LTPF Season 3, Episode 5 – Video Games

Guest: Andrea Braithwaite, Ph.D. (she/her) Communication and Digital Media Studies, Ontario Tech University; Vice-President, Canadian Game Studies Association

Full Transcript:

Kadie Philp
I'm Kadie Philp. If I were to ask you to describe a typical video game player - a middle aged woman is not likely to come to mind. But that is precisely the sector's fastest growing audience. According to the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC), women represent 46% of Canadian gamers. More women developing and producing games has led to this demographic shift, and, has influenced the way women are portrayed in games. Moving from hyper-sexualized representations of women, more modern games present women as multi-dimensional protagonists with agency and emotional depth. In Canada, the video game industry has also seen a push toward more inclusive storytelling, with studios like Ubisoft Toronto working to develop games that better reflect the diversity of their audiences. All the while women coding and developing these games fight for pay equity. This episode I speak with Dr. Andrea Brathwaite, Senior Teaching Professor at Ontario Tech University and Vice-President, Canadian Games Studies Association

Kadie Philp (00:04)
Andrea, I'm going to say let's just jump into it. And I want to ask you, we're going to talk so much about different parts of video games. It's such a huge topic, first of all, but we're going to talk about women and girls in video games at like portrayal and also, you know, women as developers and designers because they're on screen and behind screen. And then women as consumers and players because they're also consuming what is being produced and seeing all these representations. So, there's so much complexity we're going to try to cover today. But so let's just dive into it. You know, historically, video games, the kind of games I remember watching over my brother's shoulders playing because I didn't really play often portrayal of female characters in very stereotypical roles. How have these portrayals or have they evolved over the years?

Andrea Braithwaite (00:58)
Yeah, in some ways we've seen representations of female characters in games follow a similar trajectory to what we've seen in other media like film and like television where they slowly and steadily are moving from being passive background characters to active parts of stories to non-player characters, like just in-game characters that we can interact with that direct us in the game and then to characters that we get to play beside or play as. Like Princess Peach for instance, or Zelda, or Tauna of characters that started as kind of

background decoration and the sort of goal for male characters in the games that have slowly become characters we can play ourselves. We've also seen more recently franchises building out that feature a woman at the centre of the story of the game, like Tomb Raider, which was an early and ongoing example of this, and more recently the phenomenal success of Horizon Zero Dawn, which gives us a similar sort of story of a sort of woman at the center of this action-packed world, right? And in a way that is sort of mirroring the changes that we've witnessed historically. But that's not the same as saying everything is fantastic.

Kadie Philp (02:53)
No, we'll dive into some of the problems, but you mentioned Tomb Raider as an early and consistent, you know, where women are not just passive. They're actually the active character that you get to play and men and primarily probably men, but men and women can play this character. What other show, like what other moments do you see from the gaming sector, from the games or either a game in itself or just some kind of moment similar to that where you see there's a more shift towards a nuanced, empowered portrayal of women from these sort of passive, they're just in the game, you don't even interact to, you can interact and then you can actually play. Like that's a really interesting trajectory. Are there other moments where you think, that was an interesting moment from a developer point of view or was that even developer driven or was that consumer driven demanding that?

Andrea Braithwaite (03:52)
Yeah, I think a great example that sort of overlaps a bunch of this is, and I'm taking us back to the 90s, so this might be more memorable for some than others, of what was called at the time the Girls' Games Movement in the 1990s, in which we had a bunch of independent studios and game designers and developers, primarily women, say there's this huge untapped market that the big companies are very deliberately overlooking on purpose. And so let's make games aimed specifically at girls and young women. And some of this was I guess a good word for it is kind of educational, right? The 90s is the time where tech is increasingly part of our classrooms, and part of what we have access to at home. And so there's this hope that by getting more girls and young women interested in playing video games, they become more comfortable with technology more broadly and then better equipped for the world of tomorrow. Right. And then at the same time, these studios all wanted to come up with different kinds of games than the sort of action and violence ones that were dominating market at the time by offering different sorts of stories and different gameplay experiences. so, most of the studios that were part of this girl's games movement have folded since. Some of them have kept going. One of them that I have done a bunch of research and playing myself is Her Interactive, which is the studio behind the Nancy Drew video game. So for everybody that has always wanted to be Nancy Drew, there's, geez, about 30 something of them now.

