

Shoot the Moon: Purple Moon and its Influence on Girl Games

Since the dawn of computer games, companies have thrived on selling their products to a male audience. Brenda Laurel, however, had a different idea. In the late 1990s, she founded the software company Purple Moon, trying to etch out a place in the lonely market space of girl gaming. Its product lines were related to its star character Rockett Movado and spanned virtual and physical mediums. Catching the attention of the mass media, Purple Moon was lauded for getting girls interested in computers and technology at an age where the drop-off was steep. Despite a rather large fan base, the company eventually faced business and cultural problems, including competition from Mattel's extremely popular Barbie software. Although Purple Moon tried to revolutionize computer games by creating software targeted specifically toward girls, its greatest contribution to the gaming industry was stimulating discussion on what the solution to the gender imbalance *really* is.

Historically, computer games have had "male" content (action, violence, competition) and girls have had...Barbie. Editor, director, and product manager Ben Calica points out, "There's been a catch-22 for a long time. Most of the people who play games are boys, so most of the games are made for and by boys." For a long time, developers tried to make computer games appealing to girls by adding "cute graphics" but still failed to capture their interest; "Barbie with a cute gun did not exactly blow off the shelves with the original Atari systems back in '78" (Calica). Because games were made for boys and getting their attention, boys would be

more likely to want to make these games in the future and, in turn, would most likely make them for boys because that's what they knew the most about. This chicken-and-egg problem made it difficult for business in girl gaming to even get a good start. Marketing would show that for computer games, girls weren't a "viable segment" (Laurel 22). Such data would seemingly further discourage anyone from even attempting to transform the industry from its current state of neglecting half the human population.

On the contrary, these statistics prompted Laurel to conduct further research on the disproportionate ratio of boy to girl gamers and led to the founding of Purple Moon. Laurel had worked for twenty years at prominent software and game companies Atari, Epyx, and Activision and is considered by some as an "interface design pioneer" (Plotnikoff, Brown). Girls' games at the time were not very inventive. Her favorite example was "*Barbie*, published in 1985 by Epyx for the Commodore-64...It was decided that the action component of the game would consist of throwing marshmallows" (see Appendix, Figure 1) (Laurel). With such a stereotypical notion of what girls wanted in a game, it is easy to see why Laurel would feel so passionately about finding out how to make games that they would like. She had undoubtedly seen throughout her career the same components of fighting and explosions from game to game to game. In 1992, Laurel was hired by Interval Research Group to study girls and their interactions with technology, where "the underlying conviction was that it would benefit girls enormously to achieve familiarity and ease with technology, and I suspected that the most effective way to make girls comfortable with computers was through play" (Laurel). Later on, Interval would serve as Purple Moon's main investor. CEO David Liddle acted as its chairman and in September of 1996, Nancy Deyo became Purple Moon's Vice President of Design and business planner.

Located in Silicon Valley, Purple Moon was formed on the basis of using research to help shape every aspect of its products intended for girls. Beginning in January of 1993, extensive research was done on the way girls played. The company “pried into gaming myths: Girls don't like violence (truth: Girls just are bored by die-and-start-over, beat-the-game challenges products); girls aren't competitive (truth: Girls compete, but often in subtle and indirect ways)” (Weil). By spending several years and millions of dollars to focus on girls and technology, Laurel separated Purple Moon from other companies that made games for girls such as Mattel and Her Interactive. According to Laurel and Deyo, Purple moon is about “‘being a girls’ company, not a software company.’ But they’re equally earnest about making what they both call ‘an intervention in popular culture’...the real game appears to be keeping young girls from turning their backs on computers” (Plotnikoff). Considering how unexplored the market for girls’ games had been, Purple Moon could have easily made their primary goal to produce girls’ games for profit. Instead, Laurel and the rest of her company wanted to make games that wouldn’t bore girls but still had an element of competition.

