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Some of My Best Dolls Are Black: Colorblind Rhetoric in Online Collecting Communities

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SOME OF MY BEST DOLLS ARE BLACK:
COLORBLIND RHETORIC IN ONLINE COLLECTING COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

REBECCA J. WEST

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2014

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To the memory of Michael Brown, Jr.
May 20, 1996–August 9, 2014

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A white woman and her daughter enter a store hand-in-hand. The little girl approaches an enticing display: girl dolls, ranked in rows behind glass like museum artifacts. The girl points to a doll with black hair, brown eyes, brown skin. “That one, mom, I want that one!”

The mother grabs her child’s white-skinned hand in her own, pulling the child away from the display. “Oh no, sweetheart,” she says. “You don’t want the Black doll. You want one that looks like you.”

At this point, the friend who was telling me this story laughed. “I couldn’t figure out why I said it,” she said. “I didn’t even think, I just told her that she wanted something else.”

“What doll did she get?” I asked.

“Oh, the redhead, of course,” said the friend. And changed the subject.

This conversation from 2004 is what prompted me to look more closely at the American Girl Doll Collection, a successful line of dolls and books that has become an integral part of middle class girl-culture in the United States of America. I had one of these dolls when I was a girl myself; I memorized the elaborate catalog pages and read every book the library had. I remembered these products as a positive influence on my childhood. But my friends’ story introduced issues I had not considered before: the issue of race, the role of adults in children’s consumption, and new styles of consumption that had developed since the company’s beginning. Many things had changed in the twenty years since I had last considered the American Girls Collection—not only had the company expanded greatly and been acquired by Mattel, it had begun to establish an aura of nostalgia as the girls who played with the dolls grew up and reflected on their experiences (Brookfield 2012).

As well as a generational change, a change in consumption had also occurred: the internet had become a driving force. While my experience of American Girl had been primarily through print media—catalogs and books—by 1999 American Girl had established an internet presence, and by 2002 their primary source of customer engagement had become their website, including offering some products only through their online store (American Girl website 2012). The growth of internet technology between 1999 and 2011 was quite astounding.

- Between 1984 and 2011, the number of U.S. households with a computer increased from 8.4% to 75.6%; 71.7% of households in 2011 had internet access within the home. For higher-income families, that percentage increased to 86.9% (File 2013)
- Since 2004, the amount spent on online commerce has steadily increased, even during the 2008 recession, with sales increasing from \$50 billion to \$250 billion by 2013. (Nielsen 2010)
- Established in 1995, the online auction site eBay and its competitors made collecting a much easier, less time consuming process, as collectors were no longer required to travel to obtain an item (Burns 2004)
- While online communities are not strictly social media, the growth of media such as Facebook and Twitter (which 71% of American adults were using in 2013) demonstrates an increasing willingness on the part of internet users to regard the internet as a space for social engagement, rather than merely as an information tool (Pew 2013).
- American Girl, introduced in 1986, targeted girls ages eight to eleven. Thus the first generation of American Girl consumers grew up at the time that computers and the internet were being introduced. While they are still ‘digital immigrants,’ internet technology has still been part of their lives since their early childhood (Prensky 2009).

Given that the first generation of girls to experience American Girl were also the first generation of girls to grow up with widespread computer technology, it is not surprising that these adults—driven by memory, nostalgia, or their children’s interest—turned to the internet to find information about their childhood collections. The informal social networks formed through the process of information gathering and sharing

eventually began to establish a community of fans. It is these communities that I interrogated in this dissertation.

Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, in their discussion of brand communities, emphasized how online communities are important resources for brands to build equity (2003). But such communities can also function in the other direction—rather than being corporate creations, they can be created and maintained by individual consumers, and in this form they may even be more long-lasting than corporate-assisted communities (Kozinets et al. 2010). This participation often leads to higher levels of brand commitment among members, as the interactions within the community influence buying decisions and general attitudes towards the products, often in positive directions.

These buying decisions are some of the “real consequences” of online community participation that I examined in this dissertation. In addition, I also analyzed the role of online community participation in shaping participants’ racial ideologies, both online and offline, as reflected in the purchasing decisions and interpretive understanding of the products. The American Girls Collection was an ideal site for my investigation because of its uniquely conscious messages of racial, ethnic and national identity, as well as the company’s positioning as an “edutainment”¹ company that providing messages of (gender) empowerment. The company’s multiple products—dolls, accessories, clothing, books, magazines, and movies—have saturated the tween market of consumers ages 10–12. Importantly for this study, American Girl passed its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2011.

¹ “Edutainment,” as defined by Okan (2003), is a hybrid genre combining an informal, less-didactic educational approach with game-like or narrative features; pedagogical research since 2000 has criticized this approach as lacking in rigor.

The collectors who participated in the online communities expressed their knowledge of and engagement with these products in the past, as well as their present-day interactions.

American Girl provides a contradictory message: an advertised message of empowerment and diversity, while the products themselves do not fully support this rhetoric. Despite these contradictions, the company remains iconic and popular with consumers. I propose that the contradictory message is accepted by consumers because it resonates with deeper cultural tensions. The ideology of equality, colorblindness and social mobility exemplified by the company flies in the face of mediated and lived experiences of discrimination (as both the actor and the acted-upon), but this discourse remains central in the American national consciousness. Rather than being a source of cognitive dissonance for consumers, American Girl's products provide a reification of what they already know and live.

A factor that has been overlooked in the previous studies of American Girl is the racial messages of the products. Much attention has been paid to the gender elements (Innes 1998; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Marshall 2009), and some to class (Schlosser 2006), but race has been constructed as a side factor rather than a central issue. What conclusions have been made are ones that focus on the historical inaccuracies within certain parts of the collection and an overall trend of racial tokenism, without an analysis of how consumers actually perceive the messages of the collection (Hade 2000; Williams 2006). This construction presents the average consumer as a passive assenter (Sutherland 1985). My research demonstrates that individuals do not merely assent to

these messages, but advocate for them through their social interactions and individual choices.

To both address the gaps in the analysis of American Girl and challenge the assumptions about collecting practice and virtual community, I focused on the following three questions:

1. What is the relationship between the consumption and collection of the material objects of the American Girl Collection and online community interactions?
2. Are there any real-world consequences of these interactions and consumption practices?
3. What is the role of online communities in shaping race and gender ideologies, both on and offline?

In my dissertation, I provide a close examination of the ways adult consumers engage with the products of the American Girls Collection and how that engagement allows them to establish and maintain relationships within a socially significant online community.

Prior research on American Girl has examined several very different areas: the messages explicit in the books (Hade 2000; Nardone 2002), the interpretations of the products on the part of the consumers (Acosta-Alzuru 1999), and the company's marketing (Diamond et al 2009). But one common theme in these studies is most clearly expressed by Sally Edwards in her book analyzing sustainable toy production, *Beyond Child's Play*:

As I designed my research study, I considered how I could amplify women's voices that are often not heard (through my choice of interview subjects), and also how I could engage a new audience, that of women and girls, in a vital conversation about sustainable production and consumption. (2010)

The goal of amplifying women's voices, as they spoke about their own lived experiences, was a goal I shared. But as these varied studies show, dolls as objects in themselves are the result of social organizations and reveal deeply held ideas of race, gender, and nationalism, as well as providing a guiding focus when examining institutions of production. By examining the practice of and the community around doll collecting, I brought to light an often marginalized and overlooked social arena that is a microcosm of larger social patterns.

My research findings are valuable to sociology in several ways. First, my work demonstrates the importance of considering material artifacts, such as dolls, when analyzing micro-level processes that form ideas of race. Second, my research focused on women's leisure activities; while these activities are often dismissed, my research shows how even in these marginalized arenas, participants engage in serious and meaningful racial discourse. Finally, because my respondents were mostly white women, my research demonstrates how notions of white superiority are reified through micro-level social interactions.

How This Dissertation is Organized

In chapter 2, I outline four areas of scholarship relevant to this project: racial ideology, collecting, virtual community, and material culture. I also provide a brief history of dolls and doll production (with a focus on the United States), situating American Girl in to these historical developments. In chapter 3, I discuss my methods, define online ethnography, and provide an overview of the organization of my research sites, paying particular attention to the demographics and membership patterns of these

communities. In chapter 4 I explore the specific activities that make up the social environment of these online communities, explaining the specific activities of discussion that are dictated by the social norms of the environment.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are focused on each particular product line from American Girl—the historical, contemporary, and limited edition dolls and accessories. These chapters examine the frames of colorblind racism, racial ideology, and the social role of collecting respectively. Finally, in chapter 8 I discuss the recent developments in the communities, address some ethical issues, discuss shortcomings of this project, and outline future directions for research. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my findings.

CHAPTER 2

SITUATING IN THE LITERATURE

Material Culture and the Social Life of Branding

The idea that “some things matter” is key to the study of material culture (Miller 1997). Miller differentiates the value of the object from a decontextualized economic value and centers the question in the practice of consumption:

the key moment in which people construct themselves or are constructed by others is increasingly through relations with cultural forms in the arena of consumption. This is in recognition of a historical shift from production to consumption and a legacy of the neglect of consumption as people remained wedded to theories devised in another time (Miller 1995a).

Miller’s analysis follows on Appadurai’s critique of Marx: noting that even a purist would not deny that a commodity is a “thoroughly socialized thing” (1986: 6), and that this “sociality” is highly contextual. Depending on the who, when and why an object is considered, the meaning and value will change. Appadurai identifies this discursive process as the “social life” of the commodity. This conceptualization of Appadurai’s (1986) takes Simmel’s idea that the value of an object is not inherent in the object itself, but is instead centered in the judgments made by subjects regarding the value of the object—judgments that are expressed in the relationships between people who desire an object of value (Simmel 1907:1978; 71). This definition recognizes that the value of an object is relational.

Baudrillard classically described objects as part of a system of meanings, wherein the advertising messages, connotative messages of consumer and artistic objects, and the

objects themselves have differential, complementary, and sometimes contradictory messages (1995). McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig added to this discussion by exploring how brand-consumer communities are formed and what role these communities play in shaping brand loyalty (2002). Their research recognizes that the relationship between consumers with the product, the advertising, the social meaning and other consumers cannot be conceived of as linear. Rather, these relationships form a “mosaic” of meaning—meaning that constantly shifts.

Brands create equity—and in the process acquire iconic status—by providing powerful imaginative constructions that help resolve cultural contradictions. Meanings associated with these iconic brands serve to eliminate felt tensions between societal ideals and people’s day-to-day experiences, and they address the anxieties of a nation through myths or stories that affect the way people think about themselves and their lives (Holt and Thompson 2004). While Holt and Thompson focused on masculinity, Diamond et al. turned their analysis to girlhood and femininity, positioning American Girl as one of the potential meaning-makers for individual identities (2009).

As Kellner notes, we as individuals construct our identities and ideologies based on our experiences with and through institutions; the media in its many forms provides the raw material from which to construct ideas of race, class and gender as well as the self (1984). American Girl is part of American media culture; their books, magazines, movies and other products show what it means to be “American” in both historical and contemporary contexts. The company creates the image that is consumed and internalized by customers. Sutherland (1985), Inness (1998), and Nardone (2002) have argued that by

consuming the products, individuals are practicing a “politic of assent.” This concept assumes that individuals agree to cultural influences without being consciously aware they are doing so. The language of consumption identified by Baudrillard is clearly present in the “system of objects” that is American Girl (1996).

And yet this is not quite the end of the story. Sutherland (1985) notes that beyond the ideology of assent there is the ideology and politics of advocacy—the active support of and choice to consume media images (1985: 147). While American Girl presents their images, consumers must agree to consume them—these are luxury objects that are not required for daily functioning. This is where the matter of choice comes in. Individuals who buy, play with and collect these products are not passively accepting any ideology, any more than American Girl is “passively” presenting it. In the same way that advertising cannot be separated from the system of objects it represents (Baudrillard, 1995: 178) neither can the habits of consumers be separated from the social context in which they are developed. While individual choice is heavily influenced by the system of culture in which they make those choices, empirical evidence supports the idea that individuals are conscious that their choices imply agreement and advocacy of certain positions. American Girl consumers seek to create a myth for themselves.

My research sites, two American Girl collecting forums, are communities built around the consumption of a specific set of objects. Within this community, questions of conspicuous consumption are engaged with actively. The concept of conspicuous consumption brings up the idea of consumption as a means to appear as part of the upper class: goods should not only be expensive, but be clearly differentiated from the world of

productive labor (Veblen 1899/1957: 170). American Girl collecting fits this description: not only are the goods expensive (and frequently criticized for this fact), but as toys they are obviously objects of leisure. American adult doll collectors do not even have the socially-acceptable “reason” to collect toys that American children have (namely, that toys teach “life skills.”) This construction of self-centered consumption patterns demonstrates more than simple possession of wealth—gender, race, class and sexuality are all practiced through the act of collecting and the objects collected.

Dolls

What is a doll? The politics of this question are informative. Many texts on the production, playing, and collecting of dolls reference the definition in the Oxford English dictionary: “An image of a human being (commonly of a child or lady) used as a plaything; a girl’s toy-baby.” The emphasis on “plaything” creates classes of dolls, distinguishing sacred objects used for ritual purposes from objects used to entertain children (Daiken 1953).

Existing between these categories is the doll intended for the adult consumer. These dolls are often set apart as being more complex, more delicate, or simply more expensive than dolls intended directly for children, such as porcelain collector dolls (Robertson 2004) or the ball-jointed dolls known as “dollfies.” Incorporating elements of both German-inspired doll construction and Japanese art doll traditions (Pate, 2008; Bou, 2014), these resin dolls were and are designed with adult hobbyists and collectors (rather than children) in mind. These items are *dolls*, but they are not *playthings*. As such, neither the objects themselves nor those who collect them share in the stigma imposed on

those adults who collect “out of sphere”—like the adults who collect American Girl dolls in America (Belk, 1995; Robertson 2004; Clark 2007).

Boehen makes the claim that “dolls come from civilization,” but for the class of objects I am considered in this dissertation, it would more correct to state that “dolls come from childhood” (Cunningham 2005). With the “invention” of modern childhood in Europe and the United States came the idea that play is not only necessary, but requires specially designed ‘tools’ to facilitate the experience. A mark of modernity is the historical point at which religious icons and adult amusements are turned in to children’s play figures, with adults ceding control of the purpose of play (Cross 1997).

The definition of “doll” is not merely situated in age and location, but also in gender. This inclusion has serious social and political consequences. Perhaps most amusingly is the distinction between “doll” and “action figure”, with dolls being associated with girls and action figures with boys. This distinction became the basis of an American tariff case, because toy soldiers (action figures) are taxed at higher rates than dolls. Many American men might be concerned to discover that their G.I. Joes are officially considered “dolls” in the eyes of the United States Trade Commission. Another gendered distinction has been drawn between “dolls” and “puppets,” with Bil Baird, a well-known puppet performer, arguing that despite puppet’s human appearances, they are definitively “not dolls” (Purves 2008). These arguments over what is, and is not, a doll demonstrate that dolls have been central to many discussions of social meaning. As stated before, the doll as known in the United States today and that I am addressing in my dissertation is a result of the conditions of industrialized capitalism that began to develop

in the United States and Western Europe in the 1850's. It is at this point that dolls and doll-making began to move from the household in to the marketplace, creating standardized ideas of style and play (Formanek-Brunnell 1993). Child-rearing experts, taking advantage of an expanding market of women's magazines, proposed dolls as key to teaching girls the needful skills of sewing and child-rearing: rather than participating in the work of the household, girl's interests would be engaged through having them create things for their own personal possessions (Beecher and Stowe 1872).). It is at this point that the gender distinction between girl's toys and boy's toys begins to be cemented: girls are given miniature objects related to their roles as wives and mothers, while boy's toys were miniatures of farm and factory implements (Speare 1961).

But even in the early days of dolls and feminine socialization, there were the girls who resisted. "Of doll haters I have known quite a few," a contributor to *Babyhood* magazine wrote in 1905, discussing how she had seen girl beating their dolls, swinging them by their hair, drowning them in bathtubs, and poking them in to fires (Formanek-Brunnell 1993). These instances demonstrate girl's resistances to parental and social agendas for girlhood, and represent some of the ways in which girls struggled to define the meaning of dolls in their own lives and as representations of their culture.

Dolls as girl's toys fall broadly in to two categories: the baby and child doll, and the fashion doll. The distinction between these dolls is primarily a matter of the size and shape of the bodies of the dolls, with the baby and child dolls being rounder, softer, and lacking a defined waist or hips. Fashion dolls are generally thinner, taller, and are sculpted or padded to have a figure that supports adult clothing. In both cases, however,

the faces are often sculpted to mimic infant and child features, with larger eyes, rounder cheeks, and smaller mouths that are placed more closely together (Robertson 2003).

For my analysis, I have focused on this very specific type of doll: a girl's toy, intended for active childhood play, which is anticipated to instill a culturally-specific set of norms and practices for their targeted consumer. The adult women who collect these dolls and who made up my pool of respondents are consuming these products in ways unintended by their creator.

American Girl

Deep in the basement of a small museum lies a tattered, water-stained doll trunk. Open the dusty lid and the long-ago childhood of some lucky young girl comes instantly to life.

Tucked gently inside is a beautiful porcelain doll—dearly loved and much played with. Dressed in blue silk and surrounded by marvelous accessories, this doll and her tiny treasures were the cherished possessions of their owner—possessions so special that they were put away until some faraway day when her own little girl could delight in them.

So begins Pleasant T. Rowland's "Statement to Parents," explaining the concept behind Pleasant Company and the American Girls Collection. This statement was featured on the back of the mail-order catalogs that were sent out beginning in 1987, and would be repeated in the marketing materials for the company until 1998, when Rowland sold her company to Mattel. The story was accompanied by a sepia-toned photograph of the doll and trunk, abundant accessories spilling around her.

This statement helped to set the American Girl Company apart from other toy companies. To begin with, this is addressed to parents, not to children. Rather than attempt to appeal directly to girls, this statement explicitly recognizes the role that adults play in children's consumption—not only are they the ones who will complete the actual

purchase of the products, but there is an explicit recognition that adults look at toys for their long-term potential as training objects for future life.

The statement also appeals to adult nostalgia—for childhood memories and the creation of future connections, but also to the idea of a lost era. The parent is invited to consider their own child as a “lucky young girl,” whose possessions would be so special as to be passed on when the child was grown.

Of course, like many marketing presentations, this one tells a sort of half-truth. The doll in question exists, and is indeed part of the collection of a small museum. But the doll has never resided neglected in a basement. Rather, it holds pride-of-place in the Wisconsin Historical Society’s museum, listed as one of the curator’s favorite objects. The doll is in fact in pristine condition—the original owner, Nancy Henks, was never permitted to play with the doll. The actual doll’s trunk is not shown in the photograph—it has been replaced with one that better sets the scene of a beloved piece of personal history. The use of a prop is a standard marketing trick; why does this matter? The next line of that statement makes the issue clear:

I discovered this trunk by chance more than a year after I had begun working on the American Girls Collection. It served as a powerful reminder of why I had begun the collection, and what I hoped it would accomplish.

Rowland’s statement begins a creation story for the American Girl products that—like the products themselves—seeks to establish a lineage from the present to the past. A doll so precious as to never be played with is not appealing; it suggests that the toys were not integral to the girl’s experience. By suggesting that such luxurious and complex toys were beloved in the past, Rowland is excusing parents from concerns over

conspicuous consumption and a loss of cherished values. Rowland's statement portrays consumption as part of the experience of American girlhood.

Rowland is also centering herself in the creation of American Girl dolls. Here is an authentic connection to history in general and the history of dolls specifically. Many other iconic doll lines—from the Bye-Lo baby of the early 1900's to Barbie herself—were created by, and marketed by, women. Like these predecessors, Rowland positions her desire to create these dolls as part of her life experience, as a woman who had played with dolls herself and understood the need for dolls on a personal level. In other statements, Rowland referred to her frustration with finding a satisfying toy to give her nieces. Like the early female commercial doll developers, Rowland is focused on the player (consumer) of the product, rather than the product potential itself (as early male commercial doll developers would (Formanek-Burnell 1993).) The next line of the statement also connects Rowland to the reform-oriented doll creators of the early twentieth century, by suggesting that toys are essential to the development of character:

At an age when girls are old enough to read and still love to play, they need books and dolls that capture their imaginations. The stories in the American Girls Collection come alive with beautiful dolls and period doll clothes. The doll accessories are replicas of real things found in times gone by. They are quality pieces—not plastic playthings—and are made for children over eight years old to treasure.

It is here that a thinly-veiled critique of other toy companies and products can be read. When the company began, American Girl distinguished itself from other doll companies in several ways. First, the book series offered in conjunction with the dolls was an original product at the time it was introduced. The 1980's was the height of the product tie-in era of children's toys, with television shows and movies being produced

specifically to promote specific toys and therefore encourage children (or rather, their parents) to spend money on toy versions of their favorite characters (Fleming 1996). In a similar way, the books were written with the idea of creating appealing toys. However, by choosing to promote the product line through books—rather than television or movies—Rowland set the company apart from other, more commercialized products that were gaining traction in the mid 1980’s.

Further, Rowland focused on the “educational” aspect of her products. Again, education is not an unusual theme in children’s products. However, the education offered by American Girl is not focused on basic literacy skills or fact drills. Neither do the books claim to teach historical dates or details of well-known historical figures. The main characters in the stories are fictional eight- and nine-year-old girls, most well removed from the major historical events of their time. The books and associated products educate through encouraging girls to relate their current lives to those lived by the historical characters. By “bringing history to life,” Pleasant Rowland hoped that girls would be “inspired” to continue learning about history on their own—“inspired” in the same way that Rowland herself was by her museum discovery.

American Girl dolls, despite the emphasis on fashion and accessories, are not “fashion dolls” in the strictest sense (Robertson 2003: 230). Unlike Barbie and similar dolls, the American Girl dolls are proportioned like young girls, at about age eight.¹ Their clothing is culturally appropriate for that age group, as are the accessories, and the

¹ Realistically proportioned for dolls, that is. As Robertson notes, there is a disproportion in terms of the dolls’ head size and facial features, a common feature in dolls that helps stimulate an empathetic/caregiving reaction in the consumer. However, the dolls’ cloth bodies and limbs are modeled on a pre-pubescent shape lacking secondary sex characteristics.

characters in the historical books are between the ages of eight and ten. This is in line with another mission of Pleasant Rowland's, who felt that the market was missing a line of toys that encouraged "girls to be girls," rather than focusing on growing up to be sex objects (Barbie) or mothers (baby dolls). This is actually the arena where Rowland's statement about the connection to the past is more grounded in truth: Pleasant Rowland re-introduced the child-doll. Her concerns over the sexualization and adult shape of the iconic Barbie echoes the same concerns of early 1900's social reformers who felt that girls were being encouraged to mature and copy the rituals of adult womanhood at the sacrifice of their appropriate development (Seelye 1890).

Given Rowland's statements against "plastic playthings" and opposition to dolls that encourage girls to grow up, the fact that the company was sold to Mattel in 1998 surprises many. As I will discuss in chapter 5, many long-term patrons of American Girl felt betrayed by this sale. After the sale, Rowland remained on the Mattel board for two years of transition time, before stepping down.

I hope the American Girls Collection will be dearly loved and well played with and then passed down to other generations of girls tomorrow—a reminder that growing up in America is, has been, and can always be an experience to treasure.

If the name of the company does not make it obvious, American Girl's books, products, and philosophy present American history. Though the individual stories are usually well removed from any "actual" historical personages and events, each doll's book series is set during the time of a distinctive historical event (for example, the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars) or in an "era" (the Great Depression; the Belle Époque).

The history is also history for children, and as such must appeal not only to children but to parents. The role of parents' beliefs in the selection of children's toys is often overlooked, not only in the analysis of the American Girls collection, but in the analysis of the consumer toy market as well. American Girl continues to stress the "educational" nature of their products quite strongly in their advertising. Such emphasis can only encourage parents to question what their children are being taught. Concerns over this issue were at the root of a recent protest after American Girl partnered with Girls Inc., a not-for-profit organization that supports girls' leadership and sexual education, among other endeavors. Despite the many changes, American Girl still relies heavily on the "myth" created by Rowland, a myth that reflects a "sincere fiction."

Race, Gender, and Sincere Fictions

In an era of colorblindness where to acknowledge race or ethnicity in American at all is to risk being declared racist (Bobo, Sindanius, and Sears 2000), American Girl's explicit presentation of racial and ethnic identity stand out. The company has won five awards for their production of multicultural toys and books, which are held up as examples of how to do diversity "right" (American Girl website, accessed 5/20/2010). In some ways, this equal positioning of these characters can be seen as a way to build empathy between those who are racially privileged and those who are not. The recognition of ethnic oppression becomes the basis for understanding (Frankenberg 1993; Hartigan 1999) and, with this empathy, a right to speak for and about the experiences of those who are racially oppressed.

However, such methods of claimsmaking overlook the reason that white American ethnics are able to mobilize their ethnic identity: they are working from a

position of racial privilege. The empathy of white ethnics with racial minorities comes at no price to their (whites) socially perceived actual identity (Hurtado 1996).). As a privileged social category, whites can easily mobilize ethnicity as a tool for promoting their individual and social agendas, while for non-white ethnicities, ethnic identity is a continuation of the process of Othering (Waters 1990; Steinberg 1979; Gans 1979; Alba & Nee 2003). As a product of a white-dominated media and consumer economy, American Girl's presentations of race and ethnicity pay lip service to ideas of confrontation and change, but like the ideology of multiculturalism and much racial scholarship, instead reaffirm racial division and oppression (Brady 1997; Steinberg 2007).

The cultural analysis of racism views prejudice as a product of group position stemming from the desire of groups, if not to advance their positions, at least maintain to them (Blumer 1958). Recognition of radical changes to the American social structure, as a result of the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, led to attempts to quantitatively measure racial attitudes (Bobo, Krysan, Schuman, and Steeh 2005). Such measures found a distinct decline in overtly expressed attitudes of racial discrimination (such as opposition to intermarriage). But this data suffered from a problem noted by Bobo et al: while surveys showed an expressed change, actual behaviors still indicated strong opposition and an unwillingness to support actual programs of social change on the parts of whites. Continuing work in this area has demonstrated that racial ideologies are far more complex than can be ascertained by yes/no questions on surveys (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2006).).

Contemporary examinations of prejudice attempt to show that *de facto* racism has emerged as the new order of the day (Feagin 2006). American social structures inculcate racist modes of thought and action without conscious acknowledgment (Bobo, Krysan, Schuman and Steeh 2005; Kinder and Sears 1981). The examination of the inculcation of racist attitudes has also turned to exploring the effect of such attitudes on both those in positions of power and oppression. This has led to more focus being placed on the issues of unspoken and unacknowledged privilege and the use of class, ethnic, and other social identities as either defenses against accusations of racism (Lewis 2004), or as statuses considered as oppressive as race (Guglielmo and Lewis 2003).

Although the American social structure underwent significant changes during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s, racism did not end. Instead, it shifted forms to become the so-called “new racism,” where the processes of discrimination continue to operate within social institutions while individuals officially repudiate prejudice (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Chin 2009; Coates 2011). Bonilla-Silva argues that this process is accomplished by the token inclusion of racial minorities, rather than systematic exclusion of entire groups.

Further, Bonilla-Silva has defined a new ideology of racism in the post-civil rights era:

This ideology, which I label color-blind racism, is anchored on the abstract extension of egalitarian values to racial minorities and the notion that racial minorities are culturally deficient. (67: 2001)

American Girl’s position as an “educational” company is particularly relevant for the question of how racial ideologies are expressed through consumer culture. Echoing

the trends found by Acuna (1972) and Lewis (2003), American Girl presents history in neatly divided packages. Slavery is discussed only in conjunction with the two African-American historical characters (although at least two of the white characters would have owned slaves) and American Indians exist only in 1754, before the widespread holocaust (Thornton 1987). To go further on this, the images of race that have been selected for memorialization by American Girl are those which support established popular culture ideas of ethnic identity. For example, Kaya, the Nez Perce American Indian, is described as an “adventurous girl...whose respect for nature nourish(es) her spirit” (American Girl website, 02/06/2005).). Such descriptors follow on the same “noble savage” trope that is played out in Thanksgiving plays, on television and in movies (Williams 2006; Berkhofer 1979).).

Education is presented as the most powerful tool for assimilation of new minorities (Tuan 1998; DuBois 1903; Steinberg 1979).). But Acuna and Thornton (1987), among others, have recognized that this assimilation can be viewed as a kind of cultural genocide by forcing cooperation with dominant group standards of language, self-presentation and behavior. Dolls have played a large role in this process, as described by Jacobs in 2008, who reviewed the ways that white female social reform groups used the distribution of dolls to American Indian girls as part of a “white middle-class women’s... campaign to promote scientific motherhood and housekeeping” (326). These campaigns were part of a systematic attempt to abolish culturally-influenced ways of mothering and Native American culture as a whole. The tension between education as a tool for economic advancement and education as a tool of forced assimilation and cultural

genocide still resonate today as access to appropriate, well-rounded and culturally sensitive schooling continue to present problems (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Massey 1990).).

This explicit campaign is echoed in unconscious but nonetheless effective means in classrooms: teachers may dictate their student's racial identification based on the teacher's perception of the student's race, enforcing that identification institutionally regardless of the student's pre-existing ideas of self (Lewis 2003; pg. 102). This idea of identification based on external factors such as appearance is echoed in American Girl's line of contemporary dolls: the consumer is told to pick a doll that is "Just Like You!"—meaning through choices of physical signifiers such as skin tone, face shape and hair texture. This explicit identification based on stereotypical similarities presents a particular issue when considered from the perspective of education: is the history of Josefina, the Latina from 1824, history only for the girls who (more or less) resemble her? Is the history of the American Revolution only for girls who match Felicity's skin tone?

