From Barbie to Mortal Kombat

A Conference on Gender and Computer Games

The Gender and Computer Games conference addressed one of the central issues affecting women in cyberspace today: the "gender gap" in children's access to digital technologies and its implications. Computer games are proving to be a major factor attracting young boys to play with computers at increasingly earlier ages. This early access helps to make them feel comfortable with the technology. To date, the game companies have been far less effective in producing games that target girls and some now fear that the result will be a further exaggeration of the gap between male and female participation in technology and science.

In this conference, representatives from the game industry as well as researchers explored the developing market aimed at drawing young females. Scholars also considered the artistic and sociological problems surrounding its creation. The conference opened with a discussion of the cultural implications of escalating technology in a gender-biased society, followed by a look at cognitive and developmental perspectives. In the afternoon, the focus shifted from academics to demonstrations, including presenters from Mattel, Sega, and Girl Games. The conference closed with an open mike discussion mediated by Prof. Henry Jenkins.

The conference schedule and participants' biographies are included. Conference materials may be downloaded and/or excerpted as long as they are properly attributed.

This conference is sponsored by the Program in Women's Studies, the Program in Film and Media Studies, the Media Lab, the Program in Science, Technology, and Society, Dean Robert Brown, School of Engineering, and Dean Philip Khoury, School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Cultural Implications

9:00 am - 10:45 am

Henry Jenkins
"Putting 'Boy Culture' Back in the Home:
Gender, Genre, and Virtual Play Spaces"

Christine Ward Gailey
"Gender and Cross-Gender Identification in
Children Playing Computer and Video Games"

Cognitive + Developmental Perspectives

11:00 am - 12:45 pm

Cornelia Brunner
"Gender and Technological Desire: Implication for Games"

Yasmin Kafai
"Electronic Game Worlds By and For Girls"

Game Demos

2:00 pm - 5:30 pm

Nancie Martin, Mattel
Heather Kelley, Girl Games Inc.
Marsha Kinder,
Annenberg Center for Communication, USC
Justine Cassell, MIT Media Lab
Jen Glos, MIT Media Lab
Marina Umaschi, MIT Media Lab

Discussion

5:30 pm - 7:00 pm

Suzanne de Castell, Gentech Project
"Re-Tooling Play: Dystopia, Dysphoria and Difference"

Open mike discussion led by
Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins

Please send your questions or comments to womens-studies@mit.edu
The Program in Women's Studies
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Room 14E-316
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307
(617) 253-8844

Alphabetical List of Speakers
with Bios and Abstracts

Henry Jenkins
Director, Film and Media Studies
MIT

Henry Jenkins is the Director of Film and Media Studies at MIT where he is currently overseeing the formation of the graduate program in media studies. A wide-ranging scholar whose work includes fan culture, film criticism, and children's culture, his books *include What Makes Pistachio Nuts?: Early Film Sound Comedy* (Columbia Press, 1992) and *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992). He is in the process of editing *The Children's Culture Reader.* His work on video games and boys culture has led him to do consulting work for video-game companies Sega of America and Purple Moon on issues of developing gender-based video games.

Christine Ward Gailey
Professor of Sociology-Anthropology
Northeastern University

Christine Ward Gailey is a professor of Sociology-Anthropology at Northeastern University. Her research focuses on class and state formation, colonialism, gender ideologies and relations, changing family and kinship relations, popular culture, and cultural resistance. She teaches courses in culture theory, gender and comparative stratification. Professor Gailey is the author *of Kinship to Kingship: Gender Hierarchy and State Formation in the Tongal Islands* (University of Texas Press, 1987) and is coeditor of *Power Relations and State Formation* (Sheffield, 1992), and editor of *Civilization in Crisis: Anthropological Perspectives and The Politics of Culture and Creativity* (Florida State University Press 1982). Her current research is on gender, race, and class in adoption practice. Dr. Gailey is the coordinator of the Women's Studies program.

Cornelia Brunner
EDC

Dr. Brunner has been involved in the research, production and teaching of educational technology in a variety of subject areas for thirty years. In addition to conducting research projects about the relationship between learning, teaching, and technology, she has designed educational materials incorporating technologies to support inquiry-based learning and teaching in science, social studies, media literacy, and the arts. She has worked extensively with staff and students in a variety of school environments on curriculum development projects, teacher support and training, and informal education. She has taught experimental courses at Bank Street College and the Media Workshop New York, in which teachers are introduced to new technologies, learn how to integrate technology into their curriculum, and learn how to use multimedia authoring tools to design their own educational programs. Dr. Brunner has also been an industry consultant for the design of educational and entertainment products for children of all ages during the last thirty years.

Yasmin Kafai

UCLA GSE&IS

Yasmin Kafai is an assistant professor at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. For over ten years, she managed research projects on the forefront of children's interactive media. She worked for the last five years with Seymour Papert and Idit Harel at the MIT Media Laboratory exploring access and use of computer-intensive environments. She just completed her book *Minds in Play: Computer Game Design as a Context for Children's Learning* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates) and is co-editing a new book covering children's virtual communities, interactive tools and design environments. Currently, she and her research team at UCLA are developing software tools for young game designers, and are researching prototypes of interactive television programming and video game worlds designed by children.

