

# You Play Like a Girl: Samantha Noseworthy's adventures in the online world of girl games

By: Keely McCavitt



Figure 1 "Games For Girls" (2016) Noseworthy

It is just after 2am on a weeknight. I have been playing *Ariel's Oven Baked Chicken Breasts* for almost half an hour now, cooking a digital meal in lieu of the real one I should have prepared ages ago. Before this it was *Barbie Driving Slacking*, and before that an extremely questionable surgery game involving an inexplicably battered Princess Elsa from Disney's *Frozen*. I can't help thinking "*I have to be up for work in four hours*" and "*How the hell does a Mermaid have access to poultry?*". Is this entertainment disguised as research, or research disguised as entertainment? I wouldn't be able to give you a straight answer either way. This late-night foray is the result of Sam Noseworthy's video work *Games for Girls* (2016), which takes its subject matter and soul from this genre of online games. The 20 minute video piece and an accompanying essay entitled *Pregnant Tanning, Selfie Accidents and Hairy Legs: Are*

*Free-To-Play Games for Girls Worth Saving or Saveable?* are both components of Noseworthy's investigation into the world of online flash-games and gaming websites directed specifically at young girls. The sheer glut of 2D brain-melters hosted on these sites chattering for the viewer's attention is enough to make your head spin. Though it takes this overwhelming category as its subject, *Games For Girls* does not succumb to its vastness: it exploits it. Sam's work itself is like a well prepared chicken breast: the most delicious of its ingredients being equal parts humour and existential dread.

The work delves into online gaming branded as "girly" that can be played free of charge, often on sites with names like *Gamesforgirls.com* or *girlgames1.com*. The result is a looping video showing the play-through of 22 typical "girl" games shown simultaneously. Using the typical thumbnail format to show multiple games at once, the pink glitter background, and changing background music, the work adopts the language of websites like *girlgames1.com* and makes it its own. We watch recordings of the artist's computer screen as she plays through titles such as *Club Chaos*, *Pregnant Barbie Tanning Solarium*, and many others. It is interesting that this work came out of an initial (and eventually discarded) attempt to archive 50 such games. It was developed into *Games For Girls* as a more singular art piece. The archival underpinnings, however, are still apparent in the final product (which I would argue it is in fact a small performative archive itself). This is, in many ways, an archive of Noseworthy's participation as a female gamer and an artist.

Dark humour seems to be a stylistic staple of Noseworthy's practice. *Games for Girls* certainly is not an exception. There are some particularly humorous moments in

the work where the artist has placed various games next to one another.

The combination of *Barbie Brain*

*Surgeon* (in which you must cut open



Figure 2 "Island of Misfit Toys" (2015) Noseworthy

Barbie's skull and remove high heels, glitter, and lipstick) and *Baby Barbie Shower Fun* stands out as one of the most comical and disconcerting sections of the work. In her earlier and well-received piece, *Island of Misfit toys* (2015), the viewer is treated to images of beloved childhood characters seemingly dead or in the process of dying. Buzz Lightyear's body is mangled and his head has become impossibly large and flat, Sailor Moon floats on her back frozen stiff in a small tropical inlet. The Teletubbies stare out at us unblinkingly as they drift face-down in the sea. The work can be viewed as both as a dark narrative and an absurdist technical demonstration. The video work straddles this line with disorienting ease. Is this video simply a documentation of a digital world created by the artist? Or do we give into the illusory effects, buying into the narrative which leaves one wondering if the long-shots and audio track are showing the aftermath of some sort of brutal attack. Are these beloved pop culture figures the victims of some sort of malevolent force? Or is the trick of the work our inability to separate

childhood narratives from the digital interface? Does our sympathetic reaction to



Figure 3 "Island of the Misfit Toys" (2015)

something so fake (for example Mario's decapitated head, or Link writhing around on ropes looking not unlike intestines a la John Carpenter's body-horror flick *The Thing*) not only further

make us question our own biases, desires, and-dare I be so melodramatic as to say – fear of mortality? It is hard to avoid waxing poetic about the work: after all, when you stare into the abyss Tinky-Winky, Laalaa, Dipsy, and Po stare back.

