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## **A Woman in Games: A Personal Perspective, 1993 – 2010**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In common with many people who entered the games industry in the 1990s, particularly women, I got into it entirely by accident. As a humanities graduate with interests in history and gender politics, computer games then were peripheral to my existence – or they would have been had I not been living with a ‘bedroom coder’, someone who made games at home and created all the code, the artwork, the animations and the audio for them. Even so, the games were of no interest to me either aesthetically (I can remember sneering “Come back when you can do curves!”) or intellectually.

That was 17 years ago. Since then I have worked for a number of independent game developers, and by independent I mean that the company was not owned either by a large publisher, such as Electronic Arts, or by any of the hardware manufacturers – Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo. In fact, when I started, consoles as we know them did not exist, apart from Nintendo’s early handhelds and they were only for real aficionados. The first PlayStation had not yet redefined the game world and the Xbox wasn’t even a twinkle in Microsoft’s eye. The first game I worked on ([\*Captive II: Liberation\*](#), for which I wrote the dialogue) came out on the Amiga game machine in 1993. From 2010, that is an unimaginably long time ago.

I have to say, with a certain amount of shame, that I’m still not very interested in playing games; as far as I’m concerned, playing them is nowhere near as interesting as making them. Making games is absurdly difficult, massively complex and enormously satisfying.



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## THE GAMES INDUSTRY 17 YEARS AGO

I want to try and give you an idea of what the industry looked like back then, so that the changes I will describe have a context. I say 'industry' – it was barely worthy of the name. There were a few game development studios scattered round the country, but many more smaller outfits like my erstwhile partner, people creating games on their own or with one or two friends. It was still very heavily driven by technology and consequently, because they were the only people who could make the technology work, dominated by programmers. The early 90s were interesting because the situation was just starting to change from people who did everything themselves, like Ross Goodley and Tony Crowther (with whom I worked on my first game), to small teams that were typically just composed of programmers and artists who were almost universally male.

Gremlin Interactive, the first games company I worked for, was relatively unusual at that early stage because the people running it had figured out that you also needed people who designed the games. My first job, writing dialogue and designing levels for [Realms of the Haunting](#) (DOS and Windows 95, 1997). It was enormously enjoyable!

Figure 1. Cover of Realms of the Haunting PC game (Gremlin Interactive, 1997)

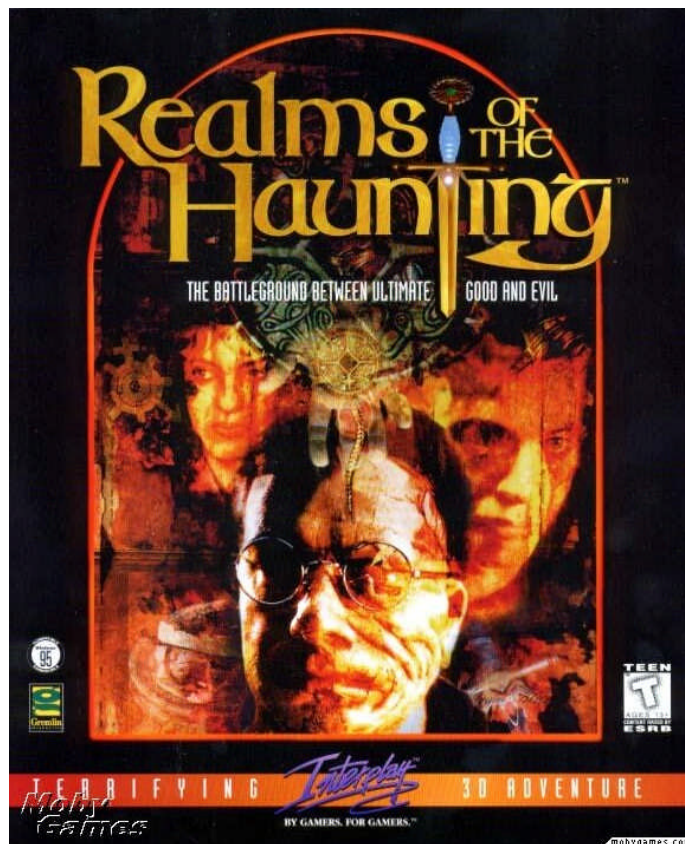


Figure 2: One of the levels I created for *Realms of the Haunting*



At this time, a typical game team would be a programmer and a couple of artists. We were just starting to make the transition from 2D to 3D after the success of id Software's [Doom](#). Big projects might have more: *Realms of the Haunting* for example had two designers, seven artists and one programmer, with another three programmers who wrote support code for the video playback, installer and so on. That is still a ridiculously small development team for such a huge, sprawling game, which is probably why it took us 3 years to finish it...

The other aspect of note is that at the time I entered the industry, the idea of project management for game development was very much in its infancy, and was bitterly resented and resisted by the game teams. This was an equal opportunities resentment - the developers didn't care whether the management was male or female, *any* form of management cramped their creativity and was clearly unnecessary and a Bad Thing. A programmer of my early acquaintance summed up *all* management as "non-creative garbage". This ties into something that I want to talk more about, which is that it took a very long time for game companies to grasp the idea that game development is a business as much as it is a passion: this has been a major contribution to the collapse of so many development studios over the last 20-odd years, although by no means the only reason.

