

At Play in the Digital Dollhouse: Machinima (Re)Productions of Girls' Gendered Identities

Cassandra Jones and Rosalind Sibielski

Abstract: This essay examines machinima produced by girls using the videogame *The Sims 2* in order to interrogate the ways in which their representation of girlhood reflects experiences, anxieties and desires often coded as constitutive of adolescent female identity within Western culture. Viewing the creation of machinima as a practice that bridges both cultural production and cultural consumption, we also use these videos to interrogate the role of machinima in girls' material culture. Ultimately, we suggest that *The Sims 2* is invested by its girl users with a function similar to a "digital dollhouse," where they engage in play exploring girls' gendered identities.

Key words: machinima, *The Sims 2*, gender, resistance, cultural production

Lamplord123's machinima *Welcome to My Sims 2 High School* opens with an adult male fidgeting with the focus on an antique camera.¹ His subjects are a variety of teens posing in succession for school photos. All the stock characters of teen-centric popular culture texts are present: the Jock, the Princess, the Nerd, the Rebel, the Misfit, and the "average" girl/guy, all of whom behave strictly according to type in the narrative that follows, which also adheres very closely to the conventions of popular Western media texts made for adolescent audiences. In this machinima, "losers" Amy and Jesse meet in a high school class, where both are ridiculed by popular girl Amber. The two fall in love, share a euphoric first kiss, and, in the story's climactic scene, become engaged after Jesse presents Amy with the requisite diamond ring.

While *Welcome to My Sims 2 High School* does appear at times to mock the conventions of teen heterosexual romance narratives, ultimately it is only the representational conventions of such narratives that are satirized, and not the hegemonic cultural values those conventions routinely reinforce. This is evidenced by the linking of narrative resolution to a proposal of marriage, in which the happy ending becomes contingent not only upon Amy and Jesse following the socially-prescribed path of heterosexual union, but also upon their conformity to orthodox gender roles in the process, thereby enacting a decidedly traditional Western cultural script of both betrothal and gender expression, in which men act, women react, and only opposite sexes attract, with that attraction inevitably culminating in marriage.

Welcome to My Sims 2 High School is representative of a significant subset of machinima posted to video sharing Web site YouTube that is

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produced by users identifying themselves as teenage girls. This type of machinima either reproduces existing popular culture texts or appropriates the generic conventions of the “teen” film and television genres to tell original stories plotted by their creators.² In the process, the majority of such machinima not only duplicate the narrative structures and visual conventions typical of mainstream Western popular culture texts produced for adolescent audiences, but they also reproduce models of hegemonic femininity articulated by such texts. In this paper we examine this subset of machinima in order to interrogate how their representation of girlhood reflects experiences, anxieties and desires often coded as constitutive of adolescent female identity within Western culture. Viewing the creation of machinima as a practice that bridges both cultural production and cultural consumption, we also use these videos to interrogate the role of machinima in girls’ material culture. Ultimately, we suggest that *The Sims 2* is invested by its girl users with a function similar to a “digital dollhouse,” where they engage in play exploring girls’ gendered identities.

Given the large number of machinima produced by girls on YouTube, a random sample of 30 YouTube channels created by girls was selected for this study by typing the search terms “Sims 2” and “machinima” into the YouTube search box. The first 30 channels whose users self-identified as girls between the ages of 13 and 18 were then chosen for analysis. While our sample should therefore not be taken as representative of *all* machinima produced by girls, it does suggest certain trends in girls’ machinima production that were consistent across our sample, and which raise some questions about contemporary media and cultural studies scholarship surrounding girls’ cultural production on the Internet which tend to celebrate such productions as sites at which dominant cultural constructions of gender are resisted.³

At the same time, while the girls in our study listed a number of countries as their places of residence, all with their own specific cultural values and practices, they all embraced hegemonic Western constructions of normative femininity, with the majority exhibiting a decidedly U.S.-inflected model of dress and speech. The majority also list popular U.S. films, television series and books in the “favorites” section of their profiles. While this perhaps explains the obvious influence of U.S. culture on the machinima outside of the United States, it also raises equally interesting questions about the homogenizing effects of the export of U.S. popular culture, and the role that this might play in the standardized models of gender expression reproduced across our sample.

1. Girls, Gaming and Technology—A Site of Resistance?

Feminist scholars have long argued that the differing types of play that female and male children in the West are encouraged to engage in are one way in which they are enculturated into Western societies' "normative" gender roles. Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, for example, note that feminine-gendered toys like doll houses or kitchen sets encourage the cultivation of feminine-gendered behaviors, so that "giving girls crafts to make, houses to decorate, and dolls to nurture . . . predispose[s] them to accessorizing, decorating houses, and caring for babies," activities all coded as the domain of hegemonic femininity within Western culture.⁴ To the extent that video game play is an activity conventionally gendered male, there is a way in which the engagement of female gamers with *The Sims 2*, as well as their production of machinima based on their game play, crosses gender boundaries, transgressing cultural expectations of gendered behavior. At the same time, there exists a continuum of gendered games and gaming practices that marginalizes feminine-gendered behavior, making the adoption of masculine-coded gaming practices an appealing way to earn the respect of other gamers.

