

## The Left Hand of Game Dev - Finding Togetherness through polarity

“Light is the left hand of darkness,  
and darkness the right hand of light.  
Two are one, life and death, lying  
together like lovers in *kemmer*,  
like hands joined together,  
like the end and the way” – *Le Guin 1980*

The games industry is growing the economy in the UK, conversely the marginalised of this country are being left behind in a business economy that shifts away from the labour market. The games industry was built by men for men, women have slowly moved into this sector but have no substantial stake in how this entertainments industry evolves. As many women in this country play videogames as men (ukie.org.uk 2017 p48-52). The market is ripe for content made by women for women. There is an opportunity to draw some of the best women in the games industry to work with under privileged women in UK society. Women who otherwise struggle with family responsibilities; ethnic and gender representation and role models; opportunities for education and employment; need to be offered a break.

This paper explores a Partnership that proposes a 3-year project that searches London for female candidates who embark on an assessment programme, receiving help and guidance from top industry and academic advisors. Candidates will receive 1:1 mentorship from leading games industry women and embark on an intensive training programme. Half way through they will be set up with roles in an incubator studio developing their first videogame with themes based on their own identified values. Year 2 and 3 will build on this studio with repeat processes, supported by the veterans from year 1. A selection of candidates each year who do not progress to the programme will be enrolled on a business track that will include an administration office to support the games development studio.

The programme supports the London Mayor’s wider Digital Talent Programme by upskilling young people in a sector where there is a current skills shortage and it builds on the legacy GLA’S to make London the games capital of the world. To that end this project links to a combined agenda to link other colleges around the UK through annual national competitions and games lecture symposia meaning this can act as a means of disseminating knowledge and learning from the programme. The occupational focus for this project addresses numerous critical labour market needs appearing on the national shortages list. The process will identify young women with potential for particular skillsets in digital technical, digital art, games design, leadership, user experience, music & sound and narrative for digital games. The project team are sensitive to the complexities of young people growing up in London and have proven track records of stretching them to become champions of their industry.

With a combined partnership of responsive connection with young people at the forefront, continual work with a wide range of stakeholders from policy makers, government and industry, combined with extensive grasp of the sector, collectively the partnership is confident

of continual sustainability to stay relevant to the needs of the project participants throughout the 3 years and beyond.

The paper documents the process and ideals that this very polemical project will affect the patriarchal norms in the industry to readdress the balance by showing how a polar stance can bring unification through diversity to ultimately engender the wider values and goals of being world beating industry leaders.

The project takes on the tenets of Feminist Educational Theory where participants will be immersed in a social learning environment to implicitly develop understanding of the industry but also a skills model will explicitly teach technical skills to create videogame content through one to one mentorship. Throughout the strategy “Validation of personal experience” (Hoffman & Stake 1998) will be encouraged amongst the participants, rather than dictated by the educators to ensure the project gives a true voice to the women taking part, along with activism and critical open-minded thinking.

Taking Lehrman’s (1998) opposition to Feminist Educational Theory into account which argues that the vast knowledge and experience of educators outweighs the benefits of social interaction and participatory self-validation – it is with this standpoint that an imbalance has been created in the games industry, one that is self-perpetuating the dogged notions that those already making videogames know best. As the industry has been built by men, and typically white middle-class men – if games were (and typically are) made based on the knowledge and experience of the veterans, and indeed if apprentices and students are taught with those values, then videogames will never be made with the richness of diversity.

Therefore, it is essential to grow a dynamic, responsive and relevant digital economy, that the Patriarchal norm of this sector (Code 2017) makes way for diverse thought and innovation. This paper posits how a polar response to a patriarchal knowledgebase can instil togetherness in the project, in development companies, between gender. Togetherness explicitly within the women participating and also the future of the industry.

It seems rather contradictory that a project that seeks to do something polar to the norm is indeed an effort to draw a group for the purposes of unity and togetherness. However, it is important to understand that the norm is far leaning to favour a narrow slice of society. The polarity of this project then, is about counterbalancing the customary way that the games industry work, and is structured, and generally operates, and give opportunity to do something different. It is about trying to create an opportunity for underrepresented areas of society to affect all aspects of the games development cycle, and put together a new epistemology, a new relational materiality in the way games are designed and presented. This is a chance to present an incongruous heterogenic path as opposed to the singular way in which the industry has worked for the past 40 years. It is a project to study new discourses in Feminist Science, Technology and Art Studies that disrupts the diaspora inherent in an industry where decisions are commonly made by men, for the benefit of men. Women and BAME employees are in the minority, and even those few within the industry are subject to elision when it comes to making

creative decisions that influence the way that issues and content women find important are represented in games. The social ordering of the games industry is such that it is a thriving business, but not a representative one, nor an inclusive one. Creative Skillset (2016) shows that women in the UK games industry workforce represent just 19% of employees. A pitiful 5% of those women are working in the creative development teams, and those in strategic management fall far below the average UK workforce, three quarters of which is controlled by white men. 4% of the industry is represented by BAME employees, and considering the vast amount of games development companies in London and the West Midlands where BAME residents are prevalent, in the games industry, they are grossly underrepresented.

There is a norm here that needs to change. And it will not change whilst the contention is held, (which is the strongest counterpoint to Feminist Education Theory) that those with experience and knowledge know best, and everyone else should do what they say.

Consider this then: If the games industry has been built by white males, now typically in their 30s and 40s – almost all of the veterans of the industry are characterised in this way. Taking the notion that the industry should be led by those with experience and knowledge means that there is no room for new thought, there is no room for culturally different ideas, and there is no room for women to make creative decisions about the games that 48% of the UK population who are women are playing.

