

# Domesticating Play at the Playboy Mansion

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how *Playboy* magazine and the Playboy Mansion shaped early gaming cultures through the lens of domestication theory. Focusing on backgammon, pinball, and early video games, it examines how Hugh Hefner's lifestyle recontextualized play as a marker of urbane, heterosexual masculinity. Games became tools for reinforcing male sociability, status hierarchies, and gendered power dynamics, with women positioned as decorative participants. Through analysis of key features in *Playboy* (1973–1975), this paper highlights how *Playboy* normalized gaming as a male-coded activity. These dynamics prefigure the exclusions and toxicities of contemporary gaming cultures, revealing the deeply rooted gendering of 20<sup>th</sup> century play.

## Keywords

Backgammon, Domestication, Hugh Hefner, Pinball, Playboy, The Playboy Mansion, Videogame History

## INTRODUCTION

Hugh Hefner's influence on gaming cultures is under explored, this is remarkable considering that he and his magazine *Playboy* championed the importance of play and playfulness in masculine lifestyles for more than six decades. In his editorial role for *Playboy*, he consistently advocated a work hard, play hard outlook where both work and play were a source of pleasure and identity for middle-class, city-dwelling men in the United States of America (Fraterrigo 2009, 58-59). By promoting a lifestyle for men that sought a balance between leisure and work, Hefner believed he was undermining the overarching 'Puritan' morality and 'Protestant' work ethic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century USA that had shaped his childhood (Watts 2008, 11). In a 1974 interview Hefner stated that the agenda of *Playboy* since its first issue in December 1953 was "to put some of the play and pleasure back into life" ("Playboy Interview: Hugh M. Hefner" 1974, 65). However, *Playboy* situated women ambiguously in relation to the aspirational lifestyle that it offered for men that celebrated play and leisure (Pitzulo 2011).

This paper considers the role of Hefner's organ, *Playboy* magazine, in using play and playfulness to promulgate the normalization of certain forms of play as a normatively masculine activities and an essentialist and objectifying concept of femininity. These notions of gender continue to echo in the dynamic of male privilege and the harassment and exclusion of women in which has profoundly shaped gaming cultures (Salter & Blodgett 2017). To explore this influence, this paper examines three key texts from *Playboy* between 1973 and 1975 that describe the integration of board games, pinball, and early videogames into the lifestyle Hugh Hefner. This was the period when *Playboy* had peak circulation selling up to 7 million copies a month in the USA alone (Pitzulo 2011, 133). These years (1973-1975) are salient for the influence of *Playboy* on nascent game cultures by providing a gendered context for the interpreting the meaning and use of games in

everyday life because for three reasons. First, digital games were first emerging as a domestic technology (the Magnavox Odyssey was released in 1972) that was being recontextualized into the middle-class home. Second, Hefner was introducing the Playboy Mansion West to the readers of *Playboy*; the Mansion was “a multimedia theme park” (Preciado 2014, 210), characterized by an architecture and landscaping that facilitated play and playful sociality. Third, Hefner was struggling to position himself, and his magazine, in relation to critiques from second wave feminism (Fraterrigo 2009, 177-181). Hefner’s response followed a postfeminist strategy that highlighted the employment on women at Playboy (Watts 2008, 417-421), while also celebrating women’s growing participation in education and work in the USA by eroticizing woman in traditionally masculine jobs through revealing they were still women beneath their work clothes in order to assure the hegemonic masculine status quo it was business as usual (Fraterrigo 2009, 187-189).

Hefner’s position on feminism is further complicated by the re-evaluation of his legacy after his death in 2017. While Hefner still has his champions particularly among his family and former social circle, many guests to the Playboy Mansion and Playboy employees have reported witnessing and/or being victims of Hefner’s unethical, abusive, and manipulative behavior towards woman. Victims of Hefner’s wrongdoing were given a popular platform by the A&E show *Secrets of Playboy* which ran for two seasons (20 episodes) from 2022 to 2023, which brought to light many voices that had been critical of Hefner’s behavior towards woman for decades. Even for those supporters of Hefner and his legacy for which the outpouring of anger over his exploitations and betrayals of trust are ‘unsubstantiated allegations,’ it was difficult to distance Hefner entirely from the legal proof that the Playboy Mansion West had been a site that criminals such as Bill Cosby used to drug and rape women. The Playboy brand, who had been sold and relaunched after Hefner died, subsequently announced he was no longer associated with the brand he had embodied for 64 years. This situation further highlights the importance for work that considers Hefner and Playboy’s problematic influence on the domestication of gaming and formation of gaming cultures.

Backgammon, pinball, and early videogames were a key part of the glamorous lifestyle of Hefner, his partner Barbi Benton and Hefner’s wider social circle of celebrities and starlets associated with the Playboy Mansion West. Using domestication theory this paper highlights the ways that these games were discussed and illustrated in the magazine that suggest ‘how’ games can be used and assign ‘what’ they mean. How *Playboy* framed material practices of play and attitudes towards play to convey a sense of gendered asymmetry in relation to play. While women are included in social, playful activities, for the women involved play had vastly different stakes.