The contemporary scholarly discourse of race in America today goes beyond the simple recognition of phenotypical traits. Today, when scholars speak of race, they are often actually speaking of ethnicity—that constellation of language, behavior, family life and all other aspects that are recognized as being the foundations of "identity" (Nagel 1994; Patterson 1975). The conflation of culture with physiology has been the root of the problem of race relations since the first contacts between the continents (Gosset 1965; Park 1950), and the biological inferiority/superiority hypothesis remains an unspoken but

powerful presence in race scholarship (McKee 1993). The assumption of natural superiority by those of European descent reflects the bias of privilege, as noted by McKee and Dubois a century apart (1993; 1903)—those in positions of power may define and redefine the social structure to maintain their power.

The concept of privilege—unearned access to social resources—has become of particular importance in contemporary discussions of racism. The question of how, or can, access to privilege mitigates the issues of subordination in another is a question that is increasingly debated (Frazier 1965; Wilson 1979). However, strong research exists to show that while privilege can mitigate the effects of structural and individual subordination, it cannot erase the social status that is marked for oppression (Galster 1988; Charles 2003). For example, despite their access to gender privilege, Black men are not granted the same social standing as white men (Young 2003). Indeed, membership in the unmarked social category itself is a form of privilege; freed from the necessity of managing multiple conflicting marked identities, white individuals in American may make claims to ethnic belonging without the knowledge that doing so will simply enhance their status as members of the dominant group (Waters 1990).

As the scholarship of race has changed, so has the scholarship on gender. Contemporary theories of both areas rely on theories of intersectionality—a paradigm that, in the words of Patricia Hill-Collins, “remind[s] us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice (2000, p. 18).” Intersectionality provides a perspective and methodology that allows us to view the way that all oppressions work together to create a matrix of

domination and oppression (hooks 1989). It also allows us to see those who have historically been made invisible by the practice of treating categories as mutually exclusive (see Crenshaw 1991; Hurtado 1996). This approach—of considering race and gender together—provides a strong theoretical grounding for my project. American Girl is situated at the meeting point of gender, race, class and even sexuality, in both their explicit advertising and company purpose and their perception in the larger world (Inness 1997a).

Vera and Gordon borrow Bourdieu's concept of the "sincere fiction" in their analysis of the construction of the ideal American self. Their analysis found that in American media, particularly film, minority characters were constructed in such a way as to enhance the portrayal of the white characters. That is, minority characters serve to emphasize that whites are powerful, brave, courageous, cordial, kind, firm, generous and natural-born leaders (Vera and Gordon 2003:12). Though this depiction is focused on the masculinity, these ideas are not far from those presented on the American Girl website:

that encourages her to stand tall, reach high, and dream big. We take pride and care in helping girls become their very best today so they'll grow up to be the women who make a difference tomorrow. (American Girl website, accessed 11/12/2007).

It is not that these images are negative. Indeed, as others have noted, what we have here is in some ways a message that is quite progressively feminist, and if "make a difference" is interpreted broadly, the message is one of challenging the status quo (Inness 1997a). But considered contextually, the message becomes a bit more muddled: how is this "growth" to be accomplished? What is meant by "difference"? Bourdieu drew

attention to the ways in which women's consumption habits make statements about their positions as wives of men—while men must work, women consume (1984).

Continuing Vera and Gordon's discussion, the popular cinema is presented as being a means through which the divided white self is "rejoined" through careful selection of what aspects of whiteness should be presented, avoiding portrayal of that while challenge the ideal image (1994: 15). American Girl's selection of historical and modern images to be memorialized in doll form constructs a narrative of the fulfillment of the American dream: assimilation, middle-class achievements, symbolic diversity (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003: 15). Although there are minority, lower-class, and immigrant characters, their ultimate goal is to reach the higher level of achievement within the system, rather than to challenge it.

Dolls have been central to the discourse of forming femininity in America, with their presumed focus on child- and home-care (Formanek-Brunell 1998). Critics of Barbie, particularly, have been harsh in regards to the messages of sexualization and objectification embodied by the nine inch plastic figure (Norton et al 1996); Pleasant Rowland herself mobilized these criticisms in creating the marketing myth of American Girl. Underlying these criticisms is the assumption that the girls who play with the dolls must of course accept the messages (again, we have Baudrillard's and Sutherland's "politics of assent.") But the effect is not that simple: as Formanek-Brunell shows, the girls who play with dolls can, did, and do resist the implicit messages. Many girls explicitly reframe the toys to suit their own imaginative play, and what "should be" a

stereotypically domesticating object becomes instead an outlet to express frustration with the limits of the “girl role” (Inness, 1997a).

Dolls have also been critical in the discussion of race and racial identity formation. Kenneth and Mamie’s Clark’s so-called “doll experiments” were crucial for the American psyche at the time of *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1988). Their studies have been reproduced and rewritten by both scholars and the popular press. The ultimate conclusion from these studies is rarely questioned: children use dolls as projections of their social conditions; the preference for white dolls is symbolic of a preference for white people (Epps 1975). However, the discourse of dolls and race, like the discourse of advertising messages and consumption, cannot be seen just as the expression of passive acculturation. Dolls have been used explicitly to teach assimilationist messages. Jacobs’ historical analysis of American Indian girls and the dolls gifted to them by white women social reformers demonstrates this. American Indian girls in the infamous boarding schools were made to “play dolls” as white girls did, and were punished for incorporating cultural traditions such as cradleboards. Despite the modern discourse that dolls are for play, there is a long-standing understanding that play equals learning—and that the lessons learned from doll play are ones of culture and behavior as well as skills.

Collections and Collectors

Who, or what, is a collector? Within the popular media there is a long tradition of depicting the collector of objects as a somewhat unbalanced, shallow, and dominating as exemplified by a description by Henry James:

There isn't one of them I don't know and love—yes, as one remembers and cherishes the happiest moments of one's life. Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another. They're living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand. (Mrs. Gareth, *The Spoils of Ponyton*, 1897)

James' classic character Mrs. Gareth finds a soulmate in *The Simpsons* obsessive Comic Book Guy, with his neatly catalogued science fiction paraphernalia and lack of interpersonal relationships. An even more negative depiction appears within the TV series *Hoarders*, where collecting is portrayed as nothing more or less than a mental illness.

Given this long-established literary background, it is unsurprising that the same negativity appears in the scholarly study of collecting. In Freudian analyses, collecting is an expression of an immature psyche, where the possession of objects is deemed to fulfill a need for security stemming from early-childhood disturbance (Muensterberger 1994). Clifford also considers the organized nature of collecting (i.e., the pursuit of a specific class of objects) to be an expression of the possessive individualism that is an expression of a capitalist ethos (1988). As described by Macpherson, "The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of larger social whole, but as an owner of himself" (1962). When applied to collecting, the objects that an individual collects are their connection to the relations of production (Belk et al 1982; Belk 1985; Danet and Katriel 1987; Belk et al 1991).

It should be noted that these stigmatized ideas attached to collecting are not universal. The cultural location of the collector and the objects that are collected can make the practice be viewed more positively. One such example is the interpretative

difference between collecting “children’s toys” such as American Girl and Barbie dolls, versus collecting “collector toys,” such as antique French *bébés* or Japanese *ningyō*. Within the United States, this latter category of doll is perceived of as having more market value as a collectible (a category I will discuss later) or of being “exotic,” mysterious, or art objects rather than toys, and thus have value beyond entertainment. That the American collector of such objects is unlikely to know much about the cultural history and traditions of these objects is not a significant factor (Pate 2008; Shoaf 2010).

A more neutral definition of collector is offered by Pomian (1990), who grounds his definition in the individual accumulating culturally and socially significant objects, but discusses them only in terms of how they are displayed and used in public spaces. Pearce and Pearce (1997) define collectors as “purchasers of collectibles,” a neat tautology which brings the question of what constitutes a *collectible*.

Burton and Jacobsen define a collectible similarly to the Pearces’ definition of collectors: a collectible is an object that someone collects, although they exclude real estate, precious metals, and gems on the basis that these objects can be direct inputs in production processes (1999). Generally, a collectible is also considered to be an inanimate object, although some scholars have made an argument that polygamy—and perhaps even slavery—can be seen as a form of collecting, thus making the human beings involved collectibles (Rigby and Rigby 1944; Jacoby 1994). In examining the collecting of dolls (which can be positioned as human surrogates), these inclusive definitions can be useful.

A further dimension of collectible lies in the actual exchange-value of an object, i.e. its market price. Collecting is an activity often identified with the middle and upper classes as they are the groups with the disposable income and leisure time to collect. This perception contributes to the quintessential examples of collecting being centered on rare coins, stamps, and works of fine art. In these cases, the value of the collectible is both in that these objects were rare to begin with, and that the collecting practice makes them rarer still. The social capital of the upper classes also helps define these collections as having value, as they are expressions of rarefied taste (Bourdieu 1984).

However, as the Beanie Baby and other collecting fads demonstrate, collectibles are not limited only to the rare or precious. The value of an object is ultimately the sum of the social relations around the object (Appadurai 1986). Scarcity—real or perceived—is only one aspect of public appeal (Morris et al 2000; Pate 2008). A collection is a group of objects in relation to each other; a “complete” collection can have both an increased financial value, but that value is not intrinsic (Carey 2008). (American Girl as a company itself recognized this—many of their products are available in specific collections, from the “Starter Collection” of doll, accessory, and book all the way through the thousand-dollar “Complete Collection.”) The relation between the objects, which may represent personal achievement, historical development, or simply the entire range of potential variation increases the value of each object in the collection (Apostolou 2011, Blanco-Gonzalez 2012, and McAlister et al 2011). Ultimately collecting is a practice that may never end: because the relations of a collection are social, the boundaries can be expanded to include many variations on a specific theme or even branch to other

objects—for example, one might begin by collecting rare coins, only to expand to commemorative medallions, and from there military medals or other markers of importance (Bianchi 1997).

From this broad discussion of collectible objects and those who collect them, a shared theme emerges: the definition of a collector and the definition of a collectible rely on the social environment which created the object and the social environment in which the collector consumes. Stebbins brings these definitions together through his perspective on leisure studies, including collectors in the same group as hobbyists and amateur professionals.

Stebbins includes collectors as a form of hobbyist, someone who is serious about and committed to their endeavors without either a personal obligation or a social necessity (indeed, a hobbyist may engage in a pursuit at social cost). Collectors, specifically, are those who:

develop a technical knowledge of the commercial, social, and physical circumstances in which the desired items are acquired. These collectors also develop a sophisticated appreciation of these items, along with a broad understanding of their historical and contemporary production and use (1992).

This definition, which includes the collectors' individual relation to the objects, the social context which gives the object meaning, and the realities of consumerism, provides a nuanced perspective that becomes a strong framework for my analysis of the American Girl collecting community.

Really Virtual: Online Communities

As the World Wide Web has developed, the ease of use and the usefulness of the information online has begun to expand. Increasing numbers of people participate in

multiple forms of virtual community (that is, communities, forums, message boards, social networking sites, etc). for many reasons: information seeking, problem solving, professional obligations, and of course, for social contact. As use of the internet has proliferated the separation between the “virtual” and the “real” has become less distinct (if such a distinction could ever be made). These online worlds provide a place for their users to join with others who share a common interest, regardless of social or geographic location: another “socially manifest” space wherein users may consume, create and define the texts that shape their interests. For fans, this is particularly salient (Sandvoss 2005).

As Kozinets has pointed out, these virtual social groups have real existence for the people who participate in them, and further, their participation influences many aspects of their behavior both on and off line (1998). As spaces of significant social interaction and information transmission, the role of online interactions in shaping ideologies must be taken into account. Although people tend to seek out a specific online community for a specific purpose, the discursive processes of participation may prove transformative for both the individual and the community itself. While the presumption that online communication is simply casual has been challenged (Brown, Broderick and Lee 2007), it has to be noted that there is a significant difference between (to use Kozinets’s terms) the “insiders,” “minglers,” and “tourists” (1999)—dedicated, long-standing members; those who come simply for the social aspect but may not have a deep interest in the central reason for the community; and those who are simply passing through. Whatever the focus of the study, consideration of the role these different participation levels play,

and how these groups interact, is an essential aspect of any study (Sangwan 2005). In the same way that interactions define the meaning and value of a material object, the interactions online define the community.

The idea that community must be formed through face-to-face interactions has been challenged many times, most relevantly by Anderson (1991). As Anderson discusses, it is not possible for all within even a small nation to meet all the other members; but that a nation is still held together by the collective imagination that generates a feeling of “communion” with the others (1991: 223).

Anderson’s concept of the *imagined community* is a productive starting place for understanding the form and function of any community, and no less so one that is found online (1991). This imaginative communion with others is the foundation for building deeper relationships and establishing a set of shared practices that could even be described as a form of culture and society. Wilson and Peterson (2002) note that Anderson’s ideas fit nicely with the more fluid definition of community that applies to virtual spaces. Although their typology of communities is limited because it excluded leisure based entertainment communities, their recognition of the importance of the imagined cannot be understated. The way a community is imagined brings people together as one group, and sets them apart from other groups (even when these groups are peopled by some of the same individuals!). As emphasized by Kozinets (2007), the distinction between “the real” and “the virtual” is not only methodologically problematic, it is artificial: a “community” is not defined by proximity, but by interaction and

identification. This is no less true if they are located in cyberspace rather than a physical place.

Conclusion

The definitions of doll I have developed here, as well as the theoretical framework for the discussion of race, are firmly situated in American culture. As I said before, American Girl is an example of material culture situated at the meeting point of gender, race, class, and even sexuality within the American context. Their products, from books to dolls, carry messages of assimilation, white superiority, and gender norms that support an existing hierarchical system. Some scholars have argued that by consuming these media messages and social objects individuals become assenters to these messages, incorporating them in to their lived experiences and supporting them in a passive manner.

By bringing the sociological perspective to these issues, I have shown that this process is not a passive one. Consumption is in fact an active process; while an individuals' choices are informed and limited by the system of culture wherein they exist, they still exercise a degree of agency in their consumption—particularly in the consumption that occurs in leisure-time space, where the choices that are made are part of the process of demonstrating an individuals' self-concept. Understanding that consumers do have and practice individual agency within their social environments—online and off—is the framework that underlies the analysis I conducted in this dissertation.

Further, American Girl builds on nostalgia, American nationalism, and idealistic conceptions of girlhood to develop meaning and identification with consumers.

American Girl's explicit presentation of racial and ethnic identity stand out in post-Civil

Rights America, but their tokenized and stereotyped presentation of race support racialized and racist social structures.

Having outlined the gender and race literature that supports my research model, as well as establishing American Girl's early history and situation in the history of doll production, in my next chapter I will outline my methods and the social context of online doll collecting.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND CONTEXTS

Research Design and Location

One of my main goals in this dissertation was to examine the effect that collecting American Girl products and participating in related online communities had on respondent's racial and gender ideology. Previous research on American Girl had focused specifically on the assumed corporate messages in the products and the effect that consumption of these products may have on a consumers' individual identity development, while research on participation in collecting activities has centered on questions of material value and moral practice. Doll collecting, in particular, has been viewed as a site of gender performance, often described as reaffirming ideas of motherhood and care work (Belk and Wallendorf 1994; Robertson 2004). Academic work on online social groups has often framed these groups as sites of "weak ties," with virtual-based interactions being seen as less central to the lives of the participant than interactions in conventional settings, or perhaps even interfering with such lives (Kazmer and Haythornthwaite 2001; Cummings et al 2002; Guss and Acquisiti 2005).

Recognizing that research on American Girl has overlooked the social element, collecting research has overlooked the influence collecting has on individually-held ideologies, and that research on online communities has downplayed their importance in daily life, I designed this project to address these gaps in past research by engaging with online communities using a mixed methods approach.

Two specific locations were chosen for the in-depth research for this project.

These sites met several important criteria, which I developed by considering the criteria suggested by Boellstorff (2012):

1. An active posting history during the time of observation, with “active” defined as an average of four posts a day;
2. An extensive archive of past posts, providing a strong grounding in community history;
3. A community by and for adults, rather than the American Girl product target age group of 8–12 year old girls;
4. Recognition as a central gathering place on the internet for these activities.

Determining the first three was a matter of examining the communities themselves. Analysis of posting history, review of the archives, and mission statements, as well as statements from moderators, were used to assess the activity of the community. I gave consideration was given to the different styles of online communities; the layout of the discussion area and how these forms affect community interactions influences the sort of community that develops, and I will be discuss them in the specific sections about each chosen location.

The fourth criterion requires more justification. My primary motivation for this criteria was to exclude virtual spaces that served an overt political purpose rather than facilitate dialogue around and about American Girl products, given that my dissertation is focused on the interactions around, with, and for the company. During my preliminary research I encountered a (now defunct) community which rigidly enforced a Christian and politically right wing interpretation of American Girl. The moderators of this community actively edited posts within the group to reflect this perspective, which tightly controlled the flow of dialogue. While this community is a fascinating case study, there

was very little discussion of issues with American Girl itself; further, because the discussion was focused on promoting the moderator's agenda, there was little to be gained in terms of understanding larger social patterns outside of this very narrow location.

American Girl doll collecting is, like many hobbies, a niche activity. My goal in seeking a community that was a "central gathering place" was to find a location that a plurality of collectors within that niche would be aware of. Through a process of following links and recommendations from participants in the sites I encountered during my preliminary research, I eventually decided on two specific locations, which I will describe after explaining my chosen methodology. .

Online Ethnography

I requested and received permission to formally observe my chosen communities in September 2011. From September to December of that year, I observed and participated in ongoing new activities while engaging in textual coding analysis of both ongoing and archived posts. Although self-reports of activity can be determined through a quantitative survey or individual interviews, ethnographic methods of participant observation allow these roles and patterns to be observed in context, giving a richer view of the community organization, norms, values, and meaning (Boelstorff et al 2012).

As a participant observer, the knowledge gathered by the ethnographer is not passive knowledge; it is "grounded knowledge" (Glaser and Strauss 1967)—experiential and particularized knowledge on a specific local subject. This same grounded knowledge can be developed through the process of online ethnography:

Netnography shares many of the characteristics of ethnography from which it has been adapted, in that it is a flexible approach that allows scholars to explore and

explain rich, diverse, cultural worlds... The output of a netnography can be descriptive as well as analytical and the method tends to generate rich, thick description through grounded interpretations, thereby providing a detailed presentation of the lived online experience of cultural members (Kozinets et al 2014).¹

The definition of ethnography in the traditional sense can be difficult to pin down, given that it is a method that is inherently flexible and adaptive to many different situations (Hine 2000). However, a common feature is the embeddedness of the researcher within the setting:

the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned, coming face to face with the natives so that a deep understanding of the practices of the setting is gained (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 2).

In this model of ethnography, which Hine characterizes as 'conventional' ethnography, "the role of the ethnographer is to observe, document, and analyze these practices, to present them in a new light" (2000). Given that an online community does not have a physical location in which to embed and interactions are text-to-text rather than face-to-face, justifying how my work is ethnographic requires some background.

As I emphasized in chapter 2, research on the social and cultural development of the internet has made it clear that the distinction between the "real" and the "virtual" is methodologically problematic and—as Kozinets particularly has argued—nonexistent. The people behind the screen are the same people who are in front of it (2008). What changes is the social location.

¹ While Robert. V. Kozinets has been instrumental in developing online ethnography, his preferred term 'netnography' has not become widespread.

Like a physical field site, an online field site is characterized by a sense of “worldness” (Hogan 2008; Boelstroff et al 2012)—that is, they are environments which participants may transverse and within which they may interact with others. These environments may have no physical existence, but they are persistent even when participants come and go. My two locations demonstrate these features, as I will discuss later; the criteria I used to determine my locations were developed with these themes in mind.

Within these “virtual worlds,” the primary form of interaction is textual, and the practices within are a form of conversation. In a similar way to Clifford and Marcus’s argument that ethnography itself is a textual *construction* of reality (1986), a virtual world is a textual *creation* of reality (Hine 2008). It is not just the words produced by individual participants that are the object of analysis for an online ethnography: rather, it is the entire conversation between participants as well as the virtual locations themselves that are significant.

In terms of the actual practice of online ethnography, these interactions can be treated as perfectly, automatically transcribed field recordings (Denscombe, 2008). This is the approach that I used. Obviously in a conventional ethnography I would have been able to note not just the words but clues such as body language to inform my analysis. Without these clues, I relied on hints such as emoticons and grammatical style changes for insight in to the affective/emotional situation of the participants.

One advantage online ethnography has over traditional ethnographic approaches is that it is not limited by what an ethnographer can directly observe (Janetzko 2008). Both of my locations had extensive archives of conversations, which I could analyze for

historical context. For both the ongoing and archived conversations, I used the approach of descriptive coding.

As with any ethnographic study, there is a potential for researcher-introduced bias in to a field site. In the online context, this can be a particular problem, since the interests of the participants are what drives the discussions between the participants (Boelstroff et al. 2012). I faced this problem myself. As I began to analyze my collected data, I discovered that I participated almost exclusively in discussions that involved issues of race. This was a concern because it showed I had developed a narrowed perspective, but also because it meant I may have been prolonging (or even provoking) conversations that did not reflect the overall interests of the community. Thus, I both broadened my participation (engaging in threads I had normally overlooked) and narrowed it (becoming passive in discussions that centered on race).

One particular issue that I faced was my movement from member to member-observer. This was not a sharp break. I had been a member of both the Pleasant Pastimes and the After-Hours Clubhouse for four years before I began my research. When I requested permission to conduct research in the communities, moderators and members alike were very positive, and many of the members were full of helpful suggestions for how I should conduct my research, pointing me towards resources I had not known about, and directing me towards particular discussions they thought were relevant. When I posted my survey, the members of the group were very helpful and engaged—in fact, several were proactive about helping me correct grammatical and technical errors.

However, as members engaged with my survey, a somewhat more complicated situation developed. While I was not directly confronted within either of my two

locations, I was informed through private messages and direct e-mails that my research project was viewed negatively by some members. This was made clear by several negative responses I received to my survey. One in particular expressed the perceived problem clearly: “you are just trying to make American Girl seem racist and it’s not okay.”

As I began to examine the survey responses, I also began to pull back from active participation within my research sites. Both for fear of being perceived as trying to steer the conversations in a particular direction, and a general sense of being unwelcome, I stopped actively participating in the day-to-day conversations in the communities entirely. During the first year of research, I continued to participate in offline community activities such as holiday card exchanges and video phone discussions about crafting. For full disclosure, I thought of these activities less as part of my research as they were social interactions with friends; as I had not obtained consent to study interactions in these communities, I did not include them within my analysis.

Location 1: Pleasant Pastimes

94.3% of survey respondents were members of this community. Established in April 2006, this online community came from the synthesis of two different websites dedicated to American Girl Dolls Collecting: one a virtual “library” of American Girl products and history, the other an online community for discussion of the products. The original founders of these websites recognized that they had similar goals and decided to centralize their efforts.

The tagline of this community is “Where little girls who play with dolls grow up and become collectors who still play with dolls!” This statement is echoed further in the

moderator's description of the community, which emphasizes that it is a place primarily for adult collectors and secondarily for older teenagers transitioning from "active play" to "collecting" activities. This focus provided a fascinating arena in which the questions of social identity, political ideology, and consumption as part of the life course were actively discussed.

The community moderators maintain that discussion of any issue even tangentially related to American Girl collecting is allowable, provided that the users maintain a respectful attitude towards the other members of the community. Overt public negativity is specifically opposed in the rules of the community, with the definition of respect and negativity being up to the moderator's discretion. This issue will be discussed in depth in chapter 4.

Because Pleasant Pastimes specifically is open to teenagers (ages thirteen and over), the moderators also request that the members of the board keep their language "PG." However, the age range of this community extends from thirteen to seventy-three, with the median age being 27. (Thirteen is the age limit for joining the community, enforced by both the community moderators and the administrators of the hosting site.²) Although there are members in the community who are under the age of 18, these members were explicitly excluded from the analysis within this research, both from survey participation and from review of their posts on the larger board.

Pleasant Pastimes is a conventional style message board hosted on an advertising-supported remote service. Advertising revenue goes to the hosting company; the moderators of the board provide their labor for free. Two of the moderators estimated that

² Thirteen is a legal age requirement specified in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998.

they spent between twelve and twenty hours a week engaged in active moderating activities (as opposed to participating in the community itself). The board is organized into “forums” which are then further divided into smaller “boards”: for example, the “Main Forum” is divided into six smaller “Boards” including “General Discussion”, “Off-Topic Discussion,” “Tech Stuff,” and others. Other forums include “Your AG Collection,” which is intended for members to share images and stories of their own collections, “Secondary Marketplace,” where members may sell items to each other; and the “Classrooms,” where members can discuss their American Girl related crafting and sewing projects, as well as get and give advice regarding specific issues within collecting. Each of these forums is subdivided by specific topic; some of them are more active than others.

There is also a “Reviews Section.” This section of the board is where members can provide their own images and reviews of American Girl products. The reviews in this section work on a loose A to F grading system, with issues such as quality, historical accuracy, and “play value” being primary aspects of discussion. This section was cited by respondents as one of the main reasons they originally joined the community—it is the only section that is readable by the general public without registration (although non-members are not able make their own posts).

For my study, I focused primarily on the “General Discussion” section within the main forum. I decided on this for two reasons: first, this area is the busiest section of the board, seeing approximately 100 new comments posted in a 24 hour period. Second, this area of the board is the longest running; while the other sections have been periodically re-organized, the General Discussion has existed since the community was founded,

providing a continuing history of the community. The date range for analysis of the posts extends from May of 2006 to December of 2012.

It should be noted that not all threads in this period were consistently available. Moderators occasionally do what is called ‘archiving,’ meaning that certain threads might be moved out of public access or merged with others. Where possible, I have noted when these actions take place, as this practice can illuminate some areas where the community has faced difficult discussions.

Location 2: After-Hours Clubhouse

22% of survey respondents were members of the After-Hours Clubhouse.

Established in July of 2006, this community’s mission statement emphasizes that it was created in response to the perception of “censorship” that was found with other American Girl discussion communities:

Tired of having to censor yourself for the younglings in the world of AG? Want to talk about topics that just aren’t love, light, and lollipops in the AG universe?...Have you ever felt frustrated with the compulsory niceness of other AG boards?...Have you wanted a little (or a lot) of debate?...Or to have a discussion of race and gender and sexuality without having the goddamn thread locked because someone got butthurt at a privilege check?

As this “mission statement” shows, this group was established specifically to stand against the standards of behavior in other communities, as well as provide a place where controversial issues could be discussed. As a group that explicitly dedicated itself to talking about the subjects that were not allowed in other communities, the membership must be familiar with what those subjects are. Because of this, it is not surprising that the members of this group have high degree of membership in other communities as well—94.1% of these respondents were also members of another group, with 80.88% being members of Pleasant Pastimes. While this degree of cross-membership was not calculated

until this project began, preliminary research had indicated that this might be the case.

This was one of the reasons why this community was selected to be the second research site.

The After-Hours Clubhouse also engaged in a practice not found in most other communities—“snarking.” While the idea of snark as sarcastic or abusive speech is well established, within internet communities there is an added dimension of using snark as a means to form a community (Rudduck, Rowe, and Hutchins 2010). This practice can be loosely defined as making fun of specific things in other communities, such as the practice of photography, outfits, or specific people’s interactions with their dolls. These activities in the online context served the same purpose as in other places—a vague sort of “bullying.”

The After-Hours Clubhouse is part of LiveJournal, which is primarily a blogging platform rather than a community-centered messageboard. In order to join a community, members must first create a personal journal with an individual username, and then they may apply to join a community. This format is significantly different from Pleasant Pastimes. The After-Hours Clubhouse has a membership application that must be filled out and reviewed by the moderators before a potential member is allowed in.

Communities within LiveJournal function as more of a group blog than a message board: participants create a top-level “entry,” to which other members reply through lower-level comments. Within the comment section, the conversation may branch off into many different directions as different participants reply to each other. These different conversations may lead participants to make other top-level posts, or someone may choose to make a top level post on a different topic, beginning a new conversation. As a

result there are no formally defined “forums” into which topics of discussion must be slotted.

Posts in the After-Hours Clubhouse may be locked to the public, but this is left to the discretion of the individual poster rather than as a matter of community policy. There was one category of posts that moderators chose to make private, open only to established community members. At the request of several participants, these posts were excluded from analysis in this research. The date range for analysis of the posts on this site extends from May of 2006 to December of 2012.

This community operates under similar age restriction to Pleasant Pastimes; their hosting site requires that members be at least thirteen. However, the community statement notes that they view maturity as a state of mind, and as a result age is not policed as strictly as it is at Pleasant Pastimes. During the time of observation, only three active members were identified as being under age 18, and these members were excluded from analysis. The median age in the community was 23.

Like Pleasant Pastimes, the After-Hours Clubhouse has a policy that requires members to regulate their own language. However, they emphasize that members have “freedom of speech,” which does not include “freedom from response.” As with Pleasant Pastimes, the definition of offensive speech is at the moderator’s discretion. In general, the moderators have not removed any topic from discussion.

The Location That Wasn’t: A Third Site

A third community, “The Fans,” was mentioned by 21.7% of survey respondents. This third community was also mentioned many times in the discussions in the two communities I studied, and it was also discussed during twenty-two of the twenty-three

interviews I conducted. I had encountered this community during my preliminary research, and had hoped to include it as a research site. I did seek membership within this community, and contacted the moderators to request permission to research within the community. My request received no response, and my application to join the community was denied on two occasions.

Interestingly, one interviewee mentioned that my request had been discussed by the moderators of The Fans, but the community felt that they had been unfairly targeted and “bullied” by members from the other sites, and that they had no interest in being subjected to further investigation. I therefore stopped my attempts to gain entrée. However, because this community was significant to many of my respondents, it is important to include some background.

