Negotiating femininities online

Julia Davies*

University of Sheffield, UK

Much has been written about the potential for online learning (Fryer, 1997; www.ngfl.gov.uk/ngfl/index.html). However this literature typically emphasizes not online learning but online education. In this paper I focus on the potential for online learning, specifically learning about issues surrounding femininity in the presence of online peers, 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, email, as well as opportunities to communicate worldwide. This paper, through an analysis of ‘Babyz’ software, affiliated web sites and forum interactions, provides an account of girls’ links with each other and their presentations of multiple identities through the Internet.

Introduction

Babyz (sic) is a software programme (Mindscape, 1999) that has, in the last few years, attracted the imagination of thousands of girls across the UK, the USA and beyond. The game presents virtual infants in a sophisticated version of ‘cyber pets’, which stormed the teeny popular culture market some years ago. Purchasers of Babyz software are invited to name, dress, feed, play with, bathe, and even talk to their Babyz in as near a parent role as can be technologically contrived through the computer screen. Yet while many girls have been immersed in nurturing their computerized offspring, taking on the identities of mother, others have extended the parameters of this game. Many girls in their play with Babyz, and in their online interactions, have reinterpreted the game, rejecting the preferred ideologies of love and nurture promoted by the software writers, usurping these with signifiers (words and images) which express cruelty. Indeed the Babyz game has provided the gateway to interactive networks with engagement in activities that contest the stereotypes presented by Babyz.

More specifically, whilst the discourse of the software and the official Babyz web site assumes a conventional doll-playing mentality in its consumers, many of the girls play alternative roles, which are not congruent with a passive acceptance of the traditional maternal stereotype. Whilst the majority do indeed seem to embrace

*The School of Education, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA, UK.
this role, it is enacted multidimensionally; *Babyz* players exploit the potential for diversity within the parenting role suggested by Mindscape (1999). Moreover, the maternal identity is treated as powerful, positive, flexible and challenging and this is fostered through networked role-play. However, participants sometimes ‘maim’ their virtual babies and express an enjoyment of doing so; they move from a nurturing to an abusive role (www.geocities.com/abusingBabyzisfun/sad.htm). Whilst some feminists might despair at the overt conformist messages about child rearing which are implicit in *Babyz* software, participants’ subversions of conformist doll playing traditions have led to other concerns, that certain types of play might lead to real child abuse (www.geocities.com/abusingBabyzisfun/sad.htm). Such play has disturbed many of the so-called ‘*Babyz* Community’ (*BC*) members, inciting them to 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 *et al.*, 1963). Acting as if stakeholders of stereotyped matriarchal values, some *BC* members speak out strongly against ‘abusers’ of *Babyz*, seeing their activities as sinister and symbolic, rather than as harmless play. The arena for a sociolinguist, feminist and/or cultural theorist is a fascinating one. It provides rich data for the observation and analysis of language use, of web-based interaction, of gendered presentations of identity, and the ways in which many young females are experimenting with and utilizing new technologies to serve their own networking purposes.

**The research focus**

This paper describes how the *Babyz* package and associated web sites encourage role-play that expresses stereotyped mothering values. Following a tradition of deconstruction, (Barthes, 1977; Williamson, 1978) I examine the images, language and technological features of the software. I discuss aspects of unofficial web pages and show how the authors create texts and images which echo, yet expand upon the values inscribed in the game. I show how the original values of the game are reconstructed and interpolated through these web sites. I consider the messages expressed through the technological medium, and also the purposes the discourse seems to fulfil for participants. As I shall show, participants become involved in interactions that seem at once both private and public; a forum for confidence and disclosure, as well as public displays of femininity and/or rebellion. I demonstrate how girls use the *Babyz* media as channels through which they can present multiple identities, coincidentally developing a broad range of technological and literacy skills on line. As I shall show, it is sustained interaction in the cyber-exchanges which seems to be paramount for participants. Similarly Coates' work on ‘women talk’ (Coates, 1996) chronicles the centrality of talk in women's lives where the culture of sharing, negotiation of meanings and multiple identities are all ingredients of ongoing lifetime conversations as many women experience them. Moreover my own previous research (Davies, 1999) found that girls' classroom talk typically serves multiple purposes, including ‘doing friendship’. I interpret online interactions as evidence that girls are using the web as a further medium for ‘doing friendship’. It may be, however, that the anonymity
provided by the Internet allows participants to experiment with voices and viewpoints that would be taboo elsewhere.

