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THE GENDER GAME.  
A STUDY OF NORWEGIAN COMPUTER  
GAME DESIGNERS

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# **THE GENDER GAME. A STUDY OF NORWEGIAN COMPUTER GAME DESIGNERS**

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# **THE GENDER GAME.**

## **A STUDY OF NORWEGIAN COMPUTER GAME DESIGNERS**

### **1. Introduction**

It is commonly believed that computer games are one of the most important gateways to become a skilled and enthusiastic user of computers. The gendered nature of this learning strategy is very pronounced and well expressed in the frequent use of the metaphor of "boy's room competence". In fact, computer games are generally perceived as being designed by men for men (boys), and this masculine prerogative of game design is held as one of the most important mechanisms that exclude girls and women from the Information Society.

Thus, it is important to study the design of computer games to analyse to what extent and how gendered assumptions work as design criteria, and whether the games industry is making efforts to provide products that may be attractive also to girls and women. In this case study, we hope to contribute to an improved understanding of the gendered dynamics of computer games design, with an emphasis on what the industry consider to be appropriate strategies of inclusion towards potential female users.

Computer games have received much attention, for several reasons. First, they have conquered a substantial space in the everyday life of children, in particular boys. This has led to much anxiety related to the consequences of such game playing, for example in terms of children's social life and the possible impact of violent games. Second, since game playing is considered mainly an activity for boys, this has produced concerns that girls are excluded from this way of being introduced to computer technologies, that is, shut out of the boy's room. Third, the nerdist image of intensive playing of computer games seems to spill over into the gender symbolism of ICT, which displays a kind of masculinity that has been considered quite unappealing, not to say repelling, by many women (and probably also by many men). This gender symbolism is held to be one of the most important exclusion mechanisms related to ICTs.

These observations raise the issue of the way computer games are designed. The standard assumption has been that computer games are made by men for men (or, rather, boys). However, recently, some games have been marketed as girl's games. Thus, this case study analyses the way computer game designers perceive their users/customers, how they understand gender and the relationship between gender and computer games, and finally what kind of strategies of inclusion – if any – we find among game designers towards female users.

According to the 2001 media survey in Norway, 31 per cent of those who used at PC at home on an average day used it for games or other entertainment. The percentage was higher for men than for women, 35 per cent compared to 21 percent. Among children, the number is much higher, 71 per cent of those between 9 and 15 years of age.<sup>1</sup> As expected, the frequency of game playing is higher among boys than girls. On any given day, 59 per cent of boys between 9 and 15 years use a PC or a TV game machine for game playing. Among girls in the same age group, the percentage is 38.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the numbers confirm the expectation of boys playing computer games more frequently than girls. On the other hand, a substantial part of Norwegian girls are also playing. Computer games are consequently not for boys only. However, we have no statistical data about what kind of games boys and girls are playing.

Research about computer games is surprisingly limited, given the substantial public interest in the issue.<sup>3</sup> A common theme in several contributions is the worry the game playing somehow may be harmful to children and adolescents. First, it is frequently noted that many computer and video games are quite violent, and several studies claim that the playing of such games raises the level of aggression.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also suggested that for most children, game playing is a fairly absorbing and harmless activity, maybe even beneficial since it may allow the players to "blow off steam".<sup>5</sup> From an historical perspective, it may also be argued that the worry about computer games fits into a pattern of moral trepidation arising with most new media technologies.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no doubt that the computer game industry has grown into a major economic undertaking, with great importance to the global information technology economy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, computer games are going to stay with us.

Second, there have been concerns that the playing of computer and video games are harmful to the development of children's social competence

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<sup>1</sup> Odd Frank Vaage (2002): *Norsk mediebarometer 2001*, Oslo: Statistics Norway, table 35.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> David Buckingham (2002): "The Electronic Generation: Children and New Media", in L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone, eds. *The Handbook of New Media*, London: Sage, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Karen E. Dill & Jody C. Dill (1998): "Video game violence: A review of the empirical literature", *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 3 (4), pp. 407-428; Russel B. Williams and Caryl A. Clippinger (2002): "Aggression, competition and computer games: computer and human opponents", *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 18, pp. 495-506.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Griffiths (1997): "Computer game playing in early adolescence", *Youth & Society*, 29 (2), pp. 223-237; Anne Allison (2001): "Cyborg Violence: Bursting borders and bodies with queer machines", *Cultural Anthropology*, 16 (2), pp. 237-265.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen A. Wartella & Nancy Jennings (2000): "Children and computers: New technology – old concerns", *The future of children*, 10 (2), pp. 31-43.

<sup>7</sup> Aphra Kerr (1999): Ireland in the global information economy: innovation and multimedia content industries, PhD thesis, Dublin: Dublin City University

since game playing is considered a solitary activity. However, it seems to be a consistent finding that this is not the case. To play such games often incurs interaction with other children, and game playing may be a key to social recognition among peers.<sup>8</sup>

Third and most pertinent to our analysis is the interest in the role of games in gender socialisation and the gendered character of computer games. It is a consistent finding in all studies that girls have less access to computer games and play less often than boys.<sup>9</sup> In their seminal book, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat. Gender and computer games*, Cassell and Jenkins argue that this puts girls at a disadvantage because they are excluded from the computer experience that game playing may offer. Therefore, they criticise the computer games industry for neglecting girls' interests in its single-minded pursuit of games that fit into a boys' culture. The topics of the games and the stories on which they are based tend to be very much embedded in masculine storytelling practices, with its emphasis on violent adventures, competition and shooting. In short, arguably, the majority of computer games have a content that turns most girls off.<sup>10</sup>

Cassell and Jenkins give an account of efforts to remedy this situation through a 'girls' games movement' that has aimed to provide girls with games that fit their needs and interests better. The iconic case is Mattel's game "Barbie Fashion Designers", which has sold in large quantities. This also illustrates the dilemma related to this effort. On the one hand, such games tend to reinforce quite traditional gendered images and a dichotomous conception of gender. Boys want to shoot and kill, girls want to dress up and to have romance. On the other, several of the proponents of the 'girls' games movement' want to empower girls by creating and sustaining a space for girls' engagement with computers.

