FROM BARBIE TO MORTAL KOMBAT: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

By Henry Jenkins

Early summer, 2001. I am walking through the great exhibition hall at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the most important trade show in the games industry. It is hard to imagine many activities that would pack in so many men per square foot of exhibition space and so few women. Many of the women we see here are dressed in scant clothing -- leather bound Valkyries, bikini-clad space bunnies, or women in tight jumpsuits prepared for motion capture demos. In what is the loudest, most visually over-saturated place I have ever been -- with the possible exception of the streets of Hong Kong, women are used as bait to lure dazed buyers into the booths. One understands instantly why most of the games on the market look and sound the way they do. It has little to do with consumer tastes and everything to do with the competition for attention at the floor show. In this environment, subtle games, nuanced games, disappear without a trace. The Sims or Black and White, for example, commanded far less space at the Electronic Arts booth than the more action packed games and Majestic debuted off the floor altogether.

One booth captured my attention. A female gamer was taking on all challengers. There was a long line of male gamers, game designers, and game executives, each pumping each other up, in the expectation of "whipping her sweet little butt" as I overheard one man to say. And one by one, they returned from the encounter with their tails between their legs, their masculinity in tatters. She was THAT good! She was one with the machine -- the closest thing to a cyborg I've ever encountered -- with absolute economy and precision of movement. She knew the game so well that she anticipated every move and compensated for it. And she slaughtered all of the best gamers.

Later that same summer, I am walking down the streets of downtown Melbourne and stumble past the window to a game arcade. In the window of the arcade, there are two teenage Moslem women -- dressed in flowing robes, headdresses, and veils, and they are dancing barefoot in front of Dance Dance Revolution. They seem absolutely free of all inhibitions, totally in touch with the rhythms of the machine. And people along the streets, like myself, are stopping and gaping at the spectacular dance performance unfolding before us.

I could be optimistic and suggest that these two chance encounters suggest the increased visibility of female gamers. After all, the Interactive Digital Software Association is reporting dramatic increases in the number of women playing games in the United States (43 percent overall with women constituting the majority of on-line gamers). The same research shows that, while the female Quake clans get lots of publicity for breaking across the gender barriers in gaming, more women play traditional card games such as bridge, board games such as chess, or trivia games such as Jeopardy, and only a small number play the kinds of games most often produced by the IDSA's member companies.
I fear that what these stories really suggest is that the sights of a female gamer remains a remarkable spectacle within a commercial and cultural space still dominated by male designers and male consumers.

*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* was conceived and written 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, creating new kinds of games which might appeal to a broader range of female consumers. *Barbie Fashion Designer* had been a top-seller in the Christmas Season, 1996, and had continued throughout the year to outsell industry standards, such as *Quake* or *Myst*, establishing that there was potentially a rather large market for female-centered software titles. Brenda Laurel, who was one of the most respected women in the computer industry, had established Purple Moon games with the explicit goal of designing products which reflected her sociological and ethnographic research into young girls' play patterns. And a number of other companies -- Girl games, Her Interactive -- were 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.

The Girl's Game movement took shape around a series of competing goals and expectations:

1. **Economic** -- The platform game market had entered into an age of heightened competition at a time when, in fact, 90 percent of American boys were already playing computer games. To survive, these game companies understood that they would need to expand their market and thus, then as now, there were three major targets -- 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 plight of pre-teen girls had become a central focus of feminist concern, following the publication of a series of books that suggested serious self-esteem issues which were impacting their ability to learn and grow within the classroom. Further research suggested that the gender gap in technological fields was growing rather than shrinking, despite decades of feminist intervention, and that the computer was more and more being 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 head start program for technological literacy. By the time they encountered computers in the classroom, boys had spent many more hours playing games than girls and often shoved them off the hardware to show them how it should be used.

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. As long as platform games ruled the roost, there was little chance of building up a girls market because consumers would have to buy the hardware before they could play games and at a time when there was not going to be a critical mass of relevant product 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 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 industry, enjoyed some degree of success, but had 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, at a time 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, 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.

Our book tried to document the complex interweaving of ideological idealism and market calculations which shaped the development of the girl's 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 which is drawing in an annual income roughly equivalent to the gross domestic box office returns for Hollywood movies.

