

Negotiating Femininities On-line: “Babyz”, cyber bedrooms and scandalous talk

In this paper I look at the opportunities the web offers to young teenagers in terms of collaborative play, the development of a range of literacy skills and the opportunity to play with versions of femininity. Through an analysis of “Babyz”. software, affiliated web sites and forum interactions, I provide an account of girls’ links with each other and their presentations of multiple identities through the Internet. Originally brought together through the medium of the Mindscape game “Babyz”, members of “The Babyz Community”, as participants describe themselves, (www.angelfire.com; www.mnbabyz.cjbnet; www.babyzrus.cjb.net) gain experience in web-site surfing and design, e- mail, as well as opportunities to communicate world-wide.

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Introduction

The software *Babyz* (Mindscape, 1999) provides virtual babies for girls to play with, as if they were dolls. The game appears to be marketed specifically to girls and certainly the numerous associated web sites strongly suggest that the game has been taken up by a mainly female community. Within this community, participants adopt a specific ways of using written language, they develop conventions of play and through these make friendships – and even sparring partners. Whilst Mindscape promotes a stereotypical, idealised mother/baby playing scenario through the soft ware text and images, pockets of the so-called “Babyz Community” have set up their own sites which promote the enjoyment of “abusing” *Babyz* (www.geocities.com/abusingbabyzisfun/sad.htm). These web sites have attracted enthusiastic participants who e mail *Babyz* from their own games, to web site authors who “torture” the infants and describe the suffering of *Babyz* in their custody. Just as many feminists might be regard the game’s promotion of uncritical, conventional doll playing in girls as part of patriarchal hegemony, some also envisage this role-played abuse as if a rehearsal of things to come in adulthood. Such play has disturbed many of the “Babyz Community” (BC) members to , inciting them to voice angry exchanges across the Internet, (www.geocities.com/abusingbabyzisfun/sad.htm; <http://books.dreambook.com/webdiva69/main>.) evocative of fears previously expressed about other popular culture media (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963). Acting as if stakeholders of stereotyped matriarchal values, some of the *Babyz* Community see the rhetoric and web based activities of self declared “abusers” of *Babyz* not as benign but as sinister and symbolic.

The Research Focus

The arena for a sociolinguist, feminist and/or cultural theorist is a fascinating one. It provides rich data for the observation and analysis of:

- The web as both a public and private space for play;
- Internet language use;
- Girls’ web-based interaction and networking;
- Gendered presentations of identity;

- Females' experimentation with new technologies;
- Home literacy practices.

Just as Coates (1996) chronicles the centrality of talk in women's lives, I argue that for many girls the Internet provides an ever open channel of communication which allows friendship talk to take place. The Internet offers an opportunity to use cyber space as a kind of cyber bedroom; an arena for talk often forbidden to girls who are less likely than their brothers, to be allowed to wander the streets and chat with their friends (McRobbie and Garber, 1976).

Matthews writes about what the street corner has to offer young people in terms of cultural space:

These are places where young people can piece together their own identities, celebrate an emotional sense of togetherness and stand apart, if only temporarily from the adult world that surrounds them. 'Streets' are places betwixt and between cultures, neither entirely owned by young people nor fixed adult domains. As such they comprise 'contradictory cultural landscapes' from which signs of autonomy and separateness are both created and inevitably blurred.

(Matthews et al 2000: 77)

Unlike the street corner though, the Internet offers an additional dimension, that of anonymity, which allows participants to experiment with voices and viewpoints which would be taboo elsewhere. I see the Internet as offering teenaged girls an opportunity to connect with each other, to role play a range of attitudes, stances and identities and to explore ideas in a free space, even freer than the street corner. As Heim (1993) would have it, "ICT can enable us to escape the limitations of our physical bodies".

This strange area of the Internet shares qualities with places which Foucault (1986) described as "Heterotopias". The concept of heterotopias invites us to consider the assumed organising principle of time and space. His examples include graveyards, guest houses, hospitals, where the place seem to stand outside ordinary time and yet have a sense of their own history and regulations for behaviour. They seem to stand in juxtaposition to "real" time and space. Heterotopias also challenge traditional binaries such as the public and the private; a feature I have found outstanding in many web sites, with publicly displayed intimacies and personal revelations. One can often come across web sites which seem to speak to closed communities, but which might quaintly request passers by, as the only entry procedure, to sign a guest book, or , more officially, to complete a registration form. The sense of a thousand closed communities, yet on world-wide display.

