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STS 145

Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion

A Investigation in Girl Games

Introduction:

I first encountered Nancy Drew in Third Grade, on the books-for-borrowing shelf stuffed in the back corner of my classroom, next to our cubbies. On the bottom shelf, bound in tattered and faded hardcovers was a complete set of Nancy Drew novels, from book 1 to maybe book 60. With no preconceptions of Nancy Drew, I pulled one title from the shelf, and judging a book by its cover, decided to read it. Mystery of Crocodile Island had a picture of young girl, facing a beady-eyed crocodile with its mouth gaping open – teeth, gums, drool, and everything. I think I read that book in a day, which was quite impressive for my Third Grade reading level. What kept the pages turning was the suspense, intrigue, and action. I wanted to be the eighteen year-old, competent, and attractive Nancy Drew. A decade and a half later, I'm finding myself reviewing Nancy Drew, not the books this time, but the “3D interactive mystery game” as it calls itself on the CD case. Granted, I'm not the wide-eyed eight year-old anymore, can “Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion” live up to that day in Third Grade?

Game Identification:

“Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion” was released as a PC game in November of 2000, designed and developed by Her Interactive and produced by Dream Catcher. “Message” is the fifth game put out by Her Interactive and the third in the company's Nancy Drew series. Founded in 1995, this software design company is one of

few to target girls age ten and up, with the mission statement: “By providing role-playing experiences through computer games and online media, Her Interactive's goal is to open the doors of technology to girls by making computers more appealing.” Based on extensive research, Her Interactive has been developing games that entertain and supply positive role models for girls to follow. With almost all seventy of its advisory board members as teenage girls, Her Interactive is continually testing its products on its target market and learning from their feedback.

Executive producer Megan Gaiser led a team of artists and developers in the creation of this game. The no more than twenty employees at Her Interactive share the common goal of encouraging girls to familiarize themselves with technology. Art Director, Laura Henion, coordinated the artistic creation, with the help of 3D Graphics artists Tim Burke and Bryan Thomas, and 2D graphics artists Laura Henion and Kristi Ulmer. Character animation is by Karen Johnston Productions and music is by Kevin Manthei Productions. Sheri Hargus, Development Manager and Wayne Sikes, Lead Developer led the developing team. The company’s Director of Product Development, Robert Riedl, wrote the Script in conjunction with Cate Riedl.

Story-line:

It is almost impossible to discuss any of the games in the Nancy Drew game series without first discussing Nancy Drew, the inspiration. Perpetually in her teens and twenties in storybook time, Nancy Drew is over seventy years old. Nancy is an adventurous, quick-witted, and attractive girl super-sleuth, solving mysteries and laughing in the face of danger. Edward Stratemeyer’s publishing company, also the creator of “The Hardy Boys” series, first conceived the Nancy Drew series in 1930. The

fate of the series and the way Nancy grew up over the years may largely be due to its early creators. After Edward Stratemeyer's death, his two daughters, Harriet Adams and Edna Stratemeyer, ran the company. Already an anomaly in the male-dominated mid twentieth century, Adams and Stratemeyer employed Mildred Wirt Benson, both an athlete and a journalist, as their first ghostwriter for the series. We may attribute much of Nancy's character's courageous and intelligent portrayal to these early creators. These characteristics of Nancy are what make her an ideal role model for a girl-empowering role-playing action game.

Third in the series of Nancy Drew mystery games, "Message in a Haunted Mansion" places Nancy in an old Victorian mansion in San Francisco. We find out, in an introductory letter read in the voice of Nancy Drew that she was brought there to help with renovations before the mansion opens as a bed-and-breakfast. Nancy has heard that strange accidents have occurred in the house since renovations began, and, egged on by her undying curiosity, confidence, and sense of adventure, it is her mission to find out what is causing these accidents: the spirits in the house, the characters' ties to the history of the house, or plain ugly, human greed. The player is recruited to become Nancy's mind as she unravels the story of the mansion.

This game easily sucks players in for three reasons. First, if anyone ever wanted to be Nancy Drew, this role-playing game allows exactly that. From seeing in first-person perspective, to being able to choose Nancy's dialog with other characters, to navigating with a magnifying glass, the player becomes Nancy Drew. Nancy's confidence and sense of adventure make her a great role to play. Playing the role of

Nancy, a harder puzzle is always less daunting. And when Nancy succeeds, the player also feels successful.

Second, the player is continually driven to hunt for the next clue. She navigates through the house by clicking the mouse pointer, shaped as a magnifying glass, in the desired travel direction. The mouse pointer turns into left or right arrows at the edge of the screen when it is appropriate to shift the view to the left or the right of the screen. A turn-around arrow that appears at the bottom of the screen allows the player to step back or turn around, giving the full sense of freedom of movement and exploration within game environment. The magnifying glass also serves as an environment probe. If there is an object to examine, the magnifying glass is outlined in red upon passing over the area of the room or the item. Clicking on some objects enlarges them for viewing or adds them to a possessions box, their use to be discerned by the player later in the game. In every second that the player is examining the screen, there is a mesmerizing anticipation for the next time the magnifying glass turns red. And the revealed clue, always different from the previous and usually puzzling enough, keeps the player from getting bored of the process by engaging their thinking. Finally, it is the nature of a mystery game, like a mystery novel, to keep players playing. A desire to find out the history of the house and of the other characters keeps me playing, just as it kept me reading.