In this paper three key features have been selected for analysis. These features illustrate how games and play from backgammon and pinball to Nutting’s *Computer Space* (1972) are integrated into the playful design and lifestyle of the Playboy Mansion West, an extensively remodeled 1920s mansion in the Los Angeles suburb of Holmby Hills. The three features are:

- ‘Barbi’s Back!’ (1973): an erotic “pictorial” of 12 color photographs shot in the grounds and interior of the Playboy Mansion West by Playboy staff photographer Mario Casilli from the December 1973 issue featuring Barbi Benton, accompanied by text discussing Benton’s cohabitation with Hefner in the Mansion
- ‘Playboy Interview: Hugh M. Hefner’ (1974): a lengthy interview of Hefner marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Playboy* where he discusses the

role of play in his lifestyle extensively that was published in the January 1974 issue, and

- 'The Playboy Mansion West' (1975) is a "pictorial essay" which introduces Hefner's contemporary "Shangri-La" to the readers of *Playboy* from the January 1975 issue through the detailed description of a typical day at the mansion, illustrated by over fifty color photographs.

Before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of these texts the paper outlines the connections between domestication theory and the portrayal of gaming in the magazine and the implications that this has for understanding the role of *Playboy* in hegemonic constructions of 'geek' masculinity. Then the selected features are explored thematically focusing on how notions explicitly or implicitly endorsed by Hefner of gender essentialism, body and sex positivity, and the role of play in mixed gender socialization. Together these factors contributed to their objectified presentation as appropriately feminine erotic subjects for the readers of *Playboy*.

## **MASCULINE DOMESTICITY AND THE DOMESTICATION OF GAMES**

*Playboy* is widely acknowledged for its innovative-- or at least a distinctive—reframing of domesticity in the context of men's interests (Fraterrigo 2009; Pitzulo 2011; Preciado 2014). In its first decade of publication the magazine promoted an urban domestic lifestyle that was explicitly masculine and heterosexual and was exemplified by the 'Playboy Pad': a downtown penthouse apartment (Preciado 2014, 31). A hearty advocate of consumerism, it offered numerous advice on the stylish integration of new consumer technologies into the home by illustrating and explaining "the latest gadgets and trends" (Fraterrigo 2009, 8). This nexus between domesticity and consumer technologies was a prominent element of the masculinity promoted by *Playboy* in its regular features, articles, pictorials and carefully tailored advertising. Furthermore, as the celebrity of Hefner continued to wax, how domestic technologies featured in the configuration and operations of his business and leisure practices became part of the content of the magazine.

*Playboy* offers a wider context for exploring the relationship between masculinity, heterosexual intimacy, and gaming as it emerged as a consumer technology. The qualities of masculinity illustrated offer a useful insight into geek masculinity, which is often conceptualised as a starting point for understanding "masculinity and game culture" (Taylor 2012, 111). Geek masculinity offers an alternate approach to masculinity that defines it in relation to domains such as technology, science, and gaming rather than work or leisure activities normatively construed as masculine. *Playboy* similarly challenged many dominant ideas about what constituted masculine behaviour and identity in the initial decade, or so, of its publication. While geek masculinity can accommodate non-normative versions of masculinity, like *Playboy* it is strongly associated with a hegemonic masculinity that presupposes and legitimizes the dominant role of men (and implicitly justifies the lesser role, or lack, of woman) in activities earmarked as masculine. *Playboy*'s influence and impact on North American geek and technocultures was palpable by the early 1970s, through the integration of *Playboy* into campus life and college education (Fraterrigo 2009, 135-138), scientific communication, and everyday work practices in technology industries. The inclusion of several images of *Playboy* 'Playmates' concealed among equipment of the Apollo 12 mission to the Moon by NASA astronaut Dave Scott (Martin 2019), and the use of the Lenna image-- the top part of the centerfold photograph from the November 1972 issue of *Playboy* featuring Swedish model Lena Sjööblom—as a standard test image for digital image processing (Iozzio 2016), are two striking examples

of the routineness of *Playboy* in the cutting edge tech industry in the USA across both the public and private sectors.

