Going it alone into space

Rosie Cross edits one of Australia's most successful online 'zines'. Available in paper format and on the World Wide Web, this pro-feminist electro-publication is getting noticed globally. *CU* went on-line to talk to her about her work.

CU: What is Geekgirl and where did the inspiration for it come from?

RX: Geekgirl is a persona and publication I conceived in 1994, since January 95 we have published on the world wide web. I was inspired to create geekgirl as a reaction to the mysoginy on the Net and the way sexism /harassment is treated as a joke. I don't find it acceptable IRL (in real life) so why should I have to tolerate it in cyberspace.? So geekgirl was born. A fashionably nerdy, sometimes crusty effort to engage more women in issues which directly affect the way people relate to each other in cyberspace and present disparate views on feminism and other broad ranging topics.

CU: How successful has it been? Who reads it?

RX: We are huge! In the States we are probably the most popular online zine for women, maybe in the world, the only zine for women interested in info tech produced in Australia (and perhaps the world, I'd have to check on that). With support from 'hotwired', 'whole internet catalogue', and so on, we have had hundreds of thousands flock to the site. I know Americans are our biggest audience. I know for a fact from the feedback I receive that we get read in Bosnia, Guam, Finland, Japan, Hawaii, most of Europe, quite a big following in the UK, Argentina etc etc..It's positively global! I think we still have about a 60/40 female/male readership. So it's interesting to see that

men are genuinely interested in the politics of cyberfeminism and generally enjoy an intelligent read and quality web product.
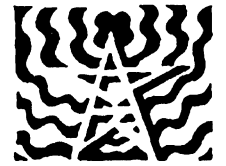

CU: Are there particular issues you face as an Australian content provider that say a US counterpart would not face?

RX: Slow bandwidth! But our service provider has just gone from a 64kilobytes per second link to 256kps so that's a big improvement. It also depends on where you are in America. If you live in Silicon Valley it's like heaven, but rural areas in the States suffer from the same kind of lag we experience in Australia. I think bandwidth charges are much, much cheaper in the States but I guess that depends on which service provider you go with and what they offer. I think it's economy of scale which drives the $ up or down, but isn't that the case with everything;) . As an Australian I have suffered at the hands

of digital imperialism from Americans pinching my name and ideas and I think it's indicative of the mentality of a lot of Americans that they are somehow insular in thinking, and believe they *own* cyberspace. Of course a lot of other Americans recognise and acknowledge that feminism in Australia is making far more inroads than they are. We certainly have more individuals or groups who started things here than they have in the States, eg geekgirl, and vns matrix [an Australian all-female digital art team] are easily world firsts so some Americans respect that. I think Americans still have a more market savvy type approach and I must confess as a publisher I would be head hunted in the States but Australia still lags behind and waits to make its moves. I think in America there is more money to express your ideas and be supported by a large audience craving for originality and being slightly ahead.

CU: Why the electronic format?

RX: Geekgirl is produced in both print and digital formats. I produce them simultaneously. On the World Wide Web we can get up to 80,000 people per month. There is no way I could match that in print. I don't have the money. The best thing about the Web is its distribution potential, nothing compares to it. I enjoy the sense of satisfaction that our publication reaches so many people and that we become a never ending (utilising other hyperlinks) source of information and entertainment. Paper costs a fortune and there is always the un-

predictable element of printing, more so than being online. The hard copy is a hard slog and I will continue it for one more year then reassess its worth. At the moment I still think it vital that women can read about the sorts of things we publish if they are not online

CU: Is there money to be made from such a venture? Do you expect to retire young to a tropical island while your empire works for you?

RX: I wish!!! No truly, I do want some financial kickback from the project. I dream of tropical holidays or swooshing down the slopes in Colorado. I work hard on geekgirl ...I haven't made a lot of money yet - a lot of people forget that I am paying for them to access the Web site and the hard copy always costs me money. I know most diy publishers are in the same boat. To continue, we will have to make some money out of advertising next year, something I didn't want to do but it's inevitable given the fact that viable alternatives, such as digi-cash and e-money have not been successfully implemented.

