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**Camille Scaysbrooke's Paper was delivered at *Plaything*;  
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play: Chaired by Zina Kaye.**

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**Boys and Girls Come Out to Play: Chaired by Zina Kaye**

This panel takes on the common perception that women don't play games, and explores gender issues in game design.

**Van Sowerwine (Aus)**

*Play with me*

**Camille Scaysbrook (Aus)**

*Games for Girls ... Girls for Games*

**Mary Flanagan (USA)**

*Let down your long hair? Projects for girls*

# Games for Girls ... Girls for Games

Camille Scaysbrooke

I'm attempting to come at this topic as a woman who has worked as a game designer within the commercial gaming industry. There aren't many of us - when I left the industry in 2001, a few were artists, a couple were programmers, and as far as I know, I was the only girl game designer working in Australia at the time, which is odd, because the problem solving skills I required to do my job aren't on the whole `masculine' skills. I came into the position mainly as a writer, as well as a gaming enthusiast, and in fact, I think the different angle I contributed did balance things out in a pretty valuable way. Not valuable enough to keep me in the industry, but there you go. Anyone who once wrote a game design based on a nineteenth century poem by Christina Rossetti probably wasn't going to go far in it anyway.

For a female, the gaming world can be a hostile place. It wasn't always so; in fact, it wasn't until the era of the first person shooter that gaming began to be perceived as a gendered pastime. As the business grew, it became increasingly focused on what was perceived as its core market - young males. This has changed somewhat nowadays, but there's no doubting that the `men's club' atmosphere continues. I have seen females subjected to appalling verbal abuse on gaming websites. Games deliberately cater towards making the unempowered feel important and heroic, which manifests itself in bullying and sexism.

I was lucky to work with a great team who valued the different slant on things that I could give, but there are certain things so deeply entrenched that they were difficult to change. Female body models are a good example.

The main title I worked on was BigWorld: Citizen Zero, a massively multiplayer online game to be played over the internet. It's still in development. The game that was intended to be particularly realistic, the male models were beautifully detailed. This made it all the more obvious how ridiculous the female models looked in comparison. I said to them - aren't you committed to realism? They said - yes, but we're giving the market what they want. This is how girls in games look. I said this was a complete load of rubbish, which it is. I said it is up to us to *redefine* beautiful. But I had very little luck. The gaming industry is wrought with inconsistencies. When I attempted to introduce into the game narrative a narcotic that characters could take and become addicted to, I was given great lectures about how this would provide a disincentive for parents to buy this game for their kids, blah blah blah ... this of course, did not preclude a pole dancing bar being one of the main game locations.

I was luckier during a brief stint on a cult game whose name I won't mention. I must admit I haven't played the game, but I was told that a mission in which your character picks up a prostitute, takes her to a private location and kills her was removed from the game.

These are not uncommon examples, and it's a vicious circle - without women in the industry to redress that sort of imbalance, we're unlikely to attract more women to the industry. Without the numbers, the sole voice of dissent becomes more and more strident, and less and less likely to be regarded by those who most need to hear her message as anything other than the `femmo nazi'.

A couple of years ago I went to the Australian Game Developers Conference, which is kind of like the Australian equivalent of E3, the enormous American games symposium. Individual companies

have their own booth, with whatever game they're publicising, which in my case was a project that was then called BigWorld: Citizen Zero.

So, we manned the booth in twos to answer questions and what have you, and the way I was treated was really strange. People would tend to sidle up to one of the blokes at the booth, have a chat, have a nod - then walk over to me. It wasn't until one of my colleagues explained it that I realised what was happening. He said 'They think you're the *booth babe*'.

Booth babes are hired models, used by game companies to advertise their products. As you can imagine, they're pretty effective.

Seriously, the idea of my being mistaken for a booth babe really made me look at the pressure I placed on myself as a female in the games industry. It wasn't until I was out of the industry for some time that I realised it had affected the way I dressed, spoke, and looked, particularly towards the media. I found that interviewers did tend to make assumptions about me - I'd get asked questions about female cyberathlete teams and so forth which I really couldn't know or care less about. They really didn't have an example to refer to.

Now, who here has actually heard of any female game designers? I'm going to talk to you about probably the two most famous female game designers, Roberta Williams and Stevie Case.