*Playboy* first illustrated how game and play could be integrated into a traditionally masculine, albeit sophisticated, domestic context. The February 1961 'Modern Living' feature 'Best Bets in Gaming Gear' offered a repertoire of luxurious and sophisticated gaming accessories for "entertaining a coed crowd" ("Best Bets" 1961, 48). Over the course of the 1960s features on boardgames gradually included more contemporary games published by 3M, Avalon Hill, Milton Bradey, and Parker Brothers alongside traditional board, card and gambling games made with high-quality materials ("Chairman" 1965, 114-116, 136-138). The boardgames were showcased alongside other suitably masculine playthings: model trains and airplanes, pinball machines, executive desk toys, and chic party games "for swingers" and "tuned-in couples" ("Adult Toys" 1968, 129-133). Through such features *Playboy* introduced niche boardgames to a mainstream audience, and associated them with traditionally masculine leisure pastimes such as backgammon, and emerging forms of electronic and digital play such as pinball and eventually arcade and home computing. One widely repeated anecdote which suggests the reach and influence of *Playboy* in the formation of gaming cultures is how Robert Kuntz, a co-designer of *Dungeons & Dragons*, was introduced to wargaming scene through the November 1968 issue of *Playboy* (Kuntz & Kutalik 2011).

This paper uses domestication theory to consider how *Playboy* contributed to the common-sense hegemonic understanding of the default masculinity of gaming cultures. Previous historical research examining the role of trade and hobbyist publications in the formation of gaming cultures considers the publications crucial in cultivating the association between gaming culture and masculinity (Kirkpatrick 2017; Kocurek 2015). This approach focuses on how a technologies uses are integrated into everyday experience, considering: "what the technologies and services mean to people, how they experience them and the roles that these technologies can come to play in their lives" (Haddon 2006, 195). The *Playboy* magazine offers a notably different context from industry and hobbyist contexts as it symbolically positions the material cultures of gaming within the sophisticated heterosexual masculine lifestyle promoted by the magazine. These materials contributed to how early gaming cultures imagined how gaming—from boardgames to digital games—could be integrated into everyday practices and what gaming might meant in the context of masculinity.

The concept of domestication can be applied relatively flexibly. Domestication theory emerged from British cultural studies where it was developed to conceptualize television use. But it has also be widely influential in other disciplines particularly science and technology studies and has been applied to many different domestic technologies including home computers. Domestication theory is often associated with methodologies that gather observational data from embedded research in domestic spaces. This is a key point of divergence for this paper which examines selected magazine features covering the discussion of gaming in the context of lifestyle at a crucial intersection of the history of domestic gaming and *Playboy*. This approach focuses on how *Playboy* presents strategies for domestication to a particular audience. Silverstone and Haddon (1996, 46) argued that matters such as marketing and design shaped how consumers defined their relationships to new technologies. More recent research has highlighted that during the early stages of a technologies introduction advertising and marketing materials forms a key repertoire of possibilities for imagining how would be used in the home (Ask 2023; Baym 2010). Silverstone (2006, 232) argues that the symbolic values that new domestic technologies acquire draw on very specific contexts and embedded relations even if in the

process of adapting the technologies to everyday life they come to acquire new meanings. Adapting domestic technologies into everyday life involves “imaginative work” that reconstructs the consumer technologies as “objects of desire” that create a sense of “difference and social meaning” (Hynes & Rommes 2006, 128). *Playboy* offers insight into a widely circulated illustration of specific ways that such material cultures, practices and technologies were embedded in the microstructures of everyday hegemonic masculinity which offered readers a narrow framework for how such practices might be imagined, given meaning, and used to create a sense of distinction.

The selected features discussed in this paper situate the material cultures, practices, and technologies of gaming within an idealized luxurious heterosexual masculine lifestyle. This aspirational fantasy illustrates how gaming features in the organization of Hefner’s everyday life and reframing and reconstruction of his personal domestic space masculine. The games mentioned in the texts include a variety of boardgames—*Backgammon*, *Monopoly*, and *Risk*— the *Fireball* (Bally 1972) pinball machine and several early arcade cabinet videogames: *Clean Sweep* (Ramtech 1974), *Computer Quiz* (Nutting Associates 1968), and *Volly* (Ramtek 1973). *Speedway* (Chicago Coin 1969) a coin operated mechanical car racing game made by a pinball manufacturer is also mentioned. Only the pictorial essay “Playboy Mansion West” (1975) visually depicts the playful spaces and moments of Hefner and his social circle. Photographs demonstrate many cases of formal play using established codified games such as volleyball, tennis, backgammon, chess and charades, and more informal playfulness in the interactions between Hefner, his guests, and the large menagerie of animals housed in the grounds of the Mansion.

## **BARBI AND HUGH’S DOLLHOUSE**

As well as illustrating life in the Mansion the three selected features each offer perspectives on Hefner’s relationship with his contemporary partner Barbi Benton. Both Benton and Hefner intimate that playing games together was an important part of their relationship. But a crucial asymmetry emerges which indicates a profound belief that how play and playfulness was appropriated into everyday life was largely dictated by gender. This is illustrated in how a competitive approach to formal games was associated with a performance of masculinity, and conversely how a more general social playfulness in the context of the playful architecture of the Mansion was associated with a sexually empowered performance of femininity. The problematic dimensions of the latter are considered through Benton’s description of her treatment by Hefner both as a quasi-manager and romantic partner that strongly implied an unequal power dynamic in the relationship which underscored the participation of woman in the playful environment of the Playboy Mansion West.

