

Plant's (2000) overview of history, means that once and for all "cyber-space is out of man's control" (273).

The writings of cyberfeminist critics and theorists have become important components of technology and cultural studies in academic circles and have had a dramatic impact on discourses about innovation, science fiction, political activism, and the historical position of women and technology. The rise of cyberfeminist writings has focused increased attention on women's computer-based artistic practices as a result; women's interactive games, however, remain somewhat obscure to both popular and scholarly attention. Of course, there is a lack of scholarly attention given to gaming altogether. Our most popular pastime (in the form of electronic games, sports, etc.) receives very little scrutiny. Critics, either not involved in the culture or afraid to make overly obvious critiques of what seems to "an outsider" like frivolous content lying under gratuitous, violent imagery, shy away from gaming in general. Yet the cultural stakes are quite important and necessitate thoughtful evaluation. In the competition for consumers' attention and dollars, gaming companies' interactive worlds and marketing material become more and more embellished and problematic through time, not less, and are getting more and more complicated in form, content, and the integration of gaming into everyday life. Still, cultural stakes are high, and stereotypes abound. For instance, censure by the Advertising Standards Authority has not stopped companies such as SEGA from creating games based on ethnic stereotypes ("SEGA Dreamcast" 2000).¹ In addition, those who study or speak out on issues like violence in gaming are targets for derision by proponents of computer gaming's representational "innocence."²

Women's games propose an investigation of contemporary issues in electronic media and culture and offer commentary on social experiences such as discrimination, violence, and aging that traditional gaming culture stereotypically uses unquestioningly. Games produced by women will be explored in a close textual reading to take a look at exactly how they rework these issues.

Social Critique

In her "low-tech" game projects, California artist Natalie Bookchin uses humor, pixelation, and juxtaposition to enact disturbing stories. Her

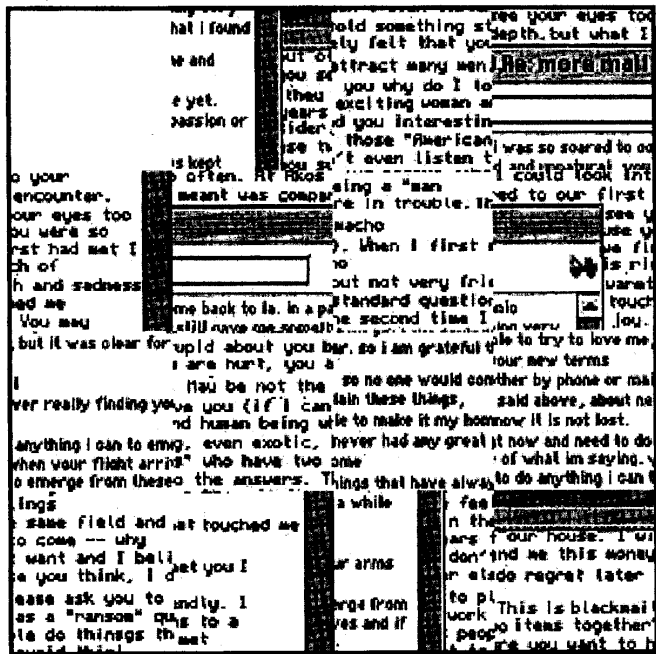
3,912,567
2,674,190
839,230
492,426
364,434
19,927
14,994
666
165

Figure 13.1
Natalie Bookchin, *Truth* (1999).

ironic number/word play *Truth* (1999) (figure 13.1), for example, begins with a list of numbers. Clicking on the numbers brings up thwarted searches in search engines or sites pertaining to "truth." Of course, as any user of a search engine expects, a great deal of irrelevant "truths" appear before the user. Bookchin's play on our expectation of fact or true story, however, is not important; her use of both political- and personal-style stories emphasizes ideas about the outside and interior worlds that "truth" inhabits.

Truth 2 (1999) (figure 13.2) is a sliding block puzzle composed of pieces of e-mail. It contains the broken narrative of a relationship, with references to "our house" and "when I first met you" and "when your flight arrived"; we get the sense of a present-day couple, perhaps even a long-distance romance, falling apart, or perhaps this is a commentary on the way we construct our contemporary communications, in fragments. The image is a narrative jumble of layers of e-mail, window upon window, with snippets of intimacy chopped off by operating system windows. Players piece together this history in a voyeuristic fashion, trying to see the sentences' form in the sliding block-style game.