This board is similar to Pleasant Pastimes community; it is hosted on the same remote site. Like the After-Hours Clubhouse, this community has an application process wherein the members must be approved by the moderators before they are allowed to participate. During the application process, a potential member must agree to an extensive list of rules. However, one is not provided with this list until one agrees to abide by them.

Among these rules are reminders that the community is open to all ages, and that the discussions within the community should be kept appropriate for a “general audience.” Unlike Pleasant Pastimes, this board does not enforce the “13 and up” age policy of their hosting site; some members are not just under 18, but under the age of 13 as well. Members are also asked to restrict discussion about religious practices and holiday celebrations to ones explicitly mentioned within American Girl publications,

which restricts discussion to Judaism and Christianity generally. A further rule requests that members do not discuss “politics,” which includes discussions of race and sexuality. Members in both Pleasant Pastimes and the After-Hours Clubhouse cited these rules as reasons why they chose to leave the Fans community. Furthermore, many members of both the Clubhouse were banned from Fans during an incident in 2007. This is reflected in the numbers of the community that are tabulated below: more members of the Clubhouse have been banned from Fans, and they are less likely than Dolls’ House members to have a membership in the Fans’ community.

Why Two?—Community Types

My original intent had been to explore three communities, but as discussed I found entre in to the third impossible. Given that much of the memberships of the communities had a significant overlap, it might seem unnecessary for this project to cover both sites. However, when examining the differences in the communities, I found that they represented different models of community types.

Although both of my research locations were online, each of these communities claimed a distinct identity and purpose from the other. But these communities also had a high level of shared membership—overall, 80.88% of survey respondents stated they were members of more than one community. What could the members gain from membership in different communities? A review of the content of the communities demonstrates that while they share similar characteristics, the purpose and function of the communities is different. In order to better explicate this, it is essential to establish who these members are and what the communities can do for them.

Henri and Pudelko identified four types of online communities, based on the goals and context of each community: community of interest, goal-oriented community of interest, learners' community and community of practice (2002). Henri and Pudelko argue that a community will develop over time depending on the intentions of the members. For example, the existence and stability of a community of practice is dependent on the members' shared body of knowledge: those who are members of a community of practice will have passed through a learners' community in order to acquire an understanding of the shared norms, values, and skills of those who could be considered "experts" or "professionals" in their area of interest.

Using this framework, what specific type of online community is Pleasant Pastimes and the After-Hours Clubhouse? I argue that while Pleasant Pastimes is a community of practice, the After-Hours Clubhouse is a goal-oriented community, despite the fact that the After-Hours Clubhouse emerged after the establishment of Pleasant Pastimes and, as I will show, was dependent on Pleasant Pastimes and other communities for its driving force.

Two-Tiered Survey

Two surveys were designed for this project. The first survey was intended to gather basic information about community membership, demographics, and purchasing behaviors, as well as the participant's impression about how community membership had affected their purchasing behaviors and attitudes about the products. It can be very difficult to establish the demographic information for an online community: because individual's participation varies over time, and there is rarely a formal process for leaving a community environment. The breakdown of community membership is below, while

the full table with community demographics can be found in Appendix A. Please bear in mind that these numbers are reflective of the specific time when the survey was collected (November 2010—January 2011³): this is a snapshot, not an exhaustive census.

Table 1. Community Membership Table

	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	Other	Totals
Pleasant Pastimes	100% (297)	18.52% (55)	26.94% (80)	433
After-Hours Clubhouse	80.88% (55)	100% (68)	13.24% (9)	132
Other	26.94% (80)	13.24% (9)	100% (89)	89
No Response	33.33% (1)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	3

As these numbers show, there is a high level of cross-membership in the communities; nearly all respondents who are members of The After-Hours Clubhouse are members of Pleasant Pastimes, an important factor that I will discuss more later.

This first survey also asked about interactions within the communities, how community participation affected purchasing behaviors, and attitudes about the racial representation within American Girl products and perceptions of cost and quality. The responses to these questions will be discussed in the relevant chapters; the full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

After conducting ten interviews, a recurrent theme about racial identification of the dolls became clear. This theme was also present in the interactions within the community. Consequently, I designed a secondary survey. This survey asked both collectors and non-collectors to assign a race to pictures of American Girl dolls. This

³ The dates for this survey distribution were centered on the period of most community activity—between Black Friday and the end of January. During this period, community activity generally increases as members plan and make new purchases during the holiday season, receive gifts, and anticipate the release of new products in the New Year.

survey was intended to obtain a clearer picture of how familiarity with American Girl products and marketing could be affecting perceptions of the doll's racial characteristics. This survey had 581 respondents, with 474 completing the survey (a rate of 81.6%).

This survey was distributed in both Pleasant Pastimes and the Clubhouse, as well as through a public Facebook page created specifically for this study. Respondents from the communities were also asked to distribute the survey to non-members in order to form a snowball sample. For the purposes of this survey, a "non-collector" was defined as someone who had never personally owned, and whose child had never owned, an American Girl doll. 49.48% of respondents (237) indicated they or their child owned an American Girl doll, while 50.52% (242) said they did not. The findings of this survey will be discussed further in chapters 4, 5, and 6. A full demographic table can be found in Appendix C. The survey questions are in Appendix D.

Interviews

Interviews in isolation do not constitute ethnographic research, but they are so central to the practice that it is almost unimaginable that an ethnographic project would not also include interviews (Boellstorf et al 2012). For my project, interviews served two important supplementary purposes: first, they provided an opportunity for respondents to discuss behind-the-scenes understandings of events within their communities, such as views on moderators and other members, in a safe location. Second, it provided insight in to how authentic respondents considered their online identities to be. This was particularly demonstrated in how the interview participants referred to me by my screen name, and asked me to do the same (with one exception). Hines emphasizes that online ethnographers must always take the reality of online interactions seriously without

relying on corroboration from interactions in the physical world (2005); what occurred in these interviews was that the physical-space interaction corroborated the importance of the online social interactions.

Interview participants were drawn from the respondents within the first survey who had agreed to be contacted for further discussion. 107 (35.3%) of the survey respondents agreed to be contacted; out of these respondents forty-five responded to the request. Unfortunately, due to the restriction of time and resources, it was not possible to interview all these respondents; only twenty-three interviews were conducted. Two of these interviews were with community moderators, while the rest were with members who had participated in the community for at least six months. Sixteen of the interviewees were white; four were African-American; two were Asian-American; and one was Native American (specifically, Comanche). Both moderators that were interviewed were white women, and none of the respondents who agreed to be interviewed were men. Interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

Pleasant Pastimes: A Community of Practice

I never participate in forum activity. I use it only for informational purposes.
(Survey, 11/27/2010)

Pleasant Pastimes is a very large community with multiple sections devoted to different specific purposes. The community was originally established to be a central location for information about American Girl products, incorporating several pre-existing product guides. This incorporation provided the basic foundation to establish a community of interest—“exchange information, to obtain answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or to play” (Henri and Pudelko 2002). The members of Pleasant Pastimes further developed

this body of knowledge by creating a publicly-accessible Reviews section where members write personal reviews of the American Girl products that they had purchased. These reviews include a letter grade, a description of the product, and an evaluation which tends to focus on “durability,” “value for money,” and “playability.” Most reviews include photographs of the items, either incorporated into a play scene in the author’s own doll collection, or close-ups of the item that are not shown in the promotional materials produced by Mattel. Each item tends to be reviewed by a number of different members, offering their unique perspective, and allowing for disagreement or accord as to the “grade” an item deserves. Indeed, this Reviews section was one of the most-commonly cited reasons that survey respondents connected with the community: they were seeking information about a potential purchase or an item that they found interesting—93.87% of respondents stated that finding information on products was their reason for participating.

In addition to providing an information resource, Pleasant Pastimes considers itself to have the *goal* of providing a place for members to discuss their collections and share information. This goal is only vaguely defined in their mission statement with a reference to “play.” This vagueness will be discussed more fully in relation to the After-Hours Clubhouse.

Sharing sewing and crafting information. This occurs mostly on Dolls’ House. This also might fall under sharing pictures and stories about your collection.
(Survey, 12/27/2010)

Pleasant Pastimes also has features of a learners’ community. While my project has focused on the general conversation areas of the community, other sub-boards are designated by the moderators as ‘classrooms’—these are places where individuals may

ask for help on specific issues such as doll care, share tutorials on how to create new accessories for the dolls, or participate in group learning projects such as all sewing a version of the same doll outfit. In these ‘classrooms’ members will describe their attempts to engage with these ‘lessons’ and provide photographs to show their progress, their successes, and even their failures. While there is no formal rule that requires learners to restrict these questions and projects to the designated areas, when such learning questions are asked in the general areas of the board, individuals may be encouraged to move to the specific learning area.

I spend most of my time in general discussion, sales, and crafts(sewing) sections. I take part in the sewing swaps and some others.

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

i love looking at everybody’s stuff. i don’t really comment much though and have yet to post photos of my doll.

(Survey, 12/7/2010)

In their definition of a community of practice, Henri and Pudelko focus on professional communities—those based specifically around the knowledge, norms, and values of specific professions and trades (2002). However, the concept itself was developed by Wenger, who specifically notes that communities of practice may be found in many arenas of our everyday lives—including, as in the case of doll collecting, our individual hobbies (1998). In his conception, a community of practice has three dimensions:

- **What it is about**—its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- **How it functions**—the relationships of *mutual engagement* that bind members together into a social entity
- **What capability it has produced**—the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc). that members have developed over time.

I have already discussed the purpose and production of Pleasant Pastimes. The third item, function, comes from understanding the larger patterns of community engagement—or non-engagement.

I love being a part of Pleasant Pastimes community. I particularly like the information I get and I love sharing pictures and being able to go to the local store and tell other board members about author events, and so forth.

(Survey, 12/30/2010)

I enjoy the support I gained through my board experience.

(Survey, 12/14/2010)

For these members who post actively, the knowledge that they are sharing with an audience is an important part of their membership. Being able to share with others—to demonstrate their knowledge to other interested parties—is the driving force behind these members' participation. The understanding that their posts have a large—if silent—audience encourages continuing participation. The “mutual engagement” that drives the environment is that of sharing and observing in particular ways to demonstrate that one is a collector of the dolls. Indeed, as Wegner notes, the exchange between the permeable boundary of participant and observer provides opportunities for new members to learn and become active, while current participants can gain insights from the less-active members (1998).

After-Hours Clubhouse: A Goal-oriented Community

The absence of such a permeable boundary may be the reason why the After-Hours Clubhouse has not developed beyond being a goal-oriented community. As I discussed earlier, the Clubhouse requires members to actively apply to be members—they are vetted through their live-journal account and must be approved by currently-participating individuals (specifically, the moderators). As a result the membership has

already demonstrated a higher level of goal-oriented behavior than the participants of Pleasant Pastimes.

Henri and Pudelko describe the purpose of a goal-oriented community thus: “The pursuit of a common objective requires the possibility for the participants to question, discuss and finally establish the concepts and the objects serving the project” (480:2002). An understanding of the project of the After-Hours Clubhouse can be found in their mission statement. Unlike Pleasant Pastimes, which presents itself as a general arena for those interested in American Girl, the Clubhouse positions itself as an explicit alternative to the other American Girl online communities. In order to understand the purpose of this board, a member would need to have an understanding of the general culture to be found in other areas of the American Girl collecting community. As the survey responses demonstrate that members of this group were both more likely to be active participants in their communities and to be members of more than one location.

This degree of cross membership has meant that the Clubhouse did not develop the same sort of archive of information about American Girl that is featured at Pleasant Pastimes. Indeed, members would often refer to the other board with the intention of directing people to find information. Sometimes members would cross-post (that is, post the same information in both locations), but this is a practice that is generally frowned upon in the internet as a whole.⁴

But it is the list of suggested topics in the mission statement that emphasize that this message board has a specific goal in mind: it is there for people to discuss other areas of American Girl collecting. Rather than discuss the dolls themselves, the focus is on

⁴ In fact, it was explicitly forbidden by the rules of Pleasant Pastimes.

discussing the issues with the other boards. This indicates the community is not drawn together out of a shared interest or a desire to explore and reinforce shared practices of American Girl doll collecting. Their focus lies on examining the practices of other communities without necessarily engaging in those communities themselves. This community is as much about its members' identities as part of an online community as it is about the American Girl dolls that drew them to the other communities in the first place. Rather than developing a set of norms and practices that stood independently, the community met a side goal of the main community. In some ways, the Clubhouse could be conceived of as a sub-unit of Pleasant Pastimes and other online communities.

The idea of the Clubhouse as a goal-oriented community is also supported by a review of its more recent history. Since 2011, The Clubhouse has seen a dramatic drop in activity—specifically, to use an internet term, it is “dead.” New posts are made less than once a month, and the responses to these posts are limited. At the same time, other communities have begun to develop that have begun to fulfill the needs that were expressed in the Clubhouse's mission statement. Indeed, some of the very topics that they stated were not allowed in other communities have begun to be allowed within Pleasant Pastimes; American Girl itself has created a Facebook page where individuals may submit feedback—positive or negative. As the desire for a place to discuss and analyze is now being met by more central, easier to access communities, it seems that the driving force behind the Clubhouse's existence has been lost.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained my overall methodology as well as the specific locations where I conducted my research. I choose my two research sites with the intent

of finding arenas that covered different aspects of collecting, but that were representative of the American Girl collecting community in general. Through this approach, I found two communities—one as a goal-oriented community, and the other a community of interest. Discovering that these communities have a deeper structure than a mere community of interest (based on shared affinity) as well as having a high level of interconnectivity showed that internet social networks are both stronger ties and more complex than previous research has shown. Particularly, I have shown that the form of community to be found in American Girl-centered fan groups is not materially different from the types of organizations that are centered on professional or educational purposes. This finding builds on the concepts of serious leisure proposed by Stebbins, moving his work from the face-to-face and overcoming the problem of geography in forming community connections.

I allowed my preliminary findings to inform the direction of my research. While an online ethnography with a high degree of participation on my part was appropriate for gaining entry to the community, I found that it was necessary for me to withdraw from active participation both to avoid creating bias and discomfort within the community. Further, while my original design had included one survey, my engagement with the community brought forward questions of racial perception that I decided to explore in more depth.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the specifics of the online locations in more depth, and explain the specific cultural context of the online community.

HAPTER 4

MEMBER ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL ROLES

What Do You DO There?: Types of Online Activities

An online community is a text-based environment; the exchange of messages in a public place is what builds ties between members. But within this general framework, there are different forms of communication and activities. As I discussed in chapter 3, the sheer amount of information that is contained in a long-running internet community can be overwhelming—not just for a researcher, but the community members themselves. Members begin to develop specific communication strategies in order to cope with this potential overload. Some members leave, while others instead develop filtering mechanisms, and begin to ignore the activities and communications (referred to as “posts” or “threads”) that are not of direct interest to them (Schoberth et al 2003). How do members filter the messages and decide which ones are worth engaging with? After three months of ethnographic observation and descriptive coding, it became clear that there were three primary forms of community activity that could be easily identified by observing the subject line and first post in a subject thread.

The three types of communication I identified were informational, material activities, and discussion/debate.¹ Within these categories there is some overlap, of

¹ Another category, selling and purchasing, was not evidenced in the main sections of the community and was not included in my analysis. This category was restricted to specific ‘selling’ sections on Pleasant Pastimes, and were very rarely done at the The Clubhouse.

course, and as the survey results will show later, not all members participated in all activities. But understanding these expected patterns of behavior is essential for understanding the role of community participation in shaping members—as well a vice versa. After defining the three categories of activity, I designed my survey to incorporate questions regarding board activities. It became clear that the members who felt deeper ties towards others in the community were more likely to participate in some activities over others, which suggests that relationships are important in the filtering process.

Table 2. Respondent Activities in Online Communities

Finding information about American Girl products.	93.87% (291)
General American Girl-centered discussion with other members.	91.29% (283)
Responding to others' pictures and stories.	71.29% (221)
Sharing pictures and stories of your own collection.	63.87% (198)
Speculating on potential future releases.	38.39% (181)
Discussing and sharing craft ideas.	55.48% (172)
Taking part in community-arranged swaps and contests.	30% (93)

Informational Usage: Q&A and FYI

raised neck stamp question

(Pleasant Pastimes, 2/2/2009, Petals)

Armpit stars?

(Pleasant Pastimes, 10/3/2009, Leona5)

Is it wood or plastic???????

(Pleasant Pastimes, 1/23/2010, daddysgirl)

FYI—Sapphire Party Dress Info

(Pleasant Pastimes, 2/24/2009, Bark3r)

Threads of this style are generally straightforward. An individual poses a question that is quickly answered, or they may provide new information that is acknowledged. The subject lines will generally identify a specific question or include the statement that this is

new information. Often within the threads, the substantive content will be at the beginning, where a question is asked, followed immediately by an answer, and then further posts in the thread will generally be expressions of thanks for the information. These threads rarely generate more than ten comments and quickly move out of the community spotlight; within Pleasant Pastimes, these threads are often archived by the moderators.

The expectation is that once an answer or piece of information has been given, the question will not be asked again. It becomes part of the general body of collecting knowledge and is present in the community archives as well as collective memory. Sometimes this is formalized and the question will be put in to the “Frequently Asked Questions” area by community moderators. If the questions are repeated, other members (both independently and as moderators) may direct the individual to these resources or suggest they take advantage of the very helpful search function.

These questions are more likely to be posed within Pleasant Pastimes community rather than the Clubhouse; as discussed in chapter 3, this is a result of the form of community. While one of the founding principles of Pleasant Pastimes is that they were creating collecting resources, the Clubhouse is focused on discussing those resources. Within the Clubhouse, information-seeking questions may either spawn a tangential discussion, or the question may simply go unanswered, as other members filter out the content that is not interesting to them and choose not to respond..

Material Activity: An Online Swap Meet

It’s that time of year again, that I’m sure is still everyone’s favorite, despite the swap box, Secret Snarkster, and the PIF swap! IT’S THE MOTHERFUCKING COSTUME SWAP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!...For the newbies, the Costume Swap is an annual

event here at AFTER-HOURS CLUBHOUSE, celebrating the best holiday of all: Halloween!

(Razpberry, 8/14/2011, Clubhouse)

In times past, a basket of little posies and goodies was anonymously left on the doorstep by a secret admirer on May Day morning. Here at Pleasant Pastimes, we have our dolls send baskets to one another in time for May Day. ... Your doll will be matched with another doll, who in turn is matched with a different doll, and so on until all dolls are matched to send baskets to one another.

(EliotCat, 3/7/2014, Pleasant Pastimes)

Several times a year, both communities organize “swaps”—an exchange of gifts of various kinds between members. These events are usually organized by moderators, although they may be inspired by suggestions from community members, and they are often organized around specific holidays. After participants have created, mailed, and received their items, they are expected to share pictures and thanks publicly on the board. Though these activities are not daily events and involve only a minority of the members of the community, they are significant in understanding the overall culture of the community.

First, these swaps do involve a high degree of trust. In order to participate, a member must be in “good standing” with the moderators, without a recent record of breaking the rules or, more importantly, having failed to meet their obligations in the past. Both communities preferred that members have joined the community several months before they were allowed in the swap as well, so they could have developed a reputation among the group.

Second, participating involves revealing ones’ “actual identity”—their real name as well as address. This reality may be why the members who are more likely to

participate in swaps are those who view the other members of the community as friends rather than acquaintances—and certainly not strangers.

Third, these swaps do create a set of formal obligations within the community. These are specific, directed actions that become part of the tradition and structure of the community. The May Basket swap on Pleasant Pastimes had occurred for seven years, with many of the same people participating year after year. These activities have a consistency that becomes part of the framework of the community. Even those who do actually engage in the swap have the opportunity to look at what others have shared when the event is over and people share what they received. Those who participate in swaps can have their reputation built through the public appreciation of others.

Both Pleasant Pastimes and the Clubhouse have swaps, and many of them occur around the same dates and holiday celebrations.

Discussion/Debate: The Discussion on the Discussion Board

Dollie abuse/neglect.	(Pleasant Pastimes, 1/9/2010, Songbird)
Taking Dolls to Work?	(Pleasant Pastimes, 9/15/2011, QuennBornstein)
Rumors about a new historical doll?	(Pleasant Pastimes, 1/27/2009, Selena)
YAY COLORBLIND BULLSHIT	(After-Hours Clubhouse, 12/23/2011, Closets4Clothes)
Theory from left field	(After-Hours Clubhouse, 9/5/2008, towers)

These threads are ones where members are invited to speak on different matters, often from personal perspectives, and to offer opinions on almost every subject that can be connected to American Girl—which is perhaps a surprisingly broad topic. Members offer opinions of existing products, speculate on new ones, debate American Girls’

marketing techniques, share images and stories about their collections, comment on the collections of others, and even engage in meta-discussions by talking about what is happening in other American Girl communities.

These are not always distinct conversations. A thread that began with speculation about a new product release could very quickly turn into a debate about racism in American Girls' marketing, or a discussion about an individual's personal collection could become a discussion about the "right" way to collect the dolls. Unlike informational requests, these discussion topics could be repeated over and over with slight variations—for example, the discussion mentioned about taking dolls to work was very similar to a discussion about taking dolls on vacation. These different threads were posted a week apart, but they still invited a lot of participation—the conversation continued for more than week each, with the threads covering more than four pages.

Two particular discussion subjects were mentioned by survey respondents as being particularly "annoying" (a frequently used term) and thus more likely for individually-based filtering: consumer behavior, and race.

I felt members of the community were putting too much focus on the consumerist aspect of collecting and less on the creative aspect or enjoyment of the items already owned.

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

I began to find that the majority of the posts of Pleasant Pastimes seemed to be more boasting than discussion.

(Survey, 11/26/2010)

They're fucking annoying.

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

I find these discussions to be annoying, to be honest.

(Survey, 12/12/2010)

The comments about discussions centering on racial issues were expected; I had explicitly asked if respondents had read and/or participated in the threads on that topic, and these responses form the basis for the analysis in chapters 5 and 7. However, the comments on consumer behavior were not solicited, but revealed an important aspect of participating in American Girl fandom. While individuals were expected and encouraged to share their collection, the simple act of buying and owning the products was not enough to be considered an interesting person, let alone a welcome presence in the community.

Who Do You Do There?: General Types of Internet Users

Many people have attempted to create typologies of internet users. In one of the most comprehensive studies, Braendtzaeg, Heim and Karahasanović (2011) reviewed internet use in Europe to identify five different user types:

1. *Non-Users*: Those who do not use the internet at all. In Braendtzaeg et al.'s sample, 42% of users were in this group, which is a reminder that while internet use is increasing, it is still a niche and privileged activity.
2. *Sporadic Users*: Characterized by occasional and infrequent use of internet services, such as e-mail and specific tasks.
3. *Entertainment Users*: Focused on the use of online technology to access television or other media, engagement with games (online and individual), music, and chat and message services as well as social media.(10% of the population)
4. *Instrumental Users*: These users are goal-oriented, using the internet to accomplish specific tasks such as financial services, shopping, and information seeking. While half of these users use internet on a daily basis, it is not a driving factor of their lives.
5. *Advanced Users*: Only 12% of Braendtzaeg's sample, these users engage with a broad array of internet activities across all user clusters. Braendtzaeg does note that these users tend to be geared towards instrumental activities, rather than entertainment; but they regard the internet as an integral part of their lives.

Braendtzaeg's typology is helpful to understand the motivations of the users of an internet community. As I will discuss later in this chapter, many registered members of

online communities do not participate actively. By the act of registering for membership, they have become internet users, regardless of their level of participation. But they have also shown that they are not sporadic users, either; they have made a commitment to the community in a small way through establishing membership; they are establishing a virtual presence with their profiles. They are beyond sporadic users, because their internet activities expand beyond specific tasks and services. Whether they are entertainment, instrumental, or advanced users depends on what specific activities they may engage in within the community itself.

The American Girl collecting community is not just a general online community—it falls within the specific type that Kozinets identifies as a “community of consumption” (1999) and Muniz and O’Guinn called a “brand community” (2001)—‘affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities.’ Based on participant’s level of consumption and the social ties that they develop within the community, Kozinets identified four groups:

1. *Tourists*: those who have only a superficial interest in the consumption activity itself and no social ties within the virtual community;
2. *Minglers*: those who have little interest in the consumption activity but a strong interest in the community itself;
3. *Devotees*: those who have strong interests in the consumption activity but very low interest in the social ties;
4. *Insiders*: those who have strong interests in both the consumption activity and the social ties of the group.

Together, these two typologies create a framework for understanding general internet usage patterns and their effect on individual practices. Through examining the patterns of interactions within Pleasant Pastimes and the Clubhouse, I have further

identified specific roles within online communities and their contributions to the culture and continuation of the groups.

Within the American Girl community, I identified five membership types, each contributing in a specific way to the overall community activity.

Lurkers

I'm still at the "stranger" stage because I tend to lurk ; I think if I were to participate more, it would move into "acquaintance" or "casual friend".

(Survey, 11/27/2010)

I lurk and don't regularly interact

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

Pleasant Pastimes has more than 7,000 individual registered member accounts; The Clubhouse has just over 200 registered members. As discussed in Chapter 3, these communities were quite active during the period of research, with multiple discussions started each day and hundreds of comments being added to each discussion thread. But the self-reports of community activity made through the survey show an interesting pattern: the vast majority of respondents are not active posters.

Table 3. Posting History

	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	Totals
Less than once a week	47.00% (141)	78.95% (60)	53.45% (201)
Several times a week	29.33% (88)	13.16% (10)	26.06% (98)
Once daily	5.00% (15)	1.32% (1)	4.25% (16)
Several times a day	15.67% (47)	0% (0)	1.25% (47)
Prefer not to answer	3.00% (9)	6.58% (5)	3.72% (14)
	100% (300)	100% (76)	376

As these survey responses show, only a few members post more than once a week; very few post several times a day. A review of the activity within the communities shows the same pattern. For example, out of the 7,411 registered user accounts in the

Playhouse, 4,113 had an empty history, meaning they had never started a discussion thread or commented on threads started by other people. They are, as the survey respondents I quoted above stated, “lurkers”—the unseen audience that makes up the bulk of internet users (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). Indeed, these self-reports of lurking could be considered low; some reports of online activity indicate that as much as 90% of registered members of communities are lurkers rather than active participants (Mason, 1999)².

This finding is supported by respondent’s specific descriptions of community activity given in response to further survey questions regarding community activity. While the vast majority of survey respondents indicated that they participated in the community for the purpose of obtaining information, they were also clear that they were not necessarily active participants—only 71% indicated that they would respond to the comments of others, 63% said that they would actively share their own collections, and only 30% participated in community organized activities taking place outside of the community itself.

The non-posters were the ones who felt compelled to define their community activities within the narrative answers—almost all of the written responses came from those who said they did not post. As I discussed previously, part of their activity is simply geared towards the instrumental and informational. A cursory examination would classify these members as devotees or instrumental users. However, that conclusion is not fully supported by the evidence in the community. Almost all of the information that collectors

² Mason, B. Issues in virtual ethnography. In Proc. Ethnographic Studies in Real and Virtual Environments: Inhabited Information Spaces and Connected Communities (Edinburgh, 1999), 61–69.

seek—item reviews and speculation on new products—is available to any casual visitor.

They would not need to register to access this information. So why bother with the process of becoming a member, including creating the basics of their online profile? If they are not posting, what are they gaining from their engagement?

As this time I am a dedicated lurker. I glean information about AG products and events from AGPT, but I also read through general discussion posts and posts speculating on potential future releases, and I enjoy viewing others' pictures and stories.

(Survey, 11/21/2010)

These comments further support the idea of Dolls' House as a community of practice, not simply because the lurking members provide the audience for more active participants, but as this respondent indicated, lurking is considered an important step towards *becoming* an active member. Indeed, in Pleasant Pastimes and the Clubhouse, members often introduce themselves by stating how long they have been lurking—anywhere from a few days to months. Members who do not lurk before joining in the community activity may find themselves breaching social norms, and being told—by moderators or other members—that they should lurk before posting in order to gain an understanding of the community rules of behavior. Lurking as a preparatory socialization period has been documented in many other communities (Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews 2004).

All these factors are what help distinguish the lurker from the casual users described by Kozinets (1999). Lurking is a distinct and important supportive and transitional role within an online community.

Establishing Identity

One of the first steps of a member moving from lurker to participant status is an introduction, a process known as “delurking.” This can be either a formal or informal process, but it is expected. What a new member will do is make a post about themselves, explaining who they are and why they are present. A typical introduction post often includes a name, indicators of age, how long an individual have been collecting, and possibly some details of their collection.

I am Bama, and I have just recently fell in love with AG dolls. I bought my little granddaughter a “previously loved” set of Bitty Twins (girl & boy), for Christmas this year, and am so impressed with the quality of these dolls. And also of the clothing! I can hardly wait for her to open her presents this year!

I have since then bought myself two dolls, Samantha & Molly! They are also “previously loved.” So we are enjoying playing with them.

I am having fun looking for clothes for them on ebay, and finding clothes for the twins on the sly! 😊

I am so happy to find a place where I can learn more about these special dolls!

I look forward to getting to know all of you better!

(Nedra, Pleasant Pastimes, 11/16/2007).

These introductory posts are required within Pleasant Pastimes, voluntary within the Clubhouse, but are a generally accepted internet norm. It provides an opportunity for the moderators to welcome the new members as well as for established members to begin to understand their new colleague.

The display name a person chooses will become their identity in their interactions with others (Gross and Churchill 2007). This name is so important that both communities require individuals who change their names to notify the moderators as well as the community as whole. Within Pleasant Pastimes, the moderators require those who change

their names to display their former name as well. This helps establish continuity and accountability for individual's behaviors, and helps other members understand if they want to continue interact with each other.

