

Building Digital Dreamhouses: An interview with JESYCA DURCHIN

Carly Kocurek, Leilasadat Mirghaderi, and Sara Simon

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In 1995, Jesyca Durchin accepted a job as a producer at Mattel Media under Nancie Martin. The then fledgling game and software studio had fewer than a dozen employees and existed at a distance from Mattel's more central toy business. *Barbie Fashion Designer* (Mattel Media, 1996) was Durchin's first major project and is widely credited with catalyzing the girls' game and software market in the mid 1990s.¹ In its first two months, the CD-ROM title sold 500,000 copies, outstripping the sales of successful titles like *Quake* (id Software, 1996).²

However, as Durchin discusses throughout this interview, the game's success was not as immediate or automatic as might be assumed. While Barbie's brand recognition certainly helped, the game was not exempt from the challenges presented in attempting to reach an underserved market. At the time, both toy and software departments often proved reluctant to stock girl-focused titles, and toy retailers like Kaybee Toys and Toys "R" Us would remove underselling products from store shelves, allowing only a brief window to demonstrate sales and remain in stores.³ In the first weekend of its release, *Barbie Fashion Designer* sold only eleven copies; Mattel CEO Jill Barad's enthusiasm for the project and willingness to invest in a television commercial salvaged the situation. Ultimately, managing to convince retailers to stock the game on girls' toy aisles rather than in the software department helped drive sales and was a strategy other games for girls publishers tried to leverage.⁴ Most companies attempting to create the

games for girls market lacked the resources of toy giant Mattel, of course, and the reality that *even Mattel* nearly failed to break through speaks volumes about the level of inertia that defined the mid-1990s computer and video game market.

Games for girls continue to occupy a fraught position in cultural history, and Barbie, in particular, is a divisive figure.⁵ While Durchin saw Barbie as a means to engaging girls with computer technology, the games faced backlash for their overtly and perhaps stereotypically girly approach and focus.⁶ Backlash came not only from uninterested male executives, journalists, and audiences; not all girls would want to play sparkly pink dress-up games, some women warned, urging the industry to expand its notion of games for girls beyond Barbie. Ultimately, however, *Barbie Fashion Designer* is one chapter of a career focused on media and entertainment aimed at girls and women. Durchin took her first job in interactive media after a stint working for the director Tim Burton, assuming that game companies might be more willing to give her a chance producing. Her entree to the industry suggests just how volatile and exhilarating CD-ROM studios were at the time. At Viridis, she worked on a Titanic-themed title before producing *Eco: East Africa*, a simulation of an African game preserve that received critical acclaim, but the company ran out of funding and shut down. She later landed at Mattel in part due to the clunky realities of how fax machines send documents—her resume forwarded by accident.

Over the past two decades, Durchin has worked extensively with Disney Imagineering, founded and sold her own startup, Digital Playspace, and today works as a senior producer at Warner Bros., where she is producing the company's first AAA game featuring Wonder Woman. Her interest in storytelling, multimedia interface design, and play patterns have driven her professional trajectory and serve as useful examples of her audience-focused approach to media

production. She summarizes her creative and design ethos as one of wish fulfillment, enabling players and audience members to experience the magic of making things better than they found them and using technology for creative ends. In this interview, Durchin reflects on her career, offering insights from her experiences creating games that girls love. She shares stories of early production discoveries that led to pivotal games like *Barbie Fashion Designer*, and she discusses the difficulties the field faced in trying to forge a more inclusive industry. Taken together, Durchin's insights shed light on an important and often overlooked chapter of games history.

Carly Kocurek [CK]: To start, can you tell us a little bit about-- like, if you were gonna give a broad summary of your professional background-- can you start there?

Jesyca Durchin [JD]: Chaos! That is my professional background. I wanted to be a film producer since I was nine years old. So, I joke about chaos, but really it was a pathway always to being what I felt was a producer of stories. I've loved stories. I love movies. I always had a vivid imagination. I played with Barbies until I was 16. I was born in California. Grew up in Oregon. And I lived part-time in South America. And, sort of, understanding two cultures, stories were a way for me to connect things that the grown-ups didn't seem to connect very well. My mother's from Bogotá, Colombia. And I also grew up in an all-female background. So, I would say that my world was highly feminized. Like, highly, highly feminized. And when I got to college, it was an adjustment.

I graduated [from] film school right when the writers' strike happened in 1991. And couldn't get a job. And so a friend of mine inherited some money and started a record label. And I ended up

producing records and getting out there in clubs. It was the closest I could get to Hollywood at the time. And then that friend introduced me to another friend, and I ended up working for Tim Burton for a couple of years. [I]t was a really interesting time in technology. Steve Jobs ended up sending over-- at that time, he was working on NeXT. At that time, [Steve Jobs] was working on NeXT. I really wanted to be indispensable for Tim. So, I learned how to actually start the NeXT machines. I got interested in them because I had some technology background. And I had it in my head, whatever I do, still making movies, but they have to have some sort of technology, 'cause this stuff is awesome.

CK: What was your technology background?