However, girls do play computer games and not just games tailored to feminine tastes. Thus, the situation is more complex than just seeing computer games as 'boys' toys'. In fact, recent US surveys find that the majority of those buying computer games are women, and that women constitute more than half of those engaged in the playing of online computer games. Female computer enthusiasts definitely engage in computer game playing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Myron Orleans & Margaret C. Laney (2000): "Children's Computer Use in the Home. Isolation or Socialisation?", *Social Science Computer Review*, 18 (1), pp. 56-72; Keri Facer et al. (2001): "What's the point of using computers? The development of young people's computer expertise in the home", *New Media & Society*, 3 (2), pp. 199-219; Carsten Jessen (2001): *Børn, leg og computerspil*, Odense: Odense University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Buckingham, op. cit. (note 3), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (1998): "Chess for girls? Feminism and Computer Games", in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds. *From Barbie to Mortal Combat. Gender and computer games*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2-45.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Jøsok Gansmo (1998): Det forvrengte dataspeilet. En kvalitativ studie av hvordan ungdomsskolejenter forstår datateknologiens muligheter i dag og i fremtiden. STS report 36, Trondheim: NTNU, Centre for Technology and Society, NTNU; Hege Nordli (2001) "From 'Spice Girls' to Cybergirls:

Still, Cassell and Jenkins seem to be correct in their assessment that too few computer games are designed to cater for feminine tastes. This raises the issue of what design criteria that should be mobilised in order to include more female users of computer games. It should be noted that this does not necessarily imply the establishment of a simple gender dichotomy of such criteria. Rather, this point should be seen as an invitation to be more reflexive about the assumptions underlying the games' design philosophy.

A study of a Norwegian effort to provide girls with a CD-ROM that would help to get them more interested in using the Internet, identified three design criteria:<sup>12</sup>

- quietness
- knowledge
- convenience.

These criteria should be understood as a contrast to a masculine/boyish preference for noise, fun and complexity.

More specifically related to computer games, some research suggests that girls prefer different sort of narratives than boys do, a parallel to differences between books written for girls and for boys. This would imply that girls like non-aggressive play activities that allow them to create fantasies set in recognizable settings with familiar characters. It has also been found that girls prefer a mode of play where they control the timing as well as the direction of the game, and games that allow them to play in an exploratory, open-ended fashion, so that they can have control of their environment.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the question is whether game designers will consider such findings and utilise them to design games for girls or women.

## **2. A brief note on inclusion**

The focus of this case study is to analyse the way game designers conceive the gender dimension of computer games and what strategies they apply, if any, to get more females included in the community of game players. To the company that makes computer games, the issue of inclusion should be expected to be primarily about selling. We expect that their interest is fuelled

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The role of multimedia in the construction of young girls' fascination for and interest in computers". In Marc van Lieshout et al. (eds.): *Social Learning Technologies. The introduction of multimedia in education*, Ashgate: Aldershot, p. 110-133.

<sup>12</sup> Hendrik Spilker & Knut H. Sørensen (2001): "A ROM of one's own or a home for sharing? Designing the inclusion of women in multimedia", *New Media & Society*, 2(3), 268-285

<sup>13</sup> Kaveri Subrahmanyam & Patricia M. Greenfield (1999): "Computer games for girls: What makes them play?", in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds. *From Barbie to Mortal Combat. Gender and computer games*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 46-71.

by economic motives. More female users mean a larger total of users, which in turn would produce a larger sales volume. Thus, what we call inclusion strategies would in some ways be similar to what the companies perceive as their marketing strategy. However, the underlying goals are different. In the analysis, we have to be aware how this may affect the relationship between inclusion and marketing, which in turn implies that we may have to decode some of the marketing language they should be expected to employ.

Of course, these companies and their employees may also have more idealistic motives that transgress the economic logic of doing business. For example, they may on principle, or for personal reasons, find it important that more women are included in the community of gamers. Thus, inclusion may be more to them than marketing. This has to be explored.

In the SIGIS project, we have worked from an understanding that inclusion strategies should cover not just enrolment but also efforts to make women stay on as users of ICT, in this case as players of computer games. This means that we are looking for strategies to recruit women, but also to retain them through socialising efforts.

As a theoretical backdrop to explore inclusion further, we have employed the translation model. Michel Callon describes translation as the following set of actions:<sup>14</sup>

- problematisation
- interessement
- enrolment
- mobilisation.

In this way, the translation model offers some conceptual tools to analyse different dimensions of inclusion strategies that are sensitive to the potential importance of technology as something that may help keep networks together. Above all, it helps to identify important aspects of the process of transforming an idea into a popular product.

### 3. Method

The case is based on interviews in the four main computer game companies in Norway:

♦ **Funcom** ([www.funcom.no](http://www.funcom.no)) is a world leading online entertainment developer and publisher. Funcom was established in 1993 and they have about 150 employees in Europe and the US. They have 14 titles and have sold more

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Callon (1986): 'Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay.' In *Power, Action and Belief. A New Sociology of Knowledge?* John Law (ed.) Great Britain, Routledge & Kegan Paul.



than 3 million units. Some of the more gender neutral games they have produced are: Casper the friendly ghost, Dinosaur's tale, Dragon Heart, Pocahontas, The longest journey, and Anarchy Online. Their target group is 'the boys' between 18 and 25. Here, we interviewed a male project director.

♦ **Innerloop** ([www.innerloop.no](http://www.innerloop.no)) was founded in 1996 and employs approximately 20 people in Norway. Their game production includes: Flight simulations JSF (joint strike fighter), Extreme Sports, Project IGI, and two secret works in progress. Their target group is 'The boys', or rather established players/established purchasers of games. Here, we interviewed the managing director.

