational text in this growing area of study, serving as an intervention in game studies and media studies more broadly. As demonstrated by the citations above, the editors of this collection, Bonnie (Bo) Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, are two of the leading voices on the topic of queerness and games. Ruberg is an assistant professor of digital media and games in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. They have published several articles and chapters on queerness and games, are currently editing a special issue of *Game Studies* entitled “Queerness and Vi-

deo Games” along with Amanda Phillips, and are also the lead organizer of the annual Queerness and Games conference. Shaw is an assistant professor in Temple University’s Department of Media Studies and Production. She has published several articles and chapters on queerness and games and her first book, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), is another work commonly cited by scholars interested in the representation of marginalized identities in games. Shaw is also the founder of the LGBTQ Game Archive, which is a collaborative curated effort to identify and catalogue queer in games.

In the introduction, the editors emphasize that the collection’s aim is to explore different takes on what queer game studies (QGS) might look like. They make it clear that this means going beyond a focus on queer designers and in-game representations in order to investigate the ways in which queerness as a broader theoretical approach might challenge and subvert existing norms and change the way we understand games and play itself (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, ix). Queer theory, then, presents an opportunity to explore “difference in games,” to “destabilize and reimagine video games themselves,” and to interrogate “the very systems that structure the medium” (ix). To this end, the collection is divided into five thematic sections which feature a broad range of topics and approaches. This broadness speaks to the editors’

intention of framing QGS as not just “the specific topic of queerness in games” (though there is plenty of that as well), but as “the application of a set of critical tools derived from queer theory and queer thinking” (xii). As with any edited collection, some chapters attempt and achieve this application more than others, though they all contribute to the arguably more politically important goal of this book to “continue broadening conversations around gender, sexuality, and games” and “to see video games as spaces of queer possibility” (xiii).

Although the editors repeatedly call for the application of queer theory to game studies in their introduction, only the first section, “Defining Queerness in Games” really includes chapters that deeply engage with queer theory and queer theorists. The section begins with Naomi Clark’s chapter in which she helpfully outlines the two main approaches to QGS: one which focuses on diversifying game content and the other which focuses on how to ‘queer’ the structure of games themselves. Interestingly, Clark argues that seeking to legitimize games as ‘productive,’ ‘useful,’ or ‘artistic’ risks losing that which makes games disruptive, subversive, and queer. Edmond Chang then introduces the term ‘queergaming’ – a queer version of Alexander Galloway’s “countergaming” – that seeks to challenge normative narratives and mechanics and embrace a “heterogeneity of play” (Galloway 2017, 15). Derek Burrill’s chapter engages the most with queer theory and while it is less accessible than other chapters in terms of academic jargon, it offers an extremely useful, thoughtful, and provocative case for centralizing the body in QGS. Burrill also reminds us that queer games should be “a means of celebrating difference without sacrificing fun” (Burrill 2017, 31). This section ends with Zoya Street’s discussion of what queer games history might look like, given that queerness is fundamentally “a resistance against [the] coercive attempt to claim knowledge about other people’s experiences” (Street 2017, 38).

Section two, “Queering Game Play and Design” opens with Peter Wonica’s retrospective on his project to develop a board game addressing the challenges faced by queer women in abusive relationships. This “community-driven development experience” involved a “collective design process” and so this chapter offers useful insight for anyone interested in participatory design or community-based participant research (Wonica 2017, 45).

Leigh Alexander’s chapter entitled “Playing Outside” argues that games are being held back as a medium due to their focus on ‘fun,’ an argument which contradicts Naomi Clark and Derek Burrill, whose chapters use queer theory to defend the importance of fun in games. Alexander states that “[c]ulture-changing entertainment is rarely described as ‘fun’” (59) and she calls for more games about personal struggles and painful experiences rather than power fantasies. Accordingly, she is very critical of the current mainstream games industry and gamers who see games as “their safe space,” occupy the “geek tree house,” (Alexander 2017, 57) and fetishize “nerd fantasies” (60). Her tone is somewhat hostile – Alexander is known for ruffling feathers – but her call for more games that highlight “the humble heroism in simply facing the world every day without privilege” is cogent (61). While it may have been more interesting to ask her to write something new for this collection rather than republishing a piece originally written for *The New Inquiry*, her passionate insistence that the personal games movement allows us to “see the genuine potential of games as art and communication” is convincing and fits in with the collection’s purpose (61).