In talking of mirrors, also heterotopias, Foucault talked about "a placeless place", and "a virtual space that opens up behind the surface", where "I see myself where I am not". Uncannily writing before the explosion of Internet usage, Foucault describes here most aptly the ways in which many Internet users utilise the web to explore aspects of their presented identities. So many of the *Babyz* web sites I have looked at include images of the authors, often in their own homes, smiling out at the camera and perceived audience as if in a show case.

The *Babyz* Community

The “*Babyz* Community” is one which functions in a similar fashion to other girls’ sub-cultures and I refer to the sociological work of McRobbie and Garber (1976) in this respect, since my observations coincide with their early work on girls’ “bedroom culture”. The similarity is strong, between my observations and popular culture research into girls’ doll playing habits, where girls have been observed moving from conventional nurturing play, into the destruction and mutilation of dolls (Formnek-Brunell, 1998; McDonnell, 1994).

Fernback describes the space offered by the Internet in this way:

There is a “virtual ideology” in cyberspace which is collectivist in orientation. There is a strong sense among users that, despite the tolerance needed for the space to be open-minded and despite the potential for oppressiveness, virtual interaction gives users back some of their humanity – a humanity which is authentically expressed among its constituents via a mass medium whose content is not wholly determined by corporate executives.

(Fernback 1997: 46).

This expresses a sense of liberation in the type of discourse available; the freedom to enter discourses and the freedom to speak in a powerful way. As Kenway and Bullen argue, this is a unique offer for the young:

The Internet is not only a source of information and games for students. IT offers children and youth a means to ‘distribute’ their voices and views in ways that they enjoy. It also offers them the opportunity to blend the playful and earnest.

(Kenway and Bullen 2001: 181)

The majority of the data I have looked at declare themselves as having female authorship; the potential for deception on the Internet is, however, frequently exploited. Interlopers have been widely reported in the press and young girls in particular receive regular warnings about this. However the evidence that the sites I have examined are authored by and patronised by girls lies in a range of places.

- “About Me” pages include photographs, reports of meetings with friends, a copious knowledge of girls’ popular culture and so on;
- Questionnaires pasted on notice boards asking about girls’ interests etc. consistently describes a whole range of “girlie” play interests (current or in the past), such as Barbie playing, My Little Pony, sticker collecting and so on.
- The girls’ interactive styles are evocative of those which I have found in other areas of my own research (Davies, 2003);
- The girls’ communities seem to chime with other data focusing on female interaction, friendships and identity (Coates, 1996; Finders, 1997; Hey, 1997; McRobbie and Garber 1976).

Clearly I cannot be absolutely certain that the sites were exclusively populated by girls. Yet it is of course , always the case that researchers must take what their

informants say on trust, albeit that they should explore potential for triangulation “Anecdotal evidence suggests that many qualitative researchers have had the experience of discovering that their informants told them lies.” (Sikes, 2000: 257) argues Sikes; the Internet is not the only place for duplicity and it is clear that caution must always be exercised and triangulation methods sought where possible.

The Babyz game

Purchasers of the pc game *Babyz* must first select a baby from “The Adoption Centre”; before being launched into a virtual house. Next, in a variety of “rooms” players can feed dress and play with their *Babyz*. These react to a virtual mother’s hand operated by the player with her mouse. The Baby can be moved round the house but will also react in a seemingly independent way to stimuli. Thus the baby may accept or reject foods, or playfully show interest in “toyz” whilst being equally capable of turning away from these things. In this respect, the game has the edge on a mere doll, appearing to have life like responses.

The graphics show a house which exemplifies an “ideal western house”, a perfect arena where idealised, even sanitised, versions of motherhood, childhood, and child rearing practices can be played out.



Figure One: A baby being fed in the kitchen. (Navigator in top left hand corner.)

The Help text defines the player as totally essential to the survival of the *Babyz* and the discourse firmly situates the reader in a particular way: unequivocally assuming total dotage and the desire to prioritise the needs of *Babyz* over her own:

Your Babyz depend on you for love and care. To stay happy and healthy, they need to be fed, clothed, washed, and have their diapers changed. They need you to take good care of them when they are sick. Babyz need to be held and rocked, and they especially like to be tickled! And they love to play and learn. The more you play with your Babyz and talk to them with the microphone, the more they will learn and respond to you. But most of all, your Babyz need to know that you love them! And they will love you back.

(Mindscape, 1999 *Help Menu*)

This extract typifies the tone and style found throughout the software. The colloquial, personal style works on graphological, syntactic and lexical levels, in order to make maximum impact.

