

Doing diversity in the tech and games industry

"In diversity there is strength and beauty"- Maya Angelou.

This is a summary report on activity proposed to Re-fig in 2017 under the title 'Doing diversity in the tech and games industry'. Caroline proposed then to do three things: (1) extend the statistical instrument developed by Aphra Kerr to investigate the profile of participants in diversity initiatives in the sector; (2) to provide a literature review of the concept of diversity; and (3) to draw on interview data to show how the 'problem' of diversity is defined in the sector, and how solutions are being defined for it.

With respect to (1), a survey was administered to participants at three Codebar events in London, and the results shared with Aphra Kerr, as well as with Codebar. Codebar is a volunteer-led organisation dedicated to promoting diversity in the tech sector. It organises weekly teaching sessions, for under-represented groups to learn programming. The survey results were published on Codebar's Slash channel and discussed extensively there, as well as at one 'review' meeting, organised by Codebar to discuss its implications. In addition, a report based on interviews and ethnographic observation of Codebar sessions has been published in the 2017 Digra proceedings - see Johnstone, D. & Pelletier, C. (2017) Facilitating Diversity-Centred Adult Computing Education. Diversity Workshop Special Issue, Digital Games Research Association.

With respect to (2), literature reviews of the concept of diversity have been included in the paper by Johnstone and Pelletier referenced above; a more focused review is included in the report below.

With respect to (3), this is the substance of the report below, which we now give some background and context to.

A report on interviews with three diversity practitioners in the games sector

Caroline set out to investigate how 'diversity' was defined and practised by interviewing diversity practitioners in the field. The intention here was to draw on the work of Sara Ahmed (2012), who interviewed diversity practitioners in the Higher Education sector, in order to describe what 'doing diversity' involves. Ahmed's purpose was to try and get behind some of the celebratory rhetoric associated with diversity, and examine empirically what the term achieves in universities: what work it performs. Caroline set out to replicate this move, by talking to diversity practitioners in the games sector, and asking them questions relating to: the aims of diversity work; the challenges of diversity work; the indicators of successful diversity work; and the activities undertaken to promote diversity.

In order to find diversity advocates, the following steps were taken: emails were sent to Diversity representatives identified on Linked-in and who work in the games sector; contacts were made with journalists who report on diversity issues in the games sector, to obtain the details of possible interviewees; events with a 'diversity' agenda were attended at game conferences; organisations with a 'diversity' remit in the sector were approached. In other words, multiple methods were used to try and identify people willing to be interviewed. On the whole, these different approaches were not very successful. Caroline secured only three interviews, two with representatives of voluntary organisations dedicated to promoting diversity in games, who do not work in games companies; one with a D&I manager in a global games company, responsible for the London office. A further 8 interviews were carried out with diversity advocates in the tech sector more broadly, but which we do not report on here.

The low rate of success for finding people willing to be interviewed highlights the difficulty of researching what is meant by diversity work within games companies. A discussion with a journalist who endeavoured to carry out similar research for a newspaper article published in the national broadsheet *The Guardian* suggested that such difficulties are not particular to Caroline's method of approach, but rather to the controversial nature of the topic: the journalist indicated that when she approached game companies, she was invariably referred to the marketing department, but that even this rarely led to an actual discussion, either because this was vetoed by management levels above marketing, or more commonly, replies from the marketing department eventually stopped. She eventually wrote her article about diversity in games on the basis of interviews with prominent women in the sector, rather than D&I managers, as originally intended.

The report below therefore is a brief summary of three interviews which were carried out by Caroline in 2017: The participants were: the head of an organisation dedicated to promoting the inclusion of women in games (identified as W); the head of an organisation dedicated to promoting the inclusion of ethnic minorities in games (identified as M); and a D&I manager in the London office of a large games company (identified as K). Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, and was recorded and then fully transcribed. The transcripts have been analysed by Dipanwita Ghosh, the researcher on this project, who also led on the writing of the analysis below. Her analysis set out to address three questions: what does each interviewee understand by the term 'diversity'; how does each interviewee set out to encourage 'diversity'; and what are the challenges they face in doing their diversity work. Overall, the analysis aims to identify some important characteristics of the discourse of diversity work in the games sector.

