

Forward

From Quake Grrls to Desperate Housewives: A Decade of Gender and Computer Games

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A decade ago, the two of us organized a conference called *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, as a part of a series of events sponsored by the MIT Women's Studies Program around the theme of "gender and cyberspace." At the time, there was a widespread concern that so many of the early settlers of the electronic frontier had been, well, cowboys, and that women were lagging behind in their colonizing of a set of technologies and technological practices that everyone knew were going to be central to the future world of work, education, citizenship, and recreation. The conference was situated squarely within the MIT Women's Studies Program's efforts to encourage discussion around the obstacles and opportunities that were shaping women's access to cyberspace.

Today, few worry about women's access to cyberspace — the gap between the sexes in online participation has largely closed; a whole variety of political, economic, social, and cultural practices have reshaped the web so that we scarcely think of it as a male-dominated space. Yet two of the issues that inspired our original conference remain pressing: (1) the debate about whether girls do and can and should play computer games; and (2) the concern that women are still vastly under-represented in the fields that design digital technology.

Ten years ago, the idea of a feminist conference about computers and video games was itself controversial. One of the members of the women's studies faculty expressed her concern that there were not enough "critical voices" in the conference (by which she meant, people who were critical of videogames, not people who wanted to end discriminatory practices within the games industry). For her, games were industrial products — not sites of cultural production — and there was some skepticism that getting girls to spend time playing games was any kind of step forward for the women's movement. And yet, for feminists within the games industry, games were seen as a site to right all kinds of wrongs — in how many women were entrepreneurs, in girls' relationship to technology, in the very definition of technology. The conference, happily, was a platform for all of these perspectives. And in the audience, listening intently, were as many industry representatives as academics.

The excitement generated by the conference was enough to convince the two of us — and the MIT Press — to publish a volume from the proceedings. Our book captured a "snapshot" of an important moment in the evolution of video games, one where feminist interventions seemed on the verge of transforming both who played games and what kinds of games we played. The book, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998) (has remained a solid seller ever since: one of the standard books on the shelf of many games industry executives and a textbook regularly assigned to students taking games studies classes at colleges and universities around the world.

Now a decade later, Yasmin Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jen Sun have hosted a conference at the University of California, Los Angeles exploring what has changed and what has remained the same in the relationship between gender and computer games since our event. Whereas we had difficulty identifying feminists who were researching games as we were putting together the first conference, more than 30 women and men participated at the UCLA event (and

indeed, most of us knew at least as many more who were also doing work in this area who didn't attend). Many of those who attended the UCLA event were elementary and highschool students at the time of the first event: many shared personal narratives of how they became interested in games — narratives that reflected one or another aspect of the girls game movement of the mid-1990s.

At the time of the original MIT event, we were both untenured faculty members and now, we are being asked to play the (uncomfortable) role of senior statespeople passing the torch to the next generation. As we do so, we return with a heightened awareness of how little has changed, how much has changed, and how much needs to be done if more meaningful changes are going to occur. In what follows, we go into more depth concerning the era in which the first conference took place in order to uncover the conditions that led to what we might half-ironically call “first wave game feminism.”

From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games — the conference and later the book — was undertaken in the midst of an era of limited but very real optimism about the ability of female-run start-up companies to transform the game market and create new kinds of games which might appeal to a broader range of female consumers. In the mid-1990s, a couple of Barbie video games were realized by small companies without any success whatsoever. Nevertheless, *Barbie Fashion Designer™* was a top-seller in the 1996 Christmas season, and continued throughout the year to outsell industry standards, such as those set by *Quake™* or *Myst™*, establishing that there was potentially a rather large market indeed for female-centered software titles. At the same time, Brenda Laurel, one of the most respected women in the computer industry, established Purple Moon games with the explicit goal of designing products which built on her sociological and ethnographic research into young girl's play patterns, and her belief that computer games themselves would change for the better all around if girls' interests were taken into account. A number of other companies were also producing girl-targeted titles; independent artists, such as Theresa Duncan (*Chop Suey*), were designing playful interactive works with a distinctly feminine sensibility; the major games companies were being forced to reconsider their marketing and design decisions to factor in female consumers more fully; and the introduction of *Tomb Raider's™* Lara Croft represented a significant new era for the female action hero in games. Taken as a whole, these trends became known as the Girls' Game movement.

