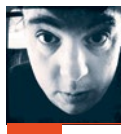

Gatekeeping in the golden age of video games

Old video game magazines are a treasure-trove of fascinating history – particularly those from the early 1980s, an era when the conceptual boundaries and even the language of video games were still crystallising. Advertisements hail long-forgotten games as the greatest of all time, while articles employ curious terminology like ‘screen games’ to describe arcade machines and ‘climbing games’ to refer to the genre we now call platformers. Suffice to say, these vintage publications offer intriguing glimpses into the roots of video game culture as we know it today.

With that in mind, I was recently skimming through the monthly ‘Glitches’ news column in the March 1983 issue of *Electronic Fun with Computer & Games* when an item caught my eye. Under the provocative headline ‘Yoo Hoo, Feminists...’, the short piece reported on the upcoming release of *Strawberry Shortcake: Musical Match-Ups* for the Atari 2600. Parker Brothers marketed the game, based on Kenner’s popular toy line of scented dessert-themed dolls, as the “first video game cartridge for young girls.” What I found striking about the piece wasn’t so much the historical significance of an early game targeted at a female audience, but rather the disdainful tone it struck – a tone all too familiar in 2019.

The authors (the column is jointly credited to Ronald Chironna, Pat Kinsley, David Celsi, Bill Sillbert, and Robert Casilla) open by alluding to “nefarious things” afoot in the “game universe.” After briefly mentioning the emerging trend of erotic games, they identify the real threat: so-called “sexual stereotyping.” The authors go on to frame the pending release of *Strawberry Shortcake: Musical Match-Ups* as a “quantum leap backwards for feminism” due to its “cute,” girl-centric content. They frame the crisis as follows:



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What is the world coming to? Can we expect to see games aimed specifically at other groups? For example, senior citizen games in which ominous muggers try to steal the elderly’s social security cheques; tall people games in which basketball players routinely step on jockeys; and, finally, dentist games, in which Strawberry Shortcake is eliminated because she causes cavities.

In case the authors’ meaning wasn’t entirely clear, an illustration (‘Cute Shoot’) depicting someone scoring a violent headshot on a shooting gallery-style figure with a strawberry head accompanies the article.

So, if you’re wondering how many video games had to be marketed towards girls before dudes started claiming the industry was under assault, the answer is one. Literally. The first one.

Looking back at this news item today, it’s hard not to interpret it through the lens of Gamergate and its own efforts to ‘defend’ gaming from perceived bogeymen – feminists, cultural Marxists, social justice warriors. It represents an opening salvo in the decades-long battle to define what counts as a ‘real’ game and, by extension, a ‘real’ gamer. As is still the case today, *realness* to many gamers remains a fundamentally gendered concept. Contemporary reactions from self-proclaimed ‘hardcore gamers’ to titles like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* – mobile, casual, female – aren’t that different from *Electronic Fun with Computer & Games*’ condescending take on *Musical Match-Ups*.

That the authors flippantly added a violent element to their criticism (‘eliminating’ Strawberry Shortcake, the headshot illustration) is unsettlingly prescient when considered in the context of contemporary harassment campaigns targeting women in the video game industry. Taken as a whole, the article’s a stark reminder that the ‘boys only’ mentality of gaming culture isn’t a new phenomenon. In fact, there’s evidence to suggest it was there almost from the start. 🗿

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