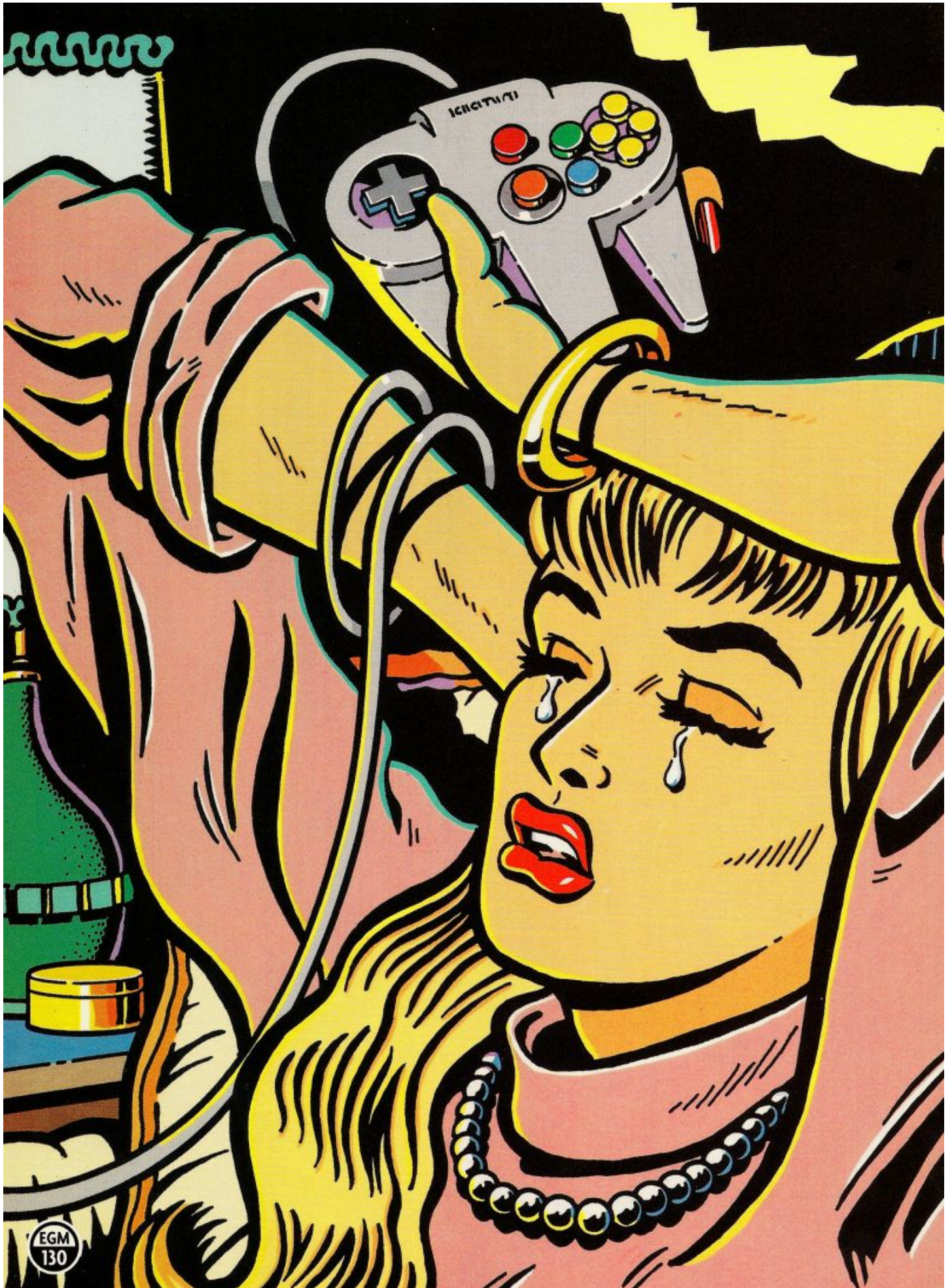



Women in Video Games

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And you thought women didn't dig video games. Turns out they've been building them for years. Strange, considering all the times their male fellow gamers have snapped...