However, as should be clear even from the list above, the Girls' Game movement took shape around a series of competing goals and expectations:

- 1. Economic** – By the mid-1990s, the platform game market (production of games to be played on proprietary platforms such as Nintendo or Playstation) had entered into an age of heightened competition and an oversaturated market: 90 percent of American boys were already playing computer games. To survive, these game companies understood that they would need to expand their market. Thus, then as now, three major targets were identified: casual gamers, older gamers, and women. Any product which could succeed in attracting one or more of those prized demographics might hold the key for the company's long-term viability.
- 2. Political** — The gender gap in technological fields was growing rather than shrinking, despite decades of feminist intervention, and the computer was increasingly coded as a "masculine" technology within the culture. Some felt that computer games might hold a key to getting girls engaged with computers at an earlier age, a sort of head start program for technological literacy. If, so the theory went, girls could be interested in computer games, and thereby in computers, and they might be more willing to stay engaged with science and engineering as they grew older.
- 3. Technological** — The introduction of the CD-ROM as a staple of the home computer opened up a new opportunity for female-centered games to find their market. Before the CD-ROM, consumers were required to buy the platform systems to play games and that set the bar too

high for female consumers, for whom there was not yet a critical mass of interesting products available. Once the home computer became the locus of game play — either through CD-ROM games or web-based games, then people who had bought the computer for other purposes could take a chance on buying software for girls or playing an on-line game. Moreover, while three major companies (Sega, Nintendo, Sony) determined what products would be available for their platforms, the CD-ROM and web game markets were open to competition. Technological changes had lowered the barriers of entry into the market place.

4. **Entrepreneurial** — A growing number of women had tried working within the mainstream games industry and had enjoyed some degree of success, but they wanted to develop independence so they could create products that more fully reflected their perspectives and experiences. The Girls' Game movement caught the rising tide of female entrepreneurship in American culture when women were starting new businesses at a rate significantly higher than men, and in doing so, were introducing new kinds of products, opening new kinds of markets, developing new forms of business management and new kinds of customer relationships.
5. **Aesthetic** — The Girls' Game movement promised new kinds of content, new models of play and interactivity, new visual aesthetics, and new approaches to the soundtrack. The Girls' Game movement set a goal of making games radically different from those on the market, so that they could attract new kinds of consumers. This made the Girls' Game movement a hotbed for innovation and experimentation of all kinds, with a strong push towards more psychologically nuanced characters, softer color palettes, more richly-layered soundtracks, new interface designs (including those such as *Barbie Fashion Designer™*, which helped bridge between the computer and real world play), and more complex stories.

These five factors shaped the girls' game movement. We were interested in the ways that the girls' game movement brought together feminist academics and female CEOs in a collective effort to transform the current state and the future direction of a sector of the entertainment industry.

We accepted as given that companies would come to make games for girls but we wanted to know what kinds of games for what kinds of girls, with what kinds of goals in mind. We included chapters by cultural theorists, educational theorists, developmental psychologists, academic technologists, computer game industry representatives, and female game players. Some chapters suggested that girls should be encouraged to play existing computer games with an eye towards their future benefits. Some suggested, instead, that girls should be lured into playing computer games through the design of games that cleverly imitated girls' current pursuits. Some spoke of how girls could appropriate computer games by leaving the rules the same but setting up all-female clubs designed to beat boys at their own game (so to speak). Winding through the chapters was the issue of whether games should be designed to reflect girls' existing tastes and interests or to transform them, and whether this question represented a contradiction within feminist entrepreneurship. Feminism has always sought to critique and reinvent gender roles, whereas entrepreneurship has had to start where the market was. An anonymous poster on a newsgroup in 1997 summed up the core question:

I have a survey up on the web about girls' interests and I've gotten nearly 1,000 responses from teenage girls, a large portion of which yearn for computer games about makeovers, shopping, and cheerleading. It's what the girls *WANT*, although this desire is clearly guided by the media and the parents. (. . .) is it worth while to use the pink and lavender, girl-stereotype marketing, to sell computer games for girls that get them to be more tech-savvy and comfortable with computing? Perhaps it is worth making pastel legos to get more girls thinking spatially and building and constructing instead of only playing with dolls. As I design computer games for girls, I ask myself this question on a daily basis. My take is, the girls who aren't stuck in the "hairspray and nail polish" rut don't need me to turn them on to

technology. The ones who need the additional skills are precisely the ones who would be attracted by pink and lavender.

