

# Computer games



## ‘Start telling the story of female gamers and developers’

Writing about women in games in the Nordic countries is really writing about women in games in the world. The medium’s audience is uniquely global and the industry’s employment market is characterized by its international nature and high mobility.

With annual revenues currently at 75.2 billion USD and rapidly growing, games are by far the largest entertainment industry in the world. Mainstream media have not on the whole covered the growth of the games industry in a serious manner. Indeed even the misconception that games are a somehow marginal medium is still wide-spread among culture writers, tastemakers and many academics. Perhaps gamers are under-represented in these groups – but they are certainly abundant everywhere else.

According to Newzoo Games Market Research, 1.2 billion of the earth’s 6.4 billion inhabitants play digital games. A useful comparison is the number of people connected to the internet: about 2.8 billion.

Just over half of US households own a dedicated console (a device used primarily for gaming). 48 per cent of game players in the US are female, and of the most frequent purchasers of video games 50 per cent are female. Trends in the Entertainment Software Association’s latest report are worth quoting at length:

Women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (36%) than boys age 18 or younger (17 per cent). The number of female gamers age 50 and older increased by 32 per cent from 2012 to 2013 ... Adult gamers have been playing for an average of 16 years, with adult men averaging 18 years and adult women averaging 13 years. The average age of the most frequent game purchaser is 35.



PHOTO: Birke Pedersen

### The Author

**Johanna Koljonen** is a Finnish broadcaster, writer, critic and media analyst working primarily in Sweden. She is an expert on the game design tradition of progressive Nordic Larp and designs as well as teaches transmedia. In 2011, she won the Swedish Grand Journalism Award in the Innovator of the Year category. She is a founding partner of the public service production house Rundfunk Media AB.

77 per cent of gamers play with others at least one hour per week ... 18 per cent play with parents. 32 per cent play with other family members ... 14 per cent play with their spouse or significant other.

The above statistics seem to support the mainstream understanding that games historically skewed male. But they also demonstrate that equal numbers of female players have enjoyed gaming for a long time. The rapid increase in female players over the age of 50 probably reflects smartphone penetration, since all demographics using these devices enjoy casual games. But another aspect is that the generation that started gaming in the late 70s and early 80s in arcades, and eventually at home on devices such as the Commodore 64, Apple II or Atari 800, are moving into the 50+ age bracket. Many of them never stopped playing, and a portion of them were always women.

The question of 'women in games' includes a cluster of issues that are in no way unique to games. The low presence of women in the industry, particularly in engineering positions, reflects the relative absence of women in technology in general. (A recent International Game Developer's Association survey, for instance, puts women at 22 per cent of respondents; the actual number is assumed to be lower. The Swedish computer games industry reports 16 per cent women.) The often stereotypical and sometimes sexist portrayal of female characters in game fictions is traditional to entertainment targeting heterosexual young males, as is sexually suggestive marketing. The treatment of women in those social environments around gaming that are predominantly or historically male is often poor – or even inexcusable – but again not all that different from other boys' clubs.

Still, it is surprising that the role of women in the field has become a topic for discussion only relatively recently. This goes both for serious study of working conditions and access, feminist criticism of the works themselves, and popular debate about the validity of such questions, exemplified in 2014 by the so called #gamergate controversy.

As we are going to print, #gamergate is still unfolding, but I shall attempt a brief description. What began as the disgruntled ex-boyfriend of a female games developer making claims on the internet that she had slept with games critics for better reviews – claims that have since been entirely debunked – rapidly developed

into two separate but intimately connected online movements, both using the hashtag #gamergate on social media.

One is a well-documented organized campaign of harassment and terror aimed at female game developers (especially of small-scale games outside the commercial mainstream), feminist and other politically progressive critics of games, female and feminist games scholars, and journalists and games reviewers writing favourably about the previous categories, or taking a stand against the #gamergate lynch mob. Targets are harassed online as well as in their homes after the addresses of many of them have been made available online.