‘Babyz’ web sites seem addressed to, and authored by, girls. The majority of these sites embrace the overt messages of the software, reproducing notions of responsible motherhood and pride in virtual children. Interactions predominantly focus on daily rituals of nurturing and childcare yet the discourse does not reflect lack of creativity. Conversely, the matriarchal voices are powerful, appropriating adult dimensions and responsibilities, albeit via role-play. The potency of the activity on these web sites illustrates social flexibility and a broad range of technological skills. This is not only the case where interactants subvert the software's ideological stance, but also in cases where participants invest in traditional maternal identities.

My 12-year-old daughter, who was captivated by the game and its associated web sites, first drew my attention to Babyz. I saw her skills in ICT develop and her social world expanding as she engaged with international online friends. Through message boards and email correspondence, I gained permission and even encouragement from the Community who urged me to write about Babyz and wished me luck in talking at academic conferences!

My interests as a researcher lie in the language used by the software, on the web sites and in associated chatrooms. I examine the effects of the language and graphics observing how these convey particular messages using a structuralist approach (Barthes, 1977; Williamson, 1978) as well as techniques from a discourse analyst tradition, (Hymes, 1964; Williamson 1978; Maybin 1994; Eggins & Slade 1997). I demonstrate also the technological skills participants use in their interactions with ‘The Babyz Community’. The BC 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’. I am struck also by the comparison between my observations here 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).

The Babyz Community

Participation in online chat allows not only open-forum participation, but also enables anonymity or the presentation of alternative identities (Valentine & Holloway, 2002). This provides one of the pleasures, yet also the dangers of online liaison; many individuals enjoy ‘harmless’ creative role-play, while others have pursued interactions where false identities have obscured sinister intent. The dangers, widely documented by the media with stories involving paedophiles, have attracted particular attention (Owen, 2001). The BC is aware of the web's potential for disguise and experimentation with identity and this potential, is exploited to the full by the BC in their role-play as mothers, teachers, employers and so on. I recognize that each writer's ‘cyber identity’ might be different to her/his ‘real’ self. Generally, however, ‘About Me’ pages are a regular feature of customized Babyz web sites (Http://ththere.homestead.com/aboutme.html; http://www.brock33.freeserve.co.uk/aboutme.htm) and most of these
reveal authors who declare themselves as teenaged and female, (often with accompanying photographs.) In pasting a questionnaire on message boards I described my research and requested information about members' lives. Within 24 hours I received 47 enthusiastic responses to my questions, which described previous prolific ownership of Barbie dolls and ‘Polly Pocket’ toys, female friendships and membership of girls' clubs, e.g., Guides and even cheerleading. Respondents declared themselves as female and whilst these declarations cannot be validated, I gained no evidence to the contrary. However, as Valentine and Holloway are keen to stress, activities online are often closely intertwined with activities in the real world, (Holloway & Valentine 2001; Valentine & Holloway 2001) indeed some Babyz message boards referred to meetings in the ‘real’ world. I cannot be certain that the sites were exclusively populated by girls. As Sikes has argued, ‘Anecdotal evidence suggests that many qualitative researchers have had the experience of discovering that their informants told them lies’ (Sikes, 2000, p. 257) and it is the case that researchers must take what their informants say on trust, albeit that they should explore potential for triangulation. My findings coincide with other data which has focused on non web-based female interaction, friendships and identity (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Coates, 1996; Finders, 1997; Hey, 1997; Davies, 1999) so I feel reasonably confident that at least the majority of my evidence is drawn from female communities.

