

You can't beat Barbie at her own game.

That was proved again last month by the demise of Purple Moon, a high-profile, award-winning software developer whose Rockett characters battled Barbie for a piece of the \$85 million girls' software market.

Purple Moon announced in mid-February that it was closing shop, letting its 40 workers go, and bringing to a close its two-year experiment in high-tech girl games. Increased consolidation in the video game market was a primary reason for the company's decision, the statement said.

Barbie creator Mattel, which last year hauled in nearly 65 percent of the revenue in girls' games, announced in December that it would pay \$3.8 billion for The Learning Company, which captured 21.6 percent of the market in 1998, according to PC Data of Reston, Va.

Pushing the Limits

Purple Moon was a spin-off of the Interval Research Group, a think tank funded in part by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. Purple Moon founder Brenda Laurel spent four years studying gender differences in computer gaming before bringing that research to market.

"I think we made a positive difference in the world," Laurel said this week. "I am very proud of the work we did for girls."

While big sellers like Barbie's Fashion Designer, Cosmopolitan Virtual Makeover and Clueless exploit long-standing stereotypes about girls and their interests, Purple Moon's games, and the companion Web site, tried to move beyond those stereotypes.

"Mattel said let's stick with what works, the computer is just another way to play with your Barbie doll," says Justine Cassell, an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Laboratory and co-editor of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. "Purple Moon said let's strike out fresh, let's push the limits of what the technology can do."

Those limits proved hard to push. While Purple Moon's Rockett series was touted as an exercise in relationship-building and personal empowerment, its plot centered around a group of junior high school girls sneaking into one another's diaries, swapping secrets and jockeying for social status. Beyond accessorizing Barbie's outfits, in other words, but not exactly Rockett science.

"There are as many types of girls as there are girls," Cassell says. "And some of them are going to want to problem solve, some of them are going to want to create clothes for their Barbie dolls, some of them are going to want to build social relationships."

A gender-blind computer market will provide games to meet the needs of every child, she adds. "It's a lesson that boys' games have always known," she said. "There are boys' sports games, military games, bookish games, nerdy games. Why would we think there should only be one kind of game for girls?"

Her Interactivity Hangs In

Jan Claesson, CEO of HerInteractive.com, one of the only remaining rivals to Mattel, says Purple Moon suffered the fate of any company forced to bet on a single product line.

"When you're a small company with a limited number of titles, you have to depend upon having great hits," Claesson says. In a market defined by falling prices and increased consolidation, a single flop can spell disaster.

HerInteractive's early title, *McKenzie and Co.*, was the best-selling girl game until Barbie Fashion Designer came along. It was devoted to the girls at Madison High, who spent their time applying make-up, changing their clothes and strategizing about how to make the boys notice them in math class. Girl stuff, in other words.

But HerInteractive's newest entry, based on the Nancy Drew mysteries, trades all that social finagling for problem solving and critical thinking.

The company designs its products in response to research about the ways boys and girls play with computers. Boys compete, control and react; girls collaborate, communicate and anticipate. Boys crave action and speed; girls value aesthetics and imagery.

HerInteractive.com faces the same market consolidation and price pressures that overwhelmed Purple Moon.

But Claesson and company President Megan Gaiser say they're sticking it out.

"Is there a market for girls' games after the demise of Purple Moon?" asks Gaiser. "We're half the population. It's a silly question."

The author of *Virtual Ethics*, Dianne Lynch chairs the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at St. Michael's College in Burlington, Vt. *Wired Women* appears on alternate Wednesdays.