Of course, designers and critics alike have continued to find it difficult to avoid essentializing gender as designers seek to identify what types of games girls want to play and reformers seek to promote the kinds of games they think girls should be playing. Often, both sides have lost track of the fact that gender is a continuum rather than a set of binary oppositions: one is never going to design games that adequately reflect the tastes, interests, and needs of all girls. At the 2006 workshop meeting, Cornelia Brunner offered a provocative way out of this essentialist trap, suggesting that we replace male/female with the butch/femme continuum that has been so influential in shaping queer theory and politics. We should design games for people who relate to gender and sexual identities in complex, contradictory, and fluid ways: butch/femme gave us a language to think about certain tendencies without assuming that those categories fit any given human being very snugly.

Today, there is no pink aisle at most local games stores. The female-run start-up companies were by-and-large bought up by existing games companies – many of them by Mattel, which was eager to protect Barbie from any significant rivals. Brenda Laurel has left the games industry to take up the challenges of training “utopian entrepreneurs” and socially-committed designers. And if you mention girls’ games to many in the games industry, you are apt to get sneering looks and dismissive comments – as if the whole thing had been a bad dream they would want to wish away.

From the start, it was clear that a large segment of the men who worked inside the games industry, not to mention the guys who played the games, had no interest in thinking seriously about gender and no interest in broadening and diversifying games content. The book was reviewed everywhere from *Ms.* to *Playboy* (which labeled the review, “A Battle-Ax to Grind”). Much of the popular press response drew a wall around “real gamers”: One could be a feminist or a gamer but not both. For example, over at Amazon.com, many readers focused on factual details at the expense of engaging with the book’s larger arguments — how dare we not mention Sonia Blade from *Mortal Kombat*? How come we didn’t discuss InfoCom’s early female character? What about Chun Li from *Street Fighter II*? Never mind that women are being excluded from full participation within the digital realm — that’s not *Mortal Kombat* on the cover! One British newspaper critic never got beyond the acknowledgements section, attacking Henry for being too gushy in acknowledging his wife and his co-editor. So many of the young males who responded to the book seemed worried that some maternal presence might force them to tuck in their shirt-tails or that the companies would stop making games to their tastes once women became gamers.

We hoped this response would fade, as gamers realized the benefits to be reaped from a diversity of game designers, and a diversity of game players. But, in a striking parallel to responses to our writing ten years ago, when Yasmin Kafai wrote a piece in *Gamasutra* about the conference, one of her first responses was from a gentleman who accused her of not having her facts right and not being a real gamer:

Every year, some headcase with a list of "facts about" comes out of the closet, when in reality there is no comprehensive fact-list, but rather a theory that caters to agenda-bending. Then they write a feel-good article and forget to balance 'fact/truth' and being objective. Those who do so deliberately are viewed abjectly or worse. (. . .) Women are not scarce in our industry because they are scorned or put upon- I have known over 20 in my career, and all but a few were awesome on every level. They are scarce because they are less attracted and inclined to our industry on a historical, cultural, and personal level. Just for an example, how many women do you know would be willing to crunch away on a 120 hour work week for 2 months on something they may not love? My own wife said "screw that &*@#!". 5

women out of those 20 I mentioned quit for that very same reason. Of over 100 men I have known in my industry, only 5 of them quit for that reason. This is a difference on a psychosomatic AND physiological level. Just one example, but valid.

From such responses, it would be easy to conclude that very little has changed – at least not for the better – in terms of women and games over the last decade. But such a pessimistic response would not reflect the enthusiasm and excitement about games as a medium displayed by so many young feminists at the UCLA conference. There weren't many girls' games but there were millions of girl gamers.