On top of your run-of-the-mill cyberbullying, targets have been subjected to hacking and other cyber attacks, as well as threats of violence, sexual violence and death. One incident involved the threat of a school shooting at a university campus where a #gamergate target was to give a talk. #Gamergate has already resulted in some women resigning from work with the games industry, not because working conditions in themselves are intolerable, but because elements of the audience are just too toxic to interact with.

The other part of #gamergate is a less organized, but numerically significant, campaign for 'ethics in games media', ethics vaguely understood to be undermined by personal relationships between developers and critics. This part of #gamergate nonsensically claims to be ideologically unrelated to the harassment campaign, although it was triggered by the false claims reported above, and seems to focus its ire on small independent games companies and small-scale progressive games media, as well as on female games writers and developers perceived to have a 'social justice agenda' (which in #gamergate parlance is a bad thing).

The well-known dependency of big commercial games media on the largest advertisers, including longstanding practices of trading access for favourable reviews, are at least at this time largely untouched by #gamergate rage, even though such practices arguably hurt the industry more than indie games fans being privately acquainted with indie games developers.

It is questionable whether #gamergate will affect ethics in games reporting, although that would of course be welcome. But it has drawn attention to the traditional idea of digital gaming being dominated by a subculture of 'hard-core gamers', the predominantly male group for whom specific types of gaming is an identity, and

for whom #gamergate purports to speak. Such gamers do exist, although the group includes women too. But digital gaming today also includes many other types of gamers and gaming, the very fact against which #gamergate conservatives are fundamentally now reacting.

Most of the challenges limiting women in gaming circle back to the factually false narrative in which *games* are made by men for men, and where *gaming culture* is produced and consumed by men. Mainstream media (and many games media) have for decades consistently reproduced this story, forcing self-identified female gamers to negotiate their position relative to a norm that others them. A norm that partly exists, it should be added, because of its value to those male gamers who construct masculinity through their participation in typically male-coded 'hard-core gamer' subcultures.

This vocal minority is financially significant to the industry and has been culturally powerful, although the criminal behaviours of the #gamergate mob is making that affiliation less attractive to many hardcore gamers of a more reasonable nature (and over time, I predict, for advertisers and employers too). Even so, the increasing presence of other types of games and female gamers in the marketplace was hardly a threat in any practical way to the interests of the hegemonic Gamer Male.

The already existing broad presence of women in the pastime has not diminished the market for games aimed at young men, just as the movie-going habits of middle-aged women are no threat to the summer blockbuster. But a correction in the *narrative* of what the word 'gamer' can mean would probably undermine group identities historically based around exclusivity, expertise and gender.

Perhaps the rage some male gamers display at progressive critique of the field should be understood like that of some Christians at the presence of female clergy, gay weddings or heavy metal-themed masses in churches. Obviously conservative Christians can still choose other services, but one can understand why some would see such changes as threatening to modify a group identity that has great personal importance to them.

That said, it would be utterly unreasonable to protect a niche group's feelings by pretending that women are not already in games – playing them, making them, engaging with them, portrayed in them. If they weren't, we should be fighting for their admittance; as it is, we should look at how inclusive the environments are, at the

processes affecting selection into professional careers in the field, and at whether the industry stands up for its female employees in the face of the misogyny of a segment of its customer base.

The presence of women in games is actually very similar to that of women in film. Just as in games, there are clearly many hurdles for women working in that industry. But we would never portray a female moviegoer as a fascinating exception to a cultural norm, as often happens with women who play games.

Since arguing for equality between the sexes is not in itself a controversial position in the Nordic region, this is, finally, a cultural space where our women in games – and their male allies – could perhaps stand up for change. But faced with an immediate online audience, operating in a global marketplace, and often at games studios owned by international corporations, this is no small thing to ask for. Even so, industry groups in Sweden and Finland were among the first to protest #gamergate harassers in their own customer base.

The burden to act for equality in games is shared by all the other forms of media. We must start telling the story of the female gamer and the woman game developer, not as a rare unicorn, nor indeed as a member of a victimized minority, but as she is today: ever-present. The rest will follow.

