

# Diversifying Barbie & Mortal Kombat

Conversations about  
Games, Gender, and  
Diversity

Friday, April 24, 2015  
5:30pm-8:30pm

Recent events in the gaming industry highlight a pressing need to extend conversations about games to focus on gender, race, sexuality and how these factors may intersect. In these panels we bring together leaders in the field to situate how far we've come and chart the future of diversity in game design and research.

## Looking Back: Deconstructing Gamergate

Florence M. Chew, Loyola University  
Katherine Cross, CUNY  
Katherine Gray, Eastern Kentucky University  
Gabriela T. Richard, University of Pennsylvania  
Adrienne Shaw, Temple University

## Looking Forward: Diversifying Gaming

Jill Denner, ETC  
Betsy diSalvo, Georgia Tech  
Mary Flanagan, Dartmouth  
Heidi McDonald, Schell Games  
Jen Jenson, York University  
Brendesha Tyeb, USC

## POSTER RECEPTION

Posters and Demos by Doctoral and Early Career Scholars  
Kicked off by Justine Cassell, Carnegie Mellon University  
Yasmin Kafit, University of Pennsylvania

LOCATION: Wu & Chen Auditorium, Lovine Hall  
University of Pennsylvania, 3300 Walnut Street

Event is free, but space is limited. Please register [tiny.cc/dbnk2015](http://tiny.cc/dbnk2015)  
For more info, contact us [dbnk15info@gmail.com](mailto:dbnk15info@gmail.com)



**DIVERSIFYING BARBIE AND MORTAL  
KOMBAT:  
New Perspectives on Race and Gender in  
Gaming**

**A WORKSHOP READER**

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## **Designing from Margin to Center: Creating an Inclusive Space for Different Games**

Sarah Shoemann  
Mariam Asad  
Georgia Institute of Technology

### **1. Introduction**

In 2012, media critic Anita Sarkeesian successfully launched her Kickstarter campaign, a video series called *Tropes Vs. Women*, which focused on the troubling representations of women in videogames. What followed was a violent and vitriolic backlash to her project, including gender-based threats, online/denial-of-service attacks, and threats against her family at home. This— along with other incidents involving threats, harassment, and abuse against women— unleashed a chain reaction of public interest and mainstream media coverage paying attention to the experience of women in games (Kocurak, 2013). While the problematic representation of women in game has long been acknowledged both in and outside of the games community (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), this year represented a breakthrough of sorts, and it was in this milieu that the first Different Games conference was held.

The conference was not only influenced by gender issues in broader games culture, but also a direct response to what we saw to be familiar patterns of marginalization and oppression in our own local games scene in New York City (Benedetto, 2012). Feelings of alienation and discomfort at our personal and professional experiences

being in male dominated spaces had become an open topic amongst women in the games community. While NYC has had a robust independent scene games for decades, it was not immune to the sexism and exclusivity that plague mainstream games culture. We found ourselves overwhelmingly outnumbered by male colleagues, speakers, and collaborators; arguing against the grain for themes and aesthetics that represented our identities and experiences, but did not appeal to our peers; we dreaded participating in game jams and other community events, skeptical of working on projects that didn't appreciate or acknowledge our interests and values. As we continued to connect and engage with more women in the NYC game scene, we continued to watch, commiserate, and make connections between the blatant sexism in games from Sarkeesian's trolling to the issues in our own local spaces.

We reached a breaking point after years of not seeing our women teachers and mentors adequately represented or credited as part of the active community of game designers in the city. We were also fed up with alleged allies both on and offline who championed feminist ideals, but excluded and eschewed queer-, race-, and class-based critiques. From all this, Different Games emerged, stemming from a collective desire to imagine a new kind of space for examining games, their representations, and their culture. Parallel to the attention on women and games in the public eye, we were also keenly aware more attuned to the need for more visibility for the many other underrepresented groups in games and— more broadly— technology-based communities. We hoped for a space that would privilege and amplify traditionally marginalized voices that we saw were missing: women— yes— but also people of color, queers, differently/disabled persons, varied socioeconomic classes, and different educational backgrounds. We began to discuss ideas for events that would focus specifically on inclusivity and diversity, that directly engaged issues related to identity, and that resisted some of the ideals that seemed to dominate the New York game scene, like games formalism (Lantz, 2015), systems fetishization (Jenkins), and an aversion to engaging personal issues (Alexander, 2013). We actively sought out calls for intersectional politics, radical critiques of faux feminism (hooks, 2013), and takedowns of seemingly subversive labor practices (Kane, 2012). We were inspired by these conversations and sought out to create a space where games culture could learn and grow in similar ways.

