Review: *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, by Bonnie Ruberg. 2020. Duke University Press. xii + 276 pp.

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Queer identities have become increasingly visible in AAA titles and independent video games. Yet, with surveillance, violence, and legislation against queer communities increasing around the United States, many North American queer game makers are questioning whether representation can adequately address the political and economic issues of the current day. Bonnie Ruberg's (2020) *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* traces the development and expansion of queer indie game making in the mid-2010s through several interviews with digital, analog, and mixed-media queer game makers from Canada and the United States. Ruberg notes the "cultural landscape" surrounding the rise of the queer games avant-garde is "turbulent," with #GamerGate, the election of Donald Trump, a prominent rise in public alt-right activity, and anti-LGBTQ+ bills and rhetoric all directly affecting the lives of queer individuals in the United States and beyond (p. 2). Ruberg argues queer game makers directly challenge dominant ideologies in gaming spaces by moving beyond representation and towards considerations of queer embodiment, care, and desire. These creators showcase their work in artistic, academic, and industry spaces. To Ruberg, the queer games avant-garde is a dynamic and shifting movement that foregrounds queer theory, design, and aesthetics to interrogate how we can engage with games, play, and systems differently.

Most of the book contains transcripts of interviews with US and Canadian queer game makers conducted by Ruberg in 2017. To highlight the various approaches to queer game making, Ruberg groups twenty interviews thematically across seven sections, with each interview comprising one chapter. The book's most powerful and

insightful moments are those that consider how these game makers' experiences and philosophies about games and queerness intersect and digress. Through these tensions, Ruberg provides an intriguing look at the philosophies of those creating queer games.

The first three sections, spanning Chapter 1 to Chapter 9, highlight the tensions of queer representation, aesthetics, and intimacy within the queer games avant-garde. In Section 1, Ruberg interviews game makers that directly represent queer practices and individuals in their work, including gay sex simulations and semi-autobiographical transgender narratives. In contrast, Section 2 of the book focuses on three designers engaged in queer art-making and aesthetic practices that focus on algorithms, improvisation, and systems of play. Here, ideas about queer representation, sex, and aesthetics differ. For example, game maker Robert Yang argues for political resistance in rendering explicit gay sex acts in games while Liz Ryerson resents "the idea that queer people have to perform their sexuality in their art" (p. 87). Ruberg further complicates these ideas in Section 3 as they interview four game artists who interrogate queer intimacies and desires. Through awkward kissing simulators, monster sex tabletop role-playing games, and intimate physical experiences, these designers explore queer intimacies beyond human sexuality and consider how "social norms of romance are imposed on bodies that refuse to behave" (p. 93). As a whole, these first three sections of the book portray the diverging perspectives of queerness, identity, and sex of game makers within the queer games movement.

Section 4 and 5 encompass Chapter 10 through 15 and focus on specific aspects of the queer games avant-garde, surveying the complicated relationship many creators have with queerness and empathy. Across Section 4, Ruberg talks to three developers who draw from feminist avant-garde and performance art practices through their work in fine art spaces and virtual reality environments. In Section 5, which discusses intersectional perspectives of queer game production, four designers consider how queerness, race, and gender intersect in their work, arguing for recognition and understanding of the complexities of identity. Many of the game makers here expressed ambivalence about the potential for games to elicit and develop empathy in players. Mattie Brice critiques the use of virtual reality as an "empathy machine" when discussing her work in Chapter 11, while Tonia B****** and Emilia Yang note in Chapter 13 that designing for empathy often results in power imbalances that gives "the upper hand to the player" (p. 157). In Chapter 14, Nicky Case questions whether games are more suitable for developing empathy than other mediums, a common assumption made by creators of serious games. To these designers, empathy is an ambivalent and loaded term, a sentiment reflected in the nuances of the games they create.

