

Archival Challenges for Inclusive Games History

Stephanie Harkin

Swinburne University of Technology
John Street, Hawthorn
Melbourne, Australia
sharkin@swin.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

Games journalism is a key site for understanding games culture (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Nieborg and Foxman, 2023; Nooney, 2020). As Kirkpatrick (2015) has found for instance, they provide crucial insights on shifting market strategies and hailings of the “Gamer” identity. Consequently, gaming magazines hold a significant place in videogame archives, where they have been preserved in both online community collections like the Internet Archive and physical non-profit institutions like the Video Game History Foundation.

Gaming magazines, however, only reveal a partial history. Archiving only publications that were sold as dedicated videogame or computer hobbyist magazines, sold in newsagents or gaming and computer stores, limits the medium’s cultural history to its most visible participants. As McRobbie and Garber (1978/1991) have found in their research on girls’ bedroom cultures, much can be learned if subculture researchers relocate their analysis away from the most visible and most public spaces. But a methodological question arises: where do we go to study the invisible?

This paper reflects upon the archival challenges of producing an inclusive games history. Following the trail of magazines as sites of culture, I take girls’ lifestyle publications as a case in point for researching games culture beyond clearly-marked gaming spaces. Pre-teen girls’ magazines offer an alternative image of games culture that situates play and games not as a discrete hobby or identity, but that takes place—and is reported—alongside YouTube influencers, electronic toys and other digital products. The games and game genres written about, meanwhile, vary significantly from mainstream games publications, as does the language used to describe them. In this sense, lifestyle publications challenge existing norms of games reporting (Nieborg and Foxman, 2023).

I analyse Australia’s *Total Girl* (nextmedia) and Nintendo’s *Girl Gamer* magazines to demonstrate these distinctions. I discuss the challenges, however, of sourcing such objects and spaces as texts to study. Girls lifestyle magazines (at the time of study) have gone unnoticed and are mostly unavailable via games history spaces. My early findings offer promising insights, pointing to the need for researchers to engage with

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marginal or seemingly unapparent materials. The question nonetheless remains though of how do researchers begin in identifying such materials?

Feminist games historians Laine Nooney (2020) and Carly Kocurek (2017) have produced invaluable groundwork for generating inclusive historical accounts of the games industry by interviewing game workers from invisible and uncredited roles—while critiquing a historiography of patriarchal and capitalist ‘success stories.’ This paper however is not intended to be a polemic against games history, I rather aim to initiate a dialogue on how the field may begin to account for the unaccounted.

I offer a set of suggestions that begin with reflecting on what we include and exclude in our research projects; the language we use in recruiting participants and whether ‘videogame’ holds a cultural weight comparable to ‘Gamer’; and encouraging researchers to be comfortable wasting time, as searching for the invisible is not convenient and far from efficient—and yet the process itself is often nonetheless illuminating, and the findings culturally rewarding.

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BIO

Stephanie Harkin is an early career researcher interested in girls’ digital cultures and gaming histories. She completed her PhD in 2022 at Swinburne University of Technology and is now a Research Associate for the projects “Understanding Children’s Play” (University of Sydney), “Esports Governance and Integrity” (RMIT), and Research Assistant for “Play it Again: Preserving Australian Videogame History from the 1990s” (RMIT). She is the elected Secretary board member of the Digital Games Research Association Australia.