## **2. INCLUSIVITY IN PRACTICE**

After diversifying our ideological frameworks (i.e. beyond simply feminism), we wanted to ensure that we were not just paying lip service to anti-oppressive principles, but trying to actively practice them. It was important to us that striving for inclusivity be seen as a process, something that must be constantly reaffirmed,

rather than an end goal to achieve or a quota to be met. We discuss two manifestations of that here. The first being external, in the way we used anti-oppressive practices to guide the structure of the event both in its form and the content covered in the conference program. Secondly, we wanted to be internally inclusive as an organizing team and to make sure that we were holding ourselves accountable to the same values we were advocating for within the broader community.

In working towards both of these goals it was important to us that the conference be as accessible as possible to both attendees and speakers. The first way we approached this was through the conference programming. We recognized that there were important and legitimate voices in the broader community of game designers and writers that were not being heard through more 'mainstream' conferences or spaces.

We also acknowledge that while several industry events and interdisciplinary conferences exist which bring academic designers into conversation with the games industry and indie development scene, academic scholars and researchers working in the humanities and social sciences are not often invited into conversation with designers (and certainly not in a space where they are likely to encounter marginalized voices).

To challenge this kind of "silencing" we worked actively to recruit a variety of speakers with diverse backgrounds and forms of expertise. This resulted in a highly interdisciplinary list of speakers— including scholars, artists, students, designers, critics, and journalists— that engaged participants through topics, ranging from the pragmatic, such as coping with sexism in the workplace, to more abstract ideas like what it means to "queer games." Sessions were also offered a variety of formats, as an intentional strategy to weave together the broad range of conventions that might be expected by various segments of the audience. In addition to panels and keynotes, there were also hands-on workshops, discussion-based breakout sessions, and an arcade to allow direct engagement between presenters and players in a safe space for sharing ideas and feedback. By bringing diverse audience members into less hierarchical and formal structures we hoped to break down the unidirectional relationship between presenters and attendees and to engage participants as diverse as our speakers'.

It was not enough for us as conference organizers to engage with inclusivity through the programming of the conference though. We also wanted its underlying structure and design to reflect the same values. One of the more concrete and significant ways this was realized was by strategically reducing financial barriers

that might impact participation. There was an intentional decision to waive any mandatory registration fees (both paid and sliding scale tickets were available) as well as make the event as open and accessible to the public, despite being hosted at a private university. This practice is in contrast to most commercial gaming and tech industry events that have prohibitively expensive to attend for independent game designers, students, artists, etc. Consider E3 and GDC—two of the largest industry events for games—which cost \$800 and \$1000 to attend, respectively. By offering greatest possible access to the conference, we hoped to create an event that would be diverse in participants, as well as speakers, the latter of whom we supported by offering travel support to as many out-of-town speakers as we could. This funding model was possible through an intensive fundraising campaign across educational institutions, as well as the private tech companies known for supporting progressive causes. While it would have been simpler to host a conference with less funding by passing the financial burden onto our speakers and attendees, we wanted to avoid replicating the self-perpetuating cycle of privilege that financial barriers create, excluding those without equal access to financial support. Fundraising independently as well as working with a university that generously donates resources of space, money and administrative support means it possible to provide guests offerings like free food and printed programs and to create a conference experience as legitimate and professional as any other gaming or technology event.

Other measures to support inclusivity involved paying particular attention to the space itself, like hosting the conference in an ADA compliant building or offering gender-neutral bathrooms, which was logistically a minor change to make, but had a huge impact on creating a safe, welcoming environment for participants. The organizing team also considered ways to encourage a safe space and sense of community during the conference. With the support of a volunteer consultant a Different Games Inclusivity Statement was crafted to communicate expectations and educate guests who might be unfamiliar with certain language or identities and might need resources to guide them on what kinds of behavior and speech to be mindful of. The Inclusivity Statement, which has since become somewhat of a hallmark of Different Games, was created as both as a straightforward resource as well as an answer to boilerplate “harassment policies” which focus on disciplinary actions and assume the inevitability of disrespectful and unsafe behavior rather than articulating what kind of participation is desirable and appropriate. The inclusivity statement set an intention for both the space and the participants to be respectful and inclusive at the start of the conference and in the years since, the statement has continued to be adapted and changed by successive volunteers and organizers as a means of gathering buy-in and articulating our team’s intention (Nooney, 2013).



We try to ensure inclusive and just practices within the members of the organizing team, as well. This is a challenge as the conference demands and attendee numbers increase, but the team remains student- and volunteer-led. As well as balancing the labor distribution and different levels of conference organizing experience, we also try to keep a fairly consensus-based decision making structure whereas many members as possible participate in decision-making conversations. This results in a perpetually self-reflective process of evaluating roles, responsibilities, and tasks to make sure that the conference runs successfully, but also that we take care of each other as a team.