Hanna Brady’s chapter is a quirky, refreshingly poetic demonstration on queering the hero’s journey and mythology in general. Brady argues for the queer potential of science fiction and fantasy which “encourages us to dream of what we might be” (Brady 2017, 68) – another contrast to Alexander’s outright dismissal of “nerd fantasies” in the previous chapter (60). Aubrey Gabel then turns to literary ludics, or the tradition of playing in poetry, to ask if game designers could play with game mechanics like the poets she discusses played with writing formalism. Mattie Brice then convincingly uses kink to examine the possibilities of using play for empathy, reflection, and connection. She reminds us that a concern for empathy should not exist solely in the realm of queer art games, since empathy “is endemic to play” (Brice 2017, 81). The section ends with Larissa Hjorth and Kim D’Amazing’s reflections on their participant-based research into the role of selfies in queer performativity. Although selfies are not generally associated with games, the authors convincingly read selfietaking as a form of play.

The third section, “Reading Games Queerly” starts with Robert Yang’s chapter, which fo-

cuses on gender-based violence and institutional misogyny. Yang uses an example of a scandalous incident – the discovery of developers referring to a woman of colour character as a “Feminist-Whore” within their coding – to discuss the ways in which sexism manifests not only in game content, but also within the very cultural and technical structures of game production and design. Amanda Phillips uses film theory to convincingly read the eponymous character from *Bayonetta* as a queer femme who aggressively disturbs the male gaze. Todd Harper, similarly, conducts a queer reading of the *Mass Effect* series through his reflections on his own two playthroughs of the series, once as a female Commander Shepard (the ‘default’ experience) and once as a male Commander Shepard who he understood to be a closeted gay man (the alternative queer reading). Gregory Bagnall does not take a close reading approach in his chapter, instead he focuses on the often-ignored material technologies of games to demonstrate the ways in which existing hardware – especially game controllers with their phallic joysticks – forces players to “enact heteropolitics” (Bagnall 2017, 140). The section ends with Merritt K’s (formerly Merritt Kopas) touchingly personal reflection on her experience playing *Gone Home* and its representation of a queer romance.

Section four, “Queer Failures in Games” begins with Adrienne Shaw’s chapter, in which she argues for “an understanding of communities as multiple and overlapping, as intersectional and coalitional” (Shaw 2017, 153). This chapter combines Shaw’s personal experience as a researcher and community member with a discussion of queer game culture, so it is especially useful for anyone interested in online spaces, identity politics, and community practices. Gabriela Richard similarly discusses her ethnographical research into a female-oriented online gaming community, providing a candid and critical look at the strengths and weaknesses of the group. Katherine Cross discusses the hostility, misogyny, and harassment directed at queer critics, designers, and games themselves by certain members of gamer culture using Susan Faludi’s concept of “the terror dream” (Cross 2017, 180).

Jack Halberstam’s chapter explores the connections between animation and video games through the queer potential of play. He reiterates the call to look beyond representation and asks

what gaming might offer queer theory and what queer theory might offer gaming. His chapter leads nicely into the next, which is a transcription of a moderated conversation between Halberstam and game scholar Jesper Juul – two very influential figures in their respective fields. Both scholars have written about failure (queer failure and ludic failure) and yet they had never previously engaged with one another. This conversation directly demonstrates that there is indeed clear overlap between queer theory and game studies. In the final chapter in this section, Jordan Youngblood reads the protagonist of *Metal Gear Solid 2* as embodying a locus of heteronormative failure, providing a space for “acceptable player loss” (Youngblood 2017, 212), thereby demonstrating how to perform a queer reading of a game that goes ‘beyond representation’ and looks instead at the function of the character as openly subverting the boundaries between player and game (221).

