

Designing Global Empowerment? Activist Self-Narratives in Culturally Mixed Settings

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the experiences of game workshop facilitators in a culturally mixed activist setting based on narrative interviews with representatives of the *Game Girl Workshop (GGW)*, a Denmark-based feminist initiative established in 2010. By identifying emergent themes and concerns in the organizers' self-narratives, this study aims to unpack some current challenges activists from the Global North face when working towards empowerment in cross-cultural educational settings. Crucially, what can be experienced as "empowering" differs depending on cultural factors. This study looks at the practices and narratives *GGW* activists have developed in response to this intercultural challenge. The focus on workshop organizers' narratives is motivated by two opposed ambitions. The first ambition is to honor and acknowledge the facilitators' activist experience and tacit knowledges which have allowed them to follow through with their aspirational, mostly voluntary work in the games field. The second ambition, conversely, is to identify and redress some problematic assumptions surfacing in the facilitators' self-narratives as popular, yet potentially harmful stereotypes about Eurocentric entitlement and the Global South. By balancing these two ambitions, this study aims to validate the previous work *GGW* and other western feminist initiatives have done to change the status quo of game making, while identifying Eurocentrism and western entitlement as persistent myths to be resolved by current and future activists.

Keywords

thematic analysis, activism, agile design, videogames

INTRODUCTION

As an initiative founded in 2010, *Game Girl Workshop (GGW)* is among the first wave of female-led initiatives responding to the dire status quo of a games industry dominated by a homogenous cohort of white male game developers (Fron et al. 2007, Harvey/Stepherd 2017) producing a limited range of virtual worlds and representations (Kennedy 2002, Taylor 2003, Shaw 2014) which do little to reflect videogames' diverse player base (Gray 2013, Passmore et al. 2018). Instead, the lack of diversity in the games industry has been linked to the rise of "toxic gamer culture" (Consalvo 2012) and "purist" formalist games research culture (Keogh 2014, Harrer 2018). Much in the spirit of the pioneering *Ludica* game design collective (Ludica 2008), *GGW* operates on the hope that by inspiring girls to get excited about game

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development in a welcoming space, the inhospitable career pipelines currently blocking women from accessing the games industry (Weststar/Legault 2018, Vossen 2018) might be successfully changed towards a more equitable future of critical game design (Flanagan 2009, Jenson/de Castell 2009, Westecott et al. 2013).

Given the global scale of gendered labor segregation (Huntemann 2013) a number of organizations like *GGW* have been founded since 2010. In 2011, this included *Black Girls Code*¹, a US-based initiative which teaches programming and technology to (pre-)teen girls of color, and *Pixelles Montréal*² (Harvey/Shepherd 2017), which organizes free monthly workshops for female game makers, mentorship programs, and game jams. In 2012, this were organizations like *Girls Who Code*³, a US-based program offering computer clubs, on-campus events and summer schoolers, and *Dames Making Games*⁴ (Harvey/Fisher 2015) a not-for-profit organization running an accessible workshop space for diverse makers. In the same year, the *XX Game Jam* in London invited 24 women to make a game in 24 hours (Kennedy 2018), and in 2013, the Montréal-based TAG lab founded *GAMERella*, an intersectional games workshop space⁵. This makes *GGW* a part of a larger advocacy movement with the shared goal of empowering girls and women to become future game makers (Harvey/Fisher 2015).

While there is a shared element of immaterial, affective labor in this array of global projects and initiatives (Conor et al. 2015, Kennedy 2018) individual motives for this labor may differ (Harvey/Fisher 2015). This includes the politics of *empowerment*, a term whose meaning may vary depending on the cultural context (Khaled 2011). Such meanings come to the fore as *tacit knowledge* – intuitive, internalized, and action-based beliefs (Donmoyer 2012) – when activists talk about their work. This knowledge can be hard to access but it contains rich information on the potentials and challenges of global feminist activism. This is why in this article I discuss experience data elicited from open-ended interviews with the *GGW* facilitators. By reflecting about their past experiences since 2010 and their hopes and aspiration for the future, these interviews reveal hidden collective assumptions about game development and empowerment in cross-cultural maker settings.

