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Book Review: Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*

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Adrienne Shaw starts her book "Gaming at the Edge" with a childhood memory about everyday life in Japan. She recalls receiving a Nintendo console and a handful of games from her mother, which her friends and family enjoyed playing on for years. "Because of all this", she concludes, "it never really occurred to me that gaming was something only a certain type of person did. In fact, it was only in my adult life that I heard people talking about the heterosexual, white, cisgendered male gamer as the norm" (vii).

As Shaw demonstrates in this vignette, marginalised game audiences have existed for as long as the video game market has ignored them. More than that, they are perfectly capable of enjoying play irrespective of whether games symbolically annihilate them or not. For those game professionals and theorists who have finally warmed to the idea that representing minorities matters, this observation might at first come as a shock. As a matter of fact, Shaw's study calls into question the relevance of a game market custom-tailoring products to the needs of minorities. One of the central achievements of the book is its demonstration that such needs do not exist, at least not in a way that can be adequately catered to by a marketing logic.

The book systematically reviews how the usage of representation and identification in game design and game studies discourses currently serves to reproduce misconceptions about players' relationships to games. Based on a feminist and queer theory angle on identity as a fluid, performative, and contextual process, the author exposes the problematic way in which games often isolate identifiers like race, class, gender and sexuality to construct "authentic" versions of the world. vRace, for instance, tends to be acknowledged only if it is deemed to matter for a particular plot or game setting: In *Grand Theft Auto*, it is used to construct a "credible" gangster fantasy, in *Resident Evil 5*, to paint a "realistic" picture of Africa. While these examples have been heavily contested as particularly "bad" representations of racial minorities, Shaw deeply challenges the idea that a case for the opposite, "good" representation can be made. Arguably, what is supposed to be "good" is based on the "typical", circulating a limited understanding of a given identity. Players' lived experiences, abiding to such essentialisms, do not simply align with what is commonly considered typical. This is particularly well illustrated in Shaw's conversation with Julia, a queer woman of colour who distances herself from the media practices "people like herself" are supposed to like. "I would think it's important to most other people because of what most other people do. You know, they tend to do what people like them do. [F]or me personally, I

don't listen to R&B, I don't listen to rap. I don't watch BET. I don't have the weave. I'm not saying this to offend" (154).

Much in Shaw's critique of representation reverberates Stuart Hall's thoughts on media, particularly his discussion of the reflective vs. constitutive paradigms of representation. While the reflective view treats representations as distorted or accurate reflections of a pre-existing reality, Hall suggests an alternative, constitutive paradigm, which assumes that representation selectively constructs reality, and always incompletely so. Hall's concerns are echoed clearly in Shaw's interrogation of a game studies and game design discourse, in which "reflective" thinking abounds, while the lived realities of minority audiences call for a more nuanced "constitutive" approach to representation.

Conceptually, Shaw chooses "identification" as an entry point to approach the question how, when and whether representation matters to her interviewees. This strategy seems appropriate in various ways. First, it taps conceptual territory that is important for game designers and scholars, since interactivity and identification are commonly believed to be related. Secondly, its process-orientation is well-suited to support Shaw's exploration of identity as a fluid and contingent process rather than a stable category. Thirdly, and relatedly, it is open enough to accommodate discussions on textual and production aspects of games without losing sight of its main question, how audiences actively - or passively - relate to the games they play.

As a matter of fact, Shaw's chapter on identification opens with an extensive note on the textual aspects of Lara Croft in the context of marketing *Tomb Raider*. Shaw's point is that designers' limited imagination of players' ability to identify with Lara has led to her specific articulation as a hypersexualized character. Similarly, feminist interpretations of Lara as a queer character have claimed this reading to be available for queer female players only. Shifting her attention to her interviewee's gaming practices then, Shaw challenges these projected limitations by asking what readings are actually available for audiences. As she explains the difference between text-centred and consumption-centred research: "Analysing texts tell us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed". (63). The task of "making sense", here, is carried out with utmost sensitivity towards the fact that neither do "audiences" naturally exist in the world, nor is gaming an isolated activity. Though Shaw generally calls her book an "audience study", she is careful to conceive of her audiences as "people rather than types of markets and players" (51). This allows her to invite interviewees of a certain demography without assuming that this "marks" them in any particular way.