As well as the introductory post and the username, the avatar or userpic is a small, visual representation of the poster (Nakamura 2008). This image may be anything that the member chooses, provided it falls within the 100x100 pixel limit—a caricature of their face, a favorite photo of a doll, a character from a book or film (including, but far from limited to, American Girl images), or a cartoon, to name but a few. Very few members choose to use their own “actual” faces with these images. As I will discuss later, it is the member's dolls that become indicators of an individual's personality and interests.

Although these avatars are easily changed, many users pick one image to use consistently throughout their membership, and become associated with the image. Using a different image may be done for emphasis or to support the theme of their conversation, but this can result in a loss of identity within the community:

I changed mine back. I had trouble telling who was who yesterday. If you didn't know any better you'd think the board had all new members!! haha I love TLPD though. It is so fun.

(trots, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/20/2012)

As I will discuss in chapter 6, these introductions are also the first introduction of racial and gender ideology in to the community. While non-white members and men mention their race and gender in these introductory posts, women and whites do not. As discussed by Nakamura, it is assumed that they are white in the absence of other markers (Nakamura 2001; Nakamura 2013).

Responsive Posters

Having established that a significant portion of registered members do not participate actively, the category of “participant” becomes more significant. Not all members are participants. Within Pleasant Pastimes, a crude number of participants can be determined by looking at the recorded post counts—only 44.5% of registered members have made even one post to the community. Length of membership is not a very significant indicator to the number of posts a person will have made; for example, while the person with the highest post count as of December 2012 had been a member since the community’s founding in 2006 and had 29,989 posts, the next-highest post count belonged to someone who had joined the community at the same time yet had only made 14,407 posts.

The most basic form of responsive participation is to comment on other’s posts, an activity that 71.29% of respondents indicated that they engaged in. A comment can be as simple as one word or picture, or it can be multiple paragraphs long. The type of response is determined by the content of the original post, of course. Specific informational questions—such as a request to identify a particular accessory—will be short and to the point. A post where someone is simply displaying their collection with no larger intent but to show it will often generate one-word comments such as “Cute!” or “Amazing!” rather than deeper discussion.

More complex questions, such as speculation about upcoming products or posts critical of American Girl as a company, will generate more detailed responses; these are also the threads that are likely to become ongoing and in-depth discussions. Some of

these topics, such as the issue of race, being an adult woman doll collector, and future directions for American Girl are discussed in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Another active form of participation is to be the one who originates a conversational thread. This involved generating some form of original content—either descriptions or pictures of ones’ own collection, provocative questions, or breaking some new information about upcoming products. In all these cases, the member must spend some time outside of the community to create this content, and then have the motivation to share their findings or opinions with the community. They also need some technical expertise to be able to do this; some knowledge of HTML coding and graphics editing is helpful. That these actions require knowledge beyond the basic ability to enter text is significant. Brandtzaeg et al noted that in the population they observed, only 12% could be described as ‘advanced users’ with more knowledge of internet technology, although many of their sample could be described as instrumental, rather than entertainment, users (2011). As a community of practice, the overlap between those who are seeking knowledge and who are sharing it is quite large.

In a review of the Clubhouses’ archives from the beginning of the community in 2006 to 2012, it became apparent that there was a small core group of originating posters. Out of the total of 3,836 discussion threads created in the community, 87% were created by the same fifteen members. In other words, in a community of 215, less than 6% of the members generated the vast majority of opportunity to provide content.³ Out of these fifteen, three were moderators at some point in time during the community; ten of them

³ Note that these are separate, top-level posts. In total, there were 53,006 comments left in response to these posts. It is more difficult to analyze the patterns of participation within these threads.

had been members since the first year of the community's founding. This 6% is a unique group that I will discuss further in the category of 'Community Facilitators.'

Because Pleasant Pastimes maintains a practice of archiving, reorganizing, and deleting comment threads, an accurate count of originating posters is not possible. However, certain names were repeated throughout the community history as either big name fans or moderators, two categories that need their own discussion.

Members who stated they were infrequent posters expressed ambivalence about their community contributions:

It's not that I'm not interested. I just don't have the time to respond to every thread. Usually I'll read and/or skim the race-related discussions, though.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

I used to participate a lot more, but the discussions always seem to go the same way and I grew tired of saying the same things over and over again.

(Survey, 12/1/2010)

For the most part, as a white person, I participate by asking questions and attempting to learn, though I have tried to help educate other people with what I have learned

(11/24/2010)

I do not feel as if I contribute much, but I do like to speak up when I feel it is important.

(Survey, 11/26/2010)

These responsive posters are the bridge between the lurker and the larger formative role within the community. The depth of response from these posters encourages the continuation of the discussion. This is particularly apparent in a community in the style of Pleasant Pastimes, where the threads with more comments are moved to the top of the board, where they are more visible. While the comments may be minimal, it is the activity of these members that keeps the community going.

Community Facilitators

So, you may or may not recall me blathering on about something sewingish to do in the Project Doll Runway off-season...How it works is I throw out a challenge, you have the month to make something according to the challenge, and you post the result of your efforts for the enjoyment of, and feedback from, the community. No points, no pressure, no problem if you can't participate that month. I'll also do occasional check-in posts (like weekly or every other weekly) for people who want mid-point feedback, and for real-time conversation there's always the weekly CraftyChat.

(Frogger, After-Hours Clubhouse, 6/1/2010)

I have already established that the majority of community members are responsive, not active, posters. They rely on others to provide the incentive to participate. This incentive can be provided in different ways. One example is in the first quote of this section. Frogger, a community member, had taken the initiative to post monthly “challenges” to the other community members. Frogger suggested a theme for a sewing project, and members were encouraged to create something that fulfilled that theme—then, they were to post pictures and descriptions of their projects.

While the moderators of the Clubhouse approved of and encouraged this project, Frogger was solely responsible for maintaining the challenge. Her posting of the monthly challenges was sporadic, a fact she herself often joked about when making the posts, explaining that other interests and projects in her life had prevented her from issuing the challenge—or completing it herself—in a timely manner. She would also occasionally comment that participation in the challenge was low:

Last month was not spectacular in its level of participation, myself included. Bean did give us a new tutorial *and* a pattern, so that rocks. I'm just going to pretend that everyone else was too busy making sure they get their Pay It Forward swaps

done on time. That was my excuse at least (that and fucking science). But with ship week next week you'll have plenty of free time, right?

(Frogger, After-Hours Clubhouse, 5/1/2011)

and it is true that very few people seemed to fulfill the sewing themes consistently: in fact, most of the members who did put the effort into *completing* the challenges were among the 6% of posters who contributed most of the original threads. But the challenges themselves provided opportunity for discussion, particularly for those who were not usually active participants in the community. Even those who did not want to sew asked for ways to participate in this community activity:

I've got a question. As these have been popping up, I've been really enjoying it. But I don't sew. I don't plan on participating. But I'd love to offer words of praise, and maybe some critique of things that really stood out to me.

(MissLula, After-HoursClubhouse, 6/20/2010)

These community activities served a dual purpose of providing opportunities for deeper interaction with individual's collections as well as an opportunity for not always active members to engage with the original poster and the community as large.

These member-organized activities could become traditions within the community, facilitating deeper bonds between members. These activities were low-stakes opportunities for individuals to interact, as opposed to moderator-sponsored gift or card swaps involving the exchange of material objects.

Other forms of community facilitation involved being willing to engage in and prompt discussion on issues related to, but not specifically about, American Girl products. Again, these issues are discussed more fully in chapters 5, 6, and 7, but these more active members—part of the 6%—were more clear about their activities when asked about their participation level:

Topics of a more controversial nature such as sexism, racism, homophobia, oppression, fanfiction such as slash.

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

I spend most of my time in general discussion, sales, and crafts(sewing) sections. I take part in the sewing swaps and some others.

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

a favorite part: sideline conversations with friends. Posting about posting, if you will!

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

These are the most fascinating aspects of American Girls in my opinion, especially when handled with respect.

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

These community members, while the minority, are responsible for the continuing success of the community. When they begin to pull away, the community become unstable and may not continue. This was particularly true within the Clubhouse. Frogger herself became even more sporadic in offering the community challenges:

Yeah, we still do this thing (when I remember). It's been a while, and that's 100% my bad. Grad school will steal your...everything.

(03/20/2012, After-Hours Clubhouse)

Between the first post of this community challenge and this second reminder, membership and posting within the community had dropped significantly—while in 2010 the community had had two or more original threads per day, in 2012 new topics appeared less than once a week. Frogger was not the only community facilitator to pull away. Eventually, the community has gone quiet. Without the encouragement of the active members, other members do not have the incentive to post. The relationship between the community facilitators and the responsive posters is a reciprocal one.

Big Name Fans and the Trolls Under the Bridge

I know every board will have it's BNF (Big-Name Fans, or popular fans)...For example, you could make a comment to a post and be ignored. A BNF would then basically restate what you said earlier and then be swamped with kudos and praised to high-heaven for their insightful comment and you'd be thinking, "I said

that way before they did - what the heck? Did the other people just not read what I said because I'm not a BNF?"

(Cheekadee, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/7/2007)

The term "big name fan" originated in the science fiction fandom of the 1950's, designating an individual whose contribution to fan culture was particularly well known or celebrated (Tucker 1955; Coppa 2006). The importance of these well-known fans was even legitimated by the Hugo Awards in 1953, which included an award category for the "#1 Fan Personality," with further categories established in subsequent years to recognize fan artists, fan editors, and fan writers.

What makes an individual a BNF? The specific actions vary depending on the particular fandom. As the Hugo categories suggest, artistic contributions that expand on the established (or "canon") universe of a particular series are particularly emphasized. BNF's may originate specific styles or ideas that resonate so well with the community that they become opinion leaders as discussed by Katz and Laszerfeld (1955). The factors they identified that make an opinion leader are:

1. expression of values
2. professional competence
3. nature of their social network.

The contributions of BNFs are wholly voluntary. While they may appreciate the feedback from the community, they are amateurs by Stebbins' most strict definition, in that their work (although publically shared) is for their own enjoyment. This does differentiate the Big Name Fan from Laszerfeld's opinion leader, in that the BNF does not set out deliberately to obtain a following. However, through their personal charisma or connections, they are able to develop a closer relationship to the media product and thus become more influential in the community.

In identifying the phenomenon of the Big Name Fan in the American Girl fandom, I began by looking to instances where members explicitly identified community members as being influential. One particular thread on Pleasant Pastimes was particularly helpful:

Does anyone else automatically associate a doll with the name of dolls made “famous” by members here? To me, every time I see #23 I think Piper, #4 is always Gretl no matter whose #4 it is, and #49 is Ava. I even see Kaya, in complete Nez Perce attire and still think Maiki! Does anyone else do this? Any more examples?

(Caitlin, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/16/2011)

Here, the original poster begins by identifying notable *doll characters* created by other members (a process discussed more in Chapter 7), recognizing how the collecting activities of the members become part of their online identity as well. While American Girl had not created characters for the particular dolls that she mentions, the characters, stories, and accessories created by the other members of the community have made them so memorable that they override not only American Girl’s own marketing, but the characters of other members—and for some members, their own conceptions of the doll’s character:

I sold my #4 recently, because every time I tried to come up with a character for her, she resembled Gretl. I decided she was cute, but I’d rather read the real Gretl’s adventures than have her twin.

(Queen Bornstein, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/16/2011)

Astra, Franny, and Gretl (who inspired me to get my own #4) are the real standouts for me. They make me wish I had the time and energy to do photostories with my dolls, but the universe just continues to get in the way.

(Ferfre, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/6/2010)

This pattern of created character becoming the powerful identifier was also seen in the Clubhouse, where many of the memorable dolls were the same as those mentioned

at Pleasant Pastimes. So what are the factors of these characters that make them memorable?

Part of it is the sharing of detailed and interesting photos. While some of the members are particularly artistically gifted and are able to compose aesthetically pleasing photographs, being able to take advantage of exciting settings (such as New York City or international locations) is also a plus. But the development of a backstory is also very important. The interest in the collections of others (and by extension, that collector) is based on how intriguing they have made their collection. It is not enough to simply *have* an American Girl doll—or many dolls—but that an individual is skilled in engaging with them—they are displaying a form of amateur professional competence (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971). This competence is attractive to other members of the community.

Beyond simple technical skill of posing the dolls and composing an artistic photograph, there are also the values that are expressed through the display of the collection. Some of these values are reflected by what the individuals have chosen to collect and display. While some members may feel discouraged from using the same particular doll that is associated with a BNF, they also lead the *style* of collecting. There are fads within the collecting community that are directly traced to the influence of specific members. For example, when one recognized member began to purchase and display specific types of non-American Girl accessories, other members followed suit. Members also acknowledge that they rely on a few core members to provide reviews before they decide to purchase a product themselves:

Member photographs and reviews tend to get me interested in things I might not otherwise have wanted, but sometimes steer me away from things I was interested in. In fact, I depend a lot on member reviews and photos in deciding what to buy.

(Survey, 12/23/2010)

Also, the emphasis on one particular doll and story by a single person is an important factor. Having too many dolls, or not interacting with them in an community-valued way, can result in members being the target of criticism, which I will discuss later.

But the final factor in the creation of the BNF lies within their use of the appropriate social media. The BNF's within the American Girl community are often active in multiple platforms—as well as participating in at least one of the collecting communities, they also maintain separate blogs about their dolls (occasionally written from the dolls' perspective), engage through Facebook, Pinterest, or Twitter-centered discussions, and generally work to reach a larger audience that expands their sphere of influence. These patterns are consistent with those found by Segev, Ahituv, and Barzalai-Nahon (2007).

As with traditional forms of opinion leadership, these BNF's have the most influence when they are not actively pursuing a leadership role (Hills 2006) and instead remain responsive to the questions of others. Their leadership is based on willing imitation rather than the power of direct suggestion.

One factor of the online opinion leader is that they also must avoid acknowledging their role. Within the discussions where their characters were mentioned, the members generally expressed surprise and modesty:

I'm just making my way to the board this busy weekend, and it's a lovely surprise to see my girls mentioned on this thread! Thank you so much; it means a lot to me that you guys think them memorable.

(Walker's Hawk, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/17/2011)

This behavior is consistent with other examinations of the BNF in online culture, where those who acknowledge their status do so at the risk of losing it (Coppa 2006). While they are happy to be recognized, it is the norm within the community that the status be unofficial.

The Notorious Few

Being well-liked or admired is not the only way to become well known or influential within a community. In addition to the people who are noted for their positive contributions to the community in the forms of creativity or well-presented posts, there are also those who gain negative reputations through actions that are seen as particularly strange or offensive (Goffman, 2005). These members have what can be recognized a spoiled or stigmatized identity.

The idea of some actions being *strange* within a community of individuals who are already engaged in what is felt to be a stigmatized behavior (i.e. adult doll collecting) is an paradoxical one. This implies that are certain norms—explicit or implicit—that must be adhered to in order to be fully accepted. Many of these unspoken norms involved specific patterns of engagement with the collected objects themselves. For example, within the survey data there was one collector who stated she owned sixteen of a specific doll, and 125 American Girl dolls overall. While mainstream culture might consider an adult woman who owned any American Girl dolls a bit strange, it is the norm in this community; doll ownership is in fact the key towards participation. Many members (78.62% of survey respondents) even acknowledge that participation in the communities has led them to purchase more American Girl products than they would have otherwise.

But owning more than twenty dolls is rare, and owning more than 50 makes one a definite outlier.

Table 4. Number of Dolls Owned

0	0.66% (2)
1-4	28.71% (87)
5-9	27.72% (84)
10-14	16.17% (49)
15-19	8.25% (25)
20-29	11.55% (35)
30-39	4.62% (14)
40-49	0.33% (1)
50+	1.98% (6)

The oddity of having so many dolls was also remarked on in the communities itself. As one particularly snarky member commented:

she has them all. Well, she has every doll ever made, including some multiples. Dude, they aren't pokemon. You don't gotta catch em all. Can you even give them any attention when THEY DON'T HAVE NAMES?

(Closets4Clothes, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 9/21/2007)

This irritation towards conspicuous consumption (a member who is not doing collecting "right," as demonstrated by the patterns of the BNF's discussed previously) was echoed in survey responses, with respondents noting that they appreciated the general culture of Pleasant Pastimes or After-Hours Clubhouse because they were *not* entirely focused on consuming for consumptions' sake. The good collector (and good community member) collects for a purpose beyond the mere object (Stebbins 1992).

Other members were considered notorious for conversational style. Both communities I observed had rules forbidding netspeak and encouraging the use of

standard grammatical English. Those who failed in this could be called out by the moderators, but also risked their posts simply being ignored by other members.

Because these “notorious” members stand out as being internal sources of community irritation, it is tempting to dismiss them as merely trolls—that is, members who are engaged with the community simply for the chance to disrupt communication (Jordan 1999). But there is a particular difference between these notorious members and the perception of the troll: they maintain their established internet identity. While these notorious members may eventually participate less in the community due to the negative or unfriendly reactions they provoke, they rarely try to escape their spoiled identity by changing their avatars, usernames, or starting new accounts. Rather, these members may engage in identity work to improve their standing, or may instead embrace their stigmatized identity in order to maintain their social status. This choice to maintain a connection to their history—positive and negative—is one of the features that distinguishes these members from trolls. Their actions, while just enough out of step with community norms to be notable, still fall within the acceptable range of behavior.

Trolls

It would be nice if trolls stayed under their bridges. Unfortunately, they sometimes surface on Internet message forums and try to wreak havoc. We’ve been dealing with a couple of persistent trolls recently on Pleasant Pastimes. These are folks who have nothing better to do with their lives than to come on forums like ours with the intent to harass people or cause disruption. When we catch them, we ban them outright.

(Pleasant Pastimes, 4/19/2009, Balenciaga)

No trolling, no flaming, no porn. Duh. There’s a difference between “I disagree with you” and “You’re a fucking moron”.

(After-Hours Clubhouse rule)

The term “troll” for a disruptive internet presence has a long history, first appearing on university-based newsgroups in the 1980’s and continuing on (Jordan 1999). In general, a troll is understood to be a disruptive presence in the community, who is engaging in antisocial behavior simply for the enjoyment of it. This does occasionally appear, despite the screening practices of both communities. One notable incident was an individual who appeared in the Clubhouse seemingly to simply comment negatively on the pro-Obama posts that appeared following the November 2008 election:

“O, merciful Obamessiah, The One, Arise...”

(Jane222, 11/5/2008)

This member was quickly banned, with the general approval of the community and an affirmation of the community standards:

I know that this is a community that leans in a certain way...but you just have to think about your comments before posting (or at least edit/add if you realize afterwards that they’re dumb) if you don’t want to offend people but want to express a different opinion. It does sound like she was stalking on purpose though
(Butterfly, The After-House Clubhouse, 11/08/2008)

But other definitions of trolling and board disruption were more difficult to define, and even long-term members could have their participation declared “trollish” retroactively should they not engage with the community in the accepted way, or if it was discovered that behavior shown in other communities was not within the norms and standards of a different one. For example, this was an issue in the mass banning that was experienced by many members of After-Hours Clubhouse. Even though they had restricted their critiques of other communities to After-Hours Clubhouse, they were informed that this behavior constituted trolling and they were therefore unwelcome in the community in future.

While some have voiced unhappiness with the rules of the AG Fans board, they are doing it in separate, private boards and 95% of that discussion has been perfectly civil. Further, not every member who was banned has posted or commented about the new rules or other unhappiness—they just happened to be a member of the after-hours community.

(SweetSixteen, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 12/14/2006)

The troll, like the notorious continuing members, do fulfill an important role in the community: they are what one should not do (Dentler and Erickson 1959).

Moderators

ProBoards, the hosting service for Playhouse, describes a moderator thus:

A moderator is a registered member of your forum that has additional “powers” that you assign. For example, they may be able to lock topics, delete threads, warn members, and much more.

(Proboards, retrieved 6/5/2014)

This definition is consistent with definitions obtained by scholars (Maloney-Krichmar, Abras, and Preece 2002). These scholars, as well as the hosting service, make a distinction between administrators—those who have the entire control of the community, often the one who created the messageboard in the first place—and those who have been designated the official enforcers of whatever rules the community has established. Understanding this distinction is very important. First, it recognizes that there is more to creating a successful community than simply creating the virtual location; second, it suggests that these should be shared responsibilities; and third, it suggests that these are additional roles to be taken on by members, rather than by outsiders (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2003). ProBoards—as well as LiveJournal, the hosting service for the Clubhouse—considers internet communities to be self-policing entities. While the

hosting service provides the technical location, the actual community is dependent on the members.

This statement of the responsibilities of the moderator is consistent with internet history. While the early history of the internet praised the idea of utopic anarchy, in truth most communities required—and welcomed—the presence of an authority figure with at least loosely defined responsibilities (Preece 2004). Primarily, the moderator fulfilled the role of demonstrating and enforcing community standards; they were the main socializing agents for new members. Within the Clubhouse, the main contact between moderator and new member is the application process (discussed in chapter 2) while in Pleasant Pastimes, lower-ranking moderators are designated to saying hello to members who post in the introduction forum. This process establishes the authority of the moderators and ensures that the individuals who seek to become members must at least acknowledge they are aware that there are community rules.

Karine Barzilai-Nahon in 2002 noted that internet moderators can serve as gatekeepers to the community, exercising hegemonic authority. The gatekeeping aspect of having an application process before a member can participate is clear. The hegemonic nature of their authority rests in the understanding of internet culture. The authority of the moderator is unquestioned. The largest tool the moderator has for controlling the members of their community—banning—is one that is considered a tool of last resort, and when used too often becomes an expression of, if not violence, than at least unwelcomed authoritativeness (Mendilow, 2001). It is simply a cultural norm that moderators are in charge and direct community activity; this is not questioned.

Moderators enforce the rules of the community; they are also the ones who create the rules. In both the Playhouse and Clubhouse, moderators will announce to the membership as a whole that new rules have been created. Within Pleasant Pastimes, it is generally known that the moderators have a private section of the board where issues are discussed. However, while Pleasant Pastimes maintains a closed-door process, and does not discuss how the new rules were created, the Clubhouse makes announcements that explicitly state that the moderators had worked together to create them:

[Mod 2] and I are still tweaking the rules as we go along. So if you see them change or tweak, that's why. After about the first week or so of this, we should have the rules set for now. We just added 6, 7, and 8; they shouldn't be a problem for now. If you have any suggestions or discussions, talk about it here. We shouldn't have to screen the posts right now, so post away!

(Closets4Clothes, 7/22/2006)

The formalization of rules and the requirement that members agree to them creates a rational-legal basis for the authority of the moderators. Noting that moderators and, to some extent, forum administrators are different from those who founded a community in the first place is also important to understand when considering an online community as an independent entity. It is possible for a community to continue even when the original motivating individual chooses to leave. This was true for both Pleasant Pastimes and Clubhouse. The communities were given to the next-level moderators, along with the controlling passwords. While the moderator change in Clubhouse was not explained publicly, Playhouse has been more public in discussing the turnover in power.

On a personal note, this will be my last Mod Reminder as I've made the decision to relinquish my role as a member of the Moderating Team effective November 1. I'll remain around for the next month to finish up a few things, but am now officially "off duty."

I've loved working on PP and take great pride at what we've collectively created here, but it's time for me to move in a different direction personally. I know that I cannot continue to devote the time and energy that's needed to maintain AGPT and also balance family needs and my many other competing interests.

(Anastasia, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/27/2012)

This explanation for stepping down from community control is helpful for understanding the motivations for community creation in the first place. It is not merely that the moderators wanted to find friends to talk to about the items they were interested in—they were also motivated by centralizing the information and providing it to others. When this interest begins to wane, so does the interest in maintaining the community. Thus, a moderator may move through different positions in the community, from insider to mingler, over their course of membership.

Being a moderator does change the relationship of the members to the community. Within the survey responses, self-identified moderators discussed these issues:

I needed a break from feeling obligated to follow all the threads, and the attitudes of many members...was causing too much stress for what was a volunteer hobby thing.

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

Banned from Third Board a year ago, no reason given. Withdrew membership from Clubhouse because I felt my presence there represented a conflict of interest with my role on Pleasant Pastimes

(Survey, 11/27/2010)

Moderators position themselves as leaders within the community. Responses from members indicate that they, too, view the moderators as distinctly different from the general membership:

I approve of the moderators stepping in and halting those discussions—such as they have done recently on Dolls’ House. There was alot of unnecessary bullying going on.

(Survey, 11/28/2010)

Even though members supported the role of moderator, they were also unhesitatingly critical of moderators who overstepped their boundaries. For example, many respondents expressed criticism of the moderators of the community where I was not able to gain entre. Some of this criticism is explained by the fact that many respondents had been removed from that community, as discussed in chapter 2. But the survey comments revealed a deeper picture:

Policies became restrictive and discriminatory Was personally attacked by members and moderators

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

Got tried of the rules, rules AND MORE rules for everything from breathing to walking mentality of AG Aficionado MB

(Survey, 12/7/2010)

When a moderator was perceived as pushing their own agenda, they were identified as the “bullies” and heavily critiqued. Indeed, moderators overstepping the bounds was identified as the main reason—after banning—that members chose to leave communities.

But moderators can also lose face, and consequently authority, by not fulfilling their responsibilities in ways that are more approved of in the community. In one incident, the moderators of the Clubhouse asked members to vote on whether a new member—a familiar face from Pleasant Pastimes—should be admitted. While the members in the community did not hesitate to vote and express their dislike of this new

member, several also commented that they did not like being made responsible for the decision.

Is this...even okay? I don't care enough to vote, but it's weird to have this be my decision.

(Belini, After-Hours Clubhouse, 11/18/2007)

While the moderators are acknowledged as an important, even essential, ingredient to the success of the community, both the members at large and the moderators themselves were clear that the role of the moderator was supportive, rather than contributive.

Conclusion

The American Girl online community is a complex social environment. As with any environment, there are social norms and roles that participants fulfill. While I as a researcher was faced with the issue of narrowing down to a specific research site, community members face the same concern and engage in active filtering practices to focus on the topics and discussions of interest to them. Within these online communities, I identified three categories of discussion: informational, material activity, and discussion/debate. Not all members participated in each of these categories, but within these discussions their relationships to each other were a motivating factor for participation. Member-organized events could become traditions and co-opted by moderators.

This was also reflected in the social roles that individuals fulfilled. The enjoyment of sharing and creating opportunities for other people to participate in was taken on by community members, not merely moderators. Even lurkers, the passive observers of the

community, still served an important purpose of providing an audience for the active participants.

Within the community itself, a member must actively establish their identity. While this is partially dependent on factors under their control—their chosen avatar image and what particular factors that they identify when they enter the community—ultimately their social place is dependent on how they are perceived by others.

My examination of members' presentation of self and interaction styles also expands on Lisa Nakamura's work, expanding the discussion from the pictorial representation of race to some of the more textually-based interactions. Further, the examination of the persistence of usernames as internet identity provides a new perspective from which to understand what it means to have an internet identity.

Creating the typology of membership and explicating the activities that the community engages in provides context for a deeper exploration of the ways members mobilize frames of racial, gender, and consumer ideology. In the next chapters, I will use the lens of specific American Girl products to analyze the member's interactions.

CHAPTER 5

THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER LINE

The 1986 debut offerings of American Girl were quite modest: three historical characters, sharing the same face mold and vinyl color, differentiated only by their hair, eyes, and clothing. Virtually all of these “new” products were recycled from the German doll manufacturer Gotz, with the face molds, vinyl composition, and wigs remaining proprietary to that company. But what made these dolls unique in comparison to other dolls on the market were their stories: each character came with a book that detailed the life of an “American Girl” from a particular historical moment. Kirsten, a Swedish immigrant from 1854, represented the settling of the American frontier; Samantha, a “bright Victorian beauty” from 1904, spoke to the idea of America as an industrial nation moving forward; and Molly, the daughter of an Army doctor, stood for the World War II homefront in 1944.

The historical collection of American Girl grew slowly over the twenty-five years of the company’s existence. Following the first three, American Girl began to create truly unique products rather than relying on parts from other makers. New characters were added, but not in a chronological order in terms of their historical periods. As with the original three, the time periods that were chosen were tied to large scale national events or stories that relate specifically to the American national narrative, and the coverage is

far from comprehensive. As of 2011, the series stood as follows, in chronological order

according to release:

Table 5. Historical Collection as of 2011

Character	Year Released	Period	Description	Race (Ethnicity)
Kirsten Larson	1986 Archived: 2010	1854	An immigrant who moves to farm in Minnesota with her family.	White (Swedish)
Samantha Parkington	1986 Archived: 2009	1904	A “bright Victorian beauty” who lives with her wealthy grandmother in New York.	White (non-specific)
Molly McIntire	1986	1944	The daughter of an Army doctor on the Illinois homefront in 1944.	White (non-specific)
Felicity Merriman	1991: archived 2011	1774	A tomboyish colonist living in Williamsburg on the eve of the American Revolutionary War.	White (English)
Addy Walker	1993	1864	A girl who escapes slavery in Virginia and resettles in Pennsylvania at the end of the American Civil War.	African-American (non-specific)
Josefina Montoya	1997	1824	A shy Mexican girl living on a rancho near Santa Fe in the country of Mexico.	Latina (Mexican)
Kit Kittredge	2000	1934	The Great Depression has hit Kit’s family hard and they risk losing their house in Cincinnati.	White (non-specific)
Kaya	2002	1764	Kaya’s tribe lives in the Pacific Northwest and trades horses with nearby tribes.	American Indian (Nez Perce)
Julie Albright	2007	1974	The child of divorced parents, Julie lives in San Francisco at the end of the Vietnam War.	White (non-specific)
Rebecca Rubin	2009	1914	American-born child of Russian immigrant parents, Rebecca confronts labor and religious issues in New York.	White (Russian Jewish)
Cecile Rey	2011	1854	A Free Black Person in New Orleans during a cholera outbreak.	African-American (French Creole)

Character	Year Released	Period	Description	Race (Ethnicity)
Marie-Grace Gardner	2011	1854	Daughter of a travelling merchant, Marie-Grace returns to New Orleans during the cholera outbreak.	White (English)

Note: This list does not include the “Best Friend” dolls that are included the collections for Samantha, Molly, Kit, Julie, and Felicity. These dolls are the same kind of eighteen inch doll as the historical characters, but they are officially accessories added to the main collections. (Cecile and Marie-Grace were released at the same time and are equal characters together, a decision similar to one for the Girl of the Year character Chrissa, discussed in Chapter Five.) Like the other accessories for the collection, these “Best Friends” are based on characters and items within the accompanying books.