Technology:

Lead Developer, Wayne Sikes uses Direct3D to develop a full 3D game environment. Graphics are extremely rich and realistic in “Message,” with the 3D rendering giving the player the sense that she is actually standing in the room. Keeping with the theme of rich, oriental decorations in the Victorian mansion, everything from

Persian rugs, to wood engravings, to the floral upholstery on a classic living room sofa, stimulate the visual senses. Although the sense of environment is created with still scenes spliced together in series, rather than smooth animation as Nancy walks around, the detailed graphics make up for the lack of animation. This style of cutting from image to image also fits the style of game play of the game: every inch of each scene must be examined closely, making it unnecessary to animate the changes in Nancy's line of sight as she moves.

Sikes is responsible for developing many of the technologies that make Her Interactive's games possible. He developed the "loss-less, blue-screen video data compression, storage, and playback systems" that probably facilitates the storage of these large graphics. Furthermore, an important component of role-playing games is the possibility for non-linear game navigation. The player can explore all parts of the house in any sequence and interact with different characters in any sequence. Sikes also implemented the game flow system for this non-linear interaction with the game environment.

Game Design Evaluation:

Evaluation of this game must be done on multiple levels from different perspectives. First, replay value: few mysteries are good the second time around. Once played, the game is no longer a test of cognitive skills but becomes a test of memory – "What did I pick up in this room?" Although each character's development in "Mansion" has a delicious tinge of mystery and secrecy, the goal of the game is to undo all these mysteries. Once undone, the characters essentially lose their attraction. However, the game is very engaging the first time around. Since girls are less interested in winning

and more interested in solving the problem, design features like the second option lets the player retry from a safe point in the game after dying. Girls are not interested in testing their skills by being forced to replay the entire game after dying, but more interested in continuing the story. This decreases repetitiveness and increases engagement in the narrative.

Another level of analysis requires asking why this is a good “girl game.” On one side, the content is engaging to girls. In an article written by Joyce Kasman Valenza, a columnist for “tech.life,” Valenza discusses what makes the Barbie interactive CD-ROMs appealing to girls. Though probably the polar opposite of Nancy Drew, there are interesting comparisons between “Message” and the Barbie “pink games.” Both have realized that girls are looking for different things in video games than boys. They seek characters that they can identify with and games that allows them to role-play as people they aspire to be. Girls usually dislike dealing with violence, speed, and competition. Repetition is a particularly big turnoff.ⁱ Nancy Drew fulfills these needs by giving girls an admirable character to role-play: the super-sleuth, Nancy Drew. The game also appeals to girls’ needs to interact with other people.ⁱⁱ Strategically, the game uses character interaction very well in moving along the mystery. While interacting with each character, the player is given a set of responses that Nancy Drew may say, usually questions about the mystery. Inferences must be drawn about the personality and motives of each character, stimulating girls’ curiosity about people and their inquisitiveness. There is also enough variety in the types of hints given, the puzzles to solve and the characters to interact with to make the game anything but repetitive.

On another level, it is important to make sure that the roles girls identify with in video games are not damaging to their self-image. One major drawback with the “Barbie” games is that girls will compare their own bodies with the 36-16-26, disproportionate figure of Barbie. Or they may receive skewed images of the female persona, as in other games with female leads, like Tomb Raider, which portray a sexually objectified view of the female protagonist’s body.ⁱⁱⁱ Nancy Drew is neither Barbie nor Lara Croft. The focus is on her mental capabilities and her crime-solving expertise. There are few pictures of Nancy Drew to relate to in the game but there is plenty of confidence and intellect in her character development.

Summary:

“Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion” has been received very well by audiences in the past year. It was #1 on Amazon’s top sellers list when it was released. Not only has it been approved by the seventy Advisory Board members at Her Interactive but has also been well received in numerous other game reviews online. The public’s warm reception of the game is a good indication that Her Interactive has accomplished its mission. Her Interactive has been the first to develop games for girls that provide a positive female role model to whom girls can relate. Created by one of the first companies to focus on the girl gamer market, the “Nancy Drew” series may finally have perfected what girls want in a video game and what girls need in order to get more comfortable with computers. What sets Her Interactive and “Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion” apart from other “girl games” is the positive psychological effects it also has on girls, aside from just being entertaining.