The fifth and final section, “Queer Futures for Games” opens with Kathryn Bond Stockton’s clever interweaving of queerness, childhood, games, and play with lateralization and *jouissance*. Next, Christopher Goetz discusses what queer growth or legitimization of games might look like and follows Clark and Burrill in a defense of fun. He reminds us that “video games are ‘queer’ precisely for their embrace of blissful *jouissance*” and calls for game scholars to not outright dismiss the fantasies of empowerment presented in games (Goetz 2017, 240). Colleen Macklin’s chapter asks where the queerness is in games, whether it is found in the game’s characters and worlds, in the game’s affordances, in the game’s designers, or in the game’s players. The answer is all of the above, and given the overlap with Clark’s work, this chapter may have been better placed in the first section of the book.

The next chapter is an interview with the organizers of three important queer games conferences – *The Queerness and Games Conference*, *GaymerX*, and *Different Games* – which will be valuable for anyone interested in the practicalities, difficulties, and rewards of conference organizing. The collection concludes with Ruberg’s reflections on their experiences organizing the inaugural *Queerness and Games Conference*, which follows nicely from the interview. While they are candid regarding the difficulties and doubts they faced, the chapter has a hopeful tone, particularly in Ruberg’s statement

that “[a] temporary community is still a community, and the powerful feeling of belonging lasts long beyond any given place or time” (Ruberg 2017, 273). Ruberg reminds us that QGS matters because “now we know beyond a doubt that the issue of difference and video games matters” (274).

In terms of shortcomings, there are only a few in this otherwise excellent collection. First, in their introduction, the editors mention that the focus on sexuality in queer studies has “at times obscured the importance of race, gender, and class” (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, xviii). This is certainly true, and while this collection addresses gender at length, unfortunately few of the contributors engage deeply with questions of race, class, or disability. Considering that the editors claim that this collection is “mapping the most urgent political concerns of queer game studies,” this lack of intersectionality is somewhat concerning (xix). However, there is only so much that can be included in a single collection and the editors do argue that this collection captures “a transitional historical moment” in the early development of QGS, with most chapters written in 2013/2014, so hopefully future collections following in the footsteps of this one will address other identity positions and engage more deeply with intersectional theory, disability studies, and Black feminism.

Second, as with any edited collection that sets out to present “a diverse array of perspectives and approaches,” the sections are somewhat disjointed, and sometimes clash in tone, content, and purpose (xiii). For example, while many of the chapters insist on the value and importance of fun and fantasy, others claim these aspects hold the medium back from reaching its potential. Most notably, this collection suffers from a tension between queer representation (that is, a focus on sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues) and queerness-as-theory (which goes beyond subject matter in order to question, disrupt, and disturb deeper underlying assumptions). This tension has plagued academia for decades: the adoption of the term “queer” into academic discourse was shaped both by the political concerns within the gay and lesbian community and by postmodernist reconfigurations and critical deconstructions of identity and subjectivity influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan (for more on this, see Hennessy 1995 and Seidman 1995). Indeed, given the editors’ call to “explore queerness beyond re-

presentation” (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, xiii), it is surprising for there to be an entire section on close readings of queerness in games and for so many of the chapters to reference the queer content in *Gone Home*. This suggests that QGS has not yet been able to bridge these two approaches, sending a clear signal that while the editors may feel that QGS is being held back by a focus on representation, critics, makers, and scholars are still interested in talking about it.

While there are a few shortcomings, this collection’s diversity in terms of tone, accessibility, and purpose means that anyone could find value in it, though it is clearly addressed to game scholars, critics, and makers who are specifically interested in the intersection of queerness/queer theory and games. As such, it could be used as a text in a game design program, or in courses on queer theory, media studies, sexuality studies, and digital humanities. I strongly recommend reading it alongside *The State of Play*, a 2015 collection featuring work by Anna Anthropy, Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, as well as some authors who contributed to *Queer Game Studies*, like merritt k, Katherine Cross, and Leigh Alexander. Overall, this collection is an absolutely essential read for any game scholar, maker, critic, or enthusiast interested in social justice and identity politics; in diverse perspectives, opinions, and readings of games; in seeing the medium and its fandom become more inclusive; in exploring new avenues of possibility for game design and reception; and in “unlocking the non-normative potential that has been waiting in video games all along” (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, xxii). As QGS continues to evolve and flourish, this collection will provide a strong and inspirational foundation for future work.

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