Looking back, Will Wright's game, *The Sims*TM, may have represented a significant turning point in the relations between gender and computer games. By some estimates, more than half of the people who purchased the game were female and this female fan base was what made *The Sims* the top selling games franchise of all time. And today Maxis, which has a high number of female designers and executives, contrasts sharply to the kind of situation described by Yasmin's interlocutor.

In the original book, we discussed what would happen when the first wave of girls' games started to influence the mainstream of the games industry, wondering whether it was possible or desirable to imagine gender-neutral games that supported multiple play patterns and sustained diverse consumer interests. As Henry suggested elsewhere, *The Sims* "shares many of the traits associated with the girl's game movement without calling attention to them as such," (Jenkins, 2003) resulting in a game that attracted a large number of female consumers. Working through a checklist that Brenda Laurel had proposed of features of girls games, Jenkins found that the leading characters were "everyday people that girls can easily relate to," that the game supported exploration and variable outcomes rather than fixed goals and hierarchical scoring, that the game emphasizes characters and stories over speed and action, that the settings are everyday and not larger than life, that success comes through social networking rather than through combat and competition. All of this was to focus on the formal and thematic elements of the game – that is, to read *The Sims* through the lens of the girls' game movement.

Yet, what was transformative about *The Sims* in the end had very little to do with its design features or content. It came through the policies that Will Wright and his team at Maxis developed around user-generated content. From the start, *The Sims* inspired a vigorous fan culture: fans designed their own characters, furniture, wallpaper, and rugs, and inserted them into the game and they used the game play to generate images they could use to illustrate their own fan fiction. Here we were seeing a games culture which looked more like traditional fan cultures (which historically were dominated by female participants) where the appropriation and reworking of media content is second-nature.

Very little time was spent at the 2006 UCLA conference discussing game content or the efforts of the mainstream games industry to reach female consumers. Rather, the focus had shifted onto participatory culture, onto the social dynamics that emerged as players created their own identities and communities within massively multiplayer online games, onto the ways that players were modifying existing games to serve alternative purposes, onto workshops that were teaching young people game design skills, and onto research initiatives that resulted in the production of games for use in the classroom. Today's gamers grew up in an era of consumer-produced content all around – web pages, blogs, music sampling and mashing. If the games industry would not produce the kinds of games women wanted to play, they would simply make their own.

As much as we value amateur and grassroots media production, though, we could not help but think something was missing from this scenario, especially if the result was that feminists were no longer struggling to insure that the commercial sector was more responsive to their concerns, or that game content might be more diversified. The debate about gender and games has always

operated at multiple levels: it was first a debate about how to insure that young girls had access to the technologies that would shape their futures; it was also a debate about how more women could participate in the emerging digital industries; and it was a debate about representation (about what kinds of stories and play experiences were going to circulate broadly in our culture).

We should measure success differently across these fronts: there is a marked increase over the past decade in the number of women playing games; some recent surveys have suggested that the majority of women have at least played games at some point, though they start playing games later, tend to play games to spend time with a boyfriend, tend to play a less diverse range of games, and play games for a shorter period of time per session. But, there has been almost no increase in the number of women working within the games industry and as several writers in this book suggest, work conditions remain overtly hostile to female employees. This issue concerns us not simply because we want to see women have greater opportunities in the workplace, but also because incorporating women alongside men in design meetings would seem to be the most effective way to insure the diversification of game content.

While computer games were slated to get girls into Computer Science and other technology fields, the numbers of girls and women in Computer Science have gone **down** over the last 10 years. Contrary to what we might have expected – certainly to what we hoped – the girls game movement failed to dislodge the sense among both boys and girls that computers were “boys’ toys” and that true girls didn’t play with computers, while true computers were just for boys. As in so many domains, the marketplace has a hard time changing gender stereotypes on its own. Without a more general cultural sense of the diversity of gendered experience, girls games were just another tool with which to construct a gender divide.