In that context, the book's focus shifted from whether there was going to be software for girls (which seemed almost a given) to what kinds of software for what kinds of girls. We asked, for example, 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. We pointed, for example, towards a controversial statement that Brenda Laurel had made, "I agreed that whatever solution the research suggested, I'd go along with. Even if it meant shipping products in pink boxes." In many ways, this was a challenge which feminist critics had never had to confront before -- how to write about cultural production in a context where women now exercised a considerable degree of power. If women were heading up the games company, their efforts could no longer be called marginal, but at the same time, they were now forced to respond to the same economic realities which shaped corporate decision-making in what remained a largely patriarchal society. Earlier generations of feminists had celebrated filmmakers like Dorothy Arzner who produced films from the margins of the studio system as engaged in a kind of "countercinema." Yet, game company executives like Brenda Laurel had control over (and thus was forced to take responsibility for) the products she shipped under the Purple Moon logo.

In hindsight, it is troubling how quickly Laurel found herself caught in feminist backlash against the reproduction of feminine stereotypes in her work when so little attention was being given to her explicit goal of using popular culture to empower young girls. We might compare the feminist backlash against Purple Moon to, say, the much more friendly reception given to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena, or The Power Puff Girls. As Brenda Laurel writes in her new book, Utopian Entrepreneur, "By trying to do anything socially positive at all, the utopian entrepreneur opens herself up to the endless critique that she is in fact not doing enough....I am reminded of the old saw: the one who attacks you is likely to be the one closest to you on the road....I wondered, did anyone
notice that this wasn't Barbie -- that Rocket struggled mightily to be ethical and self-defined?...Our characters exhibited loyalty, honor, love, and courage. They also struggled with gossip, jealousy, cheating, lipstick, smoking, exclusion, racism, poverty, materialism, and broken homes. When we had to choose, we sacrificed political correctness in order to meet the girls where they were, in the realities of their own lives."

What bothers me even more, however, is the degree to which Purple Moon has been treated not only within the industry but also within academia as a "failed experiment," as if the importance of a political and cultural intervention could be or should be measured only by market standards. As Utopian Enterepreneur makes clear, however, even by market standards, the company could scarcely be viewed as a failure, simply because it couldn't compete effectively for the girl's market against Barbie, the most successful girls franchise of all time, or American Girl, another successful franchise with pre-existing brand loyalties well before it sought to introduce its software line. Purple Moon sought to use a new set of characters and a new set of stories in order to introduce a new kind of product to a new kind of market. In doing so, it had notable success on the web, where it became the third most popular site for children, though its success came at a time when the business models for turning a revenue stream from the web still had not jelled (and guess what, folks, they still haven't, several years later). As Laurel explains, "Here's one of the perversities of dot-capitalism: if Purple Moon had not actually produced any real products, I'd probably be 'post-economic' today. Just as the dot-economy started spinning straw into gold, Purple Moon was spending real money to make real products to go into real shelves in real stores. In investment terms, this was a big mistake. Even though we had an extremely popular Website, the embarrassing detail of real goods prevented us from passing for a dot-company in the venture community. And so, instead of the wild valuations that made some of our younger friends multimillionaires, the valuation of Purple Moon could never exceed some small multiple of our revenues -- because we actually had revenues."

What killed Purple Moon wasn't the lack of a girl's market for games or the invalidity of her core model about what a girl's game might look like, but rather the impatience of the company's core investors to make the kinds of turnaround that they were seeing elsewhere in the digital economy. In the end, Purple Moon suffered the fate that befalls most startups -- it was acquired by a larger and more firmly established company, an old economy company, in this case, Mattel. In trying to break into a market, startups are often forced to try riskier new methods or to test alternative approaches or to innovate new kinds of products, where-as the established companies tend to be more conservative, taking a wait and see attitude towards innovation, since they can afford to make adjustments down the line. Larger companies absorb start-ups for two reasons -- one is to kill competition, the other is to absorb the innovation back into the mainstream of the industry. Mattel apparently absorbed Purple Moon with an eye towards killing off competition to Barbie with the result that it made only a half-hearted attempt to extend the Rocket franchise beyond those products that Laurel's company had produced. Mattel never understood what it had acquired. Its ultimate disappearance from the marketplace, then, may have less to do with the viability of its model and more to do with the serious corporate forces which Purple Moon was challenging.

One of the most frequently asked questions when our book first appeared dealt was whether it made sense to gender segregate, that is, to create a girls market, rather than expanding the existing boys market to include more gender-neutral material. We were told, for example, that no one designed games specifically for boys. I would suggest that the release of a major piece of hardware known as the game boy, suggests that the industry did identify its products along gender lines. Many felt that it was time to consciously signal to girls that there might be some forms of digital entertainment that reflected their tastes and interests. Without such a gesture, a gender-neutral playspace would remain simply a defacto masculine space. The argument for more "feminine" content lay in the recognition that a significant number of girls were playing games -- those who were already comfortable
searching for and finding common ground with boys -- where-as those girls most apt to be left behind were those whose tastes were the most traditionally feminine.

