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How to Play Spice Girls

”Why have millions of avid girl fans all over the world chosen the Spice Girls as their idols?” Posed here by Hillevi Ganetz (1998), this question has provided a starting point for many feminist writers in seeking to explain the phenomenal breakthrough of this “girl band” in the late 1990s (in Finland e.g. Jeronen 1998; Keski-Nisula 1997; Saukkola 1997; Sorainen 1998). Girl fans devoted to the Spice Girls were very young, even under school age, and existing concepts of fandom were also challenged by the fact that the girls had chosen women to be their idols.¹

In discussions,² the question of all these millions of girl fans and their motivation for being fans was typically responded to by reading the products of popular culture, the message passed on by the media and the star images of the idols, and by speculating on how they may perhaps respond to topical needs and requirements in girl culture. On the other hand, in my empirical study an ethnographic perspective means the deconstruction of notions of a broad homogenous audience, such as “millions of avid girls fans” (cf. Lotz 2000). Studying a few enthusiastic girl fans in action, the question of why gave way to how. How did the Spice Girls fans do it? How did the girls construct their own being and doing via fandom? How was a global media message shared by all shaped into personal use in one’s own fandom?

Children’s play as fandom

The need to defend fans against derogatory stereotypes may be a stage that is mostly in the past in the study of fan cultures (Nikunen 2005, 59–63; for comprehensive accounts of stereotypes, see Jenkins 1992, 9–24; Jenson 1992). But the need to defend the value of children’s play and other independent cultural expressions against the controlling and suppressive tendencies of adults will no doubt survive so long as subordinated childhood distinct from being legally competent remains (e.g. Virtanen 1970, 7, 22–23; Sutton-Smith 1997, 201–210; Kalliala 1999, 297–300; Bae 2006³). The stereotype of reckless consumers manipulated by the media will readily steer interpretations of fandom, when the fans are children, and girls in particular (Driscoll 2002, 273). Many media researchers caution against simplified interpretations as either resistance heroes to be celebrated or as pathetic, misled victims that even need to be saved (e.g.

Ginsburg et al. 2002). The images of children in studies of childhood have been the “vulnerable child”, a passive consumer of commercial entertainment culture that needs to be protected by adults against the adverse effects of the media, and on the other hand the “competent child”, an active actor idealized for his or her incomparable media literacy, among other things. (Griffitts & Machin 2003; Makkonen 2005; Wilska 2004). Also in girl studies we distinguish between the so-called victim and power-feminist orientations, with which similar images of girls have been produced. (Lähteenmaa 2002).

Children’s play has not been previously viewed as a form of fandom, although the research literature contains numerous descriptions of how children play at being the heroes or idols of popular fiction (Julkunen 1989; Kalliala 1999, 128–137). Satu Apo, who has studied the “personal mythology” of women, i.e. the use of narratives from popular and high culture as elements for constructing identities and cultural models, has described a group of girls who played *Charlie’s Angels* in the 1970s (Apo 1995, 238; see also Saukkola 1997). Children’s play finds parallels with other ways in which people create the narratives of their lives, also relying on fictive elements (cf. Appadurai 1991, 196–200). Young and adult fans write fan fictions, make videos and produce other fan culture for themselves and others, thus constituting communities interpreting popular culture (Jenkins 1992; Nikunen 2005; Leppänen in print). Similarly, for children play is a conventional form of cultural production and a means of forming communities.

Description of play

My material consists of an interview conducted and videotaped by the researcher Ulla Lipponen at the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (SKSÄ-K 22.1998), in which a nine-year old girl named Aino tells how Spice Girls are played. The interview takes a dialogic perspective: the story of playing is constructed in a conversation with an outside, adult interviewer. The story of play is not play itself; instead the narrative repeats and interprets the experience of playing. Here, solely as written text, the vivid description loses much of its expressive power, and its descriptive gestures, enthusiastic expressions and tones of voice. Also when describing play, the child surrenders to the playing in a way that replicates the experience of its intensive flow (cf. Karimäki 2005 referring to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow).

