


Gamer Trouble: A Review

Himadri Agarwal <hima_at_umd_dot_edu>, University of Maryland  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3328-1230>

Abstract

This review of Amanda Phillips' book *Gamer Trouble* traces the contents of the book, notes its resonances with larger scholarly discussions, and considers what it says about gaming and game culture overall. It also provides some perspectives on the book's importance and appeal.

Part I

Gamers, Amanda Phillips says, have always been in trouble. One could not agree more. In their book, they push the boundaries of such trouble; questioning it rather than categorizing it, choosing to “run towards the trouble” rather than against it. *Gamer Trouble* is an exploration of the discomfort, chaos, and confusion of video gaming culture, as well as an examination of how structural hierarchies inform, and are often reinforced by, the process of game design, creation, and play. The book uses queer and feminist theory, film studies, media studies, as well as race theory, to probe into gaming culture. While games have been discussed using these concepts before, Phillips' book is characterized by an important element — chaos. Unlike most other scholarship, which tries to taxonomize game theory into neat categories, Phillips not only accepts but encourages the chaos inherent in the form; accepting the mutability of gaming rather than attempting to pin it down, leads to a nuanced, fertile analysis that does not build boundaries for itself.

1

It is oft-discussed that video games perpetuate several forms of discrimination and violence, but rather than dismissing games altogether, Phillips chooses to get into the thick of things. Phillips emphasizes the dichotomy between the necessity of the simple pleasure of gaming and the frustration that accompanies the recognition of how games are contributing to social inequality — in that context, Phillips engages with sexism, homophobia, and racism in video gaming, while also being a gamer and a video game fan themselves. That is crucial — their double-pronged approach of being both an academic and a fan means that they can critique effectively while also being aware of more quotidian perspectives, giving the work an edge over several others in the field. Phillips also analyses the discipline of game studies as a whole — while occupying a position within the field, they critique the exclusionary aspects not just of video games themselves but also the ways of discussing them. Phillips' concept of *trouble* is also an invocation of the genealogies of conversations about feminism and intersectionality, which meet, diverge, and cross each other, creating another chaotic landscape that is used as a lens to view game production and content. In addition, trouble also refers to the simultaneous materiality and subjectivity of video games — which are hardware, software, story, interactivity, and more. Phillips' *trouble* has several meanings, and the book covers all these implications in some detail.

2

Gamer Trouble goes beyond just the console to think about how video games come to be, how they are played, and how they are talked about. The book is both specific and comprehensive — along with some detailed close reading of games, the book covers several important aspects of the video game scene. While the second chapter goes into the technological aspects of gaming, specifically character creation and the biases involved, the third and fourth chapters cover representation in a few case study games: *Portal*, *Bayonetta*, and the *Mass Effect* trilogy. The first chapter, meanwhile, discusses discourses about gaming, including sexist campaigns like #GamerGate and responses to them.

3

The first chapter thinks about the histories of video gaming to come to the crucial conclusion that #GamerGate was

4

ordinary rather than extraordinary. It critiques discourses in video game communities, arguing that their vitriolic, sexist nature is not new. Phillips frames this using *Dickwolves*, a 2010 controversy where gamers retaliated to a rape joke featured in a popular comic *Penny Arcade*. They discuss the figures of the “mean mommy,” “angry feminist,” “based mom,” and “killjoy,” derogatory terms given to feminist gamers, most often people of minoritized genders and of colour, for daring to disrupt sexist status quos with their critique. In gaming spaces, such critique has often been and continues to be, misrepresented, laughed at, and eventually dismissed due to (falsified) reasons of a lack of gaming aptitude. Their statement of the ordinariness of #GamerGate can be mistaken as Phillips trivialising it; however, their assertion is not that it was insignificant, but that such practices have been occurring for a long time. With the *Dickwolves* example, they demonstrate that the issue does not start with #GamerGate, but has origins much farther behind than that, compelling readers to look differently at gaming history. It is also important here to take non-academic discourses very seriously — through their methodologies, Phillips recognises that video games are not made for studying; they are primarily for playing, so conversations had on platforms like forums, social media threads, and stream comments are indispensable. Crucially, Phillips’ argument is not limited to gamer discourse itself — they also point to academic conversations about games, or the field of game studies itself. Here, they trace how it has, until recently, been male-dominated, and analyses the academic writing (or lack thereof) around *Grand Theft Auto* to demonstrate how the field has been selective in its scholarship and, as a result, prohibitive for marginalized communities.