♦ **Caprino Video Games** ([www.caprino.no](http://www.caprino.no)) was founded about 2000 in order to turn the famous film *Flåklypa (Pinchliffe) Grand Prix* into a game. They will continue to develop other games based on the famous movies of Norwegian filmmaker Ivo Caprino. Their aim is to produce high quality, non-violent games appealing to a broad group of gamers, covering several generations. Their target group is families, or everyone between the age of 4 and 104. Here, we interviewed a female producer.

♦ **Art Plant** ([www.artplant.no](http://www.artplant.no)) was founded in 2001 by four experienced game producers from Funcom and Innerloop. Their only game released as the company Art plant is *Blåffell*, a children's game based on a tv-series for the Norwegian Broadcasting Company. Their target group is families, girls and potentially housewives 'because they are different'. Here, we had a group interview with four males, one programmer and three designers.

## 4. Doing computer games design in Norway

### 4.1 Funcom

The Norwegian computer game history can be said to have started with the establishment of Funcom in 1993. At that point not much was happening on design of computer game in Norway, at least not professionally. Many young game players where hacking the games to make them better and more fun to play, but these were only distributed within the inner circles. In July 1993 five young men aged 22 to 26 thought it would be cool to make games so they decided to start Funcom Productions. They soon managed to get one important contract with a developer, Disney, and sat out to make a game for them. Within October that year, they had grown to 17 employees and ended the year with 27. They also had to move to larger locations to make room for all the new staff. In 1994, Funcom Productions increased its size to 76 employees. This year they also made their first two products that were 'A Dinosaur's Tale' and 'Daze Before Christmas'.

In 1994 they also founded two new firms namely Funcom B.V. and Funcom Dublin Ltd. In 1995 Funcom Dublin Ltd. started production with 20

employees and two projects under development. Funcom Productions A/S changed name to Funcom Oslo A/S. At the end of the year, the total number of employees in Oslo was 110. Funcom kept growing in the following years both nationally and internationally.

In 1996, it was time for a change. The company had become too large to keep going in the same way as before. They needed a more professional way of running things. Funcom witnessed a strong transition to a more professional company at all levels. Two or three of the young men who started Funcom, left the company and Funcom got a new structure and management. They also changed their strategy from primarily growth and learning, to what they call a more professional phase with better systems and better care of its future margins. After reorganising, a slightly lower rate of hiring followed. New cutting-edge control systems for financial control, production process control and resource allocation was successfully implemented. It was also at this point that Funcom recognised the immense potential for online gaming. They were in the lead of initiating new and at this point groundbreaking projects. Further, financial strength was built with investments from different financial partners.

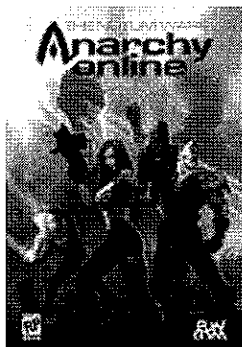
Funcom launched its first online product in May 1997. This was a multi-player Backgammon. It was later followed by Chat Café and Matchmaking for Backgammon. Late autumn the same year, they launched Paradigm Shift, a six-player strategy game which runs in Java-browsers. As part of the company's strategy to maintain creative control and increase margins, Funcom was looking to expand its operations into electronic publishing.

In 1998, they launched two online card games - Funcom Hearts in the summer, and Funcom Spades in December. The number of people registered on the site increased fourfold from 10 000 to 40 000. The site was at this point also launched in Swedish and Danish and received a much-needed face-lift.

In 1999, Funcom launched CMX and Speed Freaks, motor cross and car-games. Later the same year, they launched 'The Longest Journey'. This game received a lot of media attention due to a popular female Norwegian artist lending her voice to the lead character in the game, and it soon reached the no 1 slot in the sales charts in Norway. Later it was released in Swedish and French versions. The online site saw the inclusion of Funcom Poker, and the game server was moved from Oslo to Texas in order to reduce lag. Even after dumping a lot of non-active members from its lists, Funcom Online still had a member-count of more than 100 000 at the end of 1999. Close to 20 000 games of Backgammon were played every week.

'The Longest Journey' was released in Dutch and German versions during February and March 2000. In November, the game was finally released in the USA. In December the Spanish, Italian and Polish versions were released. 'No Escape' (previously known as 'Rocket Racer') was launched in November of 2000, first in the USA and Norway.

'Anarchy Online', the largest project Funcom has ever undertaken, started beta testing in July 2000. There were 600 testers at the end of the year, in the second phase of beta testing. 'Molekult' /'Molecool' - an edutainment online game intended to teach students more than the basics of organic chemistry was launched in the autumn. Funcom received funding from KUF (Ministry of Church, Education and Research) to make it (3 mill Nkr approximately € 400.000). During the interview, we were told that 'Molekult' was in use by many schools, but that Funcom had not been involved with it since they finished the game. Even though they enjoyed making it, they did not see any point in making more games like this since the authorities were not willing to pay what it costs to make a good game.



**Figure 1. 'Anarcy Online'**

In June 2001, 'Anarchy Online' was finally released in Scandinavia and the USA. It had taken Funcom 6 years and a lot of money to make it. The rest of Europe had to wait until September 27th before finding their copy of 'Anarchy Online' in retail. Releasing a game of this magnitude was never going to be easy, and after what they characterise as a rocky launch, things started to stabilise during the autumn. By September, the game had improved enough to win the "Best Multiplayer Game of Show" at ECTS.

However, 'Anarchy Online' did have a lot of start-up problem (and still does). Funcom, which had been growing since it started in 1993, now had to cut back on its employment from 180 to around 150 in 2001. To get a fresh start, they changed the management, which had been on board since 1996. They also decided to direct the entire focus of the company towards subscription based online games. This meant closing down the division in Ireland that developed games for the console market, as well as a merger between Funcom Mobile Entertainment and Live the Game, with Funcom now becoming a lesser partner in Live the Game.

