

Where are we now? An Interview with Adrienne Shaw

Kishonna: What does game studies mean to you?

Adrienne: Game studies is an interdisciplinary field that takes games, and increasingly play more broadly, as a starting point in discussions about meaning, culture, power, effects and affects, sociality, art, identity, economics, psychology, education, history, production and consumption, agency, etc. Sure many of us focus specifically on digital games, but that is not the beginning and end of game studies. Moreover, I have met and read the work of game scholars who come from widely diverse academic backgrounds. I do think there is a conceptual center to game studies, as there is to communication studies, but I think even if we define it as a field-- it's a pretty big field without a fence. I personally don't worry about any of the cows (sacred or otherwise) escaping if we don't construct a sturdy fence around our area of study. And if some interesting new sheep come wandering in, maybe they'll teach us that there is more to our field than what we originally thought.

Kishonna: What's missing from game studies?

Adrienne: Rather than talk about lack, I'd like to think that despite being around for decades, game studies still has tons of space to grow. I do think that we need more (some exists but we need fundamentally more) writing about race, class, religion, disability, nationality, non-binary gender, and masculinity in games. There is a lot of work on femininity and increasing amounts of work on some forms of sexuality and race in games, but there are so many other axes of identity that we could be exploring as well as the intersections of these subject positions. I'd like to see more and better games history. There are entire areas of the world that are underrepresented in game studies. I have written before about the need to explore the various forms of sociality in game play. All of these though require game scholars generally be more flexible about the types of play and games they consider studying. We, like our industry, often jump to the new and exciting but that means we do not research the old and the mundane as much as we should. I think there is room in our field for all of this work to be done, but we need to support the people doing it.

Kishonna: What have you attempted to add to the game studies conversation with your work?

Adrienne: When I got started in game studies in the early 2000s it felt like everyone was doing: games and education (which I tried for a bit but it wasn't my passion) or online gaming (which was not my thing). I went into grad school wanting to study representation in games, and started from an audience perspective and later an industry perspective. I explored these issues focusing on LGBTQ representation, but used similar approaches in studying representation from audience and industry perspectives in the Middle East, Finland, and India and kept coming back to a lot of the same conclusions wherever I went. Largely, people I spoke to expressed ambivalence about representation.

At a reception in grad school I was talking to Dr. Naomi Sakr about my projects on Arab and queer gamers and she asked me “but what about queer Arab gamers?” That was sort of the light bulb moment for my dissertation, later my first book, where I interviewed people who were male, female, genderqueer, heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, queer, Black, white, Latinx, Middle Eastern, East and South Asian, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Pagan, grew up in rural to urban spaces, and spanned the class spectrum. I wanted to reconcile the seeming ambivalence or apathy about representation in my prior research with the dominant discourse about it being important. And I feel like I did that: people like representation but they do not want to be treated as target markets. More than that people are well versed in getting what they want out of media even if it doesn’t represent them. If that’s true, then a lot of what media industries tell themselves about who they should be representing and why (normative identities to court a normative market) just doesn’t seem right any more.

In my new work, I’m focusing on two separate projects that bring together other things that felt like they were missing from game studies. First, I am developing multiple projects on the history of LGBTQ representation in games. It is not enough to assume we are on some upward progressive trajectory in terms of representation, particularly when we don’t have a thorough accounting of what came before. Second, I am working on a book that addresses some central questions of game studies through the lens of queer theory. Perhaps it is because of my academic training, but I find that most moments in which I am dissatisfied with arguments in games studies, I find queer theory offers a more nuanced approach to those issues.

Kishonna: Think back to the original text – Barbie and Mortal Kombat. What kinds of conversations were they having then? What were the problems? Highlights?

Adrienne: In the introduction to the original collection Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins write “We hope this anthology will encourage all of us to examine our core assumptions about gender and games, and propose different tactical approaches for bridging the digital gender gap” (p. 3). The book identifies a problem: girls don’t seem to be playing computer games as much as boys. Then it offers multiple different perspectives on possible solutions. They were writing in a context where publicly people were wary of games, aware of the very gendered nature of digital game play, and public discussions of computer game play being a stepping-stone in STEM fields.... A place we haven’t really left, or at least seem to have come back to.

Despite the way people summarize it, the book as a whole does not in fact treat gender as monolithic and binary; much of the introduction is about how differences in computer game use by boys and girls is socially constructed. Does every chapter in the book talk about gender with nuance, or acknowledge intersectionality, no. And I think class and race are implied in the background of several pieces but never brought into the foreground as intersecting with gender in producing particular types of players. Yet the

book as a whole chronicles a particular era of the “girls’ games” movement while also exploring critiques of it. For much of graduate school I had a quote from Nikki Douglas’s essay next to my computer:

Maybe it’s a problem...that little girls DON’T like to play games that slaughter entire planets. Maybe that’s why we are still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights. Maybe if we had the mettle to take on an entire planet, we could fight some of the smaller battles we face every day. Women are not Men and Men are not Women, but all Women are not members of the doily of the month club either. (p. 334)

This was my first inkling that game studies about gender need not treat gender in a normative or binary way, and I do not think most people remember that aspect of this volume.