Throughout a range of diverse gameplay situations and conversations, the book traces factors for identification along structural, social, and embodiment aspects of play. Significantly, whether and how players come to relate to a game character or avatar depends less on an alignment of identifiers than on the way a given character deals with the world around it. As one of her interviewees, Tanner puts it: "You're not going to be drawn to something that has no relevance or no commonality to you... But I don't think that I actively seek or gravitate towards the things that are most like me" (75). This pushes back against the claim that a demographic similarity between player and game character are required for identification.

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At the same time, Shaw delivers a strong argument against the view that identification is a central motivation to play a game; neither is it necessarily needed to enjoy it. One of Julia's quotes, "he could be a bunny rabbit for all I care," referring to Kratos, the main character in *God of War*, is used as a programmatic chapter heading to discuss the pleasures gained from different types of relationships players can have with media characters. Contrary to the popular conception that "identification seems to be standing for... interactivity or engagement in a broad sense" (79) Shaw claims that the act of taking control over a character has little to do with identification. "Games are absorbing, but in order to do that identification isn't required" (86). On the other hand, Shaw observes that some interviewees draw pleasure from relating to "credible" characters, allowing them to imagine that a person "like that" could really exist. (92).

While most of the book is a straight-forward, thoroughly argued and well-illustrated plea for diverse representation beyond niche marketing, the book's only flaw might be its inconsistent treatment of "interactivity", however marginal to the main argument. While Shaw points to the confusing way in which this term has come to stand interchangeably for the activity of physically controlling a game and emotionally relating to it, she struggles herself to reconcile it with a media-unspecific active audiences angle. First, she reminds us to remember T.L. Taylor's assertion that "games, unlike other media, don't just allow activity - they require it!" (104). This implies that the difference between allowing and requiring activity is somehow significant for our structural understanding of interactivity in games. By the same token, Shaw then criticises the way in which game scholarship has often dismissed non-ludic media practices as "passive". She asserts that "other audiences also interact with nongame media texts, by questioning them, critiquing them" (ibid.). While this is no doubt the case, what results is a conflation of different notions of "activity", glossing over media-specificity. The argument gets even more complex when "inactivity" is introduced as a pleasurable mode of gameplay consumption, be it through particularly disengaged play, or spectatorship. From the context of active audience theory, we can infer that Shaw uses "inactivity" as a subcategory, rather than the negation, of audience activity. Yet this difference may be insufficiently illuminated for readers unfamiliar with this kind of literature.

As opposed to other game-related studies, Shaw adequately accounts for the fact that games do not reside in a vacuum, but exist side-by-side of other media forms in people's lives. The book frequently draws on the fact that gaming is understood in relation to these other media practices, and that it is through cross-media reference that practices of identification become meaningful to us. In other words, reiterating a tenet from decade-old identity studies, it is through difference, not through similarity, that marginalised audiences - like any other audiences - are able to draw meaningful connections between game representations and themselves.

This is not to mean that the representation of marginalised groups does not matter. On the contrary, Shaw argues that being hailed at by games is something interviewees find "nice when it happens". This niceness can be read in terms of an overall recognition and validation "both for those who identify with those representation as well as those who do not" (67). The second part of the sentence is an important way in which the book breaks with the dominant niche marketing argument, since it rejects the idea that minority representations should be crafted with a minority audience in mind. Quite the opposite is the case. If marginalised groups, until now, have learned to "make do" with games in which they are not represented, this is certainly a skill white cisgendered male heterosexual gamers can acquire as well. Paradoxically, the fact that neither

representation nor identification seem to matter that much to minority audiences allows Shaw to argue how much diversity in games matters to everyone, really.

Biographical statement

Sabine Harrer is a cultural researcher and game designer based in Vienna and Copenhagen. She graduated from English Studies and Communication Science at the University of Vienna, where she also currently writes her PhD on loss and grief in games as a DOC fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She also works as game designer on various experimental projects with the Copenhagen Game Collective (Cunt Touch This; Pray Pray Absolution). In the past, she has worked as a lecturer in cultural studies, critical media analysis, and game studies at the University of Vienna and the IT-University Copenhagen.

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