Funcom have 14 titles in total, which have sold more than 3 million units. They still have one firm registered in Holland and one in USA, in addition to the main office in Oslo. Today, Funcom only does online games.

They have stopped all together to make console games and wants to specialise on online games since they regard this as the future. The idea is that customers buy the game in the store when it is launched. The price is about NOK 3–400, approximately € 50. With the game, they may log on to the multiplayer environment. The first month is free (however you do of course have to pay for your Internet connection). After the first month, the player needs to pay a monthly rate to be able to keep on playing. With this subscription model, they believe they will be able to make more money in the long run. Their main game today is 'Anarchy Online'. They claim to have many other products in the making but say it is too early to talk about them.

'Anarchy Online' is an action game with elements from science fiction. According to our informant, this means that the game would most of all appeal to a masculine audience. However, as the development work went on, the social element of the game more and more into focus. It is a multiplayer game with a chat room. The community around the game has started to have a great impact. In addition, it is about role-playing, which also women are said to like. Our informant argued that this social focus made the game more attractive to female gamers as well as male.

Funcom believes that role-playing is a female segment. Women like to play games that are about role-playing. They also like access to candlelight and flowers that they can give to their lovers in the game. 'Anarchy Online' may thus be said to be an effort to satisfy different gamers. Some want action and role-play, some want exploration and role-play, while others again are more into exploration and action. In 'Anarchy Online', they claim that you can get it all. Funcom does not have any statistics about the gender distribution of their players. They claim they have many female characters signed up, but they cannot know whether these female characters are representing male or female players. It is well known that many male players enjoy using a female character in such games. So, even though there is a large amount of females in the 'room', it might not be that many female players. On the other hand, it is supposedly also a quite widespread practice among female players to choose characters that are 'gender neutral', like some kind of animal, or to pick a male character.

However, Funcom believes that their main audience is male. Our informant even claims that many of the females that take part are there because they have a boyfriend or a husband who plays, and that they want to be there in order to do something together.

Funcom has a whole division, which is busy taking care of the 'fans' of 'Anarchy Online'. In the beginning, they did not realise the importance of the community of gamers, but now they put a lot of emphasis on having a good relationship with this group of very active and enthusiastic gamers. They learn a lot from them and make sure to pay them back by giving them information about new elements in the game before others get it. Their web page always needs to be updated, and they watch the community closely. In that way, our

informant says, they get the best feedback about how the players like their games and what may be done to improve them.

Funcom gets its funding from private investors. They start with an idea, they make someone believe in the concept, and thus receive funding to develop it into a game. However, today they are about to break even, financially. They are close to a point where they actually earn as much money as they spend. Through the subscription model and online games, Funcom hope to make a better living in the future. Only then the developers can actually make money. Normally, the distributors end up with most of the money.

Funcom used to test their games extensively, but they do not do that any longer. They claim it is hard to find good ways of testing. Today, of course, they test that everything works technically as it is supposed to. The graphics, the animations and the coding need to be of the highest quality, our informant states. They also test the games to make sure that they work well on different operating systems. Most of all they feel that they themselves know what the players want and desire. All the developers have played many games, and they test them by seeing how they themselves like the different aspects of the game.

The employees in Funcom are 90% men. The women work mainly within the administration. They have one female coder, and they used to have a female graphics designer. Our informant claims that the game developers work there because they want to have fun. You have to be an enthusiast to make computer games. You do not earn a lot of money, and you work long hours, so it is not as fashionable as many people tend to think.

Since much of their design ideas are based on the so-called I methodology, and since almost 100% of the designers are men, women are not an obvious target group as a market. Moreover, Funcom does not have a strategy to include more women or girls as players. Of course, they want to sell games, and they make games they believe will sell and provide profits. However, our interviewee said that by making games just for females, Funcom could easily trap them into a stereotypical pattern of behaviour. Some women liked to play violent games and most women like role-playing, he claimed. Thus, the 'quality' is the most important aspect. 'Anarchy Online' and many other games of high quality would therefore be something women also could take part in and enjoy. The problem, according to him, was rather that women in general did not see game playing as a suitable thing to do. There was always other, more important things to do, and women did not know how to relax. He told us that therefore, we should pay attention to our kids and teach the girls how to relax and have fun. Then they also would enjoy gaming as they grew up.

## 4.2 Innerloop

Innerloop was founded in 1996. Today, it employs approximately 20 people in Norway, so it is not a large company. The first game released from Innerloop was the award-winning flight-simulation "JSF - Joint Strike Fighter" from December 1997. In December 2000, they released a sports-title called "Extreme Sports" and the 3d-action game "Project IGI". The children's game "Jul i Blåfjell" ("Christmas in Blue Mountain") was released in November 2001, but only on the Norwegian market. Normally, they only engage in one game at a time, and everybody would work together on this specific product. The employees are in their late twenties, and they are all men. Most of them have a professional background as programmers or likewise. Earlier, most of them spent a lot of time playing games, but today the culture has changed, mainly due to the employees growing older, according to our informant. Most of them have families now. Therefore, they cannot spend that much time playing or making games, so they tend to work more regular hours. However, all of them used to work and play around the clock until they got family commitments.



Figure 2. "Blue Mountain".

The manager of Innerloop, whom we interviewed, says that they do not decide on their own what games to design. They need to make games that publishers want. Thus, decisions are made together with publishers. They have to adjust to the market and cannot just follow their own desires. However, they may choose which publishers to work with. Thus, choosing a concept for designing a game is most of all a process of negotiations. Innerloop has an idea, they get in touch with a publisher and then they negotiate about the elements of the game and what to expect from it. This process goes on all through the design process. Thus, publishers are active participants in the development work.

Innerloop only works with international publishers. Today they only make PC games, but they used to work for Sega Dreamcast. Our informant

says that the company probably will make games for different consoles in the future. Today they stick to PCs because it is easier and does not require that much investment. For example, to work towards Playstation 2 is a lot more expensive because you need to buy equipment that is more costly.

