International Journal of Communication 20(2026), Book Review 1538–1540 1932–8036/2026BKR0009

Bo Ruberg, **How to Queer the World: Radical Worldbuilding through Video Games,** New York: NYU Press, 2025, 304 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

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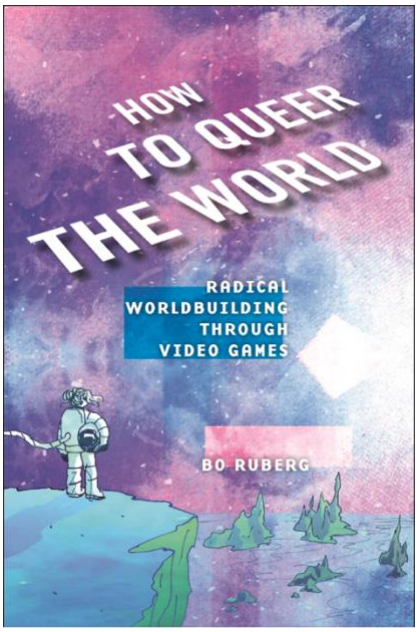

In what ways do the structures of the world around us affect us? What do they implicitly or explicitly ask us to do? And, in what ways can we destabilize them? Ruberg advocates that people consider these questions as they move through the world. Through proposing tenets that rethink concepts of worldbuilding, Ruberg questions natural laws, movement, and one's access and ability to take actions in the world. All, of course, through video games.

At the center of Ruberg's book is one core claim: All video games are worlds. Some may tell stories. But every game is a world. Ruberg focuses largely on nonnarrative games to support this claim. Ruberg shifts the conversations in worldbuilding away from narrative elements and toward worldbuilding practices that exist on the level of systems and structures. For instance, chapter 1 identifies the way What the Golf creates "Nine Thousand Little Worlds" through levels that feature increasingly deconstructed forms of playing golf (p. 35). No central narrative unfolds in the game. And yet its imaginative worlds spur a desire to create the world anew.

These notions of worldbuilding connect with queer "worldmaking" practices like those written of by Jose Esteban Muñoz, Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, and Sara Ahmed (p. 4). Influenced by utopian thinking, these notions of making a world cast an eye forward toward futurity. When the world we live in does not accommodate us, queer people strive to build a new one. Ruberg connects these ideas to game worlds, demonstrating where the media can challenge players to reimagine their worlds.

Chapter 1 on What the Golf analyzes the game's ever-changing level design that creates feelings of speculation that align with these queer utopian ideas. Ruberg proposes that play in video games is a performative act of worldbuilding, connecting two concepts whose overlap has been understudied. This game uses these performative acts to queerly destabilize expectations and identity. Through queer utopian thinking, Ruberg places game and performance studies in conversation.

This book identifies queerness in worldbuilding through both representation and resistance to normativity within the structures of games, most clearly seen in chapters 2 and 3, which look at games that rebuild the laws of nature. Trans mechanics of time and space queer the world in chapter 2, which focuses on an interactive visual novel about a transwoman returning home called If Found . . . (p. 69). Defying transnormative expectations of time, the game's temporality depicts impossibility. Narrative mechanics move forward as game mechanics move backward. This is accomplished through three design choices. Most

centrally, the game's core loop requires erasing to transition between scenes, representing this dual backward and forward movement. Second, the game's trans temporality places a character creator at the game's end, disrupting expectations by displacing it from a starting piece into a conclusion. Finally comes Ruberg's main object of fascination: its use of the black hole that defies natural law by giving agency rather than taking it away. Through mechanics surrounding time and space, the game inverts the laws of physics.

The laws of physics shift toward challenging the physics of game engines in chapter 3. Game engines have traditionally focused on a sense of "realism" informed by heteronormative bodily desire (for instance, making women's breasts attractive and moving "realistically"). Ruberg argues that Goat Simulator acts as a gravity simulator, defying expectations of natural laws acting consistently with the real world or even with their previous existence in the game world (p. 107). Focusing on Wobbledogs (p. 107), Ruberg digs into the game's history of production to see where the focus on the wobble physics leads to queer forms of reproduction. Ultimately, these game bodies make us view the material world in a new—and queered—way.