Roberta Williams was the co-founder of Sierra Online. The company is actually slightly older than the home PC, having been inspired by a now legendary text adventure called Colossal Caves. Roberta was intrigued when her husband Ken told her about these, and set about designing her own. When the home PC industry began, Sierra were the ones to bring the text adventure into the mainstream, adding graphics and increasingly sophisticated storylines, to become probably the world's pre-eminent gaming house until the mid 90s. Mention Space Quest, King's Quest, and yes, Leisure Suit Larry, to anyone my age and you're bound to see some misty eyes. The King's Quest fantasy series was Williams' particular pet, and featured adventure gaming's first female heroine - Princess Rosella.

The graphics weren't all that crash hot in those days, but in my opinion, this actually fostered a greater commitment to game design. Williams' games were cleverly written, often self referential, and very literate. They did not say 'these games are for girls 6 to 8, these are for boys 12 to 15', but were age and gender blind.

It's interesting to remember a time when this was generally the case. The games industry was originally not built on first person shooters or even platform games, but almost catered to an intelligensia. Williams has even been accused of elitism for pushing that idea - ironic when we have in fact seen the intelligensia shoved out of gaming.

It's important to remember just how different the gaming industry once was. Sierra was the largest of a cottage industry which is much more akin to the independent games market today. There was by default, an elitism of very early games, as there was an elitism in having access to or even owning a computer. The first text adventures were designed for and by bored scientists, not kids. When cartridge based systems and eventually home PCs such as the Commodore 64 were released - and again, it wasn't that long ago, I got mine for Christmas 1985 - gaming shifted from the fringe to the mainstream. The mainstreaming of the game industry inevitably shifted appeal from intellectual and visceral to physical and fast moving, a shift that generally left women gamers out in the cold.

In the late 90s Sierra was subject to a hostile takeover bid by French firm Cendant as they were later called. The company was largely gutted, and Williams and her husband lost control of the company. By this point the company had made some bad mistakes in an attempt to address the new technology in such a way that they reduced rather than increased the level of interactivity. They struggled on for several more years under the new management, but the climate of gaming had clearly changed for good. Kings Quest 8 was the final installment of the series that had made Sierra famous. In one of her last interviews before unofficially retiring from games, she told one commentator - 'I don't matter ... my games do'.

Perhaps this is why I have never once been asked how Roberta Williams influenced me, and have in nearly every interview asked how this lovely lady influenced me. You may have your own theories.

Stevie Case first became recognised when, as a 'Killcreek', a leading 'cyber athlete', she beat the legendary game designer John Romero in a world championship round of the first person shooter 'Quake', which he himself had created. And then - they started dating. Did the media love her or did the media love her? To steal a good phrase - if Stevie Case didn't exist, the games industry probably would have invented her. I'm not sure whether it was before or after her marriage to Romero that she posed for Playboy, wearing little more than a darling little choker made out of a circuit board. She was Lara Croft made flesh.

Now, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I'm not denigrating Case. It's very easy to be sceptical about her and to argue as to the true significance of contribution to the games industry, although I find her description of herself as a 'hard core feminist' a little hard to swallow. But it is undeniable that she has made it difficult for other female designers, because, quite frankly - we're not all Stevie Case. In some cases we're kind of bookish and boring and interested in 19th Century Poetry. Many of us, such as myself, have absolutely no interest whatsoever in the first person shooter - which is, as far as the media is concerned, is all that gaming is. It is significant that Case was lauded for literally 'beating Romero at his own game'. The message for women in the games industry is clear. To quote Everquest: 'you are in our world now'. Women are allowed in the industry, but they must literally play the game the man's way.

Case's media profile has declined somewhat over the past few years, all due to a little debacle named 'Daikatana'.

'Daikatana' translates literally as 'Big Sword' - appropriate, because nothing about Daikatana was small. It entered development in 1996, the first title from a newly formed game house, Ion Storm, headed by John Romero, opening with a \$22m six game deal with game producers Eidos, and populated by Case and the cream of the industry's crop. The infighting began almost immediately, the lawsuits began a year later, and most of the employees, considered the best in the industry, had left or been fired, and the whole affair descended into what one commenator called 'a toxic mix of prima donnas and personality cults'. By the time of its release, the company had spent \$26 million.

The story might have ended a little more nicely if 'Daikatana', finally released in 1998 after two years of hype, was not one of the most gob-smackingly awful games ever released.. The Ion Storm debacle became legendary, and though Romero has gone on to other things,

People have asked me what I think of Case's game design. The answer is - I honestly don't know. It has never been 100% clear what her contributions to Daikatana were, or any of the games she has worked on. There is certainly nothing overtly suggesting a female input - not that there needs to be,

of course, but again - I couldn't really say what kind of a designer Case is, other than an ambitious one.

