Interview: Game Girlz

Geri Wittig

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by Geri Wittig and Max Hardcore:**

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Geri Wittig: On the surface it doesn't appear that the GameGirlz site has any overt feminist stance (no links to feminist sites, etc.) and there's definitely not a separatist ideology, but in looking at your site, I would say that the GameGirlz are a phenomenon that is expanding the feminist front through their engagement with technology and through a forum that displays that engagement on many levels - what do you see as the GameGirlz place in or relationship to feminist discourse and movements?

Vangie Beal: This is certainly a topic I've spent a lot of time discussing with our Lead Editor, Damon. In all honesty, the common connotation of feminism isn't really what GameGirlz is about... or should I say the connotation that is accepted by chauvinistic males. I think Mur, our weekly GameGirlz columnist, said it best when she said that her view of it is equality. Not pro-women, or pro-men; just equality. That may look like pro-women right now, but only because at this point they are currently not treated as equals. But equality is really the underlying goal.

GW: What was your purpose in starting the GameGirlz site and does your intentionality change as the site evolves? What have you discovered along the way?

VB: When I started the GameGirlz site almost two years ago, my only goal was to create a website where girls who were into games didn't have to wade through the semi-nude pictures and scroll through the jokes only a guy could appreciate. I felt there were quite a few game sites online with great content already, but overall the whole social aspect of online gaming felt like this big "boys only club". I wanted to make a site where both male and female gamers could get up-to-date information on Internet gaming, and where women wouldn't feel offended at the site. We still do this, but of course our site has changed a lot and has expanded greatly. Despite the growth, our original goal is still the main focus.

Along the way I have discovered many things. For instance, there are a lot more females playing games online than I ever imagined. I've also discovered that there are many developers out there who are interested in trying to capture that elusive female gamer market. Surprisingly, there are also women who work in the games industry who don't want it publicly known that they are female, out of fear as to how they would be perceived by those working outside their company, in the same field.

Max Hardcore: Do you, as a female player, ever feel like a drag king? For example, when you play Quake, wield your weapons and enter the primarily male discourse domain of networked shooters, is it akin to putting on a strap-on dildo? Or is it an entirely feminine experience?

VB: That would depend on your definition of feminine :). When I play I don't really think in terms of man/woman, but when I go out and play with the ladies in my clan, I find it is a more "womanly" experience, but it is the social aspect that brings those feelings, not the game and game play itself.

MH: Is fragging better than sex? Is there any correlation between the two?

VB: Well to be honest, I've played a few Quake games that were intense enough to be *almost* orgasmic. Is fragging better than sex? Well, I would say no it isn't, but I've heard "Honey turn that damn game off and come to bed!", often enough to really make me wonder about that.

Sex and fragging are a lot alike. It really all comes down to; how well you can strafe, your re-fire rate, how long you can last in the game, and how big of a weapon you get.

GW: What is the GameGirlz economic model? For instance, how do you fund the site and how do you decide what to include in terms of advertising?

VB: The website is not funded. Every day since we have started GameGirlz, the contributors work on different features, interviews, and do daily news because they love gaming and the idea behind a female-oriented website. No one on our staff is paid (including me), and the banner ads we run are for our network hosts, GameStats. GameStats provides us with unlimited disk space, and immediate tech support for our website in exchange for hosting GameGirlz. Depending on how many ad views our site does, there is an opportunity to receive a percentage of ad revenue from GameStats.

Because we aren't a paid website, the staff has free reign over what they do, and when they do it. No one has to log in at a certain time and update, and we don't set deadlines. The site still continues to provide news, reviews and such on a daily basis though, simply because it is the staff's forum, and we all really enjoy doing this. If one of the staff members can't log in, we don't question it; we just find something else to do!

GW: It seems that at the crux of many of the issues that female gamers face is the divide between the developer and the user - what kind of impact do you think the GameGirlz site is having on that situation?

VB: GameGirlz gets quite a bit of response from developers in the computer games industry. At times we've placed polls and surveys on our site, asking females what they would like to see in this game, or what attributes the female character should have etc for developers. In the majority of game companies, you'll find a dozen or two males who are developing a game they all love, and since they are males, they just don't know what elements in the game could be added or changed to be more attractive to a female gamer.

I think it is absolutely wonderful to have developers ask, because when I shell out my 50+ dollars for a game, I know that at some point the company thought about me as a consumer when developing their game.

GW: What would you like to see emerge in the area of game development - your ideal game?

VB: My ideal game does exist, somewhat. Its called Half-Life. Well, actually, Half-Life with an option to play a kick-ass female character would be the ideal. As far as game development goes, it is heading in the direction of games which focus on multiplayer and interactivity through both text and real time voice chat. This is both exciting and, something I think is going to make for some wonderful games.

