Chapter 6

Game Workers and the Gender Divide in the Production of Computer Games

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses working practices prominent in the computer game industry. The chapter provides readers with an understanding of how working practices are gendered, which can deter women from entering into and remaining in the industry. The chapter also provides the reader with a review of the issue of gendered occupational segregation in order to understand the effect this has on individuals, society, male-dominated industries, and the computer game industry, specifically. It considers what impact more female game developers in core content creation roles could potentially have within the industry. The chapter also discusses some qualitative research findings from an international study with women working in the computer game development industry and reviews what attracts women to the industry and the issues they have experienced.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will discuss the game workers who develop computer games and how and why the gender composition of the computer game workforce is an important consideration when discussing the gendering of computer games. The games industry is an interesting industry as it falls under the umbrella of the wider more established science, engineering and technology sector (SET) and is also part of the creative industries sector. In comparison to the wider SET sector, the games industry is a relatively young industry...
dating back approximately four decades. The most current available figures report that in the UK women represent just 4% of the computer games industries workforce (Skillset, 2009) which is a 8% decrease from 2006 figures (Skillset, 2006). Similarly low figures have also been reported in the US (Gourdin, 2005) and Canada (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005). In their study of the computer games workforce in Canada, Dyer-Witheford and Sharman (2005) found that female game workers described the industry as having an ‘old boys club’ with just 10-15% of Canada’s games workforce being female, with very few women at the executive level. Male dominated occupations and industries such as computer games tend to adhere to the male model of work, as indeed do a managerial and senior role, which provides the focus of this chapter. It is not just women who are underrepresented in the computer games industry but also ethnic minorities and disabled people. According to Skillset (2009) less than 4% of computer games employees in the UK are from an ethnic minority background and only 1% of employees classify themselves as disabled according to the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Despite this underrepresentation of other groups within the industry, this chapter will focus solely on gender and female game workers due to the aims and scope of this book.

Underrepresentation of women within the industry can be detrimental to the industry, games culture and equality more generally as we aim to discuss in this chapter. The lack of women and ethnic minorities within the industry has been acknowledged as a possible solution to the skills shortage within the industry. According to Matthew Jeffery, Head of European Recruitment at Electronic Arts, skills shortages are becoming more common in the gaming industry and measures need to be taken to bring in more new talent. Mathew Jeffrey states that;

Games companies need to broaden out their recruiting scope and attract talent from other new industries and seduce more diverse groups into game teams, particularly women and ethnic minorities. (Skillset, 2008)

It is important for women to have a voice in all areas of the economy and the cultural landscape. The games industry is a particularly important industry as this book highlights throughout. According to Flanagan; ‘game makers possess both the most interesting technology and the distribution channels to truly lead the direction of the future’ (Flanagan, 2003, p. 359). This quote illustrates how important this industry is especially in terms of technological development and technological usage. The games industry is unique in that it tends to attract a younger workforce. According to a 2005 report conducted by The International Game Developers Association (IGDA), the average age of a game developer is 31, 80% are educated to University level or above and the average years within the industry is 5.4 (Gourdin, 2005). The games industry forms parts of the UK’s ‘knowledge economy’ due to the high level of skills game developers have (Oxford Economics, 2008). According to the Oxford Economics report, in 2008, 69% of the UK industries employees were educated to at least degree level, in comparison