

# Studying the Invisible: Femininity and Gaming in Girls' Lifestyle Magazines

Stephanie Harkin

RMIT University

124 La Trobe Street

Melbourne, Australia

[stephanie.harkin@rmit.edu.au](mailto:stephanie.harkin@rmit.edu.au)

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Videogame magazines have been pivotal sites for drawing links between games culture, industry, and marketing, prompting influential studies on games history and consumer culture (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Nieborg and Foxman, 2023; Nooney, Driscoll and Allen, 2020). There is hence a priority to preserve magazines in games archives as practiced by the Video Game History Foundation and community-led initiatives like the Internet Archive. Many collections however, tend to only feature dedicated gaming magazines (from *Nintendo Gamer* to *PC Power Play*), therefore representing only the most visible objects and players. Yet the target readers of gaming magazines—typically masculine or boyhood-coded—are not the only people who play games.

The absence of girls' gaming cultures in these collections perpetuates the false assumption that girls do not play games. To research girls' gaming cultures it is therefore useful to turn to the magazines that *do* target girls: namely, pre-teen and teen girls' lifestyle magazines, within which illuminating insights on the interplays of gender, play, and industry marketing arise. This approach follows Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's (1978/1991) work on girls' bedroom cultures, where they note the importance of subculture research that studies beyond what is most public and visible.

This paper shares preliminary findings that surfaced through an analysis of two magazine publications: forty-five issues (ranging between 2006–2020) of Australian pre-teen girls' magazine *Total Girl* (Pacific Magazines, nextmedia, 2002–), and eight issues of Nintendo's *Girl Gamer* (Future UK, 2007–2009)—a free magazine insert included inside UK girls' lifestyle magazines *Bliss* and *Mizz*.

Approaches to games reporting and advertising inside these magazines demonstrate alternative images of games culture. In place of hailing a hardcore 'Gamer' identity (Shaw, 2023; Butt 2022), *Total Girl* situates games beneath a larger banner of 'Play,' reporting them alongside YouTube channels, electronic toys, and sleepover games. Readers are assumed to be ignorant of gaming history, with introductory timelines and profiles of women characters like Lara Croft, communicating a complex

acknowledgment, and at the same time reinforcement, of gendered gaming marginalisation.

The games and genres featured in both *Total Girl* and *Girl Gamer*, meanwhile, vary significantly from mainstream games publications, as does the language used to describe them. Specific formats of girls' lifestyle magazines are deployed, like personality alignment quizzes, friendship and crafting activities, and the centring of fashion and accessories. Games are visually presented on pages bathed in pastel pink and popular characters are rated for their "looks," "huggability," and "furriness" (*Girl Gamer* issue 2, pp. 28–29). Albeit reiterating an ideological model of girlhood, these lifestyle publications are nonetheless challenging many of the existing norms of games reporting (Nieborg and Foxman, 2023), reimagining the medium as 'soft' and feminine in place of 'hard,' boyish and rebellious (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Girls' lifestyle magazines have mostly gone unnoticed in games history spaces—and reasonably so, as they are not clearly marked as gaming objects. My early findings however, begin to offer an illuminating account of feminine play practices and contemporary gendered marketing. These findings thus contribute to a much larger endeavour to account for the unaccounted in games history, in which pivotal groundwork has been laid by feminist games scholars like Laine Nooney (2020) and Carly Kocurek (2017), who give voice to those uncredited and undervalued in games histories that prioritise patriarchal success stories.

In response to the process of sourcing and analysing girls' lifestyle magazines, this paper also reflects on the methodological challenges of researching the invisible. The selected magazines were limited to what was available on second-hand online marketplaces, local library catalogues, and those owned by online hobbyist collectors (see Harkin, 2021).

This paper thus points to the promising insights offered by girls' lifestyle magazines, while also addressing the challenges in studying the invisible, beginning with identifying and sourcing marginal and culturally undervalued materials, while offering a set of suggestions to help steer games scholarship's broader inclusion of the excluded.

## 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 a board member of DiGRA Australia. She is a Chief Investigator on the 'The Australian Emulation Network – Phase 2' Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project. Her forthcoming manuscript *Girlhood Games: Gender, Identity and Coming of Age in Video Games* will be published in 2025.

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