The main purpose of this project is to give agency to a group of underrepresented women in London. To train them with female tutors, and female industry veterans. To lead them with powerful exponent women from the industry.

“don’t let anyone tell you you’re working on the “wrong” games, either. Want to create something in a niche genre? Go for it. Want to work on something that other people don’t understand? Give it a try” – lienhard & Meno 2018

There is great unity in the games industry when a team works incredibly hard together to make a product and then put their hard won art out to the world for often unreserved critical appraisal. There is relief in shipping a videogame, that a team becomes one in the celebration of the individual and micro-team efforts to make something that the world can enjoy, learn from or immerse themselves in. There is nothing to criticise in the celebrations as games development companies and their employees all work incredibly hard to stay buoyant in a prosperous but challenging sector. But it is apparent in the rolling credits of countless games that the teams banding together are lacking in diversity. And this lack of diversity can have a profound effect on the end product, which often suffers in its representation. Togetherness will happen in any mixture of teams when you work hard together on a singular product.

A shipped game invites team celebration. So we can assume that it does not matter the mixture of the team to achieve that end. More women in the industry will not disrupt the process of a company working together to ship a product. Perhaps with a female majority, the methods of which a project goes through production and release to the public may differ to those established. There is an opportunity to explore that notion in this project. However, a larger study testing the outputs of mixed and mono gendered teams would provide useful data.

There is potential for the study of togetherness between the women who participate in this project. Psychological safety is perhaps one of the important draws of the project for young women who have felt left out or let down, or indeed been left traumatised by a patriarchal system in education and wider social contexts. Women will no doubt find through the participation in this project that they will see alike participants and feel comfortable to find a voice and take risks with their learning and ambitions. The Women's only spaces offered by this project mean that otherwise precluded participants because of the presence of men in the working or studying environment will be given opportunity to prosper.

“I've been extremely lucky that I'd been able to build enough money and power to leave horrible work conditions and try to create better ones. I'm not sure all my friends are so lucky. I think some of them are stuck working with horrible bros with horrifying opinions. But as the tools become even more accessible the industry is changing and maybe one day we will all have the safety that I have found. Until then, all I can say is that we are growing in number and we see each other” – Code 2017

In the UK only 19% of the games industry workforce are women. With a mere 5% working in the creative development teams. Strategic management (27%) represents much less than the average UK workforce (creativeskillset p404 2016) and this paper hasn't begun to address the 4% BAME representation of the sector. The future of the games industry requires these inequalities to be addressed, and some organisations are starting to make that happen.

“Levelling the Playing Field is a scheme designed to finance small studios or startups where women either equal or outnumber men in the company's headcount.” – Batchelor 2018

Games development has established itself as a prosperous industry in the last 40 years. It was set up predominantly by men, and the output of which has been that which would appeal mostly to a male audience. This means that at least half of the audience for videogames are not seeing content made with them in mind. The first problem, is that with a well-established male dominated industry, it is difficult to get women to want to enter into that industry. The second problem is that because it's established by men, those that are running the industry are men, no matter how many women you attract to the sector. Problem two compounds problem one into a vicious circle. The status quo is that men know how the sector works, and what they say goes. Posing the question:

How do women establish a substantial say in how the videogames industry creates content for women? We want to find a way for men and women to work together equally on creating content for this booming industry, and I contend that it isn't by working together. Not initially. To get women to have a powerful voice in this industry, we have to show that games can be made another way and that they can be successful.

Feminist research theory contends that a student centred approach be adopted so that the thoughts, ideas and issues of the group can push the agenda of any given project. Anti-feminist

contentions contend that the teacher knows best and that a didactic approach be taken to guide a group through a project. It is with anti-feminist approaches that the games industry continues to work. The big decision makers, those in lead roles and creative direction roles are invariably men. So any women that enter the industry will have to listen to and work under that guidance. Shaped by the tenets and methods laid out by the established management. Therefore, the only way to have another voice that has a chance at appealing closely to an audience of women is to create a studio that is run by women, that the people within that group are trained by women and that in this experiment there is no interference by the established agenda.

“#GirlsBehindTheGames is much more than a beautiful compilation of women standing proud in their own achievements. These women stand together; they stand with those experiencing similar struggles, and stand with those curious about the industry and how to make their way into it. These women are engineers, artists, storytellers, sources of inspiration and wisdom ready to support prospective developers/managers in their career journeys.” – Meno 2018

This will undoubtedly spark the argument that it isn't mixed, there is no unity or togetherness in doing this. However, the counter to this is that there first needs to be an establishment of new thinking and new ways of working – once proved, then there will be more choice for videogames development workers of any gender to find work in a studio that speaks to them about the kind of content they want to produce. And resultantly a plethora of content for wider consumer appeal.

The women only studio isn't an example of how studios should be. It is proven that diversity creates the best well rounded ideas. It is about establishing that games can be made in another way, and that male voices are not the only voices of authority in the games industry. So the project is about finding marginalised young women without any aspirations or influence for or by the games industry. Women who have perhaps been failed by a patriarchal system: overbearing male figures; teachers who have steered them away from 'masculine' pursuits and careers; men who have let them down in a system where they feel like they do not matter and their voice cannot be heard. To give these young women female role models and mentors from the games industry, to give them training, equipment, a safe space to talk and share their ideas about life. This will create an environment for those ideas to proliferate, to allow for new established methods of working, new roles, new hierarchies, new workspaces, new planning and delivery. A renaissance, that the games industry requires. And that women quite rightly demand.

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