Without women, the computer game boom years may not last

July 9 2014, by Julie Prescott

Women play computer games, but they don't drive the industry. Credit: EPA

An encouraging report by the International Game Developers Association recently found that women now make up 22% of the computer game workforce. This is a massive improvement from the previous figure of just 4% of the UK industry in 2009.

But it doesn't go far enough. A serious sector ought to have a workforce

that reflects wider society. Until it does, the industry will see its creativity diminish, its reputation suffer and eventually its bottom line will be hit.

Although the computer games industry is approximately 40 years old it has grown rapidly over the past decade or two. What was once largely small firms and individuals programming in their bedrooms is now a [US$15 billion market](#) dominated by multinational corporations. And it's still growing – one forecast says the industry will be worth [US$82 billion](#) by 2017.

According to the [Entertainment Software Association](#) in 2013 women represented 48% of players and are equal purchasers of games. So given all this, why are women still underrepresented in the industry workforce?

[Recent](#) research by me and my colleagues [suggests](#) the gender divide within computer games takes many forms. Men and women are represented differently within the games themselves, there are differences in how games are played across the genders, different motivations for playing, and differences in access to the space and time to play.

The fact that games are produced by a male dominated industry producing games largely for men clearly has consequences too. In particular, the sexist portrayal of women in games and wider gaming culture perpetuates the view that computer games are for boys. Within games there is a distinct lack of playable female characters, and when a [game](#) does have a playable female character, these characters more often than not are scantily clad, showing plenty of flesh. Even the scary killer nurses in Silent Hill were "sexed up".

The problems don't end with the games themselves; magazines, reviews and game covers also under or negatively represent women. [One study](#)

examined the content of 225 [computer game](#) covers and found male characters were used four times more frequently and were given significantly more game-relevant action than female characters. When women did appear they were less likely to be the primary character, less likely to be without a male character and more likely to be portrayed as sexy or objectified.

This is particularly important as game covers can be viewed by anyone wandering along a high street or shopping mall, even if the game rating is not suitable to the observer or the observer is not interested in playing the game. As one of the main ways of transmitting information about the game's content to the wider public, the cover is an often overlooked form of perpetuating computer gaming's negative portrayal of women.

Gaming adverts also play a part. [Research suggests](#) that computer games aimed at girls tend to offer productivity over play, self-help over fun and play up to traditional expectations of femininity. This alienates women from gaming and further contributes to the myth that they don't play computer games.

Perhaps the games industry wants to exclude women, to keep gaming as a predominantly male activity? After all, there are very few positive portrayals of women within games, a disturbing fact for an industry that is supposedly producing for a more inclusive audience. To address this, we need to create realistic gender options within a diverse range of gaming characters.

This is a problem that goes beyond just the gaming industry – negative portrayals in one form of media can influence attitudes and behaviour in a seemingly unrelated area. For instance, [research has shown](#) how gender stereotyped adverts have a negative influence on women's choice of maths-related careers. The sheer size of the computer games industry means it wields serious power; we can't let it reinforce gender divides

and stereotypes.

It would help if more women were involved in making games. They could influence how women were portrayed within the games and ultimately would increase the viability of games as a female leisure pursuit and a possible career. There are already some great senior women in the industry to act as role models.

The industry needs to attract and retain more women, highlighting the diversity of skills and roles required in the industry and developing its appeal to a more inclusive workforce, for instance through offering flexible working. Such factors can only help to diversify the industry.

Women aren't the only group seen as a minority by the games industry, both as players and developers. Research on representations of race and culture within games, as well as older and gay gamers suggests the problem is wider. It appears the industry designs games for a white, heterosexual, male audience and is missing a large percentage of the population with its "boys' toys" view of computer games. Boys' toys have taken the industry a long way; but boys can't buy all the toys.

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