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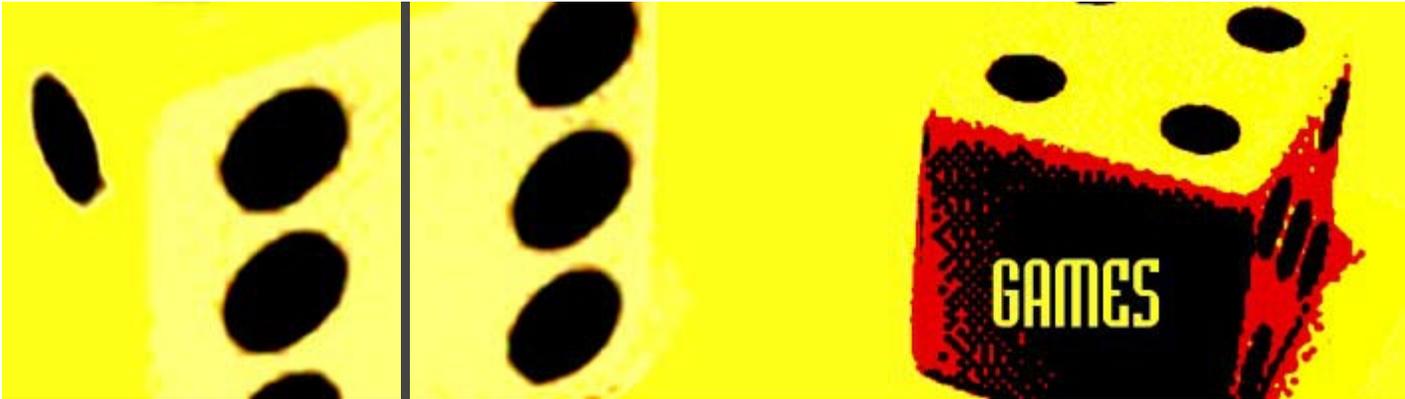
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"RUNAWAYS": DESIGNING AN ALTERNATIVE GAME FOR TEENS

RUNAWAYS

Marsha Kinder on Jul 26 1999

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Alternatives to the games played by teens.

While writing *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games : From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (University of California Press, 1992), I became interested in how television and other popular media provide children entry into narrative and thereby mediate all other forms of cultural production. I argued that television maps the world and the young viewer's position within our increasingly complex layers of networked narrative space. It defines the consumerist maze and teaches kids how to navigate its proliferating channels and promotional gaps and how to find the season's hottest hit beast at its core--whether it's Furbie or Felicity, Barbie or Buffy, Goosebumps or Austin Powers. In other words, it teaches kids how to buy into the matrix. The reason why television could perform this function more powerfully than movies was its position in the home--the mere fact that kids have access to television from the time they are infants. But now that computers, electronic games, and the internet are in the home and increasingly available to kids at a very early age, they are competing with television to perform this crucial mediating function. What gives these new interactive media an edge is that they make kids feel more empowered. As part of my book I did a case study of my son's interaction with media from infancy to age nine, incorporating his brief "version" of media history as an epigraph:

A long time ago there were no toys and everyone was bored. Then they had TV, but they were bored again. They wanted control. So they invented video games.

I was knocked out by my son's blatant emphasis on control (and worried about his growing passion for "twitch and kill" games) and was surprised by his total omission of movies. Even though "The Empire Strikes Back" was his first favorite movie, he had encountered it first on TV. His account followed not the historical chronology of the various media but rather the sequence in which he personally experienced their pleasures. I found this fascinating, and it made me want to get involved in designing electronic games that made kids feel empowered but without relying on consumerism or violence.