While the past decade has seen enormous technological shifts in terms of what the game play experience looks like (3d graphics have become the industry norm; open-ended game structures are becoming more common; game peripherals are enabling new forms of interactions with the medium; improvements in artificial intelligence are allowing for more sophisticated game characters and for emergent behaviors), there has been surprisingly limited shifts in the genres that dominate the game marketplace or the range of fantasies being represented by game characters. The game industry is still designing games primarily for men with women--at best--seen as a secondary market and more often as an afterthought. If a mainstream game attracts women, it is viewed by most games industry executives as a happy accident.

The exceptions are on the fringes — or on what the hardcore gamer market sees as the fringes: casual games, serious and educational games, and advergaming. Each of these has represented a space which for its own reasons has welcomed women as participants.

Casual Games — The leading producers and distributors of casual game report that women constitute between 70 and 80 percent of their market with the greatest concentration among women in their 30s or above. Speaking at the recent conference, Daniel James, the CEO of Three Rings, Inc., cited the power of the social networks that women were forming around casual games, suggesting that female gamers were very effective viral marketers and could make or break the release of a new title in this space.

Serious and Educational Games — The past decade has seen the emergence of a strong, committed and highly visible movement around serious games (that is, games that serve a variety of functions other than entertainment – education, corporate and military training, policy making, political and social activism, medicine and mental health, etc.). In each of these cases, game designers have to factor in women as potential players in a much more overt way if they wish to serve their various pro-social ends. As we described ten years ago, when a group of educators with software design experience was asked to design software specifically for boys or for girls, they designed different kinds of games. When they were asked to design software for generic “students,” they again designed the type of software that they had designed for

boys. The results of this “gender-blind” design are nefarious. When children were asked to solve a reasoning problem in the form of an adventure game involving kings, pirates, and mechanical forms of transport such as ships and planes, the boys did substantially better than the girls. However, when the characters in the game were 'honeybears' and the transport included a pony and a balloon, the gender difference totally disappeared. The boys did slightly worse, but the girls' performance improved almost twofold and they did a little better than the boys (cited in Gurer & Camp, 1998). It would be a big mistake to introduce games into the classroom if the results had the effect of further disadvantaging girls. As a consequence, a great deal of the research found in this new collection centers around the challenge of designing gender-neutral or female-friendly games for pedagogical purposes.

Advergaming — It has been predicted that advergaming or product placements in games will become an 800 million dollar business by 2009. Right now, the primary drive towards games-focused advertising has come from companies who are worried by dramatic declines in the amount of time men in their teens and twenties spend watching television. To reach this desired demographic, they are moving to where the boys are – games. Yet, as the role of games as an advertising medium expands, there are already signs of a counterpressure. Many of the top brands advertised in television produce consumer goods that target girls and women, and these advertisers will be pushing for more games that will attract female consumers.

Significantly, these three sectors represent the only places in the current games industry that are being driven by entrepreneurial impulses. Over the past decade, there has been enormous consolidation in the games industry as a small number of publishers have bought up and now control what used to be a series of smaller games companies. In some cases, as in Maxis' relationship to Electronic Arts, these companies maintain some autonomy within their mother companies and still create distinctive products. Yet, in many cases, these smaller game companies have been harnessed to major games franchises, producing endless expansion packs (a fate that Maxis itself hasn't been able to escape) for their most successful titles. Newer and smaller companies are being forced to work from the fringes, entering spaces that are not yet dominated by the giant games publishers, and seeking out new consumers. If the push for girls games in the 1990s came from female-run start-ups and established companies looking for new and untapped markets, the push in the 21st century for more female-friendly content seems to be coming from companies that are seeking consumers that are not already owned and controlled by Electronic Arts or Activision.

