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Women in Games at Develop Conference 2010

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REVIEW

Currently in its 6th year, the [Women in Games](#) group held a free session at the [Develop 2010 conference](#) on 15th July in Brighton. This session was open to members of the public who were interested in the issues surrounding women in the games industry, and this was how I found myself attending the event. I graduated from The [University of Portsmouth](#) in 2009 with a BSc (Hons) in Computer Games Technology. An aspiring computer games producer, I began to apply to various game companies, however quickly understood the difficulty of trying to work in such a competitive market with no industry experience. It was through contact with primary lecturer Mark Eyles (founder of Women in Games in 2004) that I received an invitation to the conference. Aware of the lack of women in the industry, I attended the conference to gain a better understanding of the games industry and the gender diversity issues that are still present within the industry today.

With the aid of their main sponsor [Interactive Selection](#), Women in Games were able to host their event during the Develop Conference. Presentations were given on the role of women in the games industry, future developments in female focussed gameplay and issues of diversity both in research and development.



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Figure 1. David Smith from Interactive Selection.



The first part of the event was a talk by keynote speaker, Sheri Graner Ray, Studio Design Director for [Schell Games](#). Sheri started in the games industry in 1989 as a writer/designer at [Origin Systems](#) on the [Ultima](#) series of games. Since then she has worked for many companies in a variety of roles from designer to head of product development. Her titles credits cover a number of genres from the classic *Ultima*'s to [Star Wars Galaxies](#) to the *Mad Dog McCree* stand-up arcade machine. She is author of the book, *Gender Inclusive Game Design- Expanding the Market* (Graner Ray, 2003) and in 2005 received the IGDA's Game Developer's choice award for her work in gender and games. In 2004 she co-founded [Women in Games International](#) and served as Executive Chair for six years.

Figure 2. Mark Eyles and Sheri Graner Ray.



Sheri's talk during the conference was thought provoking and interesting. She conveyed her personal beliefs about the issues surrounding women working in the industry and what we could do in order to improve the situation. In particular it was her positive attitude that impressed the audience, as she confidently told the audience she was not at the conference to tell 'horror stories'.

Commenting on the experience, Sheri said:

It was an odd talk for me to give as I've never really spoken on anything that wasn't specifically game design. This was my first time to "take the bull by the horns" and just talk about the diversity movement, where we've come from, where we are now and how we can move forward on a positive, productive path.

The audience was amazingly receptive! It was so great to feel such positive energy coming from them. And their questions at the end of the talk were great!

[Fluffy Logic](#) CEO and panellist, Ana Kronschnabl, commented:

She was very clear about the issues that currently exist, but also about what she wanted women involved in games to do: be positive. I realised that before I had gone along I had expected a level of resignation - and to be totally honest - a bit of moaning. But this was not the agenda at all.

Katherine Bidwell, Director for [State Of Play Games](#) commented:

Her positive outlook on the industry with her 'No more horror stories' message, was a great reminder to celebrate the achievements of women working within the Games Industry... (We should) not only look at the poor representation but to stand up and be counted, and say look what we've achieved.

The next part of the session was a workshop hosted by Mark Eyles, Lecturer in Computer Games Technology at the University of Portsmouth, entitled *Designing Games for Emotional Intelligence*. The purpose of this workshop was to have the audience collaborate about their thinking on the development of a game that would use emotional input and emotional reactions. The benefit of having a practical workshop amongst the talks in the session was that this was the first chance that members of the audience had to get to know one another, by collectively sharing their creative ideas.

Mark Eyles started out in the games industry in 1981 at the British software publisher [Quicksilva](#). At this time there were not many people involved in the games industry within the UK, let alone there being many women. Over the next 20 years Mark worked as a freelancer within the gaming industry for companies like Activision, SEGA, Electronic Arts, SCI, Hasbro, Micropose and running small independent companies creating game designs before joining Rebellion in 1999. In March 2003 Mark left [Rebellion](#) to join The University of Portsmouth's Department of Creative Technologies. At this time the University was just beginning to develop the department and whilst setting up the Computer Games Technology course Mark had the opportunity to work on another project. With the encouragement of the head of the department, Steve Hand; he decided that he wanted to do something about the lack of women in the games industry and so started [Women in Games](#).

The final part of the Women in Games session was a panel discussion involving Ana Kronschnabl from [Fluffylogic](#), Sheri Graner Ray, Helen Kennedy from the Women in Games steering committee, Chloe Giusti from [Sony Computer Entertainment Europe](#) and David Smith from Interactive Selection (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Women in Games panel discussion

The discussions covered a range of topics although some proved more controversial than others. In particular, an active debate on the purpose of half naked female models to draw in male attention at gaming conventions, more commonly known as 'Booth Babes'. Other topics included the representation of female game characters, female involvement in the games industry in comparison to previous years and what women in the industry can do to educate and inspire the future women of the games industry.

Each topic discussed allowed the women of the event to share their ideas on what they want from the games industry. One of the panellists Ana Kronschnabl stated that "It reminded me that women don't really want anything different from men, we want to play good games with a character/story-line/feeling we can identify with".

Yes, the panel discussions primarily revolved around the issue of gender however, as Rain Ashford, Senior Producer for BBC Learning and one of the organisers of [Gamecamp](#)ⁱ, commented "It's very difficult to host such an event without discussing the gender issue. But I look forward to a time when we spend more time celebrating the games we design and make".

Overall, it was very refreshing to see so many members of the audience get actively involved with the panel discussions. The audience was receptive and eager to get their opinions across, because of this each discussion was forced to move on, to the audience's dismay, in order for the conference to finish on time.

With the conference over for another year what did the participants of the event think?

Ana Kronschnabl commented:

The Women in Games event was full and buzzing. There were more women in the room involved in games development than I had believed existed in the entire universe, well the UK anyway. Certainly, if you wandered round the conference in general, you would be forgiven for thinking there were almost no women involved in games production at all.

Sheri Graner Ray commented:

I love the breadth of support the organization and the event has overall. No, it wasn't a huge event, but the passion and the spirit were so strong and so ready to move forward, that I just loved it!

Katherine Bidwell remarked:

I found the event very insightful; it was great to see so many excellent women working within a very male dominated industry. I will definitely be attending again.

With the conference still in its early years it is the responsibility of its attendees and organisers to think of new ideas to strengthen the event for the future. From speaking with some of the attendees of this year's event it is clear that it could be improved by having more time allocated for the panel discussions and a chance for the audience get together in social gatherings. In conclusion Women in Games at Develop 2010 proved to be a tremendous success; everyone who attended the session was positive and enthusiastic about the issues surrounding women in the games industry.

With the ever expanding nature of the gaming industry it is very important that groups such as this exist in order to protect the best interests of women who will try to get into the field in the future. Since the formation of the Women in Games group it is reassuring to know that women have a support structure that they can turn to. The steering committee and the other participants of Women in Games serve as a collective group of successful role models that women trying to get into the gaming industry can look up to.

Since attending the conference and meeting various people from different roles, I have been inspired and confident that the gaming industry was where I want to be. And after months of perseverance and confidence with job applications I have finally been given the position of Quality Assurance Tester for [TT Games](#).

ENDNOTE

ⁱ Gamecamp is an event held for computer games designers/enthusiasts who want to not only make games but play them and think about their inner workings.

REFERENCES

Graner Ray, S (2003) *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market*, New York, Charles River Media

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