Editorial: Special Issue Section

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Women in Games

"Humans are allergic to change. They love to say, 'We've always done it this way.' I try to fight that." ([Attributed to Grace Hopper](#))

In 2004 video games industry veteran Mark Eyles, then working at the University of Portsmouth, recognised the need for an initiative that would increase the representation of women within the gaming industry. The project Mark instigated - [Women in Games](#) (WiG) - began with a series of conferences involving an innovative mixture of people from academia and from industry. The aim of these conferences was to generate and promote initiatives and research that focused on narrowing the gap between men and women working in the games industry.

WiG is now an internationally recognised organisation, still with this mixture of people from academia and from industry. In addition to the annual conferences, WiG members are now also involved in smaller events, online discussions and journals. Now, seven years on, WiG continues to grow and develop and we, in our role as members of the Steering Committee, would like to introduce readers to the special issue section of the GST journal.

The articles included in this special issue reflect the multiple and overlapping aims of the Women in Games initiative. Each of these aims requires the interweaving of academic enquiry with industry engagement and dialogue, which has been an extraordinary strength of the WiG initiative.

These aims are:

1. To engage girls and women with technology – identifying games, gameplay and games technology as a potential 'gateway' to a confident relationship with technology. A key goal is to encourage participation in technology courses as a pathway to working within the industry as well as participating as consumers.
2. To challenge practices within the industry that actively work to exclude women at particular stages in their life – e.g. family friendly practices, identifying and working against sexist behaviour within organisations, encouraging industry employers to value the potential contribution of women as artists, organisers, managers, developers, designers, technologists.
3. To challenge the representation of women in all aspects of the games industry – from 'booth babes' to hypersexualised imagery in games themselves.
4. To challenge the widespread cultural understanding of games as a 'masculine' pursuit. A key goal is to stimulate innovation in games industry in order to attract a wider audience and to engage girls and women as participants in defining this cultural practice (as consumers and as producers/participants).
5. To provide networking and mentoring opportunities for young women studying and working in fields related to the games industry.

These aims remain important even though we have seen significant changes in the industry, game platforms and game marketing since 2004. For example, although there are fewer barriers for women to join the games industry, Skillset's latest figures (2009) in the UK show only 4% of people employed within the games industry are female, down from 12% in 2006. As such, new strategies need to be put in place to combat this dramatic decline. It is a matter of finding out why women are not joining the industry, and then finding workable solutions. The contributors to this special edition are located in the UK, Europe, Canada and the US, and they all share this common purpose.

Alongside the more conventional academic papers we are delighted to have a contribution from long time supporter and key member of WiG Steering Committee Kim Blake (Education Liaison Manger, Blitz Games Studios). In her Perspectives article, Blake discusses her many years in the industry and the changes that have taken place in terms of how the sector now responds to women as producers and as potential consumers of games. She discusses her own journey and how her career path changed alongside, and in response to, the attitudes of those around her.

We are also pleased to include a review of the WiG session held at the game developers' conference Develop, held in July 2010. Our reviewer, Jamie Adams, reflects upon this WiG initiative and discusses how it inspired her own career path, from university graduate in Computer Games Technology to QA tester for TT Games. Adams also reports on Sheri Graner Ray's inspirational keynote speech. Sheri Graner Ray is the author of Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market and current Senior Game Designer at Schell Games in US. Graner Ray spoke at the inaugural WiG event back in 2004, and she has continued to act as an important advocate of this initiative as well as providing a direct link to the US-based sister organisation Women in Games International.

A key theme explored within this special issue is the inclusion of girls in gameplay as both consumers and as a starting point to encourage girls to join technology courses, and eventually careers within the games industry. In her paper *The Sims as a Catalyst for Girls' IT Learning* Elisabeth Hayes explores the use of The Sims and Teen Second Life to develop and foster girls' use of technology within an out of school video games club in the US. This use of technology focuses on the creation of content rather than simply the 'playing' within these virtual worlds, and illustrates the usefulness of an alternative to traditional teaching and engagement methods. Using design-based research- "in which development and research take place simultaneously through continuous cycles of design, implementation and analysis" (p.125) **-** Hayes discusses how a 'passion' for a subject, can underpin skills development, in this case in IT, and act as a catalyst for an interest in developing these skills further.

Linking into this design based approach, in their case study Baytak and Land describe how they introduced a class of 5th-grade girls to programming via a computer-game design approach. Baytak and Land discuss the potential role of game design as a vehicle to involve more girls in computer science.

