

Girls' Game Clubs 'Everyone can design games'

(July 2006)

Background

This article is a summary of the findings from Girls' Game Clubs (GGCs) arranged in 2001-2006 in the metropolitan area in Finland.

I did my master's thesis on '*Designing games for girls: a method to study design*' in 2000. In my thesis I analyzed current girl games (games specifically designed for girls) and highlighted design solutions utilized and response from 'girl gamers'. After finishing my thesis I was asked to arrange a computer club for girls at the facilities for youth in Vantaa.



Image 1: Game club arranged at the Game On exhibition (2003) Helsinki City Art Museum.

At the first we had a club once a week (3-4 hours). The whole club lasted for four months. The first club was a success and soon after we decided to arrange a new one. The second time the focus was loose and the group was half Finnish, half immigrant girls. At that time learning basic skills of computing was more in focus for some girls than actual game design. Both of these GGCs were arranged at a youth club open both for girls and boys. The following two GGCs were arranged in a youth club 'Tonttula' in Vantaa which is for girls only. Also one club for both girls and boys was arranged during the Game On exhibition in 2003 at the Helsinki City Art Museum. All together there have been five clubs in 2001-2006 and 6-13 attendants at every club. I have arranged both short courses lasting about a week and clubs where we have had meetings once a week for four months. One club was cancelled due the lack of participants (we expect at least six attendees to arrange a club). The club did not cost

any extra for the girls. One could join the club just to paying the membership price of Tonttula youth club for girls (five euros per year).

Some of the clubs have been less structured – the attendants have been given a possibility to choose whether they like to do animation, graphical calendar, any type of presentation or a game. When giving a possibility to choose half of the girls decided to do interactive visualization where the other half wanted to do and eventually did a game.

Girl gamers in Finland

VTT did a survey in January 2006 asking about game play habits of 13-18, 19-30, 31-65 and 66-76 year olds. Playing computer games is most common among young people. Of the 13-18-year-old boys participating in the survey, only 2% claimed that they do not play games at all, whereas of the girls, 12% stated the same. Most of the boys (67%) play computer games every day or almost every day. Regular gaming is markedly less common among girls, only every fifth (20%) of the girls in the same age group play games as much. The young people that play games on a daily basis also spend a lot of time at it. Of those that play games every day or almost every day, the majority of the boys (53%) and half of the girls (52%) spend over an hour playing. This means that playing games is less common among girls than boys, and they also spend less time on playing at a time. Over half of the girls that play games (55%) spend less than half an hour at a time.

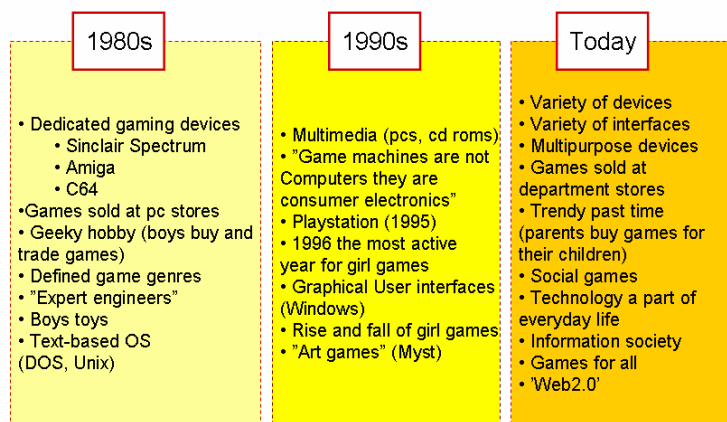


Image 2: The historical development of digital games and gaming has strongly influenced on possibilities to arrange GGCs today. Technology is more accessible and easy-to-use, everyone has an access to a computer, almost everyone play and chat at the Internet.

One of the current successes has been alypaa.com. It was reported that in 2005 Alypaa.com was played over 500 million times and the typical user of the site is 20-30 year old woman (the users 60% female, 40% male). Typical play session lasted 15 minutes.

Set against 2% that was the estimated number of girl gamers in 1996¹, there is a clear difference. Internet and mobile phones have been influential in making the difference.

¹ Sonja Kangas, survey 1996 (schools, game sellers).

Also public discussion and visibility of digital games have increased greatly within the last few years. There are more advertisements of games, game graphics and interaction has been used in commercials, the number of researchers has multiplied notably within last five years. Possibilities to combine games with more beneficial meanings have been studied.