Kadie Philp (05:50)

so fascinating. didn't know that. Yeah. And is that geared towards like women who would have read Nancy Drew, right? Because Nancy Drew was an old franchise. That's not a modern franchise. Of course, those stories get retold and young women rediscover them. So who are they marketing that to? Like is that for women like you and me who would have read that in kind of real time or for you know, my nieces who are learning it and rediscovering it?

Andrea Braithwaite (06:06)
Her Interactive was really strategic about its early marketing going for, obviously, when you are trying to bring in younger players, you are advertising in part to them and in part to their parents as the people in control of what gets purchased. And so some of this was sort of a nod to parents who have been familiar with Nancy Drew from their own childhood. And some of this is just… Nancy Drew is unstoppably popular. Despite being such an old character at this point, she continues to be made and remade, and this kind of action-adventure, mystery-solving girl continues to be just such a powerful figure that she was a great choice for trying to make games that worked a little differently but still offered an exciting experience but with a young girl at the centre of the story making all of these choices about how to bring the villain to justice, right? And so, this movement in the nineties introduced a whole bunch of different play styles into the market. As these companies studied the feedback they were receiving and the information they had about who was buying and playing these and people just writing them saying I love this game thank you so much they learned very quickly that it wasn't just girls and young women playing it was all sorts of people that were excited to have different kinds of games to play and so what was designed it yeah

Kadie Philp (07:57)
Mm-hmm. That's an interesting distinction.

Andrea Braithwaite (08:20)
What was designed initially to be ‘this is what girls like’ ended up becoming an initial attempt to broaden the way we define what counts as a game and what counts as a good game by bringing in sort of puzzle style stuff and games oriented around friendships and relationships and fashion. The whole series of Barbie video games from the 90s was very organized around fashion and being Barbie and dressing up and so yes, yes, yes.

Kadie Philp (08:53)
And consumerism, obviously, too. I love that we've stepped into the production side, which is so fascinating. And probably, thank you for mentioning Her Interactive, because it shows how when women start to design or are part of the design conversations, games maybe that aren't just, obviously, there was a deliberate effort to create games that women and young girls respond to, but I think it also changes the gameplay in spaces where typically it's more male dominated, right? We've talked about in previous conversations, women like Roberta Williams and Amy Henning, who've really left a significant mark on the industry. And can you share a bit more, like you've talked a little bit, but let's dive into it because I

think it's just so powerful. It's such a powerful example. The gaming industry has shifted so much because women's participation has developed. There's still lot of inequities, we'll cover that, but it's increased. So how has the role of women in game development changed since pioneers like Roberta and Amy actually emerged?

Andrea Braithwaite (10:08)
not as much as we would want, honestly. It is, there is still lots of work to do. It is a wonderful storyline to imagine. had these trailblazing women and the gates opened up behind them and nothing has gone quite that way. Data often provided by the industry itself tells us that women still make up a small percentage of game developers. The most recent, the Game Developer Conference, which is a big industry event, they put out every year what they call the State of the Game Industry Report. And the one for 2024 tells us that less than 25 % of game developers are women. And if we go back through their previous yearly reports, we notice that number hasn't changed much. It's been sitting right around there for quite some time. So even when some companies are taking very public steps to try to make a difference, it's still a big uphill battle, not just to get women in there, but also to keep them in there. so we are still stuck in what is a not very inspiring sort of picture of what this is like as a workplace for women.