The software

Purchasers of Babyz software first select a baby from ‘The adoption centre’; the cyber infant is subsequently launched into a virtual house. Players select to enter a ‘room’ (e.g., nursery,) from a constantly available navigator. Babyz may be fed in a virtual kitchen; milk bottles are kept in cupboards, which must be opened; they can be warmed in a microwave and fed to Babyz by a mouse-operated virtual hand. Babyz react to the home environment and to objects introduced via the hand, expressing

Figure 1. A baby being fed in the kitchen (navigator in top left hand corner)
illusionary life, since players do not directly control them. The hand can perform a range of operations, thus requiring a certain dexterity and hand-eye co-ordination.

The graphics provide realistically coloured and scaled representations of a comfortably furnished, contemporary house, populated only by Babyz and the mouse-operated hand. Fixtures and fittings reflect the design of popular western households. Views from windows disclose attractive landscapes, reinforcing notions of desirable, westernized wealth. The home is idealized, sanitized and evocative of the advertising world. While not photographic representations, neither are the graphics cartoonish. This is a world where advertisers typically sew consumer aspirations: bland, yet broadly attractive. The Babyz home serves as a backdrop conforming to the media-defined lifestyle aspirations of a whole range of social groups (Williamson, 1978). Whilst fairly class and culture specific, Babyz nevertheless presents settings in which a broad spectrum of society is customarily asked to imagine itself. It is a consummate arena in which to portray idealized versions of motherhood, childhood, and child rearing practices.

There are black and white Babyz available for ‘adoption’, of both sexes. Like most baby dolls, all Babyz possess large eyes, rounded bodies, and expressive attractive faces. Each baby develops into a toddler who can stand with help from the mother's hand. Babyz can be lifted, dressed and bathed, etc. At the click of a virtual camera, ‘photographs’ are taken of Babyz; images can be pasted into an album. With captions inscribed beneath, many ‘photographs’ are seen proudly displayed on Babyz web pages.

Babyz are not always compliant and in apparent emotion may inexplicably cry, or throw objects. It takes experimentation to discover the provocation for temper tantrums. Just as ‘real’ mothers would, players are encouraged to explore a range of options—prompted by captions from the help menu. Text reinforces the notion that a real relationship exists between Babyz and carers:

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 through graphological, syntactic and lexical levels, in order to make maximum impact. The use of exclamation marks as in ‘especially like to be tickled!’ for example, or ‘you love them!’ imply an exclamatory tone, suggesting the invisible advisor or ‘speaker’, jointly relishes the pleasure the Babyz and player enjoy. The exclamations, revealing delight, imply a shared experience amongst Babyz, speaker and player. Moreover the colloquial style is expressed here through the use of an unorthodox sentence, ‘And they love …’. To begin a sentence with ‘and’ is not strictly standard and expresses breathlessness and spontaneity through its apparent seemingly uncontrolled, childlike syntax. This construction is used twice within this short paragraph, while the sentence beginning, ‘But most of all …’ works in a similar breathless, colloquial way. Here the use of the superlative, ‘most of all …’ 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.

There is a sense of a particular type of speaker behind the text; the supportive voice of a knowing playmate. The personal pronoun offers a direct address: ‘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 voice assumes co-operation and allegiance, speaking perhaps as if another mother, or experienced advisor in matters concerning child rearing. The style expresses the essence of collaboration, yet authority, sharing, but leading the play.