Majority of teenage girl consider Habbo Hotel and other community-solutions of the Internet as games. 20-30 year old girls play World of Warcraft, The Sims, dancing games and console games more widely. There exist some girls' game clans and mixed-groups clans. Also lately the number of girls has increased at the IGDA Helsinki meetings. In 2003 when the meetings started, there were only 2-3 girls that worked at the industry and attended the meetings (besides developers' girlfriends who occasionally joined the meetings as well). Within a few years game development companies have increased by number of employees and more and more girls work as developers (coding), graphical designers, researchers and testers. This change is visible at the IGDA Helsinki meetings.

Girl gamers and girls as developers, gamers or game characters have been studied by e.g. Hanna Wirman & Rika Nakamura (University of Lapland), Maria Honkala (University of Tampere). Also studies about children's gaming preferences (Frans Mäyrä & Laura Ermi), conflicts in an online game community (Mari Nieminen) and modding communities (Tanja Sihvonen) have been studied. I myself am currently focused on experimental games and ways to widen the culture and the industry enabling new user groups and novel cross media solutions to take place.

'Everyone can design games'

The starting point of the clubs was that 'everyone can design games'. My hypothesis was that the biggest barriers for girls were: 1) girls suppose that they should already know something when attending the club ('we are not good enough'), 2) girls had a low self-respect when it comes to use computers ('everyone else can use computers except me'), 3) girls had very biased idea of digital games because of the partial picture of games given by the media ('I am not interested in violent games'). In 1990s and the beginning of 2000 only extremities were presented publicly. Doom, Carmageddon, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City and Myst were games that were more widely communicated to the public.

We have used PC computers and Microsoft Paint or PaintShop Pro as a drawing program depending on what program the attendants have got used to use. We have used several freeware or shareware programs to do animations (e.g. Gif animator, Artoonix, Milkshape Model Movie Maker), interactive games (e.g. GameMaker, GameEditor and tools created at the VTT) and illustrations (e.g. Concept Draw).

The design process has been: discussing and brainstorming in a big group, planning the idea/game by drawing by hand, with Paint program and studying Decos and creating our own "design notebook decos". We have done modifications of freeware Java and Macromedia Flash games as well as created our own games from the scratch.

Definition:

'Decos' are self made, decorated tiny books. Hobbyists swap decos together. It is a one type of exchange: compare with collecting and exchanging stickers, stamps...). The decos are usually themed (horror, Japan, Hello Kitty, glitter...). and the decos are mailed to a network of swappers. The swappers decorate their own page to the tiny book, add their contact information and pass it forward.



Girls were allowed to take breaks when they wanted and play games. First time (2001) we had Nintendo Megadrive with Mario games available. Mario had a strong influence on girls' and most of the girls wanted to make 'Mario games'. Eventually no one did as the design process advanced. At the other times girls played free online games (Pasimailma.net), chatted at the Internet (Messenger, Habbo Hotel) and watched animations (AlbinoBlackSheep). The inspiration from the net was quickly adapted to the design documents but did not show that much at the actual games designed. One obvious reason was that girls were aware of their skills and at that time were unable to develop too complex games even if they would have wanted to. The games played at the Internet were from various genres but humor was a defining factor in many of them. In 2001 girls did not visit many websites. KissFm chat was then the most popular chat and girls had a bit of identity play there. Within the following years the interest and time spent to play games increased. Habbo Hotel (FI), IRC-galleria, AlbinoBlackSheep and Messenger were the most popular online services used in clubs arranged in 2005-2006.

The games designed were: 'girls life simulation', virtual pet, UFO game, worms, a version of Boulder Dash, Infogame of the history of horses and several types of level jumping games. The freeware games used had a clear effect to the games girls eventually designed. In design documents there are also more innovative and unlike games but many of them were too complex to develop at the first stage.

It became clear that the social environment was a major factor of motivation. The first club was arranged at the facility for youth open both for girls and boys. The girls attending the club got encouragement from other girls but also wanted to place a note to the door: 'boys not allowed' because boys usually crowd at the computer room before the club and sometimes tried to enter during the class. Girls also liked to close the door so that boys would not be able to see what we were doing. The attitude changed when we did a compilation CD of our games and animations at the end of the club. Girls were very proud of their work and would like everyone to see them.

The social environment at the last clubs (Tonttula girls' youth facility) was more relaxed and girls took over the space.

