

# We can do it, can we? Experiences of Women in the Czech Video Game Industry

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Video game industry is still a male-dominated field. This fact does not stem only from the quantitative predominance of white heterosexual men, but also from the invisible barriers that impede the participation of other groups, who face obstacles that can delegitimize their choices and experiences and/or make the adopted path inhospitable. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the feelings and opinions of women working specifically in the Czech games industry.

According to the international IGDA satisfactory survey (IGDA 2021), 61 percent of respondents identified as men and 30 percent as women (8% identified as gender non-binary, gender fluid or genderqueer). The positions held by men and women also differ - women are less likely to be developers and programmers and more likely to work in marketing or HR departments (IGDA 2021; Wolf and Perron 2016; Bailey, Miyata, and Yoshida 2021).

These facts are inextricably linked to gender stereotypes and gendered frameworks. Even as the industry itself becomes more heterogeneous and inclusive (Harvey and Fisher 2015; Chess and Shaw 2015), the gaming culture is still based on the toxic characteristics associated with structural sexism, misogyny, homophobia or racism (DeWinter and Kocurek 2012), that are present in the representation in games (Tompkins and Martins 2022), in player cultures (Austin 2022) as well as in the industry itself (Weststar and Legault 2018; Cote 2020).

In recent years, a high percentage of people working in the game industry reported that sexism in games, among players, and in the workforce contributed negatively to the industry (Weststar and Legault 2018). Moreover, 74% of IGDA 2021 respondents felt that there was not equal treatment and opportunity for all in the industry. According to the IGDA data, four times as many women reported being treated unequally in the promotion process and six times as many women described microaggressions in the workplace, including verbal, behavioral, and environmental humiliation.

The above manifestations of hostility towards women that are confirmed by several older studies (Consalvo 2008; Harvey and Fisher 2015) are not the only expressions of sexism in the workplace. More common is benevolent or implicit sexism (Stermer and Burkley 2015; Fox and Potocki 2016). This approach can lead to conformity, manifested both in the workplace, in the ideas women (do not) propose, and in the

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content women (do not) create (Bulut 2021; Johnson 2014; Tompkins and Martins 2022). Implicit sexism also manifests itself in paternalism, mansplaining, or "affirmative action," in which women as tokens receive certain advantages in the workplace.

The different position of women in the games industry is related to the fact that the whole environment follows meritocratic and masculine traits and needs associated with long working hours, crunch time, project-based work organization (Weststar and Legault 2018; Vysotsky and Allaway 2018). These discourses favor young (male) and childless workers and support the classic patriarchal structure of society. They reproduce a culture that is unwelcoming to most women (Johnson 2014; Weststar and Legault 2018), as they don't fit the image of the ideal employee in a technology company (D'Anastasio 2018).

The Czech games industry certainly follows these trends, even though it is a younger and relatively small environment. According to the industry report, there were 2329 employees in 2022, of which only 19 percent are women (GDA 2022). To explore their experiences and strategies to cope with stereotypes, I conducted several in-depth interviews. I have done 9 interviews so far, and plan to conduct at least 20 in total.

All respondents work or have worked in the Czech games industry in different positions (as QA specialists, game designers, programmers, or in the HR departments). In the interviews done so far, all respondents stated that the Czech games industry should be considered from a global perspective. Therefore, they do not believe that their position and the problems they face are influenced by the specific historical, political, and social development of the Czech Republic, but that they are universal in nature.

All respondents have been confronted with sexism and gender stereotypes. For example, they were often confronted with the idea of which professions women should be (designers, artists) and which are more suitable for men (programmers). In addition, respondents stated that their male colleagues often believed in their different work ethics and "feminine" perspective that would make both the game environment and real working conditions more pleasant and friendly. Although the problem of sexual harassment or gender-based bullying cannot be underestimated, the interviewees mainly talked about implicit manifestations of sexism, especially in the form of mansplaining or seemingly innocuous remarks.

The female respondents chose different strategies to deal with these stereotypes and attitudes. For many of them, it was important to create a certain kind of sisterhood in the workplace (all women in one company set up private communication channel, senior designers deliberately chose female employees to be part of their team). Some respondents adopted masculinized traits to be taken seriously, and some, on the contrary, accepted the subordinate role. However, low self-confidence associated with impostor syndrome was an underlying theme for all.

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