

Fair Play Perspectives: Bridging Research, Design, and Industry

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INTRODUCTION

The world of games is no longer a males-only field of cultural leisure and labor practices. Many women and girls, and other marginalized groups, have taken console controls to heart and hands, embraced a variety of computer games and player modes, design games and participate in e-sports. The industry and academy and governmental policies have attempted to help balance the gender equality of the field. Yet, despite these efforts, games and their industries and labor markets leave much to be desired in terms of representation, equality and inclusion.

In line with the general aim of DiGRA 2025 to take stock of game studies, this presentation briefly reports on the findings from the first part of a research initiative that explores what has been done and what it now takes to diversify games and the game industry, from the perspective of those most implicated in it, namely feminist game design researchers, game designers and industry stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

Over the past few decades, research has highlighted the prevalence of sexist, objectifying, and stereotypical representations in games, alongside the lack of non-male, non-white, non-cisgendered, and queer characters (e.g., Bayeck et al. 2018; Brock 2011; Bryce & Rutter 2002; Cole et al. 2017; Downs & Smith 2010; Geyser & Tshabalala 2011; Lynch et al. 2016; Mukherjee 2017; Paul 2018; Šisler 2008; Shaw 2009, 2015; Shaw & Friesem 2016; Stang 2019; Wohn 2011; Williams et al. 2009). While these representations may not deter marginalized players, they reinforce a white, cis-male target audience and diminish broader identity representation.

Researchers stresses that players cannot be reduced to singular traits—categories like "female players" encompass diverse identities shaped by intersecting factors such

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as class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Chess et al. 2017; Shaw 2015; Sundén & Sveningsson 2012; Taylor 2003; Yee 2008, 2016). Taylor (2003) calls for moving beyond stereotypical "female values" in design, advocating for inclusive practices that recognize diverse identity markers and play experiences.

Barriers to women's participation—ranging from limited job access to toxic work environments—exacerbate these issues (Code 2017; de Castell & Skardzius 2019; Bailey et al. 2021; Bergstrom 2022). Designers often rely on 'I-methodologies' (Akrich 1995), basing decisions on their own experiences and preferences (Zackariasson 2007; Tompkins & Martin 2022).

While industry efforts to address these disparities are underway, progress remains slow, with persistent gender imbalances in both the workforce and game content, limiting diversification and sustainable growth (SOU 2022:44). The financial and discriminatory impacts of inequity remain significant

METHOD

This initiative is inspired by action research, which aims to build knowledge that improves participants' conditions while actively involving them in solutions (Reid, Tom & Frisby, 2006). Engaging feminist games researchers and students broadens the understanding of who should be included as stakeholders. Though not industry members, they critically interrogate structures, challenge norms, and introduce alternative perspectives, serving as catalysts for more equitable industry practices. This future-oriented project supports ongoing efforts while empowering participants to envision possibilities for greater diversity, openness, and accessibility in games.

The initiative unfolds through a series of events: two open lectures with invited games researchers and a game jam for students in spring 2025, followed by a colloquium in fall 2025. Located in Sweden, with a focus on the Nordic games industry, these events foster discussions on experiences, needs, and efforts in the field. The lectures identify key themes in feminist games research and design that may inform industry inclusivity efforts, while the game jam mobilizes students with no formal game design expertise, empowering them to create games that reflect their visions for equity. By showcasing fresh perspectives, the jam challenges industry norms and expands possibilities for more inclusive gaming experiences.

The project concludes with a colloquium, functioning as a workshop and networking opportunity where stakeholders collaborate to address industry challenges, explore solutions, and establish new approaches for disrupting the status quo

FINDINGS

We present findings from two open lectures and a game jam. The open lectures were arranged as a panel each involving three feminist game design researchers, who shared their experiences and projects and engaged in a joint discussion about current challenges and future perspectives in feminist games research and design. In the half-day game jam, students were tasked with designing games that presented their visions for more inclusive and diverse games.

The themes presented below are synthesized from the talks as well as the conversations that emerged during the open lectures and the game jam:

- **Rethinking inclusion:** This theme examined the ethics and challenges of including marginalized players, who we count in and out, the need to listen even when perspectives challenge our intentions, and the potential limitations of dominant participatory formats like game jams.
- **Play rather than games:** This theme explored how feminist research and design shift toward playfulness, challenge traditional notions of games, and open new avenues for rethinking game design.
- **The impact of play experiences:** This theme discussed the experiential side of play, the complexities of designing for the darker side of play, and the power imbalances involved in shaping player experiences.
- **Embracing failure:** This theme addressed the challenges of tackling wicked problems, the inevitability of setbacks in activist-driven design, and the need to balance aspirations for change with an openness to failure.
- **Building skills and fostering reflection:** This theme highlights the importance of cultivating reflective design practices, overcoming pedagogical and methodological challenges, and embedding reflection into game development processes.

CONTRIBUTION

By sharing the findings from our initiative with the greater DiGRA audience, we contribute by fostering dialogue and knowledge transfer among researchers, designers, and industry stakeholders, about central opportunities for future feminist and gender-informed games research to create knowledge that may support game design and the game industry to achieve more diversity in and around games, gameplay, and game production.

Although focused mostly on game production and research in the Nordic region, we expect findings to not be exclusively relevant to this region, but offer insights and recommendations that can inform global discussions on equity, inclusion, and representation in games and the industry.

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