JD: Well, my dad bought a computer in 1978. Which is very weird in 1978. He had an employment agency, creating databases that could connect companies with people. So, he was trying to do that in our house, and I found out that there was a game called *[Zork]*. And I loved those sort of Choose Your Own Adventure books. So, technology for me was never intimidating or scary because we had one growing up. That was unique in 1991. I was kind of getting into this idea that entertainment and technology were merging. And *Nightmare Before Christmas* solidified that. Because that was actually one of the first movies to use Macintosh in a heavy-duty way, to record all of the Jack Skellington facial expressions. And people knew that if something had to do with technology, that they would come talk to me about it. And I loved being that part of his team. I worked on *Ed Wood*. And then Tim and I got into a big fight.

I realized that no one was probably gonna let a 23-year-old person who had been basically an assistant, a receptionist to Tim Burton, produce a movie. But I thought they might let me produce a game. So, I had a number of friends that were at Philips. Philips at the time, in Los Angeles, started breaking off into these mini CD-ROM studios. And one of them was called Viridis. And they were going to do health and history CD-ROMs for kids. My first technology project was the end of a CD-i. They were doing *Raise the Titanic* on CD-i. And then they said we're gonna do a simulation of an east African game reserve. And that project turned into *Eco: East Africa*.⁷ And I was hired on to be an assistant, but the producer didn't really know how to organize and produce. He was a really good programmer and technologist. And so, we kind of switched roles, and I ended up spending about a year and a half producing a simulation. Which is actually one of the hardest things to do in software, period. Which was my first CD-ROM. And it was a mess.

CK: If you were gonna describe CD-ROM, like, as a medium or as a platform or what CD-ROM made possible, what was that? What was that change like?

JD: It was about the infiltration of home computers and PCs. So, simultaneously, you were seeing PCs going into households and people were like, "Well, I have this giant thing that I spent all this money on. What can I do with it? Oh, educate my child." The CD-ROMs were just meant to be a storage system. It had no business being a platform of any ability. I think about it now and think about the laser going tic-tic-tic-tic, and it might as well have been wax and a Victrola. But that was what we had to work with. It was the Wild West. No one really cared how you were doing things. It was just this really different time, where we were sort of trying to create stories and beautiful experiences on a typewriter, essentially, with a little bit of storage. What was really

cool is that you had people from all different types of industries kind of floating through this. People who had worked in movies and had one way of viewing things. People who had worked in, like, strategy board games. You had people who were just geniuses, who were building computers. What was also very exciting was that you really didn't know until you got to testing whether this thing that you just spent a whole bunch of money and a whole bunch of time on would work. Because we also had no way of digitally sending anything, I would drive every two nights to the airport to get a gold master disc on an airplane to the replication studio for the testing. But it was just so new. And everybody was in on it, because everyone was looking for the next big thing.

CK: What were your big takeaways from that project? Like, what were the things you really learned or thought were like, oh, I get this now?

JD: The publishing company that I was working with had bought all these end cap displays for Christmas. And they were calling me at home threatening me. If the game didn't come out on time, they were gonna lose all this money, and it was going to be my career. And I am all of, what, 23? 24? Big tears. Big drama. What you learn is that these plans mean nothing. That everyone shifts around. Everyone recognizes you're dealing with something that is sort of unknown. What I started learning in technology, which was harder in film, was you can break things and it's OK. Things can go out with mistakes, and they can be fixed. That's OK. You get it in the box, and you get it out. So, shipping became my thing. And closing. And getting stuff out the door. We finish the game. It wins an award for PC Family Game. And then the publisher is like, "Everybody here wants to shoot the elephants!" And I realized, I have a very different

perspective of what a game is. To me, it was just all about this conservation and beauty. So, the company that did *Eco: East Africa*, Viridis, they imploded. They ran out of money. They didn't pay us for six weeks. I ended up taking the servers with me home, to my apartment that I couldn't pay for. And our publisher sent a representative out to retrieve the computers and pay for my rent. That was the industry at the time. It was very indie and weird, and it was a Wild West.

CK: Yeah, I'm always struck by how brittle that is, too. Where it's like, there's lots of money! There's no money. There's lots of money! That's gotta be really stressful.

JD: It was very stressful. And, you know, and you kept blaming yourself. After the *Eco: East Africa* experience, people would say, you know, you made this with a female point of view, but there's nowhere for women to buy games. And I would make this joke that if it was as fun to buy software as it is to buy shoes, more women would buy games. And-- 'cause you'd go into Fry's and everything was like, thrown out everywhere. No merchandising. But no one could see that.

CK: The shoe department thing is interesting. HeR Interactive sold *McKenzie & Co.* at Sam & Libby because they couldn't get the software and computing departments to stock it. So, Mayo Clinic comes and pays your rent and gets the servers. Then what happens?