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱⁱ "Not a Pretty Picture Study: Video Games Show 'Unhealthy' Portrayal of Women"
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Current Research on Children and the Media

Girls and Gaming: Gender and Video Game Marketing

A Report from Children Now
Winter 2000

In July 2000, Children Now's Children & the Media Program hosted a roundtable discussion with new media industry executives, academics, and advocates at Stanford University entitled Supporting Children in the Digital Village. The discussion focused on ways in which the new media industry can maximize opportunities for children in the digital era and ensure that they have access to quality content that promotes their healthy development.

William E. Kennard, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, delivered opening remarks that set the tone for a fruitful and intriguing dialogue. Chairman Kennard emphasized the need to address the "digital divide," the gap between those who have access to the technology and those who do not, while also anticipating what children will find as the gap closes. He stressed the need for industry to develop content and technology that supports all children and youth, taking into

In today's technology-driven world, children and teenagers are more likely than their parents to be in the driver's seat. Children spend one-and-a-half hours a day using new media, whether it is computers for homework and research, the Internet or video games (Kaiser Family Foundation, *Kids & Media @ the New Millennium*, 1999). New media, like traditional media (television, radio, and magazines) has the potential to affect many aspects of children's lives, from their education to their communication with friends to their identity and feelings of self-worth.

During Children Now's recent roundtable discussion, new media industry leaders discussed ways in which gender differences are evident in Children's Internet use and offered suggestions for positive online experiences for girls. While video games represent the oldest form of "new media," unlike the Internet, they have yet to fully engage girls. Boys seem to find what they are looking for as video game consumers. Girls, while avid consumers of other forms of entertainment, do not consume video games like their male counterparts.

This issue of Media Now focuses on gender and video games and the content available to girls in particular. This issue also identifies ways in which the industry can play a role in creating and advertising games that appeal to girls and can contribute not only to their desire for entertainment, but also to their healthy development.

From Pac-Man to Pokemon: Video Game Consumption in the United States

From its humble beginnings in the 1970s, the video game industry has grown into a multi-billion dollar

parents, lawmakers, citizens, business, media and community leaders, creating attention and generating positive change on behalf of children.

With particular concern for those who are poor or at risk, Children Now is committed to improving conditions for all children. Founded in 1988, Children Now is a national organization with special depth in California.

consideration different cultures, backgrounds, gender and abilities. Participants agreed that there has not been enough research on new media to understand its impact on our nation's children. They discussed what quality new media means, particularly in the context of promoting healthy identity formation. They also discussed the kinds of public/private business plans or governmental policies needed to assure the rapid and consistent development of quality new media for children.

For more information about Supporting Children in the Digital Village and Children Now research, please call 510-763-2444 or visit our [web site](#)

commercial giant. In 1999, video and PC game sales in the United States alone amounted to \$6.1 billion (Interactive Digital Software Association, 2000). The gaming industry can now boast that its products are the most popular form of entertainment in U.S. households.

Traditionally, the vast majority of video game consumers have been male. Although boys and girls spend almost the same amount of time using their computers, boys spend an average of 31 minutes a day gaming compared to just 8 minutes for girls (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). Among children ages two to seven, boys are 25 percent more likely than girls to play video games on a regular basis, while male teenagers are 49 percent more likely to play than their female counterparts (Kids & Media, 1999).

Although many girls spend almost two hours a week using their computers, video games are not drawing them.

Sugar and Spice and Not Everything Nice

For boys, it's no longer snips and snails but snipers and starships. The typical video games designed for and marketed to boys are sports or "first person shooter" formats. Typical sports games take a sport such as football or car racing and allow a player to select a team or particular athlete and then use skill and knowledge of the sport to play and win. Shooter games involve one or more characters shooting their way through several stages of a game until they finally eradicate the evil character. Other games popular with boys and teen males involve martial arts or other forms of fighting, and generally end with a character, or group of characters, either incapacitated or dead.

In the world of gaming, girls seem to be forever associated with sugar and spice. Games for girls tend to focus on physical appearance or fashion style. Currently, Barbie® reigns supreme in the realm of video games for girls. Mattel's Barbie® software games were the top-selling games for girls in 1998 and 1999, accounting for a considerable amount of Mattel's \$5.5 billion in net sales (*Mattel 1999 Earnings Report*, www.mattel.com. Last visited 11/29/00). A majority of Mattel's software for girls focuses on traditional forms of play with its Barbie® dolls. For example, girls alter Barbie's® appearance, clothes and accessories.

Studies show that girls receive strong messages emphasizing an unrealistic and unattainable standard of beauty from the images they see in the media. In Children Now's nationwide survey of children, 2 out of 3 girls said they have wanted to look like a character on TV and 1 out of 3 said they had changed something about their appearance to resemble that character (Children Now, 1997). Newer media such as video and CD-ROM games offer opportunities to enhance and broaden the range of characters to which children are exposed.

A slew of video games now star female characters such as Lara Croft of Tomb Raider and Joanna Dark of Perfect Dark that attempt to appeal to teenage girls but fall short because of the violent nature of the games themselves. Even non-violent characters like Ulala, heroine of Space Channel 5, are physically impossible to emulate but are offered up as strong, independent role models. Ulala's strengths are her body and dance moves but her body looks more like Barbie's than that of your average teenage girl.