The most well known of Bookchin's gaming material is *The Intruder* (1998–1999) (figure 13.3). Working from a Jorge Luis Borges short story, "The Intruder" takes the participant through ten arcade-style games as the means of conveying the short story. Participants must play the simple arcade-style games to advance the narrative.



[Click here to scramble](#)

**To play: click on puzzle parts
to slide them to their proper position.**

Figure 13.2

Natalie Bookchin, *Truth 2* (1999).

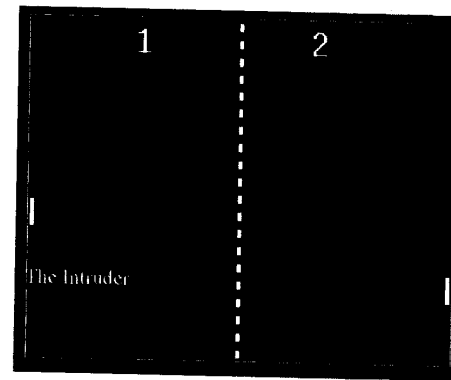


Figure 13.3

Natalie Bookchin, *the Intruder* (1998–1999): opening scene.

In the story, two close brothers decide to share their relationship with a woman named Juliana between themselves. Different games enable the narrative to move forward. With each game move, the player earns a sentence or phrase and thus advances the narrative. We learn about the brothers' relationship, their history, and their fight over Juliana. For example, when the brothers decide that Juliana is getting in the way of their close relationship, they have her pack up her meager belongings and sell her to a warehouse.

The game participants play during this sequence commences with a start, presenting us immediately with the image of a woman's bare underside and a meager bucket (figure 13.4). The body produces little trinkets; the objects begin pouring out of the woman's torso. This loaded image represents several narrative layers: Juliana's meager possessions, the wretchedness of Juliana herself as a possession, or even the trinkets that could be purchased as an exchange from Juliana's sale price to the warehouse. In the end, they fall from her body like loose children, and we collect these bits to know more about her fate.

When a silent, pixelated, blocky figure of a woman appears onscreen in yet another game (figure 13.5), we immediately know this is Juliana,

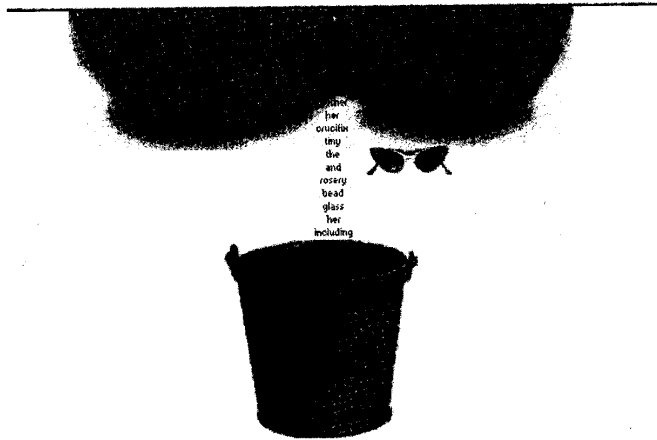


Figure 13.4

Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder* (1998–1999): trinkets collection game.



Figure 13.5

Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder* (1998–1999): woman-running game.

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yet she is never given dialogue or a voice in Borges's story. While the story unfolds around her she becomes, more and more, a shadow produced by men's desire. The game's aesthetic further supports this narrative evolution. Whereas the background graphic (a small town) is somewhat detailed, the closer human figure is obliterated in chunky pixels. As game players we maneuver Juliana, causing her to run or jump, eventually advancing the narrative when she falls into a hole.

Looking at the content of the work and the interaction style, we immediately notice the gap between these two areas, a gap cyberfeminists might note is a site for irony. To cyberfeminists, irony is celebrated as a strategy of resistance. Rosi Braidotti (1996) notes that irony must be performed, not simply presented. "Postmodern feminist knowledge claims are grounded in life-experiences and consequently mark radical forms of re-embodiment," she notes. But they also need to be dynamic—or nomadic—and allow for shifts of location and multiplicity" (para. 19). Thus, whereas women's lived experiences culminate in a variety of complex physical, social, and philosophical realities, commercial games' women characters act as static agents of pleasure. Bookchin's seemingly stiff graphic style and the narrator's solemn reading ironically play off the arcade game concept. Although the story itself is written by a Latina author, the pieces excerpted into the games are narrated (when there is voice at all) by a Latina. Because the narrative is about the control of a Latina woman character, having a Latina both participate in the narrative and refute, or at least cause us to reflect upon, the issue of voice by reading it aloud is an important aspect of the artwork.