As players of *The Sims 2*, a game that decidedly falls on the casual end of the spectrum of hardcore (The *Doom* franchise) and casual (*Animal Crossing*) games, girls already find themselves excluded from consideration as "serious gamers" by virtue of gender. Hardcore gamers are not just named as such based on obsessive gaming, but also because of masculinity and engagement in masculine coded games. "Hardcore games are seen as for mature audiences, hyper-realistic, visually cutting edge as defined by graphic realism, extremely violent, maybe really bloody, and definitely macho."⁵ *The Sims 2*, with its attention toward relationships, building sites of social interaction (businesses, homes, parks, and playgrounds), and its somewhat cartoonish appearance, decidedly falls outside the definition of hardcore gaming.

A research study funded by Maxis found four central types of game play engaged in by players of *The Sims*.⁶ The Conformists play the games as intended by the developers. Death Dealers, on the other hand, kill off all their sims, set fires, or otherwise attempt to destroy their simsuburbia. The Reality TV viewers create households filled with sims with extreme personality traits and relax watching the action play out on screen. The last of the players is The Doll Houser, or a player focused on building, decorating, and landscaping their sims' environments. All of these types of play, with the exception of Death Dealers, exemplify the feminine-gendered kinds of play Lamb and Mikel Brown discuss, thus coding the game as "feminine" in ways that marginalize players within the gaming community for engaging in types of play that are seen as less valuable (culturally speaking) than the games associated with hardcore gaming, which are organized around interests, skills and behaviors coded as masculine.

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Not only is the game play itself coded as masculine, scholarship on game play furthers this masculinization as well by coding the pleasure of game play in terms of conquest and colonization, two projects traditionally viewed as masculinist endeavors. According to Mactavish, “a key component of delight in computer games [is] user-driven *exploration* and *discovery* within a virtual space.”⁷ The work of Espen Aarseth also employs this language: “the race is on to conquer and colonize these new territories for our existing paradigms and theories...”⁸ Thus, by associating the pleasures of game play and game play scholarship with forces of domination and occupation, games not concerned with exploration and discovery find themselves shut out of consideration as hardcore, and therefore as culturally relevant.

However, if we consider the production aspect of machinima, we find that the game play of games not overtly concerned with discovery and exploration, such as *The Sims 2*, develop strikingly similar objectives to masculine game play when the gamer is producing machinima. In order to produce a certain animation, the player must have an intimate knowledge of the responses of their Sims to particular situations. Should the machinimist wish to show a Sim worrying, she must know that his mood meter should be low enough to spark the worry animation in between tasks, but not low that the Sim has an emotional break, a state that precipitates the arrival of the Psychiatrist NPC. The player therefore must have either engaged in multiple forms of *The Sims 2* game play and/or have read guides on cheats in order to understand how to produce the desired effects. To the extent that engaging in multiple modes of game play in *The Sims 2* or consulting guides might be considered forms of exploration and discovery that afford amusement to the gamer whose mastery of the games coding place them outside the definition of the casual gamer, machinima production aligns them more distinctly with the dictates of hardcore gaming—and thus with masculinist forms of game play.

As such, while girls’ participation in machinima production unsettles hegemonic notions of girlhood and its relationship to technology, their alignment with masculine-identified gaming practices does little to disrupt the hierarchization of desirable gender traits. That is to say, female machinimists are disrupting gender norms by adopting masculine traits, but they are not attempting to decenter masculinity from its position of dominance; they are simply saying “we too can play like the boys.” This equation of gender subversion with girls “playing like the boys” reflects a particular strain of feminist theory exemplified by works such as Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinities*, which makes similar claims to the transcendent possibilities of adopting masculinity as a means of overcoming

gender oppression. These claims, however, do nothing to disrupt the gender hierarchy that values masculinity above femininity.⁹

2. Gender Play v. Gendered Play: (Re)Enacting Adolescent Femininity in Girls' Machinima

If girls' involvement in video game play signals their adoption of activities conventionally coded as masculine, however, the type of play that the gamers in our sample engage in and the content of the machinima they create through that play conforms to hegemonic gender expectations, reproducing dominant models of adolescent femininity, as well as reinscribing the fantasies and desires that Western culture tells us "typical" girls long for. Of the existing popular culture texts recreated using *The Sims 2* in our sample, the majority are romance narratives, a genre believed by advertisers, publishers, television networks, and film studios alike to hold a particular appeal for both adolescent and adult women. Zoechickgothkitty's channel, for example, includes a modern-day version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁰ Chrissy4jc's includes a multi-part series titled *A Vampire's Love* based on the musical *Dance of the Vampires* (itself based on Roman Polanski's 1967 film of the same name),¹¹ while FullOfSparkle's includes a multi-part series titled *What Happened to My Fairytale?* based on *Cinderella*.¹²

