

Fun and Play

*Design, marketing and use of New Media
entertainment by and for women and girls*

Helen Jøsok Gansmo



***Strategies of Inclusion: Gender
and the Information Society***

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The Distinctive Role of Fun and Play

Design, marketing and use of New Media entertainment by and for women and girls

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are ever more important in our society, but it is often claimed that the image of ICT and of ICT professionals puts women off. A common argument is that women associate ICT with hackers and nerds, so view computers as boring, asocial and only interesting to men. By contrast, it is often claimed that men acquire skills in ICT from a long and playful experience with computers. Entertainment appears to be an important stepping-stone for (some) men to become skilled ICT users (and, potentially, designers), yet research shows that many women do not play with computers. Hence, it has been suggested that new entertainment ICTs which can appeal to girls are needed in order to attract more girls and women to become skilled ICT users.

The project Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society (SIGIS), conducted in Ireland, Italy, Norway, The Netherlands and the UK (funded by European Commission IST Programme), aimed to study and analyse public and commercial initiatives to include women as users and designers of ICTs. Design of entertainment ICT products (games and web products) and user reactions were studied as part of this project.

Girls do want to have fun too!

Girls and women interviewed for the SIGIS project enjoy their entertainment ICTs; they find them to be social and a good distraction from other activities. More generally, playing with ICTs enhances the benefits they get from other interests, and they enjoy the indirect learning offered by these technologies. Girls and women take pleasure from such interactive, informal learning – be it about a computer game, a cake recipe or how to make your own home page on the Internet.

The games women play and prefer do not fall into any simplistic categories of “traditional” or “feminine” tastes. For many women gamers the pleasure of game playing emerges from elements of flexibility and freedom in the games. They like being able to explore the world in any order they liked, and they like being in control of the main character or creating their own character. Women frequently seem to enjoy games that are cross-gender, that allow them the flexibility to explore interesting imagined worlds, and to play with, or create, multiple femininities and masculinities in a game.

Several computer game designers voiced scepticism about designing games specifically for women, and see little or no market potential for women-only games. Other designers are trying to avoid what they see as the competitive and saturated market for games for boys, and are looking for new markets. Crucially, we found, it is not necessary to design for women-only in order to be women-inclusive. On the contrary, girls we spoke to claim they would be even more interested in the product if it were not positioned as a typical girl's product.

Successful design strategies for including girls and women through play

- Start from known girls' interests, such as popular music and pop stars, without labelling these as girly. “Girliness” is a feature that women themselves may bring to the technology, but it is seldom welcomed if created by producers.
- Try to entice those girls without ICT experience to have fun through the use of ICT. Try to make them active learners of computing by focussing on an activity which interests them, leaving the computer as an almost invisible means to this end.

- Design more flexible, cross-gender and cross-generational games which tap into both women's and men's interests, also games targeted at new markets such as the family segment. Cross-gender designs can be a route to *better* games.
- Create products that girls actually want, and not what they “should” have, either in terms of being worthy and educational, or anti-traditional feminine interests. Although the themes can be “girly”, they should not emphasise old-fashioned stereotypical female roles. Be careful with stereotypes!
- Emphasise interactivity and multi-user games where users can play together rather than compete. Even more, try to create flexible, multi-level products with content of equal interest to girls and boys, but which may be played and explored in many different ways depending on the various users.

When design focus starts with established interests (which might be gendered, but not necessarily or not explicitly), and when design aims at flexibility in the content of the technology, it seems easier to hit several playful targets. By these strategies also gender norms might change.

Unsuccessful design strategies

When design strategies for women-only entertainment products start with gender stereotypical assumptions, there are many pitfalls. When the entire group of different women are homogenised into one category, ‘women’, it is extremely difficult to hit the target, or to entice them to play. Unsuccessful design strategies thus tend to:

- focus extensively on contrasts between boys and girls. These designs run the risk of reinforcing perceived gender differences rather than building on the flexibility of both gender and technology. Dualist stereotypes tend to be unattractive.
- be based on the I-methodology, where men designers regard themselves as representative users. Thus, they design games they would like to play, rather than addressing the range of potential users and their wide preferences.

Issues beyond design

The price of ICT entertainment products does seem to put some girls off, but the image of the product and of its users seem to be more crucial than price in terms of gender inclusion.

Just as access to ICT equipment does not guarantee that women will make use of it, so lack of access does not preclude use or play. Several of the SIGIS studies reveal the importance of social networks in acquiring ICT skills. Thus, the existence of a local circle of friends or family, who play games and provide easy access to game platforms, games and advice, strongly influences initial enrolment of girls into playing digital games. Such networks are important in terms of informal learning, offering access to a network of skilled players, advice on new games and on how to overcome obstacles in the games, plus access to second hand games and consoles as well as informal game evenings. Also, when girls observe the varied ICT practices of others, the boring and “hackerish” image of ICT may be replaced with many different images.

Several of the SIGIS studies also observed that when girls found ICTs to be enjoyable and fun, they no longer thought of it as technology per se. In this way, technology is not regarded as fun, only the activity. Nevertheless, through the fun and enthusiastic use these women make of computers they implicitly learn more about the technology. However, this is not an automatic route into learning about computer systems, networks and programming or becoming computer specialists. Since they did not see their activities as technology, just fun, it might take some time until girls stop associating technology with something alien to their lives. Nevertheless, it is clear that girls do enjoy using ICTs and are able to use them proficiently.



The contents of this document are based on 48 case studies and extensive analysis conducted by a team of researchers at the following institutions, who are available to discuss the research and provide advice:

The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

Research Centre for Social Sciences (RCSS)

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), NO

Department of interdisciplinary studies of culture,

Dublin City University, Dublin, IRL

Communication, Technology and Culture (COMTEC)

Studio Metis, Milan, Italy

University of Twente, Twente, NL

For further information, detailed reports and case studies visit www.sigis-ist.org or contact:

Prof. Robin Williams
Research Centre for Social Sciences
University of Edinburgh
Old Surgeons Hall
High School Yards
Edinburgh
Scotland
Tel: +44 131 650 6386
Fax: +44 131 650 6399
info@sigis-ist.org

How do women and girls use ICTs for fun?

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in computer games?**

**What design themes and publishing
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This leaflet draws on the findings of a major European Commission-sponsored research project into strategies of inclusion and gender in ICTs, summarising the latest experiences and offering guidelines for practitioners and policy makers.

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Gender Sensitive Design Methodologies

Fun and Play

Primary and Secondary Education

Getting more Women into Computer Science and

Engineering



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**This document is available on-
line at www.sigis-ist.org**