There is a sense of a particular type of speaker behind the text; the supportive voice of a knowing playmate who is fully immersed in traditional and uncritical maternal role play. The personal pronoun denotes familiarity and represents a very direct way of speaking: “*Your Babyz ...*”, “...depend on *you...*”, “...need *you..*”. The choice to repeatedly use personal pronouns strongly establishes an intimacy between reader and seeming play-partner. The style expresses the essence of collaboration like a play mate, yet there is a sense of authority, of leading the play.

The use of exclamation marks as in “especially like to be tickled!” imply an exclamatory tone, of someone who shares the pleasure of watching “*Babyz*”. The colloquial style is expressed through the use of unorthodox sentences, e.g. “And they love...”. To begin a sentence with a conjunction in this way suggests breathlessness and spontaneity. The construction is used twice within this short paragraph, while the sentence beginning, “But most of all...” works in a similar fashion. The use of this superlative expression, “most of all ...”, whilst colloquial, brings the argument to its simplistic fairy tale climax, where the player is ultimately required to express “love”, in a fair and seemingly logical, mutual exchange.

The text works with the graphics to present an idealised and simplified view of motherhood which presents happiness as the undoubted outcome if certain criteria are fulfilled. However, the simplicity of this framework is not upheld by the role playing evident in all of the associated websites.

The Web sites: Creating a Community

Through the software players can take a direct link to the official *Babyz* web site (<http://www.babyz.net>). At its inception, this site was regularly updated with information and items to download to pc desktops. These would need to be unzipped and then placed into the appropriate *Babyz* folder on the players’ computers. Technological skills were therefore at a premium and it is clear that the game playing was not simply a mindless game of Mummies; this was interaction of a technologically sophisticated kind and as I researched further it became clear that for some, the *Babyz* game was a mere vehicle to provide a reason and a means for interaction across the Internet. It appeared to be a means of contacting the outside world, beyond the isolated play of the real bedroom.

The official site (<http://www.babyz.net>) remains now but is no longer being updated. Yet but other sites continue to proliferate, being authored by *Babyz* enthusiasts who show photographs, organise beauty pageants, set up schools, adoption agencies and even health centres for *Babyz*. In this way the players adopt and creatively extend the traditional values of motherhood and femininity embraced by the discourse of the Mindscape texts. The sites display literacy and technological skills, including web design, graphics use, and even re-programming and editing of the original *Babyz* software. Many sites invite participation through competitions and information

exchange. Yet the sites also echo how 'motherhood' provides gateways to other, more diverse roles and networks. Some sites display advertisements requesting help for extending and authoring aspects of the sites, while others enjoy extending their own role-play by advertising for jobs, for example graphics designers, babysitters, and paediatricians. There is a strong sense of multiple identities within the texts.

Many of the web sites reflect and celebrate a world managed by females; child-care, health, schooling and professional work are all featured, with participants creatively using the software as a springboard for making new meanings. As Buckingham and Sefton Green point out, "The popularity of computer games has brought about a fundamental change in notions of reading and authorship" (Buckingham and Sefton Green, 1994:215) and *Babyz Community* members are both active authors and readers of shared texts.

The web sites tend to be extensive, often containing hotlinks and fifty or more pages encompassing a range of genres, thriving on interaction, via message-boards or through site based advertisements for the exchange of files containing *Babyz*, clothes and so on.

The sharing and loan of *Babyz* allows international play communities; this is not passive uncreative activity, exploring the boundaries and potential of cyberspace. Awareness of copyright issues exists and credit is given for ideas - showing the *BC* understands specific Internet related problems. Authors do not all write using conventional spellings and sometimes struggle to keep within their chosen genre, but nevertheless the role play provides an arena for acquiring and practising new literacy and language skills. Participants seem to luxuriate in the potentially inexhaustible and ever present pool of playmates and ideas, and a forum for publishing and celebrating their own pieces of work.

In the extracts below, an understanding of the way the world of work operates is shown, with reference to specific job types and again, the importance of giving credit where it is due:

Graphics Designer – I need 3 more graphics designers for my site. You must be able to create graphics for me to put on this site and some for others to take and use.

Site Hexer – I need a maximum of 5 site hexers, that are able to hex for my site, you will receive credit for your work. From time to time, I might set you a challenge and you create the clothing, food etc. to my needs, i.e. – I might give you a picture that I want turned into a t-shirt etc.

([Http://bmpms.cjb.net/](http://bmpms.cjb.net/))

Exemplified here is the most common characteristic of all sites; invitations to collaborate, interact and share resources and ideas. There is a strong sense of community and sharing with *Babyz* linking a large group of interested girls across the web.