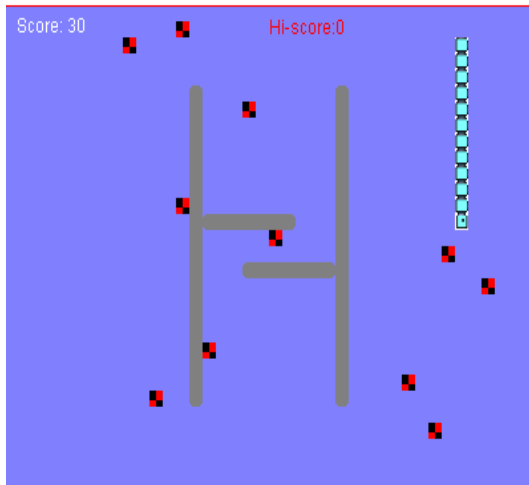


Image 3: 'Worms' game modification made by one girl in 2001.

Participatory design method

By collecting and analyzing material collected at the club I started developing an alternative method to study game design. Participatory design has been widely used as a design method. Also Eric von Hippel's notion of users as innovators was one starting point for my work. First club was a learning process for me as well. I stored some design documents and the final results of the club but did not systematically try to utilize the design process as a method to study game design. At the following clubs I kept diary, took photos, collected material created at the club as well as feedback from the participants.

Definitions:

Participatory design refers to democratic approach to design, which encourages participation in the design process by a wide variety of stakeholders, such as: designers, developers, management, users, customers, salespeople and distributors. The approach stresses making users not simply the subjects of user testing, but actually empowering them to be a part of the design and decision-making process.

Users as innovators starts from the idea that users can be innovators because they directly experience the use environment with existing products and find them to be lacking in critical functionality. The decision then is to build or buy. Often times the buy option is simply not there because manufacturers do not experience the same use environment and it takes a long time for them to recognize the 'need'. Many advanced users cannot wait for the manufacturers to build something they do not understand or for marketing departments to agree that their need can serve the mass market. Thus they innovate². Currently especially social media and web2.0 tools to participate the design have been central in structuring the users as innovators processes at the Internet.

² <http://spoudaiospaizen.net/archives/2006/07/yes-even-google-is-a-user-innovator/>.

Strong user interaction has been noted to be a success factor in service development. By modifying Polly Rizova's notions from her article '*Are you networked for successful innovation?*'³ highlighting four key factors behind successful innovations:

1. Strong support from the peer group and youth tutors
2. Open communication without formal reporting
3. A "technical star" in the technical-advice network (leader of the club)
4. A "managerial star" in the organizational-advice network (youth tutor).

Rizova have also looked at information-sharing networks and friendship networks, and found these much less relevant than the factors listed above. Rizova acknowledges that these four factors alone are not enough--they must reinforce each other in order to work. She goes on to discuss the complementary values of the technical-advice and organizational-advice networks, and how people's actual roles in these networks can help inform their explicitly prescribed roles in the organization.⁴

As a short guideline for the following clubs I suggest the following:

- 1) Group size 6-8 girls
- 2) Clear rules and direction to the group: what to do when, what tools and material to use, where to get help, by when we should have something ready, what is the goal of the club (e.g. an exhibition, a CD...)
- 3) The best length (IMHO) is once a week for 1-2 months with possibilities to develop the game on free time (between the weekly sessions)
- 4) Quick start (I have made a simple design document for the girls to fill up)
- 5) Deco method works well and is inspiring for the girls! Girls can take photos, 'glue-and-cut' or draw a sketch)
- 6) Hands on as quickly as possible (one computer per 1-2 girls)
- 7) First create small games with simple editors (Hypercard, GameMaker etc.)
- 8) Grand finale: public presentation (e.g. exhibition at the youth club, local library etc. CD compilation of the work done during the club).

³ Mit Solan Management Review. Based on in-depth study of six projects in the R&D lab of a Fortune 500 corporation

⁴ <http://connectedness.blogspot.com/>.

