



International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology

<http://genderandset.open.ac.uk>

**Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives
on Gender and Gaming edited by
Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner and
Jennifer Y. Sun.**

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PUBLICATION DETAILS

Date: 2008

Published by: MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), US

ISBN: 978-0262113199

REVIEW

Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives marks a decade on from the publication of one of the first books to explore the 90s girls' game movement. During the 1990s digital games emerged as a precociously successful media form grabbing increasing amounts of the entertainment dollar. In the adrenaline rush of real-time 3D gaming, many Western developers focused on titles that showed off their technology and prioritised the hardcore gamer. It was in this setting that the early visionaries of digital technology noticed that vast tracts of the population were being missed. Most notably, Brenda Laurel (2006) saw the possibility of rectifying the gender imbalance on display in consumer products for children. This resulted in the rise of Purple Moon and a wider interest in making computer games that would appeal directly to girls. It was in this setting that the first "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games" (1998) was published, marking an important intervention in this nascent field.

Ten years on much has changed, although the cyclical nature of the games industry remains resulting from the ongoing release of new generations of game console. Digital games have grown up and sprawl beyond entertainment as an increasingly self-aware form, widely acknowledged as the killer app of our participatory digital culture. Pink and purple games have



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been absorbed into the wider markets as the industry builds a multitude of game experience across platform, market and territory. It is in this context that "Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives" has been released and the book, once again, creates an effective snapshot of current international academic work and female industry voices. This snapshot aims to "look at how gender intersects with the broader contexts of gaming and game production available today" (p. xviii) and to reflect a "noticeable shift... to a more complex approach to gender as situated, constructed and flexible" (p. xvi).

In the production of this title the editors were challenged to justify why this publication was necessary in the contemporary environment. Their argument was that for ongoing equity in and diversification of game form that "it is still critical to consider gender in order to understand and improve on the design, production, and play of games" (p. xii). The editors move towards this aim by inviting both original contributors and new authors (from a wider international context) to participate in sections that reflect on progress over the past decade, consider gaming communities, feminine design practice and educational initiatives as well as interviews with women in industry. The work presented largely orients around qualitative methods of research and a broadly humanities-led approach to the field. The range of contributions to "Beyond Barbie" vary in their success in answering the editors call to arms, and although thereby reflecting the range of quality of work in the field, some contributions are more effective than others in pointing to future possibilities and the necessary evolution of academic work in this space. Annual events like the UK's [Women in Games](#) event and networks like the US's [IGDA WIG SIG](#) work strategically to involve the academy, the industry and society more broadly in a number of initiatives to move the field of gender and games beyond these initial teething pains.

To date the themes addressed by feminist game studies can be broadly seen as work on gendered activity in digital games and feminine preference in play style and game characteristics. Other key studies look to gender equity in game making and to the wider context of access to games. From Brenda Laurel's (2006) work in the early 90s onwards (long pre-dating any such thing as games studies); critics, commentators and the academy have offered theories and observations on the difference in play habits, styles and consumption of digital gaming exhibited by women and girls. Part of the problem inherent in this project is highlighted in T. L. Taylor's contribution in her question:

'How can we do research and write on the subject in ways that do not a priori essentialize or assume difference through the very construction of our projects, the formulation of our questions, the performance of our ethnographies and interviews? And what does research into gender and computer games look like if from the

outset it reflectively and progressively confronts and deals with the always present production and performance of gender?’ (p. 52)

Taylor points to the need to consider both the wider cultural context of gaming and the broader “media mix” within which games function as one antidote to this issue. The field cannot build a deep understanding without acknowledging the complexities of the challenge at hand. Gender is not the only issue, or the only difference that is at stake. Whether it is familiarity with or general access to leisure technologies, women and girls often do have different and difficult experiences. Yet digital gender equity is less to do with a binary fe/male behavioural split than with the wider issues raised above. The problem of encouraging women into the games industry are manifold and any efforts to build a broader gender balance need to operate on a range of levels, from childhood upwards. The only real solution is a long term and ongoing project. It is vital to encourage girls at school to be confident and comfortable working with technology and to provide strong and visible role models for the next generations of game designer.

As briefly touched on in this review, and without denigrating any of the work carried out to date, there is much to be done to strategically work towards effecting ongoing positive change in the broader cultural and technological context. More importantly perhaps than any individual or group activity is the facilitation of collaborations that build on the foundations created in the past decade. This book provides an important marker in the history of this field and consists a signifier of the start of these collaborations. This edited collection, together with the initial “From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games” should be considered a required introductory text for anyone interested or engaged in the issues around gender and computer games.

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