Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, New York: NYU Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781479831036 (cloth); ISBN: 9781479843749 (paper)

Communications studies scholar Bonnie Ruberg opens their new book by stating that "video games have always been queer. Even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly, and all games can be interpreted through queer lenses" (p.1). Engaging and well-written, Ruberg's contributions in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* illustrate how queerness and video games share a common ethos: "alternate ways of being" and ways to make space "within structures of power for resistance through play" (p.2). Drawing upon a close reading of various games' queerness through an analysis of their mechanics, imagery, and controls, Ruberg argues that queerness can be a way of designing, interpreting, or playing a game. As the literature of digital geographies grows, gaming has received markedly less attention, so geographers would do well to read this text and extend the queer and radical dimensions of digital research from their arguments.

Scholars and gamers often tell the history of video games as one that stifles exploration, and both groups assume that LGBTQ+ players, game makers, and themes are brand new. Many of these same writers would ask: if video games have always been queer, as per Ruberg, why haven't we noticed it earlier? Ruberg states that looking for queerness in video games means looking beyond representation alone which has severe limitations in merely counting the number of (usually absent) LGBTQ+ characters in video games. Trained as a literary scholar, Ruberg structures many of the analyses around close reading, the method in which one pays close

attention to the fine details, structure, and meanings of a text – here, video games – in order to develop a deep understanding of the text's meaning. As such, they closely read games with no explicit LGBTQ+ content to demonstrate the complexity, timelessness, and variety of queerness in video games.

Video Games Have Always Been Queer is a text of interest to those particularly in the fields of cultural studies, feminist studies, media studies, queer studies, digital geographies, and geographies of gender and sexuality. The text is composed of two sections divided into seven core chapters. The two sections represent two ways of exploring the complex and intertwined relationship Ruberg establishes between queerness and video games. The first section, "Discovering Queerness in Video Games", uses crucial queer theory texts from a multitude of disciplines such as film scholar D.A. Miller's 1990 essay "Anal Rope" and cultural studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) Cruising Utopia to demonstrate how queer desires, queer bodies, and queer resistances have long been (and always will be) existing and operating in video games. In the latter section, "Bringing Queerness to Video Games", Ruberg investigates the practices through which players and game designers demonstrate queer play, which they define as "a transformative practice that reframes and remakes games from the inside out" (p.1). Together these two parts argue that "all video games can be seen as queer, because all video games – like all forms of cultural production – can be interpreted through experiences of non-heteronormative identity and desire" (p.22). The split structure of the book does not create a false binary, but rather holds the complicated queer feminist elements of gaming in tension.

The individual arguments of the chapters bear special attention, as they offer nuance and innovation. I highlight some of the chapters here to give interested readers a deeper look into the text. The first chapter, "Between Paddles: Pong, Between Men, and Queer Intimacy in Video Games", places a classic video game and a classic queer theory text in conversation with one another to show how both can be reflections of queer intimacy. Here, Ruberg analyzes Pong, one

of the first video games (see http://www.ponggame.org), using literature studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), a foundational queer theory text. According to Ruberg, Sedgwick argues that male homoerotic desire in Western literature is triangulated through the female characters (p.23). *Pong* is a game of angles, one where a ball passes between player's paddles, and only when two players hold their paddles directly across from one another can the players hit the ball in a straight line. In this, Ruberg argues that *Pong* can only be played through a queer triangulation where each direction the ball is hit symbolizes vectors of desires (p.47). In this sense, *Pong* and *Between Men* come together to think about the formation of queer intimacy as an "interactive system" (p.54).