The vocabulary draws heavily on verbs expressing reliance, such as in the repetition of ‘need’ and ‘depend’; this meaning is extended through grammatical constructions, which emphasize mutual dependency and reciprocity. Thus a well intended gesture from ‘you’, the player, will gain a desirable response from Babyz: ‘The more you play with your Babyz and talk to them with the microphone, the more they will learn and respond to you.’ It is assumed that the players share the maternal desire for Babyz to ‘learn and respond’; there is no room for dissent here. The implied logic is cemented via the satisfaction of the verbal construction: ‘the more you + verb’ equals ‘… the more they … + verb’. The sentence is well-balanced, each half of the construction is complete and satisfied; the language sounds harmonious, correctly expressed and sensible. The balance and echo in the syntax helps to confirm the semantic force of the text; that balance and harmony can be achieved if a mother provides the correct trigger. Thus, the balance within this sentence exploits the way in which a grammatical construction can enact meaning; here it implies a sense of harmony and certain logicality. Moreover the emphasis on reciprocity that pervades the piece is articulated in the final exclamation, ‘And they will love you back!’ Here again is the example of a sentence beginning with ‘and’, the use of the personal pronoun, the climactic emphasis on the word ‘love’ and of course the exclamation expressing pleasure. Maternal, caring behaviour is thus shown to be balanced, harmonious, uncontroversial and pleasurable. In this way, the text within the game can be seen as manipulative, shaping a particular way of playing with Babyz. The text works with the graphics to present an idealized 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 websites: creating a community

The navigator on the software provides a link, which can be used to take players directly to the official Babyz web site (www.Babyz.net). Initially, this site was regularly updated with items to augment the software, for example, outfits, toys and food. In order to access these items, players would download files to their desktops, then unzip and move them to the Babyz folder in their computer system. Thus irrespective of the domestic nature of the content of these items, the girls acquired technological skills not traditionally associated with the maternal stereotype. As I shall further exemplify, it is often the technological interest that provides the focus of online interaction.
The official site (www.Babyz.net) is no longer being updated, but others have continued to proliferate, being authored by Babyz enthusiasts who show photographs, organize beauty pageants, set up schools, adoption agencies and even health centres for Babyz. These 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. Stereotyped notions of motherhood and childcare which pervade the software are re-generated and extended in imaginative ways. The sites show 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. As will be shown, there is a strong sense of multiple identity within the texts.

The graphics on most Babyz sites tend to be pastel coloured, using nursery-type motifs as backgrounds, and language which celebrates idealized maternity. For example on a site, which includes 25 ‘photographs’ of the site owner's Babyz, a typical caption reads:

Name: Hazel
Gender: Girl
Comments: She is so sweet! And she is doing what she does best, being CUTE! LOL!
(www.geocities.com/Babyz49/index.html)

Here, the writer uses the ubiquitous exclamation marks, abbreviations, ‘LOL’ (Laugh Out Loud), as well as a formulaic descriptive style. The use of these linguistic markers with its text message ambience, ‘LOL!’ and the colloquial tone, ‘so sweet!’, ‘And she is …’, all embrace idealized discourses of nurture. The linguistic markers signify membership of The Babyz Community for they are strongly characteristic of the up-to-date, lively style used throughout the web sites and chat forums. Heavy punctuation, text messaging, colloquialisms, shorthand explanations and the emergence of Babyz jargon, all contribute to the feeling of a discrete community following specific linguistic conventions; a community with a shared text style, expressing shared values.

The above writer’s enjoyment of Babyz is clear and expresses unquestioning acceptance of stereotyped notions of motherhood. However as Hendershot discusses in relation to Strawberry Shortcake dolls, ‘It would be misguided to condemn girls for enjoying such potently appealing fantasies, for enjoying doll play’ (Hendershot, 1996, p. 100). Moreover, as McDonnell comments ‘these kids … are not merely passive receptacles of popular culture, but active spectators and participants …’ (McDonnell, 1994, p. 18).