Marketing Strategies: Don't Always Think Pink

Video game designers and advertisers often take toys or products originally designed for boys and paint them pink in order to market them to girls as well. An early example of this strategy was Pac-Man®. This pioneering video game was as popular 20 years ago as Pokemon® is today. In order to appeal to a female market, designers created Ms. Pac-Man®. She resembled the traditional Pac-Man in every way except she wore a pink bow on top of her head. In other words, producers appealed to girls by making the game's appearance girl-friendly. A more current example is Nintendo's Game Boy®, available in bright pink for girls, which has sold 100 million units worldwide. While these marketing practices have been successful, they do not maximize girls' continued engagement because the games themselves do not include components that appeal to them.

If You Design It Well, They Will Come

There are many ways in which the gaming industry can encourage girls to embrace the world of technology. In fact, many young girls already do. But if young girls are only offered games that focus on their appearance and do not develop their coordination or computer skills, they will be less likely to play video games as they get older. Studies have shown that children's early experience with computers and games informs their use patterns as they get older (AAUW Educational Foundation, Tech-Savvy-Educating Girls in the New Computer Age, 2000).

Some software developers have begun to explore the idea that video games for children should be fun to play and appeal to all children, regardless of gender. A good example of a game that is challenging and entertaining for both girls and boys is Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?®. This game challenges both boys and girls to solve puzzles and use their knowledge of geography. After the initial success of the game, Broderbund released Carmen Sandiego Math Detective® and Word Detective®. The Carmen Sandiego® series has won several awards and has sold over 5 million copies, a popular game with children and parents alike.

Girls Just Wanna Have Options

It's not that girls don't enjoy playing, they just can't seem to find enough games designed with them in mind. Studies show that young women tend to favor games that star engaging characters, involve intricate plots and have a final resolution, as opposed to games where the sole objective is to destroy others (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, Tech-Savvy-Educating Girls in the New Computer Age, 2000; Kafai, 1996). Boys, on the other hand, favor games with repetitive sequences, characters that have varying physical skills as opposed to personalities, and fiercely competitive objectives (Kafai, 1996).

CD-ROM sales indicate that girls prefer games that utilize problem-solving and cooperative play such as *Myst*®, a fantasy-adventure game by Broderbund, or games that involve puzzles or spatial relation such as *Tetris*®. According to one study, when children designed video games, girls preferred non-violent games with positive feedback for players. For example, when a player received an incorrect answer, he or she would have to return to the beginning of the game or would lose their accumulated powers but would receive encouragement to continue (Kafai, 1996). Girls also did not program evil characters nor did they incorporate conquering an evil enemy as the goal of their games. In comparison, most boys in the study designed games that terminated with violence, usually resulting in the death of a player's character (Kafai, 1996).

Recent focus groups conducted with female middle school students produced similar findings. Most of the girls said that the qualities they want in video games include racing, challenge, mystery, adventure and winning cooperatively. They look for games that offer decision-making control and require strategy. Girls also said they would like to see games that appeal to both girls and boys (Software Games for Girls Workshop, focus groups conducted by Electronic Arts and Mattel; www.Castilleja.org. Last visited 10/18/00).

Many young girls use their computers primarily for communicating with friends and gathering information. In gaming, they follow these social patterns as well and are more often able to name characters and describe story lines and character relationships than their male counterparts. They also socialize in between games and are comfortable playing in front of others. When choosing game formats, girls have a greater desire than boys to solve puzzles and use their creative skills through drawing and problem-solving (Swanson, 1995).

With few exceptions, such as the spatial skill game *Tetris*®, games marketed to girls do not actively engage them in developing skills or testing their abilities. Sports video games designed with girls and young women in mind are rare, but the few that exist

reflect the recent rise in popularity of women athletes like soccer player Mia Hamm. This incredibly accomplished athlete collaborated with software designers and producers to create the first ever women's soccer game, Mia Hamm Soccer 64®. But this exception can be expanded to other sports. The most popular video games last year were sports games such as NBA2K®, Madden's NFL 2000®, and Tony Hawk's Pro Skater®, and yet there are no games starring members of the WNBA, or a game featuring popular women in extreme sports.

Girls and Industry Lose When Only Boys Are the Target

Tip #1 in marketing video games for girls: Start **DOING** it!

Before the market and the game publishers complain any further that girls are not buying games, they need to take a good, hard look at the marketing efforts (if any) that have been deployed. It is important to compare these current "efforts" to the amount of marketing that is dedicated to the young male consumer as well as the amount that is spent on other media marketed to young girls. There is no comparison.