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# Donna – inclusive game development by example

In Sweden, several universities and schools offer programmes in computer game development. At the University of Skövde, we host over 500 active students in the field spread over five different bachelor's programmes – Music, Sound, Programming, Graphics, Game Design and Game Writing – and two master's programmes – Serious Games and Media Aesthetics and Narration. Unfortunately, we have severe difficulties attracting female students to our programmes, in particular to the more technical ones such as programming and game design.

In an attempt to break this pattern, we initiated Donna with the outspoken goal to increase the number of female students in our programmes in order to achieve (gender) inclusive game development, which includes diversity in both teams and game design. Donna is currently organised into three different sub-groups, a steering group, DONNAstudent and Donna Network. Donna's ambition is to bring the issue of gender equality and diversity in the game community to the political agenda.

## Donna activities

We have given game design workshops and attended several high school expos in an attempt to recruit students. We have also presented Donnas and discussed gender equality in the games industry at game expos and conferences, for example at Gotland Game Conference 2013 and at Nordisk Forum in 2014. We are also an active part in a research project, Diversi, which aims to work with diversity in all relevant areas including (but not limited to) education, game content, game communities and companies. Donnas has furthermore arranged workshops for the teaching staff at the Game Development Programmes in Skövde in order to increase their competence in norm criticism and gender equality.

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**Jenny Brusk**, PhD, is the Director of the Computer Game Development-Design Program, University of Skövde, Sweden, and initiator and coordinator of Donna. Jenny has been part of the game industry since 1996 when she started as a game programmer at Tati/Vision Park. Since 2003 she has worked with the game educations at the University of Skövde and at the former University of Gotland (now University of Uppsala Campus Gotland).



PHOTOS: Private

PHOTO: Cecilia Fransson



## Diversi

Diversi started in 2013 as an initiative by Dataspelebranschen (Swedish Games Industry) and the research company Praxikon with support from the Vinnova (Swedish Innovation Agency) project Genuslabbet. In 2014 Diversi started a petition for diversity and equality, against hate, threats and sexism #gamediversity. In just a few days, thousands of people connected to games in Sweden have signed and taken a stand.



*The janitor's closet in the game Alex & the Museum Mysteries. @Jarnimal Studios*



#### Facts

The purpose of inclusive game design is also to make the game developers feel more welcome. Two thirds of the team behind the game Alex & the Museum Mysteries are women, which is a very rare group composition within both game education and the game industry.

#### Jenny Brusik

In 2012 Jenny Brusik received the local Anna Lindh Award for her work on gender equality in the gaming industry (the award is named after former Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs Anna Lindh, who was assassinated in 2003).

In 2012 we were approached by Doris Film, who wanted to collaborate in creating a game following their manifesto. This resulted in the game Alex & the Museum Mysteries created by a team of students as part of their course work. Below, we will introduce the game and our experiences of working with gender inclusive game development.

#### Alex & the Museum Mysteries

*Alex & the Museum Mysteries* [Alex & museets mysterium] is a point-and-click PC game. The player controls Alex and solves various puzzles with the help of Hedvig the ghost, once an infamous scholar who now roams the museum searching for her lost research. With the help of a magnifying glass and a flashlight, the player searches every dark corner of the old museum to discover its secrets. The player explores the museum in both the present and the past through time travel. Thus, time and the story's progression become crucial elements in both the story and the structure of the game.

The game allows children to curiously explore a game world without receiving commercial or gender stereotypical messages. By working with inclusive gender game development, the goal has been to create a game that both boys and girls can enjoy. Girls and women are often expected to identify with male characters, but not the other way around. By simply applying the Bechdel test to recent top box office films, the pattern is made very clear. By playing as Alex, boys get to experience an adventure through a female avatar. For girls, Alex is an avatar similar to those they can identify with, and also a powerful, curious and positive character.

The game has the goal of sparking an interest in science and encourage a child's curiosity and yearning for discovery. Science is combined with thrilling mysteries while the player is driven to explore, experiment and solve problems. The game is primarily focused on the natural sciences, but each chapter has its own theme introducing a new research area. Apart from the main thematic story the player delves into archaeology, anthropology, mathematics and engineering. In Chapter one, Alex and Hedvig travel to the 1800s where they meet Alexander Rhind, an archaeologist who needs help solving a mystery with aid ancient Egyptian mathematics.

