

## **Silicon Sisters Interactive Case Study (LIGHT)**

### **Launch of the company:**

Brenda Bailey Gershkovitch knew intuitively that gaming developers in her industry were largely missing the mark with women. But what she came to realize prior to launching her company, Silicon Sisters Interactive, was just how much potential there was in targeting and delivering successfully gaming products to different female segments. Bailey Gershkovitch, together with Kirsten Forbes, both industry veterans with a combined 18 years of hands-on experience, launched Silicon Sisters Interactive, Canada's first female owned and run video game studio in August 2010. The company, based in Vancouver BC, has a global focus, and is committed to developing high quality, inspirational games with a decidedly female focus: games made by women and girls, for women and girls.

### **Background on founders:**

Brenda Bailey Gershkovitch, CEO of Silicon Sisters Interactive, was the former COO of Deep Fried Entertainment, a gaming studio in Vancouver. Bailer Gershkovitch focuses on the business side of the company. While at Deep Fried Entertainment, she worked on MLB Superstars for the Nintendo Wii. Shadow Play, a Wii game involving creativity and problem solving, Full Auto 2: Battlelines, a car racing game on the PSP, and Fantasy All-Stars, an interactive Baseball game on the DS. Prior to entering the gaming industry in 2005, she worked in the non-profit sector. Currently she sits on the Board of Directors of GDC Canada (Game Developers Conference Canada). She is also Chairs Women in Games International, Vancouver Chapter.

Kristen Forbes, COO of Silicon Sisters Interactive, was previously an Executive Producer at Radical Entertainment. Forbes focuses on the production side of Silicon Sisters. While at Radical Entertainment she worked on Prototype, Sony PS3, and Xbox 360 in addition to Crash Mind Over Mutant, Crash of the Titans, Scarface, Incredible Hulk, Simpsons Hit & Run and Simpsons Road Rage.

Brenda Brathwaite is an independent consultant, and noted game designer. She oversees work by female designers for the company.

The goal of Silicon Sisters Interactive is to have a core studio in Vancouver with a web of remote developers working for the company worldwide.

### **Research supporting the potential of targeting the female gaming segment:**

Silicon Sisters has considered decades of academic research about how women and girls game. This research, together with what Bailey Gershkovitch and Forbes intuitively knew about their industry and its failure to connect with women, became the impetus for launching their company.

“We have been able to make some strong linkages with researchers in the game studies movement and access some of the literature and studies. We will use their findings to inform our design decisions,” said Bailey Gershkovitch.

Carrie Heeter, Professor of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media Creative Director, Virtual University Design and Technology, Michigan State University has studied extensively how to make gaming more compelling for girls. In a study of grade 5 and 8 girls and boy gamers, participants were tasked to design a game about aliens that include anything they

wanted. Boys built games very similar to what the market already offered in terms of first-person shooter games with violent goals and the usual structure of achieving an objective and then offering the player a break or pause before the next conquest. Girls built games that had never been done before. They were very unique, very social, very collaborative, but also competitive. They also included humour.

Elisabeth Hayes, professor with the University of Wisconsin Games, Learning and Society Research Group acknowledges girls are not technophobic; they do play games and in fact surpass boys in some uses of computer technology such as blogging.

David Dennis, Microsoft's Xbox 360 spokesperson, and industry veteran notes, "Certainly social networking functionality like Twitter and Facebook appeal to a female audience." Studies have found in general, most social networks have more female users than male, including Twitter (about 59% female) and Facebook (about 57% female). These statistics support the potential for social gaming utilizing social networks when designing games for females.

Since developers and animators tend to work on games that they would like to play, and since few women have been traditionally involved in developing video games, the industry has tended to design games that appeal to the developers demographic: young and male. This leaves a gap in games for women. For the most part the female market has been ignored, or more recently acknowledged through shallow stereotypical gestures to make traditional male targeted games appealing on a superficial level. The overall lack of quality in games produced for this target market, had a trickle down effect of fewer women playing games. However, that appears to be changing as the industry gets a transformative understanding of the female audience and its potential.

### **Evolution of an industry:**

For many years the traditional view of gaming conjured up images of adolescent boys in basements with computer game consoles in pursuit of fast-paced action heroes and unattainable women. But the industry was fundamentally transformed with the entrance of the Nintendo Wii in 2006. Aimed squarely at the CHO (Chief Household Officer), known as Mom, Nintendo did what most gaming companies dared not do – develop and market a product to an entirely new audience, one traditionally pretty skeptical of the category.

Billed as a social gaming experience, Wii combined motion-sensing technology in a remote control and on-screen interactivity. It was simple, affordable and had broad appeal. It broke down the perceived barriers to gaming: the perception of being antisocial, intimidating and often violent. Wii was actively promoted through experiential marketing set up in places such as malls and recreation centers, to get people of all ages, but particularly women, to try it. The Wii was the first major shift that really opened up the gaming market to women.