HURRY UP
AND DIE ...
SO I CAN
PLAY.

By Lauren Fielder

Wot every girl dreams of being a video game cheerleader, dressing the side of an arcade machine like a single, weary curtain while her boyfriend lays Heihachi and Law to rest. Nor does every girl dream of becoming the screen-borne leather-clad miscreant or dismantled damsel in distress. Yet these images seem to be the available female time slots in prime-time gaming. Months of research and a bit of industry temperature taking, however, say that behind just about every good game, there's a woman.

But making that known hasn't been easy, as in spite of the surprising number of female developers who've emerged on the scene—matched with the lukewarm media coverage of the issue in the past—men still hold the majority voice in the game industry. And nobody knows this better than the women who are developing the games we play. *EGM* spoke with several of the prominent names producing, programming, designing and conceptualizing console and arcade titles, in hopes of finding out why it's taken so damn long for women to join this circus. In the end we found that perhaps it's true that the old, set-in-its-ways gaming-development beast is finally kicking its gender flu—and that Lara Croft has absolutely nothing to do with it.

First of all, women have been aboard for years—even pre-dating Pac-Man. When Carla Meninsky was a programmer, designer and group leader for Atari from 1979 to 1984, she was one of the few women in the industry. “When I first started,” she explained, “most of the developers were electrical engineering majors, some had advanced degrees. They were some of the most intelligent people I've ever worked with and not

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your typical engineering-nerd types, either. But there was a stigma attached. The other two women in the field at the time were constantly hearing, 'Why don't you get a real job?' from their friends and spouses. For a woman with an advanced degree, it was hard to justify why you were spending your life contributing to the delinquency of minors."

Perhaps figuring out where the stigma originated is the first step. "Video games started out with a stigma," Meninsky said. "When video games first came out, they were placed in bars—typically a male hangout—and they were games of skill that relied on fast reactions. Without the practice and the 'tricks' it was impossible for you to win. Atari even had a requirement that forced the games to get dramatically harder after 90 seconds of play. What woman is going to hang out in a bar all day just to get good at video games?"

But long before the days of 32- and even 64-bit systems,

"I think people still assume men are making all of the decisions, all of the important ones."

Linley Storm
Zombie VR Studios

Girl Powered:

Pitfall
Sega 32X

"This misplaced belief is really at the heart of a lot of what you see in the meetings for the games, and just in the general flavor of the whole community."



"For a woman with an advanced degree, it was hard to justify that you were spending your life contributing to the delinquency of minors."

Carla Meninsky
Electronic Arts?



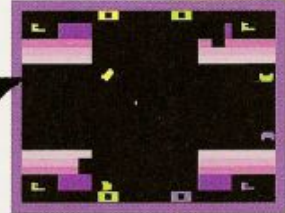
Girl Powered:

Dodg'em
Atari VCS

Warlords
Atari VCS

Star Raiders
Atari VCS

Road Rash 3D
PlayStation



Joanna Alexander
Zombie VR Studios

companies recognized that the untapped female market presented opportunities and wanted to explore any way to improve sales. Meninsky was approached, on occasion, by the CEO of Atari, who spoke with her about creating women's titles, such as shopping and socializing games. According to Meninsky, this showed a complete lack of understanding what women wanted in games.

Meninsky left her last industry position, programming and designing 3D game engines for Electronic Arts, a year ago to start her own company, RLO Consulting, in which she provides 3D graphics consulting. She suggested that, ultimately, perhaps the best way for women to get ahead in this industry is to blaze their own trails.

One such trailblazer is Joanna Alexander of Zombie VR Studios, a Seattle-based development house that's notably about 30 percent female. Alexander and partner Mark Long started the company in 1991, and three years later producer Linley Storm joined the staff. Storm and Alexander credit philosophical likeness to the remarkable number of women on their development teams, and, likewise, to understanding women and games.

EGM asked them what they think women want from games. "I think a lot of women, when they enter a game, want to

come away with something," said Alexander. "Either an understanding, or the satisfaction of solving something or acquiring some kind of new skill. And even though they're not looking for educational games, one that's more contemplative, more intellectual, is much better received by women than the twitch-factor ones."