Extending this approach, Jennifer Jenson, Stephanie Fisher and Suzanne de Castell discuss their research that focuses on another out of school video games club, this time based in Canada. Their specifically interventionist approach sets out to challenge the widely held assumption that girls and boys have different play styles. They deploy a nuanced theoretical approach, which draws on Actor Network Theory alongside insights from Judith Butler, to attend to the materiality and agency of the tools of gameplay and to support their valuable critique of assumed essential gender differences. Their work explores the ways in which performances of gender (included gendered gameplay) are socially and culturally constructed. The insights from this research demonstrate that differences are more frequently to do with skill levels than a set of biological differences between girls and boys. Their paper challenges much of the work done in relation to gender and gaming, and offers new methods and new approaches to reinvigorate this field of study.

Alison Harvey's paper, *Constituting the Player: Feminist Technoscience, Gender, and Digital Play*, is based on a larger project that includes in depth interviews with boys, girls and their parents in relation to play within 'virtual game worlds' such as Club Penguin and Webkinz. Harvey draws on insights from this research in order to interrogate the efficacy of feminist technoscience as an analytical paradigm. Perspectives from Science and Technology Studies (STS) are also used as a means of demonstrating how these might help us to understand the complex interconnections between technological competence, gender scripts, tastes, attitudes and familial dynamics in the production of gaming identities and pleasures.

Eles Rommes, Maartje Bos and Josine Oude Geerdink's research takes place in the Netherlands and is concerned with the ways in which the marketing, advertising and packaging of toys and games play a significant role in determining how these toys 'become gendered'. They explore how these processes might influence the choices that parents make on behalf of their children and the ways in which the children themselves understand their own gameplay as gender appropriate or as potentially deviant. Rommes, Bos and Geerdink's approach combines textual and discourse analysis with in-depth interviews with children aged 9 – 13, and is a valuable case study for those interested in the full range of cultural sites where

gendered differences are produced, circulated and reinforced. You only have to enter any toy store today to be struck by the force of their insights. This research supports the work of the earlier three articles and underlines the range of interventions required in order to challenge the construction of gendered play behaviours.

In their paper *Segregation in a Male-Dominated Industry: Women Working in the Computer Games Industry*, Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg examine occupational segregation in the workplace in relation to women in the games industry. Insights from previous research, both in games and ICT more generally, are used to contextualise their study. Utilising "Bem's (1974) sex role inventory (BSRI)" (p.209), Prescott and Bogg analyse masculine and feminine characteristics in responses to questionnaires completed by women in the games industry. Both horizontal and vertical segregation are considered, and the discussion highlights the differing attitudes within professions and grades, including technical, graphical, administration and managerial roles.

In his article *Play Globally, Act Locally: The Standardization of Pro Halo 3 Gaming*, NicholasTaylor deploys an audio-visual ethnographic approach combined with an analytical framework developed from the insights of Actor Network Theory. His research focuses on a team of Halo 3 players as they compete locally, nationally (in Canada) and internationally in E-sports tournaments. Taylor argues that the technical apparatus that supports competitive gameplay produces proximity between male bodies, which requires constant negotiation in relation to the scripts of masculine behaviour. The adoption of a rhetoric of 'sport' in the discursive production of these gaming competitions serves to support this negotiation and produces very particular performances and behaviours. Taylor's research reveals that these close assemblages of technologies and male bodies are productive of highly conventionalised performances of masculinity, which remain constant despite national and other cultural differences.

Kaye Elling reviews *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and their Players* by Jesper Juul and describes how Jull considers both casual gamers and casual gaming with a visual style, which creates an easy to absorb book perfect for a game expert's book shelf. Marian Carr reviews *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning* by James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes (whose paper is included in this special issue section). Gee and Hayes advocate a new way of teaching and learning for the modern age and they support their argument through case studies of girls and women who have utilised The Sims and similar technologies to develop their skills.

We hope this rich mixture of material, which reflects the diversity of contemporary Women in Games research, will provide you with 'food for thought', as well as providing valuable resources through which we can develop and advance debate. As we have shown, the aims of the WiG initiative are as relevant today as they were in 2004, and each person's contribution is needed to help bring about change.

REFERENCE
Skillset (2009) *Employment Census 2009* [online]. Available at: http://www.skillset.org. Last accessed 14th March 2011.