There is a celebration of female interests on many of the web sites, reflecting a world managed by females; childcare, health, schooling and professional work are all featured, with participants making creative readings of the software and responding as makers of new meanings. Buckingham and Sefton Green point out, ‘The popularity of computer games has brought about a fundamental change in notions of reading and authorship’ (Buckingham & Sefton Green, 1994, p. 215) and BC 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, they thrive on interaction, typically message-boards and advertisements for the exchange of files containing Babyz, clothes and so on. Here email addresses are given and requests for technological help answered:

*Babyzsitter/Nanny.* I need 5 Babyzsitters and nannys [sic] to take care of Babyz that are sent to us, until Babyz are found a new home. You must have experience, not abuse Babyz and must promise not to keep, copy or deleat [sic] the Babyz in your care. (Http://bmpms.cjb.net/)

Babyz are emailed as files and incorporated into someone else's play for a while. The sharing and loan of Babyz allows international play communities; this is not passive uncreative activity. The play is dynamic, 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. They seem to realize the Internet presents personal risk opportunities as well as offering a 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. (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 community of girls across the web. As Fernback has argued, ‘There is a ‘virtual ideology’ in cyberspace which is collectivist in orientation’ (Fernback, 1997, p. 46), something which Massey has referred to as ‘constellations of temporary coherences’ (Massey, 1998, pp. 124–125), aptly expressing both the groupings, yet also some sort of separateness in those groupings.

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 editing the programming in Babyz in order to change the appearance of an item; the clothes, toys and even the Babyz themselves can be changed and customized. The 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)

Such advice is comprehensive and illustrated with text boxes and menus pasted from original programmes into the web pages. The instructions are easy to follow and it is
clear that 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 web pages include sophisticated advertisements, which require additional skills. In this next example, the text has been extracted from a page where a graphic of a Doctor's qualifying certificate, an image of unwell Babyz (smiles turned down, wearing night-clothes, tears in eyes, etc) and an advertising poster are featured:

Does your little one feel under the weather just like Bree? Why not let our resident (Virtual Babyz) Pediatrician [sic] help out? Tammy Gibbons is fully registered with this site as a qualified Babyz Doctor. Tammy comes to us after having Doctored her own 11 Babyz. Keeping them safe and sound on her Friend's computer. She is mature, caring and kind. Tammy pledges to care for … (Http://ambergraphics.com/bindex.html)

In this role-play, there is clearer evidence of an interest in acquiring the skill to write in different genres and to use language authentically. Knowledge of effective web page layout, advertising literacy and even the qualities required of paediatricians are all displayed in this text. The language is formal, (‘resident’, ‘pledges’), yet has an approachable tone, with its use of the first name ‘Tammy’; further, the text declares itself strongly as authored by a member of the BC, through lexicon such as ‘little one’, and ‘safe and sound’. The use also of questions to engage potential readers' attention is a common advertising ploy, as is the fore-grounding of medical expertise (Williamson, 1978).

Interlocuters luxuriate in the range of roles and voices available to them in their net-based play. As Kenway and Bullen argue:

The Internet is not only a source of information and games … 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 & Bullen, 2001, p. 181)

Moreover, Maybin's research of children's talk in school settings led her to argue that:

One of the ways in which children construct personhood and build up the contextual layers in their talk, is through the reporting and taking on of other peoples' voices. The articulation of different conversational layers, the cross-cutting dialogues and the references out to other contexts and longer term themes all serve to create a particularly rich resource for negotiating and constructing meaning. (Maybin, 1994, p. 131)

Similarly, Valentine and Holloway found from interviewing 11- to 16-year-old Internet users, that “The disembodies and asynchronistic nature of online interactions also offers people the opportunity to position themselves in new ways’ (Valentine & Holloway, 2002, p. 308).

Certainly, examples throughout this research demonstrate how BC members move between different voice types, selecting from genres to suit specific identities. BC members are not restricted to interpreting the Babyz text in just one way, accepting a one-dimensional view of femininity. Through Babyz sites, the playroom is extended across cyberspace and participants experiment with a range of roles and voices, with social connection seeming paramount. As Coates (1996) found in her research ‘talk is doing’ (Coates, 1996, p. 67), and that what women friends do through talk
'is friendship' (Coates, ibid.). The ways in which mothers network in order to support each other's lives beyond the home is also imitated. A message left on a message board in February 2001 read:

Hi! I don't have Babyz yet but I am getting it this week. I tend to be a little busy on Fridays and Tuesday so my point is I would like someone to babysit three Babyz … I am desperate I can pay you in some way if I need to I can't hex or anything yet but I could find new clothes or toys or something … I would find daycare but the ones I know of don't take Babyz on those days. (http://pub.2bravenet.com/classified/show.asp?user-name=10229084&cpv);

There are glimpses of the child behind the role, the anticipation of gaining the game and ultimately the desire to become a bonafide member of the Community; wanting to hex, using the ‘z’ grapheme to pluralize and so on. Kitchin (1998) has argued, ‘life online is not divorced from non-virtual life but highly situated within it,’ thus whilst young people might experiment with identity in the net, they cannot leave their off-line social situation. The following example shows youthful anticipation of being bought the game; this next girl aspires to Community membership even without owning Babyz:

I LUV Babyz but I'm still working on my parentz to get it I'm 11 so want someone (an email friend) of my age and I'm making a web site can anyone email me Babyz? (http://pub.2bravenet.com/classified/show.asp?username=10229084&cpv)

As here, some of the messages demonstrate aspects of youthful powerlessness. Yet the sites offer an empowering arena, providing a forum for confidences and discussion in the relative safety of the home. Perhaps the BC provides a ‘cyber bedroom’ or meeting place, akin to the bedroom culture described several decades ago by McRobbie and Garber (1976) who argued that girls' bedrooms hosted important sites of both resistance and conformity. Here, girls 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. Although as Holloway and Valentine (2001) have noted, for technophobes Internet links are the causeway via which undesirables could infiltrate the home, the girls seem in full control of the kind of interaction in which they participate. Coincidentally, Holloway and Valentine (2001) also found that children in their studies managed risks with confidence, wisdom and dexterity.

Gossip has been identified as a source of pleasure for women who watch soap operas (Mumford, 1995). 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 other's behaviours. They vote for each other's sites, recommend them, decry them and insult the authors. This is all part of the enjoyment of trying out multiple identities. As Brown has said of women talking about soap operas ‘… their own spoken text is often resistive pleasure. They use it to set boundaries for themselves where they can discuss their own cultural concerns …’ (Brown, 1994, p. 112). Whilst Brown argues that although soap operas may appear trivial and exploitative, they actually create and support a social network in which talk becomes a form of resistant pleasure. Women can express uncensored views about the way fictional characters behave in a manner that might be socially unacceptable when about ‘real events’ and people. They thus enjoy using defamatory language,
exaggerated viewpoints and the luxury of unadulterated commentary in a manner which cannot then impact on their own lives. As shown below, some Babyz web site interaction is, in the same vein, highly resistant to usual social convention.

**Subversive play?**

Just as girls over the years have adapted their Barbie dolls with homemade fashions, so too the girls use hexing to alter Babyz features to suit their own requirements. On some sites, (www.geocities/riotBabyz; www.geocities.com/abusingBabyzisfun), players are asked to send in pictures of, and stories about, ‘abused’ Babyz. Typically these include pictures of ‘sleep-deprived’ Babyz, whose owners have ‘woken’ them when they have closed their eyes, or of Babyz whose nappies show signs of being dirty. These are described as neglected and tortured Babyz. Moreover, some of the Babyz have been hexed to grow hair all over their bodies and had demonic costumes painted on them, or put into stories where cruel mothers have left them in the rain. Some have been painted to appear as characters from the Starwars epic, and another I have seen has been presented as being in pieces, torn limb from limb (www.geocities/riotBabyz).

Very cartoonish, using Microsoft paint and hexing techniques, the image here is primitively unrealistic and ironic.