I most deeply enjoyed the third chapter, "'Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus': Queer Embodiment and Passing in *Octodad*", due to its intersectional analysis of narrative content alongside control schema. This chapter attempts to read *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*, a 2014 indie adventure/stealth game (see http://younghorsesgames.com), through an intersectional lens as a queer game about passing through its narrative content and its controls. In this game, the player controls Octodad, an octopus who attempts to perform the role of a straight, cisgender, masculine father. As Ruberg states, this game "parodies the ideal suburban, nuclear family and denaturalizes normative expectations around gender, sexuality, reproductivity, and the motions of the human body" (p.85). In terms of narrative content, the game is about passing with/as Octodad which simultaneously signals real world experiences of marginalized people (LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and people with disabilities) "who must contort themselves, conform, and hide elements of their identities" (p.86). In conjunction with narrative content, the game player movement is awkward and a challenge. As Ruberg highlights, players must control each of Octodad's limbs through separate controls, so no movement within the game is intuitive

or as simple as clicking one button. Through these unwieldy controls, the "game celebrates a kind of queer, distinctly non-normative movement" (p.94).

The second section starts off with "Playing to Lose: *Burnout* and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games", which examines queer play and failure by putting cultural studies scholar Judith Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) into conversation with gaming studies scholar Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* (2013). Ruberg argues that queer failure means "reveling in" loss and "challenging the hegemonic 'common sense' that underlies widespread beliefs" (p.143). Ruberg argues that playing to lose and other instances of playing "the wrong way" are ways to play queer as modes of resistance. Moreover, the focus on failure within games highlights how queer play can dismantle mainstream notions that Juul discusses such as "why players play and what pleasures they take from games" (p.156). Furthermore, I appreciate Ruberg highlighting how the two theorists are in juxtaposition about the function of success and failure within games: "Juul insists that all players want to succeed, but Halberstam problematizes this assumption by asking, so to speak: Do 'all' players really feel this way, or only those in the heteronormative majority?" (p.144). I found this point particularly exciting when thinking about how the queer art of failure can be applied to broader digital geographies beyond gaming, and the useful failures that comes from failed social media accounts, broken weblinks, and so on.

In their final chapter, "Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking: Queer Movements through Space and Time", Ruberg argues that queer spatiotemporality represents a resistance to chrononormativity within games. They respond to the wide array of writers on "queer time" (cf. Freeman 2010; Halberstam 2005; Rifkin 2014, 2017; Snorton 2017) who argue that queer time is an alternative to heteronormative time, a time that focuses on one singular and linear path which is usually around heteronormative constructions of marriage, families, and loss. Ruberg re-reads the texts of "speed runs", a mode in which a player runs through a game as quickly as possible using cheats and/or shortcuts, and "walking simulations", a game which the

player's main mode of interaction is through moving slowly, as are queer temporalities in and of themselves. In so doing, they highlight how queerness in videogames potentially sits at an intersection of temporality, spatiality, and resistance. This chapter is of special interest to researchers of queer time, space, and place, and is especially good reading for digital geographers who critically examine the production of space-time.

Throughout their book, Ruberg demonstrates how established "straight games" and the presumed straight (male, white, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied) act of gaming can be made anew through a queer lens of interpretation. That said, the only absence in the book was a more rigorous use of and attention to disability studies and crip theory, which receives scant attention but, at the same time, seems to infuse her work and perspective. Ruberg offers a paragraph intertwining the two in the *Octodad* chapter in relation to modes of passing, but I was left wanting for further description into how Octodad's body and movements could be read as manifestations of visible or invisible disabilities. Similarity, in the queer failure chapter, Ruberg suggests that her work demonstrates how new perspectives could be brought to the study of movement in games and offers disability studies as a future potential.

Overall, Ruberg's ability to explain and apply sometimes difficult or even inaccessible queer theories has created a text that is accessible to the wider gaming community, and in particular LGBTQ+ gamers. For those who have been seeking a strong text that combines queer theory and game studies, this text may scratch that particular itch and twitch.

References

Freeman E (2010) *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press

Halberstam J J (2005) *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press

Halberstam J J (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press

Miller D A (1990) Anal *Rope*. *Representations* 32:114-133

Juul J (2013) *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press

Muñoz J E (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press

Rifkin M (2014) *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Rifkin M (2017) *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Durham: Duke University Press

Sedgwick E K (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press

Snorton C R (2017) *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Payton Alexi Moore
Department of Gender and Women's Studies
University of Kentucky
payton.moore22@uky.edu

April 2019