### **Backgammon**

Benton and Hefner shared a passion for the competitive games particularly Backgammon which dominated the social scene at the Mansion. Hefner’s weekly schedule set aside time for several unofficial competitive tournaments, which were popular events among the social circle of the Mansion. Hefner boasted that the regular attendance of champion Backgammon players, including John Rockwell and Billy Eisenberg, made the quality of play at the tournaments he hosted exceptionally high. Generally, competitiveness and “rivalries among the most serious of the Mansion’s game players” was encouraged by Hefner (“Playboy Mansion West” 1975, 212). One innovation cementing the competitiveness of the Mansion’s social scene was “the posting of the 20 highest scores for each game on a walnut plaque” next to each pinball machine and early videogame in the Mansion’s game room (1975, 212).

In the feature 'Barbi's Back!' Benton suggests that while a mutual passion for competitive games underpins her relationship with Hefner, that the competitiveness between them was also a source of conflict in their relationship. While in most cases competitive play facilitated spending time pleasantly together, Benton's remarks indicate that the stakes for her was considerably different. She states:

We always have to beat each other. In most games, he [Hefner] doesn't mind if I beat him; that's considered par for the course; but it really bothers him if I beat him at backgammon. It would bother him if I continued to beat him at any heavy mental game ("Playboy Mansion West" 1975, 302).

Benton indicates her uneven participation in this statement, while it is okay for her to beat Hefner in "heavy mental games," this should be the exception. She should not "continue" to beat him, indicating that she cannot be perceived as a better player than Hefner, and any win based on an anomaly such as a lapse in Hefner's concentration, or Benton's incredibly good luck. This is an obvious example of male fragility on Hefner's part, but it also proffers a framing of backgammon prowess as a masculine attribute.

Hefner's had multiple reasons for his fondness for backgammon. It was a passion he maintained into his old age, continuing to regularly play backgammon with friends and family members until his death in 2017. Hefner described why backgammon had become a key social pastime among his inner circle at the Playboy Mansion West in the early to mid- 1970s, explaining that:

...relatively simple in concept and easy to learn, but quite sophisticated in its strategy once you begin to really get involved in it. It's a much faster and more exciting game than chess and unlike cards, it's an open game—played on a board where everyone can see the moves—with the opportunity for considerable interplay ("Playboy Interview: Hugh Hefner" 1974, 78).

In addition to being a masculine competitive game, Hefner indicates it required a particular performance that offers insight into the nuances of how gender was understood through play in *Playboy*. Hefner points out that Backgammon: was easy to learn but also requires sophisticated strategy; involved fast-pace play; and allowed for a strong social dimension. That backgammon had low barriers for entry because rule set was easy to learn, is implicitly important because it allows people with an uneven experience and understanding of the strategic dimension of the game to successfully play together. This facilitated the widespread participation in the activity, while also establishing a distinctive hierarchy of experienced "competitive" players. The fast-paced rhythm of the game facilitated sociality, by allowing players in large groups to move quickly to new opponents or shift between watching and playing. This sociality was further cultivated because of the games "openness" which allowed the possibility of banter and conversation between the player's and between the players' and audience. These elements allowed backgammon to facilitate mixed gender play with a strong social dimension that facilitated woman's inclusion in the Mansion backgammon scene while remaining distinct from competitive male players.



**Figure One:** Hefner (left) and Benton (Right) play Backgammon at the opening of Pips (a Backgammon club) in late 1973 (image used with permission from Getty Images).

*Playboy* presented backgammon as a pastime which involved socialization between men and women, with obvious terms. Benton was an exceptional player (“Barbi’s Back!” 1973, 145), but her inclusion in the Mansion backgammon scene was not exceptional, woman could and did play backgammon in this social milieu (see figure one). For example, Marlene Morrow (“This Year’s Model,” 1974, 127) and Patti McGuire (“Playmate of the Year” 1977, 220) both describe playing backgammon at Playboy Mansion during their visits there. In the gender essentialist worldview of *Playboy* it is implied that the strategic and competitive dimensions of backgammon are inherently masculine. Woman who could contribute to the sociality of the game were desirable, if they knew their place and were not winning consistently. The inclusion of young, attractive woman associated with the Playboy brand such as Playmates and bunnies along with other woman celebrities-- such as Lisa Bormann—in the social backgammon scene at the Mansion enhanced the social dimensions of the game. Not solely by creating a degree of glamour for the game, but also by offering a vision of how play facilitated mixed gender sociology that emphasized woman’s inclusion in the scene was not as a competitive player but to facilitating convivial and flirtatious socialization.

