



Girl Games: Plenty And Pink

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Now the software is here. By the end of 1998, 65 titles for girls 4 to 14 years old will be available, a striking increase compared with 1995, when there were just 10 titles available.

But for those with the lofty goal of providing girls with carefully designed, thoughtful programs that avoid blatant stereotypes and offer intellectual and creative challenges, the news is not so good.

According to PC Data, a market research company in Reston, Va., nearly half of the top 20 best-selling titles are from Mattel's Barbie collection. Other companies, like Polaroid, Hasbro and Disney, are following suit with makeover and jewelry software, pony games and kitchen fun.

The girl games are here and all decked out in pink ribbons. It turns out that girls -- and boys, for that matter -- are as locked into stereotypes as ever.

The first piece of software for girls to succeed, Barbie Fashion Designer, mimicked a successful toy. Since its debut in 1996, it has sold nearly 800,000 copies. In rapid succession, Mattel produced 24 more Barbie titles, and 5 more are due this fall.

Last month, Polaroid began selling Photomaxine, a girls' version of its Photomax program for digital photograph manipulation. Girls can scan photographs of their own faces into a gallery of other photographs that is heavy on brides, cheerleaders, waitresses, models and angels.

Photomaxine also comes with a Cosmopolitan Virtual Makeover and a computer game called Clueless, a Mattel game for preteen girls based on the movie and television series. Hasbro will soon begin selling My Little Pony software, derived from a popular toy for younger girls, and Disney will market My Disney Kitchen, a CD-ROM cooking game.

Does the preponderance of pink mean that the marketing hands have won out over the idealists?

Not necessarily. Having found its place on retailers' shelves, software for girls appears to be in a period of transition. The Barbie games are just the first step, experts say.

"Mattel really changed the rules of the game," said Justine Cassell, an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Laboratory and co-editor of a forthcoming book called "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games" (M.I.T. Press).

"They served as a wedge, and now there's a big market of parents saying: 'Oh my God, have we been selling our girls short? We've got to start filling our girls' shelves,'" Dr. Cassell said. "Parents are now thinking about their girls as consumers of computer toys, and girls are thinking that, at least in part, the computer isn't entirely a boy's toy."

Some dismay on the part of idealists was inevitable. When feminists and the industry started working in the last decade toward what seemed to be a similar goal, games for girls, Dr. Cassell said, they had actually headed in two different directions.

"Feminists went into this to repair a rift between girls and technology," Dr. Cassell said. "Industry leaders, on the other hand, went into this to acquire a new market."

Nods toward enlightenment are scattered throughout the new games. The photograph possibilities in the Polaroid gallery include a pilot and an astronaut. In Barbie's Ocean Discovery, Barbie mentions in passing her studies in marine biology as she plies the sea's depths, unfettered by diving gear but pretty in pink earrings and blue eyeshadow.

Indeed, electronic Barbie has become something of a standard bearer.

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While listing the software available for the Macintosh during a speech at the Macworld Expo in Boston this summer, Apple Computer's interim chief executive, Steve Jobs, welcomed three Barbie titles into the fold.

"And when your daughters are done with them, they can get a Cosmopolitan Virtual Makeover," he said. On the huge projection screen behind Mr. Jobs appeared a snapshot of the Cosmo makeup title. Slightly judgmental laughter rippled through the audience. Mr. Jobs, clearly a bit embarrassed, moved quickly to a slide of a Sesame Street educational game. The audience applauded with approval.

Obviously, the way girls play on the computer reflects the way they play off the computer. To expect otherwise is unrealistic, experts say.

"Because computers were such a new medium, we thought that they wouldn't carry the traditional baggage, that they would be more gender-neutral, but we were wrong," said Jo Sanders, director of the Center for Gender Equity at the Washington Research Institute in Seattle. "It turns out you can't pull computer software out of the society any more than you can pull television programs or magazines."

At the same time, many observers are pleased to see something that not only gets girls seated at the computer, but helps to keep them there.

"The good news is the fact that girls see the computer used as a medium that supports something they would do, something that belongs to them," said Maria Klawe, the incoming dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who has conducted extensive research on the differences between girls' and boys' approaches to computer games.

But some academic researchers and feminists outside universities are concerned that such games merely reinforce in girls a sense of who society says they should be rather than who they are.

More specifically, they say, fashion and hairdo games obscure the more interesting and challenging ways in which girls might use computers.

"We're all embedded in a gender system," said Katha Pollitt, an essayist and a poet. "And if you don't really work at presenting alternatives to your daughter, she falls into the accepted social pattern, which is being obsessed with her looks. I refuse to believe there are very many little girls out there who can't be introduced to the computer through something that's a little more challenging."

Purple Moon, a well-financed Silicon Valley start-up that is devoted to girls' software, is trying to create games that, while not necessarily more challenging, go beyond an obsession with looks. Purple Moon's co-founder, Brenda Laurel, a 47-year-old self-described feminist, made a conspicuous decision to stay away from a strident message and go for the mainstream.

"You can't change the world by producing something that 200 kids play with," she said. "You've got to try to do something that's pervasive enough and in tune enough with popular culture that you get your foot in the door."

Purple Moon bills its games as "friendship adventures" and says they emphasize the "formation of self." The lead character in several of the games is a middle schooler named Rockett, whose popularity hinges on decisions made by each player.

"Girls spend a lot of time thinking about what's good, what's right, what kind of relationships do I want," Dr. Laurel said.

When the first Rockett titles appeared late last year, some feminists criticized the software for being too passive and said Rockett was too preoccupied with parties and popularity.

A new title, The Starfire Soccer Challenge, due in stores in November, is about the trials and tribulations of trying out for a soccer team and has received more positive marks from feminists.

Though Purple Moon's titles have been heavily publicized and are selling respectably, they haven't done much to loosen Barbie's stronghold.

The Learning Company's American Girls games, based on the line of dolls, and the Madeline series, based on the Ludwig Bemelmans character, are also popular and present players with some intellectual substance. While they have a number of successes, they, too, remain overshadowed by the Barbie games.

DR. CASSELL of M.I.T., who also designs computer games, said games should allow boys and girls to step out of the prescribed roles society sets for them.

Instead of accentuating the differences between boys and girls, she said, good computer software should draw a "thousand-way distinction, letting children place themselves anywhere on the spectrum." One way to do this is to allow children to design the interaction, and the characters they will interact with, in the game.

For example, Dr. Cassell and her students at the Media Lab have designed a computer game called Sage, for Storytelling Agent Generation Environment.

In the game, children interact with a wise old person they choose from a menu of characters -- a rabbi, a Buddhist scholar, a grandmother -- and can also create their own storytellers, culling their wisdom from traditional folklore and their own notion of what would soothe them if they need a friendly ear.

Several companies are considering adopting aspects of Sage in upcoming products, Dr. Cassell said.

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