Nancie S. Martin

Director of Girls Software Development
Mattel

Nancie S. Martin oversees the development of multimedia play products based on Mattel's world-renowned girls' brands. She was executive producer of the top-selling Barbie Fashion Designer, Barbie Storymaker and Barbie Print 'n Play CD-ROMs, as well as of the Fisher-Price Parenting Guide and Barbie Magic Fairy Tales: Barbie as Rapunzel. She also chaired Mattel's Internet Task Force.

Before she joined Mattel in 1995, Martin was president of Jouissance Productions in San Francisco, and produced several CD-ROM titles, including *Rock Expedition: The 1960's*, *Soul Expedition: The 1960's*, and *Xplora 1: Peter Gabriel's Secret World*. A native New Yorker, Martin began her career in publishing, and was editor-in-chief of a number of major mass-market magazines. The author of four books and hundreds of magazine articles, she has taught at the School of Visual Arts, New York University and San Francisco State University, and has spoken at many conferences, including The Children's Interactive Media Festival, Digital Hollywood and Futuremedia.

Heather Kelley

Girl Games Inc.

Heather Kelley's work on computers, gender and technology is diverse and reflects up and coming changes in the development and design of instructional educational technology. She brings a theoretical background in new technologies and gender and sexuality issues to her hands-on work designing multimedia projects and product development. As director of Online Services for Girl Games, Inc., Kelley is responsible for developing content and designing interface and managing special projects related to and for girls on the World Wide Web. In addition, she has been a teacher at the Austin Museum of Art where she was responsible for developing curriculum to instruct girls ages 9 to 12 in creating digital artwork.

Marsha Kinder

Annenberg Center for Communication
Professor, University of Southern California

Marsha Kinder is a professor of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California, School of Cinema and Television. She is the author of Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Computer Games and is currently editing an anthology on children's culture. She has consulted with Sega of America on issues of children culture.

Justine Cassell

MIT Media Lab

Justine Cassell is an Assistant Professor at MIT's Media Laboratory, and head of the Gesture and Narrative Language Group. She holds undergraduate degrees in Comparative Literature from Dartmouth, and in Lettres Modernes from the Universite de Besancon (France). She holds a MPhil in Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) and a double PhD from the University of Chicago, in Linguistics and in Psychology. Her empirical research addresses issues of embodiment in face-to-face conversation, children's storytelling skills and children's acquisition of gender roles. Her design research includes (a) integrating gesture, speech, and facial expression in autonomous animated conversing agents, b) generating interactive storytelling agents, (c) designing technological toys that take advantage of gender differences in children's play styles to encourage them to try new kinds of toys and new kinds of technologies.

Jen Glos

MIT Media Lab

Jennifer Glos is currently a graduate student at the MIT Media Laboratory in the Gesture and Narrative Language Group. She received her bachelor of science degree from MIT in Brain and Cognitive Sciences. As an undergraduate, she conducted psycholinguistic research at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, and studied human memory systems at MIT's Behavioral Neuroscience Laboratory. She then worked at Microsoft designing Social User Interfaces, in particular, the role of animated computer agents which serve as a centralized location for information, advice, and help. Jennifer's research interests at the Media Lab include the digital augmentation of keepsake objects, gender issues in technology design, and the role of the computer in storytelling. She is presently developing Rosebud, a system which links children's stories to their stuffed animals, serving as an interactive storytelling environment to further children's mastery of language.

Marina Umaschi

MIT Media Lab

Marina Umaschi is currently a graduate student at the MIT Media Laboratory in the Gesture and Narrative Language Group. She received her master's in Educational Technology from Boston University and her bachelor degree from Buenos Aires University in Social Communication (Argentina). In Argentina she worked for four years as a journalist focusing in science, technology and society. Marina also worked in different communities using technology to enhance children's learning of their cultural values. Marina's research interests at the Media Lab

include the design of new technologies to support children's learning about identity through storytelling and listening, the development of constructionist environments for users to become designers of their own projects and the design of "soft" physical interfaces with an impact on children's emotional engagement. She is presently working on SAGE, a construction kit that allows children to design and program their own embodied interactive storytellers to have conversations with.

Suzanne de Castell
Gentech Project

Suzanne de Castell is a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. She holds a doctorate from the University of London, and has published widely on educational history, philosophy and theory, literacy studies and technology/gender studies. Co-edited books include *Literacy, Society and Schooling*, Cambridge U Press 1980 (with Alan Luke and Kieran Egan), *Language, Authority and Criticism*, Falmer Press 1986 (with Alan and Carmen Luke) and *Radical In<ter>ventions*, SUNY Fall 1997 with Mary Bryson. Video work includes "Deviance by Design" and "Just the Way You Are" (in progress). Studying the epistemological implications of technologies of representation is her longstanding interest. She has recently completed the second year of a three year federally funded research project, "Learning to Make a Difference" (with Professor Mary Bryson, UBC) which is concerned with gender, equity, and new information technologies in education.