A child's description of play can express something of the playing as experienced by the child, at a different level than for example observed play as such, without the player's explanations (in which case the researcher primarily gives words to the playing as he or she understands it; for example on a dance performance by a girls' group, see Saarikoski 2006a) (cf. Geertz 1986).

Me and my friends we sometimes play Spice Girls. [– –] We dress up like them and then we play that we're them, or we play, or don't play, but like that you know.

I once played with Anna, she's my best friend, I stayed the night at her place, we played that film with the Spice Girl Barbies, it was fun. [– –] There's these Barbies, we made them from our own Barbies, gave them these clothes and then we just [unclear] and sing, so like that.

What we did was that Anna had a Barbie car, it was quite big but it didn't look at all the same and wasn't as big as their car, in miniature, they've got a really big car, a London double-decker, except with only one storey, like the size of that, not bigger, we thought we'd give everyone their own corner, but there wasn't any room at all and then it was funny 'cause that playing did work out at all, funny at the beginning, in the beginning here, in this magazine [shows the *Spiceworld – The Movie* album of collectible pictures] here, we didn't even sing that, we just moved and then 'hey, hey', then, here, when Geri's got those Mel B's shoes, or boots or whatever, Mel C jumps on top of Geri, and we did it so that we just went 'ha ha ha ha ha ha' [clapping her hands on top of each other to a beat] just like that. It really didn't go anywhere. It was just a funny game.

We dressed them [Barbie dolls] with our clothes that looked the most like theirs. [– –] Was it two dolls from Anna or three from us, of four from us, I'm not quite sure. [– –] Before, we used to play [a lot with Barbies] but now we don't play that much, 'cause it makes such a mess and you have to clean up. [– –] With Miia we always had such fun playing, those Barbies, then we had a lot of stuff and it sometimes happened so that if you had an hour, we got things ready for an hour and then when Miia had to go home we hadn't even properly started.

We play, or we don't play, but you know

At the beginning of her description is Aino expressing uncertainty whether playing Spice Girls is playing or could it be called playing? Earlier in the interview she spoke at length about collecting Spice Girls pictures. Being a successful and skilful collector, she gathered the whole collection (see Saarikoski 2005a). The playing has nothing similar to be won that could be claimed as its achievement; the playing (as recounted here) does not entail competition or winning. Perhaps playing as such does not seem worth telling about just because it was fun?

Studies have repeatedly shown that children of this age, or girls in particular, do not want to say that they play. If not directly interpreted as notifying the end of play, the language of children has nonetheless raised concern about the “shortening of childhood”. Terhi-Anna Wilska (2004, 18–19), for example, describes stereotypes of discussion opposing unauthentic, passive and privatized consumption of entertainment within the home, and real activities, play and games, outside the home. The conception of play outside the home is specifically focused on boys: real play and games are the outdoors plays of large groups of boys, not the playing that takes place inside girls' own rooms. A background factor may also be adult expectations already described by Leea Virtanen in the 1970s, according to which children should spend their leisure time outside the home, not bothering their parents (Virtanen 1970, 40).

Play is the means of children to distinguish themselves as their own age-group and to be separate from adults. Play is steered by a hidden script of resistance for being distinct from adults (Sutton-Smith 1997, 114–126), the “secret” of play, and for this reason children perhaps may not want to say what they are playing at (Virtanen 1970, 21–23; Karimäki 2004).

The culture of preadolescence can generally be regarded as a transition between childhood and youth, an interstice in which the forms of both age-group cultures that are more clearly defined in our culture vary and become mixed (Anttila 2002; Saarikoski 2006b). Fandom of pop music is a form of youth culture in which the small Spice Girls fans also seek to enrol through their fandom, i.e. to distinguish themselves by it from children and their games (Saarikoski 2006a). Therefore play may not seem to be something appropriate to tell in the interview on being a Spice Girls fan: the whole cultural frame of interpretation of fandom in general is not 'play' but

'hobby', as its areas of collecting fan-related goods and holding dance performances were specifically regarded as hobbies. On the other hand, when classifying play from a theoretical starting point, the gathering of set types of picture collections, the trading of pictures and dance performances based on set choreographies can be regarded as play seeking rules.