Suppose we take at face value the claim that game designers aren't designing for boys -- they are simply designing games they would like to play. The existing employee pool for the games industry is overwhelmingly male, so the games designed appeal overwhelmingly to men. One important step would be to significantly expand the number of women working in the industry and give them enough room to develop products that would reflect their tastes and sensibilities. Another would be to make a conscious effort to broaden the range of game content, based on research if not first hand experience, in order to expand the number of women who get excited about the medium and thus help to develop the next generation of game designers. What this situation doesn't justify is complacency on the part of the games industry.

The decline of the girls game companies has taken some of the pressure off the major games companies to respond to this gender gap, buying them time to take a more conservative approach. We are not seeing what we might have anticipated five years ago -- a growing pink aisle at the software stores. Instead, we are seeing the major companies absorb those lessons that they can from the Girl Games company's experimentation and apply them to existing franchises that have already proven successful with their predominantly male consumers. So, for example, the *Barbie Fashion Designer* enabled girls to design Barbie's clothes, style her hair, select her theme music, choreograph her movements, and have her walk down the aisle onto the runway. The new World Wrestling Federation games enables boys to design the wrestler's clothes, style their hair, select their theme music, choreograph their movements, and have them walk down the aisle into the ring and then they beat the crap out of each other. Is this new focus on designing your own characters at least partially a product of the success of the Barbie franchise? Hard to tell, given the fact that hardcore gamers have long traded in "skins" but the parallels between the two interface designs are striking.

Ironically, this more conservative strategy of integrating selected traits from Girls Game models into existing Boys Game genres and franchises may be leading us towards something approaching the "gender-neutral" playscapes some of us were advocating. (Let's bracket for the moment the nagging question of whether any of us really knows what it would look like to live in a gender-neutral society and thus whether gender-neutral doesn't still mean second-class citizenship for girls.)

It is interesting to look at *The Sims*, one of the most successful games in recent years, in light of the distinctions which Brenda Laurel mapped between the classic Boy Game and her vision for the ideal Girl Game:

**GIRLS -- Leading characters are everyday people that girls can easily relate to, and are as real to girls as their best friends.**

**BOYS -- Leading characters are fantasy-based action heroes with "super power" abilities."**
In the case of *The Sims*, the default set of characters are, indeed, "everyday people," the setting is domestic, and the challenges confronted are familiar ones. Because *The Sims* supports the development and sharing of "Skins," artifacts and architecture, some players have developed larger-than-life protagonists and spaces which can be retrofit into the game universe -- including the kinds of super hero or wrestler characters found in more traditional games. What is striking, however, is the degree to which boys are forced to adjust the game to accommodate their interests, where-as so often in our culture, women are expected to read their interests from the margins of popular culture texts that center on male interests.

**GIRLS** -- Goal is to explore and have new experiences, with degrees of success and varying outcomes.

**BOYS** -- Goal is to win, and the play is linear. Outcome is black and white; die and start over; one 'right' solution.

*The Sims* lends itself to a broad array of different goals and outcomes. Often, players use the game to do psychological experiments. Friends have told me that they have used the game to see if they are compatible with a proposed set of roommates or learn what adjustments they would need to make in order to move in with their girlfriends. A single mother describe the different ways that she and her son used the game to work through the issues surrounding the recent divorce -- the son to create a perfect nuclear family, the divorced mother to imagine what it would be like to re-enter the dating world. The features of the game are familiar and evocative, encouraging us to use them to simulate our own experiences and thus test different social strategies, much as the design of the Purple Moon games were designed to allow pre-adolescent girls to rehearse social strategies for responding to the challenges of high school life.

**GIRLS** -- Play focuses on multi-sensory immersion, discovery, and strong story lines.

**BOYS** -- Speed and action are key.

The exploratory nature of *The Sims* differs dramatically from the fixed goals and rapid fire action associated with traditional boys games. The pace of this game is slower, dealing more with gradual processes and repeated routines, rather than rapid-fire challenges and conflicts. *The Sims* almost immediately developed a fan culture surrounding the production of scrapbooks documenting the experiences of the Sim characters and over time, these scrapbooks became more and more narrativized. To read those scrapbooks is to learn more and more about the emotional lives and motives of these characters. Indeed, while the scrapbooks were intended to record game actions, many players report that they play the game to get the images they need to complete narratives they want to tell. *The Sims* has thus found a way to encourage players to create more narratively-compelling
experiences. While Purple Moon authored stories within its games (while providing a webspace where girls could expand upon their understanding of those characters), *The Sims* was designed as a "sandbox" or "dollhouse" where players could play out their own narratives.