Hexing

Some web sites contain impressive and comprehensive guides on how to alter the programming of *Babyz*. The reference above to “hexing” refers to the process of changing the appearance of an item; the clothes, toys and even the *Babyz* themselves can be changed and customised by altering the software programming. The complicated process for this is detailed on some of the sites,

....In the white box type *art* then press **find next** at the side. It will take you to the words *art\autobuild\amoeba.bmp..O..end* and over the words
([Http://www.geocities.com/babyz49](http://www.geocities.com/babyz49))

Clearly the *Babyz* Community members are accumulating expertise in explanatory, diagrammed literacy as well as in the programming itself. They seem to move seamlessly from their roles as mothers, to hexers and so on, fully exploiting computer technology to share ideas worldwide.

Some of the messages demonstrate aspects of youthful powerlessness, complaining occasionally about their parents and the rules they must abide by. Yet the sites offer an empowering arena, providing a forum for confidences and discussion in the relative safety of the home. The girls seem to use the web as an arena in which they can explore identities, confide, confess and challenge using a whole range of discourses in partial anonymity.

In taking on roles as mothers, employers, employees or merely even aghast onlookers, the girls try on a range of voices which perpetually serve as commentaries on their own and each others' behaviours. They vote for each other's sites, recommend them, decry them and insult the authors. So much of the fun seems to centre around the use of exaggerated discourses, As Brown has said of women talking about soap operas, "...spoken text is often resistive pleasure ... where they can discuss their own cultural concerns..." (Brown, 1994: 112). The often defamatory language used by the girls in some exchanges certainly shows a zeal for resistant pleasures and an enjoyment of subverting social convention!

Subversive Play?

Just as girls have apparently enjoyed barbarising their Barbie dolls over the years, (McDonnell, 1994) so too the girls use hexing to alter *Babyz* features in mock barbaric ways. On some sites, ([Http://www.geocities.com/riotbabyz](http://www.geocities.com/riotbabyz); [Http://www.geocities.com/abusingbabyzisfun](http://www.geocities.com/abusingbabyzisfun)), BC members are asked to send in pictures of, and stories about, “abused” *Babyz*. Typically these include pictures of “sleep-deprived” or unkempt *Babyz*. These are described as “neglected” and “tortured” *Babyz*. Moreover, some of the *Babyz* have been hexed in ugly ways, e.g. to grow hair all over their bodies or wearing demonic costumes, or put into stories where cruel mothers have left them in the rain. One I have seen has been presented as being in pieces, torn limb from limb ([Http://www.geocities.com/riotbabyz](http://www.geocities.com/riotbabyz)).

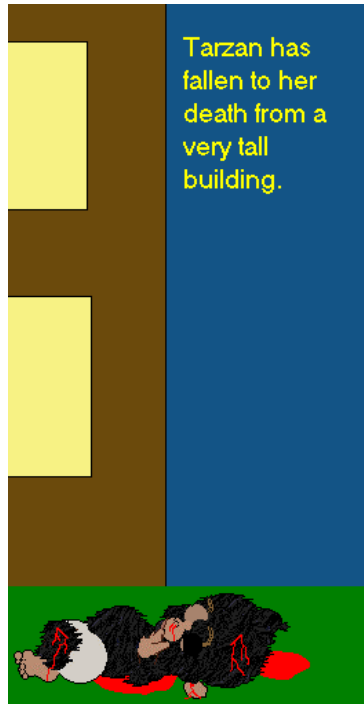


Figure Two: A hexed, hairy Babyz, “Tarzan” who “has fallen to her death from a very tall building” ([Http://www.geocities/riotbabyz](http://www.geocities/riotbabyz))

Very cartoonish, the image here is perhaps a parody of abuse, primitively unrealistic.

Formanek-Brunell’s work (1998) documents how girls have always “brutalised” their dolls as part of their play arguing that such behaviour does not imply anything about girls’ propensity towards human violence, that girls are not confused by the difference between reality and play. Nevertheless, fears are expressed on some web-sites about the mentality of those who have “abused” their *Babyz* ([Http://books.dreambook.com](http://books.dreambook.com)). Comments include, “I hate you”, “Why did you buy the game?”, “And you can’t edit imagez worth shit!!”, “Because of your website you will BURN IN HELL!!” ([Http://books.dreambook.com](http://books.dreambook.com)). The utter rejection of the played out abuse, includes a rejection of the authors as bona fide *Babyz* Community members, (“Why did you buy the game?”), and of their technological expertise. However “abusing” *Babyz* is strongly defended on one site:

This site is set up as a Parody. The definition of Parody for you MORONS IS: Something so bad as to be equivalent to intentional mockery! What does that mean? This site is PURPOSELY done as a joke, the fact that people run campaigns to save PIXELS from abuse is RIDICULOUS, use your energy to stop REAL child abuse... For those who want to comment on how the pictures look fake, well DUH that's the point. We do not support real child abuse we do support the utter and complete abuse of pixels though.

