

FEATURE

# Uncovering The Real History Of The Women Who Pioneered Video Games

Women in game development have often been overlooked, and Mary Kenney wants to change that

By Isaiah Colbert Yesterday 4:30PM | Comments (24) | Alerts



Mary Kenney found inspiration while writing *Gamer Girls* and hopes current and future female game developers will as well.

Image: Salini Perera / Mary Kenney / Kotaku



It's a fact: The women who helped shape the video game industry often go unacknowledged, hidden from history by popular narratives and male-centric scholarship. Mary Kenney, a narrative writer and game designer at Insomniac



Games, aims to shed light on some of those overlooked pioneers by highlighting key women who've made major contributions to the industry in her upcoming book, [\*Gamer Girls: 25 Women Who Built the Video Game Industry\*](#).

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In *Gamer Girls*, Kenney profiles 25 influential women dating all the way back to 1960 who wrote, designed, programmed, and composed for video games. Consider [Mabel Addis Mergardt](#), the first female game designer, who designed the text-based strategy game [\*The Sumerian Game\*](#); [Yoko Shimomura](#), the composer of *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior*, all of the *Kingdom Hearts* games, and *Final Fantasy XV*; and [Muriel Tramis](#), the first Black female video game designer, who co-created the puzzle-adventure game [Gobliiins](#).

“First, [*Gamer Girls*] is a work of education. This is our actual history versus our perceived history. And second, it’s a celebration that I hope will really encourage young women who want to be in games to enter the space,” Kenney told *Kotaku*.

*Gamer Girls* began when Kenney had a conversation with her agent [Eric Smith](#). Kenney and Smith had assumed there was more than [one book profiling women](#) in the gaming industry, but when they discovered there weren’t, she decided that she should write one herself.

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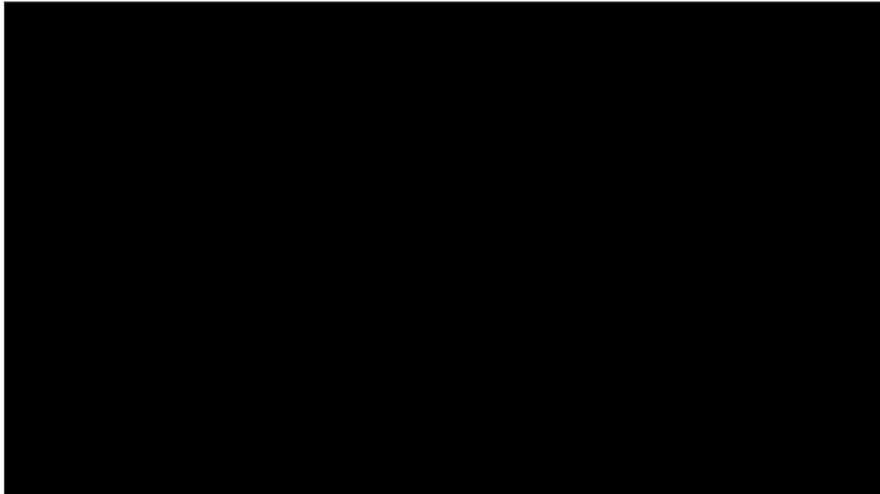
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“With any tech industry that’s constantly disrupting and restarting itself and adapting new things, sometimes I think we can forget our own history,” Kenney said. “Hitting pause and looking at where we came from makes us better game devs and better people to push for greater diversity and advocacy going forward because we’ll know where we came from, the missteps we took in the past that we don’t want to

repeat, and the successes we had.”

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Kenney decided to write *Gamer Girls* as a young adult book so it could be informative and approachable for both people already in the industry and for young women hoping to break into the space. Along with colorful illustrations by [Salini Perera](#), Kenney made *Gamer Girls* approachable for readers outside of the industry by defining insider jargon like “vertical slice” and “game engine” throughout.



