

Women fight underrepresentation among game developers, players

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In certain corners of the gaming world, women are treated in one of two ways.

"If you let anyone know you're a girl, you're going to get hit on or picked on," said Tracy Fullerton, a professor at the University of Southern California who teaches [game](#) design.

Fullerton was referring to online shooter games, which are traditionally male-dominated. In reality, gaming in general has opened up to women in the last several years, a shift that is part of the industry's broadening appeal to a wider range of ages and tastes.

But while women are playing in greater numbers, working in the industry can feel as lonely as battling aliens on a remote planet in Halo.

According to the Entertainment Software Association, 40 percent of video and online game players in the U.S. in 2010 are female, having inched up from 38 percent in 2006. The number of women working as game developers, however, is much smaller. In a 2005 demographic survey by the International Game Developers Association, only 11.5 percent of the respondents were female.

At Chicago's Columbia College, Mindy Faber was shocked to discover that the school's 2009 graduating class of game design majors had one woman out of 26 students. The ratio barely improved in subsequent classes, inspiring Faber to organize a four-day summit about girls,

gaming and gender that will take place at Columbia College starting Thursday.

"Our feeling in our department is that clearly, we can make better games if we diversify the designers," said Faber, academic manager in the department of interactive arts and media. "If the game designers out there are more inclusive and representative of our general culture, we're going to make better games that reach more people."

One gap that needs to be addressed, Faber said, is that young girls who like video games don't connect their leisure activity with a potential career path.

This was the case with Megan-Alyse O'Malley, who came to Chicago's DePaul University as a secondary education major. During her freshman year, she attended an event sponsored by DeFRAG, the campus organization for gamers and developers. Her involvement with the group eventually led her to enroll in introductory game development classes.

The experience of "sitting down with a team, brainstorming ideas on what makes a game fun, then working on my first game project" hooked O'Malley, 21, who had grown up playing console games with her siblings. She is now majoring in Japanese studies with a minor in game design.

"I just fell in love with it," said O'Malley, who will be DeFRAG's first female president when she returns to school this fall for her senior year. She is also the producer and lone woman on a 20-member student team that is entering a worldwide game development competition next year.

Recruiting more women such as O'Malley to the industry often involves a shift in mindset so that students understand they can create games for new platforms such as mobile phones and social networking sites, said

Jose Zagal, an assistant professor at DePaul.

"When people say video games, a lot of (students) think PlayStation 3," Zagal said. "When you say, 'What about a game like 'Club Penguin' or 'Farmville' or that game on your cell phone?' Then they're excited."

Women in the game industry have historically worked in departments such as marketing and public relations, rather than in development, art and programming _ areas that are directly involved with making games, said Belinda Van Sickle, chief executive of Women In Games International.

"There were a lot of assumptions about women," Van Sickle said. "People in the industry would assume you don't play games, or if you do, you're kind of weird or play games they don't think count."

This assumption may be why "female" games often fail to resonate with their intended demographic.

"The games that are marketed to females are awful," said Keisha Howard, a 26-year-old Chicagoan who founded Sugar Gamers, a local meet-up group for female players. "It's like 'Cooking Mama,' fashion design, pink-little-pony-puppy-kitten. I don't want to play any of those games, ever. I believe women like the games that are most popular, the blockbuster hits."

Last year, the top-selling computer game by units was "The Sims," according to the NPD Group. The game, which allows users to create intricate virtual worlds, is the current obsession of 15-year-old Mary Gilmore. She loves the creativity and detail that goes into playing it, and used to carry around journals to sketch out her house designs before transferring them online.

"It's not, 'There are girl games and boy games,'" said Gilmore, an incoming junior at Evanston Township High School. "It's that there are good games and bad games."

This is also the viewpoint of Erin Robinson, an independent game designer in Naperville, Ill. She graduated from college with a degree in psychology and began creating games after discovering free, downloadable tools on the Web.

"I don't really know what female players want, but I know what I want in a game," said Robinson, who will be speaking at the Columbia College summit.

Fullerton, the University of Southern California professor, will also be participating in the summit. She said she hopes the event will showcase female role models and the rich variety of games being created in the industry.

"Now we have families that are growing up playing games together," Fullerton said. "Obviously, we had that in the past in board games, and now we have that in a digital sense. That kind of connection to games as an important element of your family and social life will make people feel differently about the potential they could bring to the industry."

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