This happens in a few different ways: the first is that we ask volunteers to identify what they have to offer as well as what they are interested in to try and match their assigned tasks with the skills and experiences that they want to get out of the organizing process. Our work is volunteer-based and largely uncompensated, but we try to account for this by making the organizing process as accessible and rewarding as possible, offering travel support for out-of-town volunteers to attend the conference and by supporting our volunteers intellectually. While we acknowledge that not every assignment can be particularly rewarding— some of the work of organizing is taking on rote tasks and operational mundanities— we try to get let volunteers choose their responsibilities based on what that they prefer and will find fulfilling. Our volunteer coordinator makes an effort to let all our volunteers know that they are both valuable and valued; it's important that we acknowledge that even the smaller, seemingly insignificant tasks are important contributions to the team and are genuinely appreciated.

We try to be sensitive as to how we determine volunteer roles, such as resisting stereotypically assigned responsibilities and having transparent accountability measures (e.g. point people). Here, the challenge becomes how to manage and respond to ingrained power dynamics: contrary to conventional organizational structures, roles are not necessarily assigned based on experience or seniority, but based on personal interest, as described above. One concrete example of this is our curatorial process, which we invite all our volunteers to be a part of. Given our varied experiences with game design and criticism— including formal, informal, academic, or industry-based— it can be difficult to assess what games would be appropriate to include in the conference arcade as we are all evaluating the submissions using different criteria. While this is not as efficient or streamlined as some approaches, this is by design: as we believe enforcing overly strict guidelines has the potential to exclude work created by underrepresented voices based on a lack of technical expertise or polish, which is often a result of lack of access to expensive development tools or technical knowledge. Differences in opinion and

curation are often resolved through conversation and a shared understanding that our conference tries to offer a space for empowering voices, rather than scrutinizing them.

We do not put on airs about an organizing process that does not dissent or argue—on the contrary, many of our conversations include a plethora of perspectives that require extra time and effort to work through and resolve. We do this by trying to maintain a safe environment where we address interpersonal issues and conflicts through an introspective lens, acknowledging that we all maintain varying degrees of privilege must be examined and negotiated (Crenshaw, 1991). While many organizations try to enact flat hierarchies, we contend that this is overly idealistic and, in practice, can sometimes reinforce oppression rather than resist it (Freeman, 2013). Instead, we try to work as a fluid hierarchy: volunteers can assume a leadership role if they so choose, though this is typically in conjunction with another group member so that organizational knowledge is both learned and shared. Through this internal accountability model, we try to collaborate such that our organizing process resists the same oppressive power structures that dominate our social and professional lives in games, technology, and broader contemporary culture (Smyth & Diamond, 2014).

It is crucial that we acknowledge that we work through inclusivity as an ongoing, collaborative process, rather than a static state or end goal. It is a constant, imperfect process where we make mistakes and do our best to learn from them. But in many ways, this is the point of Different Games: to break down false barriers— gamer from non-gamer, academics from journalists, players from designers, theorists from practitioners. The inclusive approach of our conference is meant to suggest that these artificial distinctions are holding back our progress by reproducing long-standing barriers to diversity, equal representation shared power, rather than dismantling them.

### **3. OUTCOMES**

As a space that intentionally mixes methods borrowed from DIY organizing practices, academic conferences, and professional tech and game development events, Different Games has succeeded most most as an exercise in trust that functions as a learning experience for both organizers and attendees. Our goal of creating an inclusive space, highlighting diverse creators, and fostering interdisciplinary dialogue has remained steadfast over three years of organizing, but perhaps our most unique characteristic as an organization has been our ability to learn with and from our community and remain flexible and responsive as the the event and organizing team has grown and expanded into a long distance, multi-institutional collaboration.

Different Games was, at first, an event planned and organized in Brooklyn by three graduate students and attended by less than a hundred people and in only three years, its grown to a team of fifteen organizers across the country, comprised of students, early career academics, and tech professionals, and has built an audience of more than three hundred attendees and thousands more viewers via livestream. As our organization has grown, we've had to confront the reality of how difficult it is to retain horizontalism in a larger team while maintaining the accountability and efficiency necessary for producing a live event. Because we are all volunteers, many of us struggle to balance office jobs, teaching loads, family obligations, and coursework while collaborating on Different Games. Confronting our own limited resources of time and energy has allowed us to more fully embrace idea that collectively does not mean structureless.

