

Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture [Review of Gaming at the Edge by Adrienne Shaw]

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Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture by Adrienne Shaw ISBN 978-0-8166-9316-0

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Recently, digital media has rarely been out of the spotlight. From #GamerGate and the harmful portrayal of sexuality, including the heavy focus on heterosexism and sexualisation of characters like Lara Croft, this increasingly pervasive and influential medium has faced a great deal of public scrutiny.

One of the central questions within this critical discourse is the matter of representation. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* by Adrienne Shaw, a prominent voice in gaming research, seeks to explore the significance of representation. Shaw is an Assistant Professor in Temple University's Department of Media Studies and Production and has acted as co-editor of two edited anthologies: *Queer Game Studies* and *Queer Technologies: Affordances, Affect, Ambivalence* as well as writing *Gaming at the Edge* which won the 2016 International Communication Association's Popular Communications Division's Book Award. Utilising ethnographic research techniques to explore the politics and power of representation, Shaw has given a voice to those groups currently marginalised within the wider culture of gaming.

Structured into four sections focused on demographics, identification, connection with characters, and realism versus escapism, Shaw has created a cohesive narrative which also draws on visual examples to demonstrate the limitations of some game interfaces including *Left 4 Dead* and *Fable III*. In chapter 1, Shaw discusses the portrayal of gender, sexuality and race in existing games, providing examples which demonstrate the limits of current media portrayals. Chapter 2 focuses on identification within gaming and unpacks the nature of representation in various games, most notably *Lara Croft*, with Shaw dissecting the "cyber-bimbo feminist icon" (pp. 63) through her numerous incarnations and exploring the issue of sexual violence and loss as a trite means of female character development. In chapter 3 Shaw delves into character creation and the formation of relationships between player and character through the lens of player identification. The final chapter focuses on gamer views on representation and whether this is important, acknowledging the diversity in user experiences and the impact these differences can have on the significance placed on representation.

One of the most interesting facets of Shaw's work is her examination of gaming behaviour generally, that allows for a much wider analysis focused on gaming practices, rather than a niche focus on specific games or platforms. This allows for a move towards practices related to the media and the opportunity to understand how social processes are enacted through this medium. The result is a textured and cohesive piece of work that delves into the process of identification and also examines how game developers can engage in meaningful attempts at representation. Shaw has also chosen to challenge and investigate the assumption that marginalised gamers want to be able to play as characters who represent them. Giving voice to the complex, multi-layered nature of identification, Shaw has explored how gamers identify with the games they choose to play. This leads to a vivid exploration of user experiences taken from a number of in-depth interviews with gamers of varied backgrounds. Shaw has also approached the ever-present issue of neoliberalism within gaming culture, arguing that game developers place the burden of representation on good neoliberal players who must take responsibility for their own media representation, rather than proactively developing representative characters.

The purpose of *Gaming at the Edge* is to challenge designers and producers of gaming media and encourage active cognisance of their default position. This is not a rallying cry for

a game centred on those at the margins, but rather a request for conscious evaluation of the biases that influence game design and ultimately player representation. This forms part of a wider critique of the culture of game design, in which the lack of opportunities for women and other minority groups is not a new trend but is an enduring one.

Gaming at the Edge is interesting and accessible with a focus on presenting the question of gamer representation within its wider socio-cultural framework. Shaw raises a number of thought provoking critiques including issues around the theoretical conceptualisation of identification, and has produced a critical, challenging analysis of gender, sexuality and race in gamer culture. Given this critical focus, *Gaming at the Edge* would appeal to those with an interest in gender, game and media studies and those with an interest in psychology and sociology.

In an industry which thrives on creativity, designers should be able to do better. The fictitious world of gaming is a double-edged sword- on the one hand players may argue that they don't need to identify with characters in a typical way but on the other, if it is possible to create an avatar, why shouldn't you be able to create one which looks like you? This appears to be the central tenant of Shaw's work, if we are to suggest that representation doesn't matter, then why do we default to straight, white and often male?

The takeaway from *Gaming at the Edge* is that no art is created in a vacuum. No medium exists that is free from social or cultural context and within those contexts prejudices arise. Representation is not necessarily linear, as Shaw has highlighted it can be a thorny process. We, as gamers and academics, must continue to spotlight the barriers to inclusivity and highlight the ways in which companies are letting down their players. *Gaming at the Edge* is an important and timely piece of work which presents a framework for these discussions and moves beyond the idea that greater representation will solve the deep-seated issues of racism and sexism within the gaming industry.