

**Van Sowerwine's Paper was delivered at *Plaything*;  
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play: Chaired by Zina Kaye.**

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**Boys and Girls Come Out to Play: Chaired by Zina Kaye**

This panel takes on the common perception that women don't play games, and explores gender issues in game design.

**Van Sowerwine (Aus)**

*Play with me*

**Camille Scaysbrook (Aus)**

*Games for Girls ... Girls for Games*

**Mary Flanagan (USA)**

*Let down your long hair? Projects for girls*

# Play with me

Van Sowerwine

<http://www.netspace.net.au/~van>

I'm going to talk about three interactive installations I created between 1999 and 2003, all of which contain elements of game and play although they are not traditional games.

## Girlplay

<http://van.customer.netspace.net.au/interactives/interactives.html#gp>

Girlplay was the first interactive installation I ever created, and is a parody of quizzes found in women's magazines. It also my one and only foray into culture jamming.

I wanted to make an interactive work that investigated the quizzes in women's magazines, and their insidious and normalising nature. I also liked the idea of creating an interactive work that gives back input about the user – generally speaking people are always interested in what such quizzes have to say, even if the results are dismissed.

I decided the best way to present such quizzes was to use the medium itself, so I copied the web design from the *Dolly* magazine website (a popular magazine for teenage girls). Every quiz on the site is taken directly from existing *Dolly*, *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, which I then modified. Users are drawn into what looks like a standard quiz, which then changes and becomes more sinister, highlighting the ultimately sinister normalisation that goes on in such quizzes.

For the installation of the work I housed it in an old game console that I redecorated. This served to further draw people in.

## Play With Me

<http://van.customer.netspace.net.au/installation/installation.html#pwm>

Play With Me is an interactive installation about a little girl, set in a cubby house. You walk into the cubby house and sit down at a child sized table and chairs. A projection of a little girl is in front of you so that it appears that she is sitting opposite you at the table.

In this work I made it very clear how to interact with Flora, the little girl. You use a mouse disguised as a soft toy to click on a glowing object and Flora interacts with that object. It always ends badly – while Flora appears cute and innocent, she is in fact very unhappy and disturbed. While the interactivity serves to create an illusion of control, you ultimately become an active participant in a disturbing and uncomfortable scenario.

In many ways Play With Me is similar to the 'Choose your Own Adventure' books that were big in the '80s – you can pick an option at various point throughout the narrative, and are then lead down a set path until the next crossroads. I used to hate these books – I was never satisfied with the ending I got to, and would keep trying for a better ending.

While I didn't like 'Choose Your Own Adventure' books, they did draw me in and keep me searching for a better endings. Play With Me operates in a similar manner – users often went through all possible options to see if there is a better ending hidden somewhere. The work ends badly every time, however, and as a result it becomes less about trying to win or help Flora escape, and more about discovering more about Flora.

Viewers were able to write letters to Flora, and I received about 100 letters, almost all positive. Many people wanted to take her home and adopt her – while there was no resolution available within the work, viewers created their own resolution by imagining taking Flora out of the world she was trapped in.

Ultimately, Play With Me is a game where you never win. While you might play by the rules, Flora doesn't want to.

## **Expecting**

<http://van.customer.netspace.net.au/installation/installation.html#e>

Expecting is an interactive installation I did with Isobel Knowles. It was a commission for the Experimenta House of Tomorrow exhibition, where we were asked to imagine an element of the home of the future. Isobel and I came up with the idea that in the future, children will have a toy that enables them to give birth to their own playmates.

Expecting consists of a 1/3 scale girls bedroom, with the back wall of the room a projection that appears to be a continuation of the room. In the room is a teddy bear with an umbilical cord coming out of it that appears to go through the screen into the virtual part of the bedroom. In this part of the bedroom a little girl sits playing a video game on her bed.

You squeeze the teddy, and the little get gets up, walks towards you and plugs the other end of the cord into her belly button. As you continue to squeeze she becomes more and more pregnant. She then unplugs the cord, lies down and gives birth to a playmate. They play together for a short time until she gets fed up with the playmate, at which point it disappears.

As with the other works I've shown today, viewers are drawn into a world where something unexpected happens. While interactivity gives an illusion of control, ultimately viewers have very little control over what happens. While Expecting is in some ways a game, it is one where you have no control.