The original book was certainly focused on children, and for this one book that was not a problem as much as it was that game studies at the time tended to focus only on children when discussing the “digital gender gap.” I think the focus on justifying games as an entry point to STEM made sense, but I truly don’t think that is a productive argument. I think once we argue for the right to participate in cultural products in terms of productivity we rob ourselves of the simple human joy of finding pleasures in a variety of activities. I get it from an applying for grants perspective, but I wish we could say we could say it is simply not fair to exclude large groups of people from an activity for completely preventable forms of disenfranchisement and harassment. The book makes an effort in that direction by asserting that there is not “natural” sex or gender difference that makes computer game play more or less appealing. I’d push more that computer games do not have to be an entry point to particular types of career for it to be a good idea that some of them are made to appeal to more types of players.

Finally, something I always want to point everyone back to: Marsha Kinder’s project *Runaways* deals with intersectional identities and community centered design in a way games designers today could learn a great deal from. I wish more had been done with this project and I wish more people addressing similar issues would read her interview in the collection.

Kishonna: Do you think the conversations have changed over time?

Adrienne: Yes and no. I think a lot of the work following this book turned to adults and gender differences in games in productive ways. I also think more people are looking at questions of sexuality and race (though still not really class) in games. I think though that I would still like to see work that looks, intersectionality, at children’s play in a way that is not focused on education or STEM. I also think because of the focus on adults we’ve been able to have more conversations about sexuality in games. There was also a shift to talking more about social aspects of play, which in turn also led to talking about harassment in gaming. The conversations in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* still happen, but other conversations are also happening.

Kishonna: What advice would you give to emerging scholars wanting to do gaming research?

Adrienne: Do not study something just because it is hip right now or because you think no one else has studied it yet (especially because someone else probably has studied it, you just haven't found them yet). Study it because you have questions about it, something to say about it, a new take on it, etc. If your experience of gaming isn't reflected in what you've read in game studies, make that a project. I focused on solo play because that's how I play games, even when it seemed like everyone else was studying MMORPGs. It led me to different questions and answers than trying to throw myself into online gaming would have done.

And READ. Read as far back as you can find stuff and then look some more. Treat each article or book you read as a node in a network of knowledge building. The bibliography of one article and then a citation report for everything that has cited that article is a great way to follow the development of your field. I had no formal introduction to game studies. I checked out every book on game studies I could the summer before and then during my first year of grad school and worked my way through them (skimming unless I found something I really connected with). I read/skimmed whole issues of *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, etc. I still missed stuff. Some work I later found while I read for my dissertation, some work I am still coming across. I recognize there is just substantially more Game Studies work to sift through now than when I started, but it is still an important exercise. This process is how I learned to figure out what the trends and questions in games studies were so I could situate my own work. It also taught me how to sift through what is and is not useful to my work in general. Moreover, it taught me the very valuable lesson of "never say no one has ever _____ before"—because you are probably wrong. Just because someone else has done this work, doesn't mean you don't have something to add to the conversation (which is more possible if you logic for the project was not "because no one else has done it yet). And read from other fields! Media and communication studies and game studies have asked very similar questions before, and I found in my work it helped to bring them together. No field is an island, and sometimes you might have to borrow a neighbor's goat because you can't wait for them to come to you.

Kishonna: What's your top 5 (favorite games of all time)?

Adrienne: Alphabetically because I really can't order them, but I am going to do top 10:

1. Adventures of Lolo (my first game love)
2. Assassin's Creed 3...or maybe Black Flag (I like sailing ships and climbing trees because I can't do either in real life, and also love the AC series generally)
3. Batman: Arkham Asylum (the first Scarecrow sequence made me say out loud "I love this game" and I've always been a big Batman fan)
4. Beyond Good and Evil (there's a scene in this game that legit made me cry, but also it was a super fun game beyond that)

5. Dominique Pamplemousse (film noir, stop motion animation, musical, adventure game about gender and the economy...if there is one game I could make everyone play it's this one)
6. Fallout 2 (still the best of the series, though I loved 3)
7. Her Story (which gave me a gaming experience I'd always been looking for but never knew how to describe)
8. Monument Valley (I replay it constantly because it offers pleasures beyond puzzle solving)
9. The entire Myst series (no lie, playing it got me into grad school)
10. Read Only Memories (it made me nostalgic for an era of digital games I was not old enough to experience when it first happened, while also making me excited for the future of games)