

# Critical Femininities & Feminine Play

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## INTRODUCTION

Femininity operates across many paradoxes. It is simultaneously regulatory, controversial, restorative, and radical. And yet in scholarship – including Game Studies – femininity has been largely overlooked. As a concept prevalently attached to and discursively naturalised in girls and women, it is consequently devalued for its presumed unseriousness, frivolity, and anti-feminist sentiments — the latter of which speaks to its conservative and essentialist gendered underpinnings. Femininity however, has always been present in videogames and games cultures in its many contradictory forms. This paper considers how femininity's complexities manifest and are actively engaged with in local independent games through a reflection on the 2024–25 exhibition, *Feminine Play*.<sup>1</sup>

While emerging Game Studies is drawing attention to feminine traditions within 'core' videogame spaces through themes like domesticity and dollhouses (see Brierley-Beare,

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2025; forthcoming), most scholarly analysis of femininity in games has logically been directed towards gendered industries, like 1990s girls' games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Bohunicky & Milligan, 2020) and the 'designed identity' at the heart of casual games (Chess, 2017). Womanhood and femininity indeed overlap, although in such studies women players and gendered design appear to overshadow a nuanced interrogation of femininity itself as a cultural concept—whereas masculinity has been treated to a full dedicated volume dissecting its hegemonies, politics, and queer potential (Taylor & Voorhees, 2018).

The interdisciplinary field of femininities research helps to bridge this gap (see Dahl 2025, Hoskin & Blair, 2024). 'Critical Femininities' supports interpretations and articulations of femininity that account for its complexities. The field recognises plurality and thereby resists a universalising definition or subject. Femme Theory (McCann, 2018) supports femininity's detachment from womanhood and patriarchal subordination, while a 'Critical' lens addresses "the societal tendency to see femininity as inferior" (Hoskin & Blair, 2021, 5) without disregarding its regulatory norms. Femininity is treated as a "process" that is neither inherently empowering nor disempowering (McCann, 2018) but affectively connected to both "pleasure" and "pain" (Dahl, 2012, 59–61). In essence: Critical Femininities treats femininity seriously.

This was precisely the goal for Feminine Play. Co-curated by Stephanie Harkin, Xavier Ho, Mahli-Ann Butt, and Jini Maxwell, Feminine Play was an indie games exhibition held in two public locations in Melbourne, Australia — St Kilda Town Hall and ACMI. An open call was made to developers in Australia and New Zealand to submit digital or tabletop games, in-progress works, or interactive experimental projects that responded to any and all interpretations of femininity. An archival research visit to the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) Canberra and collaboration with ACMI meanwhile informed the exhibition's curated historical collection.

Three key forms of feminine play were unveiled. The first were games that value feminine traditions in works like *Sashiko* (Helen Kwok), *Candy Castles* (Olivia Haines), and *Banh Chung AR* (Nhu Bui) which appreciate feminine labour, expression, and craft. Second were games that reinterpret those traditions, as seen in games like *Ghost Cam* (Arch Rebels), which questions stereotypes of presumed-frivolous 'horse-girls' in a horror VR format, and *Don't Stop Girly Pop* (Funny Fintan Softworks) which unconventionally pairs femininity with first-person shooters. Third, several games radically upend those traditions, like *Thou Dost Bleed* (Ruby Quail) that challenges the coupling of reproductive suffering with embodied 'authentic' womanhood, and *The Cute Machine* (Martine Corompt), which transgresses the borders between cuteness, innocence, and violence.

Placed in conversation with archival commercial 'girl's games' from the NFSA as well as traditional gendered toys like dolls and dollhouses, a non-linear story was effectively presented: that games have *always* been feminine, that femininity contains multitudes, and that feminine games cannot be neatly categorised into 'positive' and 'negative' politics. Both the contemporary indie and more commercialised archival games demonstrated that feminine play holds the capacity for explorative, political, and

pleasurable expression. These overlapping themes attest to Critical Femininities' drive to recognise femininity as more nuanced than simply anti-feminist regression.

In 2023, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* launched femininity to the mainstream. This ran parallel to trends that satirise, reinforce, and reclaim different forms of feminine expression — from ribbons, 'trad-wife,' 'soft girl,' and other "memetic aesthetics" (Wiens & McWebb, 2025). These discourses are not isolated from games and game culture. Equipped with Critical Femininities, events like Feminine Play invite us to reframe our understanding of the videogame medium, where femininities are valued and attended to as equally as masculinities.

## NOTES

1. See [feminineplay.org](http://feminineplay.org)

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## BIO

Dr Stephanie Harkin is a Lecturer at RMIT University in the School of Design, Games Program. Her research is interested in girls' digital cultures and feminine gaming histories. She was lead curator of the indie games exhibition *Feminine Play* (2024–2025) and is author of *Girlhood Games: Gender, Identity and Coming of Age in Video Games* (2025). She has previously published on gender and games culture in the journals *Game Studies* (2020), *Feminist Media Studies* (2024), and the *Journal of Femininities* (2024) and is a Chief Investigator on the 'The Australian Emulation Network – Phase 2' Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project.

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