In my work on kids' media culture, I also became fascinated with the way tropes of instantaneous physical transformation (mutation in "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" and "X-Men" and morphing in "Muppet Babies" and "Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers") became so popular during the 1980s and 1990s. Although this trope can be traced back to a mythic figure like Proteus (the shapeshifting sea god in Homer's "Odyssey"), every incarnation has historical specificity. This trope also has developmental specificity for growing youngsters who use it to understand the dramatic changes they are experiencing in their bodies and desires. Whereas in earlier decades shape-shifters like Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman provided wishful scenarios for transforming ordinary individuals into superheroes, the Muppet Babies, Mutant Turtles and Power Rangers of the 1980s and 90s came in multiple sets, giving young consumers a choice of which superhero to select as a favorite, as if consumerist taste were a means of individualizing oneself and distinguishing one's peer group from earlier and subsequent generations. And like those toy transformers that easily convert from a car or rocket into a superhero or monster, their metamorphoses moved across species. Not only did

these tropes enter the popular imagination of global culture as an optimistic myth of comic transformation (which could also be found in popular movies like Jim Carey's "The Mask," in music videos like Michael Jackson's "Black or White," and in various software programs for digital compositing that quickly turned morphing into a visual cliché) but they helped reproduce postmodernist subjectivity in their young fans, encouraging them to see themselves as a new generation of protean shifters who can readily adapt to a fast-changing world rather than stable individuals who are stuck in frozen identities and fixed tastes. Since these quicksilver superheroes moved fluidly from one medium to another, their protean powers proved profitable in multiplying their marketability. But what if these protean powers could be used to address social change?

From Changelings to Runaways

That was the basic idea behind "The Changelings Project"--a research initiative at the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California that enabled me to put some of my ideas into practice. My goal was to develop electronic games that use transformational imagery to explore the fluidity of personal, cultural, and historical identity. Funded by a grant from the Annenberg Center, "Runaways" was the first project in the series--an experimental game for teens about kids who desperately want to change their lives. In this educational adventure game that combines live-action realism with animated fantasy, you are invited to join Searchers Inc., a Hollywood detective agency that specializes in finding teenage runaways. If you solve the test case of Rita Rodriguez, a 16-year old Latina who has been missing for three days, a case which takes you to Hollywood, East L.A., San Francisco, and Mexico, you can become a permanent member of the team and choose other cases involving other ethnic communities. But before starting the search, you must fill out an I.D. card that leads you to explore your own identity. Your choices on that I.D. card have narrative consequences that make you confront cultural stereotypes of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Once I had the basic idea for the game, I began working with Mark Jonathan Harris, an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker ("The Long Way Home" and "Delano") and an award winning writer of children's literature, who was then chair of the Production Division at USC's film school. Together we co-wrote, co-directed, and co-produced the prototype for "Runaways." As our director of graphics and animation, we chose Kristy H. Kang, a talented Korean-American artist who completed her M.A. degree in Animation at USC while working on "Runaways" and who supervised the work of other animation students on the project. Our art director was Patty Podesta, who is largely responsible for the basic "look." Formerly an independent video artist who teaches both at USC and the Pasadena Art Center, Patty has become a professional art director who has done wonderful work on Gregg Araki movies. Our programmer, William S. Hughes, is another hybrid with a dual background as an engineer and a TV cameraman, which enabled him to move fluidly between production and programming. We also hired many students from USC's School of Cinema-Television: production students shooting live action sequences with a mixture of professional actors and local teens, animation students doing graphics, critical studies students doing research, and students from all of our programs doing voice-overs. We wanted a great range of accents and inflections to get away from that so-called "standard English" that you usually hear on mainstream media. We wanted our game not only to address players of all genders and ethnicities, but also to have this kind of diversity in the fictional characters on screen and in the real-life members of the crew. That's why most of us appear on screen as Searchers who invite players to join our team.

We're all searchers. All looking for the truth of who we are and where we belong in this world. If you want to join our common search, you can apply to be a member of our team. We look for teenagers who have run away from their families or from themselves. Run to their dreams or to their nightmares. To prove you're qualified to work with us, you have to solve a case, find the missing runaway and help the runaway solve his or her problems. To be a good detective, you have to know yourself as well as the person you're searching for.

When players fill out the ID card, they are asked to import their own picture, give their date of birth, describe their physical build, and specify their biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race. The mere fact that they need to identify both race and ethnicity makes them think about the difference between those concepts. The same is true, of course, for gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation, which are usually conflated into simple binaries of male/female and straight/gay but which are separated here (with four choices for each) so that players can consider the complexity of these categories. If they want to know more about any of these choices, they can click on the "Help" button and see brief quick-time animated movies on each topic. These movies also show how gender and sexuality are related to other issues of identity--such as, class, ethnicity and race.

