

Amanda C. Cote: *Gaming Sexism. Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*

New York 2020: New York University Press, 264 pp.

Playing video games has become a popular leisure activity over the last two decades, as personal computers and home consoles have replaced arcades and dominated the gaming market. Gaming and gamers have also attracted academic interest, with fields such as media studies focusing on them the most. However, gaming is also relevant to sociology despite it having been somewhat overlooked in the field. In her book *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*, American scholar Amanda C. Cote (2020) intertwines these two disciplines by focusing on fundamental sociological concepts such as identity and gender while also drawing on her knowledge as an assistant professor of media/game studies at the University of Oregon. As an avid gamer herself, Cote's interest in the gaming industry has permeated her academic work since she wrote her dissertation. And although *Gaming Sexism* is her first book, she has also (co)written numerous articles centred around gaming, gender, identity, and representation. She also co-leads the Esports and Games Research Lab at the University of Oregon. Even though *Gaming Sexism* is her first book.

The aim of *Gaming Sexism* is to look at the game industry and gaming culture and to critically explore trends towards both greater diversification and discrimination via discursive analysis of video game-related materials and interviews with over thirty female gamers. It should be noted that Cote's interviewees all had higher education, which is only mentioned at the end of the book, even though it should be highlighted, considering the influence education has on the gaming. Higher education often goes hand in hand with a certain socio-economic background that not only en-

ables one to spend leisure time more freely, for example, playing video games, but also provides one with a platform or internet access in the first place. According to the data presented below, the gender gap between male and female gamers is slowly closing, and education plays a role in this, which is demonstrated through Cote's book, though only implicitly.

In recent years, video gaming has rapidly grown and expanded its audience, transforming itself from a formerly masculinised and therefore male-dominated space to a more diverse one. According to the annual Essential Facts Report conducted by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2006. Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry. Princeton Library. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from <https://library.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2006.pdf>; ESA, 2022. Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry. Entertainment Software Association. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from <https://www.theesa.com/resource/2022-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/>), which draws data from large-scale surveys, in 2006, female gamers already made up a significant proportion of gamers (38%), and by 2022, this number had increased to 48%. Race and ethnicity proportions also changed slightly, as in 2021, nearly 73% of gamers identified as white, and just one year later, that number dropped to 71% (ESA, 2022).

However, this diversification goes hand in hand with the aforementioned discrimination. Cote's main point in the introductory chapter of the book could be summed up in one sentence: the more diverse gaming becomes, the more exclusionary its fandom becomes. To explain this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon, Cote works with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to describe core and casual games as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. The former, derived from words hardcore and masocore, is a

reference to the video game industry's historic attention to male audiences, console games and masculinised genres, whereas the latter constructs the sphere of gaming as frivolous and less serious. However, this is in itself problematic, and the concepts are not, in fact, so dichotomic. Take, for example, a player who spent hundreds of hours, which is a sign of being a core gamer, playing Candy Crush, a game that fits the casual category.

Cote uses these concepts to show how discourses in the gaming industry position both new and traditional gamers in a hierarchy that prioritises the core and dismisses the casual. She refers to this conflict as a crisis of authority that occurs when core hegemonic gamers feel threatened by new, casual fans, who could possibly undermine the notion that gaming is a masculine hobby (and thus promote a real shift in power). Because a major proportion of new fans are women, male gamers are trying to (re)establish their hegemony via misogynistic behaviour and hostility towards women. Hence, *Gaming Sexism* emerged.

Each of the six chapters is centred on Gramsci's theory, making it a fundamental theoretical and analytical framework in the book. However, Cote is, as the reader quickly understands, outstandingly well read. She builds up her most brilliant contributions around the works of many scholars, including classical sociologists such as Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall, as well as the most well-known game studies researchers, namely Mia Consalvo, Adrienne Shaw, Carly Kocurek, Lisa Nakamura and many others. The main objective of Cote's book is, in her own words, 'to demonstrate how, despite gaming's perceived diversification, many barriers to true equality between different types of gamers persist' (p. 22). To accomplish this, Cote conducted a discourse analysis of magazines related to the game industry and interviewed thirty-seven women who self-identified as gamers.