Hefner’s passion for backgammon and its prominence in the portrayal of his life at the Playboy Mansion exemplifies domestication. Silverstone and Haddon’s framework suggests that technologies are not only adapted into daily life but are symbolically reimagined to align with prevailing social norms. In the context of the Mansion, backgammon was reframed as a symbol of masculine competition, prestige, and sociability—qualities that dovetailed with Playboy’s larger narrative of masculinity.

### **‘Nature’ Play**

In *Playboy*, Hefner portrayed the Playboy Mansion West as a vision of “paradise” (“Playboy Mansion” 1975, 94). The images of Benton that were published in ‘Barbi’s Back!’ had a key, enduring role in signaling how woman contributed to this notion of paradise through play. The photography featured Benton in the grounds of the previously unseen (in the

pages of *Playboy*) Playboy Mansion West. In this series of nude images, she posed with plants and decorative statuary, and in more candid and 'spontaneous' images of her interactions with the menagerie of animals kept at the Mansion. These three images of Benton playfully interacting with animals were shot on the Mansion's lush green lawn. The images feature Benton: with Macbeth, a large green macaw, sitting on her shoulder; reclining on the grass face-to-face with Yogi, a woolly monkey; and wrestling on the lawn with Big Dog and Little Dog, a pair of Old English Sheep dogs, while Macbeth watches. The photographs of Benton frolicking naked with animals in the sun-drenched grounds visually alluded to the biblical Garden of Eden, suggesting that Benton's nudity is innocent rather than sexual through the co-presence of animals who in that legend dwelt peacefully and in harmony with humans. This eden-esque image of the Playboy Mansion West was crucial for promoting the idea that the Mansion was a hangup free environment of carefree and playful uninhibition where people felt empowered to be their true selves, rather than a site of vice, corruption, and exploitation.

Benton's importance in this portrayal of the mansion as a place of joyous and playful uninhibition is demonstrated in the repetition of these images. 'Playboy Mansion West' features over fifty photographs of the Mansion and its grounds, which includes two nude images of Benton from two years previous, that were originally taken for 'Barbi's Back!' The first photograph shows her laughing as she slides down the banister of the wooded staircase in the "Great Hall" of the Mansion ("Playboy Mansion West" 1975, 96), this is contrasted with a more serious image on the same page which shows her and Hefner hobnobbing with celebrities in the same location. In the second image Benton strolls across the lawn of the Mansion with two woolly monkeys, a bird of paradise in the background (1975, 99). In the adjacent images Hugh Hefner and Peter Sellers crouch at the edge of a pond feeding gold and silver Koi; and a raccoon slinks past a group of 20 or so guests playing volleyball on the Mansion's lawn. Benton's images illustrate how the spaces of the Mansion and its grounds could create possibilities for playful nudity. This playful nudity that was both potentially disruptive of uptight social mores and at the same time 'natural' became an enduring element of the public image of the Playboy Mansion West.

Despite the concern with conveying that nudity at the Playboy Mansion could be framed as innocent and playful, the qualities conveyed by the photographs of Benton illustrate a key asymmetry between genders. In the photography published in the 'Playboy Mansion West' Hefner is shown conducting various activities around the mansion and its grounds. Like the other male guests present—e.g. Bill Cosby, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Sellers, Ringo Starr—he is clothed, or if swimming wearing a bathing suit. The nude images which are included are all of woman (the one exception is discussed below). In addition to Benton, it was the women within the Mansion's social scene that had the task of embodying and enacting the playful and uninhibited freedom through casual nudity. While implicitly signaling that the Mansion was a forward-thinking oasis of body and sex positivity, with palpable transparency the performance is also for Hefner, the other male guests, and by extension the readers of *Playboy*. The body positivity and sexual liberation celebrated in *Playboy* in this era was a device that normalized uneven, asymmetrical power dynamics between men and woman. Destabilizing the absoluteness of Berger's (1972, 45) adage that "men act and woman appear," in *Playboy* play and playfulness become actions that make woman visible. This visibility came with an alibi that the nudity which was being performed was not just an erotic performance for men, but also a 'natural' celebration of the subjects of empowered sexuality. The relative empowerment of woman in the situation is a matter too large for this paper, what is important for this argument is the



asymmetrical performance of gender play was explicitly mediated to millions by the eroticized bodies of women.

## Barbi Doll

The nickname 'Barbi doll' caused Benton some consternation. After making their relationship public in early 1969 the magazine often referred to her by this moniker. This association was cemented in its use as the title of her first Playboy pictorial in 1970, and her debut LP in 1974. Benton had been clear that she was uncomfortable with the nickname because it gave her an "aura of superficiality" which she believed contributed to her not been taken seriously as an individual and as an actor and recording artist ("Barbi's Back" 1973, 304). When Hefner had 'discovered' her in 1968, Benton was an 18-year-old extra on the set of *Playboy After Dark* (1968-1970), a short lived a variety show that he hosted. He pursued "relentlessly," with constant requests for dates and over-the-top gifts, which eroded her initial reluctance to pursue a relationship with a man who was 24-years her senior (Watts 2008, 225). Benton became Hefner's first public official girlfriend, and as such quickly came to enjoy a degree of celebrity (2008, 252), despite her nickname.