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In "Runaways" we were trying to create a game that allows kids to play around with images of their own gender and sexuality without fear, to challenge cultural stereotypes and to realize that these concepts are largely socially and historically constructed. While these assumptions about gender and sexuality are now widely

accepted in critical and cultural theory, we wanted to make them part of an entertaining narrative that was accessible to teenagers--a narrative that might help them feel more empowered, particularly within this realm of gender and sexuality where many kids feel very vulnerable and insecure.

From Game to Narrative

When I was doing the research for *Playing with Power*, I interviewed kids at daycare centers and video arcades and asked them why they couldn't choose to be April O'Neil in the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" arcade game and why there wasn't a female Ninja Turtle. I found that most kids merely accepted the game and its rules as a given, and the same was true for most other toys that are increasingly gendered in very rigorous ways both in the toy stores (with their separate pink and blue aisles) and in the packaging and promotion of these products. Kids rarely considered that these games and toys were made by specific people who had made specific choices, and that it might be possible to challenge or change some of these decisions. This rigorous gendering was further emphasized in the ways these toys were advertised on television so that while young kids might use their own choice of games and toys to express their own distinctive personality (the way teens do with music and clothes) or their own personal growth from one generation of superhero to another, those personal choices are still made within the "official" narrative framework that is strictly coded, particularly on what is appropriate for each gender. What always sticks in my mind is that humiliating moment on "America's Funniest Home Video" when two young boys are caught on tape secretly playing with Barbies and, as soon as they spot their parents's video camera, run screaming from the room.

Games, as a special form of narrative with explicit goals and an arbitrary set of rules, provide an excellent opportunity to negotiate the relation between social conventions and the degree of leeway allowed for performative variations by individual players. In many games (particularly in sports and gambling), the narrative dimension is barely visible within the game itself (scoring the most points, winning the hand, pot, or spin) but is refocalized on the players--their back stories, strategies, team play, and rivalries. In other modes of narrative, this tension is usually negotiated (both by authors and readers) through the deep structure of genre conventions and their hybridization. The greater the emphasis on the narrative and its proliferation of subplots, goals, intertexts, and pluralistic meanings, the less emphasis there is on the rules; in such instances, the player is encouraged to question or challenge the underlying premises of the authorial design and (in Barthes terms) to perform of a "writerly" reading of the text. In "Runaways," a game that relies heavily on melodrama (the most hybridized of all popular genres) and that purposely includes plenty of subplots, intertexts, and goals, there are relatively few rules.

To make our game more emotionally engaging, we decided we needed some kind of narrative quest or hunt that was specifically related to teens and that involved issues of identity politics. We decided to focus on the social problem of teenage runaways and did considerable research on this topic. Mark and I visited most of the teenage runaway shelters in Hollywood, interviewed their social workers and found that issues of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity were frequently very important, both as reasons for leaving home and as sources of conflict within the shelters. We sat in on discussion groups with teenage runaways and asked them whether they thought our story was realistic, and what they would advise our runaway to do, and how their own story might relate to our fictional version. They were very receptive to the game and were eager to play it when it was finished. One night we also went out on an outreach van, which distributes food to homeless teens on the streets of Hollywood and throughout the greater Los Angeles area. We tried to make this dimension of the game as realistic as possible.

To link this narrative premise with issues raised on the ID card, we designed it so that whatever information players give about themselves has narrative consequences within the game--it helps determine how they are treated and what kind of information they get about the runaway. At a certain point in the game, they can change those choices on the ID card, which will have further narrative consequences. But when you make these changes, you are not misled into thinking that your ethnicity or biological sex has really changed, but merely how you appear on screen and therefore how you are perceived by others, which gives us an opportunity to deal with the social consequences of these choices and the issue of stereotypes. The game puts you in the uncomfortable role of being treated as a stereotype and having other characters make all sorts of false assumptions about you, and this experience encourages you to be more of a shape shifter.

