

Review: Cooperative Gaming: Diversity in the Games Industry and How to Cultivate Inclusion, by Alayna Cole and Jessica Zammit. 2020. CRC Press. xv + 95 pp.

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Published in 2020, *Cooperative Gaming: Diversity in the Games Industry and How to Cultivate Inclusion* by Alayna Cole and Jessica Zammit summarises and discusses the challenges of diversity and inclusion in the gaming industry. Through its six chapters, the book reviews the last 40 years of these challenges while formulating prospective measures to further improve the situation.

The introduction sets the stage for our reading and provides us with the theoretical bases for Cole and Zammit's discussion. Here, we are introduced to the authors' working definitions of representation, "a portrayal, typically in media, that individuals can identify with and that grants visibility to a group," and diversity, which includes "a broad variety of different people with an assortment of backgrounds and experiences, as well as demographics such as gender, sexuality, race, and ability" (p. x).

The first chapter examines the role of marginalised groups within the gaming industry, highlighting the power imbalances caused by a predominantly white male management structure. Because women and people of colour remain underrepresented in positions of power, a status quo enabling exclusion, exploitation, and harassment is accepted in these work environments. According to the authors, the greatest challenge in resolving these issues is that initiatives and movements rallying up to protect victims of power abuse receive little or no funding. Proper funding (i.e., government programmes, private donations) would help organisations to establish themselves and grow to the point where they would exert considerable pressure on the companies to change their policies.

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In the second chapter, Cole and Zammit conclude that these exclusionary working environments have perpetuated expectations towards representation in games. These representations are primarily aimed at white male gamers with empowerment fetishism, or the fixation on deriving enjoyment through different forms of power, such as dominating other players and non-player characters or possessing rare and mighty items. Consequently, people who identify as women, trans, queer, disabled, or of colour are mainly cast as side roles that remain primarily “tokenistic or stereotypical” (p. 31). The situation has improved in the last few years, but as the authors note, AAA companies should more frequently capitalise on diverse casts to help “normalise the existence of marginalised people and create innovative experiences by telling unique stories” (p. 33).

In the third chapter, the heart of the book, Cole and Zammit express their core thought: Virtual diversity and inclusion in videogames can only be accomplished through real life diversity and inclusion in the companies producing these games. Having more progressive company cultures would not only produce more satisfactory products, but also better returns on investment for the companies themselves. Thus, concerted efforts towards diversity are not only good for cultural and representational impact, but also for big game companies’ potential economic gain. The authors acknowledge, however, that Blizzard, Microsoft, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft have been working on improving their working climate in the last few years, and the book presents these companies as case studies. These companies have been engaged in improving their hiring and promoting practices, internal policies and training practices, and establishing independent councils for marginalised groups. Yet, as the authors highlight, cultures do not change overnight, and these measures are expected to bear fruit in time. The aforementioned companies have nonetheless clearly communicated to the public their commitment to improving the situation. This, according to Cole and Zammit, is an important part of keeping these companies accountable.

That being said, the book was published in 2020 and uses Blizzard as a positive example of a corporate culture that is improving. In light of the recent sexual harassment allegations that pushed a female employee to commit suicide at a company retreat (Brooks, 2021), we must rethink how much we really can know about an industry that hides behind its opaque fortress of non-disclosure agreements. Instead of pushing companies to make promises that they may not hold, it might be more fruitful to create actual legislation that forces companies to full transparency in these matters. The case of *California Department of Fair Employment and Housing v. Activision Blizzard* reveals that with limited or no direct inside access to the industry, the possible conclusions we can draw from what we as researchers know of videogame production must be critically reviewed.

The fourth chapter addresses game-related events, such as public conventions (like the Electronic Entertainment Expo) and academic conferences (like the Digital Games Research Association), and organisers' responsibility to be more thoughtful about whom they invite and employ to enable an inclusive setting. The authors emphasize that codes of ethics should be enforced, and regardless of financial considerations, organisers should always be "aware of the ways [they] can make an event accessible" (p. 69).

The concluding chapter of the book optimistically reviews recent developments in the industry. Yet, Cole and Zammit admit that it is difficult to predict how trends will develop considering how quickly the industry changes. However, they feel positively about substantial progress regarding diversity and inclusion in the future, provided companies and communities remain committed to their goals and enable sustainable results.

Overall, Cole and Zammit provide an overdue review and assessment of the conditions regarding diversity and inclusion in the game industry: past and present. Their book continues the movement of critical investigations in game studies seen in earlier publications addressing game production and consumption (e.g., Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Gray, 2020; Paul, 2018). Thanks to its accessible written style and form, *Cooperative Gaming* provides an excellent introduction to the topic in a straightforward and approachable manner for a variety of interested audiences, such as academics, game developers, and the public. The authors' non-profit Represent Me has become one of the industry's most active queer-focused diversity organisations. The authors' expertise and experience on the subject is built on an impressive examination of the issues marginalised groups face and shines throughout the book.

Unfortunately, the quantitative strength of the book is, at times, also its biggest weakness. The authors tend to present statistics with little context and do not always give details on the methodology of the studies they refer to. Contextualizing the data a little more or adding footnotes would have allowed for more transparency. In addition, it feels at times like if the data presented is used as novel insight while in fact, studies from the last two decades have already focused on representation in videogames and have come to similar conclusions, namely that misrepresentation of marginalised groups is omnipresent (Ivory, 2006; Malkowski & Russworm, 2017; Šisler, 2008). Instead, we need studies that interrogate the emotional impact that misrepresentation has on marginalised groups to find solutions that help us challenge harmful stereotypes. Additionally, I would have liked to hear a bit more on the historical context of early videogame marketing strategies. For example, we are informed that marketing campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s labelled videogames as "toys for white boys," which pushed girls and women out of gaming. Yet, the authors do not

give us insights as to why a marketing campaign would exclude half of its potential customers. It would have been interesting to have a more detailed assessment of the motivations of marketers of that time period.

To conclude, *Cooperative Gaming* is essential for three reasons: accessibility, pragmatism, and expertise. Its compact size and writing style make it easy to read and comprehend, including for audiences who are not accustomed to the field of game studies. Its perspectives and suggestions are realistic, and the authors exhibit through their professional experience a sharp and valuable set of views. *Cooperative Gaming* deserves a place in any university course syllabus that discusses videogames and their production on an undergraduate level or corporate training events that aim at work culture transformation.

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