Reviewed by Christopher Goetz

Video Games Have Always Been Queer

by Bonnie Ruberg.
New York University Press.
2019. 288 pages.
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Video Games Have Always Been Queer makes its central argument boldly and on the front cover. Bonnie Ruberg, a leading voice at the intersection of queer theory and digital media studies, carefully lays out the provocative premise behind the title with characteristic patience and a deep eagerness to address a broad audience. If you know nothing about queer theory or video games—not to mention why their intersection has recently become so urgently important—do not fear. You soon will. Throughout the book, Ruberg demonstrates repeatedly that queerness is not some special coefficient added to games by scholars and activists; it's always been there, just as queer people have always been playing video games. Games, like the world we live in, are more diverse, complex, and strange than is suggested by the simplified frameworks or assumptions we deploy when talking about them, including what games are, why they exist, and who plays them.

Ruberg frequently frames a special connection between gaming and queer subjectivity in terms of queerness's counter-hegemonic function. She argues that both queerness and games "share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play."[1] The book's first half explores games that already oppose such structures, but perhaps in ways not always fully appreciated. In the first three chapters, Ruberg works "to reimagine the history of

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1   Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1.

video games" by locating queerness "beneath the surface of digital games from their earliest forms."[2] The book's second half considers a variety of ways players have "queered" even commercial games with no LGBTQ content by engaging in play that itself resists the dominant systems that games reproduce. In the broadest sense, Ruberg is offering a comprehensive map of how players "queer"—or pose some sort of opposition to—hegemonic forces in the industry, its games, and its communities. Queering a game can entail challenging assumptions about why we play (e.g., to win), how we interpret a game's meanings (e.g., *Pong* [Atari, 1972] is just table tennis), what features we assume a game must have (e.g., that it should take dozens of hours to complete), or even how we should feel while playing (e.g., triumphant or happy). One necessary starting point for understanding Ruberg's intervention is the notion that the video game industry is rigidly standardized with deeply embedded protocol, business models, and mentalities. So, too, is much of gaming culture apparently set in its ways and determined to resist the changes that are being called for by a growing number of voices within the community.

The threat of real-world violence directed through online spaces at anyone who stands apart from or poses questions about gaming's normative models of play or its supposedly cisgendered, straight, white, and male culture looms over Ruberg's discussion. Readers will likely have already heard about #GamerGate and the harassment faced by queer players and women in online spaces. But some readers may still be surprised to learn that simply undertaking a close reading of a game in order to highlight its gender politics can result in violent threats of rape and murder. As with their peers in the emerging paradigm of queer game studies, Ruberg sadly does not have the luxury of simply writing for an academic audience in an ivory tower, shielded from the difficult realities of a culture war unfolding in real time. Ruberg addresses and beautifully analyzes some of the anti-intellectual and homophobic vitriol that they have personally received as a result of basic queer readings of games. Though difficult to encounter even vicariously, such reactions against queer or feminist voices in online spaces attest powerfully to both the serious difficulty and the urgent necessity of addressing identity in gaming.

This reference to a culture war is meant to speak to the timeliness of Ruberg's important book. But I also have in mind Ruberg's contention that in order to act in this present moment to "make space for LGBTQ identities, lives and desires in games today . . . we must turn backwards and lay claim to the queerness that has existed beneath the surface of digital games from their earliest forms."[3] Finding queerness beneath the surface of gaming's past helps imagine queer subjectivity and gaming in positive terms, rather than though "a history of exclusion."[4] Put otherwise, coming to terms with the past has taken on a new kind of urgency in Ruberg's project.

One of Ruberg's key strategies throughout the book is to broaden the reader's conception of queerness "beyond representation," or beyond the

2   Ruberg, 209.
3   Ruberg, 209.
4   Ruberg, 209.

appearance of queer characters and themes in game narratives and imagery.[5] This is not to say that the presence or absence of explicitly LGBTQ representational content in games such as *Pong* is insignificant. Rather, even in its absence, Ruberg targets the narrow strictures binding how we might think about gaming in its entirety. They walk readers through a range of critical responses, including how to perform a queer reading of a classic game (e.g., *Pong* or *Super Mario Bros.* [Nintendo, 1985]), how to queer such a game by playing it in unexpected ways (e.g., losing on purpose or finishing it too quickly), and how to recognize and discuss implicitly queer themes in a game's subtext (e.g., *Portal* [Valve, 2007]). To further demonstrate gaming's often unrecognized complexity and potential for expressiveness, Ruberg also devotes much of the book to games that are deliberately queer in their mechanisms, such as short games about goal-less affection (*Realistic Kissing Simulator* [Loren Schmidt and Jimmy Andrews, 2014]) or expressing love in one's last moments alive (*Queers in Love at the End of the World* [Anna Anthropy, 2013]), or games that problematize movement through space that is typically fluid and uncomplicated (e.g., *QWOP* [Bennett Foddy, 2008] and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* [Young Horses, 2014]).

