

AT RANDOM CONNECTED

Behind the screen: Women make mark in gaming world

By Eric Gwinn
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More women are in the video game business than ever before, helped into the \$10 billion-a-year industry by the growing number of schools offering game-design instruction.

"I love games. I am technical. You get to be creative on the arts side and deal with technology," says Mai Nguyen, an artist with LucasArts, publisher of the popular "Star Wars" video game franchise.

Nguyen is an artist, like most of the women in video game development, according to the CMP Game Group's survey of game developers' salaries.

Unlike most of the women in the survey, Nguyen didn't arrive to the field via a school. The French-born artist who wanted to illustrate comic books came to the U.S. nearly a decade ago. A self-taught computer artist, she was hired by LucasArts at a time when video game companies didn't have time to train workers.

"In '98-'99, we saw the first generation of people coming out of school who were learning computer animation and modeling," said Nguyen. "I've seen the evolution."

CMP, a print and online publisher of industry information and conference organizer, surveyed 2,740 developers for its study. It found salaries range from about \$40,000 for an entry-level audio engineer to more than \$120,000 for experienced executive producers, who must keep projects on schedule and within budget as production costs soar.

Numbers still small

Women make up slightly more than 9 percent of the artists and animators, the people who create the way characters look and move. Only 3 percent are programmers, writing the computer instructions that turn a game's story and action into a believable universe.

With U.S. video game sales hitting a record \$7 billion last year (hardware and peripherals accounted for \$3 billion), the industry is growing increasingly competitive. Looking for

an edge, many would-be game developers are taking game-design courses at universities, community colleges, and art and technical schools.

"It's when schools started offering computer animation programs that people realized it was a viable career," Nguyen said. "You didn't have to learn by yourself on your computer at home, which guys tended to do."

While schooling helps, there is no single path into game development.

Kim McLean, an artist for Red Storm -- makers of acclaimed war games such as the "Tom Clancy" and "Rainbow Six 3" series -- found her job after getting a degree in designing patterns for upholstery in textile-obsessed North Carolina. The training prepared her for a life creating game backgrounds that are subliminally appreciated. "Either [gamers are] completely wowed by the environment, or you'll say, 'Hmm, that needed work.' The wows are plain out rewarding." She thinks that the arrival of more women into the field won't translate to only "cute, bubbly characters that make fun noises."

Girl games

"There are a lot of games out there that people would label girl games, but they're not made by girls: 'Mario,' 'Frogger,' 'Tetris.' Maybe there'll be different ideas because women have different ideas than men and working together, we'll come up with a unique view."

"I think the basic genres of games will continue to prevail," said BioWare programmer Janice Thoms by e-mail, "but we may start seeing subtle changes in the character creation, game play, and marketing aspects of games to make them appeal to more women. . . . With more women buying games, developers will have to start thinking about what the female game buyers would like to see."

Ursula Escher, an animator for Infinity Ward, grew up in Brazil wanting to draw cartoons for television. After insisting that her relatives sit for her while she drew their portraits, she persuaded them to let her go to art school in Florida.

Borrowing a lesson from her second life as a manager of a karate school, Escher urges more women to get into game development: "They think it's a guy's thing, and it's not true. They need to see it. That's what happens in karate, too."

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