Hefner managed Benton's career in a transparently controlling manner. He was convinced that Benton possessed a "unique charisma" that made her stand out on the screen ("Barbi's Back" 1973, 304), and conflict arose between them as Benton began actively pursuing a career in country music ("Playboy Mansion West" 1975, 210). Benton recalled a particularly upsetting incident when Hefner hid and secretly listened to her while she practiced singing, surprising her by turning off the music and sternly advising her to focusing on acting ("Barbi's Back!" 1973, 304). Hefner eventually began to support her singing career after she became moderately successful (Watts 2008, 253). The selected features openly describe the extent to which Hefner was involved in Benton's career, suggesting that it was as important to convey that Hefner was the manufacturer of her stardom as it was to celebrate Benton's talents and achievements. The details conveyed included: giving Playboy Records VP Tom Takayoshi instructions for the design of the jacket of the Barbie doll LP ("Playboy Mansion West" 1975, 210) and recruiting Shel Silverstein—a member of Hefner's inner circle who won a Grammy Award in 1970 for 'A Boy Named Sue'—to write four tracks for her debut album. Benton's debut album eventually reached number 17 on US country charts during 1975. Benton's success was used to cement Hefner's image as a cultivator of talent, even after the couple had parted ways some time in 1976, the magazine continued to center the role of Hefner in her success.

The three features emphasize that Hefner absolutely doted on his youthful partner (see figure two). Yet, in the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary interview he briefly discusses how he simultaneously conducted numerous short and lengthy affairs with other woman during his official public relationship with Benton, including a period of over a year where he cohabited with Karen Christy on alternating weeks at the Chicago Playboy Mansion ("Playboy Interview" 1974, 72). Benton was expected to be faithful with Hefner, and the affairs and cohabitation with Christy took place without her explicit knowledge. Hefner maintained elaborate practices to orchestrate his ability to conduct relations outside of the official public relationship with Benton. Some of these became embedded in the design of the grounds Playboy Mansion West through areas like the Jacuzzi grotto and game room (both discussed below) which were out of sight and earshot from the Mansion. Benton's drive to achieve success on her own terms, and not simply share Hefner's limelight, created time for the otherwise attentive and romantic Hefner to engage in his clandestine sex life (Watts 2008, 280). In "Playboy Mansion West" (1975, 206) Benton and Hefner are described exploring the grounds of the mansion together. However, their

romantic idyll is interrupted when they encounter Janice Pennington—with whom Benton co-owned an antiques shop in Aspen—sunbathing by the pool. The moment Benton’s attention drawn away from him Hefner shifts into a voyeuristic mode:

For a moment or two, the girls rap about business, while Hef[ner] strolls by the line of bronze bodies—flashing on the title of Roger Vadim’s film of a few years ago: *Pretty Maids All in a Row*. ‘Ah, just another typical day at the Mansion,’ he says with a sigh (1975, 206).

Once he can no longer ‘play’ with Benton, he seeks other women. This illustrates the massive discrepancy in power in their relationship. Hefner controlled her career and where she lived, as well as using the architecture and landscape of ‘their’ home to conduct multiple clandestine affairs orchestrated around the couple’s schedules. Benton’s role was his entertainment, suggesting that Benton’s discomfort in the nickname Hefner had given her was indicative of her treatment as a plaything more generally. While the relationship between Benton and Hefner waned the Mansion began to develop the “legendary” “unrestrained sexual atmosphere” that came to characterize the remaining years of the 1970s (Watts 2008, 280).



**Figure Two:** Hefner (left) and Benton (right) “doting” on each other (image used with permission from Getty Images).

## THE ORCHESTRATION OF DOMESTIC PLAY

The 1974 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary interview foregrounded play and playfulness in Hefner’s everyday life. Larry DuBios describes accompanying Hefner and his inner circle for several months while researching the interview, and in the process becoming a participant in the play practices of the inner circle. He believed this offered him a special insight into Hefner’s ‘enigmatic’ personality: “After months of playing backgammon and pinball... ..the tone of our interview sessions became very personal” (“Playboy Interview” 1974, 64). Establishing an intimate rapport with Hefner required DuBois to engage in a

continuum of playful and luxurious forms of play from those with clearly defined ludic boundaries in the form of games like pinball, Monopoly and backgammon and other forms of playful behaviors that had more ambiguous boundaries. He recounted that the best "...interview sessions... ..came from questions I asked as a result of bantering at the Monopoly table, playing backgammon, splashing in his jacuzzi grotto in Los Angeles..." (1974, 64). The play practices that were central to DuBois coming to know and understand Hefner manifested in many distinct ways in the activities of his social circle.