Over the course of seven chapters, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* offers a comprehensive primer for anyone interested in queer theory or game studies. The book is meticulously engaged with both, and Ruberg emerges as a scholar with their finger on the pulse of both canonical and recent work in these fields. Their ideas range from the immediately graspable to the nuanced and complex. This book would be wonderful for an eager college student curious about issues of identity and media. It would also sit well on a shelf beside the most engaging and important recent works of queer theory or game studies. I have taught portions of this book in my own undergraduate classrooms, and I have found that students immediately grasp the significance of its interventions and, moreover, that they apply its ideas in ways that surprise me, attesting to its timeliness and relevance for their thinking. I never have to sell students on the idea of queer failure in games (addressed in chapter 5). The subversive potential in embracing the failure to live up to the ideals of parents and the demands of society finds a friendly, if not eager, audience in young adults still under the full weight of such expectations. So, too, do students quickly grasp concepts such as queer embodiment in game mechanics that disrupt industry conventions of smoothly functioning, able-bodied avatars, such as in *Octodad*, an indie game about an octopus awkwardly trying to walk and perform everyday tasks (and thus "pass") as a man.

However, I imagine some readers may initially struggle with Ruberg's close reading of *Pong* in conjunction with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985). *Pong* is the most abstract, not to mention oldest, game Ruberg considers at length. And its chapter comes first, before discussions of games with clearer and more concrete examples of "queer experience, queer embodiment, queer affect, and queer desire."[6] Ruberg anticipates (if not directly invites) such a struggle by prefacing their reading of *Pong*

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5   Ruberg, 1.
6   Ruberg, 1.

with the backlash Janet Murray faced for reading *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov and Vladimir Pokhilko, 1984) as an allegory for the "overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s."[7] At stake here is nothing short of the meanings scholars are willing to consider or see in a game. Ruberg asserts that their own allegorical approach would remain responsive to the "'stories,' loosely termed, that these playful systems themselves tell."[8] However, these stories' meanings can sometimes feel more strongly influenced by Sedgwick's terms than *Pong*'s. For instance, Ruberg argues, "[I]f we overlay the gender dynamics of Sedgwick's erotic triangle onto the interactive structures of *Pong*, the paddles become the 'men' forming bonds and the ball becomes a 'woman' heatedly exchanged between them. This mapping implies that *Pong* offers a concerning model of gendered agency, with 'male' paddles as subjects and a 'female' ball as an object. Whereas the paddles are free to move and exert their own power, the ball must go where it is sent, obeying both the whims of the players and the basic rules of physics as programmed into the game."[9] Mapping or overlaying Sedgwick's text to *Pong* produces a "parable of oppression" in which the only "female-coded 'character'" (the ball) cannot even be directly controlled.[10] But *Pong*'s "queer geometry," which is "structured around ricochets, crossed paths, and movement that almost never adds up 'straight,'" renders any sense of control precarious.[11] Ruberg's reading of *Pong* through the lens of queer intimacy is provocative and memorable in spite of the possibility that Ruberg imagines formalist skeptics perceiving this interpretation as "overreaching."[12]

In response to such skeptics, I would join critical game scholars such as Ruberg in arguing that regardless of what we might teach our students when inculcating methods of close textual analysis, the text is never actually a sealed entity. Or, in the terms of games scholars, "there is no magic circle."[13] The formalist objection that reading gender into *Pong* is tantamount to invention (or the intrusion of a wholly external discourse to the internal logics of a game) could be productively reframed as the accusation of introducing the *wrong sort* of external text to the discussion. I don't imagine many would be as apt to reject comparisons with tennis—an external text often mapped onto *Pong*. This, of course, raises the relevant question of who gets

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7   Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 144.

8   Ruberg, *Video Games*, 38.

9   Ruberg, 50.

10 Ruberg, 49, 52.

11 Ruberg, 47.

12 Ruberg, 38.

13 This is in reference to Mia Consalvo's influential essay of the same name. The notion of "magic circle" in game studies comes from Johan Huizinga's play theory and refers roughly to the notion that play unfolds from everyday life. In game design discourse, this concept of separateness came to encapsulate the idea of a game's formal boundaries, determining the time and place in which a game occurs (e.g., the time allotted for a match of speed chess or the lines demarcating the boundaries of a basketball court) as well as the boundaries determined by its rules (e.g., when a chess match ends and who is considered the winner). Consalvo and others have challenged this idea on the basis of all the messy, complex ways that everyday life pervades the space of games. See Mia Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 408–417.

to determine which are the right sorts of textual conjunctions for finding meaning in games.

As with the discussion of *Pong*, each of *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*'s seven chapters may initially seem straightforward or even narrow in their focus, as most pair a single game with a single prominent queer theorist or text. However, the implications for this pairing can be complex. Each chapter accumulates a conceptual density that ultimately opens onto key questions facing not only the relatively new field of game studies but also queer theory as it grapples with the potential of new and digital media. Taken in isolation, most instances of queering a game could be understood in seemingly more banal terms. For example, *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s eschewal of orgasm might be queer, as Ruberg suggests in chapter 4, but it might also be understood to evoke the perversity of fore-pleasure that Freud located in sexuality more broadly (not that the two are mutually exclusive).[14] However, with Ruberg's analyses, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts, and the book's persuasiveness lies less in what's revealed in any one moment of queering a game than in the gradual realization of the potentiality of queerness in games that has been there all along. Over the course of the book, it becomes apparent that queerness as a counter-hegemonic force takes such varied forms precisely because queerness is not some radically alien condition of subjectivity. Queerness has always been part of the world of gaming. And this book is a celebration of what happens when queer subjectivity becomes visible, when the straight and narrow (but powerful and brutally enforced) assumptions about what gaming is or should be are refracted into a queer rainbow: a spectrum of possibility that reflects the variety of people who design and play games.

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14   See, for instance, Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (1905; New York: Basic Books, 1962), 38.