

PROFESSIONAL READING

GENDER AND ONLINE GAMING

Jenny Sundén & Malin Sveningsson, *GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ONLINE GAME CULTURES: PASSIONATE PLAY*. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. 246p. bibl. index. \$125.00, ISBN 978-0415897662.

Reviewed by Dorothea Salo

World of Warcraft, a “massively multiplayer online role-playing game” (MMORPG), regularly makes headlines in technology media because of sexism, homophobia, and other incidents of hate perpetrated by its predominantly white, male, heterosexual, and youthful playerbase. Were that not enough, women who brave the atmosphere to play MMORPGs chronicle (on blogs and in gaming forums) the same tiresome patterns of sexist and homophobic language and humor that can be found throughout high-technology-related professions and hobbies.

In their collaborative first-person ethnography, Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson argue that while these patterns of oppression are real and troubling, MMORPGs also demonstrate patterns of resistance, as well as offering novel channels to both straight and lesbian women for combined cerebral and physical engagement with the games’ fantasy environments and with fellow players of all sexes and sexualities.

Sundén and Sveningsson articulate three major goals for the book: to perform an intersectional analysis of gender and sexuality in gaming, since few analyses specifically of sexuality and almost no intersectional analyses currently exist; to theorize and legitimize the practice of immersive first-

person ethnography — studying the game through *playing* the game — in research into gaming; and to gather and analyze additional data on the lived experience of straight and lesbian female gamers.

Sundén’s work and language contrast engagingly with Sveningsson’s, whose literature reviews are meticulous and detailed, making a wealth of citations and discussion both of gaming research and ethnography theory accessible to the novice in either field. Sveningsson’s data collection likewise is extensive; future researchers into women and gaming would do well to examine the chat logs and incidents she describes.

Sveningsson’s conclusions with respect to women’s gaming experiences, however, are ambivalent, tentatively expressed, and, for the most part, not especially novel. That women are alternately ridiculed, harassed, courted, and placed on uncomfortable pedestals in MMORPGs is not new information, nor does it distinguish MMORPGs from most other technology-mediated environments. Examining research into women’s experiences with other high-technology leisure pursuits, such as open-source software and even Wikipedia editing, would clearly demonstrate that her experience of the social environment of gaming differs little, if at all, from that of women participating in other technology-mediated hobbies.

Sundén, in contrast, reveals considerably more of herself in her chapters, and in so doing illuminates more of her subject. Her lush, evocative descriptions of in-game locales and character designs offer a fascinating background discussion of how a gamer’s

body may respond to the not-obviously corporeal stimuli offered by the game. Game avatars and their owners participate in complex rituals and reactions when romantic or sexual attractions are in play, and those rituals and reactions are all the more compelling when the attraction is lesbian, such that the often-intrusive politics of male-on-female sexism do not intrude.

Sundén’s willingness to expand her analysis beyond her own subject position serves her well when discussing “queer play,” or how non-heterosexual MMORPG players subvert, poke sly fun at, and otherwise reframe the overwhelmingly male-gaze and hetero-oriented MMORPG environment. (In general, Sveningsson shrinks from describing or theorizing experiences not directly hers.) From the sometimes-lonely process of finding a congenial group to play with to the use of wordplay to signal one’s sexuality and push back against the sometimes-oppressive assumptions of the game designers, Sundén paints a lively, engrossing picture of LGBTQ gamers and the work they do to carve out friendly spaces in a potentially hostile milieu.

Readers not intimately familiar with gaming in general or with online gaming in particular would be well-advised to have a glossary at hand (such as *Rei’s Random Guide to MMP Gaming Terms*, <http://www.mit.edu/~rei/game-terms.html>) or a gamer friend to consult while reading this book. There is neither a glossary nor an acronym dictionary, and the authors are woefully inconsistent about defining potentially unfamiliar terms or acronyms (LAN, RL, “aggro,” and similar jargon)

on first mention. Reproduced in-game chats are naturally dense with jargon and emoticons, but on the whole are readable without intervention. That said, those who research the impact of gender and sexuality on other Internet phenomena will find this book useful, timely, and accessible.

Does the publication of this book mean that Sveningsson and Sundén have succeeded in their attempt to legitimize first-person ethnography in feminist/queer analysis of gaming interaction? That will depend on ethnographers, to be sure, but Sundén's writing at least makes a compelling case for the practice. Her frank discussion and analysis of a game-fueled affair she engaged in would be almost impossible to capture in such detail in any other investigative modality, because of natural concerns about human-subjects privacy and confidentiality. Both Sundén and Sveningsson offer valuable guidance on the ethical praxis of immersive ethnography, carefully detailing how they announced and explained their work to their fellow players, navigated their dual identities as gamers and researchers into gaming, and worked out how to distance themselves from their subject positions long enough to produce viable analyses of their gathered data and personal experiences.

The casual reader seeking to understand female and queer experience with MMORPGs might well choose to read the authors' joint introduction and then skip straight to Sundén's beautifully-written chapters. Feminist and queer theorists as well as ethnographers will prefer to read the entire book. Either way, Routledge has published a valuable addition to the growing literature elucidating the experience of often-invisible, often-ignored minorities among the largely homogenous mass of online gamers.

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James Paul Gee & Elisabeth R. Hayes, ***WOMEN AND GAMING: THE SIMS AND 21ST CENTURY LEARNING***. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 201p. bibl. index. \$37.00, ISBN 978-0230623415.

Reviewed by Linda Shimon

If a good education is the path to human enlightenment, one might well ask what the current state of education is. Authors Gee and Hayes waste few words in their answer: education in our culture is critically wanting. Their book is a detailed explanation of the skills they believe are needed for navigating the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the twenty-first century, and they showcase the experiences of girls and women to demonstrate how these skills can be acquired through playing *The Sims*, a simulation game.