But aside from the wants of developers and game consumers, there are other factors involved. The gaming press is largely male. Yet the public relations side of the game industry is largely female, and the products are generally marketed to, and packaged for, a male audience. Storm has her own philosophy on this. "I think people still assume men are making all of the decisions," she explained, "all of the important ones."

Alexander agrees. "This misplaced belief is really at the heart of a lot of what you see in the game meetings, and in the general flavor of the whole community," she said.

But the decision maker at OddWorld Inhabitants (developer of Abe's Oddysee) is CEO Sherry McKenna. McKenna spent years in the Hollywood special effects industry, and thought her partner, Lorne Lanning, had gone crazy when he spun her a yarn about his video game "concept." But when he promised superior image quality and storytelling, the Oddworld Quintology was born.

Coming from the movie business, McKenna's experiences are not the same as many of the video game programmers, designers and producers we've interviewed, but admittedly, she says, "It's not called a man's world for nothing." According to McKenna, her first game, Abe's Oddysee, garnered double the standard female sales figures for the Sony PlayStation when it came out. So McKenna seemingly tapped into something. Her recipe, simply, was to "Make the games taste good."

McKenna's solid beliefs against animal testing, and for healthful living were hand-sewn into the Abe's Oddysee framework. However, McKenna believes the cure to everything is communication, and that is quite obviously the key element of gameplay within her titles.

But what really makes the Abe series interesting, is its broad appeal—notably the big "something" game companies are reaching for, and perhaps the reason the industry is becoming more accepting of female developers. Not only did the title attract a lot of female players; it attracted just as many males. *EGM* asked McKenna what the recipe was. "If you want to shoot down everything [in Abe's Oddysee], you could go ahead and do it," she said. "We weren't going to stop you—this is a game. However, we won't reward you for doing it. And you don't get to beat the game."

Expounding on the character's appeal, McKenna said, "We want you to empathize with Abe. We want you to care for him. When I look at Lara Croft, and everyone's saying how enlightened this game is, I say, 'Are you serious?' What are we crazy? Not only is Lara in shorts that are so tight and carrying these big, ridiculous breasts, she shoots every endangered animal on the planet, and we reward her for it. We say, 'That's really cool. What a great game this is!' There is an innate caring about women. Why? It simply goes back to our species. If we care about the character, we realize that there's a purpose."

McKenna believes women and girls will play games if the purpose is distinct. But regarding the survival of women in the

"The cure for everything is communication."

Sherry McKenna
GT Interactive



Girl Powered:

Abe's Oddysee
PlayStation

Abe's Exoddus
PlayStation

Munch's Oddysee
PlayStation



"1977 made me the geek I am today."

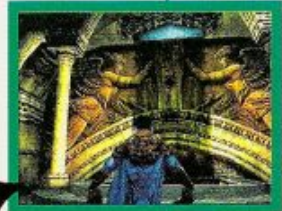
Amy Hennig
Crystal Dynamics



Girl Powered:

**Blood Omen:
Legacy of Kain**
PlayStation

**Legacy of Kain:
Soul Reaver**
PlayStation



game industry, she said, "As long as we single ourselves out by creating great games with great content, we'll be accepted. If we want to single ourselves out just because we're women, then we shouldn't expect to be taken seriously by anyone other than other women."

Amy Hennig, the producer/director of Crystal Dynamics' *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*, has played games since she begged for an Atari 2600 when she was a kid. But she stumbled into the industry by accident when she landed an artist position on *Electrocop*, a finished yet unpublished Atari 7800 title, while she was in film school.

Hennig's ideas somewhat contradict McKenna's, in that she believes character identification is not the key to luring women and girls into gaming. "Unlike male gamers, whose appreciation of a game is often about wish-fulfillment (the thrill of being James Bond, or of being behind Lara Croft), women generally aren't playing for character-identification or fantasy," Hennig explained. "I think the industry is on the wrong track if they're simply looking for characters who girls can identify with."

