Behind the scenes - Women in CG at SIGGRAPH

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Over the last 43 years SIGGRAPH in North America, the biggest ACM conference on computer graphics and interactive techniques has grown and evolved, and so has the voices of women in this ever-changing field. The influence of women working in the CG industry and academia is having a true impact. However, the conversation on this at the SIGGRAPH conference only really started 3 years ago with a panel session aptly called, “Women in CG”.

The team behind “Women in CG” is the ACM SIGGRAPH International Resources Committee (IRC), who represent the global outreach for ACM SIGGRAPH; working year-round facilitating worldwide collaboration within the ACM SIGGRAPH community and organising CG-related regional meetings that cover all continents during the SIGGRAPH conference.

The spark of this happened in 2014 during our regular “CG in Europe” session when our European lead organiser, Dolly Omisore, suggested we highlight this very hot topic of women and CG. In 2014, we came up with our first panel discussion on female empowerment in CG called, “Grrl Power”. That is how the discussion for Women in CG began.

A mix of professionals (men and women) from animation and VFX industry were part of the panel sparking very interesting, real conversation on professional challenges faced by women: work-life balance, the meaning of female power and above all, the need for everyone to work together to encourage women in CG, and technology in general. This conversational approach to our discussion topic was a phenomenal success. The high number of attendees and engagement was a sign that then it was the perfect time to bring this discussion to SIGGRAPH. By having an open space for this discussion, we make an impact in the ACM SIGGRAPH community and even beyond!

With that in mind, we have established “Women in CG” as a recurring event at the SIGGRAPH conference with a global outlook. In 2015, our second event, “Women in CG - Perspectives” focused on multiculturalism and had a professionally diverse group of women. The conversation ranged from mentoring, wage gap, to family life and how women had to work twice as hard to prove their capabilities. A transcription of the “Women in CG - Perspectives” can be found at the SIGGRAPH website:

This year, IRC has formed a sub-committee to bring “Women in CG” to SIGGRAPH at Anaheim. The group is comprised of Suyin Wong (Asia), Aruquia Peixoto (Latin America), and Jessica Sommerville (Australasia) and led by Diana Arellano (IRC Chair). As we had a good conversation on challenges faced in our 2015 panel discussion, this year our focus was on “50-50”: a positive perspective on opportunities, paths and initiatives being taken to achieve this goal. Our goal is to inspire the younger generation of artists and technologists who are shaping their way in this field and to draw on SIGGRAPH professionals to explain
how SIGGRAPH and ACM can be of help in achieving a successful career, especially from a personal point of view.

As in the previous year, the panel was very diverse. From a very young professional initiating her career to a senior producer, we counted with the following panelists:

- Gracie Arenas Strittmatter, SIGGRAPH 2013 Student Volunteer Program Chair, Senior Technical Artist at BioWare, a division of Electronic Arts (EA), in Austin, Texas, with 8 years of experience in the gaming industry.
- Denise Quesnel, SIGGRAPH 2016/17 VR Village Chair, Director of Research at Sawmill, a studio/artists collective in Vancouver specialized in motion capture with immersive technology, and graduate student at Simon Fraser University’s School of Interactive Arts and Technology.
- Jessica Sommerville, ACM SIGGRAPH IRC member and modeler at Animal Logic in Sydney, Australia).
- Jinko Gotoh, producer and consultant for the animation industry with more than 25 years of experience, and Secretary of Women in Animation, an organization dedicated to advancing women in the field of animation (http://womeninanimation.org/).

The panel session was so successful that it drew a crowd of more than 100 people for the one hour, into a room that is only able to sit 80 people.

The mix of panelists from industry and academia infused their conversations with intellectual and personal ideas, experiences and even aspirations. For a start, Gracie Arenas Strittmatter noted that women in general are interested in games with almost 50% of gamers being women. However, there are few female professionals in the game industry, especially in technical roles. Denise Quesnel cited the VR expert Jackie Morie, who noticed the same decline in the numbers of women in VR. However, she was optimistic and pointed out the growing number of women behind SIGGRAPH and the VR Village. Jessica Sommerville brought up interesting statistics from her company, Animal Logic, that seem to support the same perception of women in game, VR or production domains, “Only 20% of creative roles in animation are occupied by women. In Animal Logic 70% to 30% are women, the majority of this percentage can be found in the production department and between the creative and technical department they range between 10% to 30.”

One of the reasons could be due to the difficulties faced when trying to break into an industry that is mostly male-dominated. The panelists shared some of their thoughts in this and how they’ve managed to achieve their own career success. Here are some of them: “Have a dream and be passionate about the field” (Jinko Gotoh), “Choose one or two things to have a focus and do a good work, and think in the big picture” (Denise Quesnel), “Do not be afraid to ask” (Diana Arellano), “[Have] a support network and tell them what are your goals, so they can support you better” (Gracie Arenas Strittmatter).

In fields like computer graphics, it can be hard to constantly maintain the confidence needed to build our successful career. In the end, Rome was not built in a day. Gracie and Jessica both mentioned that they were able to persevere because of the encouragement from their mentors. They encouraged the audience not to be afraid of finding a mentor, either female or
male, to help them get ahead and provide constructive feedback on their work. Mentors can come from anywhere, including people met at SIGGRAPH. When women start to put themselves forward, they will hold the torch and be an inspiration for more women to gain the confidence to pursue their dreams.

One recurring topic every year is work-life balance. We were fortunate to have Gracie sharing her own insights as a new mom and what it meant for her to be a working mother. In order to fulfill her duties in SIGGRAPH this year, she was accompanied by her own mother who was in the audience with her newborn. As there were not many women in her workplace to look up to, Gracie has inadvertently become the new role model to some of us for advice on juggling work, parenting, baby, and family.

Now, more than ever, is the time to be involved in initiatives to foster diversity. Having women from the CG industry giving talks at schools, or getting involved with events like code.org makes it easier for young females to become inspired to study and have careers in the computer graphics field.

Women in Animation, in particular, is helping to encourage women to pursue successful careers in animation. Jinko Ito also mentioned the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, as a great source of research and information on the status of women in the industry. Other groups that are striving for diversity and women representation are ACM-W, VES (Visual Effects Society), Girls who Code, Anita Borg Institute, among others.

Thanks to the support of SIGGRAPH and the SCOOP team led by Scott Lang, we were honored to have our session live-streamed and recorded. This also opened the space for further discussions bringing other perspective into the conversation. On a positive note, some of the comments gave examples of women’s representation both in front of the screen ("The Last of Us" […] “One of the best games of all time with a teenage female lead”) and off-screen (“I work with some amazing and talented female co-workers everyday and they are fun to be around […]”).

Others pointed out the benefits of mentorship for young female artists, the importance of having women in the VFX industry, and even advice: the fact that given the size of the industry, “you will always run into bigots” (vfxforge, YouTube commenter). As expected from Youtube, there were some unsavory remarks, however this only reinforces the need to further talk about women in CG. To experience the full discussion, watch it on the ACM SIGGRAPH Youtube channel at the link below:
https://youtu.be/l3S247Gulbg

Where are we heading next?
For sure we will continue the conversation and discussing the topic from all angles until we get to the essence of this broad topic!

Our next venture will be SIGGRAPH Asia 2016, to be celebrated in Macao at The Venetian Macao from 5 – 8 December 2016 (https://sa2016.siggraph.org/en/), followed by SIGGRAPH 2017, in Los Angeles from 30 July - 3 August 2017.
For more information about the ACM SIGGRAPH International Resources Committee and the volunteer opportunities we offer, take a look at http://s2017.siggraph.org/content/international-resources