

Anastasia Niehof

February 14, 2003

Assignment 2—Children’s Game Analysis

While I was growing up, my family would often stay at my grandparents’ house during the summer. Of course everything at your grandparents’ house is special, but one of our favorite things to do there was play what we called The Barbie Game. (Technically it was the 1960 version of the game and its full name is “Barbie: Queen of the Prom.” Although it focuses on high school activities, it is aimed at girls old enough to play with Barbie dolls, probably ages 8-14.) It seemed unique and innocent, especially since it was such an old game, and I’m sure none of us considered that it might be shaping our values and ideas. Looking back, however, a careful critique of the game reveals its limiting point of view. “Barbie: Queen of the Prom” reinforces stereotypical white middle class values for women by purporting that their life is shaped by money, fate, and popularity as determined mainly by appearance.

The main goal of the game is to become queen of the prom, which one does by being the first player to land on a certain space in the middle of the board. In order to enter that center region, a player must have first purchased a prom dress, be president of a school club, and have a steady boyfriend; only then can she try to roll the right numbers to actually make it to the center and be queen.

Achieving the preliminary goals of a dress, a club presidency, and a steady boyfriend is accomplished by traveling around the board through rolling the die or the occasional small directional card which would send you somewhere on the board. Money is a key factor in this game since it is necessary to buy a dress, so the beginning of the game often involves trying to get

to the spaces where one can earn money. One outside space offers \$10 for one modeling session (landing on the space), which is an excellent start since the dresses range from \$35-\$65. (There are four choices for each of the goals; each one has a large card with a sketch of it and a player can get any combination she likes.) Other ways one can earn money include:

- circling the board because you receive allowance (\$3) at home
- entering an interior section that contains opportunities such as “wash dishes, address envelopes, walk the neighbor’s poodles, and babysit,” all for around \$5
- picking up the right cards that say things similar to those listed above.

There is no provision for an after-school job and no suggestion that a player could do chores such as mowing the lawn or shoveling the snow.

The other interior sections are attending school, achieving a club presidency, and “make a date.” The school section’s most interesting square is the one that says, “You have a headache; go home.” Club presidencies offered show a range of interests, perhaps the widest scope of choices available in the game: academic, sports, music, and drama are the options. A player has to have a boyfriend already (obtained by picking a card or landing on a square) to enter “make a date,” and then some of the squares in the section will result in “going steady,” at which point the player turns her boy card over so she can see his face.

There is little to no cooperation present in the way this game is set up—each player is on her own in the quest to obtain the three requirements. However, the way we played it was highly dependent on each person’s preferences for certain boys and dresses, so a player was seen as cooperative if she left the dress or boy that was another player’s favorite even if she had the chance to take it. Conversely, a player who grabbed the first boy she landed on was accused of

“settling” or “stealing.” Players’ preferences must be based mainly on the drawings of dresses and boys, since the game doesn’t offer much incentive to choose one over another. Exceptions would include the price of the dresses since they vary and the pickiness of the player—if a player is insistent that she does not want to be president of the athletics club because she’s not an athlete, for example. As children, the most important factor for us (and I suspect we were not unusual) was which boy to choose—Ken, the typical handsome one? Tom, the glasses-wearing, intellectual-looking one? Bob, the athletic-looking one? or Poindexter, the red-haired one? (All of them, as well as all the dress models, are white.) The game gives little clue to their personalities other than cryptic messages on the cards, the most memorable of which is, “Poindexter wrote a poem about you and earned \$5 when he published it.”

Obstacles are more minor inconveniences than major setbacks or true conflict and usually involve a small loss of money or being sent somewhere else on the board. Reasons given offer clues to the philosophy behind the game; the following samples come from cards and game squares.

- Your date says he doesn’t like your hair. Do something about that ‘do! Go to beauty parlor. (Landing on “beauty parlor” means paying \$3.)
- It’s your mother’s birthday—go to the snack shop to buy her some candy. (Each time you visit the snack shop, you need to pay \$3.)
- You get caught in the rain with no umbrella; go home.
- Your hemline falls down—run home to stitch it up!

(Notice the emphasis on relationships and appearance in the above list.) Additional financial penalties are imposed based on your relationship’s status at that point in the game: if you

haven't yet gotten a boyfriend and started going steady (two separate steps), there are several squares (beach party, dance party, football game) where you have to pay your entrance fee.

However, once you have a steady boyfriend, you never have to pay these fees again, and from this fact of the game, two important concepts emerge: first, that social class as represented by money is vital to getting ahead, and second, that relationships are crucial to women since they offer social status and financial stability. Both of these concepts continue to be borne out by sociological research today. In the game, you cannot advance without money because you need to buy the dress, get your hair done, etc. Sociologists have documented that social class intersects with gender to limit people's choices (Renzetti and Curran 114).

If a girl is not born into money, she can marry into it, and so relationships are also a way of seeking financial gain. For this and other reasons, girls are taught to value themselves in relation to males, a fact which is shown in the game by the need for a boy date to even get to the prom, and which has also been shown in recent studies: "[Girls'] socialization experiences have taught them to see themselves *relationally*... to maintain and preserve the relationships they value (Renzetti and Curran 115)." These goals continue as the girls grow up: "For women in college, the peer culture emphasizes involvement in romantic relationships and a concern with being physically attractive to men" (Renzetti and Curran 123). From the description of the game given above, the Barbie game's focal points are clearly romantic relationships and physical appearance, since the ultimate goal of the game requires a romantic relationship and perfect appearance as represented by flawless hair and clothes.

If the values are so shallow, why then do girls like this game? The appeal of the game lies in that it creates its own little world such as might have existed in 1950s small-town America or

an entirely created world, like the pages of Archie comic books or an episode of “Happy Days.” Players get to live vicariously, doing things they dream about doing since most players will never experience most aspects of the game in reality. Its underlying values remain troubling, however: a player’s fate is determined largely by the roll of the die, and even the possibilities open to her are limited. Even scarier, as this paper has shown by comparing its values to the findings in modern sociological studies, is that many of its values are still represented in our culture today, without the fun. And in a system where only one player gets to be queen, many people, both men and women, will be losers.

References:

Renzetti, Claire M. and Daniel J. Curran. *Women, Men, and Society*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.