



Where Are the Girls? Locating Girlhood in Game Studies

— Ashley P. Jones

Cunningham, Carolyn M. *Games Girls Play: Contexts of Girls and Video Games*. Lexington Books, 2018. 181 pp. \$90.00 hc. ISBN 9781498554565.

Carolyn M. Cunningham's *Games Girls Play: Contexts of Girls and Video Games* paints a picture of how girls within the United States interact with, relate to, and understand video games at large and within their personal lives. The book works to better understand the relationship between gender constructions and video games. Cunningham takes a media ecology approach to the different contexts in which girls in elementary, middle, and high school consume and interact with video games within the United States.

Cunningham builds on Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, which focuses on marginalized populations of gamers and their relationships with video games in their everyday lives. Shaw focuses on the effects of social contextualization of video games within player's experiences as an important factor to consider when exploring gaming in conjunction with gender identity and performance (22). "Girl Games" are games that feature female protagonists or feminine gameplay (Cunningham 26). Addressing the marginalized gamer population of girls and drawing from research on girls elementary school age through high school, Cunningham explores the intersection of girlhood with gaming through a variety of lenses, such as marketing and consumption as well as feminist theory and activism. Cunningham argues that gendered differences in video games are reflections of both the video-game industry and the home lives of girls in her study. Girls reported that games designed for and marketed to them often operate in accordance with a rigid form of femininity that does not capture their attention. Furthermore, video games are a leisure activity that many felt was denied to them, in part due to the challenges of accessing video

games within their homes. Limited access was often attributed to the role of brothers and the assumed masculinity of video games, as well as rules imposed by parents on access to certain games and hardware to play the games.

In addition to the gendered differences advertised by marketing companies, the girls' understanding of how video games fit into their personal lives, and access to video games, Cunningham also looks at how feminism is playing a role in video-game culture at large. Historically, female gamers have been excluded from the public spaces of gaming including, but not limited to, gaming conventions (Huntemann 75), Xbox Live clans (Gray 413), and in e-sports competitions (Witkowski 186). Within these spaces, Nina B. Huntemann, Kishonna L. Gray, and Emma Witkowski have all shown that female participation is policed and regulated in ways that keep the gaming space masculine oriented. Furthermore, Gray argues that these spaces are also policed to keep the spaces white through such tactics as linguistic profiling and the use of language in the spaces (414-16). Recent changes brought about by hashtag activism have shown that cultural discourses surrounding feminism, gender, and video games are changing, and, as a result, video game spaces are becoming more friendly to those who have historically been excluded. The Gamergate controversy—a campaign of hate speech and sexual harassment directed toward female video game designers by young, male gamers—highlights how issues of sexism, gender discrimination, and feminism have been making their way into these discourses for the last decade. Cunningham argues that it is within these feminist conversations that video games have the potential to make an impact in shaping larger cultural values. She also argues that STEM-directed community groups show potential for change, as they provide opportunities to girls of all ages to participate in video-game design. While Cunningham argues for the developmental benefits that these programs provide to a marginalized group within the video-game industry, she also adds that the economic justifications that tend to be featured as benefits of these types of programs are not reflected in real video game development companies. Women within the gaming industry still face problems with being hired and staying with companies for any extended amount of time.

Cunningham presents a well-researched perspective on the role that video games play in relation to girlhood within the United States. Her contribution provides perspective on

an overlooked aspect of video-game culture. The constructions of gender and gaming is a growing research area within gaming studies, as evidenced by the publication of such books as Carly Kocurek's *Coin-Operated Americans*, which looks at masculinity and arcades, and Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees's anthology *Masculinities in Play*. Both Kocurek's and Taylor and Voorhees's works have expanded conversations about gender identity and construction in gaming studies to explore how masculinity is constructed and operates. Cunningham adds a new voice to this subject area by focusing explicitly on girlhood. Moving beyond a narrow focus on the construction of gender within gaming, Cunningham gives a voice to the current generation of girls growing up as digital natives. Additionally, Cunningham's application of the media ecology framework to her research provides a fuller perspective on why American girls interact with and consume video games in the ways that they do. Cunningham's research also coincides with work done by Shira Chess in her book *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. Chess identifies the designed identity as a constructed and imaginary identity which is useful to industry professionals when creating content for audiences (5). "Player One" is the dominant, white, cisgender, heterosexual male audience that most associate with video games (Chess 6). Chess argues that "Player Two" is the often-marginalized gamer that Cunningham focuses on (Chess 6). Cunningham supports Chess's work through a more nuanced and detailed analysis of girls and games within the United States. Addressing the prescriptive aspects of how girl games are approached, Cunningham builds up Chess's work by exploring this prescription in more detail. Cunningham explores why girls consume games in the ways that they do, highlighting their intentions and access within this larger conversation of designed identity (25). Cunningham provides more evidence that girl games and girls who play games are often different from their male counterparts and misinterpreted by industry professionals. Approaching the research from industrial, personal, and cultural viewpoints allows Cunningham to add to the larger conversation about video-game culture and provide well-rounded conclusions.

Although Cunningham provides a new take on gender within video games, her insights draw from a very small sample size of girls. The sample is also limited to a small region of the western United States, with minimal insights in terms of diversity. Many of her respondents

identify as white, with a few tokenized girls of colour. Conducting some of the focus groups and interviews but around different regions would provide a better snapshot of the relationship between video games and girlhood within the United States. Additionally, while Cunningham discusses how gender is constructed in the introduction of the book, the research still views gender as a binary construct. Cunningham makes no attempt to discuss how girlhood does not necessarily include all bodies that identify in feminine-coded ways. Those who identify as non-binary or gender fluid are excluded. While this exclusion does not appear to be intentional, Cunningham discusses gender and technology as co-constituted in the conversation surrounding games. A historical contextualization of girl studies and how the discipline articulates these differences might have enhanced Cunningham's framework and helped to rationalize the choice of sample population.

Overall, Cunningham provides a fresh voice to a large discussion in video game studies. Starting with a young population like girls within the United States allows for a cultural discussion surrounding socialization of video-game practices and values. Cunningham's research allows readers to begin to trace how cultural values become embedded and embodied within a population through practices such as marketing, parenting, and education. Cunningham's media ecology framework is a successful approach to doing this type of epistemic, cultural, and historical work.

Works Cited

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