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## Girl Games

By G. Beato

**Computer games for girls is no longer an oxymoron.**

The toughest computer game ever? It has to be *Doom*, right, with its endless toxic corridors and fidelity to the aesthetics of terminal carnage? Or maybe *Duke Nukem* and its Mark Fuhrman-on-acid Pig Cops? Or how about the gentler trials of *Myst*, all those cryptic machines and contraptions, and not a user manual in sight?

Those games are tough, sure, but there's one that's even tougher. It has mazes riddled with conundrums, inscrutable adversaries whose unshakable indifference to your presence leaves you wondering if it's even worth the effort to attack. And there are no cheat codes to bail you out when nothing's going right. Your goal? To reach the testosterone-spattered war rooms of the interactive entertainment industry and persuade the pasty knuckle-draggers who reside there to conceive, develop, and deliver games for girls.

Call it *Woom*.

For the last several years, men and women throughout the software industry have been playing this real-life game. And usually not winning.

But now, after years of disregard and sporadic, sometimes ludicrous attempts to serve the female market, the industry's game boys are experiencing a change of heart. Companies like Mattel Media, Hasbro Interactive, Sega, DreamWorks Interactive, Starwave, R/GA Interactive, Broderbund, and Philips Media have all introduced or are developing products targeted to girls. Start-ups such as Her Interactive, Girl Games Inc., Cybergrrl Inc., Girl Tech, and Interval Research's Purple Moon are doing the same. Some expect 200 new girl games to reach store shelves or go online this year - a tenfold increase from 1996.

Why the sudden interest?

Blame it on Barbie. Last November, the CD-ROM industry received a wake-up call when the runaway best-seller turned out to be *Barbie Fashion Designer*. In its first two months of sales, Mattel's digital incarnation of the oft-denigrated but remarkably enduring role model sold more than 500,000 copies, outstripping even popular titles such as *Quake* - and leaving the rest of the industry wondering how to cash in on this newfound wellspring.

The surge of girl game activity also reflects demographics - there are simply more women developing games and using computers today than five, ten years ago. And these women are bringing their perspectives to the development process. As girl game developer Brenda Laurel points out, "The game

business arose from computer programs that were written by and for young men in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They worked so well that they formed a very lucrative industry fairly quickly. But what worked for that demographic absolutely did not work for most girls and women." While initial attempts at creating girl games amounted to little more than painting traditional titles pink, the current crop of developers understand that it's a far more complicated business than that.

## The Land of Sweeping Generalizations

That there's consumer demand for girl games comes as no surprise to Brenda Laurel. A pioneer in developing virtual reality, Laurel first zeroed in on the market at a conference in 1992, where she met David Liddle, who was cofounding Palo Alto, California-based Interval Research with Paul Allen. "We started talking about how the industry had consistently missed opportunities to get girls involved in technology," she recalls. "We asked, What would it really take to get a large number of girls using computers so often that the technology became transparent to them? In the end, we both had to admit that neither one of us really knew the answer."

Inside Interval's standard-issue gray-and-white Silicon Valley offices, Laurel leans back in her chair and smiles. In contrast to the high-collared, Vulcan-diva persona she assumed in the publicity photos for her book *Computers as Theatre*, in person she is warm and engaging, her curly auburn hair falling to her shoulders, her everyday earthwoman's garb giving her a decidedly human appearance. Compared with her forays into virtual reality, developing engaging content for girls had a relatively low fetish-factor, but Laurel eagerly accepted Liddle's offer to pursue the project at Interval - even though it came with a string attached. "I agreed that whatever solution the research suggested, I'd go along with," laughs Laurel. "Even if it meant shipping products in pink boxes."

To figure out the kinds of interactive entertainment girls would really find compelling, Laurel launched a major research campaign. "We took a three-pronged approach," she explains. "We did hundreds - maybe thousands - of interviews with 7- to 12-year-olds, the group we wanted to target with our products. We watched play differences between boys and girls. We asked kids how they liked to play; we gave them props and mocked-up products to fool around with." Laurel and company consulted experts in the field of children's play: toy store owners, teachers, scout leaders, coaches. Finally, they looked at all the research literature they could get their hands on, including material on play theory, brain-based sex differences, even primate social behavior - all with the goal of seeing how it might carry over into the realm of interactive entertainment.

Now, before we move into the Land of Sweeping Generalizations, a disclaimer: there are girls and women who like to slaughter mutant humanoids as much as any man does, and whose only discontent with *Duke Nukem* is that the bloodbaths it facilitates are simply too tepid; on the other hand, there are boys and men who don't immediately turn into glassy-eyed alien snuff zombies when presented with the latest *Doom* level. That said, Laurel's research did reveal certain patterns and tendencies.

"Girls enjoy complex social interaction," Laurel says. "Their verbal skills - and their delight in using them - develop earlier than boys'." Laurel further found that while girls often feel their own lives are boring, and thus have an interest in acting out other lives, they like to do so in familiar settings with characters who behave like people they actually know.

