

“The only skill that is really important”... Talent development of female young professionals in a video game company

Michael Ahmadi
University of Siegen, Germany
michael.ahmadi@uni-siegen.de

Rebecca Eilert
University of Siegen, Germany
Rebecca.eilert@uni-siegen.de

Anne Weibert
University of Siegen, Germany
anne.weibert@uni-siegen.de

Volker Wulf
University of Siegen, Germany
volker.wulf@uni-siegen.de

Nicola Marsden
Heilbronn University, Germany
nicola.marsden@hs-heilbronn.de

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that women in video game companies are confronted with several barriers regarding their career chances and advancement within the industry. Masculinity in organizations is considered to be one major reason for this, with women lacking access to internal networks and other social factors which hinders their advancement. As gendered working environments are considered to be the result of social constructions, one has to understand associated dynamics when having the will to restructure them. To get to know more about the situation of women in video game companies we conducted a qualitative field study in an associated organization in a large city in Germany. We found that women are confronted with masculinity at three stages during their career lifetime within a company: 1) onboarding, 2) skill usage and 3) career development.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Gender** • *Ethnographic studies*

KEYWORDS

Gender, video game industry, workplace studies, organization studies, qualitative research, masculinity, feminist research.

1 INTRODUCTION

Like other IT fields, the culturally influential video game industry is dominated by men [9,23] or, as Mitchell terms them, the “sea of dudes” [10]. Scholars have argued that in such ‘masculine environments’, career success is not necessarily the result of

Copyright held by authors. doi.org/10.18420/ct2019-087

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers, or to redistribute to lists, contact the authors.

C&T 2019, June 03–07, 2019, Vienna, Austria

Demos and Posters, Reports of the European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies.

performance but more because of networks and other social factors [e.g. 1] which genuinely disadvantage those who do not have access to them. Factors like cultural stereotypes, sexism, disadvantages in pay, a lack of advancement or access to networks as well as missing role models and peers among others have all been identified as reasons for barriers for women, who are interested in pursuing a career in video game development. Such ‘hegemonic masculinities’ in the gaming culture have been widely discussed [e.g. 22]. Companies’ will to foster diversity is understandable as a lack of such during the game development process leads to games which are more attractive to a male audience, hence self-perpetuating the problem and decreasing market chances [7]. An industry that partly adopts the gaming culture as their corporate cultures generally has potential for higher flexibility and yet we are left with a rather androcentric environment where the structures remain largely constant while a gender-sensitive perspective is often left out.

As gendered, masculine working environments are considered to be the results of social constructions [28], they can be restructured [6]. To do so, one yet has to understand the contextual parameters. Little attention has been paid on the question how women in video game companies are dealing with the subtle notions of masculinity which disadvantage them in terms of their career development and associated strategies they are using to counteract such problems.

For the said reasons, we conducted an ethnographic field study in a video game company in a large city in Germany which seeks to understand how young female professionals realize their career ambitions. For the purpose of this study, we refer to masculinity as the reason for inequalities in the workspace, which is expressed by subtle notions of discriminating, excluding and disadvantaging women [e.g. 1,8]. This way, women are for instance lacking access to internal networks or they are reluctant to express their agency which puts barriers towards their career advancement. We found that women are confronted with masculinity at three stages when progressing through the company: 1) When onboarding into the

company and getting to know the corporate culture, 2) when developing and showing off their skill set and 3) when wanting to make career development within the company.

2 RELATED WORK

Tech corporate environments are associated with factors off-putting for women such as role ambiguity, erosion of community, absence of fairness (e.g. pay gaps and family obligations), missing female mentors etc. [e.g. 14,16,21], leading to major barriers in terms of advancement. Gendered practices are constantly performed and reinforced, e.g. through activities such as pouring coffee, but also (more crucially) when filling positions [4]. Such hostile environments are not only a problem when wanting to acquire young female professionals, there is furthermore evidence that retention issues exist [25]. Feminist research [13] as well as workplace studies about masculinity [8] have examined the various forms of mentioned inequalities, e.g. the way a company is working, including its structures, advancement options, distribution of roles etc. [1] and identified hegemonic masculinity [12] as one main reason such structures remain intact.

