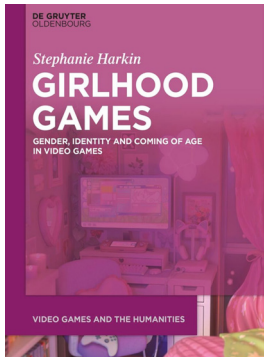

GIRLHOOD GAMES: GENDER, IDENTITY, AND COMING OF AGE IN VIDEO GAMES

Harkin, S. (2025). *Girlhood games: Gender, identity, and coming of age in video games*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111560939

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What are girlhood games? It is very likely that if the book were titled 'pink games', it would not be difficult to imagine an entire market segment, from brightly coloured consoles to digital games 'about girls for girls' themselves. Even more broad casual games, with wider target audiences more diverse in age and gender, would still be clearly distinguishable from the rebellious boy culture full of heroic figures, hacking and modding. Harkin shows us how little we associate girlhood with digital games, despite the fact that young women have been at the centre of attention for major AAA games in recent years.

The book moves the thinking about girls and women as gamers, creators, consumers, and characters forward to more modern levels. The introduction presents a condensed feminist and digital-game theoretical background. It effectively sets the tone for the rest of the book, as the introduction simply and objectively points out the major cultural shortcomings, without the reader feeling that they are reading a repeated indictment of game culture, just as it does not put women in the position of victims. Many examples from the current market (from indie to AAA production) also show that the author is very well versed in contemporary production. The introduction, which is divided into six subchapters, provides well-presented information for anyone who would like to understand the connection of games to the context of postfeminism and popular feminism, and also explains the basic feminist background of how representation and power work in game culture.

Chapter two presents the starting framework for the entire book, and an understanding of girlhood and girlhood games. The categorization of individual elements also shows the depth of what can be seen within games and the market, namely girls in games, girls' games, and girlhood games. While girls' games are a market clearly directed at girls, which is also the subject of production and subsequent marketing strategies, girlhood games "are mostly characterised by their thematic content. They feature girl protagonists and adolescent or coming-of-age themes, meaning they address, in different ways, social obstacles and identity trials" (p. 7). The author connects this type of games with the frequent coming-of-age narrative, also known as *bildungsroman* stories, which are stories focused mainly on the personal growth of the heroes. The entire chapter thus presents an excursion into girls' games (pink games), through which the foundations of the formation of stories about girlhood are shown, which paradoxically find reuse in modern games – even games that do not have strong gender coding like *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007-2021) or *Dragon Age* (Bioware, 2009-2024). The chapter naturally arrives at the development of casual games and their importance within gaming culture, which has broken the masculine coding of games. The most beneficial part can be considered the subchapter "Girlhood beyond girls' games", which shows how the features of girls' and girlhood games spread to products that were not considered 'pink', such as *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella* (Sierra On-Line, 1988) or

The Legend of Kyrandia: Book Two – Hand of Fate (Westwood Studios, 1993), both of which were well-known on the market, so they cannot be considered marginal works that did not reach wider audiences.

The following chapters are akin to separate case studies, each focusing on single series: *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016-2023), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment & Deck Nine, 2015-2024), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013-2024) and the independent games *Secret Little Haven* (Hummingwarp Interactive, 2018) and *Lost Memories Dot Net* (starmaidgames & Aaron, 2017). By the end of the book, it becomes clear that the selected material carries various overlaps, and that the search for girlhood could probably be built on repeating categories, which would create a rather interesting coherence. In this case, each game seems to have its own theoretical basis and elements that girlhood games can contain, which could have been explored throughout all of the selected digital games – *Oxenfree* as a new *bildungsroman* story, *Life is Strange* as an exploration of nostalgia, *The Last of Us* as a modern story of Little Red Riding Hood in a horror setting, and the last two games through the reinterpretation of 90s gaming culture and Web 1.0 era. Although each analysis represents a standalone, but still topical segment, the chapter that explores *The Last of Us* is probably the most thematically inconsistent with the rest of the book. The interpretation of *The Last of Us* as a modernization of the Little Red Riding Hood seems a bit forced. When a modern work alludes to a classic story, the reference is usually not hidden. The author sees the game as a metaphor to Little Red Riding Hood, but the drawn connections wane towards overinterpretation, as it does not follow the values of the original tale:

> Ellie in Part II comes to resemble this monstrous figure, hence my repositioning of her role to the wolf. It is important here to note however, that Ellie's vengeance is not in response to a sexual violation of her body, but rather to the brutal torture and murder of her father-figure Joel. (p. 114)

Similarly, an assignment to the horror genre or an explanation of the functioning of traditional fairy tales was not necessary, as many aspects to which it appeals could be assigned to the post-apocalyptic genre or speculative fiction, which have their roots in fairy tales themselves, like all fantasy genres.

The selection of the first three games clearly represents titles that have high production value, have gained considerable fan attention, and their marketing is not clearly targeted at women; all the while the heroines display a very fluid and queer identity. All stories can fit the bildungsroman genre. *Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net* represent the opposite side of the spectrum in independent creation and show how women project themselves into the medium of digital games. From the author's perspective, both games have a strong connection to the DIY culture of Riot grrrls, and both the feminist and gamer fascination with the Internet as a driving force of creativity. Finally, various types of creativity – from taking pictures, to playing the guitar or writing – have proven to be part of girlhood in each game. The last two games in particular also allow us to see the contradiction between what gaming culture means to many girls and how they are perceived inside gaming culture.

Each chapter offers a high-quality standalone analysis, but there is a certain connection missing, which even the conclusion does not draw to a desirable extent. Despite its few shortcomings, the book is a welcome and refreshing look at female identity in games and beyond. It manages to clearly and aptly work with many problematic intersections when women do not meet traditional femininity – whether in games themselves, through acceptance in gaming communities, to female streamers who do not adhere to feminine standards. It also represents a bridge between traditional feminism and postfeminism, where we no longer have to perceive the inclination towards femininity as unprogressive.

The entire book also forgoes the problematic of visual depictions of the body, and rather focuses on questions of identity in and of itself. This positions the entire work as forward thinking, avoiding the so often repeated questions of how females are portrayed in games and focusing on who females are in digital games and gaming culture. Despite a few minor shortcomings, the book provides significant insight into modern feminist views of digital games, and positions women and girls not as a secondary market for masculine-oriented products, but as an integral and inherent part of gaming culture.

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