Current marketing efforts in the video game business are primarily done through print and TV. This is a problem since 95 percent of gaming magazine subscribers are male, so a girl won't even see an ad that may potentially appeal to her. Most TV advertisements for video games depict only young boys as gamers, which simply reinforces the stereotype that gaming is a boy's hobby and ultimately further alienates young girl players. If a TV spot showed teen boys and girls playing and competing side by side in the same game, we would not only give girls a feeling of inclusion, but also provide reassurance to guys that this game isn't too "girlie."

Most of the girls that we have studied told us they find out about new or good games from friends, brothers and male friends who are avid gamers. The girls indicated they are annoyed and frustrated by being ignored by the gaming industry. They mentioned that they never remember seeing a TV ad with girls in it, or a print ad for a new game in any of the teen girl magazines.

In the early days of 1995, when our company first began developing interactive media, we were still facing a climate of fear of technology by young girls. My how times have changed. As we know, the fear is gone, and the demand for a healthy challenge, a little competition and some high-speed racing are here in full force.

Clearly, if this industry is going to reach any kind of

critical mass, there is a need to produce more games with the content and play patterns that appeal to girls. Once those games have been produced, a company must be committed to reaching out to the girls' consumer market, just as they have successfully done for young boys.

Laura Groppe is the CEO of Girl Games, Inc., a multimedia entertainment company dedicated to providing young women with products and programming that encourage them to explore cutting-edge technology and prepare for the demands of a technologically-advanced future. For more information go to www.girlgames.com.

Positive Solutions

In order to seriously engage girls and young women in this brave new world of interactive technology, producers need to design games that appeal to them and also make a real effort to reach them. Janese Swanson Ed.D and producer of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* offers these guidelines for improving video games for girls:

- Create appealing characters that both genders enjoy.
- Avoid stereotypes and myths about females and males.
- Create products and marketing strategies that feature healthy female role models.
- Have girls test products and offer their opinions on all aspects from color to content.
- Design feedback questions and consider answers with socialized biases (e.g. girls will say any pink product is for girls because that is what they have been taught by society).
- Show girls actively participating in and enjoying the use of technology on advertising and packaging.

Excerpts from *What We Can Do to Get Girls Involved in Technology*, 1995; www.girltech.com.

Examples of Positive Games for Girls

Nancy Drew Stay Tuned for Danger challenges players' problem-solving and analytical skills through participation in a detective story by asking them to find clues and solve puzzles. Publisher: HerInteractive

Judith Love Cohen's *You Can Be A Woman Engineer* encourages girls to learn about NASA and space exploration and gives an easy-to-understand introduction to engineering and technology. Publisher: Cascade Pass Inc.

Mia Hamm Soccer & Mia Hamm Soccer Shootout are the first women's soccer games on the market. These games give soccer fans a chance to enhance hand-eye coordination and their knowledge of the sport and feature a very positive role model for young girls. Publisher: South Peak Interactive

Ecco the Dolphin is a fantasy adventure game that takes places in the ocean and involves animal characters. The game offers players the chance to find "creative, non-violent solutions" to the problems Ecco faces in order to save the world from environmental disaster. Publisher: Sega of America



Rugrats: Time Travelers is a game for the younger set that appeals to both girls and boys. Players have the opportunity to travel through time while learning about different historical periods and places, ranging from the Wild West to prehistoric times. Publisher: THQ

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At Her Interactive, it's all fun and games

Thursday, November 30, 2000

By **RONNIE CROCKER**
SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER

Hannah Overman serves on the board of a local software company that boasts the No. 1 seller on Amazon.com.

She met with top management several times this year, once at the home of the president, to discuss the product then under development. Her opinions are considered vital to the company's continued success.

Hannah is 11 years old.

The Seattle sixth-grader, whose hobbies include swimming and playing soccer, is part of an advisory board to Bellevue-based Her Interactive Inc. The company specializes in role-playing adventure games on CD-ROM for girls 10 and older.

Almost all of the 70 board members, including Hannah's 14-year-old sister, Lauren, are girls from the Seattle area. They are brought together in small groups to play parts of games under development and are studied not only for what they like about specific games, but also for how they use computers in general.

This year, the company of 14 employees wanted to know how the youngsters felt about Message in a Haunted Mansion, its third Nancy Drew mystery based on the popular book series. The game allows players to assume the role of the teenage sleuth and solve a mystery in a Victorian mansion undergoing renovation.

"We showed them the library, and they said, 'You definitely need to hide something behind the bookshelves because there's always something behind the bookshelves,'" said Robert Riedl, director of product development. "So we hid something behind the bookshelves."

The girls' likes and dislikes -- they want a second chance when they've made a game-ending mistake; they are bored by the tedium and violence common to many current games on the market -- are subjects of extreme importance to Riedl, a 32-year-old adventure-games junkie in charge of forecasting "what's going to entertain them" into the year 2010.

Since getting the licensing rights from Simon & Schuster and taking its first Nancy Drew game to market two Christmas seasons ago, Her Interactive has become a major player in the market for role-playing computer games aimed at girls between the ages of 10 and 17.