This narrative focus on stories of (heterosexual) romance is mirrored by the original-content machinima productions in our sample, which similarly tend to be comprised of love stories far more than any other type of narrative. Indeed, while machinima like lodelday's series *Silent Watcher*,¹³ which features a teenage girl with precognitive abilities attempting to unravel a mystery surrounding her visions, are relatively rare across the sample, stories of heterosexual couples falling in love, getting married and/or having children occupy a prominent place among machinima produced by the girls in our study. LilHanniii's *The Sims 2 Movie*¹⁴ and *The Sims 2 Movie II*,¹⁵ which trace the trajectory of one couple's courtship, nuptials and ensuing parenthood, and thelostsheepx's *A Sims 2 Wedding Story*,¹⁶ which chronicles the wedding preparations and ceremony of its protagonists, are representative of this type of machinima.

What is noteworthy about this preoccupation with romance narratives is that the types of stories told by the machinima in our sample represent a deliberate choice on the part of their creators, one of the few aspects of *Sims2* machinima production that is relatively unconstrained by the parameters of the game. Indeed, while, within the limits placed on the characters and environments that can be constructed within the game, any number of possible kinds of stories *could* be told, the machinimists in our study overwhelmingly opted for love stories, a traditionally feminine-gendered genre, over adventure, horror, mystery, or any other genre—and

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this in spite of the fact that the character choices in the game include aliens and vampires as well as humans. This troubles Debra Merskin's characterization of girl's cultural production on the Internet as sites of resistance at which girls "create content, advocate for change, and explore questions about their minds, bodies, and roles in society," not because the romance narratives produced by the girls in our study do not do these things, but because they reaffirm dominant cultural constructions of girlhood rather than subverting them.¹⁷

At the same time, while the machinima in our sample reinforce hegemonic assumptions about adolescent girls' interests and the types of popular culture they assume, their visual representations of female characters also reproduce hegemonic models of feminine gender expression. Without exception, the teen girl characters in the machinima in our sample embody orthodox gender presentations in terms of their modes of dress, the fashioning of their appearances, and the styling of their bodies. None exhibit anything resembling a "butch" appearance, and none appear to resist hegemonic constructions of femininity, nevermind to claim gender identifications other than (heteronormatively) female. As a result, the creators of the machinima in our sample are playing *at* gender through their forays into cultural production, but not playing *with* gender in the way that the girls in Merskin's study do. By reproducing the cultural signifiers through which hegemonic femininity is constituted and inscribed upon the body, the machinima in our study do not challenge dominant cultural understandings of girlhood.

3. "Breaking the Rules": Filmmaking and Gender

Contiguous to our reading of girls' game play and the fantasies they enact through it as a signal of the entrenchment of gender norms within the narratives of our sample is the notion that machinima, as a product, is not simply a text to be read. One must also contemplate the literacies involved in the production itself, and how the technical aspects of creating machinima also figure into the reproduction of or resistance to gender roles. The insistence on the importance of narrative that occurs at the exclusion of spectacle and audio-visual aesthetic appeal, an early criticism of game theorization, notes that like film viewers appreciating special effects and wondering whether the images are "real" or digitally created, video games players "oscillat[e] between illusory immersion and technological awe."¹⁸As videogames are rerouted from an interactive text back into a cinematic form at the hands of machinimists, we must refrain from a simple analysis of the narrative and include an analysis of the methods of production as well.

With this in mind, we must consider how, while girls' machinima

reproduces gendered norms of femininity within the narrative, the very act of producing machinima enacts resistance to norms concerning the use of technology and the production of cultural texts. These girls find themselves producing films within two masculine-gendered activities—gaming and filmmaking. As Mary Celeste Kearney notes in her discussion of a 1998 promotional spot for the Independent Film Channel, even within the context of IFC and its stated goal of “breaking the rules” girls are shown to be laughably out of place in the world of filmmaking.¹⁹ This sentiment is echoed by director Francis Ford Coppola, who, in endorsing digital camcorders as a technology that will enable consumers of film to become producers in the medium, has been quoted as saying, “for me the great hope is now that 8-millimeter video recorders are coming out, people who normally wouldn’t make movies are going to be making them. And that one day a little fat girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart... For once the so-called professionalism about movies will be destroyed and it will really become an art form.”²⁰ While Coppola expresses hope for a radicalization of film production through the means of digital production allowing girls to become legitimate producers of film, this quote exemplifies how the “professionalism” of filmmaking limits legitimate production to specific bodies of a particular age, size, and gender.

