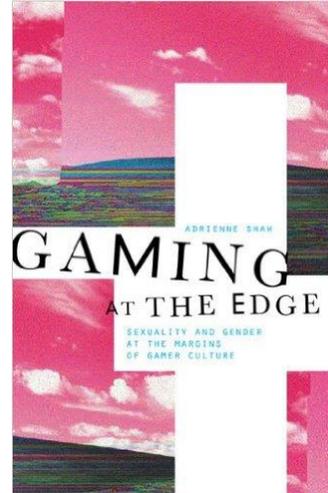


Adrienne Shaw, **Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 2014, 317 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Adrienne Shaw begins ***Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*** by detailing her experiences as a young girl playing video games. Shaw never felt excluded from the gaming world despite not ascribing to a white, heterosexual, cisgendered male identity and was surprised to discover a male-centric gamer identity once she left the realm of childhood play. While filling games with more diverse characters seems to be an obvious solution for exclusionary game culture, Shaw, drawing from her own experiences, wonders if this solution is even desired by those existing within the margins of gamer culture. This book questions the importance of representation for nonnormative gamers and finds that while diversity is “nice” when it happens, it is not necessary for these populations to enjoy gaming. Shaw concludes that game producers should include diverse representation in games precisely because representation is not a key concern for gamers; therefore catering only to the dominant market is entirely unnecessary.



Shaw takes a critical approach to representation and draws from feminist and queer theory to assert the contextually and performativity of identity. Shaw uses ethnographic methods to divorce player from text to break away from pluralized versions of diversity. While the book’s approach is well justified, it is also coupled with a condemnation of text-based investigations of representation. Game audiences make representation matter, and Shaw argues that moving away from texts provides a better understanding of the social processes surrounding game play. Shaw’s methods include in-depth interviews and “gaming interviews” in which interviewees play games with, or in the presence of, the researcher. The study’s focus on players provides a wealth of information that complicates traditional models of identification and representation. Shaw finds that marginalized groups are not inherently concerned with representation in the media texts they enjoy.

To understand this indifference toward representation in terms of media consumption, Shaw uses theories of identity to investigate marginalized gamers’ experiences with identification. She draws on Althusser, Foucault, and Butler to map identity as something both sanctioned and fluid. Butler’s notion of precarity allows Shaw to argue for representation beyond merely evaluating marginalized gamers as marketable audiences. While individual gamers may not be troubled by their nonrepresentation in games, media representation can make alternative identities plausible and livable. Diversity in games may not sell more units, but it may help a young gamer feel he or she has a place in the world.

For Shaw’s interviewees, identification relied more on emotional connections with characters than on identifiers such as gender, race, and sexuality. Shaw concludes that this is not because these signifiers

do not matter but because they are not all that matter. She finds that the lack of direct identification may have to do with medium-specific traits. For identification to occur, there must be distance between a user and character. Video games entice players to be self-referential. Respondents often equated their own goals, triumphs, and failures with those of the video game character. Players are often only able to identify with characters in certain moments of the game, such as interludes between game play. These moments of identification are not predetermined. They are seldom tied to superficial markers and often revolve around the actions of characters. Shaw concludes that representing only the largest market base is unnecessarily narrow when identification is so complex and unfixed.

The self-reference-inducing quality of games arises from their interactivity. People relate to video game characters through the process of immersion, causing interactivity to often overshadow identification when responding to these texts. Shaw works to uncouple interaction and identification by pointing to identification's reliance on narrative. It is the aspects of games that are non-medium specific, such as story and characterization, that allow players the distance required for identification. A game's ludic qualities bring about player self-reference, which destroys this distance.

Shaw uses this unique interplay between interactivity and identification to again justify her beyond-the-text methods. Because of identification's undetermined nature within game play, subjective reasons for play drive a player's connection with certain characters. These personal preferences exist outside game space and cannot be discerned through analysis of a text. Identification is personal and much more complicated than traditional models suggest. Looking at texts alone fails to capture this player-initiated process.

In addition to focusing on players, Shaw says researchers must be more attuned to the context of play. Many researchers turn to Massively Multiplayer Online Games and various types of online play to examine sociality in video game use. This focus overlooks a lot of the ways people interact while playing games. Shaw's interviewees often discuss their offline, solitary play, making it clear that these seemingly disconnected moments connect players with game texts, game culture, and other players. Offline play is an important, prolific, and underexamined phenomenon, and Shaw's study takes great strides in asserting the importance of this type of investigation.

Shaw's examination of offline play reveals that representation is important in a social sense but not necessarily at an individual level. This would seem to let video game producers off the hook. If video game audiences do not mind being unrepresented in the video games they enjoy, then why strive for diversity at all? Shaw argues that just as marginalized audiences do not avoid texts that do not represent them, the traditional white, heterosexual, cisgendered male audience will not abandon games because of increased diversity. Video game producers do not need to worry about ostracizing dominant audiences by diversifying game space because the homogenous nature of video game characters has not deterred marginalized audiences from playing. By removing this economic concern, video game producers are left with the responsibility to strive for diversity because of its social value. Validating identities by placing them in media texts may not bring in additional audiences, but it can help someone on the margins feel accepted. For Shaw's interviewees, representation is important not because they want to see depictions of

themselves, but because they want other people to see people like them. This is why representation in media texts is valuable: It allows multiple ways to be present in the world.

Shaw found that while her interviewees did not seek out texts that they felt represented them, they found representation "nice when it happened." Interviewees did not cite identification as central to their enjoyment of media texts, but they did show an appreciation for diversity in a broad sense. Respondents felt pleasure in the rare occasions they were hailed by a text. Identification is far from the only source of pleasure one can find in a media text, and interviewees were much more likely to praise diversity than call for representation within the games they played.

Gaming at the Edge contributes strongly to the currently diverse realm of video game studies. While game studies prove multifarious, social science investigations into the phenomenon of video games have mostly focused on online play. Online games, spaces, and communities provide a wealth of avenues for investigation within the emerging field. However, focusing primarily on online games leaves out a substantial reality of video game consumption. Many gamers remain offline and stick to solitary play, largely because of the harassment of nonnormative players found in online spaces. Shaw's foresight to assert the importance of offline, solitary play is a vital step in turning investigations toward this prominent facet of video game consumption. As Shaw mentions, focusing on individual experiences does not shut out considerations of the social. Game culture grows within domestic spaces just as vibrantly as it does online.

Shaw defends her methods adequately in the book, and it is clear her reliance on an ethnographic approach is appropriate for this investigation. Shaw believes considerations of representation and identity should consult video game audiences to ensure fruitful results. In defending her methodology, Shaw's lauding of ethnographic methods can be seen as a condemnation of text-based studies. It is clear the author was arguing against textual analysis for her particular research purposes. However, it is important to remain open about methodology within an emerging field. Game studies is an area of investigation that exists across disciplines. If game studies is to eventually become a standard field of study, remaining open to various methodologies can help carve out an inclusive space to explore the rich landscape of video games.

Gaming at the Edge is an ideal read for anyone interested in both video games and marginalized media audiences. Its accessible and engaging style allows it a large reach. The book is theoretically dense enough for scholars while being conversational enough for nonacademic gamers. Shaw is extremely skilled at conveying complex and important concepts in an understandable and engrossing way. *Gaming at the Edge* provides valuable insights into considerations of media representation and nonnormative gamers. While representation may not be vital for individual interviewees, diversity in games is socially important and can go a long way in validating alternative identities.