

Review

Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson, *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play*, Routledge, New York. 2012. ISBN 9780415897662, pp.234.

Research on 'women and games' has long critiqued the sexist structures in online game cultures, yet what is according to Sundén and Sveningsson still missing is 'to look at games from a feminist, intersectional perspective' (p.7). Hence, *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Culture: Passionate Play* takes on an intersectional, feminist, and queer perspective and explores how gender and sexuality come to matter in the online game *World of Warcraft*. By using a 'twin-ethnography' the authors develop two narratives which structure the book: Sveningsson explores in the first part of the book a 'straight' guild within the game while Sundén investigates in the second part 'queer' game culture within mainstream *World of Warcraft*, as well as through the case of a guild explicitly defined as LGBT. Both embodied and situated ethnographies use participatory observation in *World of Warcraft*, combined with qualitative interviews with female players in order to explore the intersections of gender and sexuality in online games.

In the introduction to the book the authors give a cogent account of their critical feminist and queer ethnography which includes 'ethnographic methods along an ethics of participation, closeness, and involvement, acknowledging that ethnographies are based on affective investments and embodied practices' (p.11). Indeed, the book's most important and suggestive contribution is its critical investigation of the exciting possibilities afforded by an affective methodology which does not deny but rather highlight the passionate researching body. This is excellently elaborated in the chapters 'Desire at Play' and 'A Feel of Play' in the second part of the book. Sundén 'confesses' here her own passionate involvement in the game and argues convincingly that we need to rethink digital games as an embodied and sensuous media form which, in turn, requires new affective approaches: 'Even if digital games are understood as an embodied, sensuous media form, this very corporeality seems to leave few traces in the methodological strategies of game researchers and their way of knowing the field. Literature on games may offer careful investigations of their seductive power, but rarely do researchers themselves admit to ever having been seduced' (p. 111). By arguing for the productivity of personal experiences in critical approaches to gaming cultures, both authors illustrate in their research how desire, emotion and closeness is intimately related to technology and how their 'falling' for an online game

has shaped their research. This is a refreshing and much need approach to online media because it accounts for the affective ways in which digital games 'aim at and involve the bodies of players' (p. 19) while staying attentive to the structural inequalities that shape these online environments.

While the book is excellent in mapping out how an affective, experiential and passionate methodology can look, it is less successful in providing new theoretical insights in regards to gender and sexuality in online games. Especially in the first part of book the reader is often presented with material that is already well-rehearsed within feminist (new) media studies: In 'The More the Merrier!', for instance, Sveningsson discusses what role women can play in the homosocial, masculine sphere of gaming. Similar to feminist researchers such as Carol Stabile, she argues that women can sometimes experience 'benefits' within a male dominated guild (i.e. male players might help them archive certain tasks) but that these perks come at the costs of reinforcing gendered and sexualised structures in which women are seen as less tech-savvy, less skilled and merely good for the friendly climate within the guild. In 'Playing Along' the author discusses some of the available coping strategies for female gamers and draws parallels to former research on women in other male-dominated areas such as the armed forces, the music industry, and journalism. Similar to these earlier studies, she comes to the conclusion that coping mechanisms such as appropriating masculine traits, 'becoming one of the boys' or playing down the passion for technology might help the woman individually but come at the cost of women as a collective. Sveningsson's research is very specific and personal and provides as such an important contribution to the analysis of how female gamers experience gaming activities and gaming cultures but one might wonder if the promising theoretical concepts mentioned in the beginning of the book (performativity and affect) could have pushed this analysis even further.

The concluding chapter is, similar to the introduction, collaboratively written and complicates the binary structure of the book into 'straight' and 'non-straight' sections by discussing Eve Sedgwick's (1985) notion of 'homosociality'. The authors illustrate how homosociality can help us to understand 'straight' and 'non-straight' gaming spaces not as oppositions but as different positions on a continuum of male desire for each other. In this sense, homosociality 'links together the seemingly disparate practices of male bonding as power play within straight game space on the one hand, with the type of erotic intimacy between men in queer spaces on the other' (p.199). They conclude that understanding male homosexual and homosocial gaming spaces as different locations on the same continuum means recognising that desire can function in both spaces as a vehicle of power that keeps the hegemonic, male-dominated power structures in place.

On the whole, the book will no doubt be of significant interest to students and scholars in the field of audience studies because it discusses some important ways in which (online) ethnography can be extended. It is, as such invaluable for thinking through how the researching body is part (and needs to be part) of research in online surroundings and what

the implications of such an affective methodology are. Thus, this book pushes forward current debates about affect, embodiment and gaming.

Anne Graefer

Biographical Note:

Anne Graefer is a post-doctoral teaching fellow in the Department of Media & Communication at the University of Leicester. Her research interests are located at the intersections of celebrity culture, new media studies and affect theory.