Kadie Philp (11:21)
Yeah. So, okay, so you said about 25 % or like, okay, so a quarter.

Andrea Braithwaite (11:38)
Yeah. Yeah. I think the number for 2024 was actually 23%, but it hovers around there.

Kadie Philp (11:44)
23, so that area, okay. And I'm sure there's also, you don't have the stats, it's fine, but I'm sure it raises questions around even gender equality at more senior level roles, right? Because we know that as this is sort of the glass ceiling effect where women generally have a harder time breaking into the senior roles and senior roles is often where those major decisions are being made. We know that pay disparities, obviously at the pay equity office we talk a lot about pay disparities, remain an issue in almost every industry, but I will say some good news for software developers and programmers in Ontario. The gender wage gap for them on average is 7%, whereas the provincial average is 12%. So there's something interesting happening in that space where, I think, yeah, that is something to celebrate. I think we should mention that because that's still a significant pay gap. I'm not downplaying that, but to say there is something happening in that industry. And I've tried to have conversations with in it and they explained part of it by saying well we do actually have an effort to try to keep women in so we have better paying benefits because we're trying to keep and retain women which I think is a good thing but from your point of view what can the gaming industry do to continue this is a great trend what can they do to continue this trend you know in any of these like this is a very creative and technical field.

Andrea Braithwaite (13:19)

Mm hmm. Yeah. Yeah. I some of it is the typical conditions under which games are made and historically have been made. And gaming is an industry is prone to what it calls crunch periods of crunch where you are getting close to the deadline and rather than try to up with a new deadline. They just make everybody put in incredible amounts of overtime to hit this initial date, right? And this, not surprisingly, leads to enormous amounts of burnout. As an industry, gaming historically has been characterized by lots of short-term contracts. You are hired to do this particular thing for this particular game for this time and this time. and then you have to go and hustle and find something else. So these sort of overlapping dynamics of incredible periods of crunch, right, where you're putting in 16, 18 hour days for months at a time and short contracts that just roll over very, very quickly can make it hard to stay in when this has been the kind of employment pattern, particularly at these entry and mid-level jobs. It makes it really difficult, for instance, to have the time to continue to work on your skills and develop new ones to help you move into higher up positions. And so these patterns have been part of why we see, well, why we see such low numbers of women in particular, because again, these jobs don't exist in a vacuum and women more often are still juggling more and different kinds of sort of care labor outside of their employment that makes 16 and 18 hour days for months at a time just incredibly difficult, right?

Kadie Philp (15:23)
No, of course. Yeah, and I was going to raise that point to say, because we see that consistently in all sectors, the challenge, the still sort of highly gendered labor market dynamics overall, still have gender segregation in the labor market is slowly kind of changing over time and these declustering, which is really good. I mean, probably if we looked, you know, the number of hovering around 25 % is probably much better than it was 25, 30 years ago, right? So we see slow incremental change, but you're hitting on a really important point is these like structural issues that actually women come to work very differently than men. you raised a great point with the care expectations. This is sort of like video gaming. And I worked in the sector. When I worked in economic development, I worked on attracting the digital interactive gaming sector to the city I was working in. It's kind of a young guy's game, right? Like it's all, it's very young, mostly single men who like is really cool and fun and at a very different age and stage of their lives, right? Cause the burnout I think is also real for both men and women. And then you have younger women who also want to get in, but they're thinking about very different things and have a very different reality if they're making other choices in their life about partnership or childbearing or child rear.

Andrea Braithwaite (16:41)
Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

Kadie Philp (17:08)
So it's a really interesting question around just, you know, it's come up a few times on the podcast over the years, just the structure of the way that that particular sector's labor market is organized and what it favors and leadership making decisions about how do we

support this? How do we create an environment? You know, I've seen gaming companies have nurseries and family rooms, also having bedrooms so their staff can take a nap but keep working, or their staff can visit the kids over lunch hour, but keep working. So it is a really interesting, high stakes, fast moving sector that may not appreciate what women go through, and what they go through in terms of their workplace journey.