In the second chapter, Phillips considers how games are created — examining animation and development processes, and how technology reflects sociocultural biases about race and gender. Phillips invokes *quantization*, or the “chunking up of a thing like the human face into discrete numbers, in order to explore the ways that the numerical fictions about bodies overwrite the complexities of actual identity” [Phillips 2020, 22–23]. The chapter begins with an exploration of *Kara*, a short film by Quantic Dreams created to demonstrate the animation potential of the company’s new game engine. Here, Phillips discusses how that was done through motion capture technology that brought together multiple actors of various racial identities, whose differences were erased in favour of homogenous whiteness while also reaffirming a unidimensional concept of diversity through Kara’s ability to, say, perform a Japanese lullaby with native fluency. Situating such analyses in the racial science of physiognomy, which attempts to read personality traits into face features, Phillips goes on to analyse avatar creation, using *Fallout 3* as a case study. As methodologies to understand the workings of the black boxes behind interfaces, they consider both deformance, or manipulating interfaces to the extreme to unravel how they work, and modding, playing around existing code to explore how much, and in what ways, the game can be remoulded. Phillips invokes Gloria Anzaldúa’s “*hacienda caras*,” and claims that gamers’ interactions with avatar creation interfaces are models of navigating oppressive structures through masks (the avatar itself) [Anzaldúa 1990]; limitations on avatar creation possibilities, therefore, represent a “wrinkle in the power envelope” [Phillips 2020, 23] that differentially affects minoritized gamers. Here, Phillips’ technical know-how comes into good use: using effective technological methodologies combined with literary theory to generate innovative analyses.

5

Part II

From analysing the impacts of avatar creation possibilities, Phillips moves on to representations of the characters themselves. Here, they use Laura Mulvey’s concept of the *male gaze*, popularized by film and media studies, to look at video game characters, specifically from *Portal* and *Bayonetta*. They consider how gaze operates differently in video games, considering the presence of user-controlled cameras and of multiple objects which compete for attention. For *Portal*, they analyze GLaDOS, the disembodied female antagonist of the game, juxtaposed with Chell, the female avatar players inhabit. Chell is upheld in feminist gamer circles for being brown and wearing a full-coverage jumpsuit — which Phillips complicates in discussing her ambiguous brownness, arguing that Chell’s character caters to concerns about representation using a least-risk model, intending to maximise market value at the expense of specificity. Meanwhile, the sexy titular character of *Bayonetta*, who, with her unrealistic proportions and improbable body contortions, was very controversial, is more than an appeal to the male gaze — Phillips moves beyond authorial intent to read Bayonetta’s mixed-race heritage, interactions with other female characters, as well as movements, to argue that the character defies heteronormativity and challenges accepted narratives of gender. Ultimately, the third chapter argues for an updated lens of considering questions of race and gender in video gaming, making the case that gendered power dynamics are “more troubled than they might seem” [Phillips 2020, 136].

6

The last chapter looks at FemShep, the female version of *Mass Effect's* customisable hero, Commander Shepard. The chapter begins with the question of whether FemShep exists, and ends with the assertion that FemShep should not exist. FemShep is known for her sexual interactions with characters of various genders, thus being heralded as a depiction of queerness in gaming; however, Phillips studies game animations to show that FemShep's animations, even in sexual contexts, are not very different from BroShep (the male Commander Shepard); more than being a queer woman, FemShep runs on the code and motion of a man, simply with the appearances of a woman. Phillips also considers how FemShep was not a part of the initial promotions of *Mass Effect*, such decisions later reversed only in favour of a white, redheaded, stereotypically attractive FemShep being shown in such promotions. Using Audre Lorde's concept of "house of difference," as well as Kara Keeling's "I=Another," Phillips moves beyond neoliberal notions of diversity and advocates, instead, for difference [Lorde 1982] [Keeling 2011].

Like the word "trouble" in its title, *Gamer Trouble* is a book that defies categories — it derives its meaning from its muchness, from its difficulty to pin down or confine. It is here, there, everywhere, in the best way possible. It looks at video games through feminist history, queer theory, and race-related scholarship, asking important questions and creating a landscape that is generative more than destructive. The book does not draw rigid boundaries, and neither does Phillips, who is a gamer, researcher, writer, and video game fan, all of which are brought to the writing, making it vibrant, dynamic, and colourful. Though it is a tad technical, *Gamer Trouble* is fairly accessible too, readable by most audiences. The conversations Phillips creates are chaotic; they engage you more than placate you, surprise you more than satisfy you, and challenge you more than gratify you. *Gamer Trouble* does not give you answers to your questions — it makes you search for them yourself, and embark on a wonderful journey.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa 1990 Anzaldúa, Gloria, ed. (1990) *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation.

Keeling 2011 Keeling, Kara. (2011) "I = Another: Digital Identity Politics" in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, Grace Kyungwon (ed.) Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 53–75.

Lorde 1982 Lorde, Audre. (1982) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name — a Biomythography*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

Phillips 2020 Phillips, A. (2020) *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*. New York: NYU Press.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.