She also believes the real issue isn't to question why there are so few women developing games, but rather why there aren't more women playing them. "I think of something a male friend said to me once," Hennig said. "Men wear clothes, men like clothes, but men do not shop for clothes. Women play games, women like games, but they don't shop for games." Hennig also thinks that games tend to enter women's lives accidentally. She continued: "No matter how much Mom loved Tetris, she doesn't go to the store to see if there are more games like it. Why? I don't know. The same reasons men don't shop for clothes."

Overall, Hennig agrees with most female developers in that women are more prone to play games that involve mental stimulation and critical thinking, but admits that being a woman in this industry is not an issue that she feels confronted with constantly. "I think my obliviousness to gender gives me an advantage; if you behave in a natural, straightforward manner, you put other people at ease," she said.

Sandi Geary, director of sound for SingleTrac, has a different approach to this industry. She originally intended to create electronic music but instead received a degree in electrical engineering and worked as an EE for 10 years. Her opinion on

"My home computer really only has games, music and Quicken on it."

Sandi Geary
SingleTrac



Girl Powered:

WarHawk
PlayStation

Jet Moto
PlayStation

Twisted Metal 2
PlayStation

Critical Depth
PlayStation

Jet Moto 2
PlayStation

Outwars
PlayStation

Rogue Trip
PlayStation

Streak
PlayStation



perspective through Mie Kumagai, a programmer for Sega of Japan. Kumagai has created some of the largest heavyweight arcade games around, such as Rail Chasers, the Lost World: Jurassic Park and Gunblade NY.

Kumagai's philosophy is concise: "Because there are so few women who like to play games, there are very few who want to make them." Such words speak volumes, because, of course, working is best if you have personal interest in what you do. Yet Kumagai also agrees with her U.S. associates, in that game companies want, and need, a larger audience.

Kumagai does notice, however, that gender plays a role in her work in that she feels the media pays attention to her and her projects because she's female, except for the U.S. market, which she says does not notice her or credit her for her work. Kumagai also spoke of a perception that "people who play games are generally looked down on by others," she said, "because it's the bad students who hang out at the arcade and all games are barbaric and a hindrance to education."

However, she continued that "the mere fact that women in the industry are trying to make games more appealing to the female consumer gives way to expanded genres—and content that female gamers will respond to." But Kumagai, like others, credits her individual effort, not her education, for getting where she is. "I'm really content," she said. "As long as the situation allows me to work here, I'll work in this industry."

Looking at the industry from the perspective of those working within it is one angle, but, naturally, investigating the inspiration to get into games in the first place is telling of the

"I play at home, of course. I like to play games as much as going to the movies and reading."

Mie Kumagai
Sega



Girl Powered:

Rail Chase 2
Saturn

Gunblade NY
arcade

DecAthlete
arcade/Saturn

Lost World: Jurassic Park
arcade

Winter Heat
arcade/Saturn



the whole thing? "I believe that since video games are perceived as games guys design for guys, women are reluctant to consider game development as a career possibility," she said. "When this is combined with the general hesitancy of women to enter a technical field, such as engineering or computer science, I believe it is reflected in the low number of women game developers."

Geary agrees that the game industry, like any industry, is looking to expand its appeal. "There is a huge potential market of women and 'non-traditional gamers' that developers and publishers would love to tap," she said. "Titles like PaRappa the Rapper indicate a willingness to take a risk and see what the market will support. I believe that as this appeal expands, the number of women who play and develop games will also grow."

Attracting women to the industry seems to be the single most baffling issue on developers' minds. Geary agrees that women are attracted to games that stress cognitive skills and involve a challenge. But she also believes that the phrase, "women in gaming" conjures up more of a hard-edge image than is really there. "After being in the industry, I know that the women involved in game development are not very different from other women I know who work in traditional fields such as nursing," said Geary.

Another point is that the industry certainly doesn't end at the U.S. border. In fact, it doesn't even begin here. EGM examined the issue from the Japanese game industry

"Mine and my husband's roles are far from those which are traditionally gender-based. The power tools are all mine!"

Rilla Jiagga

Student



Girl Powered:

Student at DigiPen

Nintendo school of game design



trends. The education behind game development is a great place to start. *EGM* spoke with Rilla Jiagga, one of only three women to grace the halls of Redmond, Washington's DigiPen University (a Nintendo-backed college-level institution that offers bachelors, masters and associates degrees for game development). We asked what inspired her to leave her career as a professor to get into this field.