We will start with a brief overview of some key points about diversity work in existing literature on the topic, notably the work of Ahmed. We have picked out key points which have helped to make sense of the interviews.

Brief literature review about diversity work

While there has been a growing interest in unravelling the different complexities that lie within this large umbrella concept of 'diversity', achieving a succinct, encompassing definition of the notion is a problematic endeavour. Perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in reconciling the abstract concept of 'diversity' with its various empirical forms in organisations. In this report on how institutions within the gaming industry practice diversity, we begin by exploring some of the existing literature in the field of diversity. Then we go on to discuss the strategies which actors in the games sector have used in order to promote diversity. Using data collected through interviews conducted with diversity practitioners, from both working in the industry and external organizations, we then engage critically with the findings and draw out some implications.

(1) Diversity as a good which already exists

In her book "On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life", Sara Ahmed (2012) states that exploring the meaning of diversity requires holding onto the uncertainty generated by the term. She argues that the popularity of the term derives in part from the work it performs in marginalising and usurping more political terms like 'equality', 'equal opportunities', 'social justice' and so on. Sometimes the all-encompassing quality of the term diversity means that it becomes vague in scope, thereby losing some of its critical edge.

For instance, Nirmal Puwar argues that "the language of diversity is today embraced as a holy mantra across different sites. We are told that diversity is good for us. It makes for an enriched and multicultural society" (2004:1) Gavan Titley and Alana Lentin similarly suggest that diversity's "apparent descriptiveness is central to its normative character: diversity implies a value-based

project of transformation towards the irreducible and irrevocable” (2008: 11). In other words, diversity becomes acceptable once it ceases being political and subject to disagreement, and once it is seen as being somehow already in place. For instance, official statements by organisations demonstrating a commitment to diversity often consist of a familiar repertoire of images that showcase diversity. They tend to show people of colour, different racial and ethnic groups, people with religious attire etc. Diversity is thereby as shown as already existing; it simply needs to be added to.

(II) Diversity in games – a problem of retention and marketing

Relating specifically to the Gaming Industry, creating and maintaining a more diverse workforce, could actually result in games that are more gender inclusive and could reflect playing styles that appeal to a broader group of gamers. Mia Consalvo (2008), talks about this in her chapter ‘Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges’, in the book ‘Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat’, that majority of current games are aimed at young adult men and boys and must seek new populations to grow. But, maintaining a successful and strong female work force in the gaming industry has met with many challenges along the way. Marketing disconnect, structural sexism, resistance to change, commonly held negative beliefs about this field of work among young girls, lack of a robust support system that allows women enough leave for life choices like parenthood etc. are some of many reasons why women continue to be wary of being part of the gaming industry. The Quality of Life Survey conducted by the IGDA, showed that only 49 percent of men stated that they would like to stay in the gaming industry for their entire career, while among women the percentage was even lower at only 34 percent.

A drive for incorporating diversity within big organizations such as many in the gaming industry opened up the pathway for bringing in more women into the work force as developers, however maintaining that workforce has not always been easy. One of Consalvo’s participants argued that the gaming industry suffers from a self-perpetuating problem where young people who have worked non-stop for two to three years often end up heading multi-million-dollar projects. While the idea may seem intoxicating, there are several underlying problems with that. It leads to normalizing extremely difficult work routines, allows for minimum work life balance, and creates a work culture that openly favours and venerates youth, passion and ability to work often inhuman long hours over maturity, experience and depth of acquired knowledge. Of course, the problem is not limited only to female workers, but in a scenario, where it has taken a long time and arduous work among diversity practitioners to include a strong female work force.