Yesterday, Amazon.com listed Haunted Mansion as its top-selling software title. Stay Tuned for Danger, which premiered a year ago, was fifth on the list and



Fourteen-year-old Lauren Overman, left, and her sister Hannah, 11, are members of the advisory board of Her Interactive, a company headed by Megan Gaiser, center. P-I Photo



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Secrets Can Kill, the 1998 game, was 73rd. Although Haunted Mansion was only recently released, Amazon editors have ranked it second in their "Best of 2000" list, behind HomeSite 4.5.

The 1999 and 2000 Nancy Drew games also received the Parents' Choice Gold Award, the industry equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

That first release was distributed primarily through specialty catalogs and the company's Web site, herinteractive.com. By 1999, thanks to strong promotion by Amazon.com and other large online retailers, sales increased nearly fourfold, said company President Megan Gaiser.

This year marks the first time that the Nancy Drew games will be available in stores, such as Toys "R" Us, Best Buy and Barnes & Noble, and Gaiser hopes to "duplicate our e-tail success in the bricks-and-mortar channel."

The Interactive Digital Software Association says it expects, following a slowdown in growth this year, that the market for games software will roar ahead again in 2001.

Yet Gaiser, 42, an East Coast transplant who worked 2 1/2 years for Microsoft Corp. before joining Her Interactive as creative director in 1997, said few competitors have entered the market.

"The industry is very risk-averse," she said. "It's a lot like Hollywood. It finds a formula that works and uses it over and over."

Gaiser called this "absurd."

"We're half the population," she said of female software users. "So there's no question in my mind that it's a lucrative opportunity."

Hannah, Lauren and their mom, Debbie Overman, certainly think so.

"There are *so* many games out there for boys," said Hannah.

"They're fabulous," added Debbie Overman, one of the first adults asked to join the ranks of Her Interactive advisers. "They're so much fun. I want them to make another one because I've already solved the first three."

Among the few companies that are vying for these young players is Mattel Media, whose Barbie Riding Club and Detective Barbie 2: Vacation Mystery are both big sellers. Other interactive games targeted for girls feature celebrities such as skater Michelle Kwan and soccer champion Mia Hamm. The No. 2 seller on Amazon.com yesterday was Clifford The Big Red Dog Thinking Adventures.

Her Interactive is the repackaged version of a company called American Laser Games, which was founded in 1989 in Albuquerque, N.M., as a maker of shooting games for boys. The company changed its name, and its mission, in 1995 and moved to Bellevue.

Reidl is one of the employees who made the trip. Her Interactive's first game for girls was McKenzie & Co., which catered to preteens' fascination with high school but drew complaints from feminists and in the press for its sections on shopping, makeup and dates. The next offering, The Vampire Diaries, marked the company's entry into the role-playing adventure market.

Then, in 1997, the company signed the deal with Simon & Schuster to develop the Nancy Drew series, capitalizing on the title's decades-long popularity. The games feature state-of-the-art 3-D imaging, original music compositions and richly detailed "rooms" for the players to explore.

Haunted Mansion, for example, features carpeting, painting and other decorations

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authentic for the Victorian era.

Gaiser said the games encourage critical thinking skills helpful to any child.

"The books, every girl read years ago," said Gaiser. "We hope this does the same thing, encouraging girls and women to enjoy the computer."

Because Her Interactive is privately held, Gaiser would not discuss specific sales figures or forecasts. But she exudes the confidence of a high-tech manager who has experienced long-term success.

The company may expand to as many as 20 employees in 2001. Plans call for two more games next year, and Gaiser said the firm is considering whether to expand into so-called console games, which, like Nintendo, link hand-held consoles to television sets. Her Interactive may eventually move into the online game market as well.

Gaiser attributed much of the company's current success to its ability to not focus on those potential growth areas until it had established itself in CD-ROM.

Reidl, a psychology major who spent a year studying in France, and Gaiser, who edited and produced documentaries in Washington, D.C., before going into multimedia, are savvy business people. But even when they talk shop, they can sound like crusaders for young girls.

Gaiser said the company is working to dispel the myth that girls are "computer-phobic" and offer the kinds of entertainment they want.

"Some like fashion. Some like adventure. Some like shoot-'em-ups," she said.

"There should be as many games for girls as there are (types of) girls."

Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion sells for \$29.99. It is rated E, for "everyone," by the Entertainment Software Rating Board and is recommended for girls 10 and older.