"Having always been involved in art, music, dance and theater, teaching finance left me with the feeling that none of my creative potential was being tapped," she said. "Here was a way to create my own imaginary worlds that were interactive and combine my love for art, music and even mathematics."

Even though Jiagga is new to the game industry, perhaps it's her economics background that allows her to see that there's clearly market potential that has not been actualized from the female audience. "Producers are beginning to realize the availability of a huge, untapped consumer niche," she said. "The notion that a good half of the population has been virtually ignored as potential consumers is quite a staggering one. Combined is the increased participation of women in the workforce and their willingness to move away from traditional occupations."

Ultimately, there's no such thing as the introduction of women to the video game industry, as if they're a rare species of bird that's frail and inexperienced. They've been here all along. And while programmers, developers, artists and producers have not had an easy time acclimatizing, times are changing—and fast. The video game industry is realizing the potential of tapping into the virtually unexplored female market, and who better to tell the companies how to do it than the women who are behind the computers, making things happen. In short, women and girls are here to stay, and all we want is equal billing, equal time. No more "hurry up and die so I can play" falling from the mouths of our male counterparts. We're taking the controller and not giving it back until the last Boss is laid to rest. ☺

Lauren Fielder is a co-host of ZDTV's *GameSpot TV*, a video game television show. She's also an editor-at-large for www.videogames.com, where you can find an expanded edition of this feature.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

Video game players throw around opinions like loose change—whether about games or another person's ability to play them. And if females are lucky enough to be on the receiving end of these tenets, they're usually not complimented. But are guys really better than girls regarding spatial orientation, object memory, reaction to objects entering the line of vision and everything else it takes to topple video game baddies?

Obviously, the ideal method of answering these questions would be to scientifically test the theories. However, not being psychologists ourselves, *EGM* contacted Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, author of the 1983 book *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games* and professor of psychology at the University of Washington, Seattle. She's one of the leading experts in memory psychology, having written 18 other books and provided expert testimony for the Rodney King and Menendez trials to name a few.



Dr. Elizabeth Loftus

Loftus gave *EGM* a little background, stating that women usually outperform men in tests of verbal ability, males outperform women in tests of spatial skills, and recent studies show that women are better with face recognition. We asked Loftus if the notion of females outperforming males in verbal-memory tests could be translated to video games. "Depending on the type of game, yes," she said. "You could create games that capitalize on verbal skills as opposed to spatial skills, and you might expect to see female superiority."

Now, think of Abe's Oddysee. You beat the game if you could effectively communicate with your fellow Mudokons. The game was successful among females—many of whom didn't know why they liked it but just did. So, if you consider an adventure game or even a platform game in which object location and placement can make or break your success level,

according to these studies, men may excel. But if verbal communication is put into the mix, as in Abe's Oddysee, women's chances of competing evenly increase. Then, say you introduce the unexplored area of face recognition, and women may routinely outperform male gamers. Or not. Remember, these are averages, folks.

According to this line of reasoning, perhaps "female content" such as the shopping and socializing sims companies

have thought to create may not be the answer. Perhaps addressing the innate abilities of females—instead of trying to appeal to learned stereotypes—might open the market.

So the issue seems to always revert back to content, and Diane Shohet, the executive producer for Hasbro Interactive, clarifies this a bit. She heads up the development of games for girls at Hasbro and says, quite simply, "I think that for women to play games, they need to have played games as girls. And girls' play patterns are different from boys. But let me stop here to say that I absolutely don't think girls' games should be restricted to hairstyling and dress-up. Girls' play patterns involve storytelling, fantasy, puzzle solving, creativity and cooperation. There is a lot to explore in these areas."

Whether women gamers' whims hinge on psychology, philosophy, neurology, communication or face recognition, one thing's for sure—people are finally taking female gamers seriously, recognizing the potential of this undernourished demographic. And while we're still not sure exactly what female gamers want, we're trying our damndest to find out.



Diane Shohet