Andrea Braithwaite (17:57)
And so much of this pattern of sort of crunch and contract work doesn't need to even be the way games are made. And a lot of this comes from companies committing themselves to a release date years out and then the process takes the time it takes, but rather than push a date for release back, they just push their employees to meet it. And so some of this then implicates us as players of needing to not be so, I want my game now. Right? Because if we wait and we get it when it's ready, right? Then employees can, you know, go home and sleep and eat and, and hang out with friends and family and then go back to work on a much more manageable schedule.

Kadie Philp (18:34)
Sure. They're sort of like they strike, and make more room for, well, especially women and younger women who want to produce the games but don't have the time and space. I love that you just brought up players, we are, players are demanding, consumers are demanding, and we're constantly, it's such a competitive marketplace, and I mean, we haven't even touched on apps and the games on our cell phones. We can get into it if you want, but we know that now, and I would love to hear some stats on this and we can look them up and add them in our show notes, but women now make up an actual substantial portion of the gaming community, which you told me that when we had an earlier conversation and I was sort of shocked because we don't think of women as gamers, right? When we think of gamers, we have a stereotype of what that looks like for better, for worse, but women now make up a substantial portion of who's playing games. So can you talk a bit about that? and how has, if at all, the growing number of actually women playing games influenced either the types of games being developed or more gender equal representations of women or gender equality themes in the types of games we're seeing?

Andrea Braithwaite (20:11)
Yeah, another great place to find information about who is playing games is the Entertainment Software Association. The stats they have for the US tell us it's almost half and half women and men. And the stats that they have for Canada have women just tiny little edge. So for these two markets, the Canadian and US market, right, the numbers are about equal for women and men playing games. And this is new information in the sense that we tend to find it surprising, but women have been playing games in enormous numbers for as long as we have had video games, right? They just are not represented in the marketing or the advertising or the way that games are pitched to players. One of the things I learned when I was doing a bunch of research on the Nancy Drew games, they had focus groups of girls and young women and ask them, you know, what do you want to do in a video game? And the games they rattled off playing made it very clear that these were

folks who had been playing games as long as they could remember, right? It's just we don't see them in how games and gamers are represented until more recently. And some of this comes along with increasing numbers of increasingly successful indie studios that are working outside of the big AAA studios. This is not Ubisoft or EA or anything like that, right? These are smaller independent companies that are making smaller different kinds of games. And so people that are looking for something in addition to or other than your typical sort of action oriented game now have many more options. And then we can go there, we can talk about mobile games. This is a huge, huge, incredibly popular sector of the industry that does not get talked about the way that it should be.

Kadie Philp (22:38)
Is it female dominated? Like is this a space where women are driving the production and the consumption and have a more controlling empowered role?

Andrea Braithwaite (22:50)
Absolutely. The Entertainment Software Association stats show us that more women than men tend to play mobile games. And some of this is just everyday patterns, right? More women than men are still organizing lives beyond their own and managing kids' schedules and family schedules and all of this sort of stuff. And so these sort of pick it up, put it down style of mobile games fits better into this kind of divided attention and juggling. But that doesn't mean they're not games. And this is a sort of bias that exists in part within the industry and in part within gaming communities, that mobile games aren't real games. Even though

Kadie Philp (23:23)
Yeah. Right. women play them or because of the platform? Or both?

Andrea Braithwaite (23:43)
A bit of both. And so trying to work against that kind of perception of what counts as a real game and therefore a real gamer is part of how it becomes easier to see just how many different kinds of people are playing very many different kinds of games.

