

Book review

Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on gender and gaming, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai et al.

Gina Serafin-Persson

County College of Morris, Randolph, New Jersey, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, eds. *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on gender and gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. \$29.95 (371p) ISBN 978-0-262-11319-9

[0.2] *Keyword*—Video game

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[1] *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* is a dynamic combination of voices that explore the current state of gender and gaming. The breadth of perspectives contributes to and reflects the changes in gaming since the 1998 publication of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins. This edition offers an important and comprehensive look at what has been accomplished and what remains to be done for gender equity in the gaming industry. Through essays and interviews, the volume provides support for the argument that although women and girls are more actively engaged in gaming and the creation of games, constraints within the gaming culture and industry continue to make it challenging for them to gain equal access and participate.

[2] *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* is organized into five sections: a historical review, girls and women as players, girls and women as game designers, the changing nature of girls and games, and industry voices.

[3] In Part I, "Reflections on a Decade of Gender and Gaming," Jenkins and Cassell, Brenda Laurel, and Cornelia Brunner provide a historical, practical, and academic context. Jenkins and Cassell's essay offers a link between the editions and presents

two pressing debates: whether or not girls should, can, and do play computer games; and the concern that women are severely underrepresented in fields of digital design.

[4] Laurel, a pioneer in the gaming industry although controversial in some feminist academic circles, argues for and supports the importance of developing games around girls' interests and play patterns. She provides examples of how developing games with an appreciation—not just an understanding—of differences in game play is imperative to the success of the girl game movement. Closing out part I, Brunner provides a refreshing perspective of the gaming movement through the lens of the LBGTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning) community by separating gender from sex: the butch-femme continuum. Instead of the construct of male and female, Brunner argues that feminine and masculine sensibilities may be more useful in the study of and creation of games, and suggests that because many schools teach technology from a butch perspective, those students with more feminine sentiments are negatively affected. Taken together, the authors in part I provide scholarly and practical perspectives of the gaming movement over the past 10 years.

[5] Part II, "Gaming Communities: Girls and Women as Players," presents essays by T. L. Taylor, Holin Lin, Nick Yee, Mizuko Ito, and Yasmin B. Kafai. Taylor states, "[R]ather than rely on stereotypical or essentializing stories of gender, we can see how becoming a player takes place through a web of networks, practices, possibilities, and technologies" (62). Gaming not only occurs in a multitude of contexts, but also embodies different ideals depending on where the games are played. For example, Lin's study of Asian players identifies how constraints of the external environment impact virtual game play for girls. Yee and Ito further support the idea that context and culture play an ever more important role in why, where, and how girls participate in various gaming environments. Taylor's research, meanwhile, underscores the importance of providing entrance points into the gaming community for girl and women gamers.

[6] Kafai's chapter, "Gender Play in a Tween Gaming Club," considers where gamers get their insider knowledge. By analyzing gaming practices in *Whyville*, a tween and teen online virtual space much like *The Sims*, the study provides useful insights into how young people learn games and share gaming capital. The findings suggest that sharing of information is not on the basis of gender, but rather proximity and previous game play. Students who sat together while engaged with online play were more likely to ask questions of those students who sat closest to them. Participant questions and interactions did not reveal a clear gender divide. This study emphasizes the importance of the context of the game play and suggests that gender differences during play are not always obvious.

[7] In sum, part II provides a glimpse into how various networks and environments both celebrate and restrain women and girl gamers around the world, and makes it clear that women need representation in gaming communities, if we want and expect more women and girls to participate. It also raises questions as to the best methods for studying gender differences in gaming communities.

[8] Part III, "Girls and Women as Game Designers," consists of four essays. The first two, "What Games Made by Girls Can Tell Us" by Jill Denner and Shannon Campe, and "Gaming in Context: How Young People Construct Their Gendered Identities in Playing and Making Games" present findings from studies conducted in school contexts. They provide interesting insights into the types of games girls like and the types of games they create when given the opportunity to do so. The challenge here, however, is that both studies occur in a school setting. If context of game play and game creation are important, wouldn't the school environment also lend itself to the creation of certain types of games? In other words, it appears as if the context of the studies may have affected the choices made by the game creators. This limitation of both studies is not addressed by the authors. Nevertheless, the studies do offer insights about how young people construct gender identities in a larger cultural context and how this influences game design and play decisions.

[9] Tracy Fullerton, Janine Fron, Celia Pearce, and Jacki Morie's "Getting Girls Into the Game: Toward a Virtuous Cycle" and Mia Consalvo's "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges" both address issues faced by women who are interested in working in the game industry. Fullerton, Fron, Pearce, and Morie provide a convincing argument for the role of academia in creating pathways for women who wish to pursue professional careers as game designers. Changes in course offerings as well as the creation of new majors are an important step toward improving entrance opportunities for women.

[10] Consalvo's chapter is an eye-opening, although not surprising, glimpse into the gaming industry's current cultural climate. In essence, the industry provides little opportunity for balance. Quality-of-life issues deter many women from entering the industry, and those who do find it difficult to stay. The chapter focuses on Stuart Hall's theory of media production and reception by exploring the dominant ideologies at play within the gaming industry. The nature of game development (consistently releasing new games) creates an environment where production cycle times are accelerated and rapid turnover of employees is the norm. Thus, while many enter the industry because of their passion for gaming, there are larger institutional issues at play. With work weeks in excess of 80 hours, passion for game development is not enough to keep women in the gaming industry.

[11] Part IV, "Changing Girls, Changing Games," provides a plethora of research methodologies for studying middle-school students' play differences and preferences. Understanding what motivates young women to play is a consistent theme in the studies presented in this section. What is most striking about the studies are the extensive and comprehensive design methodologies. Of particular interest are Caitlin Kelleher's use of storytelling as an aid to assist girls in learning programming, and Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum's values at play (VAP) methodology for developing enjoyable games that emphasize social values. The values defined by VAP vary by project; the authors provide a methodology, not the specific values to be studied. The chapters could be considered required reading for those considering methodological issues in gender and gaming research design.

[12] Part V, "Industry Voices," is an amalgam of interviews with gamers, game designers, game developers, and industry executives. It is apropos that the edition should conclude with practical perspectives of the gaming industry. While academic theory can inform and even shape the gaming industry, it is the everyday experience of those working in the industry that provides the insider understanding. Interviews with Megan Gaiser, Morgan Romaine, Sheri Graner Ray, Nichol Bradford, and Brenda Braithwaite showcase the diverse experiences of women who share a passion for gaming. It is apparent that the journey for each woman is unique. For example, we discover that Braithwaite, the developer of *Playboy: The Mansion* and now a professor, found her first job in gaming serendipitously, while Bradford's passion for technology and storytelling led her to gaming. Gaiser's leadership role as president and CEO of Her Interactive is shaping a more family-friendly gaming work environment.

[13] *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* inspires both gamers and nongamers to consider how gender shapes and constrains our choices of play. The variety of voices represented in the edition elucidates, challenges, and encourages both novices and experts to consider what gaming will be like in the years ahead.