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Games Women Play: Some Alternative Approaches

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It turns out that a feminist design perspective may be more than just political activism or social altruism. It may be pragmatic as hell.

It's always fun to dust off an old conundrum. Amanda Goodenough's article in last month's Journal brought the issues of women as a potential market for computer games to our attention again. It's a question that most of us have given up as unanswerable, or at least too complicated to debate. But with the decline in sales to our bread-and-butter segment of fourteen-year-old boys (give or take a month), it's a question that we should all be revisiting. I'd like to summarize some of the possible answers.

When I was managing the software marketing group for the Atari Home Computer back in 1981-2, the president of the division got the idea that we should design some games "just for the gals". Clyde Grossman (now at Epyx) and I came up with a list of titles, including Appliance Command, The Atari Home Pelvic Exam, Cyber-Pope (a rhythm-method spreadsheet), and of course, the Atari Stretch Mark Editor™. For those of you who are breathless with contempt, let me hasten to add that this list was to function as a rhetorical device. In those idealistic days, we felt quite strongly that a line of "women's products" would probably end up reinforcing the worst of gender stereotypes, just as the products pointed at the teen male market did (and do). We were more interested in answering the question, what kinds of games would appeal to humans of all flavors?—with the hidden agenda of doing a little positive cultural engineering as well.

We're more pragmatic now, I suppose. But as I hope to demonstrate later in this article, cultural engineering can be a very sensible thing to do when you're trying to grow a new market.

In an article entitled "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" in Adweek's Marketing Computers Magazine (Vol. IX, No. 6, June 1989), author Patty Cignarella interviewed a variety of folks and presented some new data on the subject. In a survey of 170 women at Northwestern University, the vast majority said that they would play computer games—if games existed which interested them. The number one category on the women's wish list was simulations of social situations. Sports came in second, but sports in which women more typically participate—volleyball, scuba diving, crew, bike racing, and tennis. "The big losers," says Cignarella, were "pilot simulations, space battles and exercise games." So much for the Stretch Mark Editor.

To some folks, these data probably came as a surprise. Bruce Davis (CEO of Mediagenic), for instance, was quoted as saying that women are probably not a viable market for either computer or video games due to "profound" differences in the sexes. (I would personally like to mud-wrestle with Bruce; a game that let me do it would be at the top of my Christmas list.) For others, it's not new news. Roberta Williams, extensively interviewed in the article, believes that women are attracted to story-telling games that allow interaction with complex, lifelike characters. Her approach seems to be paying off: Sierra On-Line's King's Quest IV, for instance, has achieved 35-40% sales to women.

So that's the first approach—ask women what they like and try to build it. Amanda takes a similar approach in identifying themes that would be attractive to women and then incorporating them into

the plots of games. The caveat here is that bad hypotheses can lead to disaster. Infocom's assumption that women would thrill to harlequin romances, for instance, led to Plundered Hearts, a game that did not do well in the marketplace. But as EA's Bing Gordon observed in Cignarella's article, "Most women who use computers are not the type of women who read romance novels.... If they even have time for reading fiction, they don't read cheap novels off the drug store rack."

A second approach, also championed by Roberta, is one that takes a fresh approach to gender—by offering a female protagonist in a traditional adventure context (as in The Perils of Rosella). Certainly, this technique can produce some winning combinations. But it doesn't address the fundamental issues of content and context—issues that have deeper implications than the gender of one character.

Joyce Hakansson, long-time designer of interactive products for children and founder of the software operation at Children's Television Workshop, has been observing kids using computers for about fifteen years. She notices that girls and boys are equally interested in and adept with the technology until pre-adolescence, when the participation of girls goes into a dramatic decline. She attributes this phenomenon to two interrelated variables: game content (subject matter) and cultural roles.

The content of mainstream computer games stresses combat, competition, and sports—themes drawn directly from the male cultural domain. Boys will be motivated by the appeal of that content to master the computer skills necessary to play the game. Girls lack such motivation—the content of most games isn't attractive enough to pull them through the knot-hole of heinous user interfaces. Girls' difficulties are compounded by cultural stereotypes—delivered by film, television, Barbie dolls, and other aspects of popular culture—which suggest that "real" women don't play with machines, don't do math, and don't slash up monsters with a broadsword. Thus girls are doubly discouraged, not only from buying mainstream computer games, but from becoming even potential consumers of computer products at all.

So it turns out that cultural engineering may not be just political activism or social altruism. It may be pragmatic as hell. By offering games with themes and activities that change girls' notions of themselves in relation to the technology, we may be doing ourselves a very tangible favor.

Which leads me to the third approach—taking a feminist perspective. Amanda observed in her article that women traditionally define themselves in terms of men and their relationships to them. This cultural stereotype has robbed us of many things. It precludes, for instance, the kind of idyllic "best friend of the same sex" that the male myth allows, because other women (and girls) are first and foremost our competitors in the search for Mr. Right. It precludes us from climbing trees and commanding starships. It makes us giggly and helpless when confronted with a computer. But most of all, it robs us of the kind of personal power that lets us be heroes in our own right.

Yes, women are "profoundly" different from men. Some of those differences are cultural garbage; some are real. I think that the best approach to making computer games that work for women is a combination of the three. First, ask women what kind of games they would like to see. Second, create new and different roles for female characters. And third, think about characters, plots, and themes that can empower the young girls in our culture and give them the confidence to get involved with technology.

What would I design as a computer game for women? A Central American adventure with a female peace worker as a central character, perhaps, or romp with some of the women pirates who roamed the Caribbean, or a coming-of-age tale about kids of both sexes (as once suggested by Tom Snyder and immediately incinerated by the publisher to whom he submitted it). Roberta Williams is finishing up a mystery game with a college girl as the star sleuth.

What would I suggest as design themes for developers who want to address the female market? Yes, games of sexual conflict would be fun (especially in the style of Shaw or Austen). But also games that offer young women healthy role models in contexts that are not stereotypically "female". Or games about the moon-and-magic side of the female cultural icon, where intuition and connectedness to the earth are reformulated and celebrated. Games where women have relationships with other women as robust and trustful as those between men.

The important point here is that I'm advocating unique, individual visions of what women are and can be. Ultimately, there is no template for women's games that is not fraught with cultural (or counter-cultural) stereotypes. The only way to transcend them is for designers of both sexes to create strong new images of women that we can all try on for size. This is a challenge that devolves to the individual game designer and to the game design community.
The payoff can be bigger than selling your next game.