Physical space shifts toward dimensionality in chapter 4, which establishes 2.5D as a liminal, nonbinary mode of play that works against legibility. It is queerly in-between, refusing to be one state or another. Ruberg suggests this newer form goes against a linear view of game history progressing from 2D to 3D. Building on the notion that games are spaces for being, 2.5D worlds carry contradiction. Using the example of OlliOlli World (p. 143), this chapter demonstrates the way that adding depth within these worlds asks the player to bear witness rather than providing access. Other games may offer restrictions on accessible content. OlliOlli World, however, uniquely features this inaccessible content in its level design that is full of stories and characters with which players cannot interact.

Chapters 2–4 rely on trans theory to build their arguments. Ruberg writes within growing fields of queer and trans game studies in which they have been a pivotal voice since its inception. The two fields are neither fully discrete nor overlapping, in a way that Ruberg addresses in their introduction. Transness has always been a part of queer game studies, while also operating as a distinct field. This dis/connection is seen within the writing of these chapters. Arguments toward queer worldbuilding are built on trans analyses of time, bodies, and space. This aligns with Ruberg's stated position. And it leaves a question—when is the world made trans, queer, or both?

Turning toward an established game within the queer canon, chapter 5 challenges the legacy of Gone Home (p. 171). Building on Sara Ahmed's work on orientation (p. 170), Ruberg argues that the game straightens its queerness through linear forms of movement. They compare it to dark rides and rails. The game upholds normative forms of existence, despite surface-level queerness in its environmental storytelling and disorienting imagery. It is overbuilt and restricts outlying ways to engage with the story. Ruberg considers speedrunning practices of the game that further straighten the game through erasing queer story elements and using language surrounding straight paths. They note, however, that speedrunning has queerness to it, since players find nonnormative paths through games. This chapter emphasizes Ruberg's ideas on queer worldbuilding that decenter narrative, as the game's queer narrative becomes straightened because of its mode of play.

https://doi.org/10.65476/cshtz143

A core assumption of games is that one can play them. Chapter 6 considers the queer posthumanism of a game that cannot be played: San Andreas Dear Cam (p. 194). Ruberg outlines key tenets of posthumanism, such as destabilizing the category of human and looking at other forms of subjecthood, including animals. Queer posthumanism specifically remains invested in the body despite challenging its limits and explores nonhuman desires. This is seen in San Andreas Dear Cam, which replaces the playable protagonist of Grand Theft Auto V with a deer who is controlled by randomized computer programming instead of player input. The deer becomes a queer figure through investment in this nonhuman body and its interactions with the world. The game's unplayability queers concepts seen as central to games, such as agency and player control.

These final two chapters build on established theories to examine queer worldbuilding practices. Ahmed's concept of disorientation applies to movements within games, challenging us to think of the way that the systems within worlds restrict us. This analysis also clearly emphasizes the difference between appearance and function—where the game appears disorienting, functionally it acts as a linear path. Though the tired debate of narratology and ludology never makes it into the book, the tension between narrative and gameplay clearly emerges. Queer posthumanism is brought into game worlds by San Andreas Dear Cam, challenging notions of agency and action.

The book's conclusion transforms each chapter into a suggestion for action: always be building and rebuilding the world (chapter 1), rewrite the laws of the universe (chapter 2), change the world through changing the nature of matter (chapter 3), shift perspective to reveal alternate dimensions (chapter 4), build ways of moving through the world but do not overbuild (chapter 5), and relinquish control (chapter 6). This conclusion also gives a nod to the absurdity of many of the games discussed, arguing that this absurdity undermines the hegemony of logic.

Though this work is situated within queer game studies, its application of worldbuilding practices and engagement of futurity connects to other fields. Scholars of performance studies, interested in these notions of queer worldmaking, may find value in the application of the theories to games. The book discusses game bodies in chapter 3 and game history in chapter 4, which will be of interest to game scholars researching those topics. Trans studies is at the forefront of chapters 2–4, examining time, bodies, and space, respectively. And, through the book's conclusion, it addresses players and worldbuilders with core tenets to apply to their practices. Ultimately, through weaving together arguments from game, performance, queer, and new media studies with practitioner perspectives and their own analyses, Ruberg's book furthers conversations surrounding queer worldbuilding and utopian worldmaking practices and asks us to question the ways we exist in the worlds around us, both fictional and not.