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Nineteen million girls between the ages of eight and eighteen spend \$57 billion of their own money each year in the United States. ¹ Despite this figure, the \$6.3 billion U.S. video game industry ² has been slow to develop a wide range of products that reflect girls' interests. This may be due to misconceptions that girls are not interested in video and computer games. ³ However, Mattel's success with Barbie computer software proves that there is a market for products aimed at girls. In fact, the girls' game market generated \$64 million in 1997. ⁴

Video and computer games have long been designed and marketed primarily to male consumers, who make up about 89% of the console market and 94% of the gaming magazine market. ⁵ This is evidenced in widespread aggressive and violent themes, which reflect boys' traditionally aggressive play. ⁶ One study found that 40 of the 47 top video games from Nintendo were violent. ⁷ Another study revealed that 92% of arcade games had no female roles, and of the 8% that did, 6% were "damsels in distress" and only 2% had active (rather than passive) roles. ⁸ Video game advertising has also lacked female representation; game packaging usually pictures boys, not girls. Even parents purchase video games twice as much for their sons as they do for their daughters. ⁹

However, research shows that girls are also interested in playing video games. According to a recent study, women make up 43% of PC players and 35% of console gamers. ¹⁰ Another study revealed that 74% of girls using computers spend time playing games online. ²² Though software developers are finally recognizing the multibillion-dollar industry for girls, ¹² they are slow in developing a variety of girl-specific games. ¹³

Although, games such as *Barbie Fashion Designer*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Little Mermaid* have opened doors to a girls' market, these games have not yet broadened the overall scope of video games designed for girls. Some girls regard many of these video games as too "girly-girl;" ¹⁴ the computer game industry calls them "pink" games. ¹⁵

In order to even out the gender gap, and to ensure that girls will not be at a disadvantage in their future, studies have been conducted to examine what girls' interests are and how to encourage them toward technology. Studies show that some girls view video game violence as boring, irrelevant, and unrealistic. ¹⁶ One study revealed that girls do not necessarily dislike the violence, but the repetition of the games. ¹⁷ Another study found that girls were not interested in video games because

they felt the games lacked complexity in plot and character, and thus they did not feel motivated to master the skills of the game. ¹⁸ Also, studies have found that girls dislike fast-paced activity, ¹⁹ rigidity and the lack of options in survival games. ²⁰ Finally, one study revealed that girls were not interested in being "winners" or "losers," ²¹ and they did not care about high scores. ²²

Research has revealed that girls want to identify with characters or play the role of the main character. ²³ They are interested in "open-ended" explorations with flexible environments ²⁴ and varied outcomes. ²⁵ Realistic themes (as opposed to fantasy, which boys tend to prefer) also interest girls because they provide characters and situations with which girls can readily identify. ²⁶ Girls demonstrate interest in the relational, social, and familiar, as well as non-aggressive activities. ²⁷ Secrets, ²⁸ appearances, siblings and loss are also topics of interest. ²⁹ Girls are reported to be interested in attaining a goal and reaching a destination, ³⁰ and they prefer cooperation over competition. ³¹ Girls enjoy games involving role-playing, adventure, drawing, creative writing, and problem-solving. ³² Finally, girls like games with quality graphic images and sounds or music. ³³

With the popularity of *Barbie Fashion Designer* and its clones, some experts are worried that video games will reinforce gender stereotypes. In attempts to even out the playing field some companies are marketing traditional computer games genres (i.e. violent games) to females, instead of creating female specific games. Games such as *Quake*, a shoot-'em up game, and *Tomb Raider*, an adventure game, are now being marketed to girls. *Tomb Raider*, which features Laura Croft, a strong female, has been particularly successful, attributing 30% of its sales to women. Games like *Tomb Raider* have indeed increased the representation of female video game characters, whereas in 1992 only eight of 100 games contained women. ³⁴ However, critics charge that these video games still do not reflect the interests of girls.

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Software-makers tread genderly into realm of girls' play

Can you tailor computer games without reinforcing stereotypes? Many kinds of pink and purple boxes accept the challenge.

tech.k12 / [Joyce Kasman Valenza](#)

My own children ignored my encouragement of gender-neutral play. For Matt, deprived of toy guns, a rectangular brick or a well-aimed finger would do just fine to take care of invisible bad guys. For Emily, who preferred her crayons and a sketch pad to any toy we bought, my clothes and makeup provided hours of fun. They still do. She never asked for a quarter for an arcade game. And she never went "bang bang."

Girls do want to have fun. They play games traditionally enjoyed by both genders. They play games traditionally associated with boys. But very often, girls want to play like girls. Like traditional girls, they want to dress up and apply makeup. They want to nurture. They want to create. They want to share their deepest secrets with their very best friends.

This year, the software market has finally acknowledged that there are differences in the way girls and boys play, and that gender-specific play has a feminine side, too. And it has responded big-time. A wide assortment of pink and purple boxes now lines store shelves.

The manufacturers with whom I spoke told me they were trying to make computers a friendly place for girls by providing products that address their interests without exploiting and reinforcing stereotypes. That is a major philosophical shift. For years, the software industry was a "young boys' " club; men developed software along the lines of male interests. There were few strong, young female characters in the computer games of the recent past. And often they were there just to be rescued.

Now, software manufacturers have begun to recognize the multibillion-dollar market they had been ignoring for years. They are seriously studying girls and their play and are incorporating their findings into new products.

