

## 4. Abstract

"I believe that the video game will be the most important art form of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A new art, which will reflect the everyday experiences of all of us" (Henry Jenkins 2002, cited in Walter, TV documentary).

Western culture is, to a major extent, defined by leisure. The consumption of cultural contents (media) and cultural goods is a decisive element shaping one's leisure time. Video games are a crucial manifestation of this very popular culture we live in – games reflect it but also have the power to shape it. Moreover, to play a game does not mean to "consume" it, but to actively produce meanings, symbols and contents (Willis 1990). Games are thus powerful requisites for youth scenes, not only facilitating much social interaction but also providing the resources for productive debate. They may even serve as a catalyst for creative energies, as exemplified by all kinds of fan fiction, fan art, fan games the *mod* or *machinima* scene<sup>1</sup>, etc. Video games thus offer a great introduction to the production of popular culture, as playing video games very often leads to the wish to create them. In this way, the industry is nurturing the next generation of designers, programmers and producers by providing its future workforce with gripping gaming experiences (Tepe 2005).

But is this also valid for girls? Yes, it is!

Unfortunately, girls still are a minority<sup>2</sup> within the gamer community. This has many different but interdependent reasons. Which activities we choose to pursue in our leisure time is e.g. dependent on physical and cognitive skills, cultural acceptance based on gender-roles, socialisation and education, peer-group pressure, status and image, structural obstacles and opportunities, as well as personal preferences.

There are still many impediments that prevent girls from playing video games on the one hand and from entering the business on the other – parental concern, a lack of time and money, the loss of self-confidence during adolescence, the oxymoron of feminine attractiveness and technology, lack of information concerning a specific career, the ambivalent image of the industry etc.

Girls continue to be more constrained than boys in the variety of their leisure-time activities, they are more confined to the home (bedroom culture) and enjoy less freedom from adult supervision. Video games could represent an almost perfect remedy to all of these obstacles

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<sup>1</sup> *Mod* (modification) refers to the autonomous altering of a game by the player, *machinima* refers to movies created by game fans which are made with the help of 3D-- game engines (for the rendering of computer-generated imagery), using game-specific resources (camera, environments, characters, etc.);

<sup>2</sup> However, according to the *Entertainment Software Association*, 43% of all computer and videogame players in the US are female (ESA 2005, p. 3).

in a well-sheltered girl's life, especially regarding the exploration of foreign worlds, trying out different roles, gaining self-esteem, and experiencing feelings of accomplishment.

Strangely enough, there are still many girls making do without a game-console. There are well-known obstacles which make it very difficult for girls to see that there are games available which may interest them. Although much has changed, girls still have the feeling that video games are not their domain. It takes much energy, courage and motivation for a girl to enter a traditional male domain – which video games continue to be. However, there are but few female domains which may lead their members to a position of cultural influence in the sense of acquiring a productive occupation within the cultural industry. But because popular culture surrounds us constantly, it is crucial that females also contribute to the creation of this very culture.

However, many girls who finally do make it into the world of games display not only profound knowledge and skill but also a keen interest in entering the industry. This is crucial! Is it not the female "spice" which so many industry veterans are desperately seeking in order to improve the climate within a team and to create more innovative games – and, in the end, to expand the audience as well?

Interestingly, many girls who found their way to games found it through Japanese ones. In the West, comic freaks have always been predominantly male but the ongoing global Japanisation (e.g. Kinsella 1997) seems to have also turned many girls into *manga* fans. It is high time to scrutinise what it is that makes Western girls collect "Final Fantasy" merchandise, build *Jin Kazama* shrines on the web, score best in "Dance Dance Revolution" and decorate their bedrooms with posters of *anime* heroes<sup>3</sup>!

Japan has identified girls' taste as the indicator of new trends and fashions. Thus, Japanese cultural industries have noticed that paying attention to girls pays off. Japanese popular culture seems to be a more liberated and innovative playground, as girls – otherwise a socially powerless group – occupy an influential position within it. Although woman's status is still ambivalent in Japan, girls are mostly free of social obligations and use their freedom to create powerful trends. In 2003, the Tokyo-based design company *FuriFuri* e.g. brought the "Girls Power Manifesto" into being, emphasising the importance girls and their tastes have upon the development of fads and trends within Japanese culture.

Since the 1960s, female *manga* artists have not only made the genre of *shoujo manga* (girl comics) a creative fountain of youth for other genres of comics, but girls have also established their own youth scenes which have a great influence on graphical style, fashion and character design. One does not need to be a *fujoshi* (female *otaku*) to enjoy *otomege*

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<sup>3</sup> *Manga* refers to Japanese comics, "Final Fantasy" is the title of a series of extremely successful console-based role-playing games developed by the Japanese firm *Square-Enix*, *Jin Kazama* is a very attractive male character of the popular martial arts-based combat game series "Tekken" by the Japanese developer *Namco*. "Dance Dance Revolution" by the Japanese developer *Konami* is a well-known dancing game requiring the player to control the game by correctly executing a choreography of steps on a dance mat. *Anime* refers to Japanese animation in the style of *manga*.

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(games for and by females) like Koei's "Angelique" series, dating games for girls like Konami's "Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side"-series, *yaoi* games featuring romance between handsome boys, magazines for girl gamers, cosplay (dressing like fictitious characters), girl areas in arcades stuffed with print club machines, excessive cell-phone use and the hordes of *kawaii* (cute) characters and their merchandise. Although the women who occupy a creative position in Japanese game companies constitute only a minority, Japanese popular culture has yielded many female designers whose creations have become icons of style: the creators of *Hello Kitty* (Sanrio), "Momo the PostPet" (Sony), "Mr. Driller" (Namco), the *Tamagotchi* (Bandai), etc. are female;

There is a specific girl culture existing in Japan and game creators there know how to satisfy girls' needs. Against all cultural imperialism, Japan serves as a fascinating example of how girls, once empowered as a cultural productive force, can influence the game industry extensively. This understanding may not only bring much innovation into the rigid structures of the Western game industry. Above all, it may also empower Western girls to discover the new possibilities offered by a creative environment such as that of the game industry. As at least partly the case in Japan, it is essential that the West finally acknowledges its games to be significant cultural contents. As such, games simply must be innovative, fresh and appealing to girls.

Every observer of popular culture, hence cultural scientists, gamers and game-developers alike, should consider the following crucial question: how can girls make use of a game's creative potential in order to discover new leisure opportunities, identities and career perspectives?

In order to broaden a game's audience on the one hand and to open the prospering cultural industry to female creative forces on the other, it is crucial to understand how modern girlhood in Western industrial countries has developed, how female youth scenes work, the reasons for the differences between girls' and boys' interests, which obstacles still constrain girls' leisure activities and the video game's role as a cultural artefact in our popular culture. To increase this understanding is the aim and purpose of this work.