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We know that a lot of kids will choose to "misrepresent" themselves or to perform other identities when they play the game. We expect many kids to take a playful attitude toward the ID card, and that's fine with us. Instead of importing their own picture, they can scan in any image to stand in for them or can choose an image from our database of faces. We have purposely given them this wide range of choices. But we also think that for some kids who see themselves as marginal (particularly gay teens) or who feel that their existence is rarely acknowledged by popular culture, these options may be much more meaningful.

Choosing the Test Case

In our prototype, the runaway is a Latina named Rita Rodriguez who has an older

Chinese-American boyfriend at San Francisco State, a choice that does not make her parents happy. As her parents see it, this is merely one of Rita's many bad decisions, but her parents have their own problems. For one thing, they come from different class backgrounds and have different conceptions of what it means to be a good parent. And for Rita herself, there is also an issue of adoption, a possible pregnancy, a slap in the face, a rebellion against the rules, and a lack of communication with her parents--a paradigm of melodramatic motives for running away from home.

We also constructed a paradigm of runaway cases. Since the Searchers' office is based in Hollywood, a city comprised of many ethnic communities and a mecca for teenage runaways from all across the nation, we had a diverse cast to choose from. In addition to Rita, we have written treatments for five other cases: a 13 year old Anglo boy from a small town in Oregon who has run away from an abusive father and who is being sought by his older brother who ran away three years ago; a 16 year-old mulatta from Arkansas who has run away from an alcoholic mother to pursue her dreams of independence in Hollywood; a 17 year-old Russian emigre who wants to be a ballet dancer and whose parents fear he is lost in the gay world of West Hollywood; a 17-year old Vietnamese-American girl who is afraid to tell her parents she is pregnant; and a 16-year old bright, athletically gifted African American girl who wants to play college basketball and who is now being sought by her grandmother.

In deciding which runaway to use as our prototype, we were looking for a story with strong visual appeal--that's one reason why we chose Mexican-American culture. We wanted to stress not just the problems but also the rich cultural heritage. More specifically, we wanted to show how the outdoor murals throughout Los Angeles are part of the great artistic legacy of Mexico. Thus, we made some of Rita's friends taggers and her biological mother a muralist and have Rita follow her to Mexico where she is studying the works of artists--like Rivera, Orozco, and Siquieros--and to the Pyramids of Teotihuacan, where they find provocative connections between Mexican and Chinese imagery. Both Rita and her Chinese-American boyfriend are video makers who share a strong interest in artistic expression as a means of exploring their own personal and cultural identity.

Knowing that kids are very sophisticated in reading visual culture, we wanted our game to have a rich visual texture--not only in combining various cultures and aesthetics but also in mixing live action footage with animation and melodrama with magic. We also wanted to make the language as rich as possible. Some of the dialogue is in Spanish and in Mandarin Chinese--parts that need to be translated. The Latino teens who tested the game felt empowered by the presence of Spanish because it meant that they could draw on their own cultural resources to solve the mystery. It gave them an edge they were not used to having in computer games. While one said, "it taught me more about my own culture," another admitted: "It showed me I have to brush up on my Spanish!"

Testing "Runaways" with Teens

We tested our game with over 100 Los Angeles teens at three different stages in the production: during the writing and research, at the midpoint in production, and after completing the prototype. We received enthusiastic responses from both girls and boys and especially from the Latino and African American communities. We also got positive reactions both from avid players who were used to "twitch and kill" games ("It's the first non-violent, non-sports game that really caught my eye,") and from teens who had never played an electronic game before ("I wish I could own a game like this!"). The midpoint tests were particularly encouraging. We invited a group of eight teens from a local high school in South Central Los Angeles to our lab, where they played the unfinished prototype. Ranging in age from 15 to 17, they included an equal number of males and females as well as an equal number of Latino and African American students. Since we were interested in seeing whether the game could motivate group play across the boundaries of gender and ethnicity, we allowed different students to take turns at the mouse while the whole group looked on. Although this strategy tended to make the one at the mouse more self-conscious about filling out the questionnaire, they all seemed eager to have a turn and to have the ID card reflect their own personal identity. They all appeared very engaged in the game and most of them responded verbally to the interviews with Rita's parents and boyfriend, giving ideas about where to look for Rita and why she had fled. The Latino students were particularly vocal when the dialogue was in Spanish, apparently very pleased to share their knowledge with the group. At the end of the play session, when asked what, if anything, they had learned from the game, one young man responded, "Well, you really can't tell about a person when you first meet them. You have to really know more about them." We were pleased with this response because we thought it demonstrated they were getting beyond the initial stereotypes.