"It's about time," says Karen Gould, public relations manager at Purple Moon,

<http://www.purple>

moon.com Purple Moon is owned by Interval Research Corp., a research enterprise financed by Microsoft's Paul Allen. The company began to look at the intersection of consumer technology and popular culture in 1992. "Our research revealed that girls' computer usages was falling off around sixth grade. Boys had action games to keep them interested. For girls, there was a void in entertainment products. We asked ourselves what would it take to create an entertainment experience so engaging that girls would be compelled to try it. We checked agendas at the door in our effort to understand who they were, not who we hoped they would be."

Purple Moon conducted research. It reviewed the literature on gender and play. It interviewed experts and studied 1,100 children around the country to find out what they really wanted out of software. Its conclusion? "Girls find violence boring," says Gould. "The typical game doesn't offer the complexity that girls are seeking. Girls find dying and starting over, mastery for its own sake, pointless. They do not care about playing just to get a high score. For girls, speed and action and winning are not completely engaging. What girls love are characters they can relate to and topics relevant to their lives. They prefer relationships and friendships as central themes. Their interests are aspirational. They want to explore what they will be like when they are older."

Purple Moon's research led it to the development of two new friendship/adventure games: Rockett's New School and Secret Paths in the Forest.

Mattel has also spent years conducting research. Its line of Barbie electronic products, <http://www>.

[mattelmedia.com/barbie/](http://www.mattelmedia.com/barbie/), is growing in popularity. "The new games are different," says Pamela Kelly, vice president of worldwide marketing for Mattel. "Barbie allows girls to play out their fantasies: to be a mom, a roofer, an astronaut or a teacher. You don't lose; you always get a second chance; you make things; you solve real problems; no guts are spilled. These products are not about fighting and racing and beating the master."

Have we really come a long way? I am not so sure. I know I share my own Barbie angst with many baby-boom parents. For years, I found her tiny, perfect body, her Corvette and her dream house troubling. Should we carry this angst online? Should our efforts to entice our daughters to use technology also focus on female stereotypes -- on surface, unachievable beauty; the importance of dating; and acquiring material goods? Sure, Barbie has evolved with us over the years. But even with her many career options, she is still too thin to be real.

Researchers are already studying the electronic impact of Barbie. Kaveri Subrahmanyam, assistant professor of child and family studies at California State University at Los Angeles and her colleague, psychology professor Patricia Greenfield of the University of California at Los Angeles, have focused a recent study on Barbie Fashion Designer. Introduced in November 1996, the product is

considered a software phenomenon, selling more than 500,000 copies in its first two months on the shelves. The professors discuss the reasons for the game's success in "Computer Games for Girls: What Makes Them Play?," a chapter in a forthcoming book for MIT Press, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games*.

Why Barbie Fashion Designer? In this product, "the computer takes on the role of a tool -- and unlike other games -- ceases to be an end unto itself. Our analysis suggests that the Barbie Fashion Designer appealed to girls because it aided and abetted the role play that they habitually engage in."

The researchers also noted that the game "incorporated many of the game features that girls find appealing in games and lacks features that they dislike. First, the game clearly lacks aggressive content, which turns girls off. On the plus side, by helping girls create outfits for Barbie, the computer assumes the role of another accessory in girls' pretend play, which tends to be based on real-life models and roles, and is usually more person-oriented. Here creation is in the service of nurturance, a popular play theme for young girls."

Subrahmanyam and Greenfield advise that "there is more to designing games for girls than merely having females as the lead characters. Barbie Fashion Designer goes one step further. The preference for playing oneself is actualized in the Fashion Designer program, where the main active character is you the player, the clothes designer. This appears to be exactly what girls' like in games -- to identify with, or better still, to be the main character of the game."

And what of the stereotyping? Subrahmanyam and Greenfield remind us that the stereotyping goes both ways. "It does seem surprising that a product line regarded suspiciously by feminists and others should become so influential in providing computer literacy experiences for girls, an area where girls have been at a comparative disadvantage. But then boys' computer literacy has been built on a bedrock of games that perpetuate male gender stereotypes of violence and aggression. If a value judgment is to be made, the female stereotypes of which Barbie Fashion Designer is constructed seem quite prosocial. The main danger is one of body image: girls growing up with the impossible or unhealthy ideal of the Barbie body, with its wasp waist and disproportionately large hips."

A less-shapely Barbie is on the way, but for parents the decision is still tough. To what extent do we want to encourage very feminine play? Is any product that encourages girls to use technology a good thing? Is it patronizing? Are games that encourage a focus on beauty and dating any better than arcade shoot-'em-ups? And what of software products that heavily promote a line of tie-ins? Your decisions will depend upon a combination of your politics and your own daughter's interests. While some girls would gag at the most feminine of the games, others would die for them. You know your girls! Remember, you do have the option of sticking with Monopoly, Print Shop and Myst.

Recently, an informal coalition of leading girls' software publishers collaborated to

create a one-stop resource for parents who want to buy software for their daughters. The site, <http://www.just4girls.com>, features information about 19 CD-ROMs designed for girls with links to publishers' home pages.

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