

F-agg,” Reuben Flagg is used to deconstruct Wertham’s homophobia, after which attention turns to the heteronormative undertones in the Hulk and Superman, as well as how the Northstar series threatens to fully propel gay and HIV/AIDS consciousness out of the closet.

In “Dr. Strange, or How I Learned to Love Democracy and Demonology,” Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* is channeled through Dr. Strange, Elektra and various Batwomen in order to deconstruct democracy, power and the veil separating villainy and heroism. The chapter, “9/11 and the Man Without Fear,” asks us to consider how the Green Lantern, Iron Man and Daredevil mythologies can inform the complex geopolitical realities of terrorism, Gijad, and the tradeoff between security and safety. The final chapter, “Comics and the Prison System” teams Dickens, Poe and Bentham with the X-Men, Punisher, and Hulk in order to explore controversial issues surrounding imprisonment and the death penalty, the dark legacy of childhood abuse as well punishment as a flawed form of social control.

From a technical standpoint, the book’s strengths are its accessible and fluid writing style, generous use of comic art, and creative paralleling of superhero plot lines with those of “great works” of literature. While the authors rightfully query whether their narratives perhaps “read too much into the comic book action” (135), over-rely upon comics for footnote documentation, and do not actually instruct in composition as the book’s subtitle suggests, this volume will nevertheless be equally welcomed on college quads, in comic book conventions and at scholarly conferences with appeal to students and faculty in the areas of history, literature, political science, religion, economics, psychology, sociology, communications, gender, and cultural studies.

Lawrence C. Rubin  
St. Thomas University

*Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games.* Eds. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks and W. Keith Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006.

It may be with the toss of dice, or through a deck of cards, or even by an internet connection. At any given moment, multitudes of men

and women, of all ages and backgrounds, engage in such activities as dungeon-crawling, spell-casting, or leading warriors into battle. Since the role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons and Dragons* gained a rabid following in the 1970s, fantasy games have existed as a unique, yet marginalized, facet of popular culture. With new gaming forms such as *Magic: The Gathering* and *World of Warcraft* gaining mainstream recognition, fantasy games serve as a unique location for analyzing the dynamism of popular culture. In the anthology *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, twelve scholars from fields such as sociology, media studies and linguistics investigate “the relationship between fantasy games, players and larger social processes from various social constructionist perspectives” (2).

For the volume’s editors, fantasy gaming is “a fluid, unstable category that is somewhat difficult to map” (2) for it is comprised of a variety of genres and forms. Beyond the games themselves, there exists the fantasy gaming culture that can be characterized as sharing “worldviews, lifestyles, tastes, and affinities, as well as collectively—imagined selves/identities” (2). Recognizing that many readers have little background in the subject, *Gaming as Culture’s* introductory chapter provides context, history, and description of fantasy games, while also coherently explicating the various mechanics of the often complex games by employing witty examples drawn from academic scenarios.

Dennis D. Waskul’s essay “The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life” positions the paper-based RPG as a form of “discursive impromptu acting” (23) that features “an ongoing co-authored narrative that is fashioned out of the enormous possibilities for dramatic imaginary action, consequence, and reaction” (24). Through detailed field observations and concepts drawn from Erving Goffman, Waskul examines how fantasy role-players “negotiate themselves in the precarious margins between reality, imagination, and fantasy” (19).

In “Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming,” Sean Q. Hendricks examines the discursive aspects of gaming through the writings of Bakhtin, Foucault and Derrida. For this essay, Hendricks attended, recorded and transcribed a twelve hour gaming session which serves as the material for his deconstruction of the gamers’ linguistic processes. Through an analysis of pronoun usage, Hendricks explores the notion of “blended identity” as a

“conglomeration of multiple sets of semantic and cognitive relations, or mental states, representing player and character” (46). He also notes the various popular culture references voiced by the gamers, recognizing a shared base of knowledge within the gaming culture.

Michelle Nephew’s “Playing with Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-Playing Games” utilizes psychoanalytic, film and feminist theory to examine how semantic slippage, wish-fulfillment, erotic desire and “resistance to disempowerment” (121) in RPGs allow for “players to reflexively exhibit a knowledge of self” (121) while engaging “a text shaped by unconscious desire” (122).

As a text, *Gaming as Culture* features eleven essays that are accessible and applicable to a variety of levels of students and scholars in the fields of cultural studies, linguistics, sociology, and communication studies. The volume features an impressive collection of notable research on fantasy gaming, while also serving as a companion to standard and canonized works within the field of *ludology* (game studies). With a multitude of approaches to the culture of fantasy gaming, *Gaming as Culture* serves as a superb example of inter/cross-disciplinary research and the methods in which various fields can contribute insightful perspectives on a shared subject.

Shannon Blake Skelton  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Johnny Cash: The Biography*. Michael Streissguth. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006.

When Johnny Cash (1932–2003) met his death, there was an impassioned campaign to chisel his distinct visage among the presidential profiles on Mount Rushmore. In life, the long-legged, guitar picking man wore many faces: on the one hand, he was a heartfelt balladeer, devout Christian, patriot, baritone voice for the downtrodden and a warm supporter of family, fellow musicians, friends and strangers in need; on the other, he was a lifelong pill addict, philanderer, establishment sell-out, ornery cuss and godfather of all that is dark in country music and rock’n’roll. Ultimately he was all of these—and it is that glut of contradictions that makes setting Cash’s story straight a seemingly impossible assignment. Michael Streissguth,