This “Historical Line” of dolls remains the most recognized product line from the company by the general public and adult collectors alike. The idea of an educational “historically accurate” play doll was a new phenomenon in 1986, and their commercial success was not guaranteed. In fact, the entire concept had not played well in focus groups; mothers and daughters alike had been skeptical. But the dolls themselves were a different story: as Pleasant Rowland said in an interview in 2002,

during the second half of the focus group, the leader brought out the doll with a sample book, her little bed, and her clothes and accessories. Before our eyes, the same group of women did a 180. Complete flip-over. They loved it. The experience crystallized a very important lesson for me: Success isn’t in the concept. It’s in the execution. (Sloane: 278)

The execution of the dolls was certainly a successful format; within the first three months of the product release, the company sold \$1.7 million worth of products. By the spring of 1988, three more stories were added to each character’s collection, and the format of the product line was set for the next seventeen years. Each character’s story began in a year ending in “4,” each had six books, and each had a collection of clothing and accessories that were similar in structure but different in details. The books shared common titles and themes:

Meet “Name”: Each doll was introduced with a basic outfit and a book that set up her geographic location, time period, and family structure. A set of “accessories”—a hat, purse, handkerchief and small amount of currency or other socially necessary object—could be purchased separately. For example, Samantha set in 1904 had an Indian Head penny, while Addy in her escape from slavery in 1864 carries a drinking gourd.

“Name” Learns a Lesson: The “lesson” here refers both to general ideas of formal education, as well as moral lessons such as assimilation and patriotism. The accessories included a school outfit, along with school books and a lunch. The school books were miniature reproductions of actual text books. Eventually, these collection would include a desk or other large-scale items such as lockers.

“Name’s” Surprise: While not explicit in the title, these were Christmas stories. The stories introduce a special dress, a present and originally a doll—a sort of meta-reference to the importance of dolls to girlhood. The celebrations contained within the stories were explicitly Christian.

Happy Birthday, “Name!”: All of the original characters celebrate their tenth birthday at the mid-point of their stories. This story introduced dishes, tables, and chairs, as well as celebration meals, and again, a special dress.

“Name” Saves the Day: These are “summer” stories; as the name implies, the character has an adventure of some kind. For example, in 1854 Kirsten fights a bear, while in 1944 Molly stages the invasion of Normandy in a game of Capture the Flag. The accessories for these stories are outdoor items such as fishing rods.

Changes for “Name”: A winter story, this narrative allows for the introduction of outerwear including coats, boots, and gloves, as well as appropriate winter time activities such as ice skates. These stories center around changes to the family structure: for some characters, close family members die, while in others missing family members return.

Night Time: While not a story per se, each character is provided with a bed and a storage trunk, as well as a nightgown, robe and (several years after the original release) a classic book to read.

Like all forms of literature, children’s stories reflect the ideology of their producers (Sutherland 1985). In the case of the American Girls Collection, it is important to recognize that the producer here is not the author of the books, but rather the company itself. The first example of ideological representation is Pleasant Rowland herself, based on ideas of the necessity of reading, the centrality of girlhood, and a desire to form nostalgic attachments to American history. There is also the ideology of capitalism, both implicit (these are after all, consumer products) and explicit (the storylines for the dolls include money-making efforts, and the miniature collections include currency).

In more recent years, American Girl has not followed the six-story formula as strictly. The titles of the books have been adjusted to reflect different time periods and character backgrounds (the idea of Christmas stories did not work with the story of the Nez Perce character introduced in 2002, for example). The relative size of the collections has changed as well, focusing on one or two items for each story rather than a complete set of props across the different characters. But this line remains core to the company’s brand. It is the line that established the format of storytelling for the extended product

lines, as well as being the line that identifies the company as different from other products.

The centrality of the historical line to the collecting experience is demonstrated by the number of collectors who have historical character dolls. 95.4% of collectors own at least one historical doll, while 87.2% have Girls of the Year or contemporary (MyAG) dolls.¹ For 97% of the collectors, a historical doll was the first doll they received or purchased. As adult collectors, the connection to educational experiences served as a way to justify collecting these dolls, as opposed to some other object. That is, members sometimes expressed the idea that American Girl enriched their lives in unique ways:

Research. Research is so important. I have everything I like from American Girl, but I want to get more for the dolls I have. But I want it to be good, so I spend a lot of time thinking about the dolls and the stuff I want. I read things and learn about their history.

(Soapcol, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 2/11/2008).

It is the historical characters that help move collecting the dolls from a passive pursuit to an active endeavor for the community members.

“They Have a Bit of Everybody”: American Girl’s Vision of Diversity

As shown above, as of 2011 American Girl had created twelve historical character dolls. Unlike the contemporary line of dolls, these characters come with specifically defined races and ethnicities, both through the descriptions of their physical characteristics as well as their textual narratives. Based on simple numbers, the racial diversity of the historical dolls is as follows:

¹ The number of survey respondents with contemporary and Girl of the Year dolls was identical, possibly because these dolls are both within the “modern” era.

Table 6. Racial Diversity of Historical Dolls

	Main Characters	Best Friend Characters	Total	U.S. Census 2010
White American	7 (63.63%)	4 (80%)	11 (68.75%)	72.4%
African-American	2 (18.18%)	0	2 (12.5%)	12.6%
Asian-American	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	1 (6.25%)	4.8%
American Indian	1 (9%)	0	1 (6.25%)	0.9%
Latina-American	1 (9%)	0	1 (6.25%)	16.4%
Other	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	
	11 (100%)	5 (100%)	16 (100%)	

In a crude sense, these numbers are more or less representative of the United States Census, a fact that members of the collecting community have picked up on and use as a strategy to demonstrate the diversity of the company's offerings:

I think American Girl does a good job. Blacks are 12% of the population (and didn't DuBois say that only 10% of them would be the kind that American Girl does stories of?) and there's 16% of the dolls who are Black, so since it's AMERICAN Girl they have themselves covered.

(MamaRed, Pleasant Pastimes, 8/12/2009)

There is much to unpack in this statement, but one of the first striking aspects here is the focus on numbers as the proof of diversity and inclusion. This theme was also commented on in survey responses, where 57.9% of respondents said they were at least "somewhat satisfied" with the racial diversity offered in the historical line:

I think 2 clearly non-White and one kinda non-White dolls are a decent number.

(Survey, 1/27/2010)

They have managed to have a little bit of everybody: a native american, a black girl, an hispanic one and various caucasians with different characteristics.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

This focus on numbers dances around the idea of racial quotas, an issue that was made explicit in a discussion thread titled, “What does diversity mean for your collection?” In this thread, the original poster gave examples of potential forms of collection diversity:

Does “diversity” just mean racial diversity for your collection, or do you consider other factors? For example, do your dolls have different ethnic origins, religions, sexual orientations, have disabilities, or other attributes that distinguish them from one another that don’t happen straight out of the box?

(Clapham Common, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/27/2010)

Responses in this conversation were mixed. The discussion originally focused on the doll’s stories, given that some of the aspects of “diversity” that were suggested can be difficult to express in the physical features of the doll.

This question really intrigued me. It got me thinking about the way I create stories for my dolls. Of course my dolls are all different - they have personalities and interests (and yes, some of them have sexual orientations).

(Cayla, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/27/2010)

Their personalities are really the most diverse thing about my collection. They all have different religions, different attitudes, different interests, and yes a couple with different sexual orientation. But really, I don’t decide these. They tell me ;)

(Sempstress, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/27/2010)

In this discussion, the responses generally ignored the suggestion that race was an example of diversity, substituting other examples of difference—a pattern that has been found in other discussion of diversity issues (Embrick 2011). But the reality of these dolls as physical objects, with defined features of skin color and face shape, cannot be ignored. In response to the survey, 39.9% of respondents said that how different a doll was from the rest of their collection was “somewhat important” to their purchasing decisions; at the same time, 31.7% of respondents said that how similar a doll was to the rest of their

collection was “not important at all.” The issue of diversity as physical appearance became the center of the conversation:

Well, of course I value diversity in my doll collection. Do I think my doll collection is as diverse as it could be? Definitely not! Part of this is that the overwhelming majority of my dolls are AG historicals...and well, we all know that the AG historical collection isn't as diverse as it could be.

(Queenmab, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/28/2010)

Although the question was “what does diversity mean?” none of the respondents actually attempted to define diversity in a conceptual way, instead offering specific instances of what they considered to be representations of diversity within their personal collections.

Because the American Girl historical line is grounded in specific periods, expanding the racial representation of this line requires that a relevant historical period be defined. This leads to the question of where and when such a character would be present.

I am frustrated that the only Asian release was merely a companion doll and not one with her own story. Though, historically, our treatment of Asians in this country has not been stellar and perhaps it is difficult to find a story with a positive historical bent.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

Common suggestions from both survey respondents and the larger community included “another African American, particularly one living during the Civil Rights movement,” “Japanese girl in internment camps,” “Trail of Tears doll,” and “Asian somewhere, like 1849 California.”

Some survey respondents noted that these suggestions were somewhat tokenistic:

I am disturbed that there has only been one doll of each “race”, generally confined to a time period that is stereotypical for the character (see: Kaya in a time before Native Oppression).

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

I feel more racial and ethnic diversity could be present in the line considering real life demographics of the United States past and present. I am afraid ‘tokenism’ will enter the line as characters of color are retired.

(Survey, 11/27/2010)

But the majority of objection to the expansion of racial diversity within American Girl’s representation of history stems from the recognition that while the members of this community are adults, the products are in fact intended for children. While all the historical stories feature conflict of various kinds, it is the stories of the non-white characters that address issues of race. Even Kaya’s story includes a mention of the concern of white colonization. Race is recognized as a ‘loaded’ topic, and one that can be difficult to present to children.

“Inappropriate for Children:” Historical Narrative and Consumer Choice

To return for a moment to the early history of American Girl, it stands out that the first four stories that were told about girls in American history were white colonial (if not white supremacist) narratives. These stories reflect the dominant history that is presented to Americans. The addition of Addy introduced the first explicit racial conflict to this narrative.

For eighteen years, Addy held the position of being the only narrative representation of Blackness in America. Indeed, for the first four years of the character’s existence, she was also the only representation of non-whiteness to be found at all. This ideological burden is reflected in her stories: they straddle the line of representing the end of slavery as a positive time of advancement, while having to acknowledge the continuing problem of institutionalized racism.

This contested story space is perhaps one of the reasons why the doll is not entirely popular in the white-dominated collecting community. I want to emphasize again the importance of historical stories in respondent's purchasing decisions, with 71.2% of respondents said the stories were at least "somewhat important" in their decision to acquire a doll. But the discussion of these stories is not common within the community itself: discussion of the books and other written material is pushed off the main board to a sub-section that sees only a fraction of the activity that the main board does. The occasional question in the main section about the stories center on whether or not American Girl will make the products that are contained in the pages, and how those products were or were not relevant to the plot of the story.

But within this limited discussion, the reaction Addy's stories stands out as unique. Out of all the discussions on the American Girl historical stories, totaling 145 discussions over five years of conversations, only Addy's stories were described as inappropriate for their intended target audience (girls ages 8 to 11). Indeed, the adults were not certain that they were appropriate reading for themselves:

I was devastated... I hurt. I don't necessarily think that is a bad thing... to some degree. I wondered how one human being could do this to another. I shed big tears! ... I feel the same way about the holocaust and other human horrors.

(MamaRed, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/22/2009)

I have already explained how the themes of the stories are recreated through the different books. It is the details of the stories that change to reflect the specific time. Addy's stories do contain graphic material: in her first book, Addy witnesses her father's whipping, is forced to eat live grubs by her overseer, is nearly drowned with her mother while escaping slavery, and finally ends up living in a small, cold garret over the sewing

shop where her mother works, continuing to experience high levels of systemic racism in the Northern city of Philadelphia.

But Addy's themes are not unique. In Felicity's stories, she is chased by an alcoholic horse abuser, sees Loyalists imprisoned and starved, and witnesses military action. Kit goes hungry, endures abuse and bullying from her extended family as well as other school children, and is nearly evicted from her house—twice.

Kirsten's stories, perhaps, are the most graphic in their depiction of human suffering. Kirsten's best friend dies of cholera on the crossing from Sweden in her first book; in the second, her new Native American friend is driven off her tribal lands. Kirsten and her father almost freeze to death at Christmas, there is a frank discussion of maternal and infant mortality just before Kirsten's mother goes in to labor near Kirsten's birthday, Kirsten and her little brother are attacked by a bear later that summer, and her story ends with the family's log cabin burning down and Kirsten spending a night in a cave with a dead, frozen fur trapper. So why do Addy's stories raise objections? One member's response to a question about whether the Addy stories were appropriate for a six-year-old white girl provides a clue:

I am a very protective, very liberal, pretty activist Mom... Even though I try to teach them about the importance of justice and the realities of the world, I decided that Addy's stories were beyond their understanding right now. Addy's first book is only a glimpse into the world of slavery, but it is an honest glimpse....

(Mary Poppins, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/10/2007)

The objections to Addy's stories do not attempt to say that these harsh realities did not exist. What they do emphasize is that these books could be a particularly harsh introduction to this part of American history. The description of the stories center on

them having more “mature themes” (LillianaTheFirst, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/10/2007) and being the “most sophisticated” (Anastasia, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/11/2007) among the American Girl texts. At the same time, these books are described as being some of the more cohesive and well-written books in the historical line, which is reflected in the history of awards that have been given to the series.

A closer look at the discussion illustrates some themes that help explicate the problem of the Addy stories. A comment from the user “Bama” challenges the idea that the Addy books would be a child’s first introduction to slavery:

I don’t believe there is an AA child anywhere that hasn’t heard of slavery from a young age. They may not have heard about it in such detail, but they know about it...I can’t imagine an AA parent not talking to their kids about such an important subject.

(Bellini, 12/12/2007)

This is a valid point that does reflect the reality that Black parents teach their children the history of racial oppression and the contemporary legacy of this foundation at earlier ages than white parents do (Henry 1995; Lareau 2002). But there is a deeper issue being discussed here. Bellini assumed that the child being given the Addy stories must be African-American herself—despite the fact that the child had earlier been explicitly identified as white. As I discussed previously, this reflects the idea that the history of racial minorities is something that is only relevant or interesting to those who are racial minorities themselves. As with the choice to purchase a doll, interest in these aspects of history is not presumed to be something that is shared universally.

Beyond the racially-polarized perception of Addy's stories, the specific advice about how to introduce these issues and discuss them with the child reflects a specifically individualist understanding of racial processes.

Addy has a hard, and sometimes scary life. Her family gets **torn apart because of a man** who was mean to Addy, stole away her father and brother and wanted to sell her away from her home. ... If you don't know about the background historical period, it could be very difficult to understand why things are happening.

(MinnieBelle, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/15/2007)

I would also advise the mother to **stress that this happened long ago** (we all know slavery does still go on in the world today but **not as it did in the 1800s**, and it sounds like this girl could be afraid of what happened to Addy happening to her), this will not happen to her and that Addy dealt with some very hard things but was even more happy at the end **because she was strong and made it through**.

(Gettysburg, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/15/2007; [emphasis mine])

In these quotes, slavery is presented as an individual problem; these events are happening to Addy's family, not to larger society, these events are very firmly in the past, and they should be looked at as events that strengthen individuals, rather than placed into the context of history.

... She could take the lessons she's learning and appreciate **how everyone now is treated fair**, and that slavery here in the US is gone now. I also agree about the happier Addy books too. :]

(Miscell, 12/16/2009)

Addy's position, as an explicit reminder of a painful cultural time and unflinching reminder of the continuing effects of that time, requires careful negotiation to balance the idea of colorblindness with the valuation of American Girl's "historical authenticity." By positioning Addy as inappropriate for younger audiences, the adult collectors in the

community are (inadvertently or otherwise) justifying this character's supposed unpopularity with consumers, which I will discuss later.

In addition to the question around Addy's narrative, the doll itself is questioned in terms of its appropriateness for children. Addy has what is known as 'textured' hair, as opposed to the smooth hair that was used for the white character dolls. The other historical dolls of color have different hair textures as well: Josefina and Kaya have very long hair where the individual strands of hair are slightly thicker, while Cecile has shoulder-length ringlets.² Doll's hair is important for those who play with them—it is an accepted symbol of femininity, and is central to many girl's play experiences (Porter 1971; Chin 1999; Lester, 2000; Ducille 2003). But hair is also central to many discussions of women's life experiences, Black women in particular (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987; Grayson 1995).

The hair of the dolls of color is discussed in terms of making the dolls more "difficult" to care for. Concerns over how to care for the dolls-of-color's hair are repeated in many discussions:

Speaking of Addy...I can see she has nappy hair. I am not sure if it is to long to fix in multiple braids.

(Helenabasket, Pleasant Pastimes, 3/4/2010)

I've gotten the impression that curly hair can be more challenging to keep looking nice, especially in a home with small children who like to dress and undress dolls.

(MomofEight, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/25/2010)

Cécile is beautiful but I really don't want her for [darling daughter]. Her hair would be a hot mess in a week.

(Daisydotes, Pleasant Pastimes, 8/8/2011)

² Samantha and Rebecca have curly hair as well, but their hair can be cared for using a standard brush, while Cecile's hair should only be finger-combed.

[Kaya's] hair is textured but not as textured as Addy's, feeling kind of rough but manageable... If purchasing for a small child, I would almost recommend a hair cut by a professional.

(Listra, Pleasant Pastimes, 7/12/2010)

[Daughter] was highly drawn to Kaya because of the long hair, but is disappointed that it can not really be taken out if the braids and played with.

(Jumpingbuns, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/27/2010)

I have only ONE complaint about Josie...her hair, while a lovely thick wig, can be unruly at times and tends to be coarser, I think, than other AGs hair.

(RachelAK, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/5/2009)

What unites these examples is their focus on *children*. With every product release that did not live up to collector's hopes, members in the community expressed their disappointment and annoyance that American Girl was not responding to the desires of their adult collecting market. Further, 76.7% of survey respondents states that the majority of their American Girl purchases were intended for themselves, rather than for children; only 15.2% of respondents said that they made their purchases for their own or other's children. Given this purchasing reality, the use of children as an explanation for opposition to either the doll's narratives or the dolls themselves raises questions. As one community member expressed:

I don't think I will ever understand how hair texture can actually factor into buying a doll if you're an adult. I hear this all the time on this forum and I can't get over it. Is hair texture difference so foreign that we feel comfortable saying that a doll with a different texture from our own actually scares us?

(Bandits, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 9/28/2010)

The introduction of the doll's hair as being "foreign" and "frightening" brings larger patterns of racialized discourse in to view. While the dolls' narratives and physical features bring issues of race in to the center of discussion, community members find

ways to avoid engaging directly with these issues by re-centering the discussion of diversity and race on issues of consumer choice.

Colorblind Consumption: The Frames of Consumer Choice

i was raised to think that the color of a person's skin doesnt matter. But reading the posts, i think too some members it matters too much. Come on they are dolls. If you want a a AA doll in historic.... buy one and dress her in that style

(11/25/2010, survey)

As I discussed in chapter 2, the structure of racism in the United States underwent changes during the Civil Rights movement, resulting in a new social order. Racism has not disappeared in this new context, but it has shifted from overt forms and public exclusion of racial minorities to more covert practices:

Compared to Jim Crow racism, the ideology of color blindness seems like “racism lite.” Instead of relying on name calling (niggers, Spics, Chinks), color-blind racism otherizes softly (“these people are human, Too”); instead of proclaiming God placed minorities in the world in a servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not work hard enough; instead of viewing interracial marriage as wrong on a straight racial basis, it regards it as “problematic” because of concerns over the children, location, or the extra burden it places on couples. (Bonilla-Silva 2006:3)

While seemingly ‘softer’ than prior forms of racism, colorblind racism is still a powerful political tool for the maintenance of white supremacy.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines four central frames of colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). A “frame” is a set path for interpreting information; in this case, the frame is an ideological construction that maintains the status quo. As colorblind rhetoric is the dominant strategy in American racial discussions, it is not surprising that all these frames would be present in the American Girl online community. But claiming to not see race

becomes a little thin when racial phenotypes have been turned into consumer objects. As in the diversity discussion above, face mold, skin color, hair color, hair texture, and eye color are all things that are part of the dolls' "looks." A consumer cannot pretend to have not seen these features when deciding to purchase (or not purchase) a doll, or in discussing the products in general; indeed, one survey respondent was explicit in this statement: "I buy on how the doll looks and nothing else.." (Survey, 11/29/2010).

Activating the frames of colorblindness allow community members to save face while at the same time maintaining the face of colorblindness.

While Bonilla-Silva identified these frames by analyzing respondent's comments in response to specific survey and interview questions, I have found these frames present in the day-to-day discussions in the community without prompting from me. In identifying these frames, I have relied on noting where either the topic of the thread or the responses from the community members (both in the community and to the surveys) echoed the themes in each of the frames.

"It Becomes Fake": Abstract Liberalism

The frame of abstract liberalism associates political liberalism, such as support for the concept of equal opportunity, with economic liberalism as demonstrated by personal choice. While this belief holds that opportunities for representation should be available, these opportunities should not be "forced"—that is, individual's decisions should not be scrutinized or evaluated for patterns of racial discrimination.

In terms of the opportunity for historical representation, American Girl collectors emphasize that the company is “doing better” than other doll companies in regards to the representation of non-whites in American history.

I understand the concern of lack of racial diversity, but compared to other doll companies... excluding the BF the white dolls and ethnic dolls are even in number. Second, other doll companies would take Samantha and have a white version/black version.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

Because the company does offer variations on their dolls that are not found elsewhere, this suggests that the American Girl consumer has at least a slightly more equal opportunity to create a “diverse” collection. But while acknowledging that the opportunity to create a diverse collection was there, collectors balked at the idea that they had a responsibility to take specific steps towards supporting that diversity through their consumer choices.

I’m not intentionally selecting dolls because of their skin color. I choose what appeals to me (which happens to be... um... all of them?), and I don’t sit down and think “Well, I’ve bought three white girls in a row, I have to buy an AA this time.”

(AGluevuer, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/28/2010)

Collecting on the basis of what you like is certainly a legitimate statement; the issue of aesthetic preferences will be discussed in relation to the frame of naturalization. But the “three white girls in a row” comment resembles some of the popular understanding of Affirmative Action—that is, the idea of racial quotas. This similarity is made explicit in another comment, where the discussion turned from diversity within a doll collection to diversity within larger society, with an explicit example of “Affirmative Action.”

I choose dolls that I think are cute. Frankly, besides my historicals, my girls don't have back stories. I don't force your "diversity" because it is what it is... However I feel when people try to be diverse, it becomes fake. **When they allow an AA student who has a 2.0 rather than a Caucasian student with a 3.0 because they need to bring up there numbers... I feel that is not right.**

(Strawbz, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/28/2010 [emphasis mine])

The connection between the choice of doll and anti-discrimination programs such as Affirmative Action seems tenuous at best. Indeed, another community member commented on this shortly afterwards:

Why was this relevant to a question about what your dolls look like? Do our dolls have GPA's? Is this something new from Innerstar University?

(Frenchy, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/28/2010)

But the connection here emphasizes the idea that individual choice is and should be the driving force behind social organization. The "right" to choose a doll is viewed on the same level as the "right" to maintain educational and workplace segregation, ignoring the larger structural issues that might impact such choices—such as the fact that there is an 8-to-1 ratio of white doll choices for each of the dolls of color, or the difficulties faced by students of color in a predominately white environment (Lewis, Chester and Foreman 2000).

Opposition to concrete attempts to address the problem of representation is also framed through the statement that American Girl is a business:

It would be preferred to have more diversity, though I understand from a business point of view why things are done the way they are.

(Survey, 11/24/2010)

I think the company as a whole has always tried to project diversity into it's offerings while maintaining a healthy BALANCE as in balnce sheet or bottom line. After all, first and foremost, they are a business.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

I recognize that AG is first and foremost, a business, and, (this is important) with the historical line at its current size, it is not financially feasible to ensure that there is more racial representation in the Historical line.

(Survey, 11/28/2010)

Would prefer more than the token Josefina, Kaya, and Addy but from a business standpoint I can understand AG's decision to focus more on WASP girls.

(Survey, 11/29/2010)

These comments, in response to the survey question, "Overall, are you satisfied with the racial and ethnic diversity of the Historical Character dolls offered by American Girl?," demonstrate both the "anything but race" and the "yes and no" rhetorical strategy. While acknowledging that American Girl may lack a diversity of racial representation, respondents minimized this issue by claiming that an economic reality prevented the company from expanding their offerings (Frank, 2001; Tradajewski, 2012).

Similar responses were present in community discussions regarding satisfaction with the racial representation in the historical lines:

This is about sales. The fact is that "white" dolls sell better than other dolls. AG produces the dolls, and people don't buy many of them.

(Southerncharm, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/12/2010)

AA dolls undersell their white counter parts by about 85-90%, that is an improvement from about 10 years ago when it was 95%. So, if you have a AA doll next to an identical white doll for every 10 AA dolls you sell, you sell 85-90 white dolls. Price point doesn't matter. This is true for \$5 dolls as well as \$95 dolls.

(Valerie, 12/30/2010)³

It would be a bad idea, in terms of business, to make what could be a potentially faulty move. AG is going to do whatever it takes to stay afloat.

(BeauCouer, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/30/2010)

³ Valerie did not provide any sources for these numbers.

These comments are in some ways quite reasonable. American Girl is first and foremost a business; despite the claims towards “education,” the purpose of the company is to make money. But within the context of the specific question on the survey and the conversations in the community, the responses are less reasonable. The question asked was neither “Are dolls of color popular?” or “Does American Girl make a profit from dolls of color?” Rather, the questions concerned the individual’s satisfaction with the racial representation in the historical line, and whether or not American Girl should work to increase the diversity of the line.

What these responses do is turn the question from representation to economics.

Some users expressed this attitude more bluntly:

I am sick and tired of people turning everything into racism. In this case it’s marketing. If people were actually buying the dolls, AG would be devoting more pages to them. You expect a company to spend multiple thousands of dollars putting dolls and their clothing in the catalog and not sell enough dolls to pay for all those pages??? **This isn’t about fairness.**

(GoatsAndGirl, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2010)

Interestingly, at the same time as arguing that American Girl provides opportunities to non-white representation, some users argue that this is not something for which American Girl has a responsibility:

I think the same about Josefina and Kaya...I agree that we need to never forget the history, but this is where schools should be doing their job, not a Mattel toy company.

(BouyGirl, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/20/2009)

Other members in the community were quick to point out that the point of the historical character line was supposed to be exactly that—an opportunity to teach history

to girls—but the framing of the issue as one of business necessity remains a dominant theme in the discussion of race within the community.

“It’s Just Not My Thing”: Naturalization

The second frame, naturalization, presents racial inequalities and segregation as normal, almost biological, occurrences. Although social scientists recognize that very few things are truly “natural,” this frame is persistent, particularly in predominately white environments. Within the American Girl collecting community, this frame was often mobilized to explain why collectors did not like non-white dolls.

“What is your unpopular American Girl opinion? Confess!” —A discussion thread with an introduction like that is certain to arouse heated discussions, which may perhaps be the reason it was started. Indeed, the moderators of Pleasant Pastimes certainly thought so, closing the thread down and censuring the participants as “trollers.” But this did not happen until after the discussion had become very intense—particularly around dolls of color.

I feel like a lot of the Addy love is just about showing you’re not racist. I think Addy is just ugly.

(Bunnies, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/7/2009)

I prefer light skin dolls. Sorry but it is the truth. I would never purchase Addy or Kaya for example. Just not my thing.

(MsCatStan, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/7/2009)

The phrase “just not my thing” is the exact statement identified by Bonilla-Silva in his respondents who used this frame (2003). Within the American Girl community, this phrase was used repeatedly to justify collector choices of many kinds, from specific dolls and outfits to entire products lines. But this usage reflects the idea that these

preferences are “natural”—that is, not influenced by outside influences such as cultural norms of beauty, especially as preferences for types of hair (Hraba and Grant, 1970; Hill, 2002).

The belief that the preference for a specific face mold, vinyl color, and hair texture is simply a personal taste is a reflection of the doll collecting habitus. As discussed in chapter 2, the world of collector dolls is in many ways extremely limited in terms of expected representations. Although collectors emphasize that American Girl does have diverse representation, the products are very much white dominated—even the phrase “classic mold,” in reference to the face that is used for the majority of white character dolls, suggests that whiteness is not just the original, but the primary, example of American Girl.

Additionally, the American Girl collecting community is itself a segregated environment. Survey respondents were 90.5% white. White isolation is one of the key factors influencing the development of white habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006). This is shown in the survey responses discussed in the next frame.

The conditions of doll collecting in general and American Girl in particular have conditioned collectors to attach positive perceptions to whiteness and if not negative, at least neutral, perceptions towards non-whites.

