

Traversing Sonic and Cyber Scapes  
On Becoming a Tech Geek Girl

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*This essay is a non-fiction, first person narrative that traces the author's personal journey from a timid Canadian girl with little faith in her abilities to pursue technology related projects to her current position as a professor of communication studies and media production. Its focus is the convergence of music, Internet technologies, and education.*

It's Friday afternoon and I wave goodbye to my colleagues in the unflattering hallways. Unlike most of them who are on their way home for the weekend, I'm headed towards the basement of the building where I'll spend the rest of the afternoon. The process of setting up lights and testing cameras and microphones is tedious, and I still find it a bit overwhelming. At the moment I'm trying to remember why I ever thought this was a good idea. Most people my age seem to know better I tell myself. They're done putting themselves in situations that make them feel nauseous. How is it that I got to this point anyway?

It wasn't too many years ago that I didn't even know how to program the now near obsolete VCR. That was my brother's job, even though I was five years older. The one thing he'd do for me without complaining, as long as I had my own VHS tapes. For years my primary purpose in his life seemed to be to reinforce his rapidly escalating sense of technological superiority. When I finally took the first step to moving out of my parents' house one of the first things I thought was, who's going to program my VCR or reset its clock when the power goes out? The essay that follows traces my personal journey from a timid first-generation Canadian girl with little faith in her abilities to pursue technology related projects to my current position as a professor of communication studies and media production. The convergence of music, Internet technologies, and education in my life had a lot to do with how I became the woman I am today.

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I grew up in Windsor, Ontario and in high school my interest in music blossomed into what many people—notably parents and teachers—would call an unhealthy obsession. Finding girls who wanted to go see bands play live shows proved challenging. Few were willing to brave Detroit's potentially dangerous urban landscape so I resorted to tagging along with a group of boys. We regularly rode the tunnel bus across the border to attend shows at the legendary St. Andrew's Hall where bands like Nirvana and Green Day played in front of a 1,000 or so teenagers before getting their big breaks. When we weren't at shows or learning new tricks on our skateboards in the church parking lot, we would drink and mess around with our guitars—usually both. I played bass for a short while but the lines to the latest Nirvana track would get boring pretty quickly so I quit showing up. At least that's what I told myself at the time. Looking back I think the real reason was that as the only girl in a basement of boys I always felt like a fraud. All those years of piano lessons and music theory classes didn't amount to much capital when it came to guitars and talking about gear.

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Pre-Internet boom I was barely a user, let alone a creator, of anything tech, computer or Internet related, despite having had a Commodore 64 in the fifth grade. Over the next decade, it—along with its many successors—would serve as nothing more than a faithful typing machine.

In my senior year of high school my best friend's brother—engineering student geek archetype extraordinaire—tried to explain email to us but we wrote it off as a geek guy engineer thing. We didn't give it much thought until a few years later when getting online was mandatory for completing assignments in one of our second-year English classes in university. Internet aside—despite graduating with a Communication Studies degree—I did as little as possible on the media production end—just enough to fulfill my two requirements and get a C in radio production. I wouldn't have believed it if someone would have told me that one day in the not-too-distant future, at another institution in a state I'd never dreamed of living in, I'd be teaching the class.

In the mid-'90s my new love for electronic/dance music [E/DM] and technology began to converge in unprecedented ways. I might not have been at the forefront of the Internet boom—my dad sprung for 28.8 k modem before I knew what a modem was—but not long after Netscape went public in 1995 I was careening towards Net addiction. This stage of my tech-geek travels consisted of traversing the cyber-landscape and devouring all the relevant information I could access—books like Douglas Rushkoff's *Cyberia*, *Ocean of Sound* by David Toop, and anything by William Gibson. Music by E/DM producers like Plastikman, Jeff Mills, and Speedy J became part of my everyday soundscapes. I instantly related to their minimal techno compositions, maybe because Plastikman and Mills were based in the Windsor/Detroit area and Speedy J was from The Netherlands, a far off place my friends and I dreamed of going to someday.

At first I mostly just sent emails to friends and read newsgroup postings but that would change a few years later when I'd send my first post to a mailing list. I was a hyperreal.org regular—the premiere information resource for rave related culture at the time—and signed up to every E/DM mailing list and Usenet group I could find. Soon my fascination with email and electronic music led to conversations and friendships with individuals I could only identify via email addresses in cyberspace. It was a Monday afternoon and the list was mid-west raves. I sat at my desk in my bedroom carefully crafting a review of a rave I attended Saturday night. Once I sent my post I refreshed my screen [Ctrl-L] until my message appeared for all—including myself—to read. Within moments it appeared in my inbox and that of every other mw-raves subscriber. All I could think was, this is brilliant! Who wouldn't want to see their thoughts publicly posted for everyone to read? I could have kicked myself for how long it took me to finally—in the words of William Gibson—“jack in.” What was I thinking, or better yet, why wasn't I thinking? The adrenaline was enough to keep me going for years to come. And it did.