Innerloop Studios has made a variety of games. Today they work to finish "IGI2 - Covert Strike" for PC CD-ROM. Our informant says they do not think much about who the player is or will be. When they make games, they are most of all concerned with the quality, as he puts it. They assume that other people will like the same elements as they do, so they just make games that they themselves enjoy. The employees are advanced gamers and have played more or less all types of games for many years. That makes them good at judging what will sell. As part of the development process, they also spend time comparing their own game to other games that they know have been recognised as good. Innerloop tests the game themselves, and the manager feels pretty sure that they know if a game is good or not. In the end, they also do focus tests with typical gamers and ask them to give feedbacks. At this point, the typical gamer is a grownup man.

Innerloop has never tested any games on girls. This because they claim that females are not a potential market to them. It is safer, the manager says, to go for already established markets. Our interviewee says he thinks boys and girls have different interests, and that boys are more disposed to spend much time in front of a computer. Boys are not as interested in human relationships as girls. Boys are also provided with more status by being good at playing computer games. Among girls, though, it could rather work in the opposite direction.

#### **4.3 Caprino Video Games**

Caprino was founded in 2000 in order to turn a very popular Norwegian movie, *Flåklypa (Pinchliffe) Grand Prix*, into a game. The movie, produced by Ivo Caprino, was launched in 1975 and has since then been seen by 5,5 mill people, which is more the actual population in Norway today. The movie has also been dubbed and translated into 12 other languages. To celebrate the movies 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a new version with digital sound was made, which ran at all major movie theatres in Norway in 2000.



**Figure 3. Flåklypa Grand Prix.**

The computer game Flåklypa has so far sold more than 160 000 copies, which is a record in Norway. Computer games that sell more than 30 000 copies are exceptional. There is an English version of the game, Pinchcliff. Flåklypa has also been translated into Danish and Swedish and was launched there in 2002, but so far, it has not been as successful as in Norway. The game's reviews have been even better than in Norway, but they struggle to get into the shops. It is difficult to be an independent game company like Caprino. They need to go through a distributor, and it takes great efforts to get an agreement.

It took a lot of money to make Flåklypa. Most of it came from public sources through a fund for media development and The Norwegian Industrial and Regional Development Fund (SND). In addition, there were some private investors. Caprino has planned to start making a new game based on another one of Ivo Caprinos movies, namely 'Askeladden', but they do not yet have the funding in place. According to our informant, there is no way they could raise the amount of money it takes to make another game themselves.

The total cost of making Flåklypa came to NOK 18 million (around € 2,3 million). It took almost four years to develop, and about 20 people worked full time during those years. Today, Caprino employs only 5 or 6 people. The rest is working freelance, just coming in when something special has to be fixed. The developers behind Flåklypa have mainly been men. However, the head of the company is a woman, and a couple of females have been very active in the design of the game. This has been a strategic decision. When the work was in its most intense phase, the group of young male workers more or



less lived in the office. According to the female graphic designer we interviewed, they worked long hours, then played computer games until the morning, ordered pizza in and drank coca cola. They slept in sleeping bags on the sofa in a corner of the office. According to our interviewee, this culture has changed in the later years as these boys have got girlfriends and families and tend to spend less time at the office.

As mentioned, Flåklypa is a game based on the movie. It is most of all entertainment, but the developers also wanted it to be a game where players could learn something. Players may learn by using the built-in 'factopedia'. In the factopedia, they have written about things like cultural history. There is a lot of particular Norwegian culture presented in the movie already.

With the game Flåklypa, Caprino say they want to reach out to players in the age group between 4 and 104. According to our informant, they have initiated a new segment of computer games, the family segment. The game is constructed so that there are simple parts that 3 – 4 years old can do, while more advanced players can find pieces that are more challenging. The game is said to grow with you as you get older or more skilled. It is a PC game, and the intention was to make it as easily accessible as possible, meaning that also a totally inexperienced user should be able to play. They also have given support by phone if people have difficulties.

Flåklypa is supposed to be a game for the whole family. This has always been Caprino's basic idea. It is about quality and non-violence. Quality in Caprino's terms is arguably more associated with family values than the high tech quality Funcom and Innerloop speak about. It has been important for Caprino to make a game without any kind of violence, as a contrast to most other computer games. The game, as the movie, has nearly only male characters. However, the developers say they feel that the main characters (all male) are someone with which everybody may identify. The only female character, Soline, is hardly in the movie, but she has been made a bit more visible in the game because the female developer thought it was important.

Flåklypa, the game, contains lots of small games with different levels of difficulty. In the main game, you must collect different items that in the end is needed to build the car for the car race, the Grand Prix. Overall, you need to collect 52 parts. In addition, there are several smaller games. There is a balloon game (Solan's balloon ride), there is a workshop where you can fix bikes (Reodor's workshop), there is a labyrinth/pacman-like game of picking flowers (Ludvig's flowershop), and there is a Tetris-like game where you need to put together the different parts needed to transport oil from one place to another (Ben Reddik). Some parts of the game just consist of the story (or movie) being told by showing clips from the movie and animations.

Flåklypa was a success from the very start. It was launched just before Christmas 2000 and they received so much coverage through the media that they hardly had to do any marketing. The movie is well known; especially among the generation that today have small kids or grandchildren. Our

informant claimed that the response had been positive from a varied age group, and as far as she knew, girls enjoy the game as much as boys. They have even heard of families that have bought a PC just because they wanted to play this game.