BACKGROUND

This paper ties in to an earlier study which introduces the premise and activities of the *Game Girl Workshop* from a participatory observation perspective (Khaled 2011). Being able to draw on this particular study comes with several benefits. First, by describing a single *GGW* event, the previous study provides important context on the workshop methods, activities, and outcomes, allowing this paper to use a more specific angle on the self-narratives of the workshop facilitators. Secondly, Khaled's study describes an early stage of the *GGW* strategies some of which have changed over the years. This allows a diachronic comparison of perspectives between 2011 and now. Finally, the study points out some critical challenges related to the mixed cultural setting, which are both echoed in the facilitators' self-narratives and add a useful framing.

One of the central observations in Khaled (2011) concern the intercultural dynamics around and interpretations of empowerment in the *GGW* workshop setting. Based on a workshop carried out at the Arabic DIA private school in Copenhagen, Khaled observes that the *GGW* embodies a set of Scandinavian teaching and design values rooted in assumptions about equality and individualism (Khaled 2011, Schwartz 1999). She points out that in individualist cultures, including Scandinavian countries, individuals are more important than groups, while the opposite is the case for collectivist cultures, including Arabic contexts (Hofstede 1996). This introduces difficulties in regard to interpretations of empowerment in mixed cultural settings. Khaled describes this difficulty as a central point in the *GGW*'s use of agile development methods, arguing that they embody individualist assumptions. One such embedded assumption of the organizers included flat hierarchies and an equal student-teacher relationship which clashed with the assumptions of Arabic students (Khaled 2011: 406). Eight years later, this study looks at how *GGW* facilitators have integrated such learnings in their repertoire of tacit knowledge, and how this helps them understand challenges and possibilities of game activism.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on empirical data elicited from four semi-structured interviews (May 2011) carried out with the workshop facilitators. This relatively small sample size is justified both by the small size of the *GGW* organizing team and by the choice for an open-ended method likely to elicit rich conversational data on the interviewees' experiences, emotions, and memories. To construct this kind of data, pre-formulated questions with a limited range of answers were avoided (May 2011: 312). The method was supposed to give direction without imposing a specific outcome. Instead, it was supposed to "enable the interviewer to have more latitude to probe beyond the answers and these enter into a dialogue with the interviewee". (May 2011: 134-135). To this end, group interviews were preferred, since they were more likely to invite an informal conversational tone (Kitzinger/Barbour 1999). This was possible for two of the sessions, where interviews were carried out in places familiar to the interviewees, such as an interviewee's home and a café. For these group sessions, additional boundary objects (Khaled/Vasalou 2014) like association cards and mind-mapping exercises adapted from Ville Lauttamäki's futures workshop method were used (Lauttamäki 2014). The aim of introducing provocative exercises like these was to stimulate "group think" rooted in playful materials, interactivity, and the interviewees' own terms instead of my own. It was supposed to generate knowledge through "flexibility and the discovery of meaning, rather than standardization" (May 2011).

Two interviews were carried out through individual remote video call. Due to the open-ended interview format, the duration for each interview varied between 60 and 90 minutes per session. The point was to gain insights into the *GGW* teachers' experiences, opinions, values, attitudes and aspirations (May 2011: 131) in the moment of the interview.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis (Nowell 2017), moving from unstructured data towards emergent topic categories.

Thematic analysis was conducted in four steps, including familiarization with the data in different forms (Thorne 2000), including interview transcripts, field notes, and the boundary objects used during group interviews. The transcription process served as initial immersion in the data, evoking theoretical thoughts (Lincoln/Guba 1985; Sandelowski 2004). Thirdly, a first set of codes was produced from the data, starting the process of identifying topical priorities and commonalities through repetitive interaction with the data (Savage 2000). Finally, the codes were further clustered into three main categories interpreting the interviewees' self-narratives in the context of the research question. The emergent themes were *self-expression*, *teamwork*, and *tangible achievement*. In what follows, these themes will be discussed in the context of organizers' intentions and the intercultural challenges faced in the workshop settings.