CU: Would you advise other Australians to get into online publishing?

RX: Depends on how seriously they want to produce. It's such hard work. You have to rely on your own energy and commitment. It's hard to pay people, and find the time to do everything that needs to be done and I mean the extras. Such as publicity, marketing, printing, distribution, archiving, updating, advertising, the list goes on. If you are serious and want between 73,000-94,000 hits a week which we get, then you have to be visible, you have to get the message out that you are there. I think everyone should publish online, but it's getting harder and harder to make money out of it unless you have some traditional commercial instinct and drive and you recruit a lot of help from supporters.

CU: What sort of reaction have you had from the mainstream media? Do they regard geekgirl as a threat ?

RX:- The mainstream loves geekgirl. I guess they realise that geekgirl is my baby and that although I disdain the mainstream for its superficialities and down right boringness, we rely on each other. I have also worked for the mainstream as a writer and radio producer, so I know how it works and it's so crusty! I don't think the mainstream find geekgirl threatening because they work out ways to appropriate and eviscerate it. It doesn't worry me, I rely on them for some good ol fashion push and they rely on me to be slightly radical and provide copy.

CU: Is the feminist bent of geekgirl a help or a hindrance? How do international readers respond?

RX: Well feminism is the core. If you don't like it don't read it. I guess I unintentionally buffer the hard core stuff by putting some fluffies around it, but anyone would have to be a fool to not realise what we are on about. I think feminism is fashionable, geekgirl has made it fashionable so even those never exposed to the issues or topics we raise will be enticed by the content. As for preaching to the converted, I think we have revamped and redesigned ways to make feminism fun. Many, many people visiting the site are on the look out for a good feminist read or they might take some of the material to support their own causes/cases. It's also an invaluable archive for academics and students. The international reader is kind of sophisticated at the same time fickle. If they don't like it they'll move on. So far we are going okay. ❏

Geekgirl is produced quarterly and can be accessed on the World Wide Web at: http://www.geekgirl.com.au or in hard copy form by writing to: geekgirl, PO Box 759 Newtown, NSW 2042. Cost: $28 for four issues.

A cybercino & an e-mail, please

Just when you thought it was safe to sip your cafe latte relaxing to hit songs of the past at your local cafe - bang - a cyber collision- the information superhighway is downloading next to your croissant and coffee! A latte with a chip - internet access across the laminated table top. You can browse, sip and surf, connect to local newsgroups, and chat on line to other cybernet junkies all at a click of the wrist. *CU* decided to explore this new cafe scene and see how many megabytes we could consumer in an hour.

The Internet cafe - 'Well Connected' in Sydney's Glebe Point Road is out there in the new fashion of internet cafes worldwide. The owner, John Woolford, a 'had enough' corporate computer technologist, decided it was time to enter the world of cybercinos. Postmodern meets technofunk, with coloured images from cyberspace splashing the walls. Fourteen neat modular work stations are custom-designed to invite the novice internet user to spend time tracking a path across information networks while sipping on a cybersmoothie.

Not at all what you would call a cafe or a modular office space. It seems to be stuck somewhere between. It's a whole new experience finding oneself at a desktop in a casual cafe space e-mailing friends in New York or deeply involved in an online IRC - internet relay chat.

Travellers are the most frequent users of cybercafes, dropping in to e-mail family and friends. The cafes house e-mail post office boxes for around $5 per month and online charges amount to $12 per hour or $1 per 5 minutes. Users are a mix of uni students and non-computers users wanting to understand the information superhighway hype.

'Well Connected' undertook a study of its users after 13 weeks of operation and found that women predominate in this environment. They tended to use the Internet for researching issues and exchanging information about inner city living using the online Internet relay chat forums. Women were found to be the major users of newsgroups. Boys using the space tended to gravitate more towards computer games.❏ *Amanda Butt*