JD: I move to Hawaii. Yeah, so I was there [went to Hawaii] for about four months, living in a treehouse with no electricity. No water. No technology. And I came back looking for a job. And my dad, a lot of people would go to him looking for referrals for jobs. He goes, "You know, I got

this call from Mattel. They're looking for a CD-ROM executive." And I'm like, "Great, Dad, that could be me!" And he goes, "No, no, no. There was somebody in my office, she's much heavier in technology, and I sent her." Ashley somebody-or-other. And I was furious. However, my resume had gotten stuck to the bottom of Ashley's resume. This is fax machine days. And half of my resume went through to Nancie Martin at Mattel. And Nancie spells her name N-a-n-c-i-e, and my mother, who sounded my name out, spells it J-e-s-y-c-a. I get a call on my answering machine saying, "I think I have your 'i' and you have my 'y.' Please call me." And I called Nancie Martin, who was the executive producer for girls at Mattel, and I met her on a Wednesday, and I started work on Monday. She is the single influencer, I think, for me, but in so many ways, on women and the femininity of women in games. So, I interviewed with her. She was so beautiful and glamorous. Nancie wrote books on Duran Duran. She's traveled the world. She was a poet. She lived in the Shakespeare & Co. bookstore in Paris. And we talked about Barbie, and I know a lot about Barbie. And then she took out-- she had, like, a magic wand in her desk, with all her pens, and she goes, "If you could have any job, what job would you have?" And I said, "Your job seems pretty cool." And she's like, "Bing! Done." And two years later, I ended up being the executive producer, and she went off to run Barbie.com. So, we were very close. And consumed with a passion to show that women and girly-girl women could, like, rock technology.

CK: So, you start out in production, and did they already have the idea for *Barbie Fashion Designer*?

JD: Well, the idea for *Barbie Fashion Designer* came from an eight-year-old girl. So, EJ came up with it and told her dad, and her dad, Andy Rifkin, pitched the idea to Mattel, and Mattel was just getting the numbers in. In 1995, '96, were there enough home computers to justify the cost? What they were seeing was that it wasn't the first wave of computers that they had to look for. It was the downgrade of computers, 'cause girls were getting the secondary machines. So, that's why it had to kind of wait longer than the first wave of technology. It was really waiting until dad and bro broke their machines and then gave it to little sis. And then when they realized there was enough of those, [it was] how to actually come out with something that would be amazing. That was my job. My boss Andy, who's a genius, said, "I want you to make a game that doesn't feel like a game. I want it to feel like you're playing with Barbie on a computer." It's gotta feel and act the same exact way. It's called inference of play patterns onto digital media. And I was gone. I wanted to make that happen more than anything. And so, *Barbie Fashion Designer* was my baby.

This is also Mattel's heyday. Jill Barad is CEO. She is this magnificent powerhouse. And for some reason, we always ended up in the elevator together, and I thought she was the assistant to the CEO. And I would always comment on her amazing shoes. And we got to know each other, and then when *Barbie Fashion Designer* came out, like when we first did the announcement internally, she came over, we were talking, and my boss and my boss's boss is like, "How do you know Jill Barad?" And I was telling her how important this particular project was, and how much it was going to change the way people even looked at computers. And then we launched. We sold 11 copies the first weekend. And so, then Jill called us all into her office and said,

“We’re gonna make a TV commercial, and we’re gonna show everybody how this actually works.” And we did a commercial. And that was what launched this thing into the stratosphere.

The other big part of it was that Mattel didn’t want to pay for the whole thing. So, the partner they found was Digital Domain, created by James Cameron, IBM, and Scott Ross. While we’re making *Barbie Fashion Designer*, they’re making *Titanic*. Digital Domain is responsible for all front-end, so, it’s not just going to be designing fashions; you’re gonna see her walk out in 3D, wearing the fashion that you created. Never been done before. We had Digital Domain, so they were gonna figure it out. Then Toy Fair in 1995, and we’re supposed to have a working demo. And the technology isn’t working. So, we had to build a fake version of it in Director to show how this thing worked. But the concept, this idea, of seeing her wearing what you were wearing, and then being able to make the clothes, was so big.

Mattel Media, this little software company, was created to be a small, interdependent company of about 10 people. After the big push at Toy Fair and the reaction, they integrated all of us into Mattel corporate and suddenly Mattel had a software arm. It was a lot of pressure, both for the technology, and then on the marketing side. So then *Barbie Fashion Designer* gets released. And no business happens until we get the commercial. And then, it was a race to make more *Barbie Fashion Designers*.

Also, we had this thing called *Barbie Fashion Fabric*. And *Barbie Fashion Fabric* was an entirely different project that I ran to find a fabric that could go through a home printer that you cut out and then make into Barbie fashion clothes. And I had never done materials development.

We just bought a ton of printers. And the joke was, there was, like, this toxic cloud over my cubicle for a year, 'cause I was trying to figure it out. And nothing worked. All the fabrics would get burned. They would scrinch [sic] up, and then, I had a thought that maybe what we needed was a sticker. So, I reached out to Avery, and I talked to them about doing a sticker backing. So, then I got into the Avery R&D department, but it was still burning. And then I had a dream that my PJs were on fire, that my bed was on fire. I woke up remembering that sheets and kids' clothing have an anti-flammatory [sic] protectant sometimes put on them. And I went and I brought my pillowcase in, cut it up, put it on a sticker backing, and that's how we got *Barbie Fashion Fabric*.