INTENTIONS WITH GAME-BASED FEMINIST ACTIVISM

A central topic in all conversations was the motivation to join initiatives like the *GGW*. A common concern of the interviewees was the perception that girls and young women were insufficiently represented in game development. Several interviewees mentioned the systematic exclusion of women from the games industry, and the persistence of stereotypes around gender and technology, confirmed studies in games and HCI (Shaw 2014, Light 2011). They assumed that by joining a teachers' workshop like *GGW* they could challenge the status quo and introduce new voices to videogames. One frequently voiced assumption was that by introducing development tools to girls and giving them space to explore them, they would find their voice by using games expressively. They suspected societal pressures to be responsible for gendered assumptions about technology and hoped to lessen this pressure by working with computer programs in an all-female space.

Theme 1: Self-Expression

In line with Khaled's observations (2011), the notion of self-expression emerged as a central category related to empowerment as intended by the workshop teachers. In the interviews, this was related to the assumption that workshop participants should decide over the creative direction of their games, and that preferred outcomes were individual achievements following a team's unique vision. The possibility to make games about one's experience is seen as a factor of empowerment. Interviewee R. calls this the "courage to have a voice". This is possibly inspired by game jam settings and professional game development contexts, where agile processes guide the implementation of an individual idea (Kultima 2015). To R., curiosity to follow workshop participants' self-expression processes is important. She expresses excitement over the prospect of seeing what would happen if "you put [a handful of girls] into a room [...] show them the tools to create games, and then, without like interfering in the creative direction of the games, just see what types of games they come up with [...] you gave tools to some young women, and they have the opportunity to tell their own stories in whatever form" (R., p. 1).

This implies that rather than telling the participants what to do, the focus is on making space for their situational choices and directives. This emerged in E.'s and C.'s group interview more indirectly, in the wish to see well- thought-out games with original

concepts which everyone on the team liked (I./C., p. 12). Similarly, when asked about good memories, O. remembers occasions where games were designed “outside the frame of usual games” (O., p. 4).

Self-expression is framed both as a resource against established norms, and as fragile good worthy of protection. When it comes to defying the norm, I. suspects that by proxy of being underrepresented, young marginalized game developers will use self-expression more creatively than established developers. “I don’t need to tell young people how to do things. I just need to [...] listen to what they’re asking [...] and provide them with [...] resources. And they’re going to make really amazing groundbreaking things that are more interesting than what me and my peers in the very established games industry [...] are going to make” (C./I., p. 6). These remarks frame self-expression as a resource which is somewhat more valuable if used by non-established game designers.

However, there are also concerns that industry standards will turn against self-expression by benchmarking participants’ work according to existing practices. R. locates this threat in a gender-based comparison between participants’ achievements and those of male teenagers, referring to well-intended attempts to show “that girls can be as good as the boys” (R., p. 5). As opposed to this, R. thinks that “it’s important to stay away from that type of benchmarking” (R., p. 5). She perceives this as part of *GGW*’s “feminist ambition” to give “young women and girls positive experiences”, and “a feeling that they also have a voice in the tech industry”.

Theme 2: Teamwork

Much of the conversations revolved around the value of teamwork and collaboration, both among facilitators and in regard to the workshop methodology, which used an agile Scrum model. Interviewees stressed the focus on a flat hierarchy epitomized by O.’s assertion that she liked the “professional way” in which the game design process was structured.

When it came to teacher-student teamwork, a common assumption was that they would share equal professional responsibility over an intense development experience. This is rooted in the Scandinavian participatory design tradition of distributing power equally and democratically among participants. For instance, O.’s objective is to hand over as much power as possible by avoiding interference in girls’ physical interactions with hardware. “One important teaching goal was not to take the mouse from them but to help them with the mouse in their hand”, by “maybe pointing at the screen” and explaining the next step. The reasoning behind this is that “you learn by doing, you don’t learn by watching” (O., p. 9). This underscores the assumption that facilitators ought to give space to the participants’ individual explorations, rather than direct group work from the top down.

Another teamwork principle commonly addressed was the sharing of tasks and achievements. A poignant example was the “project development wall”, which O. described as a place for “everyone on the team [to be] aware of everything” (O., p. 9). After a task was completed, the participants were asked to clear a respective note

from the physical wall. According to O., the point of this wall was a personal, embodied experience of contributing to the team. This is why it was important that “[t]he person that has done the task is the person entitled to take the pen and cross it. Because that’s their satisfaction, and they were very satisfied” (O., p. 4).