(III) Diversity practitioners as killjoys

This problematic perspective puts diversity practitioners in a difficult position. On the one hand, their job is to bring about change; on the other, that change is treated as already brought about, not least by their very appointment and presence. One consequence of this is diversity ‘fatigue’, as evoked by Ahmed, by which practitioners are seen as harping on about issues which are self-evident and already existing. Ahmed draws a comparison here with feminist ‘killjoys’. She evokes being the killjoy in family gatherings when she brings up problematic issues related to gender: her presence is literally treated as killing joy because she identifies unhappy matters, and also matters which might unnecessarily divide a united family gathering. Her work on diversity extrapolates this point from a

domestic scene to the unhappiness associated with diversity practitioners in organisations. So, she points out that diversity practitioners hired by organisations can then be perceived as obstacles in conversational spaces because they bring up problems. Hence, they too are killjoys, constantly identifying negativity. To pre-empt associations with a complaining attitude, practitioners will often make significant efforts to appear instead joyful and celebratory, doing diversity work through their bodies, by smiling a lot, appearing friendly, so that people will be more keen to work with them. In this way, diversity work can become a kind of institutional polishing, bringing out an organisation's appeal rather than dealing with inequalities.

(IV) Diversity as a good which is never achieved

One of the diversity practitioners that Ahmad interviewed said : ***I think it (equity) became a tired term because it was thrown around a lot and I think...well I don't know... because our title is equity and social justice, someday the other day was saying to me, "oh there's equity fatigue. People are sick of the word 'equity'....oh well, okay, we've gone through equal opportunity, affirmative action- they are sick of equity- now what do we call ourselves?! They are sick of it because we must keep saying it because they are not doing it (laughs). (p.98).***

Ahmed (2017) suggests that Diversity work is an ongoing process where there is no clear end goal in mind. Workers must keep pushing, even when policies that they were pushing for have been adopted by the organization. According to Ahmad (2017), thus practitioners are often caught in a tussle. One on hand, notions of equality and diversity are still not the default, automatic route for many institutions. Which is why there is a need for diversity workers to propel these ideologies forth. However, on the other hand, there lies a risk in associating a small number of people – a diversity team only with these notions because then these concepts never become part of the mainstream. It is a tight rope to walk thus for practitioners to work around these obstacles.

The Interviews

In this section we present detailed accounts of the data collected through three interviews conducted by Caroline. We present the interviewee's notions of diversity followed by their accounts of how the organizations they are currently or used to be associated with, carry out diversity practice. We provide a glimpse of activities they carry out to promote diversity practice and the problems they run into during their endeavour.

(I) Interview with W

W stated that for the longest time the gaming industry primarily targeted a male demographic in the 90s and as a result of that the consoles, the services as well as the products were all centred around reaching out to an all-male audience. In some studios during that time period no women would even be employed. It was often not necessarily a conscious agenda, but things were quite often like that.

It is therefore no surprise that for the gaming industry games sector is making an effort to show they are doing something proactively to encourage diversity, even if in the long run it sometimes begins to falter as something more for an outward show as opposed to actually bringing about change in policy and practice. But even to open to the notion of diversity, the process did take conscientious effort on the part of management. She is of the opinion that one of the key points to keep in mind

regarding practicing diversity is that for the longest time 50 percent of the population has been ignored and it is only now that a conscious effort is being made to incorporate women in content development of the games. Most institutions are trying to take up initiatives but there is still a lack of awareness of what different organizations are doing among each other. She goes on to state that,

“I think that everybody wants to show that they are doing something in the field of diversity. Because it’s become... Instead of it becoming something they didn’t have to think about it’s become something that you have to think about. And therefore if you’ve got to think about it, I think companies and educational organisations want to show that they’re doing that because it actually helps them with recruitment, it helps them to gain, you know, for companies it helps them to get more talent into their companies.”

Thus, incorporating practices of diversity helps companies enhance their own reputation and image and in turn seem a lot more lucrative and attractive to job seekers. It is primarily for reasons like this that organizations like Women in Games was set up, to work up their image in the public sector.