CK: So, when you get the pillowcase to print, what did that feel like?

JD: I cried. I cried. I cried, and I laughed, and I cried some more. And then I had to go to where the Barbie fabric people were, and they were like, "Oh, that's just Tricot!" And I'm like, "You coulda told me that." But then we got to child testing, and that was the worst. Mattel does everything through child testing. Michael Shore ran the testing center, and he was not letting a product go out that was gonna be too hard for little girls. The first round was the girls-believe-they-break-everything stage. And that was one of the things that really broke my heart. So, we first started with just slides and presentation of, like, how the interface might work. And every time a 5-year-old girl would touch a keyboard and it didn't do what she'd wanted, she'd say, "I broke it." I mean, it was so depressing. The marketing women and I would sit there going, this is just not working at all. And what was really hard for me is that the little ones took it on themselves. But when I would watch boys test, it was the stupid software. And the stupid

hardware. And the stupid computer doesn't work. But that's not the way it worked for girls. One of the things we learned very quickly was a multisensory approach to UI. That girls needed a lot of positive reinforcement. I called it the "brrring!" factor. Everything has a "bbbrrring!?" in Barbie. Every note. Every button. Even if you do something that's, like, not appropriate for that step, it was still a positive sound, because girls are more sensitive to auditoria-- I read two or three different studies about it. But they needed response. So, our UIs are very blingy. They have lots of sparkles. But that's not just to make it pretty. It's to make it easy and satisfying. That the girl needed it to be satisfying all the way through was a key part of my learning.

CK: That's interesting. That's such a foundational idea in Brenda Laurel's book about *Computers as Theatre*. Right? If you push the button and nothing happens, it doesn't feel good. It feels like it's incomplete.

JD: I wanted to sort of take away the idea that there was a problem even to begin with. This was to be fun fun fun fun fun. I've always approached my games that way. One of the things that was interesting was the idea of designer vs. stylist. If I'm a designer, I get to choose the hem and the size-- cut and shape. No. It's just as satisfying for a child to pick from all the different outfits. And they didn't need a lot of choices. They would always pick the same outfit, but in their minds, it would be a different one each time. Because it was different to a story, or contextually different to them each time. So, my point was, like, let's do less better. And let's not give them so many different controls that it becomes confusing. Everything they do should start out beautiful and end beautiful. And that took a lot of pushing through, because it doesn't seem right.

It seems like it should start out in the makeover world, right? But that's not how the Barbie world works.

CK: That's interesting, 'cause there's been a lot of decision-making research in the past 20 years that shows when you give people too many choices, they're always unsatisfied. So, the fake demo goes to the Toy Fair, right?

JD: E3 is after that. It's gonna be the first time we're showing *Barbie Fashion Designer*. It's gonna be the first time we're showing out as a games company from Mattel. So Mattel buys this enormous booth. And that's when I have my 300 dolls, all dressed up in all the Barbie fashion things. And we actually had an automated runway with the dolls coming out. And we hired all these Barbie models. They're beautiful women, but they're also pretty modestly dressed, because it's a toy company. Well, that's not E3. We're walking by people and I'm like, "She's naked over there in the booth." And our booth is all white and girly and beautiful. But we did get a lot of press. And I also got into all the parties, because I took all the Barbie models with me. And also Brenda [\[Laurel\]](#) was showing *Purple Moon*. And then Laura Groppe was doing Girl Games. So, they were also represented and had pretty big booths. It was really an amazing event.

CK: It's interesting to think about, like, in some ways, this is not where we're supposed to be. But at the same time, you have three really ambitious projects focusing on girls.

JD: Right. And it was a little bit of a problem because those were also considered the indies, right? They were trying to create their own IP and have their own ambitions, whereas Nancie and

I were really the stewards of this gigantic IP. And there was backlash already starting against the pink boxes and the pink software. But I was oblivious, because I was just glad that the thing was working. And then we do the commercial. And then it becomes this huge thing. We went from six people to 40 people. And I started running the girls' games division, under Nancie. And then Nancie left me to do Barbie.com.

CK: So there was no plan to do an ad. I'm just shocked by that, because that's such a golden age of advertising to children, right?

JD: Not only was there no plan to do an ad, Jill Barad had to go to her secret fund. The CEO gets some sort of slush fund to spend on their favorite projects. I mean, this was science, and about how marketing worked. And it was a pretty good commercial.

CK: Yeah. I actually just gave a talk, and I showed that commercial, 'cause it's such a good encapsulation of a moment in time. So, you go to *Barbie Cool Fashions*, that's *Barbie Fashion Designer 2*. So, what happens there?

JD: I wanted to get as many girl products into the marketplace as possible. And at the time, I also came up with this idea of *Barbie Nail Designer*. I actually have a patent with Mattel for that. So we started looking at all these different types of designers. *Barbie Jewelry Designer*. And we started buying small companies that had products. Mattel bought Print 'n Play, because they had these shrinky dinks that you could print on your computer. They got the license for *Clueless*, so I also did a *Clueless* CD-ROM.