Besides procedures of agile development, teamwork was also related to the affordances of a comfortable, encouraging space. One aspect of this was related to the atmosphere, and the wish to “create this warm and fun atmosphere” (I./C., p. 14) in the workshop, which was assumed to encourage inspiration. Another aspect of a positive space was mentioned with role modelling, which came up repeatedly in I.’s and C.’s conversation. According to I., “[s]omething that’s really key in empowering girls is not to impose any expectations on them. Just give them examples [...] model some behavior that might work for them or might not”. Again, the assumption was that facilitation is supposed to give space to participants’ individual expressions and choices.

Theme 3: Tangible Achievements

What emerged from all interviews is the importance of tangible success experiences, which were believed to empower the participants in potentially becoming interested in game development on a long-term scale. C. said that “most of [the girls] had a success experience”, but that these happen “on different levels” (I./C., p. 12). Based on the interview data, these different levels can be identified as interpersonal and intra-personal validation (Neimeyer/Thompson 2014).

In all interviews, the moment of completing something was reported as a major aspect of empowerment through intra-personal validation. More concretely, it was framed as the most direct expression of the participants’ achievement. As R. put it, “you just have to remember that the fact that they can finish something that’s a big achievement for them”. This suggested the importance of individual achievements.

In line with a flat hierarchy perspective observed in Khaled (2011), the quality of what was completed seemed to play a smaller role: C. mentioned that “some games worked better than others” (I./C., p. 12), but that this did not matter, since the participants had “completed something”. More important than the final content was a sense of pride. As R. observed, “you can’t break down that wall of pride when they actually complete a game” (R., p. 3). I. mentioned the relationship between flexible development roles and personality features as a possible source for validation. She argued that “games have something for someone who’s outgoing and have something for someone who wants to do more the quiet stuff in the back. Someone who wants to organize the team. It has something from almost every aptitude” (C./I., p. 8). The suggestion was that within this climate, participants could win confidence despite varying personalities.

Another theme that emerged around pride was personal transformation through game design (Rusch 2018). One interviewee mentioned the example of a “very shy big girl who didn’t really know anybody and she ended up [...] half a meter taller afterwards.” (I./C., p. 13). She elaborated that the girl’s sense of pride grew through her sustained

contribution to her team. Achievement was characterized by the feeling of having provided something useful for one's group. I. described this as the "really good" feeling that something one made "could be valuable to someone else" (I./C., p. 5).

Another subject related to tangible achievements was the intention to celebrate the girls' successes. Making the games available to play by an audience who cared was mentioned as a way to materialize the participants' successes in a social setting. The interviewees also related this to a potential change of perspective among the girls' near and dear. R. reported that after seeing the game of her daughter, a mother said: "I never thought of my girl, my daughter taking a career path in the games industry. But after seeing what they had accomplished in two days it's something that I think we could consider." (R., p. 4).

This invoked the interviewees' hopes for long-term impacts of the workshop. As I. put it, "the games industry is going to grow and become interesting", implying that by contributing to educational efforts, this change might be expedited. Another interviewee was more hesitant to draw a direct connection between the workshop and potential career in the games industry. According to her, "if [girls] have a success experience they might look for a job in the IT industry" but it could also just be that they "feel a sense of accomplishment, go look for another job that's not necessarily right in the tech industry." (I./C., p. 7). This suggests that tangible achievements were regarded as a resource which might be transferred to and affect other parts of life. As R. put it, "I don't really expect that all the girls that go through *GGW* [...] end up doing games. Not at all, but the fact that they have this feeling of success could perhaps translate to all the parts of their lives where they kind of feel struggle" (R., p. 1).

DISCUSSION: INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES

Most of the challenges that emerged from the dataset confirm Khaled's (2011) initial observations of a tension between individualist and collectivist values. The three core themes of self-expression, teamwork, and tangible achievements are rooted in a Scandinavian-based set of assumptions about empowerment. These values are, however, in conflict with some of the workshop settings. In such intercultural settings, problems may appear, because "[w]hen stakeholders come from different cultural backgrounds [...] assumptions and accepted protocol become ambiguous, and this can lead to tension and misinterpretations" (Khaled 2011: 415). In what follows I discuss examples for frictions in regard to the three themes of self-expression, teamwork, and tangible achievements.