In the interview conducted by a folklorist at the Folklore Archives, uncertainty in calling the playing of Spice Girls play can signify awareness that playing Spice Girls is not "traditional" children's play. "Traditional" children's play largely identifies with the idea of play currently prevailing among researchers. For example, Leea Virtanen who studied the "contemporary traditions of schoolchildren" in the 1970s had a distinct ideal image of play: play as such was playing together based on the traditional rules of children (Virtanen 1970; see Makkonen 2005, 27). This ideal corresponds closely to the traditional "folk games" of agrarian culture, such as singing games whose history and distribution was investigated by Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio in her doctoral dissertation in folkloristics in 1932. Leea Virtanen was a trailblazer in the 1970s in turning towards the study of urban folk culture. As a folklorist of that period she may have felt she was on a more secure foundation when focusing on phenomena that were definitely traditional while also being contemporary and vigorous.

Since the 1980s a performance-centred paradigm has also become predominant in folkloristics, whereby the studied cultural heritage is no longer seen primarily in texts of traditional form or other products of tradition but instead in the learned skills of producing culturally acceptable performances. In the previous, text-oriented paradigm of folkloristics, play with rules was specifically regarded as traditional children's play. According to the performance-centred paradigm the ability to play at make-believe is just as traditional as playing according to rules. (See e.g. Geertz 1986; Foster 1998; Saarikoski 2005b, 2006a; cf. Kalliala 1999, 52.)

Where the real thing of the 1970s was traditional play according to rules in the yards of homes and schools, playing at make-believe and fantasized role play based on improvisation can be regarded as the current ideal (e.g. Lipponen 2005; Karimäki 2004, 2005; Winther-Lindqvist 2006). The former class of play approaches games and sports with related struggle and victory, while the latter begins to resemble artistic performances with illusions and role characters. Fantasy play essentially involves projects within the mind, in which fantasized or more generally

narrative microcosms are created as specific to each play (Karimäki 2004). The definition of play according to this concept is that of play as a way of realizing mental images and worlds of imagination shared in the activity (Karimäki 2005; Saarikoski 2005b). Within the context of fan studies, the different fandoms created by popular culture can be regarded as communities of play treating worlds of imagery of this kind while creating the forms of dealing with mental images specific to themselves.

Play negotiation

The space of play is constructed and gradually achieved via play negotiation. Play is distinguished as another reality or microcosm with regard to the external boundaries that define it. Play has a beginning and an end: the necessary players and toys are assembled and organized, and finally everything has to be cleaned up. As in *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 26–31), children starting to play conduct an inventory of available materials and means: what is suitable to the present project, i.e. the construction of the desired kind of play, what could mean what for the playing from among all that is available? One's clothes and those of the Barbie dolls, the Barbies and their accessories are inspected; music may be played or songs are remembered to be sung; the narrative of a film known to the players, its characters, plots, narrative motives and themes are put to use as factors of play. The necessary cultural and linguistic competences and material resources are chosen and they provide the platform from which play can proceed.

Elements of the media narrative are picked and creatively combined according to the needs of play in specific situations. Play has its own objectives that its elements do not dictate (Karimäki 2005). Spice Girls is not "a play with five female roles only waiting for its actors" (Ganetz 1998). Instead, it also awaits its scriptwriters, directors, set and costume designers and props. With regard to play, the media narrative is not a complete integrated play; it only offers elements that are used to construct the world of play.

