

She's Got Game

by Monique Bos

Brenda Brathwaite didn't set out to become an expert on sex in video games. But during her tenure as lead designer on *Playboy: The Mansion*, she realized the industry needed ways to discuss and assess adult content in games. So she stepped into the breach, offering roundtables, launching an Internet discussion group, and ultimately, writing a book on the topic.

Now, a Presidential Fellowship for Faculty Development from the Savannah College of Art and Design — where Brathwaite has taught interactive design and game development since 2006 and was promoted to chair of the department in 2008 — has enabled her to parlay her expertise into an exhibition and PowerPoint presentation for parents.

Brathwaite, the mother of three children under age 10, combines her industry knowledge with a recognition of the questions parents face as they decide which games are and aren't appropriate for their children.

The PowerPoint, "What You Don't Know About Video Games," provides parents with information about the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, which rates each game similarly to how the Motion Picture Association of America rates films, and what the various rating levels mean.

Brathwaite's research into sexuality in games stemmed from her work as lead designer on *Playboy: The Mansion* from 2002-04. She discovered that no one was talking much about sexuality in video games, yet it seemed like an important issue. So in 2005, she held a roundtable, "Sexuality in



With the help of a SCAD Presidential Fellowship for Faculty Development, interactive design and game development professor Brenda Brathwaite created a presentation for parents addressing adult content in video games.

Games: What's Appropriate?" at the annual Game Developers Conference, providing a forum for game developers on all sides of the issue to discuss their views and experiences. She discovered that industry professionals had confronted a variety of challenges in regard to adult content and were eager to discuss their experiences. "After that roundtable, I sort of became the go-to person," she said. "I talked about something that no one else had talked about and I wanted to explore the topic in an academic way."

Brathwaite subsequently founded and chaired the International Game Developers Association's Sex Special Interest Group (www.igda.org/sex). She also wrote a book, *Sex in Video Games* (Charles Rivers Media, 2006), and has continued to speak on the topic at numerous conferences, including the annual GDC event, where she has been an invited presenter in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Brathwaite opposes censorship, yet emphasizes the fact that not all content is appropriate for all audiences. "People have a right to make what they want, provided they are responsible about it," she said. If a game has adult content, the designer "has a responsibility to make sure that kids don't get their hands on it. But they do have a right to make it," she explained.

That focus on responsibility informs her PowerPoint, which aims to demystify game ratings and content, and equip parents with the knowledge to make informed decisions about what games they allow their children to play.

Parents and game designers aren't the only ones Brathwaite has targeted with information about responsible choices. She has brought her expertise in sexual content, as well as her sense of humor, to her work on a game being produced by the University of

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Connecticut to promote safe-sex practices, including abstinence. “They’re developing a safer-sex video game that targets at-risk urban youth,” she explained. “The message is to help prevent STDs, AIDS and unwanted pregnancy.”

Her prominence in the field of adult content in video games, however, doesn’t mean Brathwaite hasn’t successfully pursued other avenues as well. She recently was selected to participate in an invitation-only Game Design Challenge at the 2008 GDC, held in San Francisco Feb. 18-22, for which she and other high-profile designers were tasked with creating an interspecies game.

Named one of the “100 most influential women in the game industry” by Next Generation magazine, Brathwaite has worked on 22 internationally known video games, including the award-winning *Wizardry and Jagged Alliance* series. |



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Harry Eelman, Princeton, N.J., B.F.A. student in film and television, *Clouds Passing*, photography, 2007. Eelman took this photo while participating in the SCAD off-campus program to Argentina and Peru in December 2007.