"We also learned that girls are extremely fond of transmedia," Laurel continues. "Things that make a magical migration from one media to the next. Or things that can appear in more than one form, like those Transformer toys." As it turns out, Transformers - the plastic contraptions that lead dual lives as robots and heavy artillery - offer a vivid example of how girls and boys tend to approach toys differently: whereas boys are apt to use them as a means of demonstrating mastery, concentrating on the ability to transform them as quickly as possible, girls focus on their magical quality, taking delight in the fact that the toy has a secret.

Laurel may have been one of the first to try to crack the elusive girl's market, but she wasn't alone. Heidi Dangelmaier, a former doctoral candidate from Princeton's computer science program, left the school in

1992 to wage an outspoken campaign to get traditional developers to make titles for girls. Patricia Flanigan, an entrepreneur who'd previously specialized in children's furniture, started Her Interactive, the first company devoted exclusively to developing interactive entertainment for girls. Laura Groppe, a former movie and music video producer, started Girl Games Inc. Doug Glen at Mattel Media launched a multimillion-dollar effort to turn the company's successful brands into digital designs (see "Gender Blender," *Wired* 4.11, page 190).

These innovators were doing research of their own, and reaching conclusions that echoed Laurel's. "It all comes down to the nature of value," says Dangelmaier, who after brief bouts of corporate kick-boxing with Sega and other traditional developers ended up cofounding a Web development company called Hi-D. "What's worth spending time on? What's a waste of time? Females want experiences where they can make emotional and social discoveries they can apply to their own lives."

Sheri Graner Ray, a producer who left her job at Origin Systems when she grew frustrated with her colleagues' lack of interest in female players, agrees. What girls and women want, says Graner Ray, now director of product development at Her Interactive, is a game that allows them to create "mutually beneficial solutions to socially significant problems." By socially significant problems she means conflicts that happen in a social realm, that involve a group of people rather than a lone space commando going up against a ceaseless supply of enemies. In such a context, girls can use skills they tend to find more compelling than trigger-finger aggression - diplomacy, negotiation, compromise, and manipulation. "This doesn't mean there can't be fighting or combat in a game for females," adds Graner Ray. "There just has to be something beyond confrontation as the reward."

### **But enough with the theories ...**

... what do the new titles for girls look like?

In the case of Interval Research, we don't really know yet. While the firm recently announced the formation of Purple Moon Inc., a spin-off that will publish products informed by Brenda Laurel's research, none will hit the shelves until late 1997. And until they do, the company's keeping them under wraps. Still, Laurel, who will serve as Purple Moon's vice president of design, drops enough details to suggest that these products will differ vastly from the single-minded mayhem of the typical shoot-'em-up. Indeed, inside the company, they're referring to the titles as a whole new genre: "friendship adventures for girls."

Laurel says Purple Moon will launch with two multi-title product lines, which will focus on making friends and shared experiences. The lines will take place in different environments: one in a more social world, with settings like school and the principal's office and a focus on day-to-day issues; the other in a dreamier, neoromantic world of secret gardens and moonlit trails overlooking the ocean, where nature and reflection are emphasized. Both series will include a strong storytelling and narrative element and many of the same characters, but no clocks and no scores. "We want to let girls play in an exploratory, open-ended fashion, to let them have control over their environment," says Laurel. To extend these environments (and profit margins, no doubt) beyond the realm of the computer, a battery of offshoot merchandise is in the works.

Interactive stories - like Her Interactive's *McKenzie & Co.* and *Vampire Diaries*, or DreamWorks Interactive's *Goosebumps* - follow more traditional game models but include elements rare in the interactive entertainment world: teenage girl protagonists and plots that aren't based on killing someone, finding out why someone was killed, or taking over the world. Story lines focus on problem-solving, investigation, and communication with onscreen characters as a key to progressing through the drama.

And then there are titles like *Chop Suey* and *Mimi Smartypants*, the work of writer-producer Theresa Duncan, featuring nonlinear, fictional worlds to explore. With its sly whimsy and tactile, folk-art imagery, *Chop Suey* brings a whole new sensibility - quirky, poetic, almost bittersweet - to a medium that's often lacking in such nuance.

Finally, there's that feminist-nightmare blockbuster, *Barbie Fashion Designer*. Unlike almost every other interactive entertainment title, *Barbie* exists as a mere part of an overall play experience. "Instead of

looking at the computer as a game machine, we looked at it as a power tool that makes things," explains Doug Glen, president of Mattel Media. Given that that's exactly how the computer is seen in many other application categories, this is hardly an earthshattering observation. And yet very few interactive entertainment titles employ this metaphor. In the case of *Barbie Fashion Designer*, girls can make clothes for their dolls by choosing styles, patterns, and colors onscreen, then printing the resulting outfits on special paper-backed fabric that can be run through an inkjet or laser printer. At that point, they can use color markers, fabric paint, and other materials that come with the package to further enhance their designs. Like so many of the toy industry's most successful "interactive entertainment" products - think LEGO, Lincoln Logs, even Barbie herself - *Barbie Fashion Designer* is designed to let the user's imagination become the most important part of the play experience. In so many children's titles - and to a lesser extent in CD-ROM games aimed at older audiences - this simply doesn't happen. "It's CAD software for kids," says Ann Stephens, president of the high tech analysis firm PC Data. "*Barbie* did so well because it's a very good product that incorporates girl play models and a strong franchise."