For Hefner play was not a frivolity, *Playboy* portrayed both working hard and being serious about leisure pursuits as together forming the Playboy masculine lifestyle. Hefner had often sought to exemplify this outlook in his own behavior, and the heavy workload that his role as editor of *Playboy* entailed had often curtailed his leisure time. Hefner sought to solve this problem by creating a domestic enclave where he could both work and play without interruption from the outside world, or the necessity of commuting or waiting. The Chicago mansion was a prototype, and Hefner came to realise his ambition in the Playboy Mansion West which rather than being a warren-like indoors space deployed for landscaping as well is architecture to create a domestic enclave within the city. This meant that Hefner could run his business and private life according to his own drug-fueled (Preciado 2014, 127), idiosyncratic, rhythms:

...when business matters were piling up, he [Hefner] surrendered himself totally to meetings with executives that turned into 24-hour marathons; and when the last bunch stumbled away at ten in the morning, as likely as not, Hefner would make a dash for the game room to rendezvous with his pals and do a fiercely competitive and often raucous six hours on the pinball machines before retiring to his quarters with a girlfriend ("Playboy Interview" 1974, 64).

Hefner's proclivity for play was bound in a performance of masculinity which also signaled that the preternatural energy and virility after the onset of middle age. Hefner's consistently demonstrated an approach to social 'play' as a sphere that has sexual potential. In one comment Hefner states: "After the meetings, dictation and editing are done, I'm ready to relax and play—whether it's in my rotating bed or in the game room with the gang" (1974, 78). While backgammon and pinball offer a very different context for playful interaction than the (in)famous rotating bed, they each figure in portraying a multi-dimensionality to Hefner's play practices that included highly ludic structured forms of play alongside more explicitly bacchanalian and free-form play that is implied by a "rotating bed" or "splashing" in a jacuzzi. This paper suggests that *Playboy* presented this playful spectrum as a trajectory of seduction: from organized rule-based play such as Monopoly or backgammon; through playful flirtatious social interactions in the designed-for-play areas of the mansion such as the grotto or game room; to casual sexual intimacy, intercourse, and group sex.

Self-described as a "Shangri-la for work and play" ("Playboy Mansion" 1975, 94). The Playboy Mansion West also operated as a "private multimedia broadcasting garden" (Preciado 2014, 200), that made Hefner's lifestyle enduring content for *Playboy* branded multimedia platforms. Beginning in the mid-1970s, in exemplified in the initial features selected for this discussion, *Playboy* manufactured an alignment between man and Mansion that culminated in the resounding success of E! Channels *The Girls Next Door* that was screened for 6 seasons between 2005 and 2010. The Playboy Mansion West and the original Chicago Playboy Mansion shared the ambition of creating an architectural "total environment" that not only allowed Hefner to control "when and where" he

worked and played (“Playboy Mansion” 1975, 204), but also the reproduction the playful activities that the space enabled across Playboy’s multimedia empire.

The possibility of play was embedded in the Mansion environment. “Playboy Mansion West” describes the potential transformation of Hefner’s library from a board room to a playroom:

...the top of the big oak coffee table... [is removed] ...revealing a pair of inset felt-and-leather backgammon boards: and what was, a few minutes ago, *the center of a business meeting is now transformed into the focal point of competitive fun and games* (“Playboy Mansion” 1975, 211).

Such devices that transformed the functions of a domestic space had been championed previously in the “Modern Living” section of *Playboy*. The 1970 feature “Playboy Plans a Duplex Penthouse,” for example, imagines wall panels that can be flipped open or closed by remote control transforming media center for listening to LPs or watching TV, into a game area suitable for boardgames or cards (“Playboy Plans” 1970, 233). The Playboy Mansion West extended this approach from domestic space to the design of outdoor recreation, exemplified in elements such as the (in)famous Jacuzzi grotto and the game room.

## **Grotto**

Public nudity of women was in the forefront of the media imagery of the Mansion. Public sexual activity is implied in the few images which show heterosexual couples in close contact. These images all show the couples at least partially immersed in a Jacuzzi or swimming pool in the Lascaux Caves-inspired artificial grotto that was the “center” of the Mansion’s grounds (Preciado 2014, 203-204). Only in one image are both figures in the couple explicitly naked, in the other two images the nudity of the male can be reasonably implied by their close proximity to a naked or partially naked woman, even if their lower torsos and limbs are hidden beneath the water. In one of these photos Hefner sits bare-chested next to the ‘topless’ Hope Olson— who was closely associated with the *Playboy* brand at the time as she was a Bunny at the Los Angeles Playboy Club and later was Miss October 1976—in the grotto pool, while two naked women frolic in the jacuzzi behind them. Olson was one of the many women Hefner had short affairs with during his relationship with Benton (Watts 2008, 253), and she was also one of the members of the polyamorous multi-partner group sex relationship that Hefner cultivated at the Mansion after he and Benton parted ways (2008, 281). The design of the Mansion grounds first facilitated Hefner’s clandestine sexual encounters. The ‘secret’ Jacuzzi grotto was a primary location for these activities as the area could not be seen or heard from the Mansion itself (see figure three), allowing him opportunity to discreetly smuggle his other partners in another grounds while Benton was asleep or out on errands (Miller 1985, 199: Watts 2008, 255). When Benton left Hefner the centrality of the grotto in the grounds design facilitated the Bacchanal whirl of drug fueled parties characterized by casual and/group sex which occupied him for the remainder of the decade.