“They’re Not Into Them”: Cultural Racism

The frame of cultural racism focuses on shortcomings within the minority group as an explanation for racial disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Within the American Girl

community, this frame is applied in two different ways: the products themselves, and consumer choices.

Previously I quoted user MamaRed's statement: "Blacks are 12% of the population (and didn't DuBois say that only 10% of them would be the kind that American Girl does stories of?)." This reference to the "talented tenth" thesis requires an investigation of the sort of stories that American Girl tells (DuBois 1903). The stories do emphasize the ideals of education, civic duty, and professional achievement, firmly grounded in middle class sensibilities and the American Dream (Nardone, 2002). Even Kirsten, Addy, and Kit, whose homes are lost and education threatened due to financial woes, express this desire for achievement.

But this comment came not during a discussion of the ethics and morals of American Girl stories, but rather while discussing new areas where American Girl could add more dolls of color to their historical line-up. As the discussion on Addy shows, the reality of the lives of non-whites in American history may not make for particularly comfortable stories and accessory collections for collectors. And the historical reality of limited luxuries means that the possibilities for product tie-ins may be limited:

Everyone complains about Kaya having a small collection. And I agree, she does seem a little neglected...But people in her time period (meaning Indian tribes) didn't have the luxury of having more than one or two outfits. And if they did, they probably looked about the same, right? Why would a little girl want two pretty much identical outfits?

(Poppy, Pleasant Pastimes, 4/11/2009)

Balancing the push towards historically accuracy and authenticity with the necessity of creating products to sell is a problem. But as Daniel Hade points out in his essay 'Lies My Children's Books Taught Me,' American Girl has not shied away from

masking some of the harsher realities of history in order to create compelling toys (2000).

One of the most obvious aspects of this is the sheer number of accessories available for the characters: while some of the characters were identified as wealthy, even the 20th Century characters were unlikely to have had the extensive wardrobes that the catalogs offer. Community members are away of this:

I never saw why AG limited Kaya's collection so, and use the excuse of historical accuracy. I enjoy a little fantasy in my imaginings...Kirsten's prairie wardrobe was vast compared to real prairie girls maybe having three, let alone a collection of aprons, ribbons, and a bevy of shawls.

(Fievel, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 4/19/2011)

So while American Girl may not have always lived up to the ideal of accuracy, this cultural-circumstance based argument provides an explanation for the limitations of the representation in the collection.

The secondary application of the frame of cultural racism focuses specifically on consumer choices. I have already discussed the belief that only people of color would be interested in dolls of color. This belief was explicated by one survey respondent:

Do you not think AG knows the majority of their buyers aren't African American or Mexican? I've never met or seen a Mexican or African American girl into AG dolls and I AM NOT being racist.

(Survey, 12/22/2010)

While this survey respondent may not have met any girls of color (that is, children) who are interested in American Girl, she did identify herself as a member of both doll communities under review. With 3.1% of the survey respondents in these communities identifying themselves as African-American and 6.1% identifying themselves as Latino (though not specifically Mexican), she has indeed encountered people in these groups who are interested in American Girl. But with these groups being

definitively minority, it is possible to dismiss them even though a number of these members explicitly identify their race when engaging in discussion in the doll communities

In this framing, the lack of dolls of color is explained because African-Americans and Mexicans are not interested in the dolls themselves; this lack of interest is attributed to the culture of the group. Interestingly this is the only application of a frame that acknowledges larger structural issues, such as class status, as part of understanding interactions with these products.

I'd wager the families who buy a fair amount of AG items for their girls are in the higher income brackets. That's why all the stores are in very wealthy areas. AG has always been something that was mainly seen in the middle/middle class (as opposed to lower middle class) and upper class.

(Valerie, Pleasant Pastimes, 1/1/2011)

Valerie had previously made the argument that American Girl did not produce more dolls of color because of they did not make money. The connection between these two issues—race and class—emphasizes the idea that American Girl dolls, and to some extent the collecting community, is viewed as a white space.

The Missing Frame: Minimization

...I would love to say my collection is diverse! In the way I said, yes it is, in the religion/race/looks area no. I have 3 blondes, 2 brunettes and a red-ish head, 2 classic molds, 3 Jose mols and a Jess, and I want another blonde-haired blue-eyed classic girl.

(Giggitygiggity, 6/28/2010)

Surprisingly, one frame that is not present in any widespread way in the community is that of minimization. While members of the community sought non-race based explanations for American Girl's marketing practices and their own consumption

patterns, there was no significant attempt to claim that race was not an important factor in regards to American Girl. Although only named explicitly when discussing the importance of non-white representations for non-white consumers, finding a doll with a similar historical background as well as physical features was named as an important factor in the attraction to American Girl specifically. Rather than make a claim that race itself is declining in significance, collectors used the other frames of color-blind racism to argue that racism itself is not an important issue in their or the company's product choices.

One of My Best (Dolls) is Black: Rhetorical Strategies

I really only like the classic mold..I just can't bond with the Josefina mold, Kaya doesn't appeal to me, and I know I'm going to get flamed for this but honestly? None of the African dolls appeal to me either. Does that make me racist? No. That just means I don't like the dolls. **One of my best friends happens to be half black..**

(Ms. CatsStan, Pleasant Pastimes, 6/8/2009)

The three molds named here—Josefina, Kaya, and African (or Addy) mold—are the three faces that were specifically created to represent non-whites.⁴ The Josefina mold has since been used for contextually white characters, but the association with non-whiteness continues within the collecting community.

Using the naturalization frame, the rejection of these molds is framed as a matter of personal taste. The three molds referenced are relatively new; a consumer who had become accustomed to the original style of these dolls might be reluctant to embrace

⁴ There are two other face molds that were used to indicate Asian-ness; both of these molds were created for the Girl of the Year and Contemporary lines, and are discussed in those respective chapters. While one of the molds was recycled for use in the Historical line, this character is not central to the associated story.

something new. But this echoes back to the issue of habitus and how the structural and economic realities of doll collecting have shaped perceptions.

But MsCatStan's story referenced more than simply an issue with the doll's face. The mention of the "half black best friend" moves this past the realm of preference for a specific style of consumer good and makes a connection to larger world interactions. Her words are in fact one of the specific rhetorical strategies identified by Bonilla-Silva as being one of the semantic moves that whites use to save face in a racialized interaction: realizing that a critical statement may indicate that they harbor general negative feelings towards a person of that race, whites seek to establish that they are not racist by referring to close friends who are non-white (Briggs 2007), and specifically, Black (Jackman and Crane 1986).

I suppose it would be good to be diverse but I don't get the dolls for my kids and they already know about diversity through their family. They have black cousins and I am so proud (being from an old racist Southern family) that they are truly colorblind with their family and friends.

(Finnishfish, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/29/2010)

Members of the community understand that their preferences for certain dolls can be read—correctly or not—as a reflection of racial attitudes.

I don't think anymore about making my collection diverse than I do my friends. People are people no matter how small (or dark, or light, or asian, etc).. Really I just buy who I think is pretty or appeals to me. I find that the commonality is light eyes. I love blue, hazel, or green eyes. So most of my dolls, no matter the skin tone, have light eyes. Does that make me a racist? No, I just don't want to spend \$100 on a doll that doesn't appeal to me. It is just like any relationship that you can control: you choose the puppy you think is cute and has the right characteristics for you, you choose your life mate the same way. We are only animals after all.

(Finnishfish, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/28/2010)

While I am all for racial equality among people, I will not buy a doll with features I do not find attractive just to prove that I'm not a racist.

(Survey, 11/21/2010)

These comments repeat some of the themes that are found in the idea of naturalization, particularly in the idea that these choices are based on some sort of 'animal' nature. But these comments are also explicit denials of racism: while the collectors acknowledge that their choices could be read to indicate racial preference, they are able to use the rhetorical strategy to counteract these ideas. While maintaining the idea of colorblindness, these community members also explicitly acknowledge the issue of race.

Many of the survey comments and community conversations I have shared show grammatical and spelling errors. Errors of this kind are sometimes used as indications of discomfort with a topic; Bonilla-Silva does specifically define "rhetorical incoherence" as one of the strategies that mask colorblind racism (2003). I did not find this to be true in the textual medium of these virtual communities. While grammatical mistakes are present in the examples I have provided, they were no more likely to occur in a discussion of race as they were to occur in a discussion on sewing a doll's dress. Community members benefited from having time to compose their answers within the community, as well as having help from browser-installed spellcheckers. In Pleasant Pastimes community specifically, moderators have gone so far as to program the community spellcheck to replace common misspellings and grammatical errors. Rather than become incoherent when confronted with an emotional topic, community members simply choose to ignore the conversations:

I feel that every word I type will be scrutinized and things I say will be taken the wrong way and then I will be criticized. Therefore I feel no need to engage in these types of conversations.

(Survey, 12/30/2010)

I used to, but have stopped since it's obvious that the boards are not a safe place for debate; I go to learn more about the dolls/sales/what's coming up, not to have every single thing I write get overly read into and then have myself attacked for it.

(Survey, 12/1/2010)

Conclusion

The historic line of American Girl dolls, as the original line from the company, is the iconic form of American Girl. It represents the face of the company, and demonstrates the model of edutainment—combining play with education—the best. But this is also the site of much debate from collectors.

The question of whether or not American Girl is acting in a racist manner as a *company* is well beyond the scope of my dissertation. Instead, I have focused on the ways in which the community members discuss the company and its products. The patterns of discussion to be found within the community reveal the active use of the tropes of colorblind racism; community members connect their consumption of American Girl products with their racial attitudes.

In this chapter I also demonstrated how the rhetorics of colorblind racism are enacted in community. While abstract liberalism, naturalization, and cultural racism were evident in the community discourse, the frame of minimization was not. While it is difficult to determine why something is missing, the fact that the American Girl dolls are explicitly racialized, and that the community is discussing these objects (rather than people and actual life outcomes) means that the primacy of race cannot be ignored.

Another form of collector criticism focuses on how some of these dolls' stories—particularly those regarding non-whites—are inappropriate for children. This focus removes responsibility from themselves as consumers—instead of acknowledging themselves as adults who make their own choices, they can displace responsibility for the negative racial choices made by American Girl on to the target audience (rather than themselves as consumers). In the next chapter I will discuss collecting, through the lens of the Contemporary line of products.

CHAPTER 6

“YOU’RE A PART OF HISTORY TOO!”: CONTEMPORARY DOLLS

In 1995, American Girl introduced a second line of eighteen inch dolls—the “American Girl of Today.” This line included twenty-five dolls with varying hair, eye, and skin colors. Twenty-one of these dolls had the original, ‘classic’ face mold created in 1986, the mold that has been used primarily for white characters. Three had the African-American face mold created for Addy in 1994. One doll had an entirely new face, marked as “Asian”—featuring almond-shaped eye sockets to suggest the lack of an epicanthic fold associated with East Asian ancestry. The dolls also featured three skin tones: the light, white vinyl of the first four dolls, the dark brown vinyl created for Addy, and a third skin tone, “medium,” was also introduced at this time, available on both the classic and African-American face molds.

While the premise for the historical dolls was that the consumer would connect with the dolls on the basis of their stories, the byline of the 1995 introductory catalog suggests that the girl consumer will identify with the doll on the basis of looks: “She’s just like you. You’re a part of history too!” To supplement this idea, the dolls originally came with six blank books in which the girl could write the doll’s own story—or rather, the girl’s own story. (Two years later, the dolls would only come with one blank book, and the line would be subtly renamed “American Girl Today.”)

The first outfits and accessories created for this line included school, holiday, birthday, and adventure themes, echoing the historical line but with more available variations. For example, rather than the overt focus on Christianity that marked the historical collections at this time, the “American Girl of Today” could also celebrate Hanukkah, Chinese New Year, Kwanzaa, or the happily non-ethnic, non-religious “Winter Recital.” Like her historical sisters, the contemporary American Girl went to school; she dined on a miniaturized lunch and engaged in healthy outdoor exercise; she could snuggle in her miniature bed with her own one-third-scale historical American Girl doll. And, of course, she had any number of appropriate outfits for these events.

While maintaining a connection to the original narratives established for the historical line, the contemporary line did make one major break with the previously established model: the products suddenly had a “shelf life.” While the historical line had emphasized that the dolls and their accessories were timeless, designed to be heirlooms passed on to future children, the contemporary line had a rapid turn-over. Few of the accessories and outfits were available for more than two years. Certainly part of this is the need to keep abreast of the trends of “today”; collectors who remember the introduction of the contemporary line sometimes remark that they felt the outfits the dolls wore were dated even before the catalogs arrived.

That magenta outfit, the first one—it was like, does anyone actually wear this? And the Urban outfit seemed like it was too old for the dolls age. But they were right on trend, I guess.

(Nethilia, interview, 4/1/2011)

Discontinuing the products that no longer reflected the idea of “today” kept the line on trend. But this also exposed an element of consumerism that had been masked by

the American Girl creation myth. These contemporary dolls were no longer presented as a way to forge a connection from the past the future; they were direct reflections of the contemporary circumstances of American girls. They were aspirational artifacts, easily disposed of, and changing constantly with shifts in cultural practice.

This became even more explicit in 2006, when the line was renamed “Just Like You.” Suddenly, the focus on identification as an American was removed and replaced by the idea of the doll-as-doppelgänger. The girl-consumer was encouraged to focus on a doll that would be an expression of her own self: an individualistic approach, rather than a collective and historically grounded one.

Some collectors found this change disturbing:

I sometimes feel that the commercial aspect of the products is overshadowing the whole purpose for which the company started. I would like the emphasis to be more about the history and the reading and less about what Mattel can make in pink plastic to sell without teaching anything. As a child, I received my first doll because she represented history and that interested me very much. I would hate to see that disappear.

(Survey, 12/5/2010)

The name of the doll line would be changed one more time in 2010, to “MyAG” (or “My American Girl,” the name used interchangeably in American Girl’s marketing materials). This name change also introduced an online universe, similar to the computer game *The Sims* or the social media juggernaut *Farmville*. “Innerstar University” is a digital campus where consumers may act out aspects of Innerstar University books, as well as wear and interact with digital versions of the items they have purchased. A player gains access to this campus by using “codes” that are sold along with a doll. This online game is strictly limited and does not allow players to interact with each other.

Despite the name changes, this product line has remained generally stable since its creation. More variations on the dolls have been added while others have been removed. One notable removal happened in 2010 when the Asian mold was discontinued, replaced with the mold created for Jess, the Japanese-Irish Girl of the Year. This mold, while still featuring slightly almond-shaped eyes, was less explicitly based on the stereotype of East Asian appearance.

Collector Perceptions of Contemporary Dolls

75% of respondents to this survey were over the age of 25, and 44.3% reported having been first exposed to American Girl between the ages of 6 and 11. This group of respondents is referred to as “first generation collectors” within the community, having been introduced to the products in their first years. This term also indicates that the members of the group believe there to be a generational difference in the dolls and their interactions with the products. For these first generation collectors, their introduction to American Girl predated the introduction of the contemporary line by at least five years. Some of these respondents described the modern dolls as a disruption to their experience of the products:

I really lost interest when I saw the girls of Today...they didn't have stories and I was in it for the history. I remember my mom getting mad about it, too—they weren't something she wanted for me.

(interview, 2/13/2011)

What attracts me most to American Girl is the historical characters. If they discontinued those, or decreased the quality of the historical dolls, I would seriously consider no longer buying their products. Additionally, as someone who has American Girl products from the original Pleasant Company, I noticed a decrease in the quality of the toys... As a collector, I resent the “plasticizing” of the brand. I notice that especially in the JLY selection.

(Survey, 1/23/2011)

80.3% of survey respondents owned at least one contemporary doll (compared to 96.6% of respondents who owned at least one historical doll). Even those collectors who prefer the contemporary dolls, American Girl's historical offerings were significant in their interest in American Girl in general:

I love reading the American Girl books...So what is my dilemma you ask? Why am I not drawn to the Historical dolls? All my girls are modern. My scenes are modern. My storyline is modern.

(Wenceslas, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/12/2011)

I think the modern girls are more conventionally pretty, which is why they tend to be more appealing. But I remember it was the historicals that drew me in and got me into history, so I'm currently trying to get more historical dolls and items.

(Roselle, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/13/2011)

Roselle's comment is particularly interesting given that all of the historical dolls share the same physical features as the contemporary dolls. As in everything else, context is key.

As well as the time of discovering the collection, another generational break occurs with the perception of the dolls before and after the company was acquired by Mattel. This acquisition happened in 1998, three years after the introduction of the contemporary line. Despite the fact that the contemporary line was created in the "PM" (pre-Mattel) era, the line was significantly expanded after the Mattel acquisition, at the same time that the first wave of retirements hit the historical line.

Anybody miss Pleasant Company running the show over Mattel? When I think about it I sure do, I think that some of the changes they've made and their deemphasizing the company from not only it's history but history its self is just tragic.

(Pulsar, 11/15/2009, Pleasant Pastimes)

I am upset that Mattel has shifted from the effort that PC had established in presenting an authentic item. I'm not such a worshiper of PC that I don't realize that sometimes authentic meant broken easily or unplayable, but those were few are far between and those items have ended up being a real collector's dream.

(Beauregard, Pleasant Pastimes, 11/5/2009)

At the same time as these criticisms were made, the contemporary dolls represent something positive for their own children and others for whom they might purchase the products:

For as disappointed I am in Mattel's handling of the company, I think it is a great company for young girls-and boys- to buy products from. Even though they have removed some great characters children could be learning from, it is better than the alternative slutty bratz dolls or violent video games.

(Survey, 12/22/2011)

I haven't liked some of the clothing they offer for Just Like You dolls, nor some of the programs they sponsor, but for the most part AG is committed to helping girls stay girls for as long as possible, and that is an extremely important message.

(Survey, 12/30/2010)

This dichotomy of viewpoint—the dislike of the products as something for themselves but the approval of it as an alternative to other toys—calls back to the “Message to Parents” that Pleasant Rowland used to introduce the collection. While the products are not seen as being as high quality or positive as they were before, they still occupy a place as an alternative to mainstream products.

Another positive perception of the contemporary line is that it provides room for creativity that is not necessarily available in the historical line. American Girl dolls are not customizable—that is, the company only offers a limited number of options for the dolls themselves.¹ Some collectors (36.1%) did indicate they did home customization on their dolls, including such things as exchanging wigs or painting freckles, but other respondents viewed the idea of ‘customizing’ as referring more to the process of creating a new character idea, such as the notable dolls remembered from Big Name Fans. There

¹ With 54 dolls available as of 9/11/2013, American Girl does provide more options than are available in other doll lines, but these dolls cannot be customized to have specific features. If American Girl was customizable, there would be 1,176 possible combinations.

is also a belief that the contemporary line of dolls can be used as something to fill in the gaps that are present in the historical and Girl of the Year dolls:

If you want a a AA doll in historic.... buy [contemporary] and dress her in that style

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

I think the MyAG line is actually one of the most diverse doll lines out there, period, due to the racial ambiguity of the dolls. They are blank slates and can be anything their owner wants them to be. While there might never be a character of Phillipino/Austrian/Egyptian descent in the line proper, these dolls can be anything.

(Survey, 11/28/2010)

to me they are all just a “base” to add my own creativity to.

(Survey, 1/11/2011)

As shown here there was some discussion of race in reference to the contemporary line, but the dominant critique of collectors centers on questions of quality and purpose. While the contemporary dolls provide a place for collectors to express their own ideas of both history and contemporary life, the loss of direction from the company is seen as decreasing the cultural value of the products.

When the company was founded by Pleasant Rowland the key marketing gimmick had been the inclusion of the historical narrative. This is, of course, absent in the contemporary dolls.

Acosta-Alzuru, in her analysis of patterns and play of girls and their dolls, observed that the girls rarely engaged in historically grounded creative play. Instead, the girls simply acted out variations on the themes in the books. Popular press coverage of girls play with American Girl dolls echoes this theme, noting that quite often girls do not play with their dolls, viewing them as collectibles not toys. The perception of the historical line by sociologists, educators and consumer researchers has been that it stifles,

rather than encourages, creative doll play (Story 2002; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel, 2002; Marshall 2009). Interestingly, popular press coverage that talks about the contemporary line echoes many of the criticisms of collectors.

But these are contradictory positions. On the one hand collectors state that they prefer the “authenticity” and “educational” nature of the historical dolls, at the same time they are engaged in creating a counter narrative to American Girl, in that the very act of being an adult collector undermines the overall message, theme, and purpose of American Girl as envisioned by Pleasant Rowland. Many discussions within the community deal with collectors attempting to expand on and “correct” oversights in the existing historical narratives (oversights that have not gone unnoticed by scholars, either [Sutherland 1985]).

Collectors, particularly first generation collectors, must work to reconcile their knowledge of history, and recognition of the imperfect nature of American Girl’s telling of history with their brand loyalty and nostalgic myopia. So in this process of reconciliation of adult and child they often engage in the same sort of narrative creation that the contemporary line was designed for.

I’ve been working on her story so input is very, very welcome. I’ve got plotlines worked out for Inky Learns a Lesson and Inky’s Surprise... but I’m stuck on the middle of the meet book.

(Colette, Clubhouse, 4/22/2006)

Kagome (Ka-go-may)(Ivy) is a 11-year-old girl (turning 12 in the book) from Tokyo, Japan. She loves Japanese street fashion, but since she moved to America she has toned it down some. She is a dancer and an aspiring actress. Her favorite hobby is putting fun outfits together, then going shopping and showing them off. Her dream is to become a Super Model like Yuri Ebihara*. Her favorite band is Perfume**, they are a J-pop/techno group. She speaks enough English to get by, but sometimes she gets confused and says something totally off topic and weird.

(Miss Twiggy, Pleasant Pastimes, 1/11/2008)

Collectors are explicit in the way they repurpose American Girl products to fit their own ends. So if they do so blatantly make use of the contemporary line, why are they so relentlessly critical? Several explanations are suggested through community interactions. The first reason may be grounded in the relationship as consumers to the corporate body. American Girl produces the products for consumption, but the company has failed to produce what these members would like. So they have had to step out and exercise their independence, doing such things as turning to other companies to produce what they want, or even producing them themselves.

Ruthie definitely needs a winter coat to get through the Cincinnati winters. This coat is illustrated on the front of Really Truly Ruthie. I used green flannel for the coat and drafted my own pattern.

(GranCarol, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/19/2010)

Now really, why couldn't AG have made this dress? Ah well, they wouldn't have done it as well as this, so maybe I should be glad that they didn't! ***sigh*** Sign me up for one of these too....

(slou61, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/11/2010)

These collectors take pride in what they have added, but they must also face that American Girl is imperfect. Once American Girl's imperfections have been acknowledged, continuing to justify the high prices of the products may pose a challenge.

Pleasant Rowland once said something along the lines of 'not just another plastic play thing' in regards to the dolls and their collections, i feel mattel has ruined that, it's all superficial plastic pink selfcentered crap.

(Survey, 12/4/2010)

Most of the items from the Pre-Mattel collection were high quality and lasted for years. The newer items, particularly the Julie collection and the GoT collection, look plastic and cheap, and while this may make them attractive to younger consumers, the older girls who were the dolls' original target market will lose interest faster.

(Survey, 11/25/2010)

As these are luxury goods, and the collectors are luxury good consumers, this imperfection is hard to reconcile as their entitlement has been betrayed (Belk 1995; Silverstein and Fiske 2003). The recognition of themselves as consumers, rather than recipients, could be a source of cognitive dissonance.

The theme of quality as justification for high prices is echoed in the justification as education for high prices, but even more importantly than that, the fact that these products are educational is used by collectors as a justification for an adult to still engage with them. Adult women face social stigma for engaging in leisure-time play (Henderson and Allen 1991, Mattingly and Blanchi 2003), but as long as American Girl is perceived as a purveyor of learning, it is acceptable for adult women to maintain an interest. This is a claim to self-improvement (Stalp, Radina and Lynch 2008, Yarnal 2006).

... You have just described the experience Pleasant Rowland intended when she created the American Girls Collection. My grandmother just told me she thinks Kirsten inspired my love of history though I seem to remember being into history before that. I guess the American Girls really inspired my passion and knowledge of history and I hope that your Bean will continue on the same path for many years to come. Thanks for sharing.

(QueenPoohBear, Pleasant Pastimes, 11/20/2007)

love the fact that many of the people on PTs know a lot about history in many aspects, costuming, and that people come from all over the country, and sometimes outside of the country.

(Survey, 12/30/2010)

The contemporary line may come too close to emphasizing negative stereotypes of girlhood and womanhood, in that it is explicit in its mission to “celebrate girls.” Contemporary girlhood, with its stereotypes of vanity and shallowness, may not be a comfortable subject for these adult women to dwell on.

As for lower-middle class people not getting AG dolls, I agree with you there as well. My parents BALKED, bordering on laughing in our faces when we begged

for the dolls. ...we never were allowed to save up and order and of their clothes and accessories.

(Camille, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 7/21/2006)

Little Miss Ostracized! Yes, you, too, can relive your experiences with the Weird Girl from your elementary school days who is not beloved by the entire schoolyard. Whether you were her or you just picked on her mercilessly, you all know who I am talking about! Comes in “disfiguring birthmark”, “slightly overweight”, and “chronically open, spacey eyed” models, your choice! Attired in battered blue jeans and oversized sweatshirt with nothing printed on it. Each one comes with notebook and pen, notes to get out of gym class detailing various exotic problems, note from parents threatening a lawsuit if the bullying continues, and tearstained pillow! Pre-order the “I Was An AG Outcast” tell-all book written by bitter adult version of your doll now and save!

(Pantaloons, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 9/1/2006)

As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, American Girl’s contemporary collection are aspirational artifacts. In addition to being opportunities for creativity, this line also provides collectors the opportunity to fantasize about idealized lives. The dolls may have “adventures” that the adult collectors feel have been lost to them, and the doll can be a stand-in for the individual themselves. As Yarnal described how members of the Red Hat Society would use their badges of membership (red hats, purple clothing) as ways to establish individuality and make connections with others so too can these contemporary American Girls serve for collectors (2006).

I’ve brought my AG’s to work several times and set them up on top of one of my lower filing cabinets. Most people walk by and comment on how beautiful they are, or come up and stroke their hair, gasp when they see an AG for the first time, reminisce about how they once had AG’s or are now buying them for their children, etc. I’ve never had a negative comment. The reasons for bringing the dolls have been to share my joy- either showing off a fun new outfit and how glorious it is or a new doll squee. ... I think most people can understand having a beloved toy or doll and how special that is.

(ChandlerBingsGirl, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/23/2010)

This engagement, however, is not without its risks.

Coming Out As a Collector: Adult Women and Serious Leisure

“Adults who collect dolls *know* they are a bit odd,” A.F. Robertson says in his study of American collectors of porcelain dolls (2004). And this truth is supported by an ongoing discussion within the American Girl communities: how should an adult collector tell other people about their hobby?

I was surprised at how much more comfortable DH was with my doll collecting when I told him I was embarrassed about it. He was really relieved, like maybe I didn't know how embarrassing it actually was. I told my sisters and my in-laws that I was starting a collection, but I do feel a little embarrassed when I tell them. I still haven't told my own parents! With my latest find though, I decided to “come out” on my blog. I don't really get why coming out as a doll collector is tougher for me than coming out as bi to any given person--that I'll easily do if I'm comfortable with the person or it's applicable to the conversation.

(SproutsMom, Pleasant Pastimes, 4/19/2007)

While this member made an explicit connection between her coming out as bisexual and her coming out as an adult doll collector, other (heterosexual) members agreed with her assessment of the difficulties, and the term “coming out” was repeated many times in the following discussion—as well as in new discussions started later. Discussions on the theme of being an adult collector, specifically on how the hobby and those who engage in it are seen by outsiders, was the second-most common discussion in the Pleasant Pastimes board after explicit discussion of American Girl products. Between 2006 and 2011, there were 520 separate threads on this topic, an average of one every other week. While this theme was not often discussed in the Clubhouse, occasional mentions of the issue were made within the context of how one should ‘play’ with ones dolls—as in, taking photos in public, and other activities where people might see them with the doll. The language used in these discussions is explicit in its recognition of a very adult experience of stigma.

Leisure pursuits fall into a contested space in industrial capitalist American society. First, the emphasis on productive labor means that “free time” is limited. Given that free time is a scarce resource, individuals are pressured to use it “wisely” (Thompson 1957). Wise use of one’s leisure time is often constructed as participating in actions, activities, etc. that benefit the capitalist system. These include self-improvement, such as exercise or learning, creating a side business, or volunteering (that is, doing for free, the work that the larger system refuses to pay for) (Livingstone, 2003; Gibson-Graham 2006). Consumer activities may have some benefit, in that the process of buying and selling stimulates the economy (“go shopping” in the famous words of George W. Bush), but this explicit acknowledgement of money and consumerism accords ill with the social norm that insists that we mask our obligatory relation to consumer capitalism (Zieger 2004).

As discussed in the previous section, American Girl collectors may use the educational ideal of the company as a means to hide exactly how much fun they are having. This is a common statement for other kinds of collectors, such as bookphiles and philatists (Gelber 1992; Belk, 1995). But American Girl collectors cannot generally take advantage of the other economically-grounded justification for the hobby—that of purchasing the products as an investment (Olmstead, 1991). Rather than preserving the objects in mint condition to sell later, or having their purchasing decisions guided by what they anticipate being most wanted in the future, American Girl collectors engage actively with their toys. It is this active engagement that brings up the necessity for telling people about their interests. Like other serious leisure pursuits, collecting dolls requires

time and money; how one uses time and money is open to criticism from others (Stebbins 1982).

Adult collectors of children's toys particularly must navigate the criticisms about their use of time, as well as the judgment that their interests are immature. Many of the members express both on the communities and in the survey that the existence of the doll community in terms of strength of numbers, if nothing else.

I have been amazed to see that other adults are as passionate about AG dolls as I am. I'm fairly new to this forum and I am loving it!