It is a pervasive and irritating myth that game developers are all wealthy teenagers, driving around in Ferraris and generally living the life of rock stars. Sadly, it ain't so (with a very few exceptions). Making a living out of game development is extremely hard; something like 80% of published games do not recoup their production costs. You can sell a million units of your game these days and still not go into profit - indeed, one of

my favourite industry quotations is from a designer who once sighed and remarked to me, "I've seen more money in redundancy pay than I've ever seen in royalty payments...".

The industry model is, and pretty much always has been, that games are created by developers and published by publishers. In the UK, this means that independent studios develop for American or Japanese publishers, because there are almost no British publishers left. In my time I have worked for one developer-publisher, Gremlin Interactive, and four independent developers, Particle Systems, Argonaut Software, Headfirst Productions and Blitz Games Studios.

Their histories are instructive. Gremlin was founded in 1984. During the mid-90s, they floated on the Stock Exchange, but this was not a success and they were bought out by a French publisher, Infogrames, in 1999 (the year I left the company). The studio continued to lose money and Infogrames closed it down in 2003 (around 100 jobs lost). By then I was working for Particle Systems, a smaller independent development studio founded in Sheffield in 1993. In 2002 a struggling Particle was bought out by Argonaut Software, founded in 1982. By now also a public company (Argonaut was floated in 1999), this development studio also failed to thrive and went into receivership in 2004, taking Particle with it (300+ jobs lost).

Having apparently learned nothing, I moved to another small independent developer, Headfirst Productions in the West Midlands. Headfirst itself was founded in 1998, but the core team had been involved in game development since the early 1980s. This studio suffered a fatal blow when their Canadian publisher folded in 2005, and they themselves went under in 2006 having failed to make the jump to (what was then) the next generation of consoles, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 (around 30 jobs lost). Currently I am at Blitz Games Studios, founded by Philip and Andrew Oliver in 1990 and so far looking very healthy, thank you!

A major reason why development studios fail, it seems to me, is that most of them were never founded as businesses per se. They sort of accreted around one or two guys who wanted to make games: Ian Stewart at Gremlin; Michael Powell and Glyn Williams at Particle; Jez San at Argonaut; Michael and Simon Woodroffe at Headfirst; the Oliver Twins at BGS; the Darlings at Codemasters; the Kingsleys at Rebellion; and Darren and Jason Falcus at APE. UK game development has long been a band of brothers! While I believe that in the US there were development studios founded by women, I know of none in the UK during this era and actually only one since then, Just Add Monsters, which was co-founded by Nina Kristensen and is now the very successful Ninja Theory. The smartest amongst these early founders hired in people who did know about business, but too often both business acumen and decent management practices have been considered optional extras. It is no accident that those studios still flourishing are those who are agile in business terms and who put time and money into looking after their employees. Their highly skilled, very creative, highly motivated employees...

## **WHAT HAS CHANGED?**

### **Skills**

As I said, I got into games by accident. I got a job as a game designer when I not only did not play games, but I didn't like them either. I had no skills except a reasonable facility with words, the ability to communicate with programmers (because I'd lived with one) and an active imagination. This simply would not happen now.

Actually, it is one of the changes I regret most about the industry. I started out working with a German and Linguistics graduate, a butcher's boy, a couple of art students and an ex-construction worker. People fell into the industry from all over, and all the programmers had taught themselves to code, usually starting about the age of 13. No-one had any meaningful qualifications (because they did not exist) and you got hired on the strength of your creativity and any randomly useful skills you might possess. So I was promoted to Producer in 1996 (aka project manager) because, frankly, I was a bit older, a bit more level-headed and a bit more organized than anyone else. I had no management training and I would not receive any in the entire 12 years I worked in games project management.

These days it is all very different. My job now is to work with universities and government bodies such as Skillset to improve the quality of the education available to people wanting to work in games. This is necessary because there are many really bad courses out there, which through negligence or malign indifference are happy to take a student's money and three years of their life and fail to teach them the skills they need. It should be said that there are also a few very good courses, most of which are Skillset-accredited; check out the Skillset website for more details: [www.Skillset.org/games](http://www.Skillset.org/games). These craft skills are now very specific and needed at a frighteningly high level of quality. This is not the place to go into great detail on this (please see our careers advice website which has a vast amount of information on job descriptions and relevant skills: [www.BlitzAcademy.com](http://www.BlitzAcademy.com)), but the days where mad enthusiasm and a great imagination were all you needed are sadly long gone. Anyone wanting to become a developer now does still need mad enthusiasm and a great imagination, but they are competing globally for that position, whether that is as a coder, an artist, an animator or whatever. We have become, by default, an elitist industry, and I genuinely regret that; but the truth is, the public is more demanding of quality and studios that cannot provide it will fail.