Pressure to self-express

The first problem is related to the facilitators' expectation that "technology is more than just putting the game together. It's also about the design, it's about the idea, it's about the creative output. Or the artistic output" (R., p. 4). As mentioned, this is a cornerstone of *GGW*'s individualist concept of empowerment. However, as Khaled (2014) argues, some participatory design contexts may require a consideration of collectivist values (Khaled et al. 2006). If participants are intimidated by the idea of freestyle creation, an individualist notion of empowerment might simply not be

appropriate. In the case of past *GGW*, the facilitators mentioned two undesirable side effects when using the Scandinavian approach with girls raised in a collectivist paradigm. For instance, when instructed to brainstorm freely and jot down ideas, the girls were likely to copy ideas of others. A similar effect was observed when the girls were presented with other games. Rather than as inspirational materials giving some loose direction – as intended by the *GGW* facilitators – the girls treated these examples as authoritative instructions to be followed rigorously. This can be unpacked with the concept of social desirability, the tendency of individuals to behave in ways which are coded as more socially acceptable than one’s current state of mind (Lavrakas 2008). For instance, O. observed that “some girls had already played dress-up games, and they were very much set on making this dress-up game at the beginning” (O., p. 3). This indicates a pressure on the participants to make the “right” choice, inducing them to retreat to approved concepts rather than exposing themselves to a collective that might judge them. This tendency is closely related to the observation that in many workshop settings, participants used their “free” design space to produce conservative game narratives and heroes. R. described a scenario in which the teachers tried to defuse a situation where the all-girl team had decided to model a male game hero: “[W]e tried to ask one of the groups like “hey, look, this is your game, and if you want you can make a female heroine character as the player character”. And they were like “No, no, because if you’re a male you have more powers to go out into the world”. And, oh my god, this is what they are brought up with...” (R., p. 2).

The expectation of free expression contained in the Scandinavian participatory design model clashes with another reality – the protocol of internalized sexism (Bearman et al. 2009). The latter includes a set of cultural assumptions about female incompetence, a sense of powerlessness, and the construction of women as objects. Internalized sexism can be an explanation for how a potentially free choice translates into a harmful design trope via the notion of social desirability; the individualist imperative to “make whatever you like” may turn into “make whatever is socially acceptable”.

Marginalizing Design Partners?

Besides cultural hurdles to Scandinavian-style self-expression, some workshop contexts simply did not afford this possibility. One of the workshops was hosted in a refugee camp with girls struggling with post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSD) while participating in the workshop. “I had to explain things to the girls [...] hundred times... and I just couldn’t understand. Because I told the same thing many, many times. And I knew that they knew the answer” (R., p. 4). R. reported that the local workshop coordinator later informed them that the girls had not slept through a single night for most of their lives. This highlights the western-centric aspect of participatory democratic design as a process which might not work in settings affected by political stress. Adding more stress through “open” participatory design processes might marginalize participants with PTSD even further.

A similar challenge regarded collaboration with teachers in non-western contexts, who might be the “right people” (C.) for collaborations, while being overburdened

with joining yet another project partner for intercultural collaborations but who are already burdened by the work they are doing. C. and I. discuss the notion of pioneer in regard to marginalization, and the request for marginalized people, especially women, to be burdened with this responsibility (C./I., p. 10). One facilitator mentioned her previous experience as part of a company's diversity initiative which was expected to be run by the most disadvantaged people. The facilitators acknowledged similarities between this scenario and the request put on the shoulders of marginalized co-organizers.

Facilitator or Cultural Outsider?

Multiple interviews mentioned the importance of role-modelling, while also pointing out frustrations in regard to mixed cultural settings. As C. described, "...we are definitely from the outside. We are coming from a different culture... We can't say 'Look at the life we lead. That's the best way of living'" (C./I., p. 9). This statement questioned the potential workshop impact, due to the outsider status of the workshop facilitators. According to C., this status is frustrating, since it relegated the relationship between workshop facilitators and participants to a level of cultural projection. C. compared the workshop organizers with creatures from Mars whose lives and motivations must have been impossible to imagine for the participants. In contrast to these "blonde women from Mars", the participants' long-term perspectives are rooted in different cultural assumptions and logics.