Yet, if these smaller companies are showing some interest in wooing women as part of an alternative market strategy, in the absence of some sort of feminist enterprise, there's nothing to prevent them from falling back on the same old gender stereotypes which have plagued the female games movement from the beginning. A case in point is the new *Desperate Housewives* game, which debuted at the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the games industry's major trade show, the same week as the UCLA conference. The game is loosely modeled on *The Sims* in that it involves the simulation of domestic life within a suburban community (the world of Wisteria Lane as depicted on the TV series). The players adopt the role of a previously unknown housewife who awakes one day with amnesia and seeks to find out more about who she is and how she fits within the community. *USA Today* (Slatzman, 2006) quotes Mary Schuyler, the producer of the title: “As fans of the show would expect, the game is loaded with gossip, betrayal, murder and sex — you know, all the things women like.” Once again, in a striking parallel from a decade ago, the industry claims it is designing to the tastes of its female consumers: “each company's extensive focus-group testing shows, as Philips Media Home president Sarina Simon puts it, ‘this is what girls want’ (Tanaka, 1996). The *Desperate Housewives* game reflects, for better or for worse, some of the trends that we have been describing above, yet it also suggests, as we tried to do ten years ago, the limits of applying market forces to reshape the construction of gender in popular culture.

The television series, *Desperate Housewives*, has proven enormously popular with female viewers — though the game may have difficulty achieving the complex balance of melodrama and comedy that has been the hallmark of the series. Indeed, the series itself has had difficulty preserving its quirky and somewhat ironic tone as it moved into the second season. Creating a game based on the series, however, represents the kind of transmedia strategy that has been successful in generating female interest elsewhere in the world. Mimi Ito (this volume), a USC anthropologist who does work on games culture in Japan, argues that a key factor in closing the gender gap among gamers there had to do with the integration of game content into larger "media mixes", such as the transmedia strategies which have emerged around hot anime and manga properties. She suggests that girls in Japan embraced games as another source of content that interested them as it flowed organically from one medium to the next. Scott Sanford Tobis, one of the TV series' writers, described the game as an "additional episode," offering new insights into the characters and introducing new situations into the story.

Given the appeal of casual games for women, the game company has chosen to base the title heavily around a series of mini-games, including the integration of cooking challenges and card games as core activities within a larger framework. The *Desperate Housewives* title hopes to bridge between casual games and longer play experiences. For some time, observers of the games industry have questioned whether the current models for content will serve the interests of even the core gamer market for much longer. The average gamer is older each year simply because people are continuing to play games later in life than anyone would have imagined. The generation that grew up playing *Super Mario Brothers* is now entering young adulthood. They now need to manage their game play time alongside expectations from spouses and offspring. Women often complain that the units of time demanded by most games are impossible to negotiate around the expectations they face within their families. All of this points towards the desirability of developing games which come in smaller units of playtime. Details about the episodic structure of *Desperate Housewives* remain vague, as does the business plan that will support this content: early interviews describe the game as composed of eight smaller episodes that combine to form a larger story arc, each representing roughly two hours of game play.

Moreover, the game reflects the pressure to open up games as a site for advertising. A partnership with Massive will result in an unprecedented amount of in-game advertising and product placement. This is what IGN had to say about these aspects of the game: "Most of the products in the house will be real-world name brands. Thanks to a deal with Sears, washers, dryers, and vacuum cleaners will all have familiar logos on them. When your character walks out to the mailbox, coupons will arrive from time to time. Thanks to a print option, you can take these coupons to their respective store (in the real world) and use them towards a purchase." (IGN, 2006) In short, the domestic setting is motivated — and helps to motivate — product placements for the kinds of consumer goods that most aggressively target women. In turn, this focus on branded goods probably determines the focus on cooking, cleaning, and other household activities that do not necessarily play a central role on the television series itself.

That said, the women who attended the recent "Beyond Barbie" conference had pretty strong responses to the idea that cooking games and gossip were "all the things women like." They saw this push towards stereotypically feminine content as a return to some of the pink box thinking that doomed previous generations of experiments at creating "girls games." This gets at the Scylla and Charybdis of designing games for girls, which is to tread lightly in between designing for "the girl" (as if there is only one sort) and designing for "no girls" at all.

So the debate continues. Our book sought to ask readers to question their assumptions about what kind of games should be designed for girls. Today, we might rephrase that question to ask how gaming culture has and will change as a result of women's more active presence. Yet, either way, we are caught in a discussion which brings together market pressures and political

agendas and tries to negotiate around the complex set of relationships between gender and technology.

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