The real celebrity of Purple Moon came to be character Rockett Movado and her eighth-grader friends. They made appearances in software, web site, and merchandise form. The first two mediums were most heavily promoted by the company. First released was *Rockett’s New School* (see Appendix, Figure 2). The player can pick different attitudes and actions for Rockett as she makes it through the school day, where “generally, the act confident and nice choice seems to work best” (Huang). For example, girls can see what happens to Rockett if she is nice or mean in different situations. Purple Moon “wanted to give girls the opportunity to have an emotional rehearsal space where [girls] could try out stuff they might not be able to try out in their real lives” (Plotnikoff). The affiliated web site let girls learn more about the characters and

trade “treasures” (trinkets associated with the game). One month after its launch, the web site had 2.3 million hits from 78,000 visitors (Plotnikoff). Observed Deyo about the overwhelming enthusiasm Rockett was receiving, “[eight-to-12-year-old girls] love that ubiquitousness, that feeling of, oh my God, this character's everywhere!...And that pervasiveness, we believe, will help us deliver on a suite of experiences that is just really really relevant and meaningful to them” (Weil). Young girls were getting immersed in Rockett’s story, which is exactly what they (and Purple Moon) wanted. Reviewers were seeing the game as a means of empowerment for young girls. While girls were learning that being sure of themselves had its rewards, they were also getting accustomed to using computers and the Internet, perhaps paving the path to tinkering with other technologies.

Not only was Purple Moon changing the gaming industry by introducing games made by and for girls, it was also changing gaming culture. Games now had educational as well as entertainment values. Calica notes, “sure games for girls is a huge amount of money that’s not going into the software business, but despite what the censorship freaks may say, games are very important for kids in terms of creating the smooth bridge that brings them into feeling comfortable with computers and technology...” Purple Moon was attracting a preteen fan base, precisely the age where girls begin to lost interest in the sciences and math. By excluding girls from being able to getting interested and staying interested in computer games, the gaming industry was also shutting the door on keeping girls interested in technology. Other companies had weakly attempted to keep the door open and failed, but ““now there’s at least a possibility [distributors will] give this stuff a chance,” says [financial analyst Jim] Cooper. ‘And with the retailers, there could be a dawning realization that a pink shelf in the corner in between the shoot-’em-up games won’t work’” (Plotnikoff). Girls were finally getting the attention they had

long been deprived of in relation to computer games. Purple Moon had set out to equalize the disparity in gamer genders and had now set the wheels in motion.

Unfortunately, in the business world, good intentions don't guarantee success. Business problems started to get in the way of Purple Moon's agenda to encourage girl gamers and played a part in the company's eventual demise. Justine Cassell, MIT Media Lab professor and editor of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* commented, "the whole girl games movement came from an unstable alliance between people out to make money, and therefore subject to market pressure, and people out to do good for girls and technology" (Brown). Formally, the company cited increased consolidation in the now \$85 million girls' software market as its reason for shutting down (Lynch). Quite a large and dedicated fan base had accumulated, but newcomer Purple Moon couldn't cut it with a limited product line against the already established Mattel and its perennially supported Barbie merchandise. Additionally, Purple Moon was suffering internally as politics got in the way of productivity. "In our research about girls, we explored the social complexities of girlhood and the recurring themes of affiliation, exclusion, secrets, and self-esteem...In a remarkable case of recursion, these themes showed up again and again in the social dynamics of the companies involved, as well as in the feminist response to our work," reflects Laurel. Ironically, the interactions Purple Moon found to be desirable by young girls contributed to its downfall.

Purple Moon's fate was sealed when it was then bought out by nemesis Mattel in mid-February of 1999.

Barbie had proven to be strong competition against Rockett and that its lightweight software could win over girl gamers. What used to be the hyperlink to Purple Moon's heavily visited Web site, <http://www.purple-moon.com>, now takes the user to a sister site of barbie.com

(Lowood). Although Purple Moon had caught the attention of the media and young girls worldwide, selling 175,000 units worth \$4.7 million within a year, Mattel's Barbie software still held 63% of the market for girls' games (Purple Moon, Brown). In 1996, Mattel released *Barbie Fashion Designer*. While *Rockett's New School* was a role playing narrative, *Barbie* was more of an artist's tool. Users could design clothes for their Barbie dolls and print out the patterns on fabric. Not much of a game, but still more popular with young girls than *Rockett* had turned out to be. At the 1998 Computer Games Developers' Conference (CGDC), games for girls were heatedly debated to the extent of almost inciting a riot. Amongst the adult women, not only was Barbie looked down upon but so "was Rockett, the popular character from Purple Moon. Most of the women felt that 'pink' packaging (packaging designed to appeal to women) was very demoralizing, and they wouldn't be caught dead buying it. The men however, pointed out *Barbie's Fashion Designer* has sold a tremendous number of units, so someone must be buying it" (Farmer). What was this saying about what girls (and women) really wanted if they didn't even like a game that had been made especially for them by the people who were against the Barbie alternative?

