

## **Teen Girl Gaming: The New Paradigm**

Girl Games Research and Development Lab

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### **First and Foremost**

We want you to know what girls *really* want out of gaming, because it is Girl Games' mission to provide a voice for teen girls and empower them as consumers. We talk to real girls who tell us what they want from the Gaming Industry. Now we're telling you.

### **The New Paradigm in Girl Gaming**

The purpose of this study was to give you a clearer understanding of how teen girls feel about gaming in general, as well as to delve deeper into their specific attitudes and preferences regarding actual and ideal gaming experiences for girls. Nearly all of the girls communicated feelings of frustration with the current level of interest by the gaming industry in girls, as evidenced by both the dearth of well-designed games for girls, as well as nearly non-existent girl-related game marketing. When we asked girls what kinds of games they really wanted, the popularity of racing games was surprising. If the gaming industry continues to erroneously assume that girls' interests are as limited as current game marketing to girls seems to indicate, it risks further alienating the growing, lucrative and interested teen girl market.

### **Data**

This report combines data from extensive open-ended e-mail surveys and numerous focus groups.

### **Overview of Findings**

- I. General Gaming Attitudes and Preferences
  - a. Platforms
    - i. Online
    - ii. CD-ROM
    - iii. Console
  - c. Game Styles Girls Want
- III. Racing Games
- IV. Sports Games
- V. Fighting Games
- VI. Features of a Good Game
  - a. Emotional Payoffs
  - b. Visual Payoffs
- VIII. Developing and Marketing Games for Girls

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## General Gaming Attitudes and Preferences

### Platforms

Based on their response patterns to gaming platform surveys, most of the girls we talked to play online games most, followed by CD-ROM and Console games. (See Figure 1). Several factors are universally important to the girl gamer:

- Laughter: Make 'Em Laugh
- Competition: With Both Boys and Girls
- Mastering Successive Skill Levels



## Online

Recent surveys and focus groups have revealed several characteristics of online gaming that girls value highly:

- **Girls love multi-player gaming:** In a recent online gaming survey, girls said the ability to play with or against others was the best thing about online gaming. When asked what made an online game "fun", many of the girls again indicated playing with or against others. Also noteworthy: several girls included chatting as a "fun" factor associated with multi-player online gaming.

*"AOL game shows are pretty neat, cause you play against other people" Anonymous, 16*

- **The Free Factor:** girls cited the free factor enthusiastically as an important factor in attracting them to gaming web sites or to any site with games. The high price tags that accompany console games may be prohibitive to many teen girls. Also, noteworthy, girls hate online games with time limits or limited free play.

*"When you have to pay for a game that sux, and pay a lot for one that you can only play for less than a half an hour." Kris, 15*

- **Convenient:** Games are always there, day or night. Girls like the freedom to stop and start a game whenever they feel like it, with a minimum of setup.

*"You can quit in the middle and no one gets mad at you, and there aren't a million pieces to set up" Melanie, 16*

- **Variety:** Many girls mention variety as a prime reason for seeking out games online. The most popular online games with the teen girls we talked to were simple ones involving matching or mazes, and card games.

Notes on Downloading: Girls' feelings on the process of downloading software or games before they can play tend toward:

- Qualified neutral

*"I don't mind as long as it doesn't take forever" Elaynah, 15*

- Negative

*"It sucks major ass," Thuy, 16*

- Fear of Viruses

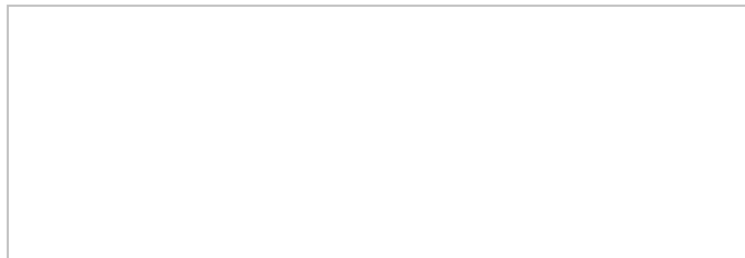
*"I'm afraid it'll have bugs and destroy my hard drive."*

Rachel, 17

It is therefore advisable to offer online games that are compatible with lower common denominator pre-loaded software. If a site is confident that its offerings are virus-free, it would be a good idea to post a confidence statement of some kind.