#### 4.4 Art Plant

Art Plant was founded in 2001 and consists of four men who for many years had worked for Funcom and Innerloop. They are all experienced computer game designers and have worked in this industry since they were 17–18 years old. They are now in their late twenties and characterise themselves as hard-core gamers. One of them works as a programmer, while the other three are designers. The only game produced by them as the company Art plant is the previously mentioned *Blåfjell*, a children's game based on a tv-series for the Norwegian Broadcasting Company. They started working with *Blåfjell* as employed by Innerloop, but left Innerloop to start by themselves in the middle of the process. So far *Blåfjell* has sold 30 000 copies, which is not at all as well as *Flåklypa*, but nevertheless successful in a Norwegian context. Now they are making the game to go with this year's Christmas series on television, 'Jul på Månetoppen'. They are also engaged in making a game for horse-interested girls.

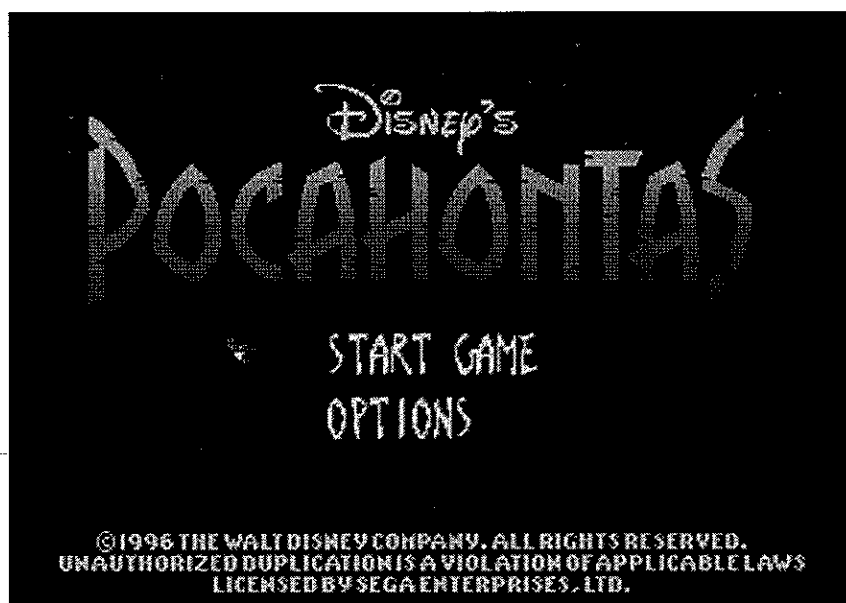


Figure 4. Pocahontas.

While employed at Funcom and Innerloop, the boys felt that they worked to reach hard-core gamers. Their reason for leaving and starting Art Plant was that they were tired of all the gigantic projects and to compete with the top of the world. Instead, they wanted to make games that were not as universal (less comprehensive), but which at the same time should have the same high quality as they used to make. They wanted to make smaller quality

games that did not need 40 men and 3 years to be developed, but something that could be done by four men in four months. Thus, they had to search for a different market segment. So far, they have worked towards children's television series and a magazine for youngsters (girls) with an interest in horses. In these segments, you find players who do not necessarily play a lot, but play every now and then.

When making *Månetoppen* they have tried to transfer the experience of the TV-series by the same name to the world of games. They had 6 months to develop the game, and they worked closely with the author of *Månetoppen*. The project was funded by the Norwegian Broadcasting System and the distributor of the game, Pan Visions.

According to our informants, Art Plant always does a bit of focus testing. However, they say it is not enough and that they would have liked to do more of it. Since they are making games for players that are different from themselves, they need information about what this group like and enjoy in games. They also rely on information from their friends and families, and what they perceive to be the interests of different groups, like younger sisters, for instance.

Art Plant claimed that the best strategy was to make games based on already existing interests among the group you want to reach. When they make the game for the horse club magazine, they have been told to make a game for girls aged eleven and a half. However, they do not see that they are making a game for girls in particular, but rather think that they are designing a game suitable and interesting for eleven and a half year old children with horses as their main interest.

To get the information they need to do such work, Art Plant says that they depend upon their publisher, Stabenfelt. As they see it, Stabenfelt knows the market, while they know how to make games. In addition, they have been to a stable, talked with girls there, and asked them what they would like in a game. They also test the game as they go along to see if they like it or not.

The men in Art Plant do not have an explicit goal to make games for girls or children, but they said that they needed to look at a different segment outside the main games market because they are a very small company. Most of all they just want to do what they are skilled at and what they think is fun. They want to make games, but they need to land new project so they can survive economically. To do that, they maintained a need to think differently from the others. As a follow-up of that, they told us that they would like to make a game from the books of a bestselling author of Norwegian paperback novels for women, Margit Sandmo, called "Sagaen om isfolket" (The Saga of the Ice People).

## 5. The culture and strategies of game design

When we summarise the accounts of the informants in the computer games companies, we may notice several important features that appeared to be common. First, this is a highly competitive industry. The companies are largely dependent on client funding (publishers or distributors) or public support, like we saw in the case of Caprino. None of them claimed to be very profitable, in fact, the industry came across as a kind of enthusiast undertaking. The work was supposed to be fun rather than well paid.

Second, and probably related, this is very much an industry of young men. The few women constitute a very small minority. The culture appeared to be in line with this, with the kind of masculine traits often associated with nerd-like computer enthusiasts like long hours of work, a lot of passionate game playing and heavy consumption of pizza and coca cola. However, several of the informants claimed that this nerd-like culture was being superseded by a more normal culture of work, because the employees were getting older and more established, with girlfriends or even families.

Since the young men are such passionate game players, there seems to be a strong tradition to consider themselves as a representative user. This implied a marked tendency towards a conservative perception of their customers, perhaps most outspoken in Funcom. These users were well-established and well-known. To design games for a different audience was considered risky, also because new user groups were seen to need a lot of 'upbringing' and guidance, and thus, new titles and themes would not automatically work to include new user groups. From this perspective, the companies claimed to have close interaction with users.

However, Caprino as well as Art plant were trying to construct new user groups, so here, there was greater diversity. Still, it is important to note that new user groups did not necessarily mean women. Children or families appeared to be a more attractive or open alternative.