A girl plays *The Sumerian Game* in a 1968 photograph (left). It was created in 1964 by Mabel Addis, seen in a 1984 newspaper clipping (right). Image: [gamehistory.org / acriticalhit.com](http://gamehistory.org/acriticalhit.com)

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Although many of the women in the game industry started their journeys differently, Kenney said one common trait amongst them was their determination to keep going and to succeed in their field. Whether in the face of harassment or misogyny, or the creative pressures that come with any job where you're making something, Kenney said the women she profiled remained passionate throughout the ups and downs.

"I think that game devs of any age can look at [*Gamer Girls*] and it can give them ideas on what they want to do next, what interests them, and what excites them," she said. As she wrote *Gamer Girls*, Kenney herself drew inspiration from some of the writers she interviewed, who shared about what keeps them excited and how they pull themselves out of creative ruts.

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Although this will be Kenney's first book, she is no stranger to writing. Kenney was a journalist before becoming a game developer at Insomniac and Telltale, generating bylines as a reporting fellow at *The New York Times* and as a weekend editor here at *Kotaku*.

Another goal Kenney wanted to achieve with writing *Gamer Girls* was to credit women in the industry for their achievements which have often been overlooked or omitted.

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Kazuko Shibuya drew much of the art in early *Final Fantasy* games, including the first NES game's iconic "bridge"

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screen. Screenshot: Square Enix / Kotaku

“[Kazuko Shibuya](#), who worked on *Final Fantasy* early on, wasn’t credited on the game at all, even though she had done all of the art on it,” Kenney said. “Even the games that we know and love didn’t always credit all the people who actually made them. So correcting that a little bit feels like a good first step.”

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One of the hardest parts for Kenney was not finding the women she would include in her book, but deciding on which 25 she would profile.

“I went into this book somewhat ignorantly thinking that the list of women who were working in games in the ‘60s ‘70s ‘80s, and even early ‘90s, would be pretty short,” Kenney said. Once she had assembled her list of women in game development, she had more than 150 names.

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“There were a lot more women working in the space that never really got a highlight,” she said, “and realizing that was exciting.”

For the women that Kenney couldn’t interview, like the late [Danielle Bunten Berry](#), who worked on groundbreaking games like [M.U.L.E.](#) and [Modem Wars](#), Kenney drew from previous interviews and written materials to write profiles on them.

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Kenney noted that the idea of the auteur—a “lone genius” who guides art in media—is a misguided idea that we as a society love, and that is not unique to video games. Although a select few individuals are often propped up as the spokespersons for a game, she asserted that the finished product of a video game is thanks to the collective contributions of the diverse people behind it.

“One of the bigger conversations that we’re having right now, thankfully, is when women are getting promoted and hired, it tends to be white women like me,” Kenney said. “We’re not doing a great job of advocating for BIPOC women and for nonbinary individuals. We’re limiting our diversity to cis white women, [which] in some ways kind of feels like an easy way out [toward achieving] inclusion. And I think we could be better.”

Yoko Shimomura composed most of the iconic soundtrack to Capcom’s smash-hit *Street Fighter II*. [Capcom / TRP Video Game Vinyl Rips \(YouTube\)](#)

According to Kenney, two of the (many) steps the game industry needs to take to make game development more inclusive are to listen to non-white voices about issues of inclusivity in game development and to overhaul hiring processes to invite more people into the space and to keep people within the space if they wish to stay.

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“I tried to address [advocacy] as much as I could in the book and the different challenges that women of color face versus white women, said Kenney. “It’s something that I hope that the industry continues to push for going forward.”

For women already in the game development industry, Kenney said it feels like every day is nothing but bad news. Whether it’s harassment, misogyny, or being talked over, being a woman in the industry can be exhausting and demoralizing. Kenney’s hope with *Gamer Girls* is to remind people that there is more to the games industry than its worst parts.

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“I hope that in reading it, anyone who is feeling tired or demoralized, gets that uplifting feeling of, ‘Oh, actually, I could belong here’ and ‘I could enjoy myself here,’” Kenney said. “It’s not just about surviving the industry, it’s ‘I can be happy here. That’s the dream.’”

*Gamer Girls: 25 Women Who Built the Video Game Industry* comes out on May 24, 2022.

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