In designing the game, we tried not to imply that every kid who runs away is necessarily at fault because there are some homes that really are dangerous. On the other hand, we didn't want to encourage kids to run away or minimize the real dangers that are out on the street. So it becomes a question of realistic problem solving. While a twelve year old African American girl said, "In this game, you could help find the person and give them their life back," her boyfriend concluded, "It shows you that it's tough out there...and what happens to you if you hang around with the wrong people." We purposely don't have a single happy ending, but four different possible resolutions which each has its own limitations. We tried to take a complex approach to Rita's

problems, to show that there are always multiple explanations and that blame usually belongs neither solely to the runaway or to the parents. It's usually more of a combination where everyone is partly to blame. What was heartening was that the kids really liked this approach to the problem because they thought it was realistic. As one girl put it, "What I liked about the game is that it had to do with reality and what could really happen in life." Several of them said that the game was more realistic than any other game they had seen and that moved them. We were also pleased that the girls were as vocal as the boys and that both groups realized the game was designed for both genders.

Alternative to What?

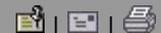
"Runaways" is an alternative game in a double sense: it presents an alternative not only to the majority of games that are targeted at young males, but also to those newer games designed exclusively for girls by companies like Mattel, Purple Moon and Games for Girls. Although the latter succeeded in proving that there is a girls' market out there for electronic games (a crucial achievement which should not be underestimated), they also risked reinforcing the great divide between boys and girls. Although these products are based on extensive corporate research about what girls like in games, there is a circularity in these studies for these tastes are socially constructed. Even when kids are designing their own games, as in Yasmin Kafai's fascinating studies, it is not as if this reveals distinctive biological tendencies that are immune to cultural influences. I think kids learn very early what they are expected to like; if their parents, teachers, and friends don't tell them, then television advertising does. For example, there is no inherent reason why little boys shouldn't like little ponies, but they can clearly see from television ads that "My Little Pony" is designed exclusively for girls.

What we were trying to do in "Runaways" is to design a game that not only could address both girls and boys but also might motivate cross gender play--that is, making it more fun to play the game with people of another gender. We did this by explicitly calling attention to issues of gender and sexuality, and we hoped to accomplish the same kind of goal on the register of ethnicity. Although we chose a Latina protagonist for our first case study and included other strong female characters, we also included strong male characters of other ethnicities as well. Our tests showed that boys liked the game as much as girls did, and that young players of color were particularly enthusiastic, regardless of their gender.

The Next Step

By the time we finished the prototype for "Runaways," we realized that the CD-ROM game market was in serious decline. We became more interested in using the prototype for an internet version for multiple players, which we are now designing. In this version, a player will choose to be either the searcher or the runaway and will be able to invent her own character and write his own back story. Since there will be stronger links to real life cases and more interactivity, this version will provide a vicarious alternative to actually running away from home. The movements of these fictional runaways will be followed not only in "daily bulletins" on the Searchers Website, but also in virtual squats and in chat groups and bulletin boards throughout cyberspace. This website will allow new players to preview the test case of Rita Rodriguez, to become a permanent member of the Searchers, to be assigned new cases, to receive daily bulletins about fictional searches in progress, and to gain access to public archives and other sites dealing with real-life runaways. In this way, we hope the game will spread like a benevolent virus throughout cyberspace, recruiting new players, providing potential runaways a vicarious mode of escape, and stimulating interest in this real-life social problem. Most important, we hope it fulfills the promise of one of the African American teens in our final test group:

If it goes out on the internet, or even to different schools...it could give students a chance to find out they aren't the only ones who are running away.



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