Kadie Philp (23:52)
Mm-hmm. Well, I appreciate the point you made earlier that like, actually, women have always been present playing games. They're just not represented in the marketing. But now because the trend is so big and because you're at parody and in some spaces like mobile, as you're saying, where women are out using that platform than men, it's like, okay, we need to make serious attention and we need to be honest and clear that women are in this space and they're making massive contributions to consumption, which then influences production, right? And this relationship between that. I want to talk a bit about more about the industry sector, because I know you're well versed in this. And there's been like several high-profile cases. I think we've talked previously about Riot Games gender discrimination lawsuit, which have really brought attention to paying equities. You know, from your perspective, how have these cases impacted the industry's culture and practices regarding

pay equity? I know at the beginning you said it's not as great as we were hoping, but have you seen, you know, what did that lead to these lawsuits that became high profile, has there been a shift in the practices and culture?

Andrea Braithwaite (26:04)
Again, not in the way we would hope, right? A lot of the litigation around Riot Games is still ongoing. And a few other really big companies have found themselves on the receiving end of similar cases. Ubisoft a few years ago, Activision Blizzard a few years ago as well, about sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the workplace, about structures that make it significantly more difficult for women to be promoted and to move up within these organizations. And some of this is that these kinds of cases don't really get widely covered outside of sort of tech journalism and games journalism. And so some of the challenge of taking these issues seriously rests in taking gaming more seriously as well. Right? Despite the enormous amounts of money this industry makes, we still have this very sort of deep pervasive understanding of it as a frivolous pastime, as something that you grow out of eventually, even though that's not the case. And so it doesn't get the same sort of public and popular attention the way the Me Too movement, for instance, has drawn our attention to other really big media industries. And so part of what we need to do better is to recognize that these are workplaces like other workplaces and because they make games does not exempt them from the same sort of critical attention that we are increasingly paying to other media workplaces.

Kadie Philp (28:08)
I think it's important. That's a great point is the visibility, right? Visibility matters in terms of who's talking about it and in what spaces. And, you know, there's a broader conversation, not for today's podcast, but just on the perception of the game, people who play and people who produce games, even just non gendered, right? Like there's a stereotype there which changes and then you're going more granular to women. And I'm sure intersectionally that has different consequences as well. In terms of the pay inequity, and I know we have some research, we look at Stats Canada, we can get pretty granular, and as I shared, actually the programming and software developing outperforms the provincial average, is great news. And obviously we see larger pay gaps at the executive level, which is usually quite common across sectors. Do you see any promising steps or initiatives that gaming companies are doing to address pay inequities and gender disparities? I know with the previous question you mentioned, like, you know, we didn't see the floodgate of change after these big litigations, but, you know, what have we seen or what can be done?

Andrea Braithwaite (29:30)
Yeah, I too follow up specifically on a few of the big studios that are dealing with these issues. Ubisoft and EA Entertainment Arts, for instance, have both implemented mentorship programs, essentially, as ways of creating more entry points for applicants that want to get into the industry and as a sort of selling feature in the recruitment process for a more positive set of working conditions, right? If you can be sort of paired up with a mentor who's been through it, who shares some demographic overlap with you, right? Women

mentoring other women and so this promise of being able to talk to somebody who's been there has had some positive benefit for their recruitment efforts going forward, at least in the material that they make publicly available in promoting their new mentorship programs and the impact that it's having, right?

Kadie Philp (30:39)
Mm-hmm. Right.

Andrea Braithwaite (30:49)
other companies and Riot is one of them have taken to being much more transparent about their salaries for the positions that they advertise. And as anybody on the job market knows, job postings either don't disclose a salary or will have one that is just so ludicrously broad in range that it might as well not be included at all, right? And so some studios have taken to posting very clear sort of salary floors and ceilings for this appointment that is out there, it is on the job posting, and that makes it much easier to hold these kinds of companies accountable when folks are hired because there is this visible trail of, of here's the range in which anybody should be paid for this work regardless. Right? Yeah.