Breken, age 14 is an avid online gamer:

- Likes "mindless" games like Snowcraft, Roach Killer and Frogapult
- Fave sites for games: [www.won.com](http://www.won.com), [pogo.com](http://pogo.com)
- Hates pop-up ads, ignores banners



## CD-ROM Gaming

In a recent platform preferences survey, several factors emerged as important to girls in the CD-ROM gaming experience:

- **Laughter:** A universal must for girl games. Girls like sarcasm and have a great appreciation for intelligent, dry wit.
- **New Tech:** CD-ROM girl gamers are into learning about new forms of technology, which might make them see their computer as more "techie" than a console system, which is

generally considered a toy.

- **Competition:** These girls like competing with others, both boys and girls. It seems likely that these girls would enjoy CD-ROM games that synch up to web sites where girls can try to outscore other players and communicate via chat or BBS about tips and the game in general
- **Levels:** CD-ROM girl gamers enjoy mastering successive skill levels. However, mastering levels shouldn't be an all day affair or require extraordinary dedication.

*"CD-ROM games are really great because you can play and the levels keep loading really fast. There usually aren't lines at the top like in some console games like NFL2K and stuff like that. Online games are kinda slow sometimes." Joleen, 15*

- **Fighting:** Most girls aren't into gory, realistic fighting games, but many say they'd enjoy fighting games with cartoon characters. Since "killing" is fairly unavoidable in fighting games, it is preferable to make "death" funny or slapstick.

*"Blood and gore isn't necessarily offensive, it's just not interesting." Holli, 18*

## Console Gaming

Girl Console gamers are a breed apart. That's not to say that they don't enjoy other platforms, but as primarily console gamers, they have some unique characteristics:

- **Mainstream:** As a group, console girl gamers expressed less interest in new technology, and unlike CD-ROM gamers, feeling smart through game skill isn't a priority

*"I like console games cause you can just pop them in and play. You don't have to worry about if you need to download something or not." Kristen, 17*

- **Competition and Winning:** Unlike both CD-ROM and online gamers, console girls place premium on winning by beating others, and express intense and enthusiastic preferences for racing games. They also have very clear ideas regarding the characteristics of a good racing game.

*"It's fun when you're competing in the game." Jen, 13*

- **Racing:** Of the girls on the e-mail panel that responded to a recent survey, more than 10% specifically cited Mario Kart (Nintendo was most-named console system) as a cool racing game. When we asked 3 girls in a recent gaming focus group to describe a real or imaginary game they'd enjoy, all three mentioned "car games."



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### Girl Cannot Live On Fluff Alone: Game Styles Girls Really Want

Games for girls shouldn't necessarily aspire to be the answer to gender inequities in Western society. They should first and foremost be fun. Armed with knowledge of what girls repeatedly say they want out of gaming, developers have the chance to do it right from the beginning and avoid many of the mistakes made (and being made) in "boys" games.

### Racing Games: Girls Are Not Trophies!

In both focus groups and e-mail panel discussions, girls say frequently that they love auto racing games. Mario Kart and Crazy Taxi were mentioned frequently, though Crazy Taxi's TV Ads were criticized for depicting the only female character as a large-breasted "psycho". Unfortunately for game publishers, girls are often turned off from current racing titles due to "trophy syndrome", or the pervasiveness racing games that portray female characters as bikini-clad bimbos who hand out trophies and pose with the winner who is almost certainly male.

Factors girls said would make a cool racing game:

- **Choice of car:** There should be a wide variety of cars to choose from, and if possible, allow girls to customize their car with respect to color, design, interior and mechanics. Both cartoon-ish and realistic cars are popular.

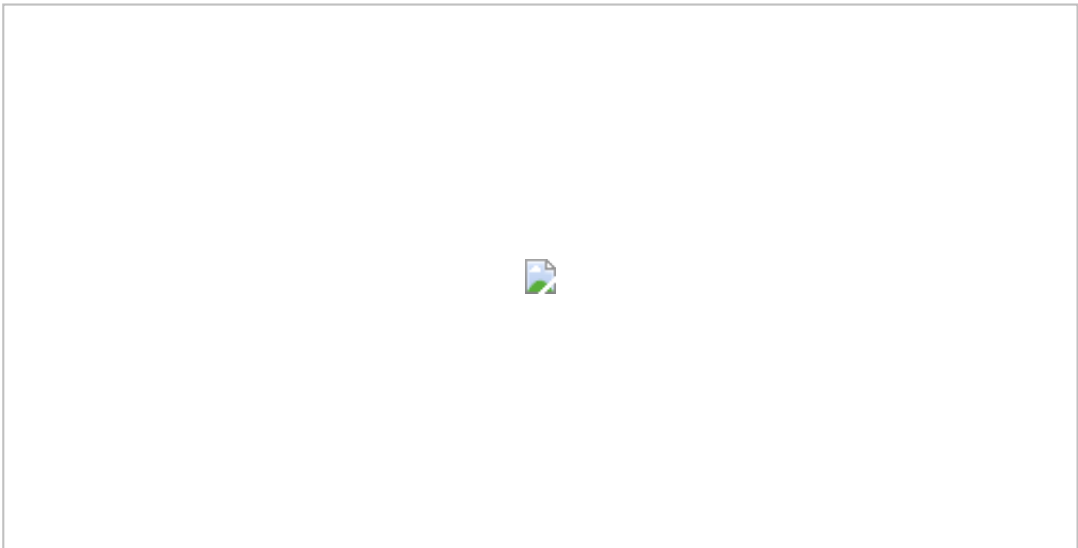
***"Well a girl car is like navy blue, maybe slick. All the cars on a game are boy cars because they are like huge trucks or red with yellow racing strips with a huge muffler and all that stuff...girls wouldn't have that on their cars!" Brielle, 16***