Aino describes two kinds of play, first role-play in which "we dress up as them and then we play that we're them". Nothing more is told about this playing; negotiations on the roles, however, are typical of role-playing, as a result of which children's play roles may replicate quite faithfully the hierarchies and difference of status of their everyday lives (Winther-Lindqvist 2006;

Lipponen 2005; on role competition in a dance group of Spice Girls fans, see Saarikoski 2006a). The points recounted by Aino in her interview underline the harmony and merging of the play group, not any differences or conflicts – the emphasis is connected to the content of the playing. In the interview, the play with Barbie dolls appears more readily alienated as a subject of narration than role play, in which the player herself personifies the character of the playing. Playing with “oneself” and playing with dolls are alternative parallel forms of make-believe playing offered by the culture of play (Kalliala 1999, 114–116). Aino reflects this knowledge of play also to the products of pop culture: the Spice Girls are “also as Barbies”, alongside humans acting out roles. Paradoxically, understanding the Spice Girls themselves as play represents the debated ability of even small fans to “distinguish between reality and fantasy” (see Jenson 1992). The star characters of the Spice Girls are comprehended in accordance with the model of play to be fantasized roles in which both Barbie dolls and people can be dressed.

The relationship of fan play with the mother text

The script of the play with Barbie dolls is a scene from the Spice Girls film that serves as cultural competence in the playing, as shared knowledge making the activity meaningful – and also meaningless (Bourdieu 1972, 182; see also Saarikoski 2005a, note 35).

Play separates itself from the mother text, i.e. the film, when the story is improvised further, thus creating play that is *fun and amusing*, as appreciated by Aino. Play becomes alive precisely through not replicating or imitating anything mechanically. Instead, a new imaginary reality is lived, the illusion of play here and now. It is evident that the play does not even intend to imitate the film closely, scene by scene, although the description of the play “not succeeding” here obviously points to Aino’s competence regarding the film. The fun arising from failure is characteristic of the trickster, a roguish cultural hero or jester, who opens up the possibility of the freedom of impulsive chance in the fate laid down for man in a preordained script. The trickster tests the boundaries of everyday reality and carnivalizes norms and role expectations by failing completely again and again in following them (Radin 1956; Alho 1988, 33–59; Saarikoski 2001, 96–97). Play with Barbies provides an opportunity to enjoy such freedom of failure. With its parody of failure, it thus also appears to deal with the fear of being unsuccessful, which has been called the essential nightmare of our competitive culture (cf. Sutton-Smith 1997, 165; Henry

1975, on which see Saarikoski 2006c, 44–45).

Viewing the fictive narrative of the playing from outside in relation to the story of the film, the most radical rescripting can be seen in the part where in the film “Mel C jumps on top of Geri, and we did it so that we just went ‘ha ha ha ha ha ha’ [clapping her hands on top of each other to a beat] just like that.” An adult viewer can see this scene in the film even as slightly pornographic and clearly homoerotic, with Mel C jumping into the lap of Geri sitting in a red, lip-shaped divan, while the other girls throw large pillows on top of them, and even Emma jumps into the same pile, in a playful wrestling match, make-believe fight or pillow fight. In a joint role play for boys and girls studied by Ulla Lipponen (2005), which was based partly on a German hospital series on television, the children removed all the romantic plots; the little girls playing Spice Girls remove the erotic features of the media narratives. On the other hand, older fans of Mel C from different countries studied by Mari Pajala (1999) and who wrote to the fan pages on the Internet engaged in active debate concerning the possible lesbianism of their idol – this discussion approached fan fiction in that individual speculations and fantasies are added to the elements provided by the media message, but in principle, however, it remained within the bounds of the existing reality of the band members and their lives.

The removal of romance and eroticism in children’s play could be psychologically interpreted as the need of latent-aged children to repress such elements from their consciousness (according to the sociologist of puberty/adolescence Sinikka Aapola (1999), the founding theorists of latency or repressed sexuality in prepuberty include Anna Freud, Erik H. Erikson and Peter Blos). In the light of new empirical research on the culture of preadolescents, however, the generalization of developmental psychology regarding the latent age is unfounded (Anttila 2002, 2005).