Comments made at the CGDC as well as Purple Moon's acquirement by Mattel suggest that there were flaws with the design of the *Rockett* series and incorrect assumptions made about girl gamers. It was agreed at the conference that girl games for young females would help them become comfortable with computers (Farmer). However, making *Rockett's New School* so centered around pre-adolescent and adolescent girls may have actually hurt Purple Moon. An educational study at Stanford University concluded that "*Rockett's New School* will probably make Purple Moon a lot of money, not because it has suddenly sparked girls' interest in computers—but because it capitalizes on girls' fears about middle school and adolescence"

(Huang). The study claims that “Purple Moon does not only perpetuate the stereotype that girls are only interested in boys, clothes, and being popular, but also perpetuates other stereotypes such as the snobby popular blond girl and the smart Asian with glasses” (Huang). Countless other reviews have criticized the series for teaching girls to care too much what others think and its emphasis on popularity and materialism. It might be true that a majority of girls have such a mentality, but trying to pigeonhole girls can be disastrous in the eyes of adults who don’t want to see their daughters and nieces growing up this way. At the same time, notes Cassell, “parents are so aware in 1999 of the fact that what used to be called the games market is actually the boys’ games market. Neither girls nor their parents are going to put up with boys’ games in pink boxes” (Brown). Purple Moon recognized the longtime separation of girls and computer games as an abundance of poor attempts to make good games for girls. Unfortunately, their noble movement for reparations was met with backlash for being “too girly.”

The notion of what a game for girls would be like is blurry, but at least Purple Moon got people to start squinting their eyes. Author and gender expert Kate Bornstein argues that “It’s a double-edged sword... It’s good that we’re looking for something beyond blood-and-guts. But who’s judging what the girls want, and why do we have to label that specifically ‘girl’?” (Girl Gamers). Purple Moon misjudged what the girls wanted in the late 1990’s. Since then, the computer game industry has been changing and “the market for girls’ games has grown. Other companies are following in [Mattel and Purple Moon’s] footsteps, and women have begun flocking to game Web sites that offer ‘family games’ such as Uproar.com’s *Family Feud*” (Takahashi 34). Even with younger generations, “gaming is also becoming a steadily less male-dominated world. ‘Heavy gamers’ are more likely to be male, but among preteens, nearly as many girls as boys own and play video games—even the more violent games” (Jones 172).

Even though Laurel was unsuccessful in keeping Purple Moon alive, its spirit continues to inspire others to get girls interested in gaming. Today, surveys have shown that lots of women are playing computer games. While it is not necessarily Purple Moon per se that got girls into games, it certainly influenced other companies to take into consideration their female audience and taught girls that technology isn't just for the boys.

Other options for female game players are the subversion of "male" games or the creation of gender-neutral ones. Looking at girls' games more in general, attendees of the 1998 CDGC thought that "'girl games' and 'games for girls' were condescending and women didn't need special games just for them," one woman saying that they lent a feeling of inadequacy, "as if she somehow couldn't enjoy a game that was a 'man's' game and needed to have one designed just for her gender" (Farmer). The women at the CDGC clearly did not want companies trying to cater to what they thought women needed. Contrary to what some people have thought, there are plenty of "women who play to silence the trash-talking males in games like *Quake*" (Takahashi 34). That is, there are now female game players happy to play with (and against) their male counterparts. Web sites such as <http://www.grrlgamer.com> and <http://www.ladygamers.com> are forums for the women gamers community (see Appendix, figure 3). Mods and patches have been made by women to make existing games a little more female-friendly; for example, there are female skins for the characters in *Quake* (Lowood). Another alternative is to bring more gender-neutral games into the market. Cindy Hardgrave, executive producer of family/girl products at SegaSoft, agrees "that gender-neutral games are the way to go...That's the only way you're going to make money on a female audience. There's a huge problem with distribution, and if boys are buying, why would you want to leave them out?" (Girl Gamers). As evidenced by the waxing and waning of Purple Moon, neither having solely conventionally "male" games

nor introducing heavily female-centric games has satisfied the public. Gender-blind games like *Myst* or *The Sims* have been hugely successful, attracting a following consisting of both males and females. It would be to the advantage of both publishers and gamers to have more of these kind of games developed.