The video game industry as one part of the IT landscape shares similar problems: Although it is considered to be an entertainment-, cultural- and creative industry [23] which hires intrinsically motivated personnel (often gamers themselves), it is still lacking gender-inclusive workforces. Long working hours, low wages and crunch times [29] are accepted as paying the price for an informal and relaxed environments where people tend to be hired due to interpersonal fit [17]. Discussions of who a ‘real gamer’ is and what ‘real games’ characterize within gaming culture in turn influence the gaming industry [e.g. 9,22,27]. An image of sexism in the workforce was e.g. visible during public discussion of the #gamergate controversy [26]. The few women working in the industry are then rather employed in non-technical areas, e.g. working as project managers, in human resources communications [23] etc. and they are often disadvantaged when it comes to access to networks or ambiguities with gender roles.

Despite efforts to understand the situation of women in the video game industry [e.g. 29], we still lack *contextualized* knowledge [15,19] of how young female professionals are actually confronted with masculinity in terms of their career development. As laid out, organizational structures play a major role in this context. Our ethnographic study aims to contribute to the discussion. We argue that an ‘on the ground’ [31] oriented qualitative approach seems to offer potential to unravel the often historically established structures within an organization [11], this way contributing to a growing interest in feminist research in the field of HCI [3].

3 METHODS

To gain insights into the situation of women in an internationally acting video game company, we conducted a field study in the tradition of ‘institutional ethnography’ as proposed by Smith [24].

Here, we collaborated closely with seven women at said company over the course of 8 months. In addition, two women as well as two men participated (exclusively) in a focus group discussion. In terms of data collection and data analysis, we chose a multitude of qualitative methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews and we used observation, more precisely shadowing, as a method to collect data [20]: Two researchers (first and second author) visited two women (in comparison, a long- as well as a short-term employee) twice a month for several time. Interviews were transcribed and notes of the observations were later expanded to detailed fieldnotes [18]. The qualitative data was then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach [5]. The results of this coding process were mirrored back to participants at a focus group discussion which sharpened our themes again. We will present our findings in the followings.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Onboarding

Most of the women stated that joining the company was the result of being a passionate gamer or a ‘geek’ and to work in the industry (or specifically at that company) was a huge desire. To realize this, the women faced obstacles along the way, left their former companies and accepted lower salaries to land their ‘dream job.’

During the first weeks within a company, one gets to know better the corporate culture and it became obvious that the company adopts the ‘geeky’ gaming culture as their corporate culture. From the very beginning the women felt a fit, describing the atmosphere within the company as “like a family.” People are engaged to make the first weeks within the company easier, inviting newcomers for lunch, a beer in the evening etc.

Based upon those reports, it might be tempting to assume that the situation is generally trouble-free for the women. Nonetheless, onboarding processes are considered to be still rather unstructured which is regarded as a challenge especially for women entering a male dominated field. Furthermore, despite the women applauded the general atmosphere, it became apparent that subtle notions of masculinity are present. During the observation phase at the company, the researchers were able to observe behavior of and interactions amongst men one could conceive signs of ‘masculine behavior’ such as jokingly teasing each other. The shadowing of a female newcomer additionally revealed interesting insights in terms of group dynamics amongst women and how they are dealing with subtle notions of masculinity. An anecdote about the responsibility to pour coffee for the team showed that ‘manning up’ in masculine environments right from the start might be an important task. A group of three newcomers felt that the obligations of brewing new coffee was continually left to them. They found strategies to cope with those subtle masculine notions by printing a ‘meme’ which was hung to the cupboard in the coffee kitchen. Hence using humor (which was adapted to the ‘geeky’ culture of the company) as a way to advocate a more social behavior without pointing the moral finger was one strategy we found.

