

book appears generally well grounded in both video game studies and sports studies. Brookey and Oates do a particularly good job of setting up the context for the book in their introduction, demonstrating knowledge of both sports and video games and their respective bodies of academic literature.

My greatest reservation about the book has to do with the sometimes sluggish pace of academic publishing. Published in 2015, the book includes statements about how “video game studies have not embraced sports games” (p. 5) and seems largely written at least a couple of years ago. There is no mention of *Sports Videogames*, a collection edited by Mia Consalvo, Konstantin Mitgutsch, and Abe Stein that appeared two years earlier in mid-2013, almost two years before this book. The major point *Playing to Win* makes about sports video games being relatively understudied compared to other types of games, particularly online fantasy-themed games, still holds, but it is severely compromised by an earlier volume absent from this work’s discussion.

The timing problem also reaches into the book’s analyses of particular games and systems, as most chapters focus on the 2012 or 2013 version of a game, which is often two or three versions behind the current market. The highly iterative, annual tradition of most sports games makes them both hard to think about innovatively and hard to write about: many changes have been made in the games since the versions discussed in the book. One game analyzed in *Playing to Win*, *NCAA Football*, is no longer produced, a fact the authors relegated to a chapter postscript. Moreover, I would have liked to see more about the

court case and circumstances surrounding the game’s demise. The Wii chapters make no mention of the WiiU (2013), which could complicate or change some of the author’s contentions. Issues of timing rarely damn a book, but they may lead a reader to question some conclusions and to long for something more timely.

Overall, I found the book’s breadth, diversity, and focus quite interesting, despite my lingering worry about the gap between when the chapters were written and when I read them.

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Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture

Adrienne Shaw

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Notes, gameography, bibliography, index, images. 317 pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9780816693160

In *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw offers an incisive critique of the ways in which scholars, activists, and media producers have approached issues of representation and diversity within video games. Shaw’s work is based on a number of in-depth interviews she has conducted with individuals who are at the “margins” of gaming culture—individuals who are not part of the core demographic (young, white, heterosexual males) that many major gaming studios are assumed to view as their target audience.

Shaw argues that the standard approach to diversity in mainstream video gaming, which seems to boil down to something like, “add minorities and stir,” is misguided for three reasons. First, including marginal voices in video game production does not necessarily mean better representation of these individuals in game texts. This approach problematically treats people of color, LGBT, and disabled individuals as monolithic groups, suggesting that each individual is invested in or somehow should care about representation more than others. And, in many ways it lets the mostly white, heterosexual males who largely make up the industry off the hook—suggesting that only those who are affected by issues of diversity should be the ones championing these issues.

Second, it ignores the structural and social inequalities that already serve as barriers to entry for many people. For example, in her concluding chapter, Shaw tells a story about a session at the 2013 Games Developer Conference (GDC) in which a white male game designer forcefully argued that the industry could and should do more to push for diverse representation in games. In an ironic and not-surprising turn of events, the International Game Developer Association (IGDA) also hosted during the conference a party that featured scantily clad, dancing women. This kind of double speak permeates much of the gaming industry’s approach to diversity, or as Shaw argues, the gaming industry’s overreliance on offering pluralistic choices (for example, you can be a woman if you so choose in a role-playing game which allows avatar creation) rather than actively engaging in diverse representations (for example, the main character of

a game with limited avatar choice being a Latina) which suggest what possibilities might exist.

Third, it reduces individuals to their group identity, problematically insinuating market logics that they are either an untapped audience to be solicited or that their identity is singular and tied only to markers such as their sexuality, gender identity, racial or ethnic background, or disability status. Shaw’s interviewees view their identity as something much more fluid and contextual. Thus, representation of a given identity or the ability to shape an avatar into an aesthetic reimagining of oneself did not necessarily equate to more identification with the game or even more immersion in a game world. In fact, attempts to market to groups of individuals based on identity markers often fall flat and ring hollow, as even a superficial investigation of the “girl games” movement demonstrates.

More provocatively, though, Shaw argues that diversity of representation is not actually that important to those at the margins of gaming culture, at least not all of the time. Her informants repeatedly articulate a perspective that suggested representation was “nice when it happens” (p. 209). This is both because of the complexities of identity are contextual, fluid, and liminal and because games serve different purposes for different individuals at different moments. Sometimes games offer ways to escape or to relax, so identification with whatever avatar or sprite represents the player is unimportant. At other times, games serve as a social activity in which identification or representation takes a backseat to social connectivity. And, as Shaw and others have noted, individuals

play games whether or not they are considered among the “core” gaming audience or whether or not the stories they see being reflected on the screen are *their* stories. Shaw’s interviewees demonstrate that identification with a game character is not necessarily predicated on that individual sharing some demographic marker. Likewise, identification does not necessarily equal immersion; players in Shaw’s study often became incredibly immersed in games even if they did not identify with the character they were controlling.

What makes Shaw’s work an important contribution to the field of game studies is that it provides a new perspective on the complexities of both identification and representation—one that suggests scholars, activists, and media producers have all been quick to say that diversity is important in games (both within texts and as an industry) without really exploring why and under what circumstances it is important. At the same time, Shaw argues that if representation really does not matter to those at the edges of gaming culture, then there is no reason not to offer more diverse content. As she notes, part of the importance of diversity in representation is that it allows us to envision possible worlds.

Shaw’s argument persuasively implies that diversity can actually encourage more playful and creative games. Diversity, according to Shaw, encourages designers and audiences to explore and more fully represent different experiences of real and imaginary worlds, those that do not simply rely on stereotypes or superficial portrayals but that truly reflect the complexities and fluid nature of personhood.

Shaw’s book is both theoretically rigorous and accessible. It provides an important salvo against much of the rhetoric of gaming culture that suggests that diversity is good but does little to interrogate why or for whom or in what ways diversity is desirable. It also suggests designers, scholars, and activists become much more clear about what they mean when they use terms such as “identification,” “representation,” and “immersion.” In short, this is an excellent, well-researched, and well-argued text that would be welcomed by any researcher or designer interested in more fully understanding the complexities of how identity relates to the world of games and play.

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