In a similar vein McDonnell describes two girls' play with their Barbies:

![Figure 2. A hexed, hairy Babyz, ‘Tarzan’ who ‘has fallen to her death from a very tall building’ (www.geocities/riotbabyz)](image-url)
One day Martha and her friend Carla emerged from the bedroom holding a couple of naked Barbies over their heads ... Closer inspection revealed that the Barbies were not only naked, but their bodies had also been streaked with magic marker. Also, one Barbie was missing her head altogether. These Barbies had been re-christened the girls informed me. Henceforth they would be known as Stinky-Bum Barbie and Dirty-Bum Barbie. (McDonnell, 1994, p. 13)

Formanek-Brunell (1998) documents the way in which historically, girls have 'brutalized' their dolls as part of their play, noting that this did not reflect anything about girls' propensity towards human violence and that contemporary role-play of destruction is not a reflection of modern times. Just as in times gone by commentators have feared that childhood play might provide the blue print for behaviour in adult life, so too, fears are expressed on some web sites about the mentality of those who have 'abused' their Babyz (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). 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. We are no longer taking Babyz in to be abused because I don't have Babyz installed on my new computer, broke the CD, and haven't had time to buy another copy. OF course if you want to send me a copy of Babyz feel free to contact me. Otherwise, we will be getting one soon. If you have pictures of Babyz that you have abused PLEASE send them in and we will post them. We will keep you anonymous if you wish. 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. (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 argues strongly, using the technical term 'pixel' to refer to a Babyz figure, reminding others it exists only digitally. The author's arguments coincide with Tobin's on the question of television and imitative violence:

... most discussions of the effect of television on children fail to distinguish between children witnessing actual violence versus watching media representations. This conceptual confusion is captured most clearly in the line of morally panicked media critics ... (Tobin, 2000, p. 29)

Moreover the plea remains to keep the interaction going, ‘PLEASE send them in ...’ with emphatic use of capitals. It is also the enjoyment of scandal that 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. The subversive sites seem to be deliberately provocative and ironic for resistant talk can be pleasurable. 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.

Hey (1997) has documented the complexity of girls' friendships and the values inherent within different groupings. Her ethnographic portrayal of female cultures whose parameters are constantly tested, affirmed, explored and even rejected explores unarticulated ideologies, which are most often poignantly revealed at friendship crisis points. Seen through this framework, 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.

Final comments

Babyz has facilitated girls to safely explore a range of voices and to push back boundaries within their dramas, in a similar manner to infants' socio-dramatic play (Marsh, 2000). The Babyz web site writers and chat room participants present powerful, flexible interpretations of female identities. They indulge in escapism of the sort Radway (1984) describes women enjoy in Reading the romance, blamelessly taking time out from the real world to inhabit an existence with idealized conventions. Within the hearty, rebellious debates and extravagant dialogue about Babyz abuse, girls comment upon each other's behaviours. There are echoes of women's soap opera talk, where pleasure is gained from the guilt free sense making and scandalizing about others' behaviour (Brown, 1994; Mumford, 1995). The girls relish the opportunities offered by technology, exploiting it to form bonds, sometimes subversively. The networking is creative, dynamic and resourceful. Irrespective of Babyz' somewhat narrow presentation of motherhood, it is clear that today's players of these very
modern dolls, like their historical counterparts, (Formanek-Brunell, 1998) have an interest in exploring a range of voices and in manipulating parameters in the safety of an (apparently) all-female community.

Clearly the Internet provides a forum for discussion 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 & Garber, 1976). Radway has commented that:

I am drawn finally to McRobbie's brilliant suggestion that it might be our traditional restriction to the arena of personal relations and our resultant penchant for talk about them that will enable us to come together as women and to explore our common cause and divergent agendas. What we need most then, is a place and a vocabulary with which to carry on a conversation ... (Radway, 1998, p. 306)

The girls who use the web sites in order to communicate with others are using roles to express themselves in a range of ways; sometimes speaking as ‘themselves’ and sometimes as mothers or as employers (etc). Their interaction is both public and private, conformist and rebellious and forms just a small segment of a much longer international, historical conversation where women and girls continue to grapple with a range of definitions of what it means to be feminine. In doing so, they form crucial links with each other and seek above all, to stay in contact.

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