In addition to the core craft skills, soft skills are now just as important. The ability to work in a team, often under pressured conditions, and remain pleasant and professional is crucial, as is the ability to communicate with people who may not see the world the same way you do. This really has changed since the early days when people skills were not considered a premium. Now, divas need not apply because while your craft skills are important, if you cannot work with others we will not hire you. I always feel that, in theory, this should mean that it is easier for women to get jobs in games, as (huge generalization ahead!) we are often very good at the soft skills. The problem, as ever, seems to be that women simply do not think of the games industry as somewhere they would like to work – if indeed, they are aware of it at all.



## **The Gender Mix**

It should I hope be clear by now that the games industry is a hugely different beast from what it was when I first started out, drawing my level maps in coloured pencil on sheets of A2, scribbling "this happens here" with an arrow to the relevant location, and handing that over to the programmer to get on with. One of the happier changes, I am pleased to say, is that we are a much less solidly Caucasian industry than we used to be. More varied cultural input can only result in better, more rounded, more satisfying games.

What has not changed much, depressingly, is the gender mix. I was the first woman in development at Gremlin and at Particle, and none of the companies I have worked at have succeeded in hiring enough women to get them into double figures. (I stress 'in development', because it has always been the case that there have been plenty of women working in the support teams – HR, PR, admin, finance and so on.) I genuinely believe that this is not in the main because development studios do not want to hire women... although in my first week at Gremlin, in the pub after work, I was told flatly by a programmer that women had no place in the games industry. When I smiled and asked him why, he explained without any animosity or aggression that team rooms had a certain culture which would be completely changed if a woman came to work in there. He was quite right of course, but it was usually a change for the better! I disagreed with the underlying philosophy, we discussed it thoroughly and went on to be friends.

There is a very strange mismatch between the highly vocal, highly unpleasant misogyny that you can encounter any day on any of the internet game forums, and the actual experience of working with game developers. One of the main reasons that I still enjoy working in this industry is that I work with some of the most intelligent, funny, creative, witty, smart people I have ever met. That said, it is undeniable that the industry was a pretty laddish place when I started out. I probably found it easier to survive partly because I was used to working in a male-dominated environment. I had spent the previous few years crewing at a local music venue, and while we had a woman crew boss and a few women on the house crew, 99% of the visiting road crew were male.

The other helpful factor was that I was older than most of the men I was working with. I was in my mid-30s and thus had about a decade on everyone else, usually including my bosses. I have always felt that both my age and my gender were more useful than otherwise when I was promoted to the Producer role. I could ask for changes from, say, the Lead Artist which, had they come from a man of the same age, might well have resulted in a power struggle. As it was, I did not lose face by asking nicely and saying please, and he did not lose face by graciously giving in. As I said, it was early days for all of us with the whole idea of management...

I find it depressing that we have so far failed to attract more women to an industry where I do believe that many would thoroughly enjoy working. There are many reasons for this, to be sure, starting with the way that many girls are systematically put off mathematics, engineering and the sciences, proceeding through the common lesson taught to women that they must do something 'useful' with their lives – a double whammy this one, precluding both the playing of games for pure entertainment and the

idea of working in an entertainment industry which superficially appears to be all guns and guts – and maybe concluding with the widespread and not entirely unjustified portrayal of the games industry as a place of prolonged periods of overtime and no respect for family life.

I believe it is true to say that all these things are either untrue or changing, but I do wish they were changing faster. Quality of life issues are very important and not only to women. I realized with a slight shock when I came to work for Blitz that of the 28 or so people who attend the monthly management meetings (of whom fewer than 10 are women), nearly two-thirds have children. That is a huge change from the early 1990s and it demands a mature, responsive, flexible approach to working practices that I believe more and more studios are adopting. This is not just necessary in order to appear to be a 'nice' company or in order to comply with employment law. The UK games industry is facing a dangerous and increasing drain of development talent to countries like Canada and Australia, and we need to use all the tools at our disposal to keep our experienced talent happy and contributing to our projects.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

So what has changed in 17 years? Pretty much everything, really, except these: it is still all about creativity, it is still all about problem solving, and it is still massively male-dominated. The industry has faced numerous crises, both economic and technological, and will doubtless continue to do so. The technology is unrecognizable from where I started and continues to produce innovative and ridiculously exciting variants ([Kinect](#), [3DS](#)). The business models first contracted and then diversified beyond anything we could have predicted (social media, [World of Warcraft](#)). The dazzling variety of skills that are needed now to make the best, the most beautiful and imaginative games, are based on solid, traditional, core skills, some of which were essential then and still are (mathematics, physics) and some of which have only recently become crucial foundations, such as life drawing. Above all, we are a vastly more professional industry, both in terms of our actual business and management practices and in terms of the individual developer's outlook. We hope that what we do is art, but we also know that we are in the business of entertainment and we have to make games that people want to play. These two aims do not have to be incompatible!

Perhaps the opening up of games to a wider audience will mean that the next decade will see more women entering the industry, bringing their various talents and discovering for themselves that it is a place where long-term, satisfying careers are open to those who enjoy working with likeminded and intelligent people and the challenges of constant learning. I sincerely hope so.