We also had a problem in that *Barbie Fashion Designer* was only released on PC, and the Mac advocates were making Jill's life hell. They were writing letters and protesting. And she finally said, "We have to make a port." And I had never made a port before. And if I thought Microsoft was hard to deal with, try Apple in the late '90s. You had to work on Macs historically. So, you have to make the game work on a Mac that hasn't been out there for five years, but somebody might have it at their house. Then we made it and it didn't sell at all.

We started working on consoles. I did a presentation for Sony PlayStation in 1997 about hair play and makeup and fashion play, and they told me never to come back into their building. Ever. And then David Haddad, who was the general manager at the time, he said we're gonna go to England because Sony London-- Europe-- will do this. And they did. And that's how we got *Barbie Riding* on PlayStation. We went around Sony.

But it was getting to be the point where *Barbie Fashion Designer* was a huge success. But everything Barbie is evil. It was, software was evil. And I gave a talk at the Game Developers Conference, and that was in 19-- I should know this by heart. 1998? And people told me I was corrupting their children. That I was the worst thing to happen in women's software. I wanted as much technology [as possible] for girls, because we needed to show that. We needed to increase the numbers in general. And all people could see was that I was trying to put lipstick in games. And that was hard. And it was getting harder internally, because Mattel bought The Learning Company. And I found out that they bought The Learning Company on CNN. When I was driving into work. So, I went in, and they were like, "We're gonna become educational software

people. And creative software people.” And I’m like, there’s nothing left of these companies. Everyone in the industry knew. And Mattel buys them for four billion dollars, and there’s nothing really there.

And also at the same time, Brenda Laurel’s company went under. And then we buy it. David Haddad puts me in charge of going and finding out what’s left and then revitalizing the brand. I was already neck-deep in Barbie. And I said, “OK, I’ll do that, but you have to promise that there will be commercials. If you really are serious about the Purple Moon brand, and you want to create an alternate for older girls, we have to do commercial advertising.” So, Mattel was like, yes, we’re gonna do that. So, I went and I was so sad taking over Purple Moon and the dreams of all these people who’d worked so hard. And then right in the middle of production on the Purple Moon titles, Mattel said we’re no longer producing software commercials. And then the whole thing happened with The Learning Company. And I quit. It was really, really rough. And I was so close to so many people there. And it was my first big job. And I loved it so much.

CK: Yeah. I look [at] the original Purple Moon games, and I think a lot of the Barbie games, too, and I’m so sad they haven’t just reissued them for mobile. Like, they seem so perfect for it. I would play this on my phone right now.

JD: Oh my gosh, me too. I mean, it was all about play patterns. You know? I was trying to look deep into Purple Moon and say, what about the play patterns here-- and I admired Brenda so much, for all the love that she had put into it. She and I were on a panel recently at a Game Developers Conference⁸. She was like, “Well, I was always the nerdy kid in school.” And I was

like, "So was I." The Barbie thing. This whole thing? It's a glamorous representation of femininity. It's not a construct that is who I am essentially. I believe that girls need to be in front of computers. I do take an enormous amount of pride in what we created and how many girls got onto the machines that they wouldn't have touched if they didn't have *Barbie Fashion Designer*.

CK: Can you talk about why that's important? Or why that's something you care about?

JD: I went on this date with this guy. To see *Terminator 2*. We're leaving the theater, and I said, "Why are all technology movies about the destruction of humanity? Why is that always the endgame of these things?" And he said, "Because technology is destructive. It's not creative." And I was like, A, not going on another date with you. B, why do you think that? "Because men control technology, and men's nature is to create destructionism." And I was like, "But computers are creative." I had already worked for Tim Burton. I knew that they were creative. How do we keep them in the creative mode, as opposed to the destructive mode? Barbie-- all these were designers and creators, and the endgame was to get something better than when you started it from, because your ideas had to be involved with it. Every game. Even, like, our *Riding Club* games, and our pet games. I would tell them. I said, "The most important thing is about naming the pet." And marketing would be like, "No no no, we're gonna be going out on all these adventures." I'm like, "No one cares." They want a beautiful pet that they can name that is their own. And that should be enough. It's just a different way of looking at it. I saw them more as tools than full-on narrative games with endings.

Barbie's a prop for fantasy. I always used to call it "Barbie is a boat." You put all your dreams on her, and you send her off on her way. For me, in the games, she was just the opportunity to live out a wish fulfillment. Everything we did at Barbie, and I would say, everything I tried to do in my career, is about fulfilling a wish. So, I knew girls wanted to do something fun on a computer. I knew they wanted to make clothes for Barbie. So that was a wish fulfilled. I knew little girls wanted to be like mom, with nails. And Barbie had fancy nails. And they could do it together. Wish fulfilled. I didn't care what it was-- I wanted them to use their printer.

CK: What were the most important takeaways? If someone's gonna make games for girls, or get more girls on computers, like, what are the most important things to do?