There are both female and male characters in the story, and their parts are not assigned according to stereotypical gender roles. By showing female scientific personalities we create new role models

for young boys and girls with the help of potential role models who have not been given much light throughout history.

To further increase the inclusiveness, the game mechanics are designed to be simple and intuitive so even children with little or no computer skills can understand the game. Instead, the challenge can be found in the game's puzzles for which time travel and classic elements of the point-and-click genre lay the foundation. The puzzles are built to encourage curiosity, experimentation and logical thinking. As players progress, they are rewarded with a new piece of the story. The story is structured into chapters, where the completion of one gives the player an additional piece to the main puzzle: finding Hedvig's lost research.

The purpose of inclusive game design is also to make the game developers feel more welcome. Two-thirds of the team behind the game are women, which is a very rare group composition both within game education and the game industry. While it's impossible to draw any definite conclusions, the team members have noticed two main differences between this gender-balanced team and other teams. Firstly, it has been okay to voice concerns about subjects such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, and about what kind of message the game sends to the player. In other projects, it's not uncommon for people to dismiss such issues as boring and as attempts to be politically correct, and thus to say they'd rather just ignore such considerations and simply make a 'fun' game. Such dismissals are rarely based on bad intentions, but from a position of privilege it can be hard to see that something that is considered a joke to one person might be insulting or uncomfortable for someone else. However, in a balanced team like this one, all thoughts have been okay to share. Secondly, it has been easier to create female game characters. It's probably not a coincidence that there are few female game characters (especially playable ones) and few women in the industry. People want to design, draw and write characters they identify with and feel that they understand. Thanks to several female designers and graphical artists on the team, it has been easy to create two strong and non-stereotypical female protagonists.



*Alex, one of the characters from the Alex & the Museum Mysteries, a point-and-click PC game, created at the University of Skövde in collaboration with Doris Film. The game allows children to curiously explore a game world without receiving commercial or gender stereotypical messages. @Jarnimal Studios*

## Empowering girls through technology

With Game Girl Workshop we wanted to set out to change something. We wanted to make a difference and try to have an impact on the current media picture, especially within the computer games industry. The industry today consists overwhelmingly of a male workforce and the games released are for the most part very stereotypical, one-sided and genderfied. A Game Girl Workshop is a short and intensive workshop where young girls are inspired to have fun with technology and to develop computer games built on their own stories. The girls get introduced to audio, graphic and coding programs in order to build their own computer game – based on their own imagination and experiences.

We, Nevin Erönde and Andrea Hasselager began Game Girl Workshop as a response to the significant lack of women working in the games and technology industry. Through positive motivation and inspiration, we create a dynamic learning environment in which the teenage girls discover the various methods of game development – with the objective of providing them with, both educational and professional skills, in order to take advantage of the opportunities in the computer science industries of the future.

Game Girl Workshop is also a response to the ‘Western, white male’ perspective that we see in so many computer games today. Being women in a very male-dominated industry, we naturally got together.

At the Nordic Game Conference 2010 in Malmö, during a talk by Business Analyst Samer Abbas, about the emerging Arabic market, we thought that in an emerging industry, we could actually inspire some girls to get into the craft of games development and have them be part of shaping the growing industry. The idea grew


 The logo for Game Girl Workshop features the words "GAME GIRL" in a bold, sans-serif font, with "WORKSHOP" in a smaller font below it. A blue horizontal line underlines the text.


PHOTO: PRIVATE



PHOTO: LARS EMIL TEGBJÆRG

### The Authors

**Nevin Erönde** and **Andrea Hasselager** started the Game Girl Workshop as a response to the vast lack of women in the games and technology industry. They have created a dynamic learning environment where teenage girls can discover the various methods of game development with the objective of providing them with skills that will help them take advantage of the upcoming opportunities in tomorrow's computer science industries.

on us: What would in fact happen when you get a bunch of teenage girls together and teach them the tools to create games? This led us to run a 3-day test workshop at the Islamic Arabic Private School in Copenhagen with 10 girls from the 8th grade. The girls got introduced to open source software tools like Game Maker, Gimp, Audacity and an online music creation tool. The 10 girls were split into 2 groups of 5, and each girl had a role in the group as a coder, game/level designer, graphic artist and audio designer - just like in a real world games development production. They created two complete computer games and most importantly they were super excited! – We concluded that this was a positive experience for the girls and then formed the Game Girl Workshop group as a voluntary association.