Will Case live up to expectations? I honestly hope so. I am genuinely interested to see what she does next. I mentioned Lara Croft earlier. What I didn't mention is that, despite the boobs and the salivating boys - many, many women love Lara Croft. I love Lara Croft. I think women genuinely do want intelligent role models in the game world - we just haven't got many to choose from.

There's conflicting views of how many women actually do play games. Reliable statistics are surprisingly hard to find, because the majority of surveys are conducted by games sites. The figure generally hovers around 48%, depending on who you're talking to, and more importantly, what game you're talking about. This means there's at least 52% of a market out there to capture, and if you've got 52% of any demographic, it's inevitable that someone's going to want to market something to them. Therefore the women's market is perceived as the holy grail by many producers. So, what *is* this fantastic product that is suddenly going to draw 50% of the market share?

I'm afraid I'm not here to offer conclusions about that, although many have tried - and it's interesting how many of them are men. While working in the gaming industry I was often asked about it. I can't say. To me, that's almost like saying 'Right, so you have blue eyes, so what do people with blue eyes like?' I could say 'a game based on a 19th century poem by Christina Rossetti', but that's just me.

However, we can make some fairly broad generalisations about female gamers. There is no doubt that women and men have different perceptions of play, and therefore different demands of games. Studies have found that, for example, when asked about a memory of a movie, a man is more likely to focus on the incidents of the plot, while women are more likely to remember smaller details, say, 'the way the sun sparkled on the water' in one scene. Men tend towards the perceptual, women towards the experiential. Men prefer competition, women prefer contemplation. Games that have been successful with both sexes, such as *Myst* and *The Sims*, cater more or less equally towards both approaches.

It's interesting to apply the male idea of perception to the classic platform game formula - overcome increasingly difficult obstacles to arrive at a so called 'boss', or mega obstacle, before proceeding to the next level. In my own experience, while men I knew would work for weeks on defeating this 'boss', I couldn't really care less. That's not to say women aren't competitive, as anyone who was ever in Year 9 knows, but the competition tends to be one of status rather than material gain.

This provides the first dilemma for game designers hoping to appeal to the female market. basically to keep you interested enough in your next goal to keep playing. It's impossible to say whether the differences are nature or nurture, but if it's the latter, it begins very early in childhood, which is what makes the research done by Interval Research so interesting. Interval put millions of dollars and three years into study of the young female market, and used their conclusions to launch the game company Purple Moon.

Interval found that the interest in games and computers was fairly evenly distributed between boys and girls in childhood. Boys were more likely to carry that interest into high school. But for girls, there was an immediate drop off at age 12 or 13. It just went 'shhhw'. This is around the time that girls are in high school, and begin succumbing more markedly to the opinions of their peers and so forth. Other studies - and I should add, these are a few years old - found that high school computer teachers also concentrated more highly on male students and automatically assumed girls would

not be interested. It's a terrible shame that that level of sexist stereotyping should exist these days, but it's there.

It's important to note that we are seeing a change in attitude since these studies were done. The advent of the internet, of chatrooms, of mobile phones and SMS has broken down that stereotype somewhat; to the point where it would probably be uncool to be computer *illiterate* for young girls today. However, like Stevie Case, even this is within clearly defined barriers - cool to know how to talk on a chatroom, un-cool to know how to design one. Nevertheless, advances have been made. Young females make up 52% of all buyers of 'The Sims', now the best selling game of all time. I have some high hopes for the massively multiplayer industry, which I haven't got time to go into today.

In my opinion, one of the mistakes game designers have made in regards to tailoring games for girls is targeting this end of society, a market that simply does not and will not ever exist. If we look at the Purple Moon games for example, which are designed to reflect and appeal to the desires of its audience see little girls writing diaries, keeping and telling secrets, gossiping, being worried about their appearance, and fighting for social hierarchy. One thing we do not see is them taking any interest in computers whatsoever. I think that says it all. After resisting a takeover from Mattel to the tune of \$200m, Mattel eventually picked them up for \$4m. Yes, the blonde bitch won

However, the main mistake was in seeing women as an all inclusive demographic in the first place. I'll end on a quote from game theorist Justine Cassell, which really sums up my thoughts about it all.

"A gender-blind computer market will provide games to meet the needs of every one. It's a lesson that boys' games have always known. There are boys sports games, military games, bookish games, nerdy games. Why would we think there should only be one kind of game for girls?"

Until there are more women in the industry, this goal is unfortunately, an inherently unachievable one. Here's hoping there's a game producer out there who likes nineteenth century poetry as much as I do.