- **Need for Speed:** Many girls said that cars should be able to go super fast.
- **Multi-player:** In all platforms, girls love playing with and against others.
- **Variety of Courses:** Girls want to change the terrain, encounter obstacles and race on courses that

resemble the area in which they live.

Sports Games: Bouncing Balls and Snowfall Rule

In a recent survey, we asked 120 girls what kind of sports game they'd create if they could. The pie chart below summarizes the sports they mentioned.



Ball Sports

- Basketball
- Soccer
- Basketball, Girl's
- Volleyball
- Tennis
- Baseball
- Volleyball, Girl's
- Football
- Softball
- Kickball
- Tennis, Girl's
- T-Ball
- Soccer, Girl's
- Football, Girl's

Winter Sports

- Ice Skating
  - Snowboarding
  - Ice Hockey
- Indoor Sports
- Cheerleading
  - Gymnastics
  - Boxing
- Turf Sports
- Track and Field
  - Horseback Riding
  - Field Hockey
  - Golf

Water Sports

- Surfing
- Swimming
- Water Skiing

Adventure

- Mazes
- Gladiators

"Social" Sports

- Dating
- Flirting
- Fashion
- Shopping

Street Sports

- Skateboarding
- Rollerblading

## Fighting Games: Yep, You Heard Me

Fighting games for girls can sometimes seem like an oxymoron, and while developing them can be a slippery slope, there *is* demand for them, and a game can be successful if it follows some basic girl guidelines.

- **Cartoon Characters:** Realistic blood and gore are not interesting to most girls, especially younger teens. But, any kind of survival involves inherent tension and excitement so develop fighting games for girls with a sense of humor and a grain of salt.

*"Cartoons are just less serious." Allison, 13*

- **Girls Kick Butt:** ...For a change. Several girls on the e-mail panel and girls in focus groups expressed enthusiastically that they wanted to see girl characters beat up guys. The heroine should have a sassy and sarcastic sense of humor. Hair pulling, slapping, martial arts, and boxing were popular fighting styles. Most of the girls we talked to dislike shooting, stabbing, blood, exposed organs or other "over the top" forms of violence.

*"In my opinion, shooting games are SOOO boring!" Becca, 16*

- **Choices:** Just as there are all kinds of real girls, so too should there be all kinds of female avatars in a fighting game. Guys may enjoy pretending to be Rambo, but girls like avatars with whom they can identify. Providing girls with power over hair, skin tone, body shape, fighting style and costume encourages them to feel represented and respects and to be more invested in the game; thereby becoming more avid players.
- **Boobs:** Newsflash! Lara Croft is not a girl-- at least not the kind of girl *other girls* can admire. Ripley from Alien, now there's a girl. Here's another newsflash: most girls do not have, nor could they fight effectively with gigantic, over-inflated and immobile breasts. In focus groups, girls provided a lot of specific characteristics regarding female characters in girl games, not the least of which was the desire to simply see more of them as heroines instead of damsels-in-distress.

*"In Final Fantasy 7 and 8, there are strong female lead characters, not just skimpy-dressed eye-candy!" Anonymous, 17*

## Features of a Good Game: Variety is the Sugar and Spice of Life

- **Online:** On the most-mentioned reasons for playing games online was the wide variety of games available. Girls can go online and choose anything from RPG's to trivia games to card games. The growing popularity of online gaming with girls may support the theory that girls are dissatisfied or simply unaware of games on the market for other platforms. (See "Marketing...").
- **Avatars:** In both focus groups and e-mail panel discussions, girls demanded choices. A common complaint about games that involve avatars was the lack of representative female avatar choices (or female avatars altogether). Most girls said they wanted to see more realistic female body types and



more practical costuming. In racing games girls want more choices of cars, especially in terms of make and model, paint job and mechanics/skills.