We are often asked the question ‘Why girls only?’ – It is not that we believe in gender separation, but taking into account the already existing gender distortion in society, we see a point in giving girls a space where they can experiment with technology on their own terms. Furthermore girls and boys at certain ages do learn in different ways and we believe it is important to let the girls be in focus. Having no boys around, girls can actually take charge over technology themselves. Even though we do a lot of our work on a voluntary basis, we are still lacking sponsorships and funding. It has also proven challenging to find partner organizations (youth clubs etc.), that share our vision, and will encourage the girls to continue after we are done with the workshop.

Game Girl Workshop has several missions:

From the very beginning it was important for us to be all female teachers, to show positive female role models to the girls. The young generations are brought up learning how to ‘consume’ technology, whether it is technological gadgets or social media such as Facebook, Twitter and etc. We want to empower the girls to learn about the design behind the technology. We believe if they can take control over technology they can maybe apply this to other parts of their lives as well.

Games are cultural artifacts and as such they also shape the general media picture, if there is no variety, but only one way of portraying gender and society in general, children and young people will get a very skewed view of the world.

So far we have developed a concept that aim to change the world! We do not only teach girls how to make games, but also how to



PHOTO: Anni Lyygskær

*‘For the first time in my life I have accomplished something. I feel that I’m successful’. Lujayn, Game Girl Workshop, Tulkarem, Palestine.*

collaborate in a democratic process, make common decisions, take control over technology and make them try something they have never tried before.

We have run three Game Girl Workshops in Denmark and three in Palestine. We have also recently received funding for a research trip to Saudi Arabia. And have also been selected for the 20th International Symposium of Electronic Arts in Dubai 2014.

Making Game Girl Workshop a success was a big achievement for us and we would truly recommend others to keep pushing and believing in their ideas.



#### Facts

Ultimately, the hope of Game Girl Workshop is for more women to be included and advance within the games and technology industry, thus helping to achieve a balance in the workforce and to create a multitude of game narratives. Try the games and meet the girls here: [gamegirlworkshop.org](http://gamegirlworkshop.org)

#### Further reading

WIRED magazine article [www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-09/10/palestine-game-girl-workshop?page=all](http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-09/10/palestine-game-girl-workshop?page=all)

## Gender and computer games in the construction of identity

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In today's society there are certain expectations as to how young women and men relate differently to computer games. Such expectations can be seen as day-to-day discourses. These discourses can be explained as understandings that guide our perceptions of ourselves and others. One of the common perceptions concerning computer games is that it is a boy thing, not a girl thing. Computers and computer games have a strong masculine connotation (Ravnberg 2005, Hommedal 2006), which can lead to assumptions like: 'Girls are not as good with computers as boys', 'Girls are not as interested in computers as boys' and finally 'Girls do not play computer games'. Although it is commonly assumed that men play more than women, the Entertainment Software Association reports that 48 per cent of the gamers earlier this year were women (ESA 2014). In an earlier project (Hommedal 2006), I found that girls and boys thought that there was a difference between what kinds of games girls and boys play, but when asked what kind of games they themselves played, the girls and boys actually had and played many of the same games. In my thesis, I take a closer look at two questions in particular: 1) What expectations about computer games are directed at young female and male gamers in our society today? 2) How do the young women and men handle the different expectations directed at them – do they incorporate them in their identity discourses or do they distance themselves from them?