When we look at the strategies of game design, they appeared to follow a reasonably constant pattern:

- There was a general agreement that the main challenge was to find a good story, from which a game could be made. However, it was difficult to get the informants to really specify what 'a good story' was. There was something intangible to that characteristic. But at least 'good stories' were usually dramatic. Very often, that implied that they were violent, but not necessarily so. It was interesting to note that 'soap' was not considered a good drama, from which a computer game could be designed. On the other hand, competition was regarded as drama and an alternative to violence. Clearly, 'good stories' are close to the standard narratives of books written for boys. It is also interesting to note that a 'good story' might be equivalent to a 'well-known story', as with Flåklypa, and partly in Art Plant's strategy.

- The other main challenge was to find an audience. To some companies, the audience was predefined. It was their usual gang of hard-core and casual gamers, the community that they felt they knew. To other companies, the search for potential customers was more challenging and they often depended either on publishers or distributors to help them find their target group, or they looked for an audience that already was established, like the viewers of very popular television series for children or the readers of a magazine for horse enthusiasts.
- It is probably not very surprising that the dominant design methodology follows the pattern of the so-called I methodology, where designers see themselves as typical users and use their own tastes and preferences as the basis for making design decisions. However, to be fair, the accounts of our informants suggested some important modifications to the I methodology. First, all companies did some testing that involved potential users. Second, they claimed to have quite close relationships, at least with established users. Clearly, the Internet provides very interesting possibilities of interacting with users, at least hard-core players. Third, several of the informants referred to families, friends and established customers as sources of inspiration and information.

Arguably, neither the culture of the companies nor the main features of their game design strategies appeared to be conducive to transgress the established tradition of thinking about users either as hard-core male gamers or as somehow gender neutral. The informants tended to make statements about women claiming that they either could be attracted to the same games as male customers or that they were a particularly different segment because computers did not have a place in their leisure habits.

This seemed to be related to the discourse about quality. All companies claimed to be designing quality games, and the informants maintained that in the end, what mattered about a game was the quality. However, it was difficult to get clear statements about what quality really meant. It appeared to be a kind of aesthetical element. Games should look and feel good. The features of a game should work 'properly'. In this sense, 'quality' was argued as a neutral or universal property of a game. There was no willingness to situate quality or relate it to particular groups of users. In the end, quality would be the same to women as to men.

## **6. The gendered construction of game players**

While quality was presented as something gender neutral, all the informants agreed that the playing of computer games was gendered. They recognised that men dominated game playing, not just as customers but also because masculine fantasies are given a lot of space in game design. The ease with which the informants commented upon gender issues related to game

playing suggests strongly that there is a well-established discourse within the computer games community about the gendered nature of this activity.

However, the normal assumption that computer games are essentially masculine was frequently challenged. The informants were generally aware of the recent surveys, which claim that the proportion of female players is much larger than has been maintained in the public debate. They took this as evidence that available games were attractive also to women, maybe due to their 'quality'. Still, they would agree that the computer game discourse was gendered in a way that made it masculine. Men had greater visibility and more influence in terms of the choice of stories from which games would be designed.

As noted above, there was a strong belief in the fruitfulness of making cross-generational and cross-gender games. The scepticism towards designing games especially for women was very outspoken, though. The dominant idea was that females should be reached either through games for children (i.e., games suited for girls as well as boys), games for 'everybody' or even through products designed basically for a male audience. Some of the informants made explicit reference to the experience of making 'Pocahontas', a computer game targeted explicitly towards girls. This was considered a failure and evidence of how difficult it was to design something particularly for a female audience, which to some degree also means a new audience.

When we look in some detail at the way the informants constructed gender, we find that they tended to transgress the simple dichotomy of men are like this and women like that. In their accounts of male game players, we could identify at least two different versions. First, there were the hard-core gamers who play a lot, but who were not considered very interesting as a market because they tend to buy few games. Thus, in terms of market potential, it was the second group of males – described as the casual gamers – who were most interesting. This is the group of boys and men who play now and then, but who are not intensively engaged in game playing.

In the computer games discourse, it is more common to talk about boys than men. To some extent, this is probably a trivial expression of the fact that computer game playing is a rather recent phenomenon. The males that are most comfortable with game playing are the ones who have grown up with this activity, and who are still so young that they like to consider themselves as boys. This also implies that they still may spend much time playing games, a masculine trait generally recognised by the informants. They also agreed that boys tended to be most interested in action games, in particular so-called first person shooting games.

The ideas about female game players were more contradictory. On the one hand, there was the large group of 'traditional' female gamers. They were perceived mainly to be influenced by conventional feminine values and activities like social relations, romance (availability of flowers and candlelight), emotions and personality. According to our informants, this

group of females was fascinated by games based on role-playing and/or strategy, and they were concerned with conflict resolution rather than violence. The iconic example of a game that satisfied such requirements was, not very surprising, 'The Sims'.

Also, the 'traditional' females were seen as having a limited engagement in games because they had different priorities than males. They would rather spend their money on other things than games (which implied that the price of a game would be an important feature), they would get little positive feedback from peers for their computer skills (perhaps even negative reactions), and they would prefer to use their leisure time for other purposes. Our interviewees meant that girls would rather be with their friends than play games. Also, women tended to feel that they always should do something useful.

However, the informants also argued that there was a smaller, different group of female gamers that perhaps could be labelled 'post modern'. These females would play violent games as much as and as good as boys. On the other hand, this game playing was seen as part of relations with boyfriends or spouses, so again the interest in games would be a secondary thing.

Judging from our interviews, the computer games industry is concerned with the issue of gender, not the least because this is very much related to the potential size of their market. However, it seems as if the female gender(s) are a puzzle, and even if the informants tried to avoid using the simple dichotomy of men and women, they nevertheless frequently invoked rather simplistic stereotypes in their reasoning around the subject.