Interpreting the narrative of play in cultural terms, the anomalous clapping of the back of the hand with the palm represents the difficulty of interpreting the paired choreography in this part of the script. The play fighting is both “not a fight” and “not a non-fight”, if there even is any kind of fight in the picture. The “ha ha ha ha ha ha” imitation of laughter is a sign there is play in this part of the playing; it concerns the metatext of play or metaplay, the signal “this is play” (Bateson 1972). Rhythmically repeated onomatopoeics and a gesture at the point of an image in the film signify a break in the verbal play narrative, pointing to a key scene that is challenging to interpret. Ambiguity in film is primarily translated as ambiguity in play (cf. Sutton-Smith

1997, 142–144; on cultural translation from one semiotic system to another see Foster 1998). The homoerotic content is not repressed but instead recognized and treated with the means specific to play, by making play of it.

The imaginary utopian space of play

While the mother text, the media message and its images of stardom, facilitates "playing Spice Girls", play also offers freedom from the mother text, the opportunity and also the necessity to do otherwise, on one's own and in one's own way. The stereotype of fandom and also a threat presented in debate of children's policies is the so-called couch potato hypothesis: the recipient of a media message, especially when she is a woman or vulnerable child, is a *tabula rasa* that can passively and uncritically adopt as such the distorted models and repressive ideologies issued by the media (Jenkins 1992, 10; Jenson 1992; Lotz 2000; Sutton-Smith 1997, 146; the tendency to see consumers as passive victims totally manipulated by the culture industry originates in the early Frankfurt school's critique of popular culture; Ganetz 1997, 33; Modinos 2003). Neither cognitive studies of culture any more than media-ethnographic studies of audiences support the assumption of audience as a homogenous mass, passively absorbing media content. The media message has to pass through the imagination of children and to be filtered by their signification in order to be received at all (Sutton-Smith 1997, 154; see also Saarikoski 2006a, 98). Following media messages and fashion trends – as all other construction of cultural models – entails replication and imitation, but it is creative imitation and replication in a different manner.

In its degree of freedom, the playful may even be more radical than feminist rewriting which however renews certain discourses or structures of power (cf. Leppänen in print). As a parallel, I cite the feminist researcher Antu Sorainen's interpretation of Spice Girls as drag (Sorainen 1998, on which see also Pajala 1999) and the treatment of the homoerotic scene in the film in play. I feel the latter could be simply termed "ridiculing". Laughter is an ambiguous strategy of reading that can refer to anything from deprecating or acknowledging the ridiculed message to its exaggeration, turning it upside down and disputing, repelling and denying it.

The discourse on the vulnerable child permits the interpretation that a media message steers children to deal with subjects that are not specific to their age or appropriate for children. In free

and independent play, however, it is difficult to see how children could be forced to deal with subjects that they would not want to address. It is an easy assumption to state that the intimacy of friendship between girls also produces homosexuality as an issue to be dealt with. Questions of “lesbian” or “gay” even in the discussions of small children can be appropriate issues of knowledge, and not just name-calling with terms whose meaning they are not thought to understand (Anttila 2006; cf. Saarikoski 2001, 41, 98–99 et passim). Play provides the means to deal with something that preoccupies the mind, or should we keep to the interpretation of a vulnerable child we can see that play provides the opportunity and also the means to reject dealing with an improper subject.

The media narrative of the Spice Girls provides a great deal of material for interpreting and negotiating the nature of relationships between women, although it never directly refers to the sexual nature of relations. Antu Sorainen’s interpretation is totalising, as suggested by its heading “Spice Girls – Total Drag”: according to it the media message of the Spice Girls creates space for desire between women, gives primacy to relationships between women and displaces heterosexual romanticism, and the star image of the band presents the variety of gender and its constructed and performative nature as something self-evident. The Spice Girls thus produce an alternative for the heterosexual matrix, according to which the dichotomy of two opposite sexes (desiring each other) is natural. Mari Pajala’s critique of the discussion aroused by Sorainen’s contribution, which displayed “a strong desire to explain the meanings of the band unequivocally” (Pajala 1999, 27), could as such be extended to Sorainen’s interpretation as well. In play, on the other hand, the primary aspect appears to be to live through the situation in some jointly agreed-upon mood (“laughter”), experiencing the situation together without having to agree upon its meanings or to explain it more closely.