JD: Context is the first. So, creating a context and a story that makes sense for girls, or giving them enough information that they can make their own context, is key to any product. And I think that's something that apps don't get enough of. So, we were always trying to establish either a narrative or an outcome. And sometimes the best commercials really do that. They establish the outcome, and then they help you get to that outcome. So, for me, it was always getting a relevant context that was exciting and engaging for a girl. You have to not only start with that. You have to show it. And if you can't show it on a box now, 'cause there are no boxes, you have to show it on the intro. And you have to support that throughout. The other thing for girls is to understand the multisensory UI. And that it's still really important. And that girls relate to their positive and negative information. They're just incredibly sensitive, especially at younger ages. Though, again, some of this stuff has changed. And then the other thing is to understand that the outcomes have to be so satisfying. In some gaming, you get the quick action dopamine

but a longer sustaining satisfaction is preferable but harder to show. Now, the other thing that I think has changed a lot-- when I was working in girls and games, there just wasn't a lot of 3D mapping. So, we would run into this a lot, where girls would get lost in the 3D world, so we would overdo the maps. If you notice, there's a lot of maps in Barbie stuff. I bet that's changed. But it was really important. Young girls, especially if they didn't have a lot of experience with computers, they got lost really easily. So those were sort of my big takeaways. I also had original music in everything. I hired bands, and I had songwriters. I love music, but I think girls love music. And we had great soundtracks, and girls played 'em in the car. I still get notes saying, "Hey! You know, that song!" You can find 'em. Somebody did a website with all the music for all the games.

CK: So you leave Mattel. And then what do you do?

JD: I got a job at Imagineering. Another passion of mine was Disney. And a friend of mine was at Imagineering. And she moved to a big dot com, and there was a space open, and there weren't very many women Imagineers. So, Joe Garlington was running something called DisneyQuest, which was an indoor interactive theme park. And he wanted to bring in a woman's point of view. And the first thing I got to do was work on Epcot. You cannot have a better job than Imagineering. As a creative, it just doesn't get better. It's like grad school for creatives, because they go all over the world. If you want to study how gondolas are made, you can go to Italy. It's just crazy. They were asking me, why aren't women and girls coming to our parks as much? Because at the time, remember Disney was being thought of as being too girly, remember? When [Disney] XD was coming out, they were like, "Oh, we know boys, and we have this--." Well.

What was also happening at Imagineering is that they were trying to get more thrill rides. And they weren't really thinking about the needs for girls and women. So, I went to Epcot, and my first thought was like, "You need more rest stops and shade." It was taking sort of what I had learned with Barbie and then CD-ROMs and now expressing it to a total location-based phenomena. And it was just incredible. But there was still a lot of unknown bias. Like, they have no idea. I gave a presentation saying-- 'cause I was just coming out of Barbie, and I was like, you know what this place really needs is Barbie princesses. And I gave a whole speech about [how](#) having [\[a\]](#) Barbie princess brand. And someone wrote a two-page hate letter, that I wanted to create a pink ghetto at Disney. When I started at Disney, the princesses weren't even really allowed to look at each other, 'cause they came from different time periods at the park. So, no Disney princess brand, marketing's still thinking about it. I'm like, doing this, and then the pink ghetto thing happens. And then they hire a guy. Comes in and says, "Let's do Disney princesses!" Different group. Consumer products. And it just takes off. And then Bippity Boppity Boutique. But I got to work on Pixie Hollow. And Tinkerbell. And my boss, God love him, he really got to understand that I was trying to bring something new.

I was there for about six months, and then Mattel called and said, "We're gonna do the Barbie movie." And I said, "You guys are liars. You guys always say you're gonna do a Barbie movie, and you never do it, and I'm never coming back, because that was the worst." And they said, "Well, if you could do it from your apartment, if you could be an independent producer, would you do it?" And at the time, also, Disney wanted me to produce Mission:SPACE, the post-show in Florida. And I was really gunning to redo Cinderella's castle for Disneyland. And I'll never forget. Marty Sklar, who's one of the original Imagineers, he sat me in Walt's office. And they

threw money at me, and they were like, "Stay. This is gonna be great." And I said, you know, "I don't want to be in space. I want to live in Cinderella's castle." And he's like, "You're sitting on Disney's couch!" And I'm like, "What if I'm the next Disney, and you don't even know that, Marty." And I think his head exploded. And then I took the job making *Barbie in the Nutcracker*.

CK: Can you talk a little bit about the Barbie movies and what you see their goal as? Because you talk about, like, the creativity and the magic with the interactive things. What's the purpose from your end on the movies?

JD: What was really interesting to me was it was a total 360. So, the Barbie movies-- and the first seven movies that we created-- I literally sat down and played out the Barbie-- the stories with dolls. Because I wanted them to be starting points for the girls to create their own stories. That's why Barbie is an actress who plays these characters in the first seven movies. It's not really about Barbie and Barbie's personality. We got out of that. It was the idea that you could be anything and create anything, so that there would be theater play and creative play. And that's how we did each one. So, each one has sort of an idea. Like, for example, *Barbie Swan Lake* is: you're braver than you think. And actually, if you watch the end of the credits, you'll see what each one is. Our organizing principle was that the story was going to show that this character was going to change because of the world around her or supported by the other characters and relationships around her. We would also build out all the toys to support those wish fulfillment ideas. So, the two worked really close together. It wasn't like the movies are commercials for the toys. I would have loved to have made software with them.