Now, titles that emphasize fashion and makeup might sound like a conspiracy hatched by Rush Limbaugh to turn prospective riot grrrls into complacent, pretty little consumers. But if the product's intended audience likes it, and if it introduces them to the world of technology, then why complain? This, at least, is how Her Interactive's Patricia Flanigan responds to critics. Besides, she points out, her company surveyed 2,000 girls before embarking on development of *McKenzie & Co.* and found that makeup, fashion, shopping, and boys were subjects girls wanted to see.

In addition, *McKenzie* and similar titles have real utility; they let girls experiment - in a comfortable way - with identity, appearance, and communication at an age when these things are extremely important to them. They also familiarize girls with interface and interactive media conventions. Indeed, diary-style titles like Girl Games's *Let's Talk About Me* and Philips Media's *The Baby-sitter's Club Friendship Kit* are practically full-blown personal information managers, with address books, calendars, daily planners, diaries, and other pre-Office features built into them.

But however individual developers feel about selling stereotyped girl themes, most in the interactive entertainment industry are overjoyed by *Barbie Fashion Designer's* success. In one fell swoop, *Barbie* cracked open the market for girl games. Purple Moon vice president Nancy Deyo has nothing but praise for the title: "We're thrilled to see *Barbie* do so well," she says. "We're going to enter a retail market that simply didn't exist six months ago."

## The future of girl games

The greatest potential for girl games still lies largely untapped. At a time when many companies view the Web as an all-purpose revenue enhancer, expected to add mouthwatering zest to even the blandest business plan, the firms focusing on interactive entertainment for girls seem to have reason to be licking their chops. As Brenda Laurel says, "The Web has an innate sociability - so there's loads of potential for activities that appeal to girls' social intelligence, their penchant for narrative play."

For many girls, the online world has already begun to supersede that sacred tool of female adolescence, the telephone. According to Aliza Sherman, creator of the popular Cybergrrl Web site, "Girls want to meet other girls their age and they really want to chat. When we held a Team Webgrrls event to teach 25 girls age 5 to 15 to learn to surf the Web, they got the biggest charge out of the CU-SeeMe and IRC instead of the Web sites themselves. They wanted to make contact and interact."

Ellen Steuer, a 20-year-old sophomore at Mills College in Oakland, California, first started going online when she was in high school. "My brothers wanted me to get a computer because they said I'd need one in college," explains Steuer. "I didn't really have any interest in computers until I discovered chat. For me, it's all about people - I've become friends with so many people I never would have met except online. And along the way, I really learned some interesting stuff."

So much stuff, in fact, that soon she was switching from her initial AOL account to an ISP and creating her own Web site. Today she has a job as a technical assistant in her college's information technology

department and is planning to pursue a career that involves the Internet. In short, she's a perfect example of a girl whose introduction to technology has had a major impact on her life. By the time she finishes school, she'll have more than six years of experience using interactive technologies.

Thousands of other girls are creating their own Web pages and chat rooms, forming alliances to promote each other's pages, and sometimes even starting secret clubs that require a password to view other members' sites. For developers, then, the question is this: How can we create products and services that can add to what girls are already doing themselves online? In their efforts to answer this question, Her Interactive and Girl Games Inc. have created community-oriented Web sites, with bulletin boards, advice columns, contests, pen pals, interviews with mentors, and online games. None of these sites is exactly cutting edge, but compared with the brochure-style sites that many traditional game developers have put up, their grasp of basic cyberspace principles is quite apparent.

In addition to creating its own site, Girl Tech, a start-up targeting 6- to 14-year-old girls, has several other Web projects in development. The company's trying to negotiate a deal with a major search directory for use of its "girl-friendly" rating system, and it's also created a book called *Tech Girl's Internet Adventures*. Along with site reviews and basic how-to information about the Web, the book includes a CD-ROM with software and clip art that girls can use to develop their own Web pages.

But how much interest do 6-year-old girls have in the Web? Girl Tech's founder and CEO Janese Swanson tells the story of how she helped her daughter have an online conversation with another girl on the other side of the country - who, in turn, was being helped by her dad. "My daughter loved learning about this little girl from a different part of the country," says Swanson, who as a product manager at Broderbund helped create *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* "We took out maps and asked questions about what it was like there."

As the Net continues to develop as a platform for interactive entertainment, look for girl game developers to be at the forefront. "So much of the Web's power comes through orchestrating human interactions," exclaims Heidi Dangelmaier. "The key to success in this medium lies in communication, human interaction, participation, and emotional impact."

In other words, all the things girl game evangelists have been thinking about for years.

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