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The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games

Bonnie Ruberg

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, Acknowledgments, introduction, afterword, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. 288 pp. \$26.95, paper. ISBN: 9781478006589

Framed by the cultural and political backdrop of the 2016 election in the United States, the #GamerGate backlash beginning in 2014, and the nascent indie games movement (queer and otherwise), Bonnie Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* offers a well-curated, thoughtful, playful, behind-the-seined-curtain look at the "rising tide of indie games being developed by, about and often for LGBTQ people" (p. 3). Ruberg weaves together working definitions of "queer" and "games" and "avant-garde" and makes astute connections across past, present, and future that leans into the messiness of a diversity of perspectives and lived experiences of the featured artists, writers, organizers, and creators and that emphasizes the powerful idea that "making video games as queer people is a political act" (p. 6). All of the conversations presented within the book are also in conversation with one another, and collected interviews revel in the resonances, frictions, sparks, glitter, and the occasional heavy petting across

games, stories, identities, and theories. These postcards from the vanguard allow LGBTQ players, designers, and makers to speak for themselves and to offer insights into the practicalities, economies, and the vagaries of game making and game sharing, as well as of the gaming communities.

The book is structured in seven parts, framed by an introduction and afterword that attempt to reimagine the medium of video games, and it features twenty interviews with twenty-two game makers. Ruberg's introduction identifies several main features of the "queer games avant-garde": it explores queerness beyond representation; it makes identity in- and out-of-games messy; it is interested in affect, emotions, intimacy, and "how games feel" (p. 20); it questions the idea that games can or should be about empathy, particularly through identity tourism; and finally, the queer games avant-garde is political and intersectional. Overall, the book invites meditations on and explorations of these features and gives space to those interviewed to share their personal histories, journeys, fears, and desires. Many of the interviews explore how the individuals got into games and game making, what their major influences are, what makes their games queer (or how they queer their games), and what advice they would give to other game makers and artists.

Part 1, entitled "Queer People, Queer Desires, Queer Games," presents three game makers that foreground queer characters and identities. Notably, Aevee Bee, writer and creative director of *We Know the Devil* (2015), argues, "Queer characters must remain complex" (p. 53). Part 2, called "Queerness as a Mode of Game Making," features creators who employ

“the conceptual queerness found in queer theory” (p. 61) to make games beyond representation, or as Liz Ryerson, designer of *Problem Attic* (2013), insists, “We have to make our own rules” (p. 61). “Designing Queer Intimacy in Games” is part 3, and “The Legacy of Feminist Performance Art in Queer Games” is part 4, both of which engage questions and manifestations of gender, embodiment, affect, consent, vulnerability, and performance in games. For example, Mattie Brice discusses the legacies of her game *Mainichi* (2012), a game about “navigating life as a black trans woman” (p. 135). Part 5, “Intersectional Perspectives in/on Queer Games,” presents four game makers that explore the connections and interactions among race, gender, sexuality, and other structures and norms. Part 5 features Tonia B***** and Emilia Yang, who discuss making games about queer women of color and their interactive web series, *Downtown Browns* (2016). Two noteworthy sections—part 6 on “Analog Games: Exploring Queerness through Non-Digital Play” and part 7 on “Making Queer Games, Queer Change, and Queer Community”—expand the discussion of video games to rightfully include board games, live-action role-playing games, and paratexts (even metatexts) and places in context the game industry, its research, and such gaming communities as game jams and fandom. These last sections explore what Avery Alder, creator of *The Quiet Year* (2012), calls “structural queerness” (p. 181) at the micro and macro levels from individual games to game companies and collectives writ large.

The Queer Games Avant-Garde is a generous and generative book; it is approachable, accessible, teachable, and

complements Ruberg’s other books and projects including *Queer Game Studies* (2017) and *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019). But most importantly, the book offers radical possibilities, both practical and playful. In its publication year 2020, the year of a global pandemic, a national racial reckoning, and another traumatizing presidential election, the voices and stories gathered in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* try to reimagine the problems of the present and to imagine alternative possibilities and futures. Each of the discussants delve into queer(er) forms of pleasure, self- and mutual care, and sustainable labor in games and in everyday lives. Hailing Jose Esteban Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), this book is in a deep sense about hope—for video games, for marginalized creators, and for the world. In the first line of the Afterword, Ruberg asks, “What does the future look like for the queer games avant-garde?” (p. 237). In a phrase, it looks like what Dietrich “Squinky” Squinkifer calls “joyful resistance” (p. 33).

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CORRECTION:

Olga S. Jarrett’s review in our Winter 2020 (vol.12 no. 2) issue of *Let the Children Play: How More Play Will Save Our Schools and Help Children Thrive* by Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle describes “Anji Play” as “influenced by the Finnish Model,” a statement in need of correction. According to Jesse Robert Coffino, cochair of the

True Play Foundation and a translator for Cheng Xueqin, this kind of play developed independently and without outside influence from a grassroots movement of public early childhood educators in Anji County, China. Cheng, a county director

of preprimary school education led the movement, based on attempts to understand the true nature of play by teachers who took care to observe and question children directly.