For me, every movie had to do something new. So, for example, in *Princess and the Pauper*, I produced a singing cat that was a stuffed animal that had an audio code that was not audible to the human ear but was actually interacting on the CD itself. And it would talk back and forth with the movie. It was really about sort of reconfiguring what this entertainment line would be. And at the same time, because I was able to do it with my own company, I also had a lot of autonomy. Which is why simultaneously, when I was making the Barbie movies, I decided to start my own games business. So, when I was making the Barbie movies, one of the projects that we were working on before the Mattel thing kind of all fell apart was Barbie Dreamhouse. We spent a lot of money doing a deep dive into girls and creating dollhouses online, or dollhouses on their computer. And what happened was that girls couldn't figure out how to play with Barbie, but they loved, loved decorating the dreamhouse. And I thought, well why don't I create a company and call it Digital Dollhouse, and create an online dollhouse, where girls anywhere can have their own Victorian dollhouse. And it took me seven years to get the money to actually go out there. I created Digital Playspace while we were producing the Barbie movies. And Digital Playspace was the idea that women and girls would like to create their own spaces. So, that launched in 2009. At the same time as the credit crisis. Same month. And it was a subscription-based experience.

I raised the money through an angel investor named Poju Zabludowicz, who I met through various random people. And I went to London, and he and his wife basically liked me and they gave me a million and a half dollars to put together this software company. And I did. And I ran it on servers online. We had about 500,000 unique players. And at the time, a dear friend of mine was running Barbie.com and she let me put an ad on there, and we got, like, 20 percent

clickthrough. Everybody wanted to play Digital Dollhouse. But we didn't have the server infrastructure. So, you know, crash. That was an incredible experience. Because it was something completely, 100 percent my own. And we discovered that it wasn't making any money. 2009 was a rough year. 2010 was even rougher. And I went back to Imagineering.

So, a lotta jobs at once. I'm producing the movies. I also get a job, because Paramount Digital wants to do *Clueless* as a mobile app. Right now, at this time is when *Farmville* and all these social games are going on, and they decided they want to do another simulation of Hollywood. So, they asked me to produce a Hollywood simulation game. And Digital Dollhouse. And the Barbie movies. And keepin' the whole show going. *Deadline Hollywood*, for Facebook, I produced that, and that opened me up to the idea that Facebook might be the place where somebody wants to design dollhouses together. We launched worldwide-- and I used something called Woopra Analytics, where I could watch what was happening across the world, and what I was seeing was that girls would play with their dollhouse-- our engagement numbers were through the roof-- but they would go to bed at night, and then somebody else would turn on their account, and that person would spend money. And I couldn't figure out what was going on. And then I realized grandmothers and moms were buying stuff and decorating Victorians. And they were sharing pictures with each other. And I thought well, if I can pivot this and put it into Facebook, maybe we could do something. So, we created something called *Dreamhouse Designer*. We launched on Facebook. It was actually a really big success, because we became sort of a Pinterest for games. I also worked with a technologist from Barbie, and he helped me understand that people wanted to also make their own furniture. So, you could take any furniture from any website and turn it into a piece of furniture for your dollhouse. We kept the link, so if

you wanted to buy that piece of furniture, you could click on it and then go back to where you could purchase it. It was a really, really cool game. And we could not make it profitable.

CK: Yeah. I'm struck by how much *Barbie Fashion Designer* takes this existing kind of, like, dollplay and crafting play and remediates it into the computer. And then now we've got the dollhouse being remediated into. They're original approaches but to things that are really well-established and we know people love. Right?

JD: Play patterns. All I want to do is get these play patterns. Because they're so important to humanity. You know, this is not even just girls and boys. Play patterns are key to who we are, I think, as people. To me, that was always the key strength of our games and of the movies that I created, were, the play pattern was first. Everything else was second. Here's something someone told me, when I first started out in interactive. When you're making a movie, you're really respecting the filmmaker's mind. You're guiding the story of how the filmmaker sees it. When you're making a game, you're respecting the gamer's mind, because the gamer is creating it. You're giving them the assets to create the experience. But ultimately, the control is theirs.

And I wanted to really give that experience to girls. I think that is a profound thing. That the control is yours. And I just wasn't seeing it. I wasn't seeing it in stories. Barbie is ultimately, the control is hers. You control her. She is nothing more than the avatar. Now, Mattel thinks differently. But at the time, that was the way I was approaching it.

CK: It's gotta be really difficult how much this ends up getting pushed by external-- right, like, you don't control the credit crisis. Or, you know, somebody makes a bad business deal, and then something you've been building really thoughtfully kind of gets the legs kicked out from under it.

