

Chapter 1

“Come Fly with Us”: Playing with Girlhood in the World of *Pixie Hollow*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pixie Hollow provides a series of useful, accessible examples for discussing gender, the mechanics of community building, and the interconnections between technological fluency and community norms. This game also provides an opportunity to talk about literacy as a fundamentally social act. Also, the overall assignment and its emphasis on journaling as a research tool meant to encourage critical self-reflexivity helps students grasp concepts central to the course as a whole, including race, class, and gender.

INTRODUCTION

Pixie Hollow is a useful teaching tool for first and second year college students in women’s studies, gender studies, and American studies classrooms because of its incorporation of gender roles into the prestructuring of the program. This massively multi-player online game centers on the world of the Disney Fairies. Tinkerbell is the most prominent, and she, as well as the other fairies, flit about the *Pixie Hollow*, helping the seasons, animals, and flora of the Mainland (the world of humans) to flourish. The player designs a character, and embarks on self-selected mini-quests in order to gain points, in-game prizes, and to help the flora and fauna of *Pixie*

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Hollow. This class looks at the connections between technological evolution and hegemonic structures, so prestructuring here refers to both the technologies of game design and the sociocultural framework surrounding design decisions on the part of the programmers and developers.

Discussing *Pixie Hollow*’s design encourages conversations about a version of femininity centered on consumption, affective labor, and performing acts of kindness. This discussion also provides an opportunity to describe the ways in which girlhood becomes a site of both play and policing. Because this game is designed for younger children, it is very easy for college students with varying degrees of technical competency to master it. *Pixie Hollow* provides a unique opportunity to see how technologies of gender (such as the idea of fairies as feminine and little girls as fragile and in need of protection) impact the technologies of game design. I use this game in the classroom to talk about the prestructuring of gender roles into various types of built environment, the roles of various types of literacies in framing community development.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The course “AMST 260: American Culture in the Information Age” focuses on the use of technology in everyday life. I have taught five iterations, each of which drew on the *Pixie Hollow*, a game hosted on go.Disney.com. I designed this course to help students consider the role information, surveillance, and play take in structuring space online and off. I also placed a particular emphasis on the race, gender, class, and affective labor in the construction of communal space. This is a tall order for a second-year course open to any student at the university. Together, my students and I grappled with a number of theoretically-dense texts, including Hayot and Wesp’s “Towards a Critical Aesthetic of Virtual World Geography” (2009), excerpts from Nancy Baym’s work on online friendship (2003), Boellstroff’s *Coming of Age in SecondLife* (2008), and Lisa Nakamura’s seminal *Digitizing Race* (2007). Throughout the semesters I have taught these texts, we’ve struggled with them again and again, particularly their discussions of the built environment of a program’s infrastructure and its impact on the emotional experience of community.

We begin discussing these issues in the second week of class, when I introduce the Disney website. For the first six weeks of class, we engage in a series of virtual fieldtrips while in class together, visiting both *Pixie Hollow* and other online games. Our main focus in these initial conversations are the social rituals associated with friendship and community, paying particular attention to the ways in which community as a concept is both amorphous and fraught with emotion. We talk about how the university, for example, refers to students as members of its community,

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