- **Environment:** The teens we talked with were very aware of the small details in a game. Details were mostly important to girls in terms of racing games. They listed things like "hot guys in the stands," the ability to race on local routes, and customizable backgrounds. When describing their ideal racing game, girls mentioned "high detail," and "realistic feel". Realistic cars were more popular than cartoon cars.

*"I think the most important thing in dealing with the addition of more girl gamers is simply adding more options. A racing game with only 4 cars is no fun. Neither is a fighting game with only 6 characters," Violet, 17*

### Emotional Payoffs of the Gaming Experience

For boys, extreme fantasies and over-the-top action combined with high-intensity violence and gore make for a great gaming "buzz." Designing a stimulating game for girls is not so simple.

- **Multiplayer:** Since teen girls tend to use the computer and Internet primarily for communication, an important factor for any girl's game is multi-player capability. Girls frequently mention this as a crucial ingredient in any "fun" game, whether online, console or CD-ROM.

*"If you can compete against other people or compare your score it's fun." Nithya, 18*

- **Communication:** Chatting or Instant Messaging for online gaming sites is a must. While girls are indeed competitive, they are not as concerned as boys generally are with boasting about their high scores and "kills." Instead, the ideal multi-player environment for girls would be one involving healthy competition, tip-sharing, and screen-shot "show and tell".

*"A game is fun when you play other people online and you get to meet new people and talk while playing." Caitlyn, 16*

- **Challenging:** Girls are into trivia, quizzes and testing their intellectual skills. At the same time, if a game is too difficult girls will lose interest. Here's how one girl summed it up:

*"It's fun if it's a bit challenging, but not a lot cuz then your brain will go crazy tryin' to think it out and you'll get a big huge headache and that's a drag." Mayumi, 16*

- **Creativity:** When we asked them to tell us about a game they might design for girls, many of the girls we talked to included the ability to build or design certain parts of the game. For example, several girls said they'd like to be able to design and build a custom racetrack in a racing game.

*"A game is fun when you get to make things or be in charge and have to find things." Melanie, 17*

## Visual Payoffs of the Gaming Experience

Girls have a keen eye for details. In gaming discussions, many girls mentioned "good" graphics as an important factor in the games they like. "Bad" graphics were mentioned frequently as a major deal-breaker. More focused research is needed to clearly define "good" and "bad" graphics from the girl's point of view, but there are some general guidelines based on what girls told us about how games should look:

- **Bright Colors:** Girls tend to prefer bright but cool colors like blue, purple, and green. Pink is of course a perennial favorite, but too much pink can make a game seem "young" to older teen girls.
- **Details:** Girls have often mentioned that background details need to be crisp and accurate.

*"Creating games for girls, you usually want to stick to cool stuff like colorful graphics of flowers, rainbows, stars and funky fonts with color and a lot of cool music" Brielle, 16*

- **Representation:** As we mentioned earlier, girls are tired of female video game characters with totally unrealistic body types. Obviously a small element of aspiration is involved, so characters can still be attractive, but most of the girls we talked to wanted a character they could look up to for her physical and mental strength, not her double D cup-size or ability to perform miraculous stunts in thigh-high stiletto boots.

## Developing & Marketing Games for Teen Girls: Not As Pink As You Think

Tip #1 for marketing video games for girls: *start DOING it!* Before game publishers complain any further that girls aren't buying games, they should take a good hard look at the marketing efforts (if any) that have been deployed.

- **Word of Mouth:** Most of the girls we talked to told us they find out about new or good games from friends or others at school. A lot of girls have brothers or boyfriends who are avid gamers, so they are most often exposed to the games favored by male counterparts. In focus groups, girls communicated feelings of annoyance and frustration, saying that they felt ignored by the gaming industry and didn't remember ever seeing a TV ad with girls in it, or a print advertisement for a new game in any of the popular girls' magazines.
- **Print Ads:** We know that 95% of gaming magazine subscribers are male, so print ads for new games that will potentially appeal to teen girls should be placed in magazines that they actually read.
- **Television Ads:** TV ads desperately need to represent girls as gamers. Video game ads that depict only young boys as gamers reinforce the stereotype that gaming is a "boy's" hobby and further alienate teen girls. Showing teen guys and girls playing (competing) side by side at the same game would not only give girls a feeling of inclusion, but also provide reassurance to guys that this particular game isn't too "girly".