BOOK REVIEW

Brenda Laurel: pioneering games for girls, Carly A. Kocurek, 2017 New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 184 pp., $72 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 5013 1978 5; $24.95 (paper- back), ISBN 978 1 5013 1977 8

Third in a series edited by Carly A. Kocurek and Jennifer deWinter, exploring the most influential designers in the history of video games, this volume focuses on the designer, playwright and entrepreneur Brenda Laurel (1950, Columbus, Ohio). While both male and female designers have been object of study, the collection has an overall gender slant, noticeably in the editors' prefaces and the conclusions of each volume. In other words, the series is especially concerned with the nature of gender representation within video games and how this correlates with their target audience. In this sense, Laurel's study is highly relevant as she contributed to the development of games specifically designed for female audiences and which were conceived as an alternative to other "games for girls" (Cassell & Jeankins, 1998) such as those of Mattel (i.e. Barbie's video games).

Kocurek starts by outlining the two backbones of Laurel's work, i.e. research design and entrepreneurship, as a first assessment of Laurel's authorial agency. Afterwards, she reflects on the fundamental basis of Laurel's ethos as a creator, namely the role of research-driven design. Laurel started off as a researcher for companies such as Atari Labs, CyberVision and Lucas Arts. She then worked for many years at Palo Alto-based Interval Research before contributing to its spin-off, the independent video game producer Purple Moon. For Laurel, research does not merely under- pin the creative process but it is its main design tool. For four years she conducted interviews with large groups of children (boys and girls aged between 7 and 12 years) and the results of these surveys informed the main design features of her two main series of video games *Rockett's Movado* and *Secret Paths* targeted to preadolescent female audiences.

This monograph also deals with Laurel's contribution to the narrative theory in the field of digital media. Laurel's enormously influential research consists of a transposition of the poetics of Aristotle and of Brecht's immersive theatre to the emergent field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI). This section also delves into her exercises around the

simulation of fantasy interactive systems as well as her pioneering exploration of embodiment and user interfaces using Virtual Reality.

Kocurek reflects on the real nature of Laurel's innovations when she speculates about the inception of a new genre which Laurel's company labelled 'friendship female adventures' (p. 71). Laurel argued this mainly narrative genre was more valuable and educational than others because of the central role played by emotions in the users (through avatar stories) – an experience she called 'emotional rehearsal' (p. 13). In any case, what the text implies as the relevance of Laurel's work is not the creation of a new genre but the coming-of-age of digital storytelling. Laurel's video games show strategies derived from other serial forms, including the construction of characters' spin offs, the development of creative tools to facilitate user-generated content and transmedia narrative, supported by the interaction with audiences through websites.

Following the pattern of other books from this series, the text includes an exclusive interview by Kocurek with Laurel in 2015. Considering its chronological structure and its intrinsic human value, readers might want to read the interview first. As well as serving as an introduction to Laurel, it might lead them to navigate the book in a different way, as it functions as a map of the busy research and business curriculum of this designer.

Brenda Laurel is not only one of the most influential women in the video game industry but, in her own right, in the academic world around video games. Laurel's contribution, however, has been controversial. True to her convictions, the designer released her products in response to the results of market analysis. Thus, Laurel intended to give children what they wanted, while retaining (when possible) a strong ethical conviction about how to help them in their personal growth. However, during the first wave of the 'Games for Girls' movement it was argued that this was Laurel's mistake as her products were considered to help perpetuate gender roles that she should have, as a feminist, fiercely challenged (Jenkins, 1998). It could be argued that criticism was result of two different visions confrontation: the political and cultural motivations of the movement and the strategic design for specific markets.

The book is highly recommended for anyone interested in narrative games, being a valuable addition to these series on video game authorship. Laurel's contribution to attracting female audiences to games was a response to the 'social problem' (p. 94) of hegemonic products and markets for male audiences. The subtitle of the book could not have been better chosen. 'Pioneering' is the adjective that best defines Laurel's academic and business work. Like any other pioneer, she ventured into unknown territory and made numerous mistakes. This is some- thing for which we should all be thankful as we can all learn from them.

Reference

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