(Survey, 12/14/2010)

I feel like Im not the only adult who still plays with dolls.I find it more pleasing.

(Survey, 1/8/2011)

Up until recently I thought I was one of a kind, but I'm so grateful to find many other women just like me; long time collectors with kids of their own who are still kids at heart themselves. So from the bottom of my heart "thank you" for helping me to feel like my lifelong obsession is more normal than my friends and family led me to beleive. :D

(MineyMoe, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/26/2010)

Obviously, the other members of the community are geographically separated and do not engage socially offline, but they do know that there are other adult people like them "out there." The existence of these other people not only reassures the collector that they are not alone, but allows them to redirect their doll activity towards other people and not focused on themselves. For example, a collector in a city with an American Girl Place can visit this retail location, take pictures, and enjoy the experience, but be able to say that they are doing it at the request of a "friend." I did this myself when one of my interview respondents requested pictures of a specific display in the Chicago American Girl store. I had hoped to simply blend in with the tourists, but when I was approached by a sales clerk, I told them that I was shopping for a niece.

The online community also serves as a place where members may turn to each other for advice and support on how to “come out” to non-collecting intimates (be they family members, friends, or associates).

The support may often take the form of reassurance that family members are not as “creeped out” as the closeted member may fear, as SproutsMom discussed above. The accounts of positive experiences serve as models for others contemplating taking the leap. But the desire to come out is not just about being able to freely engage with one’s hobby. It is also about being a full and authentic person, especially in relation to one’s partner or friends. Another form of support that is provided in the community is advice and reassurance when one’s “coming out” is not met with a positive reaction:

My dh thinks I am nuts. He is always complaining...He doesn't 'get' it at all. I think he is embarrassed by it and does not think a grown woman should be playing with dolls. He walks in the room and sees me changing clothes/brushing hair and says incredulously “are you playing with dolls?” to which I answer yes :) He tries not to listen to any of my doll talk and shows less than zero interest. Nothing changes a conversation quicker than doll talk lol! He is also rough with our dolls. it really bugs me and my dd's,

(SquirrelMom, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/8/2009)

In the wake of this negative incident the advice of the community was not to offer advice over her doll collection, but general relationship advice, trying to reassure the member that the fault was not with her collection activities, but with her partner for not at least tolerating her hobby, as an act of caring.

The term “coming-out” in relation to collecting was first used by a non-heterosexual person, but many of the members who have used it since are heterosexual. It does need to be acknowledged that not all members of the community were comfortable with the use of the term “coming out” when it was used by heterosexual people:

Given that I can't even talk about my partner on some of the AG boards, the fact that these people are saying they are 'coming out' as a collector pisses me off. It's not like they're facing any real consequences for it...

(KissTheSky, After-Hours Clubhouse, 7/21/2007)

These protests aside, the process of confronting stigma and forming a social identity that incorporates the stigmatized identity is evident among these adult collectors (Goffman 2009).

The use of a sexuality related metaphor may speak to the conflicts that these primarily women collectors feel in that they engage with "childish" entertainment or age inappropriate hobbies. They may struggle to reconcile the idea of womanhood marked by sexual maturity while still enjoying the hobbies of the prepubescent. While discussions of sexuality was not common in the community, sexual history was sometimes leveraged to establish the authority of ones opinions.

Sex Offenders and Eye Swaps: Perversion and the Presentation of Adulthood

Another aspect of collector angst centers around the question of sexuality: as adults who dress, care for, and play with what are essentially effigies of prepubescent girls, questions of maturity, desire and attraction come in to play.

As the majority of community members identified as women (94.6%), some of the suspicions about inappropriate sexuality were dismissed. As women, these community members can rely on ideas of shared girlhood and nostalgia to deflect questions about sexual attraction to the dolls as objects in and of themselves. As members of a group who had stereotypically been encouraged to enjoy dolls, the question of

appropriateness for most members centered around age and maturity, as well as exploring the doll's inherent connection to motherhood.²

As many feminist scholars on dolls have pointed out, girl's doll play is seen as an activity that prepares them for their future roles as mothers (Formanek-Brunnel 1993; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2005). This same theme is present in the examination of doll collecting and doll play by adult women, although the age difference moves the dolls from being appropriate play objects towards being presumed substitutes for actual children—either children that the woman never had, or children who have been lost, either to age or premature death (Fitzgerald 2011; Forman-Brunell 2012).

But like the girls in the late 1800's who set fire to their doll babies (Ellis and Hall 1896; Forman-Brunnel 1993) and the preteens of the nineties who mutilated their Barbie dolls (Griffin et al 2006; Engin 2013), American Girl doll collectors resist the implication that their toys are inherently connected to emotional immaturity, misguided mothering instincts, or social mandated performance of adulthood. This resistance was shown in the community in two areas: a refusal to accept the idea of being the “mom” of the dolls, and discussions of sexuality.

Sexuality

59% of survey respondents indicated they had been in a long-term relationship (including marriage and other family arrangements), and 44.3% indicated that they had at least one child. This is significant because neither my survey nor the communities invited explicit identification of sexuality or sexual experience. Like race, sexuality was an

² None of the men who responded to the survey agreed to be interviewed. Although some men clearly identified themselves as such in the community, these conversations represented a very small aspect of the community interactions.

unmarked category rarely mentioned in individuals introductions to the communities or in other contexts. On my survey I asked if members had children as a means to determine purchasing behaviors and intent, but it also came to serve as a marker of sexual experience. This is not to assume that all people who have children are heterosexual, but that they have some kind of connection to sex.

An explicit discussion of sexual perversion connected to American Girl began during a rather innocuous thread about “the worst doll situations”:

What’s the worst condition/situation you’ve ever found with regards to dolls and/or doll clothes. What about making doll clothes or doing custom dolls? What’s the worst condition you’ve ever found a base doll in? Just wondering about the crazy situations everyone has found themselves in once in a while.
(RedStater, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

Among a general discussion of matted hair, dirty vinyl, loose limbs, and the logistics of rescuing eyes from destroyed dolls,³ came a comment about a doll seen in an eBay auction:

The worst thing I have ever seen is an abused doll that is up on ebay right now. This is so bad that what seems to have happened to her can’t be talked about in polite company. I can’t believe the seller does not recognize what has happened to this doll. The person who owned this doll has someone in their home who should be on Megan’s List.
(Offred, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

Other members in the community began to clamor for a link to the auction (although posting current auctions was against the community rules), and began pushing for a more explicit explanation of the situation in both Pleasant Pastimes and the After-Hours Clubhouse:

³ American Girl dolls have proprietary eyes; they cannot be purchased separately. When advanced collectors wish to change their doll’s eye color, they have to locate an eye ‘donor’—usually by finding someone who wants the color eyes that their doll has. Another option is to locate a cheap doll with the right eye color through eBay or yard sales.

Wait, dude, what? Also PM me the link. The real thing can't be worse than what I am imagining.

(GuysAndMolls, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

I took a look and.....well, I am naive enough to not totally get it....I am assuming perhaps one could get a DNA sample off of the doll???????

(BoBo, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

The use of euphemisms here is intriguing. One participant would later ask if they were not permitted to be more explicit:

Also a question. Are we allowed to say "semen" here? Because everyone has been short skirting around it on this thread.

PS. it's totally a water stain.

(SewingMama, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 12/4/2009)

But there was no board regulation that required members to avoid using the term semen or indeed any other specific word. The members involved in the conversation chose to write in this coy manner. This coyness presumes that there is a community of similarly sexually experienced peers who understand both the subtext and the desire to use euphemisms in this context (Griffith 1998).

Despite the requests Offred initially refused to share the link to the auction, with the following statement that made an explicit connection to pedophilia:

It's bad. I wouldn't want someone really young to see it. At least the person used a doll not a little child, at least that's the bright side of it. It's after midnight here. Got to sleep. Hope I don't see this in my dreams.

(12/3/2009)

Nevertheless, other members were able to find the auction she was referring to and shared the link and image among themselves. As the link spread, it was realized that the item was no longer for sale and so the participants in the conversation began to speculate as to what had happened.

Well, ebay hadn't removed those auctions, the seller did. The seller probably figured there was no way she'd sell anything now after those kind of accusations, and she was probably really upset and frustrated. Can you imagine how anyone really would feel if they'd been accused of selling a wank-soaked child's toy?
 (Kretak, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/5/2009)

Wat. Just because your ex-husband blew his load on your dolls out of spite does not mean that every stained doll on eBay had the same thing happen, and certainly does not give you the right to slander an innocent seller.
 (Sprinkles, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/5/2009)

WTF I've made the same mark on a doll myself. With ACETONE. Trying to get paint off the torso. It leaves a mark. Depending on where you live- if your water comes from a place high in sediment, it'll do the same. What I'd like to know is... does semen have an innate target to hit the SAME spot on humans AND dolls in her world? Because, TMI ahoy, it's never automatically flown to my back left side every time!
 (Anna, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 12/5/2009)

In the discussion, both Offred and her challengers used the same tactic of drawing on their personal experience with sex as a way to establish their authority in identifying the stain.

It's the pattern of the stain plus the appearance of the stain. I'll stand by my experiences on this having been married and divorced twice. I have also seen the same stain pattern on at least a dozen dolls on Ebay since I have been looking. It's quite impossible for all of them to have come in contact with dirty or salty water in quite the same spot without help
 (Offred, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/4/2009)

You have a lot of people here telling you they've both seen stained dolls AND have experience with the particular bodily fluid you are referring to. I'd listen to that, and listen good, and then apologize to the person you've been needlessly harassing on eBay.
 (Caprice, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/4/2009)

Offred, just because you've been married twice doesn't make you an expert on this type of thing. Many of us have been in long-term relationships with men and can vouch for what things DON'T look like as well, and can vouch for where said stains would NOT end up... like on expensive dolls in that area EVERY SINGLE TIME. Notice the length of the dolls' hair with that wig style? When the hair is wet, what area of the body would it touch?
 (Anne of Cleves, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

There is much to unpack in this conversational thread. The moral concern of the doll having been integrated into sexual activity, a concern that such integration may indicate not just a paraphilia but a sexual disorder that would victimize children, but also concerns for individual reputations. All members were seeking to establish themselves as adults who could interpret dolls in adult manners. Offred was also trying to distance herself from having made a potentially damaging admission—i.e. a concern that she has an inappropriate sexual connection to the dolls.

I've had more sex partners than you've apparently had lady, and I've never in all those encounters seen a stain like that left by what you're implying its left by. Thus, the logical conclusion is that you're either continuing this because you're too stubborn to admit you might have acted ridiculously and embarrassed that seller for no reason, or you're into some really kinky shit with your dolls that has resulted in the same imagine.

(Summer of Luv, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/5/2009)

You and several others are accusing me of unspeakable things and those are personal attacks which are not allowed here. Neither husband did anything horrible to my dolls, nor did I ever know someone personally who did such things. I simply can recognize the stain because I have seen those fluids dry on fabric. You should all be ashamed of yourselves as well.

Your reactions are inappropriate and way over the top. I would question why you are reacting so strongly. I am a former elementary school teacher and have seen a case of abuse that happened to a child. Hopefully, the person who did this to that doll will not do it to a child.

(Offred, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/3/2009)

Note that in this conversation no one challenges the idea that a doll may be integrated into someone's sexual practices, just that their knowledge and experience indicates that this is or is not what happened to this particular doll.

This entire conversation is significant in several ways. There is drawing on common experiences as adult women involving sexuality, demonstrating connections between these women outside doll collecting itself. There is also the acknowledgment of

concerns over pedophilia. A consistent and real worry in contemporary life, but one that would not be included in an American Girl story.

While not discounting the reality that women may and can be abusers of children, no member expressed the concern that she would be accused personally of such actions. (As I have stated before, there is very limited data regarding the male members of the community and thus I cannot make a statement regarding their concerns in this area). Of far more constant concern to the majority of members was the question of them being seen as playing in an immature way with their dolls—that is, that they would be perceived as pretending to be their doll’s mothers.

Not the Mother

When I began this research, I asked my father to please send me my childhood American Girl doll that had been languishing in a box in the basement of my parent’s home. I used the process of restoring this doll as a way to gain entrée in to the American Girl community. (Full disclosure: I also enjoyed the process very much). I viewed my renewed interest in the doll in a scholarly light, but my family did not share this view. Consistently when I have spoken to my father my research, he inquires about the health of my “dollbabies.” I have found these comments infantilizing and frustrating.

This experience is shared by many within the collecting community, although they do not have the reassurance that their interest is approved of by an academic institution.

I hate the ‘dolly mommys’. I think these are the same sort of people who grow up and base their identities solely on their wife-/mother-hood. It’s like they’re already prepping themselves to not have a personality or mind of their own.

(Wiley, After-Hours Clubhouse, 3/14/2007)

Pleasant Rowland designed the dolls in the American Girl collection to explicitly challenge the idea of dolls as stand-ins for children. Her claimed aim was to challenge the sexist rhetoric that all girls should aspire first to be mothers. But although this was her intention, the power of this psychoanalytic Freudian framework remains. In several discussions on the community the question of what one calls their dolls, and what their dolls call them was explored. While most conversation revolved around the engagements that collectors have with their dolls, the other side of the coin was exposed in the conversation “What does your doll call you?” revealing an imagined context where the doll engages with its collector. In this conversation most members explicitly denied that they held a maternal relationship with their doll:

I also have a really tough time figuring out what to call [doll] in relation to me. She’s my doll, but I’m her...what? Not doll-mom, or anything. I guess I’m just her Cosmos.

(Cosmos, 3/14/2007, After-Hours Clubhouse)

Some members, particularly those who wrote story blogs from their own perspectives acknowledged that while a maternal presence was imagined to exist in their dolls’ lives, this was not meant to be the collector. In fact, an overall consensus emerged among participants that those who did have their dolls call them “mother” were to use a community word “creepy”. But if the collectors are not the mother of their doll, that does beg the question, what is their relationship to them? Several members jokingly described a “god-like” relationship where they provided gifts and blessings, and controlled their dolls’ fate:

They regard me as a semi-benevolent caretaker that keeps them warm, dry, and clothed, and interacts with them.

(TansyTen, 3/14/2007, After-Hours Clubhouse)

Others imagined themselves as favored aunts or older sisters:

To me they are all friends. And I am their big sister.

(Murine, 3/14/2007, After-Hours Clubhouse)

And of course a few explicitly acknowledged that they were the owners of the dolls that were inanimate objects.

Like the young girls who resisted to being forced to “play doll” as part of their socialization into womanhood, so these adult women resist having their leisure time activity shaped into an echo of their social expectations. While the dolls are neither their children nor their avatars they and their collections are an opportunity to explore activities, ideas, and even personalities that have no place in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The second line of eighteen inch dolls American Girl introduced were the contemporary dolls, which removed the narrative element of the historicals but kept the idea that a doll’s character could be established through clothing and accessories. This line also asked consumers to identify with the dolls on the basis of appearance, such as skin color, rather than story.

Because these dolls do not have an established narrative, they can serve as a blank canvas for collectors to enact their own fantasies about girlhood. One expression of this in the collecting community is that these dolls could be used to make up for gaps that American Girl has produced—specifically, that a collector could substitute one of these character-less dolls in a historical era of their choice in order to bring more racial diversity.

But this line also interferes with some collector’s nostalgic attachment to the American Girl Collection. The lack of historical grounding removes the educational

aspect of the toys, which also reduces the justification that adult women collectors may claim in order to legitimize their hobby in terms of both time and money.

Beyond the discussion of doll products themselves, collectors are also concerned with their belief that they are stigmatized for their engagement with children's toys. Within the online community, these women can find support for their interests and belief that they are not as alone or exceptional as they had believed. In negotiating their identities as adults, women, and collectors, these members draw on their experiences in relationships—both sexual and maternal—to establish their social role. In the next chapter I will explore the Girl of the Year product line and its relationship to racial ideology and consumer choice.

CHAPTER 7

GIRL OF THE YEAR: LIMITED EDITION CHARACTER DOLLS

In 2001 American Girl introduced a third product line of eighteen inch dolls: the “Limited Edition.” This was the first time American Girl introduced the idea that their dolls could have a limited shelf life: while some accessories and outfits had been retired before, this was the first time that such a process would be applied to the doll itself.

The original Limited Edition doll, Lindsey Bergman, had a story that focused on her family interactions around her brother’s Bar Mitzvah. This meant that Lindsey was two American Girl firsts: the first limited edition doll, and the first Jewish character introduced. She was not, however, particularly successful from a corporate point of view. Given overall disappointing sales figures, American Girl chose not to introduce a second new character in 2002 while they re-considered the product line. It is interesting to note that American Girl was disappointed in Lindsey’s sales figures—the doll is considered particularly desirable by collectors, with even her smallest accessory, a bobby pin, selling for more than \$60 on the secondary market.

American Girl was also disappointed with the sales figures of their next Limited Edition doll, Kailey Hopkins, introduced in 2003. However, with their third attempt, they seemed to hit their stride. Marisol Luna was a Latina dancer from the Chicago area, whose stories centered around her love of dance. Not only did this doll’s sales figures impress, but she seemed to re-invigorate the American Girl company overall. While still

out-performing many other toy lines, since their acquisition by Mattel the company had suffered from a credibility problem. Marisol's debut was accompanied overall by positive press, several major awards, and again, impressive sales.

Marisol's success has become the pattern for the continuation of the Limited Edition line. Although each individual collection has expanded over time—as of 2008 the collections feature at least two books, furniture, and live action movies—the focus on a central, easily accessorized activity was established. Unlike the original two dolls, the future activities would also take on a more overtly gender stereotyped aspect: horses, figure skating, and gymnastics have been among the more popular themes. The line was renamed “Girl of the Year” in 2006, emphasizing the annual nature of these products.

As of 2013, American Girl has produced eleven Girl of the Year dolls. Each of these dolls has featured some unique physical property to distinguish her from the dolls of the contemporary line: a unique hair style, hair and eye color combination, or even a unique face mold. Unlike the contemporary line, these dolls are explicitly identified in terms of their race and ethnicity. That is, there is a specifically Latina character (Marisol), a biracial Japanese-Irish (white) character (Jess), and a triracial English (white)-Japanese-Native Hawaiian character (Kanani). The remaining eight dolls are presumably white, in that they all feature the color of vinyl that American Girl uses for its white dolls and they are not otherwise identified as another race or ethnicity. This practice of placing whiteness in the unmarked category is reflective of American racial ideology overall (Frankenberg, 2001).

Within the collecting community, the introduction of the Girl of the Year is an annual event that results in a large influx of new members and activity. Predictions and speculations as to the “look” of the doll as well as the “theme” of her stories abound from mid-year. Attempts are made to get hold of unofficial images or story proofs before the official release, by examining new patents filed by American Girl, checking for Amazon book previews, and otherwise pursuing multiple channels through which to find information. Community members have often made tongue-in-cheek remarks to this effect. At exactly 12:01 a.m. on January 1st, 2010—seconds after the doll Lanie Holland was officially available on the American Girl website, one user in Pleasant Pastimes made a brief post: “Well, we’ve seen her and we’re already bored. Anyone got any ideas about 2011? ;) I’m guessing she’ll have blonde hair.”

While brief, this comment sums up much of the central themes that can be found in how collectors interact with this product line, and gives insight to the discussion of racial issues to be found within the community.

Are There Black Skaters?: The Representation Oversight in the Girl of the Year Line

As noted, there were eleven Girl of the Year dolls in the time I was conducting my research. While the company’s choice to produce a Latina and two multiracial character dolls is laudable (and has indeed won awards), it is not only the collecting community that has noted a particular glaring oversight in the Girl of the Year line: they have not made a Black character doll within this line. Like the influx of activity that

centers around the premieres of the Girls of the Year themselves, the discussion of racial issues in the dolls is perennial.

Although American Girl prefers to maintain secrecy regarding upcoming products, consumers are very willing to exploit whatever resource they can find in order to obtain early information. One source of this information is “prototype” photos, obtained through various means and shared within the community. In 2007, three pictures of the potential Girl of the Year were made available to members of Pleasant Pastimes community. The first of these images was a dark skinned doll with dark hair and, of particular interest to the community, a new face mold that had not been seen in either the historical or contemporary product lines. The second doll also appeared to feature this mold with a different skin tone. The third and fourth images were of pale vinyl dolls in the classic face mold; one had red hair and one brown.

The community immediately identified the first two dolls as “African American”:

I would love it if she’s Af-Am, it’s time for one, ya know?
(ChanadlerBong, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)

The new AA face mold is gorgeous!!! I love her!!! I do not care if she is Mia or the new JLY; she will be joining my dollie family!
(Slurpie, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)

Now I’m kinda hoping that Mia’s one of the Black dolls (I’m using Black rather than African- American because she could have come straight from Africa or the Caribbean)...”
(Cosmos, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)

As the conversation continued, however, more negative commentary about the doll began to emerge.

The new Af. Am. mold is cute- but she does look a little like a Battat doll to me.
(Hilighter, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/15/2007)

I don't like the new mold too much. Hopefully it looks better in person.
 (Grendel, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)¹

The top two dolls remind me of the Cheetah Girls like whoa.
 (Usual, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)²

The new mold is just....ugly...Battat ugly.
 (Kendra, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/11/2007)

While of course personal preference for more established American Girl faces is understandable, the racial context of this discussion is important to understand. This new doll was explicitly identified by the community as Black, and as discussed in the previous Historical chapter, the community had also held similar negative ideas about the Addy (also African-American) face mold. Within the discussion of the prototypes, neither of the white-perceived dolls was discussed in more negative terms than to declare them “boring.” The discussion of the explicitly non-white doll, however, was unblushingly critical.

But the discussion of the potentially Black Girl of the Year doll did not end at the question of her appearance. Her activity theme was also scrutinized: the proposed doll, Mia, would be a hockey player who discovered her passion for figure skating. This theme was immediately seized upon for a discussion on gender stereotypes:

I think it sucks that it seems to send the message that girl enjoys doing “boy thing” for a hobby, but faces hostility and “discovers” her “true passion” is something slightly related but more “appropriate” for a girl, and thus, girl is finally happy and able to “triumph”... what they really wanted was to be deluded into their “passion” being for something far more appropriate, usually involving

¹ “Battat” refers to another, less expensive line of eighteen inch dolls that are generally interchangeable with American Girl dolls. The line is available at Target and other mass retailers.

² The Cheetah Girls were a tween pop band created by the Disney Channel and featuring Raven-Symone. The group was specifically multi-racial and featured particularly glamourized personal looks.

being thin, “pretty”, make-up, and overly/overtly “feminine” via vis frilly, skimpy outfits.

(Helenabasket, Pleasant Pastimes, 9/15/2007)

This view of Mia’s theme was shared by other community members, who echoed the sentiment that they would have preferred a less stereotypical theme—or at least one that left room for a continuing “passion” for hockey. But these members also perceived that there were other factors at work besides their personal desires:

Breaking free of gender stereotypes would be a grand thing but unfortunately “girly” seems to be selling right now. In that AG is saying that the overly girly frilly stuff is what all girls want to buy when in reality that could not be the case.

(AliceWonderland, Pleasant Pastimes, 10/15/2007)

Although this discussion of gender is interesting, it was quickly drowned out by a discussion of racial issues.

I have a feeling that she is caucasian, since they just released Ivy and there are rumors of a new AA JLY doll coming out and we all know that there is only so much diversity that AG buyers can stomach in one year, right? Ice skating as her theme just supports her being caucasian, because that’s just not something you associate with black people.

(HandsomeSpinner, 10/17/2007)

I have to agree with HandsomeSpinner on every point. Maybe the doll could be a Chinese skater (who doesn’t remember Michelle Kwan?) but I know that only hardcore skating fans like me know about Surya Bonaly...

(FrancoFile, 10/31/2007)

Shortly after this comment, another discussion began that centered on what sort of interests would be appropriate for a Black Girl of the Year. Many of the suggested themes were racially centered: that the doll could be a graffiti artist, be dealing with a father who was emerging from prison, or—most notably—helping her family learn to “eat properly.” These suggestions draw on well-known media stereotypes of the “black experience” (Harris-Perry 2011).

A Different Doll: Racial Perception and Advertising Presentation

The story of the Black-perceived prototype doll has an epilogue. The doll chosen from the four potential options was the pale skinned redheaded doll with the classic—and most common—face mold. Collectors speculated that perhaps the first “new mold” doll had not existed at all—that it was simply Photoshop. This seemed to be confirmed when first no contemporary doll with those features appeared, and that the 2009 Girl of the Year was white as well.

However, the 2009 Girl of the Year had a unique gimmick: her collection featured two “Best Friend” dolls. One doll was simply a re-dressed contemporary doll featuring blonde hair and brown eyes. The second friend was the new face mold, who was given a name: Sonali Matthews. American Girl explicitly characterized the doll as Indian-American.

Reaction in the community was confused. Many people remembered that they had perceived the doll as African-American only months earlier, and were uncomfortable with this sudden change. For others, this new racial identity helped overcome the problems that they had perceived with the face mold. For one, she was no longer Battat- or Cheetah Girl-looking:

I think Sonali is favorite. She is beautiful. My DD think she is too. She is been telling people about the new Indian doll.

(Isis, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/31/2008)³

I do think she has this gorgeous, shiny hair and in person she is WAY better looking than the AG photos.

(Rachaelly, Pleasant Pastimes, 12/31/2008)

³ “DD” is a commonly used abbreviation in these communities for “Darling Daughter”

At the same time, the doll was underwhelming to many: while they did not consider her ugly, just “as not the doll I was imagining.” She did not, apparently, look

Indian:

She doesn't look like any Indian girl I know, she doesn't look like the actress, and even her features don't scream “Indian” to me...I went to three temples with my parents yesterday for the New Year, and I was staring at every little girl, every woman there, trying to see where the vision for Sonali came from.

(Paulino, Pleasant Pastimes, 1/15/2009)

Or perhaps it was that the doll looked like an entirely different “kind” of Indian:

She reminds me a LOT of Kaya, despite the fact that they are entirely different races, etc. I sort of feel like I don't want another doll who looks so MUCH like Kaya, you know?

(Krazycat, 1/16/2009)

The extreme difference in the community between the original and second viewing, as well as the willingness to accept a change of perceived race, was intriguing to me. After analyzing the prototype/Sonali discussions, I created and deployed the second survey that I discussed in chapter 2. The responses to this survey provided critical insight to the power of outside influences on racial perceptions.

They're Not Human Enough to Have Races: Racial Perception and the Non-Collector

In order to identify the power of American Girl's presentation to change how consumers perceived the race of a specific doll, I obtained a sampling of non-American Girl collectors to participate in a survey that presented images of American Girl Dolls and asked them to assign a race to each doll. I defined “non-collector” as a person who neither owned American Girl products personally, and/or whose children did not own an American Girl doll either. I chose to focus on ownership and consumption of the

products, rather than community membership, because it was clear that participation in a collecting-focused online community had a profound influence on perception of the dolls (see chapter 4).

The most outstanding feature of the non-collecting group was that they did not see the dolls themselves as having the features of “people.” As one respondent explained:

Race is too fluid, and the dolls too non-human, for me to select any answers. I could see possibilities for any of them, especially given the categories presented.
(Survey, 4/22/2011)

Or, perhaps the rather more blunt answer of another respondent makes the point clearer:

“They all look alike” (4/1/2011).

Despite this uncertainty, certain statistical patterns emerged within the data. For one, no light skinned doll was identified as anything other than white in any significant number. The same holds true for the dolls with the darkest vinyl: these dolls were overwhelmingly identified as Black.

But a more interesting pattern begins to emerge in the space between Black and white. Three dolls were clearly identified as the racial category that they had been assigned by American Girl: Kaya, the Nez Perce doll; Kanani, the English (white)-Japanese-Native Hawaiian doll; and Ivy, the Chinese American doll. For these dolls, and no others, respondents noted that features such as hairstyle and clothing influenced their responses.

On Kaya: “It’s the braids.” (Survey, 4/5/2011)

On Kanani: “Wearing a luau.” (4/7/2011)⁴

⁴ The Kanani doll was not, in fact, wearing a traditional Hawaiian feast. She was, however, pictured with a hyacinth in her hair, a bead necklace with more hyacinth designs, and a Hawaiian print dress.

On Ivy: “I guess this one seems more Japanese, maybe the haircut, which doesn’t make any sense anyway ;)” (4/13/2011)

But the influence of outfit is not isolated in its explanatory power. Josefina, identified by American Girl as Latina, was displayed with a different hairstyle and earrings that could have been interpreted as clues to her ethnicity. But these signs carried no significance for my respondents. Josefina—along with most of the medium vinyl contemporary dolls and those with the “Asian” face mold—were relegated in to the overall category of “other.”

Respondents were particularly confused on identifying specific groups of Asian dolls based on the faces. “I don’t know which Oriental she is,” one frustrated respondent commented, and then ended their participation in the survey with the statement, “Like no one knows the difference between Japanese and Chinese anyway.” (4/31/2011)

This inability or unwillingness to make distinctions between distinct Asian ethnic groups is in striking contrast to a clearly expressed problem with the blanket term “white” as a racial group. Nearly half (49.8%) of non-collector respondents left suggestions for specific white ethnic groups, including “Eastern European,” “Italian,” “Irish,” and “German.” Several more respondents left comments at the end of the survey explicitly stating they were “surprised” that there were not more options for whiteness. The idea that all Asian groups look alike, but that different white ethnic groups do not, reflects a peculiarly American attitude regarding ethnicity (Sasson-Levy 2013).

Medium skin also had multiple meanings for these respondents. One emergent pattern was that the doll would be marked as “Other,” with a comment that followed stating, “White with a tan” or (my personal favorite) “Barbie.” Both of these specified

groups could fall easily under the racial category of “White,” but the respondents indicated that they were unwilling to make this identification.