She also raises an important point introducing the key notion of social class whereby she talks at length about how often poorer sections of society and not just women are left behind in this system. A diversity map that showcases who lives where and that highlights important factors about livelihood, income groups, population demographics, what initiatives different companies in the specific areas are taking to practice and promote diversity could be vital in keeping abreast of ongoing trends among institutions. With the right kind of support in poorer areas, there could actually be young people who might be encouraged to explore career options like work in the gaming industry and eventually could lead to them becoming assets to the institutions. Currently her work for a Quality Assurance Body has her insisting that with the right kind of economic support and motivation, many young minds could be initiated into a potentially successful and motivating career path. In other words, she approaches achieving diversity as a problem that needs to be addressed with reference to young people and how more young people could be motivated to join the industry.

After the initial interest in incorporating diversity, the greater hurdles appear in the form of monetary funds to carry out the strategies. To ensure that meaningful and impactful work is carried out, institutions require considerable economic support from different channels for example through private sponsorships or government agencies etc. She goes on to say that external organizations would want to invest money in diversity practice only if they realized how lucrative it can prove to be in the long run. She states,

“They’re interested in obviously fairness and, you know, gender and equality of diversity issues and everything, but the bottom line is they want to know how they are going to be more successful.” Therefore, practically speaking, based on her work with games companies, who in her opinion agree with her that having more women in the work force in the gaming industry would be the right steps to take towards a more profitable future of the organizations.”

Given their restrictions, the company has tried to work towards making optimum use of the limited funds they received from big corporations. A large tech company provided around hundred pounds only for each participant in an ambassador scheme. But effectively speaking Google’s gesture is not very sustainable in the long run. A lot of the capable women who successfully qualified under this scheme only got hundred pounds which is a meagre amount. However, she is still hopeful that these help participants with networking which can propel them towards success in future. She explains,

“I’d like to be able to extend that ambassador scheme to make it more solid if you like and be able to give those women more financial support so that they can put together perhaps bigger events,

you know? So that matters to me. The membership matters to me because I think if we had money coming in, we could get people together more. Because what I've found is that a lot of the women that are part of the mentorship really enjoy like the conference and then the social thing afterwards. You know, so that you actually get to know people and the networking."

Most of the events and conferences surrounding this theme of diversity practice can be useful for lots of working women, especially those who are easily intimidated in a male dominated environment. While some women can be inherently quite confident and do not need support, for younger women sometimes, being at these events proves life changing. They are encouraged to explore beyond options that they have been familiar with all their lives, she explains.

She goes onto say that right from the start, diversity work is extremely laborious and seldom as rewarding as one would hope it to be. In her words,

"You've got to be quite hard-nosed and probably in being hard-nosed you've also got to accept that you might not, you know, you might get rebuffed sometimes. But you still plough on. So, there does seem to be, you know, some things in there. But, you know, I've also, you know, I've experienced harassment and discrimination within the university sector. Really badly actually."

In her work Ahmad (2017) noticed that many diversity practitioners talked about how they felt that their work was not always fully 'supported'. They needed to be extremely persistent and most often would come across obstacles in the manner of others who would not necessarily have an interest in diversity or equity issues. Interestingly, while institutions harp on the necessity of diversity and equality, most often that kind of thought is not automatic. While on paper, institutionalizing diversity means that the organization has opened up, it in no way means that the institution has actually opened up: the resistance is even clearer and the institution showing signs of immobility. Thus, W urges people to be wary of using the word diversity in a shallow and superficial way. Brandishing around such a loaded word casually often undermines the actual level dedication and hard work necessary for properly incorporating diversity into the work-fold. She is hopeful that organizations like Women in Games are trendsetters that will be able to get organizations inspired on bringing in newer and effective policies to encourage a more diverse work force in different areas within the gaming industry like content development, production, marketing and so on.

(II) Interview with K

K's overall tone in the interview is one that is clearly optimistic. She stated that, in her company, the situation is positive and the organization has come a long way since its onset in terms of promoting diversity. She is very keen to add that Kings was founded on principles of inclusivity and diversity even if they were not explicitly mentioned. Thus, even though the ratio in terms of numbers of women vs men in the work force is still skewed, the scenario is not as grave as in some other organizations like traditional computer games studios or console game studios. She is proud of the fact that at Kings' they set the scene that diversity is not just one thing. ***"A lot of companies are talking about either gender, or in the US, they talk a lot about ethnicity and race, but for us, we try to focus a lot on the intersectionality part and that we think it's all part of a bigger puzzle,"*** she says.