As we grow into a larger operation with a larger community to serve we've specialized our roles, assembling smaller teams to tackle individual aspects of the planning process from fundraising, to reviewing categories of submissions, crafting press materials, and doing community outreach. While this atomizing of responsibility might be seen as antithetical to consensus building within an organization, we have not found it to have, in fact, required more— rather than less— transparency and trust between members of our organization. Working on specific, chosen areas of the project means that volunteers are able to exercise choice and agency in how they carry out their work while remaining accountable to the larger group as a whole through report-backs and shared documentation of our processes through simple tools like Google Docs.

Welcoming more voices to our organizing staff has not only added diversity of expertise and having a larger team has also been immensely beneficial in terms of knowledge transfer. Now in our third year of organizing the event and having grown from a team of three to a team of ten and finally sixteen members there is now a wealth of distributed knowledge among our returning organizers which allows them to share the responsibility of integrating new volunteers.. As knowledge has become further decentralized, it has allowed for more equal peer-to-peer relationships to emerge, even amongst organizers with different levels of knowledge and expertise, but particularly between the most senior members of the project and the group as a whole now that everyone sees skill-sharing and task management as their shared responsibilities. In tandem with the way that growing our team over time has lead changes in our organizational processes, the public facing operation of the conference itself has also changed as part of a process of learning and reflection throughout the last three years. In the same way that our own assumptions need to be constantly re-evaluated to strive for greater awareness

as organizers, our operating procedures must evolve to reflect the needs and concerns of attendees and community members as they are raised.

Audience feedback over various backchannels, Twitter in particular, have proved invaluable for quickly responding to the community we participate in. While we offer mediation and support to conference-goers who are experiencing speakers or other attendees as marginalizing and encourage face to face interventions to “calling-out” (Goldberg, 2014) individuals publicly on twitter, we still see enormous benefits to the way past participants have used social media to make their concerns known before during and after the event. Experience has shown us that these critiques are in fact a vital form of contribution to the conference as a whole.

In the weeks leading up to the first conference in 2013 it was tweets from a trans game developer, voicing frustration and concern at the security requirements listed on our ticketing page, which lead us to work more closely with security staff to ensure that our security policies were not discriminatory. Originally, we had deferred to the university’s boilerplate visitor policy which required the use of government issued IDs which would have potentially forced trans attendees to identify themselves using misgendering credentials. We realized that while we had been congratulating ourselves for working with campus administrators to temporarily designate a set of bathrooms as gender-neutral in the hopes of being more trans inclusive, we had unthinkingly created a (literal) barrier to entry for our trans friends and speakers. Being “called out” publicly on Twitter was and continues to be a humbling experience, but it is in fact a study in exactly the kind of dialogue that is essential to a project like Different Games. By having our ignorance of day-to-day trans experience (born undoubtedly out of our privilege, as three cisgender organizers) exposed, we were forced to confront the lack of trans-inclusiveness at the event and to gather input from the community to improve our policies.

Live tweeting during the conference has in some circumstances been a direct challenge to problematic behavior. In 2013 audience members called attention the fact that casually ableist language like “crazy” or “lame” had been slipping into to a speaker’s presentation unacknowledged. It was decided (with permission from the parties involved) that the best way to move forward was to acknowledge these transgressions openly and encourage better awareness and accountability going forward.

This meant one of our organizers taking the stage between sessions to offer an impromptu reminder of why we had all promised to avoid ableist language when symbolically signing the conference inclusivity statement at the event’s opening.

We were encouraged to be thoughtful about our word choices but (crucially) not to fear simply acknowledging or apologizing when mistakes were made. It is these efforts, these extra steps to acknowledge our positions and make ourselves accountable that we believe constitute the real labor of inclusivity that is so vital to Different games.

As academic Alison Harvey noted, these kinds of reminders and moments of self awareness are crucial to the ways in which "...we, in our pursuit of inclusivity, must be ever mindful of how every single day our ally card expires and we need to actively work to earn it again..." (Harvey, 2013) While it might seem easier to let an ableist gaffe fall by the wayside, in the hope that it won't matter or won't be noticed, those at the margins of the games community know that does matter. It matters that we see each other and know that we are seen. It matters that we refer to one another other by the right pronouns, that we check that there are no stairs in the space and don't assume we can all afford plane fare. To build the trust required for mutual aid we must allow ourselves take on a deep sense of responsibility to one another, not to flee or minimize it as we've been taught.

It is this active process of working towards the goal of inclusivity but accepting that it is a constantly moving target that makes Different Games vital for us as organizers and meaningful to those that inhabit the space together for a weekend. Dr. Adrienne Shaw said of the conference "...embodied a coalition politics I always felt game studies and game design needed" (Harper, 2014) and like Shaw, we as co-organizers recognize that while the struggles we and other members of our community have been used to isolate us they also hold the power to bring us together through in building shared understanding of our experiences and our differences. Through Different Games we strive for a space in which to build that understanding together each year. We hope you'll join us.

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