.....

And to top it off, over the last 3 months we had over 100 babies sent to us to be abused, all by different people, and we are the sickos right? HAHA...feel free to contact us if you want to bitch, moan, complain or send pics of your abused pixel babies.

(<http://www.geocities.com/abusingbabyzisfun/index.htm>)

For this author, it is clear that membership of the Community is about more than just exploring technology and subverting imposed messages; she is keen to continue interaction and retain membership; she validates her worth through indicating how many *Babyz* Community members approve of her game. She is keen to ensure that readers are distanced from any kind of empathetic feelings for *Babyz* by using “pixel” to refer denote a *Babyz* figure, reminding them *Babyz* exist only digitally. Moreover the plea remains to keep the interaction going, “PLEASE send them in...” with emphatic use of capitals. It is the enjoyment of scandal which emerges through some of the exchanges on this topic. The use of strong language, the employment of taboo terms of abuse (“this site WON’T stop real babies abuse, you fucking asshole” – <http://books.dreambook.com/webdiva69/mainhtml>) and a frenetic use of capital letters shows that, like women who discuss soap operas, (Brown, 1994; Mumford, 1995), some of the girls relish the opportunity to extend and play a part in the drama through their commentaries. These sites deride *Babyz*’ values yet nevertheless the authors wish to remain part of the *Babyz* Community, albeit wishing to negotiate a place for diversity from within:

I think everybody is entitled to their own opinion on how they play the *Babyz* game... all you people who swear at this site should really get a life ... Just because you don’t abuse *Babyz* that does not mean that everybody else has to play the way you do

(<http://books.dreambook.com/webdiva69/mainhtml>)

Here one girl demonstrates that for her interaction is of greatest importance, while for others, there were clear values being articulated through the play.

Abusers of *Babyz* express a derision that is not only deeply hurtful in individual terms, but also in terms of the social group. The way in which most girls’ play had shown strength was through the incorporation of a range of marketable skills, such as web design or the ability to participate in particular types of networking, such as babysitting arrangements etc. Collective interests were served and ‘traditional’ feminine roles were both preserved and enhanced. Meanwhile, others had demonstrated their rejection of stereotyped values by totally rejecting the play at motherhood. For many girls, the reliable coherence of the *Babyz* Community is utterly betrayed by “abuse” sites, whilst for others the “abuse” sites represent only more of the same: fun with the Internet and a play with identity.

Matthews et al (2000), Valentine and Holloway (1998) found that girls who hang around on the street as a leisure activity, the majority are not involved in “Resistance Activities” but are more interested in ‘just talking’ and generally playing. Matthews et al cite other research too (Corrigan 1979) and Lieberg (1995) who also found that being on the street was more often a place identified because it provided opportunities to meet with similar aged others. Moreover Matthews et al (2000) note that hanging

out is about being with and forming friendships and also that places become invested with the cultural values of the young people who frequent them. This is very similar to the way these young people, the *Babyz* Community use the web.

Indeed, as I argued above, the way in which Matthews et al (2000) theorise the role streets play in girls' cultures as meeting places for them, describes also the role of web domains for many girls.

Final Comments

For the *Babyz* Community it seems to me that *Babyz* has facilitated them to explore a range of voices and to push back boundaries within their dramas. The *Babyz* web site writers and chatroom participants present powerful and varied interpretations of female identities. Interactants indulge in escapism taking time out from the real world to inhabit a slightly different kind of space from that of the real world, able to speak in ways they might not in ordinary life. Within the extravagant dialogue about *Babyz* abuse, girls comment upon each others' behaviours, pleasure is gained from creating and commenting upon scandalous situations (Brown, 1994; Mumford, 1995). The girls exploit the full range of possibilities offered by technology, and their networking provides them with excitement and new friendships across the world. Irrespective of *Mindscape*'s somewhat narrow presentation of motherhood, there is massive variety in the dimensions of play exemplified on the net. The Internet provides a place, a heterotopia for many girls, perhaps representing an international "cyber bedroom" which plays the same role as the bedrooms described by McRobbie and Garber nearly thirty years ago (McRobbie and Garber, 1976).

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[Http://books.dreambook.com/webdiva69/main.htm](http://books.dreambook.com/webdiva69/main.htm)

[Http:// www.angelfire.com](http://www.angelfire.com)

[Http:// www.babyzrus.cjb.net](http://www.babyzrus.cjb.net)

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