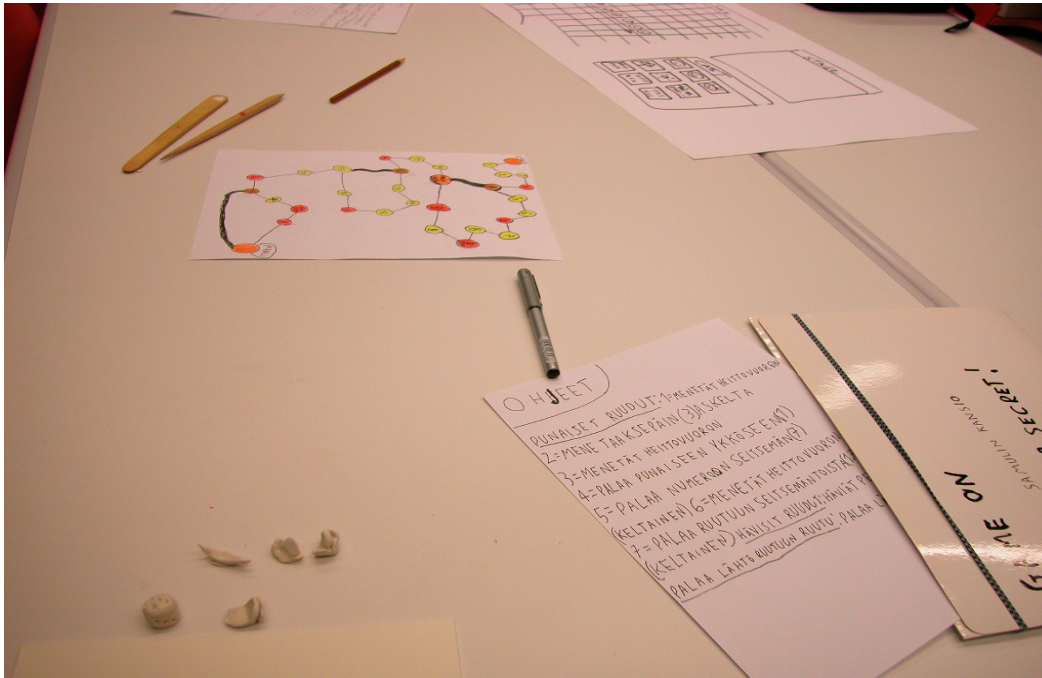


Image 4: Design documents and Plasticine at the table (from the club arranged during the Game On exhibition).

Summary

The clubs will continue sporadically and I would very much like to share (and discuss) my ideas with other researchers about this topic.

The starting points were a) to support girls in their computer-related hobbies, b) to learn what type of games girls would like to play and c) to learn what type of applications they would design and consider to be games.

The findings from the clubs were:

- 1) Girls are not orthodox in defining “a game” – interactive or animated screen savers were considered as games
- 2) Girls found the division that was strong in the 1980s and 1990s that boys were gamers and girls non-gamers, uninspiring
- 3) Current division between hard core and casual games is at least unofficially drawn between gender being boys as hard core gamers and girls more into casual gamers – that continues the categorization of the 1980s and is a negative trend
- 4) There are no girl games: girls design different girls based on their interest
- 5) Girl games were not pink games but actually included almost every color
- 6) Empowerment is a key to draw girls to have computer hobbies
- 7) Social environment is very relevant when arranging clubs.



Image 5: Ufo level jumping game (modification) made by a girl in 2001.

General findings that have an effect to the GGCs:

- 1) In 2001 the Messenger, Habbo Hotel, ICT-gallery and other current successes were not yet that popular. E-mail was the first contact to the computer world for many girls in 1990s – beginning of 2000
- 2) The popularization of the Internet has effected strongly to girls' interest to contribute and play with computers as well as their self esteem as gamers or computer "geeks"
- 3) In 2001 geek was a loser, now geek is somewhat cool person who can make her own web sites, have a blog, and make comic strips or animations.

References, websites mentioned:

My thesis (abstract): [<http://souplala.net/gradu/english.pdf>]

Habbo Hotel: [<http://www.habbo.fi>] [.com]

IRC galleria : [<http://irc-galleria.net/>]

Game on exhibition: [<http://www.barbican.org.uk/artgallery/event-detail.asp?ID=3725>]

MIT Sloan / Hippel: [<http://web.mit.edu/evhippel/www/>]

[<http://alypaa.com/>] (there are alypaa quizzes also in English and Swedish available)

Rizova, Polly (2006) *Are You Networked for Successful Innovation?* Management of Technology and Innovation. MIT Sloan Management Review. Spring 2006, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 49-55 [<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2006/spring/10/>]

World of Warcraft (WoW)

[<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/index.xml;jsessionid=556D4D2EB58F32410662C51234A8E160.app03>]

Sonja Kangas

Researcher at the Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT). Doing her PhD at the Helsinki University of Technology.

Sonja.kangas@vtt.fi

Web: Souplala.net