We were candy kids consumed by the new tools of communication and computer culture. For the next few years I lived a music infused version of the tech-geek subculture promoted in the 1995 film *Hackers*. I idolized Kate “Acid Burn” Libby. Not only because she was played by Angelina Jolie or hooked up with the super sexy Dade Murphy/Crash Override at the end—but because she was one of the first sexy, tech-savvy, geek girl, pop culture icons of the time. My first mid-waves raves net-meet was an influential experience that I continue to carry with me.

After two months and hundreds of emails debating different visions for the event the midwest-raves crew reached some consensus on who would bring what food, which DJs would play and when. The year was 1999 and I was finally committing to attending a net-meet. The air was crisp on that Saturday morning when I got in my car and drove to Ann Arbor to meet the rest of my traveling companions. They were three University of Michigan undergrads, only one of whom I’d gotten to know online and at parties prior to this road trip. She was a suburban Detroit transplant via Austria and her two male companions were East Coasters. The drive to Urbana, Illinois would be a long one. Somewhere in western Michigan we even remembered to pick up the watermelon, candy, and drinks on our list, though few people would end up eating any of it. After a full day’s drive we rolled up to the site. As we got out of the car booming bass beats reassured us that we were heading in the right direction. The house was big and yellow with a long front porch. Couches, lawn chairs, and party kids sat outside drinking and smoking. It was the first weekend of spring, cold now that the sun had set but the air still felt fresh after months of winter and we were all eager to be outdoors. We sat on the porch until the wee hours of the morning. I had never met anyone from Iowa or Wisconsin before and they were equally inquisitive about my Canadian background. I remember how this one guy, a trance—a subgenre of E/DM characterized by repeating melodic synthesizer phrases and a tempo of 130-150 beats per minute—DJ originally from Russia, said he was “tripped out” by my unfamiliar Canadian accent. There we were, gathered in the student ghetto a short distance from the University of Illinois.

I was in my early 20s and up to this point I had never known so many tech-savvy girls—with the exception of Angelina Jolie in her fictional role before her Oscar winning performance days. But here they were, women obsessed with the Internet, computer programming, graphic design, DJing, and all other things techno, all assembled in this one place for the next 12 hours. It was a new and fascinating experience putting faces to all those email addresses and Internet posts. It was also the first time that I had the opportunity to converse with so many women with male-dominated tech-related interests including DJing, E/DM production, graphic and web design, one of whom would become a great friend once I moved to Iowa City to attend graduate school. Once the sun rose we packed up our gear, say our good byes, and once again dispersed across the American Midwest.

The party was then extended by virtue of its attendees who began to regularly linger on IRC [Internet Relay Chat] from work, school, or anywhere else they happened to be. I’d spend hours logged on from the desktop in my bedroom, engaging in conversation about recent and upcoming parties or the next net-meet, all the while falling in and out of love, and putting off my master’s thesis until I deleted the IRC client from my hard drive.

Armed with a new found confidence at the age of 24, I finally moved out of my parents’ house and trusted that I could learn how to do things like program my VCR. I then moved on to a Ph.D. program where I convinced my advisor that I wasn’t leaving without the media production skills that I was afraid to pursue up to this point.

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The next couple of years were kind of a blur. I continued to work diligently on my production skills. I learned to storyboard and practiced using digital video cameras and mini disc recorders while building up my knowledge of editing software like Final Cut Pro and ProTools, all of which required unending patience and critical conversations with my advisor who provided encouragement despite my amateur productions. A short while later I was even asked to teach my newly-acquired skills to undergraduates.

But it wasn’t until the summer of 2003, when I headed out to California to do fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation, that I started buying my own records. I set out to interview women who DJ and produce E/DM] so I decided it was about time I gave it a try for myself. Up until that point I was a CD junkie and before that a mixed tape head but I hadn’t bought a piece of vinyl since the INXS Kick album in 1987. At the time I considered INXS to be the world’s greatest band ever, undoubtedly because the INXS show my dad took me to that same year was my first ever rock concert experience. I had been surrounded with the techno-speak and the goods—the vinyl, the turntables, mixers, amps, computers, and software—for years but it took nearly a decade for me to make it my own. Back in the mid-’90s it didn’t occur to me that I could DJ, despite the hours I spent hanging out at record stores in Detroit and Toronto while my friends and boyfriends dug through hundreds of record bins. It always felt like their eyes—the male record store clerks and vinyl connoisseurs—were watching me. It made me uncomfortable so I thought it best to stay out of the way of the aspiring male DJs waiting in line to hear the man behind the counter play their picks in the back rooms of places like Play De [Record] on Yonge St. in Toronto. I’ve since wondered, what if I had picked up a stack and handed it to one of those clerks behind the decks? At the time it didn’t seem like a possibility. I feared that he would indignantly ask me who the hell I thought I was taking up his valuable time, and I didn’t have a well prepped answer. So instead I’d read the latest flyers advertising upcoming parties that lined the store counters or wander down Queen Street East shopping for the latest urban street wear fashions.