The future of girl gaming is uncertain, whether there will be a re-emergence of games targeted towards females or a flourishing of gender-neutral games. Nevertheless, Purple Moon helped bring forth these gender issues in the computer gaming industry. Brenda Laurel once had a vision of creating a company that would change the world. In some ways, it has. The time and effort that went into research for Purple Moon and its *Rockett* series was not wasted. Young girls now know that there's more to software than just Barbie, and the public is well aware that females are feeling short-changed. And some day, all this talk about how to get girls interested in computer games will just be history.

Appendix

Figure 1: *The Past*—Barbie makes an appearance in Epyx's spring 1985 catalog (Feldman).

ACTIVITY TOYS

NEW!

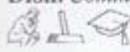


DESIGNER CLOSET

BARBIE™

Browse through *Barbie's* closet full of beautiful clothing and dress her for a party. You can cut her hair or make it longer, color it or change the style. Buy new clothing at the Boutique, or any of the four other specialty shops, or even go to the dress shop and create *Barbie's* own designer clothes. With the help of the computer, the combinations are endless, and so is the fun!

Joystick Controlled
One Player
Disk: Commodore 64



NEW!

 DUKE	 SCARLETT	 RECONDO	 TORPEDO
 SNAKE EYES	 ROADBLOCK	 SPIRIT	 ZAP
 GUNG HO	 SNOW JOB	 BLOWTORCH	 STALKER

G.I. JOE®

Start your mission by checking the computerized World Hot-Spot Map for areas of *COBRA* activity. Pick the area that needs your help, and then select any one of the 16 *G.I. Joes* who is best suited for the mission. Play alone or with a friend; if you plan the right strategy you'll complete the mission. If not... you'll have to try again.

Joystick Controlled
One or Two Players
Disk: Commodore 64



NEW!



HOT WHEELS™

Now all the action and fun of playing with *Hot Wheels* cars is taken one step farther on the home computer. *Hot Wheels* lets you choose your play activity, from repairing cars to a destruction derby and then actually perform the activities alone or with a partner on the computer screen. You can even build and customize your own cars. A whole new way to "Play with Hot Wheels."

Figure 2: *The “Present”*—Purple Moon’s *Rockett’s New School* computer game packaging and characters from the game (Epinions.com, Huang).

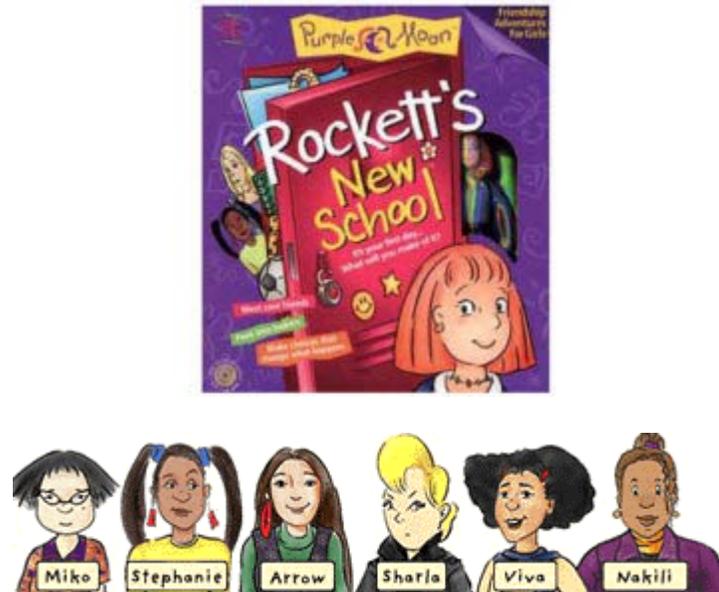


Figure 3: *The Future?*—LadyGamers.com’s mission and home page character contrast greatly with Purple Moon’s goal and eighth grader Rockett Movado (LadyGamers.com).



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