An argument that these respondents were activating color blind strategies is perhaps a stretch. Although a large number of respondents made statements that fit neatly within the general framework of color blind rhetoric, the context of the survey makes accepting this as the situation questionable. It is absolutely true that the dolls are not human; however much they may be identified with by those who play with them. If race is seen as a property of human beings, then a suggestion that this is racist talk is problematic.

However, the further survey responses suggest that even in the absence of explicit racial ideas, there is a tendency to categorization and grouping that mimics particularly Almaguer’s Latin Americanization thesis (2003). The categories of white and Black are clearly defined in the responses to this survey: whiteness is identified as pale skin, Blackness as dark. In between there are multiple gradations with one primary meaning: while the specific racial identification of these features is in doubt, they are clearly “not white.”

American Girl Says She’s Black: Racial Perception and the Community Collector

I have covered the story of how the community’s perception of Sonali’s race shifted significantly in response to American Girl’s statements. But the Sonali situation does not end there. It was complicated when American Girl introduced an explicitly Black historical character who used the Sonali face mold in the spring of 2011: Cecile Rey, a free Black person living in New Orleans in 1854. The premier of Cecile happened

just before I began to collect survey respondents, and therefore her face was not included in the images that the respondents could view. Nonetheless, primed by the American Girl stories, collectors explicitly identified the Sonali mold faces as being potentially either Black or Asian Indian.

A similar pattern held true for the other face molds that American Girl had used for multiple dolls of different ancestries. Collectors, recognizing the fact that the “Josefina” face mold had also been used for white characters, suggested that even the Josefina doll herself could be seen as either white or Latina.⁵

Collectors showed a similar level of confusion to the non-collectors regarding the identification of Asian dolls. In regard to the “Jess” mold, which had been used for both a biracial white/Japanese character and a Chinese character, the respondents suggested that the doll could be “Various Asian.”

One stark difference between the collecting and non-collecting group was the explicit use of racialized terms, including slurs, in their responses. Collectors were much more likely to engage in racialized talk. “Dot, not feather,” and “Feather, not dot,” was used repeatedly to make the distinction between American Indian representations and Asian Indian ones. “Mulatto,” “high yellow,” and “massa’s child” were also offered as descriptors for dolls of medium skin types. These terms are not in common public use within the collecting community, but within the anonymity of the survey they came up repeatedly.

⁵ While there is an academic understanding of the difference between race and ethnicity, I elected to list “Hispanic or Latina” as a racial option because I recognized that this distinction may be unclear to non-scholars. While a few respondents (four, out of 581 total) noted that this was “sloppy” work, I am confident that this choice was the correct one.

Collectors were also less likely to engage with questions of symbolic ethnicity. Ethnicity was indicated for white dolls only in cases where American Girl had explicitly mentioned it: Irish, Jewish, Swedish and English were all mentioned. Only one respondent in this group expressed a desire for American Girl to provide more explicit discussions of white ethnicity in their collection.

The collectors were clearly reading race in to the dolls that they were viewing, and there was a high degree of correlation between how they identified the dolls and how American Girl has presented them through their stories and advertising. The power of familiarity with established racial tropes is clearly visible here.

They Don't Care About Collectors: Doll Collectors and the Politics of Consumption

Members of the collecting community spend time and energy discussing and exploring their relationship with American Girl as consumers. They set themselves apart from those who constitute the “core market”, not only because they are adults who are purchasing dolls for themselves, but also because part of their motivation to collect and interact with the dolls is to be part of the online community in which they think and talk about what they buy and why.

The members of the collecting community recognize that their buying behaviors are not necessarily representative of American Girl's “core market.” American Girl has been explicit in their unwillingness to cater to the desires of adult collectors; while Mattel has created “designer” collector lines for Barbie and their other well-known toy brands, American Girl has remained strictly for children. Collectors occasionally report being treated negatively by customer service while placing phone orders, particularly when

attempting to exchange items. Given this explicit rejection of the adult collector, it is not surprising that collectors would perceive themselves as behaving differently from the customers American Girl actively tries to appeal to.

One aspect that the collecting community says they “differ” from the core consumer on is the issue of wanting more “diversity” within the doll product lines. The most overt form of this difference is the perennial discussion around why American Girl has not yet produced a Black Girl of the Year.

Members of the community are genuinely interested in this issue, and even seek out answers that can be reported back in discussion threads. In fact, they take an almost sociological approach to answering this question. The community belief that they are outside of American Girl’s core group of consumers demonstrates an awareness of the power of supply and demand in a company’s product decisions. As discussed in Chapter 4, collectors see themselves as a minority among other consumers, and as such that their desires are of secondary importance to the company.

The community is also very aware that the products are expensive. In the original survey distributed to the community, 60% of the respondents felt the price of these products was “high.” But there is also an understanding that these prices are in line with the perception of the goods as luxury products:

I think the dolls are over-priced,But too I think it makes the dolls feel more special,like you know you have something thats good quality& collectible,...

(Survey, 12/13/2010)

Although some complain that the prices are high, I feel the quality is exceptional and therefore well- priced.

(Survey, 12/25/2010)

From the start AG has always been a luxury item for me so the pricing will always be seen as 'high'. However for the quality, even back in the day I think it's a fair expectation.

(Survey, 1/1/2011)

People in the community have been explicit in their recognition that wealth follows racial stratification in the United States. In acknowledging that they as collectors are not within American Girls' key demographic, they also acknowledge that larger groups may also be outside of consideration. In a discussion regarding the production of live action movies for the historical dolls, this comment received general agreement:

You have to see though, that they are going in the order of Favorite to least favorite, Sam's the favorite... There are also more Caucasian girls who can afford AG's. and if what i said above applies to them, then it's pretty obvious why she got the first movie...

(Ceaser, The After-Hours Clubhouse, 9/25/2012)

The idea that some racial minorities, specifically Black people, do not generally have the wealth to afford an American Girl doll is an entrenched idea in the community that has some objective support. Wealth in the United States is racialized (Beerman, Glaser, and Casey 2011). But this belief is also part of color blind racial rhetoric: it is assumed that the major explanatory power for the popularity of a white doll lies with the price point. What is not being interrogated here is the question of why white consumers would prefer a white doll (or feel unable to identify with a Black one), and indeed the question of why American Girl would provide support only for their most popular products, rather than engaging in a campaign to make the doll more popular on her own.

Community members seek support for their beliefs about the buying habits of other consumers through amateur ethnographic methods. When visiting retail locations,

collectors pay close attention to whom they see looking at particular displays. In one report, a collector explained:

I just have never seen white girls looking at the dolls of color. Even more, I see a lot of aa girls who are looking at the white dolls and wanting to get Julie, etc. It's sad, but if that's what the customer wants, that's what they're going to get...

(Yvonne, Pleasant Pastimes, 2/12/2007)

Of course these incidents are likely not illustrative of the consumer behavior overall; while these collectors may visit the retail locations fairly often, these visits are not planned with a particular research agenda in mind. Confirmation bias may also be a serious factor within these observations: given the pre-existing belief that dolls of color are unpopular, focusing on these incidents provides support.

Beyond these observations, collectors have also been direct in their approach: they approach sales people and inquire about the purchasing behavior that these clerks have observed as well. What they have heard from the sales people also confirms their beliefs:

This one rep in Chicago told me that she never sells an Addy, or almost never. She sells lots of Julies, though, and Marie-Grace is doing really well. She said that people just don't like Addy's stuff.

(Usuala, Pleasant Pastimes, 2009)

This investigatory impulse extends to investigating American Girl's (or Mattel's) annual reports and official sales figures. While certainly not generating wide spread interest, these reports are discussed as barometers of American Girl's future product releases. For example, in 2009 American Girl stated that their profits were up by 5% as a result of the strong sales of Lanie (the Girl of the Year) and the pre-retirement popularity of Felicity. When these sales figures were announced, several people in the community

suggested that this would lead American Girl to continue to retire dolls and likely produce more white, blonde dolls similar to Lanie as future Girls of the Year.

However, the annual report in 2011 indicated that another 5% rise in profits was driven by Kanani, the multiracial Girl of the Year, was not taken to indicate that American Girl would continue to produce non-white characters. In fact, community members instead relied on their other sources of information (store observations, discussions with sales people, and personal preferences) as reasons why the company should *not* be expected to produce future non-white dolls. According to these personal observations, customers were reporting difficulty with Kanani's long and curly hair.

Conclusion

The Girl of the Year combines the narratives as used in the historical characters with a contemporary setting. Because American Girl explicitly intends these character dolls to represent present-day conditions of American girlhood, it is not surprising that this line inspires particularly intense discussion between collectors on issues of racial representation, perception, and prejudice.

The choice to reinforce the idea that non-white dolls are not lucrative for American Girl—in spite of other evidence—speaks to the powerful belief that the explanation for American Girl's failure to diversify their Girl of the Year line lies not with themselves as consumers of these products, but with profit forces outside of their control. While there is some acknowledgement that there may be racial attitudes affecting these purchase patterns, these attitudes are seen as lying outside the collecting

community. Collectors, it is assumed, are not the consumers driving the market forces that limit the release of dolls of color.

But an investigation of the purchasing patterns within the community reveals otherwise. The most popular Girl of the Year doll within the community (as assessed by how many were purchased by respondents to the first survey) is Mia, followed by Nicki, Chrissa, and Lanie.⁶ All of these dolls are white. The same pattern (white dolls being more popular) holds true for the contemporary dolls as well; the top five most popular dolls in this line are white and blonde, and the first non-white doll does not make the list until number 13. Within the historical line, the statement of the community member who said that Samantha was the favorite is demonstrably true, followed by Molly and every other white doll—with Addy, Josefina, and Kaya, the three dolls of color, coming last.

Certainly American Girl has chosen not to respond to the specific requests of the adult collecting community. The actions of three hundred consumers for a billion-dollar product line are most likely not enough to change the company's direction. But the fact that these collectors claim to want more dolls of color—while consistently choosing not to purchase them when they are available—demonstrates that there is a disconnect between their expressed racial attitudes and actual practices. In short, there appears to be a sort of consumer Bradley Effect occurring here: while the collectors may clamor among themselves for a doll of color, their response in the privacy of the American Girl order form tells a different story (Payne 2010).

⁶ Within the raw data, it appeared that Jess was the most popular doll by a significant margin. When analyzed, I discovered that there was a respondent who was an outlier; she had purchased twenty-two Jess dolls and had answered the survey accordingly. This information was removed from the data.

Having discussed the major product lines of American Girl products, established the patterns of community interaction, and located my research within a sociological framework in previous chapters, in my final chapter I will discuss some new developments from American Girl and suggest directions for further research.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS: SAME BRANDS IN NEW PACKAGES

In this dissertation I sought to answer three major questions:

1. What is the relationship between the consumption and collection of the material objects of the American Girl Collection and online community interactions?
2. Are there any real-world consequences of these interactions and consumption practices?
3. What is the role of online communities in shaping race and gender ideologies, both on and offline?

By relying on the data gathered through qualitative and quantitative means, I have made several observations that provides answers to these questions.

In chapter 4, I examined the process by which members become integrated in to the online community, both as non-participating observers and active contributors. With this analysis, I have shown how membership in the community begins to shape both member's sense of identity as well as consumption patterns. I also discussed the theme of consumption in chapter 5, demonstrating that there is a difference between expressed ideologies and purchasing patterns. These patterns of consumption and personal identity are indicators of "real world" consequences on community participation.

While it is a theme throughout my dissertation, the role of community participation in shaping racial ideologies was most explored in Chapter 5, where I used

the framework of Bonilla-Silva's colorblind racism to analyze the discourse used in the community around both the products and stories presented by American Girl (Bonilla-Silva 2003). I demonstrated how community members used a focus on children as a means to disguise their own internal conflict and dislike of American Girls' non-white dolls, while also relying on rhetorical strategies such as abstract liberalism to avoid explicitly expressing such conflicted attitudes.

In Chapter 6, I addressed the ways in which community members discussed gender and sexuality—both their own and that of their dolls—in terms of their relationship to the collecting community. This discussion was conflicted, with members recognizing that their hobby was viewed negatively by the larger world including their spouses, children, and extended family. Nevertheless, collectors demonstrated that they brought a specifically adult and sexually mature attitude towards their doll collecting, separating themselves from assumptions of emotional maturity and misplaced maternal fixations.

Within Chapter 6, I used a comparative analysis of collectors and non-collectors to show how exposure to American Girl's racialized marketing strategies altered perceptions of race. While both groups of respondents used colorblind rhetoric to discuss their perception of race, a clear pattern emerged that collectors had had their perceptions shaped by ongoing exposure to American Girl's ideas of race, as well as by the ongoing discussion of race present within their communities. With the comparison of collectors and non-collectors, my analysis revealed an interesting pattern that while members were careful to use colorblind language when discussing race *within* their online communities,

within the anonymity of online surveys, they were willing to use explicitly racist language in ways that were not demonstrated when engaging with other collectors online.

Shortcomings of This Dissertation

The first and most glaring shortcoming in this dissertation is that the study population is, like the American Girl Collection itself, lacking in diversity. As 90% white and 99% female, the sample here is hardly representative of the American population as a whole. Beyond this, the socioeconomic characteristics demonstrated within the collecting behavior is a further limitation to the generalizability of this study. This limitation could be addressed with further research in two directions: first, a future project could focus specifically on recruiting and interviewing American Girl collectors who hold minority status in the community. Second, the methods I used in this project could be applied to examining other online collecting communities for other products—some that might be more specifically gendered masculine (such as My Little Pony) or that have a more diverse racial representation.

A second serious limitation to generalizability is that this study took place in the online context. Future research could be more productive if it examined consumers of American Girl in a “real life” context, such as within the American Girl stores or during other major American Girl events.

Future Directions

The key strength of my dissertation—that it examines adult women who are direct consumers of the products—is also the key weakness. While examining the adults acknowledges the truth that it is adults who control children’s consumption, even my

respondents acknowledge that the target demographic for these products are children. A future project could address this issue by engaging with girl consumers of the target age range and observing how their relationship to and understanding of the American Girl products develops over their early adolescence.

Another approach could be to take a generational-comparative direction, but specifically interviewing mothers who had American Girl products while at the target age who have now purchased the products for their daughters. Examining the change in perception, as well as the motivations for sharing the products across the generations, could help understand the development of racial ideology through generations.

Although a side issue for this dissertation, the “death” of the AG Clubhouse, while Pleasant Pastimes has continued to function, reveals an interesting aspect of online culture. A project that expands on this theme, to examine in more depth the forces that contribute to the success or failure of independent online communities, would be a significant contribution to the sociology of online culture. Further, my analysis did not significantly address the reasons why individuals would choose to engage in an online community; this theme should be developed to explore the development of social connections and community bonding in an online space.

Final Thoughts

On June 4th, 2013, American Girl placed the name “BeForever” under copyright, igniting a new wave of speculation within the American Girl doll communities.

Collectors began to aggregate leaked books covers, packaging, and even prototypes from

gray market¹ overseas dealers to determine what this term referred to. The collecting community quickly decided that “BeForever” was a move to re-brand the until-then nameless Historical line, a rumor that was confirmed on May 15, 2014—nearly a year after collectors had first noticed the event.

The reaction of the American Girl collecting community to these early rumors is telling. Most importantly, we see how proactive collectors are in seeking out information. Collectors periodically reviewed new copyright and patent filings by Mattel at the United States Patent Office; they pursued connections with third-party dealers on eBay; they visited obscure publishing-industry conferences to seek information about new books. Then they brought this information to their peers in the community, where it was dissected, confirmed, debunked, and discussed to the point that the official BeForever launch video was met with *yawns*:

Nothing we didn't already know...maybe the choose your own adventure thing is new? I already know I'm going to get the new Samantha if she has nice shoes...
(Mermaid2011, Pleasant Pastimes, 07/15/2014)

Long before American Girl turned their marketing machinery on, the collectors in the community had made up their mind about the rebranding effort. Overall, collectors appreciated the idea that American Girl was turning more effort towards their historical products—the products that many of them had grown up with and considered central to the American Girl style and brand. The confirmation that this re-branding would include the re-introduction of archived characters (such as Samantha) was also taken as a welcome return to the business model that had been so praised by survey respondents.

¹ Defined by Bucklin (1993:387), “Gray market goods are genuinely branded merchandise distinguished only by their sale through channels unauthorized by the trademark owner.”

Oh, it's such a nice little video ! The emphasis in the end "Times change. Girls are forever." is a nice way to put it and make it relevant to today's girls I think, or at least, it's a fresh way to restate the initial idea.

(Mathomiracle, Pleasant Pastimes, 7/22/2014)

At the same time, there were continuing concerns that this re-branding could continue to emphasize the "girly," feminine, and "pinkification" of the historical collections. In particular it was noted that the packaging began to feature more of the "Mattel pink" rather than the "American Girl" burgundy.

I'm not happy. Aside from the fact that I'm displeased with the inaccuracy of Sam's outfit, and all that pink. yuck. The red always made me think of Pleasant Company.

(LAH, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/17/2014)

Some collectors also raised concerns that the new color palette for some of the characters, particularly Kit, went directly against the established storylines. The tension between appreciating the revival of the historical line and the concerns over American Girl becoming "too girly" were quite stark.

Argh! What's with all the pink for Kit! Has nobody who designs these outfits read the Kit stories? (Probably not..).

(Ursula, Pleasant Pastimes, 5/11/2014)

This speculation and debate eventually reached outside of the collecting community itself, as a wave of popular press articles—from lifestyle bloggers all the way to the Huffington Post—indulged in a sort of nostalgic critique of the company, its products, and especially its message. Of particular debate was the notice that the *historical* line was predominately white—and getting whiter. As well as announcing the rebranding effort, American Girl quietly indicated that the entire collection for Marie-Grace and Cecile, introduced together in 2011, and the two remaining Best Friends

character, Ivy and Ruthie, were to be archived in August 2013. Cecile had been the second African-American character created by American Girl, and her short shelf life and quick retirement concerned collectors and nostalgic journalists alike.² But by retiring Ivy, American Girl would be removing the only historical representation of Asian-American girlhood entirely.

These two concerns—the stereotyped-gender messages and the lack of minority representation—are reiterations of the themes that I have discussed in depth in earlier chapters. That the discussions within the community continued, developed, and expanded is reassuring from my perspective as a researcher—that the discussions continue indicates that I have identified significant and concerning themes within the community interactions.

But while the discussions continue, they have not progressed. Although some collectors continue to criticize American Girl as well as their peers for the repetition of racist and sexist tropes, as collectors they continue to consume the products and to deny their role in shaping the direction of the company. After spending a year digging information without the support of American Girl while the community discussion explored the issues in depth, one poster summed up the launch with the same repeated theme:

American Girl makes dolls based on what sells. If girls of Color don't sell, they don't make 'em. I'm looking at the business part of AG.

(LGXLover, 10/12/2013)

² Leaked book covers and product prototypes confirmed that Addy, the first African-American character, would be continuing under the BeForever label.

While members of the collecting community showed a high degree of agency in seeking information and understood the larger social issues that surround their idealized objects, they were unable to mobilize these individual realizations in a way that allowed them to challenge dominant cultural narratives of race and gender. They believe themselves powerless in the face of American Girls' marketing decisions and self-limit the impact of their individual resistance. Ultimately, these consumers bought both the dolls and the ideology presented by the company.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY 1 RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS
(AMERICAN GIRL COLLECTING SURVEY)

Table 7. Respondent Demographics 1: Gender

Gender	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	All Respondents
Woman	94.92% (280)	91.18% (62)	293 (94.5%)
Man	3.39% (62)	5.88% (4)	11 (3.5%)
Other	1.02% (3)	2.94% (2)	4 (1.29%)
No Answer	0.68% (2)	0% (0)	2 (0.06%)
			310 (100%)

Table 8. Respondent Demographics 1: Age

Age	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	All Respondents
18-25	23.91% (71)	29.41% (20)	91
26-35	42.09% (125)	54.41% (37)	162
36-45	14.14% (42)	7.35% (5)	47
46-55	10.44% (31)	8.82% (6)	37
55-65	4.71% (14)	0	14
66 and above	1.68% (5)	0	5
			356

Table 9. Respondent Demographics 1: Income

Income	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	Total Respondents
>\$20,000	11.46% (33)	19.70% (13)	46
\$20,000 – 39,999	15.97% (46)	19.70% (13)	59
\$40,000 – 59,999	15.63% (45)	16.67% (11)	56
\$60,000 – 79,999	10.67% (31)	6.06% (4)	35
\$80,000 - \$99,999	9.03% (26)	7.58% (5)	31
\$100,000 – 149,999	15.62% (45)	10.61% (7)	42
<\$150,000	5.21% (15)	1.52% (1)	16
Prefer not to answer	16.32% (47)	18.18 (12)	59
			344

Table 10. Respondent Demographics 1: Race

Race	Pleasant Pastimes	The After-Hours Clubhouse	Total
White or Caucasian	90.54% (268)	88.24% (60)	280
Black, African-American, or African	2.70% (8)	8.82% (6)	10
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2.36% (7)	5.88% (4)	9
Asian	4.05% (12)	0	12
Latino or Hispanic	6.42% (19)	4.41% (3)	19
Some Other Race	0	1.47 (1)	1
Prefer Not to Answer	1.69% (5)	2.94% (2)	5
			336

Table 11. Respondent Demographics 1: Marital Status

Marital Status	Pleasant Pastimes	After-Hours Clubhouse	Total
Single, never married	40.20% (119)	47.06% (32)	151
Married or partnered	52.7% (156)	45.59% (31)	187
Divorced	2.03% (6)	2.94% (2)	8
Separated	0.68% (2)	0	2
Other	3.04% (9)	2.94% (2)	11
Prefer Not to Answer	1.35% (4)	1.47% (1)	5
			364

APPENDIX B
SURVEY 1 QUESTIONS
(AMERICAN GIRL COLLECTING SURVEY)

1. Statement of Consent: Please enter your legal name. Your electronic signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, are at least 18 years old, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study.
2. Please select your age.
3. Please select your gender.
4. Please select your household income level.
5. Please select your race. You may select as many options as necessary.
6. If you identify as a particular ethnicity, please state it here.
7. Indicate your marital status.
8. How many children do you have? If you do not wish to answer this question, please leave blank.
9. How did you first hear about the American Girls Collection? Select all that apply.
10. Please select your age at the time you first learned about the American Girls Collection.
11. How old were you when you got your first American Girl doll?
12. How did you get your first doll?
13. How many American Girl dolls do you currently have?
14. Which of the following Historical Character dolls do you have? Select as many as apply.
15. Which of the following Girls of the Year dolls do you have?
16. Which of the following MyAG/Just Like You/ Girls of Today dolls do you own? Please select all that apply. Dolls are listed using the Pleasant Pastimes numbering system. You may view the guide in a new window by following this link: [JLY Identification](#)
17. Are there other brands of dolls that you consider part of your American Girl collection? Select all that apply.
18. Have you made any custom dolls?
19. If you have made custom dolls, please select your reasons for customizing. (Check all that apply). If you have not, feel free to skip this question.
20. Are there any dolls you have multiples of? If so, please list them, and how many of each.
21. Which American Girl communities are you a member of?
22. If you are a member of Pleasant Pastimes, select the answer that best describes how often you have posted in that community, on average through your membership.
23. If you are a member of the After-Hours Clubhouse, select the answer that best describes how often you have posted in that community, on average through your membership.
24. If you are a member of American Girl collecting forums not listed above, please enter the name of the community you participate in most. Then select the answer that best describes your participation in that community.
25. Please enter any other comments about your board activities here, if desired.

26. Have you ever been a member of a community that you later left? If yes, please select the answers below that best describe your reasons for leaving. (Select as many as apply). If not, you may leave blank.
 27. What of the following forum activities do you participate in? (Select all that apply).
 28. Do you ever participate in the off-topic sections of the forums?
 29. Do you have contact with other board members outside of the forums? (Select all that apply).
 30. How would you characterize your relationship with the forum members you regularly interact with?
 31. Overall, are you satisfied with the racial and ethnic diversity of the Historical Character dolls offered by American Girl?
 32. Overall, are you satisfied with the racial and ethnic diversity of the Girl of the Year dolls that have been offered by American Girl?
 33. Overall, are you satisfied with the racial and ethnic diversity of the MyAG/Just Like You/ Girls of Today dolls offered by American Girl?
 34. Is your race and/or ethnicity represented by American Girl?
 35. Please offer any other comments you would like to make about American Girl's doll offerings.
 36. Are the majority of your American Girl purchases for...
 37. From where do you buy the majority of your American Girl products?
 38. Overall, do you feel American Girl's prices for their products (dolls and accessories) are...
 39. Do you feel that your participation in AG forums encourages you to...(check all that apply).
 40. Please rate how important the following factors are for your decision to buy a new doll.
 41. Please leave any other comments regarding American Girl buying, pricing, and the influence of online communities on your purchasing here.
 42. Do you feel that the way American Girl represents girls is...
 43. Do you think that American Girl's presentation of girls is stereotypical?
 44. Would you be interested in a boy doll in the same scale as the 18 inch American Girl Dolls?
 45. Is there any American Girl doll (in appearance, story, or any other reason) with which you particularly identify? If so, please describe the doll.
 46. Do you ever read the discussions about American Girl and race?
 47. Do you ever participate in the discussions about American Girl and race?
 48. Do you ever read the discussions about American Girl and gender?
 49. Do you ever participate in the discussions about American Girl and gender?
 50. The second phase of this research project involves interviews. If you would like to be contacted to participate in a telephone interview about American Girl, please select Yes. Otherwise, select No.
 51. Please enter your name and e-mail address below.
- You may leave any final comments below.

APPENDIX C
SURVEY 2 RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS
(AMERICAN GIRL RACE AND ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION)

Table 12. Respondent Demographics 2: Groups

Groups	Collectors	Non-Collectors	Total Respondents
Have AG Dolls	237	0	237
Do Not Have Dolls	0	242	242
			479

Table 13. Respondent Demographics 2: Age

Age	Collectors	Not Collectors	Total
18-25	35.44% (84)	40.91% (99)	183
26-35	39.66% (94)	42.15% (102)	196
36-45	10.97% (26)	8.68% (21)	47
46-55	8.86% (21)	3.72% (9)	30
56-65	3.80% (9)	4.55% (11)	20
66 and above	0.42% (1)	0	1
			477

Table 14. Respondent Demographics 2: Gender

Gender	Collectors	Non-Collectors	Total Respondents
Woman	94.51% (224)	70.25% (170)	394
Man	4.64% (11)	27.27% (66)	77
Other	0.84% (2)	0.83% (2)	4
Prefer Not to Answer	0	1.65% (4)	4
			479

Table 15. Respondent Demographics 2: Race

Race	Collectors	Non-Collectors	Respondent Totals
White or Caucasian	88.94% (209)	67.78 (162)	371
Black or African-American	5.53% (13)	19.25 (46)	59
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.7% (4)	2.09 (5)	9
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.43% (1)	0.42% (1)	2
Asian	2.55% (6)	5.02% (12)	18
Latino or Hispanic	4.68% (11)	8.37% (20)	31
Some Other Race	2.55% (6)	2.93% (7)	13
			503

APPENDIX D
SURVEY 2 QUESTIONS
(AMERICAN GIRL RACE AND ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION)

1. Please select your age.
2. Statement of Consent: Please enter your legal name. Your electronic signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, are at least 18 years old, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study.
3. Please select the racial category to which you most associate the doll shown. You may also specify an additional ethnic identity.
 - a. White
 - b. Japanese
 - c. Other Asian
 - d. Some Other Race
 - e. Black or African American
 - f. Chinese American Indian/Alaskan Native
 - g. Multiracial
 - h. Latina/Hispanic
 - i. Asian Indian
 - j. Native Hawaiian

[Questions 4-53 repeated the text of Question 3, but changed the image shown.]

54. Do you or your child currently own any American Girl Dolls?
55. Please select your gender.
56. Please select your race. If you identify as a specific ethnicity, you may also specify that group.

You may leave any final comments below.

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part I: General Demographic Information

- Age
- Income
- Geographic Location
- Marital Status
- # of children

Part II: Specific Racial and Ethnic Information

- Race (self-described and U.S. Census category)
- Ethnicity
- Brief family history
 - Immigration
 - Where from?
 - Languages spoken in home

Part III: The Dolls

- How did you first hear about American Girl dolls? At what age?
- Which dolls were you first interested in?
- Why these particular dolls?
- What one feature were you most drawn to – her clothes, her hair, her physical shape, etc.?
- When did you get your “first AG”?
- Was she a gift? Something you got for yourself? Something originally for a child?
- How many AG dolls do you have now?
- Do you have many accessories?
- Are there any dolls you don’t like?
- What feature don’t you like?
- Have you done any customization work on your dolls?
- Why have you done this? (or, Why haven’t you done this?)
- What do you think of the prices?
- Have the prices influenced your purchases at all?
- Do you have a preference between the new American Girl or the old Pleasant Company?
- Do you think the collection is exclusionary in any way?
- What do you think about the diversity of offerings by American Girl?
- Do you think having these dolls are important? (Why?)
- Is your ethnicity or race shown in these dolls?
 - Yes: What do you think of that presentation?
 - No: Would you like AG to make a doll that represents you?

Part IV: The Online Community

- When did you first discover online collecting forums?
- How did you find them?
- Which communities are you a member of?
- What is your main activity in the community?
- How often do you post?
- Do you stay on-topic or “get into” the off-topic sections?
- Have you made any friends through the community?
- Have you ever met these people in person?
- What do you think about the community’s attitude towards American Girl’s presentation of race in their collection?
- What do you think about the community’s attitude towards American Girl’s presentation of gender in their collection?
- Have the discussions in the community changed your attitude towards the dolls or collecting in general?
- Have you ever felt excluded by the online collecting community?

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VITA

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