

Nancy Drew Computer Games and the Spaces of Girlhood Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 1998 the game company Her Interactive released *Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill*, the first computer game in the Nancy Drew game series that went on to comprise over 30 titles. Marketed to girls ten years of age and older, the Nancy Drew games were a product of the girls' game movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s – an effort amongst game designers and critics to develop video games targeted specifically to girls. Based on characters and storylines from the long-running book series that has been published since the 1930s, the Nancy Drew games are one of the most enduring and commercially successful products to arise from the girls' game movement. Pursuing the theme of playgrounds, this paper will consider what types of play spaces are offered for girls to navigate in these games in order to better understand the “politics of girlhood” they put forward (Marshall 2012).

Although the Nancy Drew games may challenge gendered expectations for spatial play and mobility by presenting girls with both public and private spaces to explore and navigate as scenes of adventure, as playground spaces they have a more complicated relation to the depiction of non-white or non-US racial and cultural difference. Designers at Her Interactive stated their intent that these games would work as educational or enriching insofar as they were designed to stoke players' curiosity about unfamiliar topics and histories – including other cultures. Most often, this is presented in the form of objects and artifacts of non-white or non-US cultures that players are encouraged to collect, analyze, and manipulate. In various Nancy Drew games, players encounter Chinese artifacts and puzzles based on Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Mayan calendars. While it is possible to see the inclusion of these artifacts and representations as an attempt to promote cultural awareness, in their educational address to girls, these games engaged with cultural difference through colonialist orientations in which the acquisition and manipulation of exoticized cultural objects are used to reinforce the privilege and mobility of white girlhood. This results in part from Her Interactive's reliance on citations to white women's culture and white feminist tropes in order to make games more welcoming to girls and to encourage them to inhabit these games spaces. Even as the company

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made some efforts to address multicultural girl audiences, this reliance on insular women's cultural references in their production process limited this effort.

This essay interrogates the racialized and colonial politics of the gendered spaces of the Nancy Drew games in order to understand how the assumptions of the girls' game movement reinforce white feminine spatial imaginaries even as they try to correct the masculine bias in video game spaces and cultures. I will offer close readings of two Nancy Drew games – *Message in a Haunted Mansion* (Her Interactive 2000), and *Secret of the Scarlet Hand* (Her Interactive 2002), focusing on how these games depict space, how they expand and restrict player mobility, and how they utilize cultural artifacts as narrative and gameplay resources. I will also supplement this game analysis with information gathered from production notes and design documents created by Her Interactive while developing these games – documents that I have accessed from the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. These materials help demonstrate how Her Interactive's citational practices that focused on white women's cultural traditions limited their address.

In analyzing the navigation of space and exploration of cultural difference in the Nancy Drew games, this paper will also put studies of girls' games in dialogue with video game scholarship that considers the spatiality of video games in relation to postcolonial critique and that considers how video games orient players in relation to colonial or imperial ideology (Lammes 2010; Mukherjee 2015). Nancy Drew games take place in more circumscribed spaces – often in homes and mansions, but also hotels, museums, movie theaters, or workplaces. Nonetheless, as I will discuss, these spaces are still linked to their own colonialist practices and histories and reinscribe a white feminine imaginary insofar as they are presented as spaces welcoming to the occupation or inhabitation of white girlhood and that provide this white girlhood with greater comfort and mobility through the manipulation and consumption of cultural difference. As a result, this essay will show how the colonial and racial politics of a game arise not only from the mastery and mapping of spaces, but also through the attempts to make domestic or comfortable spaces for girls in games. Nancy Drew games demonstrate how even feminized game spaces and cultures that offer less expansive spatial imaginaries can also reinforce colonialist perspectives through their encouragement to consume and manipulate cultural difference in order to enhance white girlhood.

As commercially successful and long enduring examples of video games for girls, the Nancy Drew games offer a productive way to study the tensions and ambivalences that are faced in attempts to make sense of what games for girls should be and what ideas about girlhood they assume. Nancy Drew games challenge gendered expectations for play spaces that had previously developed in children's culture – as Henry Jenkins notes, in video games as in children's literature, boys are often presented with spaces to exercise mobility and experience adventure whereas girls are only given access to circumscribed domestic spaces (Jenkins 1998). The spatial and social relations in these games also complicate some of the approaches taken in girls' games, such as by game designers like Brenda Laurel, to appeal to girls primarily through a focus on the social (Kocurek 2017, Braithwaite 2018). Although scholarship on these games is still quite sparse, they tend to get taken up as successful attempts to counter dominant or hegemonic ideas about what types of play are suitable for girls (Braithwaite 2018; Kocurek 2022). Yet, these accounts often presume a white girlhood norm. In this instance, it is productive to put criticisms of gender and games in dialogue with existing scholarship on Nancy Drew from children's literature in order

to highlight the long history of critiques of the franchise's white supremacist, liberal girlhood (Marshall 2012; Nash 2006). Rather than present Nancy Drew as a figure of empowering girlhood that is translated into empowering video games for girls, these critiques help highlight the racial and colonial politics of girlhood play, with attention to the particular ways that this gets taken up within the medium of video games.

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