A Review of 'Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture' By Adrienne Shaw

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REVIEW

'Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture' provides readers with different perspectives about gender and sexuality within video games. There are four main sections:

- From Custer's Revenge and Mario to Fable and Fallout: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Digital Games;
- Does Anyone Really Identify with Lara Croft? Unpacking Identification in Video Games;
- He Could be a Bunny Rabbit for All I Care! How We Connect with Characters and Avatars;
- When and Why Representation Matters to Players: Realism versus Escapism."

There is little awareness within gaming studies of the extent to which some individuals/academics have had to deal with abuse and threatening behaviour from a sub-group of people within the 'gaming community'. In the opening paragraph of the introductory chapter, Shaw describes the case of Anita Sarkeesian who has "received an onslaught of misogynistic, sexist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and generally vitriolic comments." Sarkeesian received this response after soliciting a Kickstarter project for a 5-part video series focusing on female representation in digital games. Her project aimed to "explore, analyse and deconstruct some of the most common tropes and stereotypes of female characters in games". Her goal, as a gamer and a feminist media critic, was to identify the limited roles of women in digital games, including those

In which they are featured as "damsels in distress," "sexy sidekicks," and "rewards" (p.1). Shaw acknowledges there is a broadening video game audience, and yet the controversy surrounding Sarkeesian and other academics indicates that:

> "some members of the gaming community continue to define 'game culture' as something specific and particularly masculine, heterosexual, and white. In many ways, digital games seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one the newest mediated forms" (p.6).

Throughout the book, Shaw has reported interviews from gamers, enabling them to express their views and experiences of gaming in their own words. Shaw addresses the nature of gender bending within the game environment. Some male gamers will choose to play games which have a female protagonist such as Lara Croft. Conversely, some male gamers choose not play the role of a female avatar and this is demonstrated by Shaw when interviewing Malcolm who had previously chosen to play both male and female avatars in the offline game Diablo II. However, when playing World of War Craft, Malcolm chose not to play as a female character:

> "Picking a female avatar just has way too many random issues associated with… There's always fourteen-year-old boys playing out there, and they see the avatar as female, and even if they know psychologically that 90 percent of the people that play these games are male, they are still going to, you know, hope that that's a female and try to interact with you in that way" (p.137).

Another line of Shaw's enquiry is the relationship between the gamer and the character and whether the gamer is able to feel some affinity to the character they are representing in the game world. For some:

> "caring about a character was more important than identifying with a character. When she identified with book or film characters, she saw herself in them, but when it came to games, that rarely happened. She really felt attached, however, to characters in the game *Kingdom Hearts* and, thus, felt an emotional connection to that game" (p.88).

The representation of diversity in sexuality and race is also addressed by Shaw who interviews black and white gay men in their 30s from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Both reported different perspectives of game representation, for example:

Rusty, a white gay man, "did not think much about whether he identified with characters or about representation: I just kind of know who I am, and that's the only thinking I do about that."(p.153). Shaw notes that Rusty attempted to associate his own persona with that of "himself as boring and viewed games as a way to escape, rather than find, himself: "I'm white; I'm boring. I want to be that Orc that could rip a car in half with my hands […]"" (p.153). Whereas Gregory, a black gay man, acknowledges "[Seeing people like me in media] shows that I'm being heard and seen and I'm being acknowledged and I'm here" (p.153).

Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture is a book aimed at a variety of audiences. These include games researchers/students seeking to broaden their perspectives of differing views of gender and sexuality of female avatars; media and communication students/researchers; and researchers and students - from fields such as psychology, gender studies or gerontology (seeking an

understanding of game player perspectives of older BME adults from a sexuality, gender and BME standpoint) - who are unfamiliar with this sub-domain of game studies yet whose are cross disciplinary and would like to learn more about this topic. The narration of this publication is clear, constructive and easy to follow.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, and I would recommend it both to those who are interested in gaining further insight into gender and other diverse representation in digital games and to anyone conducting research on technology and gender, or more generally in gender studies.