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Book Review

*Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era
of Casual Video Games*

Amanda C. Cote

New York University Press, 2020, 274 Pages

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Video games have become a mainstream form of entertainment, permeating various aspects of daily life. We encounter gaming culture in multiple ways, from advertisements on the street to game software in electronics stores, and even in the sight of people playing mobile games on public transport. Friends might invite us to join them in gameplay, or we can simply watch others play online. Beyond mere entertainment, the gaming industry has evolved into a massive business, offering opportunities for those skilled in gaming to pursue careers as professional players. In many countries, achieving professional success in gaming also often leads to becoming a celebrity and a youth icon.

Given the close association with advancements in technology and the nature of play, gaming culture is often considered an integral part of youth culture. However, how does gaming culture intersect with gender issues? This relationship can be interpreted from two perspectives: the demographics of those who play games and the content of the games themselves. If we define a “gamer” as someone deeply immersed in gaming culture, what image comes to mind when you hear the word “gamer”? You might picture someone intensely focused, sitting in front of a screen, pressing keys or buttons. These individuals are often young, male, and, in Western culture, predominantly white. Moreover, what types of games do they play? Common assumptions might include an affinity for violent games or those that demand significant time investment to overcome challenges.

From the first chapter, Cote establishes a foundational explanation that drives the gender issues in gaming culture by theorizing the concepts of “core” and “casual.” Although the distinction between “core” and “casual” is central to understanding the hierarchy within gaming culture—essentially, what kinds of games are deemed more important and legitimate—there is no clear academic

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definition separating these categories. This chapter delves into the challenge of defining core and casual games, providing an essential background for understanding gender dynamics in gaming culture. As in other cultural domains, such as punk music, the term “core,” derived from “hardcore,” is deeply associated with masculinity, signifying serious, male-dominated styles and content. In contrast, “casual” is linked to femininity and perceived as less serious. Through a critical analysis of gaming magazines from 2005 to 2008, a period when the industry began to focus more on casual games, Cote highlights the anxiety within the traditional core gaming industry. This anxiety stems from the fear that the rise and popularity of casual games could shift the industry’s priorities away from core gaming.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the effects of a masculinized gaming culture through in-depth interviews with female gamers, adapting Stuart Hall’s framework of overt and inferential racism to the context of gaming sexism. While Chapter 2 illustrates how women feel marginalized through women’s representations in games and online harassment towards women as forms of overt sexism, Chapter 3 discusses the stereotype of “girly games” and “girl gamers” as inferential sexism. Cote argues that sexualized representations and harassment reinforce the perception of gaming as a male-dominated space among her participants. However, games specifically designed for women are insufficient to challenge this status quo. This gendered separation perpetuates the notion that core games belong to male gamers, aligning with the stereotype that women are merely casual gamers. To address this, the book provides positive examples of how mainstream games can challenge and transform masculine attributes to become more inclusive and friendly for female gamers.

In Chapter 4, Cote explores the pleasures women find in core gaming through her interviews and analyzes how they navigate their diverse identities to enjoy these experiences. She discovers that female gamers’ preferences vary widely, with no significant gender-based patterns. This provides a new perspective that differs from the conclusion that female and male pleasures are essentially different, as previous works have suggested. The chapter argues that “rather than interpreting everything through the lens of gender, they interpret many games and experiences through the lens of a gamer”(p. 131). However, female gamers have a complex relationship with the imagined gaming community: while some feel a deep connection to it, others perceive it as exclusive. The author emphasizes that women’s gaming practices are already core, and their negotiation blurs the boundaries of what is traditionally seen as a masculine domain.

Chapter 5 delves into the strategies female gamers employ when choosing games and coping with online harassment. Cote reveals that her participants avoid monetarily attributing to hypersexualized games since they identified female gamers. Interestingly, however, they also feel guilty about playing “girly” games due to their identification as core gamers. From an active media audience perspective, these women proactively use media technologies and information to manage their gaming

experiences. The chapter highlights the importance of these strategies but also acknowledges their limitations, arguing that “it is unfair to ask women to shoulder the entire burden of changing audience stereotypes and behaviors” (p. 169). In addition, it also introduces current strategies employed by some well-known developers and assesses their effectiveness, offering practical insights for future efforts in the gaming industry.

In Chapter 6, Cote examines the impact of #GamerGate—a misogynistic online campaign and backlash against feminism in gaming culture that occurred in 2014—on her participants. She conducted follow-up interviews five years after the initial interviews. Although the book’s initial question focused on the effects of #GamerGate, the event did not seem to have directly influenced her participants’ gaming experiences. Instead, their reflections on the event reveal a complex process of navigating their identities as female gamers. On the other hand, their gaming habits changed in response to changes in their life stages; many participants reduced their involvement in online or digital gaming but continued to prioritize gaming as their main hobby, often shifting towards in-person gaming. As a specific case, the chapter explores why *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop role-playing game, has become popular among female gamers despite its demands for more time and social investment compared to digital games.

The conclusion of this book centers on the identity of female gamers and the strategies needed to transform the male-dominated gaming culture. Cote asserts that while female gamers navigate fluid identities and demonstrate skills as capable media managers, individual strategies alone are insufficient to challenge the hegemonic masculine culture. Consequently, she offers suggestions for interventions in gaming culture, outlining actions that gamers, industry professionals, journalists, and developers should take. The author also acknowledges the limitations of her work, advocating for future research from an intersectional perspective, studies that explore men’s fears about industrial change, and investigations into gender and gaming beyond Western contexts.

Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games is truly illuminating. The appendix provides detailed information about the author’s research design and data analysis, making it a valuable resource for students interested in qualitative research and seeking practical insights into research methods.

This book has made a significant effort to clarify the underlying logic of gender discrimination in gaming culture by examining the definitions of “core” and “casual” gaming for audiences, regardless of their prior experience with games. This phenomenon can be understood through Sarah Thornton’s concept of “subcultural capital” (Thornton, 1995), which is derived from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “cultural capital.” The author’s key contribution lies in her precise analysis within the gaming context, providing valuable material for comparison with other male-dominated contexts.

In addition, the two interviews conducted at different times offer a more comprehensive view, helping audiences better understand the challenges female gamers face as well as their sense of agency. Furthermore, beyond highlighting the issues they encounter, this book expands on previous research by exploring the pleasures female gamers derive from gaming. It demonstrates that these pleasures are shared across genders, challenging the notion that gaming enjoyment is essentially divided by gender.

As gaming has become a mainstream aspect of youth culture, it is essential to study gaming culture and understand both societal and individual gaming experiences, particularly those of marginalized groups. The author advocates for future research that examines gaming beyond Western contexts, such as in Japan. From a geographical standpoint, key gaming markets like Japan, Korea, and China—important both in East Asia and globally—offer rich opportunities for media studies. These countries have distinct gaming cultures, shaped by Western influences but also uniquely their own. On the other hand, from a temporal perspective, the rapid evolution of the gaming industry and technology since this book's publication has made gaming even more prevalent, especially among the so-called digital native generation. This raises intriguing questions: Will the power structures of core and casual gaming collapse in this new era, or will they reemerge in different forms? Finally, as Cote highlights, her work centers on women's experiences, underscoring the need to explore other marginalized groups through intersectional perspectives. This issue no doubt merits future studies.

Reference

Thornton, S. (1995). *Club cultures: Music, media, and subcultural capital*. Polity Press.