### Theory and method

The study is based on post-structural feminist theory, which understands gender in a cultural way, social constructivist theories, which consider society and technology as mutually co-constructed, and

PHOTO: Jan Kåre Wilhelmsen




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### The Author

**Silje H. Hommedal** has recently presented her PhD thesis *The Discourse of Computer Games – Gendered Expectations in the Construction of Identity* (2014), which focuses on how young women and men perceive computer games as gendered and how they use these perceptions in their constructions of identity. She wrote her thesis at the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen.

lastly discourse theory. Discourse theory is here used as a method to investigate the informants' understandings of games as gendered and how the informants handle the different subject positions that the discourse offers them. By looking at how the informants position themselves in relation to the discourse of computer games, the study analyses the identity discourse of each informant.

### **Empirical material**

The empirical material in this project consists of qualitative interviews with 19 young women and men aged 16–19 who all play computer games. The topics discussed were perceptions about computer games and computer games in general.

### **The discourse of computer games**

The following part is not a full description of the informants' shared understanding of the discourse of computer games. Instead it focuses on the assumptions that the informants articulate about computer games as gendered. Here we are looking for the subject positions that the discourse of computer games offers young women and men. These subject positions must not be mistaken for real young women and men, but must be considered as a description of how the discourse creates gendered expectations about computer games. The subject position that is available for boys is that boys have a close relationship with games and that they play a lot of shooters. According to the young women and men, the antisocial 'nerd', who plays all night, is closely tied to both the subject position available for boys and with the perception of the 'typical gamer'. The shared understanding of the subject position that is available for girls is that girls have better things to do than play computer games, and if they do play they do not play much. The popular game *The Sims* is closely tied to this subject position together with non-violent games with bright/light colours and a sweet appearance.

### **The young women's identity discourses**

I found three different strategies that the girls use in order to position themselves in relation to the female subject position that is available to them in the discourse of computer games. I call the strategies 'the gamer girls', 'girly girls who play' and 'girls don't like shooters'.

### **'Girls don't like shooters'**

Compared with the other female informants, these girls position themselves relatively close to the feminine subject position that is available to girls in the discourse of computer games. They all like to play puzzle and platform games online. These girls do not like first person shooter games and distance themselves from violent and dark games. This shows how they relate to the assumption that girls are not aggressive and do not like violence.

### **'The girly girls who play'**

These girls like the fact that people normally would not consider them as gamers. The fact that people get shocked when they say they play computer games and that they do not fit properly into the female subject position is something they enjoy a lot. They play all sorts of games and don't mind playing shooters.

### **'The gamer girls'**

These young women are secure when it comes to computer games and characterise themselves as gamers. They like first person shooters, which is what they play the most. They try to move away from the female subject position by expressing their joy of playing first person shooters even though they are girls.

### **The young men's identity discourses**

As for the young men, I had a hard time figuring out their identity discourses and positioning strategies because of the shared assumption that there is a 'natural' connection between young men and computer games. But eventually I found three different strategies and identity discourses that the boys use in order to position themselves in relation to the male subject position that is available to them in the discourse of computer games. I call these strategies 'computer games is a boy thing!', 'more than just computer games' and 'gaming is for everyone'.

### **'Computer games is a boy thing!'**

The majority of the young men ended up in this group, and they are the ones who position themselves very close to the male subject position in their identity constructions. These young men have different positioning strategies and like different genres, but they all assume and underline that there is a 'natural' connection between masculinity and computer games.

**'More than just computer games'**

The young men in this group are separated from the rest of the men by the fact that they do perceive and articulate different negative sides of computer games that they do not want to implement in their own relations to computer games. These men do not rely on the earlier mentioned 'natural' connection between masculinity and computer games alone to articulate their masculinity in their construction of gender and identity.

**'Gaming is for everyone'**

The young men in this group have grown up in families where the entire family plays computer games in one way or another. They are aware of the connection between men and computer games, but emphasise both that games are for everyone and that they consider most of the games they do play to be neutral. In this way they try to work against the masculine connotation they perceive in connection with computer games.

**Conclusion**

Even though these young women and men all relate to the discourse of computer games as valid, it does not mean that they position themselves within the discourse according to the feminine and masculine subject positions that are available to them. They all negotiate with many different discourses by incorporating or distancing themselves from many different subject positions and perceptions in order to construct their own identity discourse.

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