The second shift was the evolution of the internet to mobile platforms. The iPhone and iPad, and products like them have opened up another venue for gaming and interaction. Gaming can now involve more than interaction with just computers and gaming consoles. This appeals to the female target.

But the third trend is possibly the most transforming, and that is the evolution of interactivity through the internet on social media platforms. The notion of interactivity, group contribution, collaboration and competition are all aspects of social media. Games such as Farmville on social-networking sites like Facebook have opened up video games to whole new audiences who

previously shunned computer and console gaming. It is this potential for massive exposure and growth via social media that holds much promise for the growth of gaming to new markets.

In essence, it is now easier to bring new gamers, including women, into the hobby.

#### **Silicon Sisters Interactive funding:**

Negotiations with a venture capitalist major funding partner are currently under way. Silicon Sisters has also been selected to receive Canada Media Fund investment as well. Funding will be used to build up their studio internally and to market the business.

#### **Industry competitive analysis**

Back in 2006 Nintendo realized there was a problem in the gaming industry. The number of people playing was decreasing and the only way to expand the market was to reach more people who weren't playing. That is why they launched the Wii. This stagnant growth in the traditional core segment continues to plague the industry.

According to Bailey Gershkovitch, successful traditional video games are becoming more rare and more expensive to build as the core gamer market shrinks. "That product is going to be more and more difficult to deliver. It is so incredibly competitive right now," she said. "It is also very risky to be building in that segment and honestly, I am happy to moving away from it."

There are some industry players trying to satisfy the female gaming segment, however Bailey Gershkovitch dismisses much of their efforts as superficial or failing to truly hit the mark on a deep level. *Popcap Games* based in Seattle, WA and California based *EA (Electronic Arts)* have brought out games that target women such as *Bejeweled* and *Peggle*. Applications are largely in the casual gaming category. In the core gaming market, *Her Interactive* has developed things such as *Nancy Drew* games. Bailey Gershkovitch notes a game called *Sorority Life*, made by *Playdom*, pits women against each other competing for status, shoes and guys. "It was essentially a Mafia game that had been pinkified and put to market in 8 weeks," notes Bailey Gershkovitch. "There are lots of small studios where the guys know the potential of the market, but they are often making assumptions about the target, and not hitting the mark. Our biggest competitors will be the ones that come after we've launched our products", say Bailey Gershkovitch. "We'll be looking in the rear-view mirror."

#### **Projects under development:**

The company will focus initially on the "Casual gaming" segment, rather than the traditional core console game market. Casual gaming refers to games that can be played online, and on a variety of platforms such as computers, smart phones and tablets. Research has shown that the casual segment has the most growth potential for female gamers.

Gaming is about living your fantasy. Male fantasies are often based around conquest, speed, agility, cars and guns. Silicon Sisters is interested in what fantasies look like from a female point of view. They suspect this might include fantasies around social engineering, being negotiation, interactions, mystery, problem solving and intrigue.

Their first two projects are currently under development. They will be casual games for the iPhone, iPad, android system and PC. The company is also looking at handheld games in the future.

“The video game industry is experiencing a rebirth of sorts,” says Forbes. “PC online gaming is up, social networking has become pervasive, and mobile platforms are ubiquitous. Women are adopting games on these platforms in droves. It’s time to get serious about delivering quality games into this burgeoning market. There’s no desire at Silicon Sisters to exclude males. There’s just a desire to explicitly include females,” she notes.

One project slated to release February 2011 is called Case Worker Kate. A game for the iPhone, Android and PC, it is based on the social perils of surviving high school. Kate is a new social worker at the high school and she needs to get to know the students, their issues, real life challenges, peer pressure issues, family and friend conflict and alliances as well as social issues students are negotiating such as alcohol and drugs. Kate is the great-great grand daughter of Katherine the Great and has certain magical powers, which can be used, but with consequences. Kate’s job is to help her students find resources. She uses various social tools such as personality quizzes to get to know her students. The game taps a sense of “wanting to help” by being social, exploring the human psyche, and understanding others which appeals to girls. Case Worker Kate also ties into real community resources, such as Kids Help Line and Alcoholics Anonymous, Bullying help lines, and links students to these resources in the area where the game is being played in, should the game stir a need to discuss their own personal issues. This social responsibility element is unique, and very in keeping with what marketing research on female consumers has revealed: women are drawn to offerings that have a social responsibility tie in. Giving back and helping is a strong part of their make up. Case Worker Kate is scheduled for a winter 2011 release and will be the subject of an editorial feature in an upcoming issue of Wired Magazine.

