

Girls got game

August 29 2014, by Bella Peacock



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Debi Taylor has worked in everything from construction development to IT, and is well and truly socialised into male-dominated workplaces. So when she found herself the only female in her game development classes as a mature age student in her honours year of IT, she was more curious than intimidated.

Alone in a sea of men, Taylor wondered, "Is there a 'type' of woman who is more likely to see it through to a career in game development?"

This question became the basis of her honours thesis.

As she began her research, Taylor soon realised that information on the Australian gaming industry was noticeably lacking. She decided to conduct her own survey, which yielded responses from over 150 women in the industry and identified a further 120. Taylor went on to do comprehensive three-hour interviews with a sample group of 10 female game developers, and the results were incredibly telling.

All of Taylor's interviewees adhered to a surprisingly tight set of parameters, suggesting that yes, there is indeed a type of woman who pursues a career in game development.

"Each of these women was strongly influenced by a male relative who introduced them to gaming, all came from educated households, none had any sisters, and all were self-professed introverts," says Taylor.

It wasn't hard for her to see why the field appealed to such a narrow group of women. In fact, she had witnessed many of the challenges firsthand at university, including dismissive or over-enthusiastic treatment of female students by males in the course.

"Sometimes it was like we were all out of the TV show 'The Big Bang Theory'," says Taylor.

While national drop-out rates are unclear, most of the women Taylor interviewed said that women made up 15 to 20 per cent of their first year class, but by graduation each of them was the only one left.

These are issues the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT) is actively engaged in tackling.

"We have a commitment to student-centred experience, collaborative learning, gender inclusion, and breaking down old binaries and ways of

thinking," says Women in Engineering and IT (WiE&IT) Programs Director Bronwyn Holland.

WiE&IT delivers a wide range of support and development opportunities for female students, including formal and informal mentoring, seminars and networking events throughout the year.

"We collaborate with people and organisations who want to see more women joining and succeeding in these fields," says FEIT Equity and Outreach Coordinator Imogen Aitken, citing recent events run with the UTS Engineering and BiG societies to connect women up with industry.

"These were pitched as a celebration of more women coming into engineering and IT, and men were welcome to come along."

The team has recently moved into a suite on the student-centred level 5 of the new FEIT building – alongside the software development studio and the learning precinct – presenting further opportunities to collaborate and connect.

Taylor hopes the new buildings and social spaces opening at UTS will also provide more possibilities for students to socialise outside the classroom, allowing them to mix among broader groups of friends and break down gender stigmas organically.

She suggests that women's tendency to underestimate their abilities is another impediment to a career in game development, and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Outnumbered and without many female role models to look up to in the industry, it can seem to female students that maybe it is a man's world.

But Taylor steadfastly disputes the idea that women are less suited to game development than men.

In fact, she says women often have a broader suite of skills to offer the field than men do, because they are not inclined to focus on a certain type of game.

Taylor also points out there is a vast range of communication skills that are vital to the field – from storytelling, to art design and an ability to draw a sense of fun and meaning into the game. Her research suggests that women engage across this spectrum of skills rather than focusing exclusively on the programming.

As a result, Taylor says, women tend to produce far richer and more diverse content when developing games. She believes it's a huge loss to the industry that more women don't pursue game development as a career.

One of the primary barriers for women is their lack of engagement with game culture from childhood. Every one of the female game developers Taylor surveyed reported they were introduced to gaming at a young age by a male relative. Unfortunately, not many young girls have this opportunity – with games being marketed specifically to males in the past, the majority of girls are not interested from early on.

Because of this lack of interaction with the industry, few girls even consider game development as a potential career pathway. Furthermore, Taylor found that while many parents deemed game development a viable career path for their sons, they considered it an irresponsible choice for women and "not a proper job".

Taylor believes this socialisation of 'appropriate' careers for women is a hangover from a past era when gender roles were more defined. "As a society, we still believe there are jobs for boys and there are jobs for girls," she says.

While it's difficult to pin down why this attitude remains so prevalent, Taylor believes it is fed by the widely held perception that "games are the realm of guys". This misconception is one WiE&IT aims to address.

"Through the Sydney WiE&IT Speakers in Schools program we travel to schools with female students who talk quite personally about their pathway into the field," says Aitken. "We talk to over a thousand high school students a year, including regional visits."

The team also runs Hands on Days where female high school students come onto campus for a suite of activities and guest presentations. The March 2014 event attracted 370 school students and 60 UTS student volunteers.

"In the feedback, a number of girls reflected that they'd uncovered a passion for an area of study they hadn't previously known of!" says Aitken.

And Taylor's results suggest game development is a passion worth pursuing. Having made it into the [game development](#) industry, the women in her study reported high job satisfaction and had few complaints about their professional experience.

Taylor's findings also tell a hopeful story for the future of women in gaming. "More [women](#) own their own companies than ever before, and small businesses are recognising that teams are improved by female input."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

Citation: Girls got game (2014, August 29) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-girls-game.html>

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