

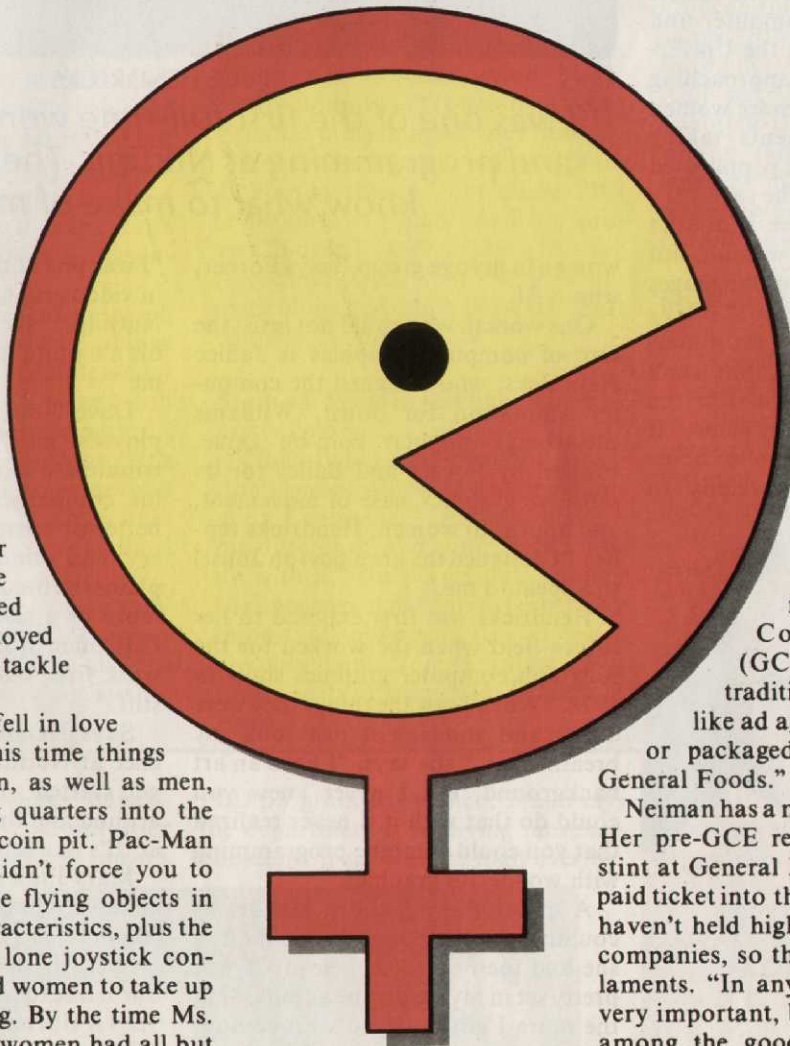
# Welcome to the Club

Having liberated the arcades, women are just starting to make their presence felt in the mostly male game business. **By Anne Krueger**

**F**our-and-a-half-years ago, when Space Invaders first appeared at my neighborhood bar, I was one of the few women to play it. Most of the other women called the game a "boy's toy" and ignored it. I remember being annoyed that they felt no urge to tackle this curious challenge.

A few years later I fell in love with Pac-Man. But this time things were different: Women, as well as men, were eagerly dropping quarters into the machine's bottomless coin pit. Pac-Man had personality and didn't force you to shoot up unidentifiable flying objects in space. It was these characteristics, plus the game's easy rules and lone joystick controller, that encouraged women to take up the art of video gaming. By the time Ms. Pac-Man came along, women had all but liberated one of the last bastions of male privacy—the arcade.

Bally/Midway, Pac-Man's manufacturer, claims the percentage of women playing video games has risen from eight to 30 percent since the introduction of Pac-Man in 1980. During that same period, women have begun to make inroads in the game business. It was once rare for a woman to be hired in marketing and game design capacities. Now it seems every company is making an effort to recruit women for these jobs. In my research, I turned up



15 women in positions that are not related to promotion, publicity, or advertising.

"Most women in business," explains Hope Neiman, director of marketing at General Consumer Electronics (GCE), "have been in avenues traditionally more open to them like ad agencies, marketing firms, or packaged goods companies like General Foods."

Neiman has a math degree and an MBA. Her pre-GCE resume, which included a stint at General Foods, was not exactly a paid ticket into the business. "Women just haven't held high-level positions in other companies, so they can't cross over," she laments. "In any business, networks are very important, but they're usually set up among the good ol' boys who've been around the industry. Consequently, men hire other men. Most new companies are started by men in high-level positions who need to find other men in high-level positions."

As a lowly designer/programmer, Dona Bailey was able to avoid this catch-22 situation. She simply quit her programming job at General Motors and signed up with Atari's coin-operated games division in 1980. Centipede was her first project. "I really like pastels," she says, "which is why there are so many pinks and greens and violets in



Centipede. I really wanted it to look different, to be visually arresting. I think that's a new emphasis in games."

Says Ed Logg, Bailey's partner on the project: "Centipede was definitely aimed at the women's market. I'm not sure that without Dona's viewpoint it ever would have made it there."