The story becomes particularly effective and poignant because of the technological approach used; we, the once perhaps "innocent" interactors/readers/listeners of a short story, find ourselves, within a game format, actually participating in the further abuse of Juliana. What is striking about the work as a whole is not the assembly of cute, fun games but rather how those cute, fun games implicate the participant within the dark narrative. The political position of the game interaction against the narrative becomes stronger when one takes into account the user: we instinctively know that as users we are in a precarious and uncomfortable place, not the typical "rewarded" command post most computer gaming

"Next Level"

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products offer. The implication of the male user becomes particularly marked because of the narrative's focus.

The final tense game seals this implication into an indictment. The player takes part in a "fugitive"-style game in which we guide crosshairs over a pixelated "brush" landscape. The point of view and the sound of a helicopter let us know we are hunters and thus, there is indeed a victim. To complete the narrative, we must aim and "shoot at" a fugitive figure below (metaphorically, at least, this is Juliana) to earn the "reward": the story's end.

While the debate about violence and gaming rages on, the use or at least the suggestion of violence is invoked in Bookchin's work. Mary K. Jones, a producer for Edmark Software, notes that although it is too simple to blame video games for cultural violence, games do offer a unique platform for violence over other media: "I think the trouble with computer-game violence is that you actually cause it to happen . . . you make choices in computer games" (Gillespie 2000: 17). At first, Bookchin's work looks like pure arcade fun; while playing *The Intruder*, however, we unsuspectingly cause Juliana's destruction. Perhaps this is a stronger indictment about violence in computer games than any critic's words could offer, or we could read this activity of "hunting the fugitive" in its larger technocultural context, in which, it seems, woman just does not belong.

Questioning "Woman"

Many women's gaming projects delve into the meaning of "woman in technoculture." This investigation works at odds with stereotypical game images of women and against larger assumptions about the body. The perpetually problematic issues brought forth by the body-mind duality are now inflated by the incorporation of technology artifacts; the relationship of the body to the mind to, now, new technologies and networks must be better articulated and mapped. As architect Karen Franck (1999) notes, "We construct what we know, and these constructions are deeply influenced by our early experiences and by the nature of our underlying relationship to the world" (295). And these experiences have been lived through the body, though Western traditions (including disciplines rang-

ing from classic philosophy to, more recently, design) have sought to deny that fact. Because the body itself not only is a matter of material existence but is also constructed through common practices and discourses, the question of women in computer culture takes on additional meaning as game bodies such as avatars and virtual characters are literally and consciously constructed.

Gaming culture's production of woman is problematic. In fact, while computer games offer a seeming variety of characters as women, from random monsters in *Resident Evil* to *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, the games' relationship to women is an exploitative one. For every seemingly liberatory image of a female heroine or monster in these games, the problematic side of these characters—through dress, unreal body design, and the relationship of the body to the user—dominates. Braidotti (1996), among other writers, is struck by the repetitive "pornographic, violent and humiliating images of women" (para. 46) that are circulated and produced in new technology artifacts. Proponents of computer games argue that characters are simply fictional constructions; many say that games, as a form of popular culture, cannot be taken seriously. Yet the problem lies not only in the representation of the image of woman in gaming culture, but in the relationship we have to that image through game-style interaction and the subjectivities offered through games. The centrality of women characters and bodies in computer games is disturbing because of the control of the virtual body; users cause these virtual women to respond to their actions at all times, complicitly assuming a command-and-control relationship with virtual bodies. This is problematic because such total control over the body, any body, makes the body itself quantifiable. Further, because women have been historically "tied to the body" in a range of ways, from the writings of classic epistemology to current-day health realities (such as higher health premiums due to women's birthing capacity) to marketing efforts that encourage us to "fix" the body (with cosmetics and other products), this association has had a particularly negative effect upon women. Since women are at a disadvantage by being historically "tied" to the body, the controlling relationship to our virtual avatar bodies reduces women's autonomy and value. As Dianne Butterworth (1996) cautions, high-tech "propaganda reinforces men's [and via them, women's] conceptions of the 'inherent' dominance and subordination