

Gaming Representation: Race, Gender & Sexuality in Video Games

Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (eds.).

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As the twenty-first century continues and issues of colonialism, gender and queer lived experiences prove inescapable in both broader academic discourse and in Anthropology, there has been a notable wave of popularity in addressing issues of identity and representation in video games. Inspired by the ever-increasing number of voices contributing to the scholarly dialogue on virtual representation as it relates to gender, race and sexuality, Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm seek to present a collected volume of the various “discursive threads in game studies about identity and representation,” in their monograph *Gaming Representation* (Malkowski and Russworm 2017, 8). As experienced games scholars working in Media Studies and English respectively, Malkowski and Russworm use this work to highlight the productive intersection of Queer Studies, a field focused on critiquing normativity, and Game Studies, a field that aims to analyze digital and analog games both as media and as deeply meaningful processes of meaning-making through play á la Geertz. While they strive to present a collection of essays accessible not only to learned games scholars, but also the non-academic side of the video game world more broadly, the disparate voices of the various contributors and the questionable editing choices made on the part of Malkowski and Russworm prove a major hurdle in seeing this goal realized. Nevertheless, future research into identity and representation in games will find this monograph an important building block upon which to build their arguments.

Malkowski and Russworm begin the introduction to their 2017 monograph with a cursory apology for failing to organize their volume in a more intersectional manner, claiming that their authors’ interdisciplinary backgrounds ensure an intersectional conversation throughout the rather antiquated categories of representation they divide the volume into: Part One focusing on gen-

der, Part Two on race and Part Three on queerness, broadly defined. Unfortunately, a thorough reading of the sections and chapters leaves any semblance of intersectional dialogue in the introduction. This is evidenced in the dearth of queer analysis throughout the sections on gender and race, as well as in a similar neglect of race and gender in the section allegedly dedicated to an investigation of sexuality in video games. Again, while this work is a well-intentioned step in the right direction for the field of game studies and, more directly, anthropology's investigation of identity, it tends toward an aggressive (albeit warranted) critique of white masculinities and the erasure of women in gaming while abandoning discussions of the anti-queer violence well evident throughout mainstream gaming culture and its penchant for using both the term "gay" and queer slurs as equivalents for unskilled or poor play.

This neglect to attend to the most basic discussion of homophobia in games begs the question: How is this work then meant to account for the even more difficult question of the non-binary or trans player? Though discussions of race and gender are incredibly valuable, one is left hungry for a more thorough treatment of issues of sexual representation in a volume that labels itself as the primer for diverse perspectives on issues of representation in gaming.

In fact, whereas the other two sections delve deeply into Stuart Hall's conceptualization of the "politics of representation" the editors herald as their rallying cause (Malkowski and Russworm 2017, 3), the section on queerness is brief and bereft of any substantive discourse on the matter. Ruberg, Wood, and Chang all address queerness in games quite broadly, which in turn leaves the reader feeling as if they have stepped out of a book on representation and into a discussion on the application of queer theory in Games Studies. Though laudable in their content, one wonders why these particular chapters were included in a monograph on identity and representation in video games. In turn, the reader is left wondering if the discussion on sexuality, queerness and representation in gaming is limited to queerly reading video games and looking for what Chang terms "queergaming," playing games in a non-normative manner. It is not, as evidenced in Malkowski and Russworm's own introduction, where they acknowledge work by T.L. Taylor and Adrienne Shaw, who both have written on queer representation and identity in video games and wider

gaming culture. This seeming erasure is further echoed in the conclusion of the monograph, wherein Nakamura focuses on two important examples of marginalization, #Gamergate and the death of Michael Brown, but in so doing once again eschews any notion of queer representation.

Despite the editing choices Malkowski and Russworm made regarding the discourse on sexual representation in games, a number of the chapters nevertheless prove quite elucidating. One in particular embodies what a monograph claiming to speak to issues of representation in gaming should be: the opening chapter on Gender by Malkowski herself. Diving into a carefully researched and historically contextualized example of the “femme fatale” in film, Malkowski shows that while the rise of the highly-sexualized women in film was heralded as a major step forward (and indeed it was for 1940s Hollywood) the same figures in modern video games, as seen in the examples of Mona from *Max Payne 2* and Madison from *Heavy Rain*, prove problematic on a number of levels. Malkowski’s chapter not only demonstrates academic rigor in its historical content, but also flags the reader with a clear warning: This monograph is not going to blithely accept the appearance of an alleged progressive character as a legitimate form of progressive representation. It is important to consider the nuances of characters often championed as forward-thinking and Malkowski’s careful reading of both Mona and Madison shows the reader one manner of doing so as the field of game studies delves ever deeper into issues of progressive representation. Her analytical prowess grants Game Studies scholars a template with which to interrogate the authenticity of alleged forward-thinking representations of identity, not just with regards to gender, but also within the wide intersectional web of disenfranchised and marginalized identities.

Although several other articles merit praise, there are also a few that the reader must trudge through, most notably Braxton Soderman’s chapter on casual gaming. Soderman’s analysis of *Diner Dash* through a temporal-feminist lens, though provocative, proves quite abstruse for the average reader given its deeply feminist-philosophical bent. Its aim to show that casual games have a place in the broader dialogue of game scholarship merits discussion, yet the chapter itself certainly is not geared to the casual games studies reader that the volume’s editors aim to reach. While the primary impetus of understanding is on the reader, this

chapter demonstrates that part of that responsibility also falls to the author and when the two do not match, you find a compelling argument mired in non-committal suppositions about gender in gaming that only tangentially relates to the broader academic dialogue.

With a well intentioned, albeit intersectionally devoid and discursively disparate collection of chapters that sought to be too many things at once, Malkowski and Russworm have crafted a reader that nonetheless serves as a stepping stone on the path to more rigorous and thorough discussions of identity and representation in video games. Despite the editors' inadvertent neglect of the academic discourse on queer representation in video games, this monograph is useful to anyone looking to research identity and representation. *Gaming Representation* challenges the interdisciplinary field of Game Studies and other fields interested in social life, such as Anthropology, to address the pressing issue of representation and its role in reproducing marginalization through video games, while providing a number of analytical tools such as Malkowski's reading of the characters Mona and Madison that more than make up for abstract entries such as Soderman's examination of *Diner Dash*. This volume, while flawed in various ways, is a much-needed call to arms for scholars to get to work on addressing the problematic manner in which video games neglect or oppress marginalized identities.

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References

Malkowski, Jennifer and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, ed. 2017. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender & Sexuality in Video Games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.