In Section 6 and 7, featuring Chapter 16 to Chapter 20, Ruberg interviews analog game designers and queer games organizers to further consider the complexities of identities, queerness, and games. Ruberg features analog game designers in Section 6, who argue live synchronous play affords engaging and transformative queer experiences through engagement with collective identities and embodied queerness. Yet, like previous game makers, these creators are wary of the call for empathy and representation that often elides the "intimate yet complex connections between queer games and the lives of their creators" (p. 185). Section 7 includes interviews with AAA industry researchers and queer game event organizers, providing a much needed and intriguing look at how game research and curation can support and potentially harm queer game makers. For example, Ruberg's interview with Jerome Hagen, a queer user researcher at Xbox, gives insight into the complexities of advocating for queer representation, aesthetics, and desires in video games on a broad scale without commodifying these identities.

Finally, in the afterword, Ruberg briefly interviews four upcoming queer game designers who point to potential futures in queer game making. Through critically considering these similarities and differences, Ruberg paints a broad but incisive portrait of queer game making across the United States and Canada during the mid-2010s. Ruberg also includes an insightful and engaging list of queer games at the end of the book. As Ruberg notes, the best way to understand and engage with the queer games avant-garde is by "playing queer games" (p. 245). Each entry includes the name of the game and its creators, and a brief description of the work, making it an ideal reference for game developers, educators, and those simply interested in playing more queer games and paying queer game makers for their labor. The list is particularly helpful for those who are unable to attend in-person and/or digital conferences and art shows that might include this work. While the works listed mostly come from creators from the United States and Canada, these games still provide insights into the complexities of queer game making and playing.

With this established group of queer game makers, Ruberg's book serves as a base for future inquiries into the intersections of queerness, games, play, and the avant-garde. Other scholars should expand the scope of such projects to include a wider variety of queer game makers. Most of Ruberg's interviewees come from major cities on the east and west coast of the US along with Montreal and Toronto, and several of the game makers have also presented at the Queerness and Game Conference (QGCON), IndieCade, or other similar venues. Most designers in the book are also college-educated or are current graduate students, with a few exceptions. Finally, as Ruberg notes in the introduction, they personally know several interviewees from their work at QGCON, potentially limiting the application of these concepts and

ideas beyond the scope of queer game production beyond the coastal US and Canada.

Rather than treat Ruberg's work as an exhaustive or representative list, future work should consider how queer game makers from suburban and rural spaces in the United States and Canada conceptualize their work. If, as interviewee Heather Flowers states and Ruberg echoes, there is an "existential horror of growing up queer in the void between the South and the Midwest" for some queer game makers, more work should attend to how these individuals and communities make do and even thrive in spaces outside of typical queer enclaves (p. 241). Those interested in building on Ruberg's work should consider queer game production outside of US, Canadian, and Western contexts. Focusing on small-scale, queer production outside of the West can further highlight the tensions and diverging conceptualizations of queerness, play, and resistance among queer games creators. Similarly, interviews with modders, hack makers, and fan game creators could point to how queer individuals and groups share resources and develop skills outside of campuses and art spaces. Doing so could further decenter the academy and fine arts and consider how regionality, access, race, and other identity markers affect queer game making.

Similarly, a more thorough investigation of queerness as a concept could further situate the queer games avant-garde within broader inquiries of game studies and queer theory. Ruberg defines queerness as "both the identities of LGBTQ people and more conceptual notions of non-heteronormativity," while also contending that "queerness means different things to different people" (p. 25). Ruberg notes the slipperiness of the term queer makes it difficult to pin down how queerness operates in specific contexts. One way to gain more specificity with concepts of queerness could be to historicize how such definitions circulate in specific social, economic, and political environments, including the queer games avant-garde movement in the United States and Canada. Future game scholars should further interrogate the intersections of queerness and play and consider how queerness as a concept, identity, and/or design principle becomes legible to players and game makers in specific time periods and communities.

References

Ruberg, B. (2020). *The queer games avant-garde: How LGBTQ game makers are reimagining the medium of video games*. Duke University Press.