This underlying unease is also present in *Games for Girls*, but in a much more concrete way. Continuously cycling through recordings of Noseworthy's game play, the work forces the viewer to contemplate the act of her continuous participation in their absurdity and negativity. Sinister in their simplicity, perverse in their unapologetic sexism and (often times) blatant misogyny, the subject matter can be understood as a commentary on the role of such ugly cultural phenomena in the world of online gaming. This is a world which is primarily male-dominated and often times an unfriendly place for female players (the infamous "Gamergate" controversy of this past year is an excellent example of online misogyny rearing its head). Although some games may simply perpetuate over-used stereotypes, others are downright violent and disturbing. It is not uncommon to find a game in which the player perpetrates sexual assault/harassment against a woman advertised right next to simple dress-up or baking games intended for

younger audiences. While explaining this negligent ambiguity, Noseworthy states, “It seems to me that this mutual proximity creates a mutual poisoning”. It is this poisoning which makes the more “innocent” games seem partially malevolent, and the violent games seem partially comical. Many of the violent games involve playing the role of a male character trying to trick a female boss into humiliating herself in front of the office, or making her remove her clothes for him. The creators of the games have not paid much mind to concealing sexually explicit thematics. Other games involve women

sabotaging one another in their attempts for the affections of male characters. Considering that the intended demographic of these games is (as the childhood character franchises and sparkly background seem suggest) young



Figure 4 "Pregnant Tanning Solarium"

girls, one can only wonder how playing these games unsupervised may shape self-image and self-worth. It is very clear, as Noseworthy says, that “Games for Girls does not care about girls”.

To approach the work purely as a hard-line critique would be misguided, as the piece does not take itself too seriously. Humour comes from the absurdity of the games and titles such as the previously mentioned *Pregnant Barbie Tanning Solarium* or games in which the artist uses the simple point-and-click commands to perform complicated tasks such as brain surgery or even delivering quintuplets. The “mutual poisoning” also serves to complicate the video piece. Noseworthy leaves the work

without a specific or heavy-handed message being forced upon the viewer. Its effectiveness lies in its duration and ambiguity.

Noseworthy has had a busy year. Finishing the first half of her MFA at the University of Western Ontario, her most recent work *Vapor Mall* was shown as part of *Art Athina* in Athens in May of this year (represented by Ed Video, based in Guelph - curated by Scott McGovern) as well as in *Basement Revolutionaries* as part of *Vector Festival* in Toronto (curated by Clint Enns and Amber Christensen). *Island of Misfit Toys* has been selected to show at *In/future* art fair happening in Toronto as well. Her body of digital works is impressive, but it is not the only medium she works in. When asked if she would be continuing her investigations into online gaming for girls, Noseworthy says she is taking a break from the darker regions of the internet, and even the internet in general. Finding *Games for Girls* and other projects focusing on more sinister online content to not only be depressing but leaving her feeling like “an estranged outsider”, Noseworthy is going back to her roots in drawing and painting. However, she does not dismiss the importance of academic examination of online content or her previous works. She regards *Games for Girls* as a stepping stone to continue her investigations into low-brow contemporary culture: a category, she states, *Games for Girls* wholeheartedly resides in.

## BIOS

Originally from Riverview New Brunswick, **Samantha Noseworthy** is a multidisciplinary artist and MFA candidate at the University of Western Ontario. She is interested in storytelling through appropriation and simulated identities within internet and gaming communities. Drawing, video and machinima are mediums she most often works in. Her online persona consists of a body constructed solely of empty Mountain Dew bottles- add her on *Steam* (gnomechild69) to say hello! Her favourite “girl game” is: *Ariel's Oven-Baked Chicken Breasts*

**Keely McCavitt** is a writer, museum aficionado, and recent graduate of the Masters in Art History program at Western University where she also completed her BFA. Currently based in Vancouver, she is continuing research around the possibilities of 3D printing in museums as cultural institutions. Interested in the intersections of emerging technologies, visual arts, and museum practices McCavitt is currently completing an immersive internship through the MOA at UBC. Her favourite “girl game” is: *Anna Tooth Injury*.