While the filmmaking world might dismiss these girls as cultural producers, many of the girls in our sample marked themselves as serious producers. Several of the girls have created cross-promotional websites, linking their YouTube channels to personal sites, replete with production company names and logos. The seriousness with which they approach their craft is made clear in their expressions of identity and practices of channel labeling. Sistaess, for example, labels her YouTube channel as a director and notes in her personal information: “i am essence and i am 15. i am director for sim music videos.”²¹ She does not identify herself as a *Sims2* enthusiast or a simple gamer. She claims for herself the title of “director of music videos.” As of the writing of this paper, she has posted eight music videos made with *The Sims2*. She, like many other girls who create music videos, attempts to recreate the original music video for each song. This painstaking recreation of the original might be said to mirror the system of apprenticeship employed by master painters of the Renaissance to train their underlings. Indeed, many film schools continue this practice today by requiring students in introductory classes to recreate particular scenes from existing films in order to demonstrate their mastery of the craft. In this context, sistaess’s recreation of these music videos and her claim of directorial status function as her insertion into the ‘boys’ club’ of filmmaking through the adoption of traditional filmmaking apprenticeship practices as well as masculine gaming traits. Again, however, as with adoption of masculine gaming habits, her method is to simply emulate the original construct without challenging it.

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The sample of girls' machinima examined here presents some compelling questions for the labyrinthine online maneuverings of gendered behaviors and resistance to gender expectations. The 'digital dollhouse,' in which these girls engage in the exploration of these behaviors, functions somewhat differently than the traditional analog dollhouse. Whereas the traditional dollhouse encourages the fostering of feminine behaviors such as familial caretaking through play, the activities these girls are engaged in both replicates and challenges gendered expectations at the narrative and production levels respectively. While the parameters of this study format does not allow us to include these interrogations here, the question of how hegemonic body and beauty ideals are reflected within the machinimists' productions, how the work of heteronormativity is accomplished by the films in our sample, and how racial difference is eclipsed are all concerns to be addressed in the making and sharing of girls' machinima.

Author Affiliation: Cassandra Jones and Rosalind Sibielski are both PhD candidates in the American Culture Studies program at Bowling Green State University, USA.

End Notes

lamplord123, *Welcome to My Sims 2 High School*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrJCXAqzQUM&feature=channel_page (accessed May 9, 2009).

² For a detailed explanation of the formal conventions of teen films or teen TV see, for example, *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (eds.), BFI Publishing, London, 2004, Timothy Shary's *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*, Wallflower Press, London, 2005, or Roz Kaveney's *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from 'Heathers' to 'Veronica Mars'*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

³ See, for example, Mary Celeste Kearney's *Girls Make Media*, Routledge, New York, 2006, *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet and the Negotiation of Identity*, Sharon Mazzarella (ed.), Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2005, or *Youth Identity and Digital Media*, David Buckingham (ed.), The MIT Press, 2007.

⁴ S. Lamb and L. Mikel Brown, *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 2006, p. 213.

⁵ E. Kubik, *Gender and Video Games*, forthcoming PhD dissertation.

⁶ M. S. Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*, New Riders, Berkeley, 2008, p. 14.

⁷ A. Mactavish, "Technological Pleasure: The Performance and Narrative of Technology in *Half-Life* and Other High-Tech Computer Games" in *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska (eds), Wallflower Press, London, 2002, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁹ J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinities*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998.

¹⁰ zoeychickgothkitty, *Romeo and Juliet [Sims2]* <http://www.youtube.com/user/zoeychickgothkitty#uploads/36/hhU5NioRKg8>

¹¹ Chrissy4jc, *A Vampire's Love, Parts 1-4*, posted at <http://www.youtube.com/user/Chrissy4jc>

¹² FullOfSparkle, *What Happened to My Fairytale, Parts 1-7*, posted at <http://www.youtube.com/user/FullOfSparkle>

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¹⁴ LilHaniiii, *The Sims 2 Movie*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HORONE8NOKI&feature=channel_page

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¹⁶ thelostsheepx, *A Sims 2 Wedding Story*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbBMzPEbXyQ&feature=channel_page

¹⁷ D. Merskin, "Making an About-Face: Jammer Girls and the World Wide Web," in *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet and the Negotiation of Identity*, Sharon Mazzarella (ed.), Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2005, p. 52.

¹⁸ A. Mactavish, "Technological Pleasure: The Performance and Narrative of Technology in *Half-Life* and Other High-Tech Computer Games." *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska (eds.) Wallflower Press, London, 2002, p. 37.

¹⁹ M. C. Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 2.

²⁰ H. Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*. MIT Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 281.

²¹ sistaess. Posted at <http://www.youtube.com/user/sistaess>.

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