Susan Forner, a freelance game designer and graphics consultant at Bally/Midway's game-design subsidiary Dave Nutting Associates (DNA), says the demand for quality programming in the intensely competitive game business is making sex discrimination less of a problem. It's not so much a question of what women can bring to video games, but "what artists can bring that engineers can't—namely, appealing graphics," she insists. A self-taught artist, Forner studied computer and electronic visualization at the University of Illinois before approaching Nutting. "I see more and more women in engineering departments taking programming courses that people used to think were too hard," she says. "It's getting to the point where it doesn't matter whether you're a woman, but how many programming languages you know."

Forner is now working on a non-violent, educational game. She can't discuss details other than it won't be either a shooting or strategy game. "It will appeal to people who've never played games before, especially to



SUE CURRIER

*"Sometimes we're our own worst enemies."*



Photo by Steve Kagan

JANICE HENDRICKS

*"I was one of the first full-time women in graphics and programming at Nutting. They didn't quite know what to make of me."*

women in my age group," says Forner, who is 31.

One woman who could not resist the lure of computer graphics is Janice Hendricks, who designed the computer animation for Joust, Williams Electronics' popular coin-op game. Praised by Forner and Bailey for its sensitive graphics, ease of movement, and appeal to women, Hendricks replies: "I designed the graphics (on Joust) to appeal to me."

Hendricks was first exposed to her future field when she worked for the Siggraph computer graphics show in 1978. "When I saw the things they were doing and showing it just took my breath away," she says. "I have an art background, but I never knew you could do that with it. I never realized that you could combine programming with wonderful graphics."

A psychology major, Hendricks couldn't get the computer animation she had seen out of her head. "I was pretty set in my field," she admits, "but the more I got involved with computers the more I was tempted to putter around with them. Actually, I thought that by taking a few courses I'd get it out of my system. Instead, it got worse!" Hendricks ultimately decided to get a master's in engineering, not psychology.

In 1979, she again worked at Siggraph, and this time she introduced herself to people at the Nutting booth. Three months later Nutting hired her.

"I was one of the first full-time women in video graphics and programming at Nutting," she says proudly. "They didn't quite know what to make of me."

Dave Nutting calls his female employees "girls" and believes they contribute a distinctly feminine touch to his company's games. "Women are better at creating the patterns, imagery, and atmosphere for games," explains the industry veteran. "They have more of a sense of feeling and color than men do. Games done by men work fine, but usually will look a bit stiff."

Says Hendricks about her experience at Nutting: "It's a good place to get started. You're allowed to drift around and find out what you're good at. It's like school."

Mary Ptak wouldn't mind enrolling at this "school." She recently left an engineering position at Honeywell to give birth to—and raise—her child. She'd like to join her husband, Tom, at "DNA University" (as Nutting's firm is affectionately called by his "students") in the near future. "When I was in college women weren't encouraged to go for math or engineering careers," Mary recalls. "I think it's changing, but I don't expect this to change that much. The numbers will probably just even out."

At Columbia University in New York, Joseph Traub reports that the enrollment of women is steadily climb-



# The Myths of Pac-Man & Other Related Topics

Since most women were introduced to video games via Pac-Man, and since Pac-Man is so cute and cuddly, popular industry wisdom says that women only want to play so-called "cute" games. True or false? Let's just call it a myth. This and other myths surrounding female game-playing attitudes should be demolished once and for all.

## Myth #1: Women play easier games than men.

Most female gamers are beginners, says Williams' Janice Hendricks. And what kind of game would a beginner naturally prefer? "Any game that has simple controls and is easy to understand," she says. "Games that take a lot of time and money to learn aren't instantly appealing to most beginners."

Kathy Novak, market research manager at Bally/Midway, thinks women's aversion for complex controls and complicated games will pass. "It's all due to indoctrination," she says, referring to Pac-Man. "It's easier to start with simpler games and then advance to more complex ones that require more strategy and offer a greater challenge."

Novak offers herself as an example. "I worked here for almost a year before I played any games at all," she admits. "They intimidated me, but not any more."

## Myth #2: Women prefer simple controls.

According to the "brain dichotomy" theory, women have better reflexes, but don't think in the abstract as well as men do. Freelance game designer Tim Skelly suggests this may explain why women generally dislike spatial games such as Asteroids and Defender. "Those left, right, thrust, fire, multi-button flying-type games require an intuitive sense of what position your spaceship is in," he says. "You need to figure out how long you have to press a button to get where you want to go. The kinesthetic feedback you get is not nearly as direct as the kind you receive with a trackball or joystick." Centipede and Pac-Man, which employ a trackball and joystick respectively, "don't require spatial play," Skelly continues. "You don't have to visualize everything in your head."

Hendricks doesn't buy the brain dichotomy theory, contending: "It's conjecture. It's quite far from proven." Susan Forner, of Dave Nutting Associates, adds that "women are meticulous and can handle the most complex set of controls."

## Myth #3: Women just like to look at pretty colors.

Dona Bailey paid plenty of attention to color when she was programming Centipede. "Graphics make a big difference, and color has a lot to do with it," she points out. Though she concedes that "color is especially important to women, I never heard any complaints from men about Centipede, except from a lot of guys at Atari."

