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Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins, eds. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games.* Cambridge Mass. and London, England: MIT Press, 1998. x + 360 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-03258-2.

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Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

In the early 1990s, when my ten year old niece spent most of her time with Super Mario and the Nintendo gang, her elders shook their heads in despair. Wasn't she wasting time learning useless knowledge? Wouldn't she be better off reading a book, playing with friends, or even just joining in conversation? Our apprehension only underscored the great divide between pre- and post computer generations: The computer games we disdained a decade ago are hailed today as gateways to technology and high paying jobs. Little did I know that my niece's distressing behavior would be a model of progressive girlhood, so much so that MIT's Women's Studies department would sponsor a one-day symposium on gender and computer games.

The book that resulted, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, is a wide-ranging collection of essays that examines the rise of the "Girls' Game Movement" and the consequences of separating girls from boys in cyberspace and the marketplace. Supporters argue that the allegedly neutral status quo is in fact biased against girls who have no interest in violent competitive games, no point of identification with predominately male actors, and no desire to fight the boys for access to the computer–which, supporters point out, they tend to identify as male turf anyway. This built-in bias, or so the argument goes, keeps girls from achieving the skills, status, satisfaction, and power that computer-based jobs apparently deliver. By offering stress-free, female friendly computer games, the industry will not only broaden the market but enhance a girl's chances to land a good-paying job. Critics of the movement, on the other hand, only have to mention the most popular girls-only games ("Fashion Designer Barbie," "Let's Talk About Me," for example) to make their point: These non-competitive, mindless point-and-click exercises are mired in the traditional female world of clothes, make-up, social relations, and appearance and are therefore designed to hold a girl back, not propel her forward.

The debate that ensues raises some interesting questions that are not necessarily answered here: Does it matter whether sweeping generalizations about girls and their interests emanate from feminists or traditionalists? Should girls be shielded from the "stress" they encounter in cyberspace, or would they be better off learning to fight for themselves when the stakes are comparatively small? Is there any proof that girls (or boys for that matter) are more satisfied in their adult lives because they played computer games? And do girl consumers benefit as much as scholar-consultants or game makers do from the expansion of the market? Because we barely hear from the girls themselves, and because no one really questions the relation between game-playing (or chatting, or surfing the net) and technical prowess in the future, we don't hear much about these issues.

But what we do hear is often interesting, especially when game makers themselves do the talking. Unburdened by the theory that clouds some of the academic essays, these interviews show us the practical side of market building and demonstrate what the editors call entrepreneurial feminism in action. Like the girl consumers they try to attract, game makers offer a range of opinion on what's important and what's not–the bottom line being, of course, that they have to sell their games to stay in business. "As far as the content being traditionally coded as feminine," one points out, "we did go to the girls and ask them what they wanted, and some of the things they want are traditional" (p. 161). Another wonders what the fuss is all about. "We get asked all the time, 'Why didn't you develop games for girls?' Well, these are for girls. These are for girls and boys. They're for everybody. There for fun, you know?" (p. 195). Overall, the most interesting interviews are with Theresa Duncan and Monica Gesue, who have been inspired by their own childhood enjoyment of books like *Alice and Wonderland* and *Harriet the Spy* and seem more concerned with narrative, complexity, and enjoyment than they are with issues that

launched this book.

Historians of childhood may find this book interesting for the light it sheds on the modern development of the youth market. But they should be warned that there is no sense of historical development here, no effort to relate this chapter of the ever expanding girls' market, to earlier chapters like the development of *Seventeen* magazine in the 1940s. After visiting some of the web sites mentioned, though, I think a comparison could be made. At girl sites like Purple Moon and Girlgames (which are related to, but not the same as the CD-ROMs described in the book), shopping seems to be the number one concern.

So I still don't know whether I was right to worry about my niece's obsession with computer games. Now that she's older I worry about the time she wastes chatting on line with fellow fans of Phish (a music group for those of you completely out of touch). But having watched her do exceedingly well in school (and become more of an artist than a computer nerd) I realize that these cultural crises are usually constructed to sell one thing or another–sometimes books condemning computer games, sometime books promoting computer games, and sometimes the games themselves. Her experience also makes me realize that I have more faith in a girl's ability to fight her own battles and develop her own talents, tastes, and skills for the future, than I have in adults, academics or otherwise, who insist on paving the way for her.

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