She goes onto to talk about how an institution might incorporate diversity as part of its brand but that could potentially be only a marketing gimmick. She mentions that in the recent years many institutions like Kings for example have taken stock of their policies regarding diversity and have decided to make important changes. She says,

“last year, I was doing more diversity and inclusion and less branding, because that was the year where we had to, kind of, take a hard look at ourselves and realise that we were very tactical, reactive, and values-led, and not properly working with diversity and inclusion. So, we had to change a lot of things last year, and during that time, I was probably focussing 90% of my time on diversity and inclusion.”

For far too long diversity as a term has been used quite regularly and quite loosely without effectively focussing on actual implementation, she says. But she is glad that the scenario is changing. In terms of diversity in sexual orientation, there has been considerably widespread progress in this industry, which is inspiring and signals a brighter future but in terms of number of women working within the industry there is still a long way to go. Ironically good intentions are not always plausible end goals by themselves. She stresses, “Right now, we were just, kind of, doing things because we thought it was a good thing to do and it was the right thing to do and it made sense and we had a passion for it, but we didn’t have an end goal.”

In her interview she says that diversity work should not be about only working towards a set of distinct statistical targets related to gender, race, sexuality etc. If that is the case, she is wary that once checkboxes are ticked about creating a certain kind of image that the company wants to present, then the further work in practicing diversity will not be promoted.

The goal should not just be about achieving target numbers, but to make the office an environment where the employees can feel content, she argues. She insists that the organization at Kings takes steps further than just bringing about diversity. They aim towards making all their employees feel involved with the company, which is why their institution has a fifty percent involvement of women in their clientele. She goes onto say that since the time she has joined Kings which was in 2013 and since King’s started, there has been a marked increase in the number of women playing games (44 percent). At King’s they focus greatly on teamwork and collaborating and each person making small contributions to the team so that everyone can reap the benefits of working in such a healthy and inclusive environment. She goes onto argue that unlike several other big organizations that tend to focus only on certain types of diversity (race and ethnicity in American discourse, gender and women in some others, at King’s they try to look at how these ideas fit into a bigger narrative, as parts of a big puzzle. However, that kind of strategy is not without its pitfalls. Because there is a desire to include everybody in the strategy building, in the spirit of true diversity, there is bound to be differences of opinions that where people disagree on which issues to focus on or the strategies to employ.

In her interview she provides a powerful example of how sometimes diversity practitioners are perceived as killjoys in the work they try to do. She mentions that a female employee was against the ‘Women at King’ network because she felt it portrayed her and other women as victims rather than being empowered. While she was of this opinion, there were others who were happy that there was a separate network for women because it gave them a space to explore and engage with their desires from the company. Because she believes that diversity is a goal that requires constant working towards, she hopes that these smaller sub networks will become such an integral part of the collective psyche that there will no longer be a need to have different viewpoints on how much to stress on what type of diversity be it gender/ race/ ethnicity/ socio-economic status/ culture/ and so on. But that is still a while away so for now as an organization they try to engage as much as possible with qualitative and quantitative data to make sure they have a comprehensive data set to reflect the ongoing diversity work and the results it produces.

Diversity practice however does come with its own set of difficulties. She admits that the data collected can sometimes be overwhelming especially since it ranges from a variety of manners like a

chat in the kitchen to focus groups, surveys, questionnaires, interviews and an inclusion index, that for example doesn't just show how many people of colour were promoted in a year but actually what each employee had to say about how they feel working at King. In her view, actual narrative accounts of the employees where they can freely express their feelings about working in the organization, can be a potentially solid means of achieving diversity.