Skelly, on the other hand, asserts that colors are of equal significance to both men and women.

## Myth #4: Good girls play "cute" games.

"Most of the games I play men don't seem to like, but one we agree upon is Centipede. It's easy to learn, yet tough to master, and combines personality, humor, simple controls, and attractive graphics." Dona Bailey definitely knew what she was doing. Recently, Dona offered these comments about the game Robotron:

"I have an enormous amount of enjoyment playing it and while doing so it's challenged some of the things I'd been thinking about women and games. Since I like it so much, it's forced me to consider whether games really need some sort of peace-loving quality to them. Robotron is a shoot-'em-up, but it's not advocating violence or mindless slaughter. Robotron is funny without being a cartoon. I really respect that a lot."

## Myth #5: Good girls don't play games at all.

"Women traditionally haven't participated in games," says Jewel Savadelis, software product manager in the consumer division at Atari. "It's just not something we were introduced to earlier in life."

This, of course, is changing. Hendricks cites her 12-year-old sister who took an eight-week computer class last summer. "If women are exposed to things at that age, the awkwardness will certainly disappear."

—A.K.

ing in the computer science department, which he chairs. While only four of the 32 students in the department's

PhD program are women, Traub says the department is receiving more applications from women than ever be-

fore. At Barnard College, Columbia's sister school, the computer science department has grown to 50 majors in

ROBERTA WILLIAMS

*"I think it will remain a male-dominated business."*





three years of existence.

Linda Averett, who along with her husband, Ed, designs games for the Odyssey<sup>2</sup> system, estimates that "at least 50 percent of software graduates are now women." Her degree is in engineering physics; computer science was not offered at the school she attended.

The Averetts are responsible for games like K.C. Munchkin, K.C.'s Crazy Chase, and Pick Axe Pete. "We did K.C. Munchkin right after Pac-Man became so popular," she says. "We knew it was a game women would definitely like. Women are more analytical. I think that's why they don't like shoot-'em-ups." In a switch, Linda usually does the programming while Ed creates the graphics. They license games in the name of Averett & Associates.

Probably the most successful of the husband/wife teams now entering the business is Roberta and Ken Williams, co-founders of Sierra/On-line Software. Sierra had revenues of over \$10 million in 1982, primarily on sales of game software produced for Apple computers. Roberta is a self-taught programmer who specializes in adven-



Photo by Steve Kagan

SUSAN FORNER

*"It's getting to the point where it doesn't matter whether you're a woman, but how many programming languages you know."*



Photo by Janet Fries

DONA BAILEY

*"Atari was always saying they were trying to hire women, but they said the percentage of women applying was low."*

ture games. Disappointed with the games available for the Apple, she created her own, Mystery House, and has since produced several bestsellers, including Zork, a 12-disc epic, and worked with Henson Associates on the computer game based on *Dark Crystal*.

Roberta believes women are better than men at writing and verbal communication. Men, according to her, usually excel at math and logic. Writing an adventure game, she says, "is easier for women to do. It's like screenwriting."

Williams agrees that more women are "getting into all aspects of the business," though she doesn't see them coming in droves. Of Sierra's nearly 100 freelancers, only a handful are women. "I think it will remain a male-dominated business," she concludes.

Working in a male-dominated field can be a tremendous strain. Suffering from what she calls "fraternity burn-out," Dona Bailey recently left Atari and joined Videa, a design firm founded by three ex-Atarians. Being the only woman in coin-op engineering slowly wore her down to the point where she had to quit.

"When I first started it wasn't so overwhelming," she says. "But as the department grew, it was like being on

*(Continued on page 81)*



# Welcome to the Club

(Continued from page 54)

another planet. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy being the only woman at times, but it was certainly bizarre. After awhile, I just wasn't comfortable, and I think it reflected in my work, or lack of.

"Atari was always saying they were trying to hire women," Bailey adds, "but they said that the percentage of women applying was low. I don't really know why there aren't any more female programmers in the business. Maybe women are discouraged by the male domination in this business."

Video also lacks an abundance of female programmers, but Bailey isn't complaining. Back in the company of former colleagues Ed Rotberg and Howie Delman, she feels at home. "We want to do state-of-the-art games," Bailey says. "Games that are funny without being sickeningly cute. Just

really good entertainment."

But not everyone agrees it's tough to be a woman in the video game business. It can even be an advantage, says 32-year-old Sue Carrier, co-partner with her husband in Softsync Inc.

"It's not a sexual thing. It's just a change. When I started I didn't know anything about the business. Everyone taught me. I don't know if I were a man if they would have taken to that."

Carrier originally came to the U.S. from Australia as a model and started distributing computer games from her kitchen table in between modeling assignments. In just over a year-and-a-half, the little enterprise grew into one of the main software suppliers for the Timex Sinclair 1000.

Carrier believes many female programmers are hesitant to submit programs. This is a shame, she says.

"I maintain women can do anything they want. Sometimes we're our own worst enemies." ▲



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