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Review of 'Girls and Digital Culture: transnational perspectives on girlhood'

King's College London, 13-14 Sept 2012.

Website <http://gdc.cch.kcl.ac.uk/>

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King's College sits in an authoritative position on the Strand in London. It is proud of its scientific alumni, researchers and teaching staff and has profiles of them in large photographs in windows facing onto the Strand. A small proportion is women: among which are Rosalind Franklin and Florence Nightingale. It seemed an anachronism that on the days I attended this conference the pavement in front of these profiles was criss-crossed by women tottering in impossible shoes to London Fashion Week at the Courtauld Institute in the next building. These 'fashionistas' are a reminder that the world we live in is still a contradictory one for women and men. We campaign for our seats in boardrooms while paying a huge amount of our hard earned income to look like Barbie dolls who have undergone foot-binding. The men we know learn to work with women bosses, come home and do their share of the childcare, and then play out roles of extreme masculinity in 'Call of Duty' and 'World of Warcraft'. Sometimes some of us play alongside. Digital culture produces huge challenges to the achievements women have made in the real world by offering a place where extreme gendered behaviour is the norm. It also provides opportunities for women to organise, and challenge gender oppression, locally and internationally. This conference had presentations covering every point on this continuum. The conference had a wide aim: to look at the effect of digital media on the experience of girlhood.

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There were presentations about the ways in which young women were creating support and online communities for themselves around issues such as being young and pregnant (Lauren Sherman) or of a minority culture (Makiko Nishitani) and finding a global identity (Nadda Albunni) or sharing the experience of being inter-racially adopted (Frayda Cohen). Jessalynn Keller talked about the creation of young women's popular blogs and the income they got from allowing paid advertisements on them. But Vanda Cernohorka reminded us, using examples from Facebook, that the internet is full of verbal violence against women, and jokes about rape and sexual violence, so that women are made to feel vulnerable or co-opted into 'enjoying' the humour. She made a powerful case that feminist activism has not kept up with the new digital media, either on- or off-line.

Lisa Nakamura from the University of Michigan, an author of a number of books about identity and the internet, made a keynote presentation that used evidence from online games sites to argue that digital culture was one of the main environments where young men learned to perform a particular kind of extreme misogynistic masculinity. She introduced us to the concept of 'trash talk' in online gaming. The term 'trash talk' is probably unfamiliar to those of us outside the USA. It is used to describe insults and taunts used by competitors in 'real life' sports in order to upset or anger the competing team so that they play less well. Lisa described how trash talk was the significant discourse in online gaming and the insults and taunts were directed at anyone who did not fit a white male stereotype of a games player. The insults were highly sexist, and, she argued, learned by boys as an appropriate form of masculine behaviour. Learning to do it well gave a player 'rhetorical capital'. Women and others who join the games culture find it very hard to challenge the use of trash talk – even though they are the focus of insults, because – they are told– this is the indigenous culture of whatever game is being played and they have to learn to operate in this culture if they want to join the game. Unlike such language used in 'real life', where it would be immediately challenged as offensive, sexist, even as the language of race or gender 'hate', in the virtual world trash talk is defended as procedural– there to serve a purpose– not expressive of actual feelings of race or gender hatred. Users deny that it is a discourse with meaning, and so deny that they are behaving in a racist or sexist manner. The kind of insults that women gamers receive are often posted on the website '[Fat, Ugly or Slutty](#)'. I am not a gamer so I found the insults copied there pretty shocking, and not something to tempt me to join the gaming fraternity (which appears quite literally to be just that).

Lisa looked at the ways in which women are challenging this behaviour, and are challenging the host websites, however with limited success. Whereas images of breast feeding mothers are censored by Facebook (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/29/facebook-breastfeeding-photo-policy-confused>) , the same site refuses to remove rape 'jokes' (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/09/facebook-controversial-pages_n_1082870.html). Finally she referred us to a blog posting by John Scalzi: '[Straight White Male the Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is](#)' , a post that uses the notion of 'levels' in gaming to explain structure discrimination and disadvantage. This is well worth reading – try out its argument on the young men you know.

The conference was hosted by the School of Arts and Humanities in King's College, with some financial support from the Leverhulme Trust, which made it a very affordable conference. There were about 70 international delegates over the two days, mostly younger women, many doing early career research and post-graduate study. There was a friendly relaxed atmosphere, helped by London showing itself at its best

– and not through fashion week but through two days of late summer sunshine, with views over the Thames. GST readers would recognise many of the topics in the sessions: girls in computing, social networks and community and feminism in the digital world, but others that were more strongly situated in the digital arts and humanities: identity and society, girls on film, and avatars. The issues discussed in this conference take up some of those published in the [special issue of this journal on women and gaming: Vol. 3 No 1.](#), but also remind us that we are an interdisciplinary journal and need to keep an eye on what our colleagues in the digital arts and humanities are doing with the technologies we know so much about.