JD: It's hard, but at the same time, it's kinda life. I've been thinking a lot about this. I just produced the latest *Curious George* movie. And I worked with a really great boss, and I was stressing out about something, and he goes, "What? You didn't know the Covid crisis was coming? You didn't know that we were all gonna be quarantined? How awful!" And I was like, you're right, you know? If there's anything to actually teach women, [\[it\]](#), is that it's not their fault. It's hard. But I got to experience a whole bunch of success, too. Even when it was the hardest, when everything was falling apart with Digital Dollhouse-- so, the end of that part, of that story, was everything's falling apart. No one's buying it. I have the servers on my credit card and a lien against my house. And as a last resort, I go and buy a 3D printer at Staples. I also always think it's like, what are the assets I have to work with? What are the things in front of me that I actually have, that I don't even think about as assets. And I realized we had all of this 3D-designed furniture, and I thought, well, maybe I can 3D print a piece of dollhouse furniture. And damn it, if that didn't work. Like, I plugged it in, and I printed out this little tiny screen. Like one you stand behind and get dressed. And I thought, this would be amazing. So, I made this video of two little girls playing *Digital Dollhouse* on the computer while they're printing out furniture behind them. And we sent it to the CEO of the printer company. And he came back and he said, "Can you make me a dollhouse for CES 2014 with 100 pieces of 3D printed furniture in six weeks?" And I hired a bunch of ex-Imagineers, and we made the most beautiful dollhouse. And

it had working furniture. Beautiful. And right before CES, the CEO called me and he goes, "Well, you know, you're gonna go there and you're gonna be really popular, and other people are gonna want you. So, what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, you could buy me." And he said, "OK. How much?" It never even occurred to me-- and I said six million dollars, because I was thinking about *The Six Million Dollar Man*. And he came back and he said, "How 'bout four million?" And that's how I sold my company. And then he took my whole technology team, and then moved me over. And then a year later, let me go and kept all of them. So that's, you know. This is a career. Comes up, goes down.

CK: So, if you were gonna give someone advice. If they wanted to make games for girls right now, what advice would you give them?

JD: Make great games for kids right now. I think that time is done. I do. I think it was important where-- when it needed to be. I'm not saying that there shouldn't be Barbie games. But I think that they should be marketed for kids. I think we had to do that at the time. Nancie and I used to have this conversation a lot. Because we would talk about, like, boy aisle, girl aisle. We had to do it at the time. I wouldn't do it again.

It even bothers me sometimes. Looking backwards, it was really isolated. I didn't want to even think about what boys needed. And that isn't appropriate. Like, now, I would do a cooking game. I would have loved to have done, like, *Easy-Bake Oven* and like a whole world around cooking, but I would never make it just girls. That particular moment in time was special. And it breaks my heart that in the 75-year book for Mattel, *Barbie Fashion Designer*'s not mentioned. It was

so popular and such a money maker that Mattel wrote a letter to Hasbro asking to buy them. On the strength of *Barbie Fashion Designer*. It moved mountains. And then it went forgot.

CK: If you're thinking about the game industry now and interactive media now, what would be your hopes for the future?

JD: It's already better. I go to a VR conference. Half of them are women. I see no more, "Oh, I might break it." That stuff just-- I just don't see it. The phone changed that. Tablets changed that. It's ubiquitous to living. So, it's not a girl thing or a guy thing. I'm just seeing lots of girls in robotics in my son's world. So, it's really changed. I definitely see there just being lots more women. And that's only gonna make the games better. It's only gonna make technology better. It's already happened.

CK: Is there anything I didn't ask about, that you want to make sure is part of the story?

JD: I think there were a lot of male advocates in this world. And maybe that's why Nancie and I, and maybe Laura Groppe and, like, other people who were sort of major players during that time-- we were really team players. Because we had the Andy Riffkins of the world. And Doug Glen. And even David Haddad, who's now the president of Warner Bros. Games, where I am. There were a lot of people who knew if this works, it's gonna be big. And they made it happen. And it just didn't exist. Making a category that didn't exist? Andy was right. There's nothing better.

The interview as it appears here is taken from a larger conversation and has been edited for length and clarity. Full interview is archived in the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at the Strong Museum of Play.

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Biographical Notes:

Carly A. Kocurek is professor of Digital Humanities and Media Studies at the Illinois Institute of Technology. She is the author of two books: *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and *Brenda Laurel: Pioneering Games for Girls* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and co-editor of the forthcoming anthology, *Historiographies of Game Studies: What It Has Been, What It Could Be (Punctum)*. Her articles have been published in journals such as *Game Studies*, *American Journal of Play*, *Visual Studies*, and *Velvet Light Trap*, and she co-edited a special issue on feminist video game history for *Feminist Media Histories*.

Leilasadat Mirghaderi is a Ph.D. candidate majoring in Technology and Humanities at the Illinois Institute of Technology. She also holds a Master of Architecture from the University at Buffalo. In her research, she is exploring how Eastern internet users use social media features with their digital activities to create a public sphere for self-expression.

Sara Simon is a Ph.D. student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, studying the history of technology. Prior to graduate school, she worked in newsroom technology and data journalism.

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