(III) Interview with M

M was somewhat sceptical of the concept of diversity. Notions of diversity can very easily be written off as being lofty ideals that are best left just discussed in theory but with very little practical implementation. He warns that in many institutions and clubs which he knows of, diversity works starts with board meetings and sadly finishes there itself. Meetings are regularly held to go over strategies and what is being planned and after three weeks it is back to the same discussion and starting over again.

“So that’s what I’m very wary of right now: not to crazy grow big or even claim in interviews that we’re going to be the biggest thing ever. So one thing I obviously know is the ultimate aim is to close it down because we won’t need one, and the same with Women in Games and any of these diversity groups [?], so that should be your ultimate goal, that you won’t need these sorts of things. It’s in between where you build and where you get to make a difference, is the bonus which I’m hoping for”, he says.

In other words, he wants diversity practice to become such an integral and intrinsic part of an institution that there will cease to be a separate conscious demand for it. He reflects Ahmad's (2017) experiences of working as a diversity practitioner when she realized that when institutions appoint external diversity practitioners, like BAME in this case, it reflects a positive step towards transforming their institutions into a more welcoming for all organization. In his opinion, to properly embed diversity into the working flow within an institution requires a great deal of focus on communication. Institutionally the work involves the gradual refinement of systems for percolating information down to all those employed by the organization. Often just one method is not enough, and organizations need multiple communication strategies to get through to a diverse group of people.

He is of the opinion that besides having conferences and group networking events, the thing that works most effectively is diversity as encouraged through mentors. Thus, introducing real life role models of colour, different gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity can encourage younger people from diverse backgrounds to consider career options in these sectors. Most often even today, when one thinks of the gaming industry people still think 'white male' and that notion needs to be nullified. He is aware that in such instances data collection can be difficult, because it is hard to monitor if the reason someone is working in the gaming industry today is actually because of a speech she heard several years ago but over the years such a strategy of introducing real life role models could help younger aspirants to identify with and better affiliate themselves with the gaming industry. Thus, mentoring schemes can prove to be extremely helpful in the long run. He wants the concept of diversity to be as inclusive as possible, to the extent that he would have preferred BAME (Black Asian Ethnic Minority) to be named Ethnic Minorities Diversity Group to highlight their widespread outreach. Going forward from just mentoring he discusses their long term plan : ***“we are already looking at phase two of a mentoring scheme also where we’ll create, we’ll include diversity, and then, you know, almost the ultimate goal should be everybody, just mentoring everybody in the industry. I think there are other people probably who do that anyway. But yes, again, where we see we should collaborate, we absolutely do, but there are... there are areas***

where it's just very, very different issues which both need to tackle separately." This way, diversity ceases to be associated with specific kinds of bodies. It becomes about everyone.

Conclusions

The data collected through the interviews with diversity practitioners showed that almost all big organizations, at least on paper declare their allegiance to continuing to promote diversity. The speakers at Women in Games and BAME are advocating from an external point of view so they are in a position to be more critical of the work being carried out. However, at Kings, she is currently a part of the system and provides a realistic but inspiring and hopeful picture. There is no organization that is against at least in theory a desire to incorporate practices of diversity within their organizations. All the interviews said that the focus should be on how to maintain a diverse workforce after the initial influx. In spite of diversity initiatives undertaken regularly and funds set aside, there has not been a striking rise in the number of people from different genders, socio economic groups, age groups, racial and ethnic groups within the work force. The process is long and arduous. But having regular conferences where institutions can get to know of what is happening in other organizations is a great starting point. Instead of just focussing on big words and lofty narratives, institutions should focus more on reaching out to diverse youth and providing them support to enhance their interest in the gaming industry. That said, the existing trend of pushing forth only a youth driven initiative isn't fulfilling in the long run. People who have been part of the work force for extended periods of time, especially mothers, need to be supported and appreciated. Only through introducing better work life balance, providing proper support systems, organizing regular conferences, bringing in motivational speakers, constantly working through the numerous obstacles in the existing system, can a collective consciousness around the notion of diversity be raised. Without a multipronged approach involving employees of the organization, diversity practice will never be a rewarding endeavour.