GW: In spending some time with the site, it's quite easy to come to know or observe on some level the GameGirlz social dynamics. For instance, in reading your coverage of the E3 show in Los Angeles, it became apparent that the GameGirlz crew operates to a large extent telepresently (you hadn't seen HaB and Mur for a year and it was the first time you'd met Goliath and Cassandra). From reading editorials and interviews, I learned "family" details, such as Jason "loony boi" Bergman is Bobbi's brother and that you have a son. This type of personal information makes the GameGirlz seem very accessible, which I think would be beneficial to building community, but it also seems like it could have some negative repercussions how do you deal with or relate to your telepresent visibility?

VB: When we first started we didn't include this kind of information on our site. Awhile back I wrote an article for a game magazine that discussed being a game girl, and my advice on what information you should not give out about yourself for protection. After a year of running GameGirlz, I swear I've broken most of my own rules about that. In light of saying that, however, I still would never provide the kind of direct information that would enable anyone to contact me in any way other than an e-mail message.

In my case, from GameGirlz.com, you can find a link to my personal website, which contains a lot of information about me. You can see photos, you can find out what my favorite dessert is. I think this shows I'm just an average girl who loves games, and that I don't do GG, Clan PMS, Female tourneys and the likes for any reason other than I have fun doing it.

I think if I write an editorial, someone can come read it and say "Cool!" and, well that's it. If I say somewhere that I'm a single mother, than any single mothers who play the kinds of games I do now feel like they know me. Chances are if the person who reads what you have to say can identify with some aspect of you as a person or some aspect of your life; they're more apt to come back. Chances are they'll even pop off a nice e-mail telling me about their kids and how great it is to have found someone who loves the things they love.

I don't think this social aspect would happen if I remain just a name tagged onto the end of a game review. I'd much rather be a person to the people who visit GameGirlz, rather than just some "author".

MH: Do you converse with your enemies when you are in a frag fest? What sorts of things do you say to one another?

VB: It depends on the game. When I'm out fragging with the girls in the clan, we laugh a lot and taunt each other back and forth. Sometimes on random servers we'll find out where others are from and that sort of thing. On servers where there's rude and obnoxious people playing, the comments get nasty (from the Quake girlz as well as the guys) like, "I may not have a dick but you're still going to be riding my rocket". All in all, Quake is not a nice game, and you can't expect everyone to say nice things when they play. When I log in as PMS-Aurora, I think it's fairly obvious I'm a chick, and when the comments turn to outright insulting and unbearable comments, I just find another server to play on.

I usually tend to ignore the "chatting" most of the time anyway. That's what IRC is for. Quake servers are for fragging.

MH: What are the steps I would need to go through to become one of your towel boys?

VB: Well, first we fly you to a sunny beach, where we test out your ability to hand feed grapes and fetch us ladies drinks. During this time you're also tested to see if you are able to love, honor, worship and obey. You also have to prove to us that you can wash your own clothes and do your own damn dishes! Oh wait, those are the fantasy towel boys... oops! My apologies.

Actually, to be a towel boy, you have to be a good person, be someone who can take a joke, deal with the varying moods and personalities of 20+ women, have fun, and be able to deal with getting your butt kicked by us girlz. :) The Towel Boys are our online male friends, who wanted to be a part of Clan PMS, but didn't meet the "must be female" requirement.

GW: What's the next big challenge or goal for GameGirlz?

VB: The next big challenge for us is to work on making interaction with other players through GameGirlz more accessible, and enable female gamers to get in contact with other female gamers.
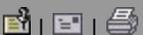

Vangie "Aurora" Beal, is a 23 year-old mother and webmaster, located in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is a hard-core computer gamer, and is actively involved in the online gaming community. Starting with the founding of the first all-female Quake Clan, Vangie has adopted "female gamers" as a pet hobby and has been working to promote games to women through the Quake Clan, and her Internet gaming resource, GameGirlz.Com.

As the site creator and director, she created GameGirlz to provide an open forum and voice for women gamers. Vangie also works as a freelance journalist, who has been published in several print computer gaming magazines, and most recently was interviewed for a MIT Press book titled "From Barbie to Mortal Combat".

Outside of doing GameGirlz.Com, Vangie also works on several other popular Internet gaming resources, including; BostonChick's Quake News, the OGL, Clan PMS, All Games Network, and the weekly webcast show for women gamers, Lilith & Eve.

GameGirlz: **http://www.gamegirlz.com**
BostonChick: **http://www.bostonchick.com**
OGL - Online Gaming League: **http://www.ogl.org**
Clan PMS: **http://www.gamegirlz.com/pms/**
AGN3D: **http://www.agn3d.com**
Lilith & Eve: **http://www.allgames.com/lilitheve/**

::CrossReference

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