4.2 Skill usage

While ‘talent’ is a technical term used by the Human Resources department (HR) participants agreed that the term can be misleading as ‘skills’ is the more fitting term to describe the requirements to fulfil duties. Compared to ‘inborn talents’, skills are something that could be achieved via hard work and diligence. Those nuances in terminology seemed important to the women. Gaining the required skills to fulfil the duties leaves one with a feeling of satisfaction and one participants stated that “the only skill that is really important” is “not giving up” and being persistent. In terms of their skill set, several women described being in conflict with the expected gender roles and the linked notions of femininity associated with such. This might lead to a feeling that the own takes and perspectives are devalued within the company which then leads to a reluctance to express self-confidence. An emphasize on ‘feminine’ tasks during game development (emotionality) or a more empathic leading style might e.g. by times clash with more ‘masculine’ dominant ones within the company.

4.3 Career development

Talent for open positions is usually searched internally within the company and participants universally agreed that HR offers numerous opportunities for career development such as courses. The women yet stated that applying for such courses often comes with dilemmas in comparison to their male peers: With a ‘project first’ mentality present, being a women interested in fostering the own career ambitions might lead to a stigma of being “pushy” or “bitchy.” Indeed, several participants reported that they felt disadvantaged by such issues. In addition, HR is aware that development of capable personnel does not only mean supporting the extroverts but also to foster the strengths and skills of introverts. Considering the before mentioned dilemmas, this seems especially important in terms of female employees.

5 FUTURE WORK

When gendered, masculine working environments are considered to be the results of social constructions, we are able to change and reconstruct them. Within the video game company, we found a corporate environment that offers flexible structures and a welcoming corporate climate with highly motivated personnel. Subtle notions of masculinity yet remain as barriers for women to fulfil their potential and in the future we have to analyze more deeply the barriers women are facing and how the female strategies we found can be supported by the company. We believe that our lessons learned from a video game company provide an interesting case study other industries can learn from. The study at hand is part of a larger Living Lab Project aiming at the intersection of gender studies and IT practice to enhance the situation for women in IT organizations [2]. The Living Lab follows a Participatory Action Research (PAR) [30] which means it advocates for change within a social system. The insights presented here should be used as a base in the future to develop

change-actions collaboratively with the participants of the study and test them in iterative cycles [2]. This way, we hope to make an impact for the women in the field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), grant number 01FP1603, 01FP1604, and 01FP1605. The responsibility for all content supplied lies with the authors.

