



INFLUENTIAL VIDEO GAME DESIGNERS

Brenda Laurel

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*Pioneering Games
for Girls*

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Pages from book preview follow.

Introduction

I think one of the main reasons why the videogame business has been so horribly stunted in its growth is that it has been unwilling to look beyond itself to its audience.

Brenda Laurel (2001, 36)

While completing graduate degree work in theater in the 1970s, Brenda Laurel did what many students do: She picked up a job. In Laurel's case, she took a position as a software designer and programmer at CyberVision producing interactive fairytales. The work drew on Laurel's growing interest in interactive theater and storytelling, but more importantly, it helped launch her on a career trajectory that took her through stints at leading game companies like Atari and Activision to consulting work with major names in games and media more broadly, such as LucasArts, Apyx, Brøderbund, Paramount New Media, Apple, and Sony Pictures, among others. In 1986, she completed her PhD with a dissertation that drew heavily on her immersive storytelling work at Atari Research Labs, and in 1988 she co-founded the Game Developers Conference.

By the early 1990s, Laurel entered her second decade in the games industry when she accepted a job at Interval Research Corporation, a lab and tech incubator founded by Paul Allen and David Liddle. There, Laurel oversaw a multi-year study to understand the relationships between gender and technology among children and youth, research that became the spinoff company Purple Moon. As co-founder and VP of Design at Purple Moon, Laurel combined her extensive industry experience both as designer and as manager with her training and expertise in theater. Purple Moon was among the most visible of a

number of “games for girls”-targeted start-ups in the 1990s. The “games for girls” movement was—and remains—a critical intervention into a games industry that had, by the early 1990s, come to overtly cater to a consumer base made up almost entirely of boys (King and Douai 2014, 4). While Laurel’s published games are also innovative, the very act of taking girls seriously as a potential audience for games was already in and of itself revolutionary. Laurel and her company Purple Moon were at the vanguard of seismic shifts within the game industry. By connecting with and catering to tween girls, Laurel and Purple Moon were at the forefront of exploring what the industry might look like if it looked outside itself to consider the particular needs and desires of the audience. Laurel’s commitment to design research drove innovation at Purple Moon and continues to influence audience-centric approaches to game design. This is particularly true given Laurel’s more recent work creating and leading multiple graduate programs in design. As the games industry is publicly struggling with efforts to diversify in-game representation, audience appeal, and even its workforce, Laurel’s decades of work—as designer, as theorist, as executive, as educator, and as advocate—offer a powerful example of how interdisciplinary thinking, design research, and a willingness to take risks can lead to successful interventions and innovations.

From stage to monitor

Laurel’s design work traces a rich, interdisciplinary path that crosses between the academy and industry. When she began working at CyberVision, Inc. in 1977, she was still in the process of completing her graduate studies. After leaving CyberVision, she worked at a number of Silicon Valley companies, including time spent as a Research Staff Member at Atari’s Sunnyvale Research Lab (1982–1984), and as Director of Product Development for Learning and Creativity at Activision (1985–1987). In 1986, Laurel completed her PhD in Theatre from The Ohio State University. Her dissertation “Toward the Design of a Computer-Based

Interactive Fantasy System” drew on drama theory as well as her work at Atari Labs; it is a clear example of the degree to which her academic training in theater and research forms a palimpsest with her industry experience. Her work for Interval and later at Purple Moon relies on this particular context of training and experience.

Laurel’s theoretical and critical work also draws on a set of insights from both academic and industry perspectives. Her book *Computers as Theatre* (first released in 1991 and re-issued in 2013; see Figure 1.1) has become a classic in the field of human–computer interaction (HCI). It relies heavily on her dissertation research and is a crash course in drama theory for the uninitiated mixed with practical examples of how theoretical concepts can usefully inform design projects. For her second book, Laurel turned to a reflection on her own industry experience. Both more personal and more reflective, *Utopian Entrepreneur* details her own entrepreneurial experiences in games, multimedia, virtual reality, and dot-coms and provides a practical guide for others interested in producing positive social change in the context of for-profit business. While providing a guidebook for others who might wish to follow a similar path, Laurel offers significant insights into her own career, which has been driven by a belief that businesses can do good and enact change in meaningful ways. In these books, Laurel demonstrates her willingness to cross-pollinate fields, to mix HCI with Aristotle, or to infuse entrepreneurial pursuits with a commitment to social justice.

This interdisciplinarity and hybridization is fundamental to Laurel’s approach and is a key part of what makes her work innovative and important. It is visible in her training, but the culmination and result is not her training, but her finished work, which has proven influential not only to game design, but also to design research, entrepreneurship, and efforts to ensure diversity in technical fields. For Laurel, game design was not an end in and of itself but rather a potential means of addressing a complex social problem through the production of popular culture. In this way Laurel’s game design work is intimately bound with her work as a researcher-practitioner and her desire to further social good. Game

design, in Laurel's hands, is not a practice, but a praxis—an opportunity to fully realize the potential of her work as a researcher.

Drawing from the notion of game design as a critical research praxis, I consider the extent to which Laurel's research drives her own design work and subsequently illuminates her ongoing influence as a designer.

In this chapter, I interrogate both Laurel's research-driven approach to design as realized at Purple Moon and her books *Computers as Theatre* and the memoir-fueled *Utopian Entrepreneur*. Throughout, I consider the ethos of Laurel's work as expressed in the books and as evidenced through her game design work. In unpacking Laurel's writings on design and entrepreneurship and placing them in a context of her design praxis, I argue that Laurel's innovations in game design emanate from her diverse professional and intellectual background. These experiences are critical to understanding Laurel's work and are central to her vision as a designer.