

## *Review of Computer Girl Games in Spain*

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There are no reliable figures for the percentage of computer games in the Spanish market aimed specifically at girls, but if we look at the offering in the U.S., which has pioneered this sector, we find that only 25% of the titles are designed for girls (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998).

By computer games for girls we mean recreational and/or educational software –also known as "edutainment"– aimed at female users between the ages of three and fourteen. It is not surprising that the sector should initially have been monopolized by pink design, that is, the type of game design that reproduces the inequality of the genders in society. The first games offered for girls gave a totally stereotyped image of what a girl and a woman should be. The assumption is that girls are interested in romantic tales, make-up, dieting, cooking and fashion. The heroines of these games perform completely conventional roles such as housewife, mother, schoolteacher, nurse, model or princess. Men appear mainly in the form of princes or kings, and usually have better jobs than the women, such as doctor, manager or lawyer. The graphics tend to be based on smooth, rounded shapes, and the dominant colours are pink, lavender and other pastel tones. Generally speaking, the games are simple, uncomplex and not very interactive.

For the moment, the most profitable computer games for girls are "pink games". This is amply demonstrated by the Barbie phenomenon and the Disney productions. The top CD-ROMs designed specifically for girls are by Mattel, whose Barbie collection was a best-seller last Christmas in Spain, where distribution rights are held by the publishers Planeta Multimedia. The titles available in Spanish include: *Salón de Belleza* (Magic Hair Styler), *Diseña mi Moda* (Fashion Designer), *Crea y Decora tus Fotos* (Photo Designer), *Decora tus uñas* (Nail Designer), *Aventuras a Caballo* (Race and Ride) and *Cuentos Mágicos: Barbie Rapunzel* (Sleeping Beauty: Barbie As Rapunzel).

Two other companies that have published CD-ROMs specifically aimed at girls are Crayola and Playmobil. Crayola had a big success with *Juega y Pinta con Pony* (Paint 'n Play Pony) (1998), whose characters, like those of the Barbie games, are dolls that already exist in real life and that have been very popular in their own right. Subsequently, it published *Vestuario Mágico* (Magic Wardrobe) (1997), in which the user chooses a particular historical period and can then dress and undress a doll in period costume, listen to music of the period, or read about historical events that occurred at that time.

For younger girls, Playmobil has published *Laura y el Secreto del Diamante* (Laura's Happy Adventure) (1999), together with two titles specifically for boys, one for the younger age group, called *Alex en la Granja* (Alex Builds His Farm) (1999), and the other for older boys as an initiation into the typical world of battles in cyberspace, called *Hype: The Timequest* (1999).

A different category within this proposed classification is that of lilac design, which could be defined as the sort of game that tries to project the prototype of the girl of today, with female characters from different cultures who are more equal in job status to the male figures. These games are designed to appeal to modern girls and so try to cater more to their tastes, hobbies and needs. For example, girls prefer cooperation to competition, since they are more interested in working together than in competing against one another (Fiore, 1999). Girls like to explore rather than to complete "levels" and move up from one to the next. They like storylines that combine adventure with friendship and creativity, without any need for rules or winners or losers. With respect to graphics, girls prefer relatively large and detailed images of people, animals and plants that use a wide range of colours, not just the primaries, to compose calm, peaceful and friendly scenes. They find the monotonous buzz of most videogames tedious and want their games to be very realistic, almost three-dimensional (Escofet, Espanya, Herrero and Rubio, 1999).

So far, the offering of "lilac games" in Spain has been practically non-existent, but a full exploration of the reasons for this would require a separate article. In my opinion, the big surprise in the market for "lilac games" has come from Lego, with its product Friends (1999), aimed at girls aged 5 to 12 and inspired by the music group Loose Chippin's, made up of five young girls. The game allows the user to write songs, create dance numbers, take a ride through the virtual city or call her friends on her mobile phone. It differs from typical "pink games" such as Barbie in that it addresses the interests of young girls who like listening to music, dancing, having a good time and talking about boys. The main characters are not the typical blondes; instead, each member of the group belongs to a different culture and has a style of her own.

In the United States, feminist movements and businesswomen have joined forces to publish "lilac games" specifically for girls. Companies include HerInteractive, GirlGames, Girltech and Purple Moon. What they have in common is that they are run by women, have a lot of women working for them, are motivated by a desire to transform relations between the genders in American culture, and want to open up a new market. One indication of the way these companies operate, with a less hierarchical, more cooperative style, is the collaboration agreement they have signed. In 1997, together with other companies such as IBM, they joined forces to set up the Girl Interactive Library with the aim of making technology more accessible to girls. Their web site, Just4girls, is an information centre on software for girls.

It is only natural for us to be concerned about the role of women in relation to the new technologies, and their first contacts with them through games, when statistics show that the inequality of the genders persists in the digital world: an inequality of use, access and attitude towards computers that works clearly to the disadvantage of girl users. In virtual reality, women are still worse off and are usually stuck with secondary, passive and coarsely stereotyped roles. And in the real world, there are far fewer women than men among the executives and designers in the videogame industry, and they are generally less well paid and occupy lower positions.

All this is reason enough for feminist authors, businesswomen and businessmen to make an effort to open up the market for girls. There are many different ways of capturing girls' imagination: from the romantic type of games full of beautiful princesses with blonde hair and blue eyes, to games that invite girls to invent their own stories and make friends from other cultures, or games in which ferocious but irresistible female warriors do battle with the most powerful enemies.

Game playing is an important gateway to the new technologies. All the great computer geniuses started out playing videogames and gradually acquiring new skills and knowledge of their own accord. Also, game playing leads to the creation of new forums in cyberspace: female users look for information about their favourite games on the internet, group together in clubs (like Purple Moon), join chat groups and exchange hints and tips.

Doing this, they soon learn to search for information on their own, and discover how to do it efficiently and selectively. According to Castells (1997), information search and selection are the two key skills that determine whether a person is on one side (interactor) or the other (interacted) of the inequality barrier in the information society.

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