REFERENCES

- [1] Joan Acker. 2006. Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & society* 20, 4 (2006), 441–464.
- [2] Michael Ahmadi, Anne Weibert, Corinna Ogonowski, Konstantin Aal, Kristian Gäckle, Nicola Marsden, and Volker Wulf. 2018. Challenges and lessons learned by applying living labs in gender and IT contexts. In *Proceedings of the 4th Conference on Gender & IT*, 239–249.
- [3] Shaowen Bardzell. 2010. Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '10)*, 1301–1310.
- [4] Laura Berger, Yvonne Benschop, and Marieke van den Brink. 2015. Practising gender when networking: The case of university–industry innovation projects. *Gender, Work & Organization* 22, 6 (2015), 556–578.
- [5] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, 2 (2006), 77–101.
- [6] Judith Butler. 2004. *Undoing gender*. Routledge, New York & London.
- [7] Justine Cassell. 2003. Genderizing HCI. In *The Human-computer Interaction Handbook*, Julie A. Jacko and Andrew Sears (eds.). L. Erlbaum Associates Inc., Hillsdale, NJ, USA, 401–412. Retrieved March 18, 2019 from <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=772072.772100>
- [8] Cliff Ed Cheng. 1996. *Masculinities in organizations*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- [9] Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw. 2015. A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, 1 (January 2015), 208–220. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917>
- [10] Jack Clark. 2016. Artificial Intelligence Has a ‘Sea of Dudes’ Problem. Retrieved March 11, 2019 from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-06-23/artificial-intelligence-has-a-sea-of-dudes-problem>
- [11] David L. Collinson and Jeff Hearn. 2005. Men and Masculinities in Work, Organizations, and Management. In *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and R.W. Connell (eds.). SAGE, Thousand Oaks, 289–310. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233833.n17>
- [12] R.W. Connell and James W Messerschmidt. 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society* 19, 6 (2005), 829–859.
- [13] Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner. 2002. Ethics and Feminist Research: Theory and Practice. In *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop and Tina Miller (eds.). 14–31.
- [14] Elena Gorbacheva, Jenine Beekhuysen, Jan vom Brocke, and Jörg Becker. 2019. Directions for research on gender imbalance in the IT profession. *European Journal of Information Systems* 28, 1 (2019), 43–67.
- [15] Steve Harrison, Phoebe Sengers, and Deborah Tatar. 2011. Making epistemological trouble: Third-paradigm HCI as successor science. *Interacting with Computers* 23, 5 (September 2011), 385–392. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2011.03.005>
- [16] Karen Holtzblatt and Nicola Marsden. 2018. Retaining Women in Technology. In *2018 IEEE International Conference on Engineering, Technology and Innovation (ICE/ITMC)*, 148–155.
- [17] Aphra Kerr. 2006. *The business and culture of digital games: Gamework and gameplay*. Sage.
- [18] John Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 1995. *Analyzing social settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth (1995).
- [19] Patricia Maguire. 1996. Proposing a More Feminist Participatory Research: Knowing and Being Embraced Openly. *Participatory Research in Health: Issues and Experiences* (1996), 27–39.
- [20] Seonaidh McDonald. 2005. Studying actions in context: a qualitative shadowing method for organizational research. *Qualitative Research* 5, 4 (November 2005), 455–473. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794105056923>
- [21] Andrea Hemphill Merrills. 2016. *A Qualitative Exploration of the Workplace Culture of Women in Information Technology Careers*. Brandman University.
- [22] Benjamin Paaßen, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer. 2017. What is a true gamer? The male gamer stereotype and the marginalization

- of women in video game culture. *Sex Roles* 76, 7 (2017), 421–435. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0678-y>
- [23] Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg. 2014. The Experiences of Women Working in the Computer Games Industry: An In-Depth Qualitative Study. In *Gender Considerations and Influence in the Digital Media and Gaming Industry*. IGI Global, 92–109.
- [24] Dorothy E Smith. 1987. *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. University of Toronto Press.
- [25] Andrea H. Tapia and Lynette Kvasny. 2004. Recruitment is Never Enough: Retention of Women and Minorities in the IT Workplace. In *Proceedings of the 2004 SIGMIS Conference on Computer Personnel Research: Careers, Culture, and Ethics in a Networked Environment* (SIGMIS CPR '04), 84–91. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/982372.982392>
- [26] Cherie Todd. 2015. Commentary: GamerGate and resistance to the diversification of gaming culture. *Women's Studies Journal* 29, 1 (2015), 64.
- [27] Lotte Vermeulen, Mariek Vanden Abeele, and Sofie Van Bauwel. 2016. A gendered identity debate in digital game culture. *Press Start* 3, 1 (2016), 1–16.
- [28] Candace West and Don H Zimmerman. 1987. Doing gender. *Gender & society* 1, 2 (1987), 125–151.
- [29] Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault. 2018. Women's Experiences on the Path to a Career in Game Development. In *Feminism in Play*, Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees and Emma Vossen (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 105–123. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90539-6_
- [30] William F. Whyte. 1991. *Participatory Action Research*. SAGE, Newbury Park.
- [31] Volker Wulf, Kaoru Misaki, Meryem Atam, David Randall, and Markus Rohde. 2013. On the Ground in Sidi Bouzid: Investigating Social Media Use During the Tunisian Revolution. In *Proceedings of the 2013 conference on Computer supported cooperative work*, 1409–1418.