The focus on race and appearance in this comment underscored that non-western role models are required in order to make long-term perspectives on activist efforts possible. It indicated that role models in workshops like *GGW* should share cultural context with the participants, since it would signal a potential professional future in game development. In contrast to this, mixed cultural settings impose the pressure of free self-expression under the condition of "alien" values. Under these conditions, a choice for a game career might entail the rejection of one's home culture. For instance, if the participants' home culture projects early marriage as a valuable aspiration, breaking into the games industry might be a radical, potentially socially divisive, move. This further problematizes the notion of empowerment as imposed by a Scandinavian model rooted in an individualistic context.

Ethnocentric motives

Finally, the interviews brought up a problem connected with ethnocentric, e.g. the idea that "all third world women have similar problems and needs. Thus, they must have similar interests and goals" (Mohanty 1984: 344). According to Mohanty, ethnocentric universality is present in many white feminist accounts of women in developing countries, and produces a homogeneous image of the "average third world woman", e.g. as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc. (Mohanty 1984: 337). This notion appears when interviewees speculated on the effectiveness of the workshop in different cultural contexts. Interviewees repeatedly assumed that among the workshops they remembered, those in less privileged communities might have had the more pronounced effect. Such contexts were identified as more important activist sites, because they were related to a more significant "imprint" of the workshop on its

participants. As put by R., workshops “in third-world countries [...] make a bigger impact. I mean, it’s hard to measure. Now I’m just assuming things. But being a girl, brought up in a refugee camp in Palestine, the way that social structures are - I think it means more to them to have been through a workshop like ours where they get full attention. I think, yeah, it makes a bigger [...] imprint in their brains of something that they have achieved.” (R., p. 2).

The impression of a “bigger impact” in developing countries was shared by O., who concluded that if she could she “would like to go more in poor countries. Not just countries that are male- dominated, but countries that are poor, where you can try and teach them: Hey this is one possibility you can learn to use computers and then you could do this” (O., p. 14). I. makes a similar suggestion when arguing that “of the communities I’ve made connections with outside the west, they need support with education” (C./I., p. 13.).

These assumptions relate to Mohanty’s description of ethnic universalism in three ways. First, they expect the existence of a common, average experience of women living in less privileged areas of the world. Secondly, they expect a monolithic effect of the workshop on all participants of a single setting, producing a universal educational impact. Thirdly, the expectation that marginalized cultures may more easily be “imprinted” than privileged ones assumes that there is some difference in the complexity of experience. There is the danger that white western feminism be elevated as a nuanced and complex solution to the simpler, and therefore more impressionable life contexts of non-western participants.

That any kind of experience is diverse and nuanced should be clear from the complex challenge of sustainable game education. One idea that was brought up was the possibility of community-led, intergenerational incubation workshops, in which participants not only received input, but handed down and appropriated knowledge for new contexts within their communities. Perhaps teaching software to other peers, or mediating intergenerational discourse inside their community, could be an alternative possibility to frame empowerment within the appropriate context of collectivism.

CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS

This study has presented some of the collective themes and challenges emerging in the self-narratives of feminist game activists from the Global North. Instead of painting a comprehensive picture of what must be done to continue the emotional labor of gender-based activism in culturally mixed settings successfully, this study has arrived at a number of questions to be addressed in future research. The most urgent one concerns ethics of accountability in “empowering” a culturally other through game making. Rather than assuming that a Northern feminist tradition can serve as a parsimonious, universal lens through which to determine appropriate tools and literacies for emancipation, we require what Bernd Reiter calls a social “pluriverse”, an epistemological possibility space in which local knowledges are allowed to clash and compete (Reiter 2018).

This is tied to another request for feminist future practices, namely decolonization and a turn towards knowledge as bound by place, time, and positionality (Harding 1986, Haraway 1988, Adésínà 2002). This indicates room for a future discussion of the interview data in the explicit context of the mixed cultural “pluriverse” of the *GGW* and its participants and outputs.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.blackgirlscode.com>

² <https://pixelles.ca>

³ <https://girlswhocode.com>

⁴ <https://dmg.to>

⁵ <https://tag.hexagram.ca/gamerella/about/>