Future game releases will be for Apple, Android and the PC casual gaming market. In 2013 Silicon Sisters will have a game for Microsoft Connect virtual game, an interactive game like Wii but with no controller.

“The right mechanics wrapped in the right themes on the right platforms at the right price,” Forbes concluded, “That’s where Silicon Sisters is going.”

### **Target market**

#### Demographic:

The demographic target market for games developed by Silicon Sisters Interactive will vary according to the game. The target for the initial offering, Case Worker Kate, will be young girls ages 12-24yrs, with a primary focus on the 14-18yrs core teen market. Secondary targets will be influencers in the targets life, such as Moms 35-55yrs, educators and social workers.

#### Geographic:

Silicon Sisters will target segments in North America (both Canada and the US), and the UK, as well as the Dutch, French, English, Italian, German and Spanish speaking European markets. They also want to target specific regions in Japan and Korea and they are also eying Latin America as a developing region with lots of future potential.

#### Psychographic:

The psychographic values and beliefs of their target market will vary by segment and gaming product. The target for the initial offering, Case Worker Kate, will be an audience that values and cares about others, shows care and empathy, is intrigued by human interaction, enjoys investigation, and ultimately want to help others in this world. However, wrapped in this package is an individual with a desire to compete and achieve.

Behavioural:

Initially Silicon Sisters will focus on casual gaming, which will include those who have access to online through various devices such as smart phones and tablets. Specific usage behaviour will vary depending on gaming product. Both existing female gamers and those new to gaming are potential targets. Light, moderate and heavy users will further define their segment breakdown.

**The power of the female consumer:**

Mindshare/Ogilvy & Mather research indicates that women account for 85% of all consumer purchases. Women influence 61% of all consumer electronics purchases and 66% of PC purchases. US women spend more than \$5 trillion annually on consumer goods and services. 22% shop online at least once a day.

Charleson Communications, a Vancouver based marketing consulting firm that has worked extensively gaining insights about the female market and how to market successfully to them, contributed the following insights:

- Women love technology that simplifies their life, they don't just love technology. Technology with purpose is key. This might involve technology to bring friends and family together, help to solve a problem, gain insights, or help her to improve herself.
- Keep applications, set up and learning simple. Give her what she wants, not just what you can design or think she needs. It's not about dumbing things down. It's about applications being intuitive and not delivering an overwhelming number of bells and whistles if they're not needed. Often keeping things simple is really about respecting her time and not causing frustration.
- Women crave an escape. And gaming can be the ultimate fantasy escape. Just make sure it's her fantasy and not his.
- Aesthetics, design and service are important. Women notice details. Clean and simple is best. Exceptional service will also make an impression.
- Women talk in concentric circles of influence. This can be the source of your best or your worst advertising, and you have little control once the word is out, so make sure you give them something positive to talk about. Game marketers need to harness the power of "word of mouth, mouse and mobile" utilizing experiential marketing and product trial.
- Social responsibility and having a social strategy is very important. Good corporate citizenship matters. This cuts through all age groups. However social responsibility needs to be authentic and not applied like philanthropic lipstick at the end. Honesty matters too.
- Relationship building and storytelling are important to women. They value relationships and the camaraderie and company of those like them. This network can be very powerful and hold tremendous word of mouth opportunities.
- Women and men reach a buying decision in different ways. For women decision-making is informed and deliberate. They tend to gather research from a number of sources – friends, experts, the internet, magazines and the media. Men tend to eliminate unnecessary data to reach an objective decision. It's not about which method is better, it's about respecting the differences.
- Women will notice the consistency or lack thereof in your marketing mix. All communications must be integrated.

**The marketing challenge:**

The overall marketing challenge facing Silicon Sisters Interactive is how to market their products to the target market and how best position the company to create further awareness of their approach to gaming. They want to be recognized in their industry as the premiere providers of

games for the female target segment. Their immediate goal is to find creative and innovative ways to promote and gain a large share of the young female gaming market with their recent launch of Case Worker Kate. The marketing budget is \$30,000 CND for all territories. Historically, video games have been successfully marketed through retail partnerships. Silicon Sisters is bringing the games to market digitally, and without a retail partner. Most developers market using online magazines and video game blogs. However, these resources are primarily read by male video game consumers.

It is important to them to build a brand associated with authenticity in the category, not just pinkifying games for girls, as they view some of the early adopters in their industry have done. Their target is worldwide – North America, parts of Europe, Asia and South America. Based on what you now know about the gaming industry, the market potential for the female gaming segment, and insights on marketing to women, what creative marketing and promotions recommendations would you make to Bailey Gershkovitch and Forbes? How would you go about positioning Silicon Sisters to authentically own the female gaming space?

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