At the time I didn’t think I could DJ and it was easy to put off since I was a broke student for so many years. I reasoned that I couldn’t afford turntables let alone the constant fresh supply of records that were a must have for any DJ, even those who rarely spun records beyond their bedrooms. I then spent another five years thinking it was too late. Why should I bother at this point, everyone who’s anyone knows that the glory days are long over. By this point all the classic tracks I loved had been pressed onto vinyl, distributed, bought, sold, resold on Ebay and were now collecting dust in basements, replaced by mp3s and newer songs.

My interactions with women in the San Francisco Bay area was a microcosm of a unique time and space where women are not relegated to the margins of music/youth (sub)cultures and technology is not discursively constructed as male. So it was in San

Francisco and Berkeley that I began to stumble into record shops and dig into their bins, and for the first time feel like it wasn't a big deal. Six months later, I dusted off the used turntable I bought a few years earlier and saved up the money to buy a second—even though I had less money as a grad student than I did in my undergraduate years. This was the moment of two firsts in my life: my own pair of decks, industry standard Technics no less, and credit card debt. Six months before graduation I finally felt like a bona fide grad student.

By the time I approached my 30th birthday I had more tech-related projects underway than I could have ever predicted. For starters, a mid-western university had enough faith to hire me to teach courses in digital culture and media production. My daily routine now begins with checking my email followed by a series of google searches seeking the latest tech-related events and news to share with my students. Many of them, the young women especially, express hesitation learning about revolutionary communication technology like wi-fi—short for “wireless fidelity,” the term is used to refer to certain types of wireless local area networks— or how to produce their own audio documentaries. The first time they are faced with media production software their faces are overcome with confusion and in some cases even fear. It's at this point that I relate the tale of my own uncertainty. Over the course of their undergraduate education they are exposed to the theories and practical application of new media technologies, they acquire the confidence and skills to edit video, produce audio documentaries, or participate in other media and tech-related projects. In most cases they rise to the challenge and in all cases they learn that a tech-geek girl is somewhere in all of us.

When I'm not teaching I spend most of my time in front of computers in my office even though it's getting kind of cramped in here. I've become involved with documentary work and somehow I keep acquiring more gear: monitors, speakers, hard drives, a new lighting kit. But despite all the tech I've still cornered off space for what came before—books printed on paper and Barbie dolls, though newer versions like Beyoncé in her Grammy-winning garb, and extreme sports buff Tori from the Generation Girl series. It's unfortunate that only Blaine—the lone male doll in the Generation Girl series—comes with a set of turntables but at least Tori's got a snowboard. It's long overdue. I've also got a soft spot for My Little Ponies Bowtie in particular, who occupies a permanent place on my desk to the left of my power-book. The red, blue, and violent streaks in her hair mesmerized me long before the advent of the rave days.

Most of the members of the mid-west raves crew have dispersed over the years but in cyberspace we are never out of reach. A few of them even showed up to the opening of my first multi-media installation project in Chicago I completed with a colleague at my new academic home. And while I still listen to E/DM it now competes for time with all the other genres of music in my iTunes library.

So, despite the occasional butterflies in my stomach, technological mishaps, and having to work on Friday afternoons, I've realized a few things from traversing tech-geek and cyber scapes over the years. I no longer perceive tech-related projects and interests to be beyond my reach and in my teaching I aim to empower young women to adopt a similar vantage point. Traversing tech-related sonic and cyber scapes has enabled me to fit into my own skin—despite pop culture's media generated depictions of what qualifies as girly, tehy, or lady like in the oughts.

#### Works Cited

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*Rebekah Farrugia received her doctorate from the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa in 2004. She is currently a media studies professor in the School of Communication at Western Michigan University where she teaches classes in the areas of digital culture, popular music, and media production. As a (mostly) reformed raver, these days she's more likely to be found DJing in her bedroom or attending a Wilco show than getting down on the dance floor. When she finds herself in tech overload she reverts to low-tech activities like soap making and scrapbooking.*