

Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity

Shira Chess

Videogaming is currently the most popular worldwide form of media entertainment. Sales of games regularly outstripping box office launches and a vast swath of users engage with games daily. We often typify these players as the spotty male teenager angrily playing *Call of Duty*; however the reality of gaming is more complex. From the commuter playing *Candy Crush*, to the pre-schooler learning about shapes in *Peppa Pig: Paintbox*, “gamers” are not that easily quantified.

Shira Chess' *Ready Player Two* examines a consistently underplayed aspect of gaming - that of the non-male gamer. In doing so, she asks deeper questions about who plays games, and why half of them are seemingly ignored; by the media, by the academic field, and by the games industry itself. If 50% of gamers identify themselves as female - a statistic that has remained consistent stable for fifteen years - then why do such strong stereotypes of player remain?

By diving more into the world of “Player Two”, a player who often actively refuses the title of “gamer”, Chess finds that games made for women are changing the monetary, ideological and rules-based structures of games. In *Kim Kardashian's Hollywood*, the player becomes a successful fashionista, and in *Gardenscapes*, they embrace early retirement to restore the decrepit grounds of a Vanderbilt-style mansion. Both of these games have sold in their millions. However, Chess argues that Player Two is as much as fiction as her cis-male counterpart, and that these games present us with an idealised, troubled version of wish-fulfillment that reflects that of the more well-known, louder games. In an interview with designer Sheri Graner Ray, Ray argues that ‘the game industry does not see women as a market. They see women as a genre’.

Chess suggests that one reason for this downplaying might be the trivialising of female orientated media. Romance, true crime, mystery and erotic fiction are bestsellers, but continually derided in a way that say, the most recent *Fast and Furious* movie is not. However, Chess also challenges assumption that these games do not serve their audience. As an older (yet demographically typical) player, Player Two's needs have evolved. These games feed their players bite-sized chunks of play instead of long drawn out sessions, understand that playing might be a ‘guilty pleasure’, and present aspirational topics in place of violence. Subsequently, the ways that games are constructed and marketed is changing.

In recent years toxic behaviour has been rife in gamer culture, largely caused by the hate movement #gamergate. This group have threatened and harassed prominent female members of a community which was starting to recognise that it was inadvertently stifling diversity. This book addresses this by presenting Player Two as a vital part of our leisure time. Chess demonstrates that we have reached a point where wider questions about game design are needed. This is a vital step onwards in the field of Games Studies, and will resonate strongly in critical arguments further afield about gendered play and leisure activities.

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