The authors are clearly qualified to assess how the current state of public education inhibits the full cultural participation of women and girls. James Paul Gee, who has an M.A. and a Ph.D. in linguistics, has researched the applications of linguistics to literacy and education; one result of his research was to identify the learning principles present in the design of good video games and apply them to classroom teaching. Elisabeth R. Hayes's research focuses on gender and digital technologies and learning. She was involved as an investigator for two MacArthur-funded projects and was a founding member of the "Games + Learning + Society" research group at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; she is currently a professor at Arizona State University.

Chapter 1 introduces, among other ideas, the notion that schools should prepare students for a culture that requires complex language, thinking, and problem-solving skills. Television is now demanding that the viewer do more than passively watch, as the plots of some shows engage their audiences with many intricate subplots using language that is "complex, technical, and specialist" (p. 5). Gee and Hayes comment that although students never experience this language in school, video games do present critical thinking opportunities. They cite the "modding" of video games, or modifying games by creating new environments — a project that demands complex thinking, technical skill, and problem-solving. This introductory chapter does much to promote the benefits of game play to education, but does little to analyze the gaming practices of women and girls or to describe any differences between the practices of women and girls and those of men and boys. Only the very last words of the chapter refer to gender and gaming, promising that before the book's end, an explanation will emerge of how women and girls are involved in the "big issues about learning in our complex, globalized world" (p.16).

Nor is there much attention to women and girls in Chapters 2, 3, or 6. In fact, Chapter 2 revolves around a boy named Sam, spanning the part of his life from ages seven to fourteen. This chapter explores the interest that educators and policymakers have in video gaming, presents case examples of the relevance of gaming to learning and higher-level thinking skills, and looks at the use of digital tools and gaming's encouragement of social participation (both in person and virtually) (p. 24). I suspect that Sam's story is actually used here to strengthen the argument for using gaming to sup-

port literacy — which is, I think, Gee’s main reason for writing this book, as opposed to the connection of women and girls to gaming. The final section of Chapter 2, “Themes for this Book,” explains how girls and women fit into the authors’ model for the importance of video gaming. After asking, “So why have we started with Sam?” they answer that this will help the reader gain a better understanding of the changing world of gaming, and that these changes involve both men and women (p. 38). I felt that, with all the data these authors have collected over the years, a woman’s or girl’s experiences could have been used here instead. That they featured a boy was more evidence that the book was written only to further their premise of the importance of gaming as a learning tool.

A small portion of Chapter 3 does focus on a case study of a woman’s gaming practices and makes a short comparison between her game design and that of a man’s. The player Yamx not only used the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich, to create a Sims-type game in which players act out conditions detailed in the book (p. 46), but she also exhibited her skills as a “game designer, modder, mentor, teacher, and leader.” The authors then claim that the male paradigm of game design can “lead us to see what Yamx is doing as ‘soft’” (p. 60). Soft, in this context, means using a person’s social and emotional intelligence.

Chapter 6 suggests that “passionate affinity groups” — defined as groups of individuals who have a passion for building and designing real and powerful virtual tools within a specific virtual world for those who participate/belong

to that community — draw together people with common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices rather than separating them by race, class, gender, or disability (p. 107). These groups mitigate a world where expertise “over-values what it knows and undervalues what it does not know” (p. 123).

Chapter 4 contains the first substantive hints of how women fit into the world of gaming, showing how playing *The Sims* can be a gateway to careers in such fields as mathematics, engineering, and computer science, where women have been underrepresented (p. 62). This case study examines the immersion of a young girl named Jade in the game, showing how it motivated her to develop skills in hardware and software technology. In addition, Jade adopted a new, proactive view of her life when she learned that these technical skills could open up employment opportunities beyond the low-skill industries she feared she would be relegated to because of her poor academic record.

Chapters 5 and 7 provide case studies that show how “the female touch” can result in school reform. In Chapter 5, players Tabby Lou, Izazu, and EarthGoddess demonstrate the giving and receiving of help among the Sims community of designers, the process of proactive learning, and the importance of encouraging the *passion* to learn. Chapter 7 shows a player named Alex improving her writing skills by developing stories based on *The Sims* enterprise. Positive benefits in this case extended beyond Alex to another population of girls, because her fiction attracted a very loyal fan base (almost entirely girls) who felt that her writing spoke to their “age, feelings, and experiences in a deeper way. . . in part because it is written by another teen girl” (p. 138).

Chapter 8 presents a case study on diversity in virtual worlds, showing, with the example of Jesse, a thirty-something, biracial lesbian, that online gaming can redefine the concept of diversity. The virtual world allows for the free flow of information and ideas uninhibited by classifications of culture, religion, or sexual orientation, because people are “often playing different sorts of people in virtual worlds than they are in real life” (p. 154). As Jesse comments, “Well the way I see life is that everyone you encounter can create a learning experience” (p. 155).

The authors of *Women and Gaming* use their own case studies and the abundance of existing literature on games and learning to prove their argument for learning through simulation game play. Although their case studies focus on women and girls, however, only a stray sentence or two compares the gaming practices of girls and women to those of boys and men. The book does draw upon the experiences of many ages and types of girls and women, and would be relevant to many other topics related to education. The reference section is fourteen and a half pages strong, and definitions are provided for gaming jargon.

The authors have done a commendable job of positing a theory of learning according to which real education is not about acquiring knowledge, but rather about “becoming” something. *Women and Gaming* is an easy read and should be useful in many instructional settings, although it may quickly become dated due to the rapid growth of science and technology, jobs, skills, and information.

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