Kadie Philp (31:28)
Right. Yes. Thank you for mentioning that, I didn't know that the gaming sector had adopted pay transparency so proactively because, you know, right now actually in Canada, pay transparency is becoming a tool that different provincial governments are using. I know, British Columbia has it, Ontario has one that's coming into force potentially. Like there's a lot happening around that space. And I think the pay equity gaps we know. There's no like one magic tool, right? There's no, you can't just level up. Like it's not a, if only there, but at there we've observed through our research, there's suites of tools, like having a pay equity act, but then also pairing that with pay transparency and then strong employment standards really helps to bring down the pay gap. So I'm really happy actually to hear that the gaming sector has picked up on that. Now, as we close out, I want to ask, you know, kind of forward thinking, what do you think the future holds for women in the gaming industry? Like, are you optimistic that we'll see a more equitable landscape, you know, in any of the contents, in representation in games, in development, in consumption? Like, are you hopeful for the future?

Andrea Braithwaite (32:42)
Mm-hmm. I am endlessly hopeful for the future. I don't know whether it is grounded in facts or if it is just sheer brute hope.

Kadie Philp (33:05)
Love that.

Andrea Braithwaite (33:16)
Part of what makes me less hopeful is some of the other kinds of work we see coming up around gaming. And I'm thinking of eSports, right? That is not nearly as big in North America

as it is elsewhere, but it's getting there and streaming. And so as places where people are making money in and around games, these continue to be just deeply unequal in terms of the money people are making, along gendered lines especially. And so this is one of those additional areas that we need to keep an eye on, particularly for women that want to play competitively. And so this matters. At the same time, I see the students in my classes and the students in the game design program at my school and their determination, right, to make their careers meaningful. And that is part of where my unfounded but also unstoppable hope comes from is the women currently moving through our education system, getting the skills that they need to become the designers and developers of the future.

Kadie Philp (34:48)
And what advice do you give them? Like, I love that you're bringing that up. Like, you know, you're at the front lines. You're seeing the next generation who are studying this at school and preparing for careers in this. And so you see women and men and non-gender conforming. Like, you see people, a lot of people. You know, what advice do you give them when they're talking to you about this?

Andrea Braithwaite (35:14)
few things. One, as somebody who's always very pro-labour and pro-union, to support labour action and unionization. The State of the Game report from the Game Developers Conference tells us younger game developers are like three times more likely to support unionization efforts in the gaming industry than older game devs, and this is fantastic. I would also recommend to connect with your community. There are great organizations out there for women just starting out or wanting to break into games and gaming that solidarity makes a difference. Pixels based out of Montreal is a great one that does this kind of work. so knowing that you are not the only person facing these obstacles and that they are not specific to you, but they are systemic and you can work with the people around you to try to make a difference is really important.

Kadie Philp (36:12)
Right. That is so great. think there is power in collective bargaining. There's power in community to come together and to support women supporting women, like the whole community coming around you. is wonderful. that is great advice. And I appreciate your, you know, cautious optimism. We can leave it at that, but I think that the industry is looking good and my office will certainly be following the gender wage gap stats because it is outperforming other scientific and technical sectors. our job here is to try and understand why. So thank you so much for your insight, for sharing this information, and we look forward to having you again.

Andrea Braithwaite (36:55)
Yeah. My pleasure.

Kadie Philp

Here are the top three things I got from Dr Andrea Brathwaite in this episode:

1. Women Have Always Been Gamers: Despite stereotypes, women have been active players since the beginning, but their presence hasn't always been reflected in marketing or industry narratives.
2. Pay Gaps and Progress: While the gender wage gap in gaming is smaller than in other industries, significant barriers to leadership roles and equal opportunities remain.
3. Change Needs Community: From mentorship programs to unionization efforts, collective action and support networks are key to creating a more inclusive and equitable gaming industry.

Thank you for listening. Don't forget to follow or subscribe and share this podcast. Until next time, let's keep asking questions, challenging norms, and working toward a more equitable world for women to work, live and thrive.