**Figure Three:** The Grotto at the Playboy Mansion West (image used with permission from Getty Images)

## Game Room

The game room – a converted gardener’s cottage in the Mansion’s grounds — became a signature feature of the Playboy Mansion West. “Barbi’s Back!” introduces the space and describes its contents (“Barbi’s Back!” 1973, 304), but the first public images of the collection of games in the game room were not published until the “the Playboy Mansion West” feature in January 1975. It featured two images of people using the game room. The first shows a mixed gender group, six woman and two men, using the facilities. In the left foreground of the photo a couple play a cabinet videogame with a steering wheel controller, this may be *Speedway* which is the only game of this type mentioned in the text of the feature. How the couple are positioned in relation to the cabinet is reminiscent of many portrayals of couples in promotional materials for pinball and arcade cabinet game in the 1970s. The man is operating the game and is positioned actively in relation to the game, while the woman stands near the gaming machine but with her body facing the man. They share the same affective register and appear to be both looking intently at the screen (or in the case of pinball the ‘playfield’) of the game. In the center ground of the image a game of mixed doubles is being played on a pool table. In the background are various early videogame arcade cabinets, among them is the distinctive outline of Nutting Associate’s 1971 *Computer Space*.

In the second image a group of male members of Hefner’s social circle confer around the pool table prior to the break. The group includes Hefner’s brother Keith who was an executive at *Playboy* in charge of training and recruiting bunnies for Playboy clubs, along with actors Don Adams and Tony Curtis, singer/actor Jimmy Boyd, and Pips (the private Backgammon club co-owned by Hefner) manager Joe DeCarlo. The photo captions narrate the contrast between the two images, while the exclusively male group play an “old-fashioned rack of pool” while the mixed group play “electronic permutations on Pong” (“Playboy Mansion” 1975, 103). Suggesting that such a space can be effectively used for both exclusively male forms of play and mixed play, and that this “electronic playland” (1975, 212), is a suitable site of socialization between men and women. The opportunities that formal play created for social intimacy and sexual intercourse in the mansion



environment are highlighted by the two ‘secret’ bedrooms adjacent to the main game room: “There are two minibedrooms adjoining—one done entirely in red, the other in blue, with mirrored walls and ceilings, for game players of another sort” (1975, 212). The doors to the bedrooms were concealed in the wood-paneled walls of the main game room and became key to the legendary status of the game room and illustrative of how to play was understood as a trajectory that manufactured socialization, intimacy, and sexual intercourse in the Playboy Mansion, and *Playboy*.

The transformation of the gardener’s cottage into a game room exemplifies the domestication of gaming technologies. By integrating arcade cabinets, pinball machines, and billiards into the game room (see figure four), Hefner recontextualized these technologies as both markers of status and playful seduction. This spatial adaptation reflected the broader ethos of Playboy: technology and play as vehicles for demonstrating control, mastery, and masculine identity.



**Figure Four:** The Game Room at the Playboy Mansion c. 2008 (image used with permission from Getty Images)

## CONCLUSION

Playboy’s domestication of games during the 1970s reflects broader processes through which gaming technologies were integrated into everyday life and imbued with cultural meaning. Hefner and Playboy symbolically reframed games as extensions of an urbane, heterosexual masculinity. Games like backgammon, pinball, and early arcade cabinets were not just pastimes; they became tools for cultivating male sociability, reinforcing status hierarchies, and positioning women as playful accessories to a male-dominated leisure culture. This domestication process occurred not only through the material design of spaces like the game room and Jacuzzi grotto but also through the magazine’s visual and textual narratives, which aligned games with luxury, sophistication, and hegemonic masculinity.

Playboy’s inclusion of women in these gaming spaces often reinforced asymmetrical power dynamics. While games offered opportunities for mixed-gender play, women’s participation was framed as secondary to the competitive and social performances of

men. Hefner's Playboy Mansion embodied this hierarchy, using playful spaces and technologies to manufacture intimacy and reinforce male dominance.

These dynamics prefigure the gendered exclusions that persist in gaming cultures today. The Playboy Mansion is a significant example of the normalization of gaming as a male-coded activity that reproduces existing gendered power structures—a notion that continues to shape sexist elements of gaming cultures in the present that frame the participation of women as peripheral or decorative.

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