Following Pierre Bourdieu, Henry Jenkins distinguishes bourgeois aesthetics appreciating an analytical distance when considering an art object from popular aesthetics, which is emotional and immediate and draws closer. Cool distancing is valued as a means of reviewing the ideological content of a text critically while the popular reading is suspected of an uncritical surrender to the ideology offered by the text. Imaginative, emotional identification is an opaque, undisciplined way of reading and as such beyond the control of authority (Jenkins 1992, 18). Fantasy is a frightening, odd and rebellious way of creating reality, for example in carnivals

(Geertz 1986). In the fictive state of play, there is identification with the moods, personages and events of the media narrative as means of dealing with self. The media text is drawn close and there is immersion in it, but at the same time it is distinguished into its constituent parts and rewritten, which is one way of alienating and criticizing a message. The generated proximity typical of fans is thus not a way of falling under the domination of the media message, but instead a way of controlling and appropriating it for one's own use. (Jenkins 1992, 60–66).

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962, 26–47) distinguishes the engineering sciences from bricolage and its intellectual equivalent of mythical thought. The former operates with concepts and seeks to open up, analyse and conceptualize the phenomena that it studies, while the latter “the first science” operates with signs instead of concepts and seeks the reorganization of the project at hand, signification in which the various elements of mixed origins that are in use gain a new meaning in the new totality. Playing Spice Girls is equally bricolage, pottering with physical elements and means, and mythical thought creating the girl group's fundamental story of itself. The poetry of bricolage, the aesthetic of play arises from the fact that it is not limited to physical performance. Instead, it “speaks” with things and objects; even when incoherent and imperfect a performance tells of its author, who through choices inserts something of him or herself in it (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 32).

Parallelling the intellectual interpretation of the Spice Girls and play, we can see that not only the means but also the objectives of interpretations differ. The girls did not choose the Spice Girls as their idols in order to create a girl-cultural interpretation of a media narrative. Through the Spice Girls, however, they create their own culture and interpretation of themselves and their community. The interpretations presented in play are neither unequivocal or completely accessible. Play is above all a comprehensive experience. It is not an explanation of a complete world or the map of a previously used route, but instead a personal, new and hitherto unexperienced reality, a voyage of discovery to the unexpected and at the same the skill, specific to children, to undertake such a voyage.⁴

Material

SKSÄ-K 22.1998. Interview videotape in the Sound Archives of the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. Interview and videotape by Ulla Lipponen (17 August 1998), interviewees 9-year-old Aino (name changed) and her 7-year-old little sister. Duration 60 min.

Spiceworld – The Movie (1997). Directed by Bob Spiers. Distributed by Buena Vista. Duration 1 h 28 min.

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¹ On the connections between fan concepts and gender, see Modinos 2003; on defining Spice Girls fans in terms of “little girlhood”, in order to avoid the gender problem posed by the traditional heterosexual interpretation of fandom, see Pajala 1999.

² The research material here consists of nine articles from 1997–1999, a text corpus formed with a database search in the Helsinki University Library, e.g. Ganetz 1998, Jeronen 1998, Keski-Nisula 1997, Pajala 1999, Saukkola 1997, Sorainen 1998. Mari Pajala’s work is a scientific article published in a journal of media studies, while the others are debate articles and columns of lighter import.

³ Nordic studies of children’s culture cite the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its 13th article on freedom of expression and communication, and the consideration that play is a form of expression characteristic of children. See also Saarikoski 2005b.

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