The first chapter covers the previously mentioned difference between core and casual, showing that, in reality, the stereotypical views of core meaning masculine, committed gamers and casual meaning non-serious, shallow gamers do not match the lived experiences of players. While this argument might be highlighted as the central notion of the book, it is the second and especially the third chapter that I consider truly exceptional for the reasons presented below.

In the second and third chapters, Cote draws on Stuart Hall's work on overt and inferential racism, adapting the framework to her central topic: sexism. The second chapter focuses on overt sexism in games, which most often manifests as hypersexualised, overly girly and less powerful female characters (or the complete absence of them). A content analysis conducted by Teresa Lynch et al. (Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., Van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. 2016. *Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years*. *Journal of Communication*, 66(4), 564–584) showed that, compared to male characters, which are quite often hypermasculinised, the majority of female characters are represented in a way that draws attention to their underdressed bodies rather than their skills. This only reaffirms the masculinised core of gaming, making it harder for female gamers to navigate through the gaming spaces or identify with the character. Another aspect of overt sexism is the harassment that women face. While trash talking other players is rather normative in gaming culture, female gamers are typically insulted with sexual comments, including rape threats and derogatory names. Inferential sexism, by contrast, describes an event or policy that rests on naturalised assumptions that have a sexist basis, such as female gamers being praised or treated extremely nicely just because of their gender. This initially turns a woman gamer into an 'other', which fur-

ther reinforces the masculinisation of gamer identity.

The fourth chapter delves deeper into the fact that female gamers are already core. Cote's interviewees describe what pleasure they find in gaming and how they manage to embody a gamer identity through adopting proactive identity fluidity. Chapter five shifts the focus to the strategies female gamers employ to choose content and manage their encounters with the community. While the strategies for selecting what to play, including genre conventions or social network recommendations, are neither revolutionary nor surprising, strategies for coping with online harassment include rather drastic and exhausting mechanisms, such as camouflaging their gender or even avoiding online gaming and focusing solely on single-player games.

In 2014, two years after Cote conducted her initial interviews, a movement that would later be called #GamerGate emerged. A female game developer was accused of exchanging sexual favours with a game journalist for a positive review of her game (the claims were later disproven). Because of this incident, Cote reached out to her interviewees once again and managed to conduct follow-up interviews with 11 of them in 2017. Chapter six, aptly named 'In the aftermath', reveals that events like GamerGate are not particularly significant for women, who dismiss it as just another instance of the sexism they already face. Despite this, Cote remains hopeful, as she sums up in the conclusion alongside suggestions of how to address the problems introduced in previous chapters.

Gaming Sexism is a brilliant book. Cote shows deep expertise in the topic and writes with a certain lightness, which makes the book accessible to both lay and scholarly audiences. I assume that this is the reason why the methodology chapter is placed in the appendix. Although this is understandable, placing it at the beginning might have given readers a clearer overview of its

limitations, such as the interviewees' characteristics (e.g. the fact that most of them were US residents). The clarity of this otherwise exceptional book would have been even greater. That said, *Gaming Sexism* has rightfully earned its place on the bookshelves of not only media studies and games studies students and scholars but also sociologists specialising in gender studies and media consumption – and, of course, gamers as well.

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Louisa Allen: *Breathing Life into Sexuality Education*

Cham (Switzerland) 2021: Palgrave
Macmillan / Springer Nature
Switzerland AG, 197 pp.

Discussions about the form and objectives of formal sexuality education have become increasingly important in recent years in both academia and public policy arena. Louisa Allen, a professor at the University of Auckland, has consistently been a prominent voice in this discourse, presenting her perspectives from a feminist vantage point. Her work focuses particularly on the disembodied nature of sexuality education, illuminating discourse that prescribes certain (heterosexual) futures while it neglects students as sexual subjects in the present. In her latest monograph, titled *Breathing Life into Sexuality Education*, she extends her critique through the lens of new materialism. This approach represents a unique departure from the poststructuralist perspective that dominates feminist scholarship on sexuality education, and it has the potential to foster new ideas for a rethinking of this curriculum subject. Unfortunately, this potential has only been partially fulfilled.