**GIRLS** -- Feature everyday 'real life' settings as well as new places to explore.

**BOYS** -- features non-realistic, larger-than-life settings.

In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, I contrasted Sim City with the "play town" which Harriet constructed for her imaginary life in the classic children's book, *Harriet the Spy*: "Sim City embraces stock themes from boys' play, such as building forts, shaping earth with toy trucks, or damming creeks, playing them out on a much larger scale. For Harriet, the mapping of the space was only the first step in preparing the ground for a rich sage of life and death, joy and sorrow, and those are the elements that are totally lacking in most simulation games." *The Sims*, however, is Harriet's "play town." The shift in the scale of the game from *Sim City*'s objectifying top-down view of urban renewal to *The Sims*'s subjective, eye-level perspective on individual characters, reflects this openness to new kinds of narratives, which center around characters and their emotional lives. The interface is designed to foreground emotional responses -- rendered all the more powerfully when abstracted from the specific verbal content of their speech. The characters weep when other characters die; they make passionate love; they flirt; they get depressed and mope; they get tired and cranky. As *The Sims* moves from a stand-alone game to a multiplayer on-line game, the universe of spaces and characters expands enormously, creating many more opportunities for both spatial and social exploration.

**GIRLS** -- Success comes through development of friendships.

**BOYS** -- Success comes through the elimination of competitors.

Consider Laurel's descriptions of the different ways that girls and boys compete: "Girls and boys are equally competitive -- they are just different kinds of competition. Girls assert social influence and structure relationships while boys seek to dominate and defeat." Girl's competition, she asserts, reflects a "desire to establish relationships/friendships," to extend their "social status" through processes of affiliation and exclusion, and to "figure out" opponents. *The Sims* can be seen as a game that rewards precisely these kinds of social and cultural competition, including the development of a rewards system based on the player's ability to establish strong social bonds with a broad array of other players and characters. Much of the game play consists of social interactions within the family or with friends and the expansion packs offer more options for hosting parties and thus expanding the circle of one's social contacts. The game excludes almost altogether those forms of competition which are traditionally associated with boy's games where "social status tends to be by achievement
and physical domination" and where the goal is to "outwit" opponents. Indeed, in the absence of pre-structured goals or pre-determined competition, the element of direct physical combat is excluded from *The Sims* almost altogether.

I have spoken to Will Wright and others at Maxis and I am reasonably convinced that they were not directly modeling their game on the Girls Game movement products. Rather the decisions they made came out of a context where there were more female designers and more highly ranked female designers than I have seen at any other mainstream game studio. In such a context, even if there is no conscious goal of expanding the female market, the unconscious decisions made by men and women working together is likely to produce a product that is very different from one where the intuitive decisions were made by an all or predominantly male team of designers. Not surprisingly, then, *The Sims* has proven to be highly successful in attracting female players while at the same time, the product has expanded the range of play experiences available to boys.

I concluded my essay in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* with these words of caution: "[Sociologist Barrie] Thorne finds that aggressive 'borderwork' is more likely to occur when children are forced together by adults than when they find themselves interacting more spontaneously, more likely to occur in prestructured institutional settings like the schoolyard than in the informal settings of the subdivisions and apartment complexes. All of this suggests that our fantasy of designing games that will provide common play spaces for girls and boys may be illusive and as full of its own complications and challenges as creating a 'girls only' space or encouraging girls to venture into traditional male turf. We are not yet sure what a gender-neutral space will look like. Creating such a space would mean redesigning not only the nature of computer games but also the nature of society. The danger may be that in such a space, gender differences are going to be more acutely felt, as boys and girls will be repelled from each other rather than drawn together. There are reasons why this is a place where neither the feminist entrepreneurs nor the makers of boys' games are ready to go, yet as the girls' market is secured, the challenge must be to find a way to move beyond our existing categories and to once again invent new kinds of virtual play spaces."

*The Sims* is an important step in that process -- one which shares many of the traits associated with the girl's game movement without calling attention to them as such and which embeds them within a successful pre-existing franchise with a known appeal to male consumers. *The Sims*, of course, in reproducing domestic space, reproduces many of the ideological assumptions that currently shape the contemporary family, yet it also gives us the tools to re-script and restage those relationships in new terms. As such, it would seem to me to represent the logical culmination of the Girls Game movement and the beginning of the process of developing a more "gender neutral" playspace. As we move in that direction, however, we need to be aware of the kind of "borderwork" which demarks places where boys and girls can and can not play together and try to understand what it really means to provide a common ground for both genders.