

y Dee Warner

fter years of producing nothing but sports simulations, shoot-'em ups, and testosterone-driven adventure role-playing games, game programmers have begun to focus their energies on ensnaring the other half of the computer-owning public: girls. It is true that when they're young, many girls LIKE sports, shoot-'em ups, and role-playing games, but eventually there comes a time when girls put down their soccer balls and pick up a mascara wand, trade games of Cowboys and Indians for Spin the Bottle, and generally realize that there's a whole world of boys, clothes and teen magazines out there to be discovered. McKenzie & Co. from Her Interactive is a game for that moment of life. It is an idealized version of high school that teaches girls to be intelligent and strong — but still comes with free lipstick.

#### [This week on McKenzie & Co....](#)

The game is played from the point of view of either Kim or Carly, both juniors at Madison High School. Madison High is populated by a complete collection of stereotypes: a nerd, a jock, a country and western dude, a foreign exchange student, a earthy-crunchy hippie chick, a rebel, a twangy cowgirl, and lots of zany and eccentric teachers. Your goal, as Kim or Carly, is simply to do homework, take tests, earn money, shop, hang out with friends, and, most importantly, get a date for prom. To help you out, you have a big (and racially diverse) group of girlfriends and your oh-so-sensitive "best guy pal" Bryan.

At the very beginning of the game, you must choose whether to play as Kim or Carly. Both girls are relentlessly perky and wholesome. Your only real choice is whether you want to be a WASPy thespian with a hat fetish or a star gymnast and cheerleader. McKenzie's first disappointment is that you don't get the choice to play any of the far cooler and more interesting characters, for example: soccer star and tomboy Sam (anthea) or the straight-talking Trish.

Once you settle on who you are, you must decide which boy you want to pursue. The basic version of McKenzie offers a selection of four guys, two each for Kim or Carly. There is also an add-on disk available (for a price) with two more potential conquests. The guys are the least realistic part of the whole game: they are all wealthy, cute, and insufferably polite. I don't remember these guys at MY high school.

After these important choices are made, the plot unfolds as a week in the life of your character. Some scenes, such as your first encounter with the guy of your dreams, are interactive video clips which let you choose your next line in a conversation or your next course of action. Others, such as taking tests at school or earning money at your job, involve playing arcade-style games. These games are all based on three classic models (Tetris, Space Invaders, and Concentration) but their executions are far more complex and interesting than I would have expected. Particularly nerve-wracking was the "art test", in which you must identify which of eight small images show a detail of a series of classic paintings. These mini-games add a great deal to both the length of each game and to their replayability.

[Ohmigod, it's so, like, my life ...](#)

The makers of McKenzie assembled an advisory panel of both male and female teenagers, lending a degree of realism to the dialog and action. Best of all, the writers have included modern and sassy dialog choices as well as more traditional giggly-girl responses and both seem to work equally well for getting the guy. The teenage actors also all do a very good job of fleshing out the cardboard cutouts they play (except for the hapless exchange student Lars Larsen, but really, who could make lines like “Ja Ja, I am exchanged stooudent” sound credible?)

McKenzie also does a very good job of presenting a good role-model for preteens and junior high schoolers. In the game, you are rewarded for such virtues as doing your homework, keeping your obligations, being responsible, and doing well in school. The guys even like it if you show that you’ve got a brain.

... But it’s also so, like, no way

Where McKenzie becomes a bit more morally ambiguous is in its heavy emphasis on product placement and materialism. A large chunk of the game is taken up with shopping and trying on clothes and makeup. In many ways this makes the game function more like electronic Barbies or paper dolls than a liberated training ground for the next generation of women.

The game also serves as one big advertisement. In the opening video sequence, you learn that McKenzie, the game’s namesake, is a car that the girls have pooled their money to buy together. In fact, you learn that the car is a Geo, as in “Hey, I heard you guys just bought a new GEO,” and “Yeah, we’re really excited about our GEO,” and “When can I see your new GEO” over and over again. To Her Interactive’s credit, the GEO does not come up again after the introductory sequence, but still I was far from surprised when I noticed Chevrolet Motor Division is one of the game’s sponsors. Similarly, the mall where the gang shops is filled with actual stores, and each girl’s room comes equipped with a copy of Teen magazine and a vanity full of brand-name makeup to try out (also all sponsors).

McKenzie & Co. also suffers from some real technical problems. The game is stored on five CDs, a main disk and one for each guy you choose, so there is much switching of disks and waiting for them to mount. One of the CDs also doesn’t run properly: money that you earn on the job and stuff that you pick up never makes it into your inventory as it should. I also never could get the “pretend to put on makeup” module to run properly. Most aggravating of all, though, is the absolute lack of a troubleshooting guide in the game manual. Admittedly, there is some basic installation information and a tech support number in a “Read Me” file on the disk, but it is nowhere near the level of detail found in most other games — for guys.

### The Bottom Line

Beyond the philosophical question of whether McKenzie & Co. is a positive or negative influence on our nation’s girls, it is a heck of a lot of fun to play. For a thirteen year-old girl, just finishing her first Judy Bloom book and dying to be grown up at last (at an age that high school students are considered “grown up”), it offers a great way to play at being older. Even a jaded old married lady like me felt a little thrill when that right guy gave Carly her first kiss and asked her to the prom. If Her Interactive can only find a way to smooth out the clunky interface and ease up on the relentless marketing, McKenzie & Co. would be a good first step in designing some fun for the rest of us.

### Pros

- Surprisingly challenging mini games
- Encourages positive values like responsibility and intelligence

### Cons

- Too much product placement
- Lame guys to choose from
- Very buggy with minimal tech support
- Unwieldy interface

#### Publisher Information

Her Interactive

4801 Lincoln Road NE

Albuquerque, New Mexico 87109

<http://www.her-online.com>