"Techno-femininity" and the World Wide Web: Locating Girls' Early DIY Gaming Cultures

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INTRODUCTION

In histories of early videogame DIY cultures, there are few available accounts of girls' participation. Around the 1990s, hobbyist gamemaking was already limited by a relative lack of accessible gamemaking software (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019), while tinkering with computers and hacking videogames largely belonged within the jurisdiction of boyhood (Burrill, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Many of the overlooked perspectives in videogame history are beginning to be addressed through initiatives like Adrienne Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Rachel Weil's Femicom Museum, as well as through accounts on female game developers (Salter, 2017; Kocurek, 2017) and women in "undocumented" roles outside of programming (Nooney, 2020). This paper builds upon these histories by locating spaces in which girls' amateur DIY game cultures took place in the 1990s and early 2000s.

To learn how girls were involved in DIY gaming cultures, I draw inspiration from Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's foundational study on post-war British youth subcultures (1978/1991). McRobbie and Garber address the invisibility of girls in youth subcultural studies that heavily centered on male participants in public spaces. They therefore looked for subcultural practices within the private realm of girls' bedrooms. Careful not to imply that girls were absent from public spheres, the bedroom was rather framed as an alternative—rather than exclusive—location for girls' culture.

Like McRobbie and Garber, my research also revealed a need to locate an alternative site for girls' DIY gaming culture outside of gamemaking and hacking practices. Girls' participation rather took place through various web activities that have not been traditionally associated with videogames culture. In contrast to gamemaking, web design in the 1990s and early 2000s was immensely popular with teen girls (Gregson, 2005; Kearney, 2006; Mazzarella, 2005; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004; Stern 1999). The sources listed above indicate that girls' web design was certainly acknowledged in studies of girls' cultural production in the 1990s and early 2000s, although these

practices were rarely, if ever, tied to gaming culture. Areas of web design, however, were not isolated from videogaming and so girls' web design ought to be recontextualised in conjunction with gaming DIY culture. Within these alternative spaces, compelling instances of self-expression, creativity, and self-representation emerge.

This paper overviews a sample of girls' web activities, from games-adjacent web design (like Animal Crossing blogs and FanListings pages) to the phenomenon of Dollz, which spread to flash design contests and trading cards inspired by card games like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic the Gathering*. These practices reside outside of commercial industries, representing a convergence of consumption and fan creation.

A compelling intersection of technology and femininity emerges through girls' early online play culture. I take on the term "techno-femininity" to refer to this intersection, which is often displayed through "girlie" aesthetics, like warm, pink colours, or "cute," "sparkly" graphics, but also through gendered traditions translated on screen, like writing in a diary (blogging) or dressing up dolls. Techno-femininity is related to how girl agency and expression was cultivated through technologies like the World Wide Web in the 1990s to 2000s. While the term is related to the feminist "cybertwee" movement (derived from "cyberpunk") I employ "techno-femininity" because it is not strictly rooted in political resistance but may also be located within mainstream and postfeminist contexts.

The concept remains relevant today as gendered barriers to gaming culture are slowly dissolving, and the colour known as "millennial pink" or "Tumblr pink," has been taken on since the late 2010s as a rejection to hegemonic gender roles by women and online queer communities (Bideaux, 2019; Kearney, 2015). Today, the merging of technology, femininity, and gaming can be found, for instance, in streamer Pokimane's annual hyperfeminine "bedroom tours" (where makeup and plush toys are proudly displayed alongside advanced gaming hardware); or in Petra Collins' web browser game, *Brutal: The Game* (2021)—released with Olivia Rodrigo's single "Brutal"—which features Rodrigo battling undead teen girls all represented as "Dollz." A history of girls' early DIY gaming culture helps to contextualise these nostalgic resurgences of techno-femininity in contemporary popular culture. But this history also crucially expands videogame cultural histories beyond boyhood-aligned hobbyist practices by accounting for girls' participation too.

BIO

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