This was perhaps most evident from their perception of the gendered distribution of skills. In general, they saw males as more skilled in how to master a game than women were. In particular, females were described as lacking in network skills, compared to males. This was explained mainly in two ways. First, females were seen to lack the time needed in order to acquire 'advanced' skills. Second, since few women apparently play games, they had relatively less access to information from skilled friends. Skills appeared to be a dichotomous feature, a clear example of how a gender dichotomy is turned into an hierarchical relation.<sup>15</sup>

If we analyse the relationship between our informants' understanding of gender and the design of games from the perspective of co-construction of gender and technology, some rather interesting features appear. First, it is clear that they are most comfortable with familiar or established masculine tastes and practices. These tastes and practices, it seems, are easily translated into games for boys, like first person shooting games. It is all about finding the good, familiar story and audience, usually in accordance with 'what I prefer'.

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Wendy Faulkner (2000): "Dualisms, hierarchies and gender in engineering", *Social Studies of Science*, 30 (5), 759-92.

In the masculine part of the spectrum, co-constructions appear to be working smoothly.

Second, it is equally clear that these designers are not comfortable with feminine tastes and practices. Above all, they are nervous about what they see as the strong feminine tendency to be disinterested in computer games. Largely, it seems like they use this observation as a kind of excuse to avoid the exploration of feminine tastes and practices and the challenge of translating them into something that could be considered as games for girls or women in particular. Here, the practical aspect of the co-construction is resisted.

Instead, and this would be the third point, they try to construct games that may be considered – not gender neutral, because they remain aware of the gendering of tastes – but rather trans gender. The most obvious space for trans gender games seems to be in the area of children and family activities. Here, they try to design games that somehow represent a bundling of masculine and feminine tastes. Note for example in our previous description of the efforts behind Caprino's game 'Flåklypa Grand Prix' how the informant emphasises that some of the activities in that game, the games within the game, so-to-speak, were designed to cater for girls' assumed tastes, rather than boys'. Thus, these game designers do enter into co-constructions of femininity and technology, but only as a partial and small-scale effort.

In many ways we are left with the impression that if our informants had dared to do so, they would join in with professor Higgins in 'My fair lady' and sing: 'Why can't women be – like men'! This seems to be the ultimate 'wet dream' of the computer games industry; evident from the cheerful way our informants talked about those women that nevertheless seem to enjoy the same kind of games as boys.

## **7. Strategies of inclusion**

Reasoning from market realities, the computer games industry is definitely interested in getting girls and women included among their customers as frequent users of games and enthusiastic players. However, as we have seen also, there is considerable ambivalence and ambiguity towards the development of inclusion strategies toward females. There seems to be two main sets of reasons that are offered to explain this. First, there is an outspoken scepticism to design games that are labelled as designed particularly for girls or women. This doubt is argued from experience. As already mentioned, the main negative incident referred to by our Norwegian informants was the game 'Pocahontas', which several of them had been involved with. This game was considered as a definite failure.

The scepticism towards girl's or women's games appeared to be mainly based on a disbelief that there would not be a sufficiently large demand for such games. However, there might also be some anxiety related to the ability to translate femininity into games in a way that the designers would consider to be of 'high quality'.



The second set of reasons given for not making feminine games stem from the claims made by our informants that the number of female game players already was considerable, in particular related to online games. Thus, maybe this kind of gendered design was not really necessary either. Rather, as we have seen, the preferred strategy was to introduce more options in the games to make them more trans gender-like, either by having feminine games within the overall game or to cater for some kinds of feminine tastes alongside the male tastes to facilitate a greater variety of game behaviour. However, this strategy did not appear to be very well developed.

Still, there were some additional explicit ideas about strategies that would promote the inclusion of women into the society of computer games:

- The informants were quite unanimous in their argument that ‘high quality’ of games would make them attractive to females as well as males. For example, the use of well-known stories as the backdrop of games design was assumed a road to success in this respect. However, as already noted, it was really never made quite clear to us what was meant by ‘high quality’.
- It was also considered an effective strategy to focus on role-playing and strategy games. Such games were assumed to work to get more women into games. However, this was not thought about as an inclusion strategy particularly for women. Basically, it was an inclusion strategy for all, women included.
- Some informants thought that one could utilise the potential flexibility of interpretation of games when designing the packing of games. Attractive packing could be more effective than a change of content to get women interested, was the argument.
- If one should design games particularly for girls and women, and the if was a big one, it would be important to work from established feminine interest. The effort to develop a game about horses was offered as an example of what this meant. Our informants were very hesitant towards experimenting with tastes, in the case of women as well as for men. The safe thing was to work from the well known.

The main aim related to the inclusion of women into the society of computer games, or perhaps rather the dream, was to get them interested. However, none of our informants really knew what it would take to achieve this goal. But they were hoping that it some day would be realised. In this context, and from the way we have analysed inclusion strategies in SIGIS, we should note that inclusion was mainly considered in terms of recruitment. The problem was considered to get women to buy and try out games, not to retain them. Socialisation in terms of getting them to stay on as game players was not really on the agenda. The underlying assumption was probably that if women would just start to play, they would become just as hooked on this activity as men.

From the perspective of the translation model introduced earlier in section 4, we should note many quite serious deficiencies in the thinking and practice related to inclusion strategies aimed at women. There is little if any engagement with female players to perform anything that could look like a problematisation – to define a common understanding of needs and possibilities. Arguably, the main effort is related to interessement through marketing, but basically, marketing is not very well adapted to the perceived female audiences. Some enrolment is achieved by introducing some features of the game technology that should help in making it more attractive to feminine users, but the effort is minor. Mobilisation appears to be out of reach.

However, this does not mean that computer games may provide a path to computer enthusiasm and skills also for girls and women. In fact, the importance of game playing to girls and women may in general be underestimated through the dominance of the hegemonic stereotypes of the completely absorbed boy gamer and the totally uninterested girl, respectively. Probably, these stereotypes make boys overestimate the amount of game playing that they do, while girls will underestimate. Here, we may need more research to be able to assess current practices and trends.