

# “Be Prepared” to Make Video Games

Ashley Zeldin | Dec. 31st, 2013

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Girl Scouts should always “be prepared.” And through a pilot patch program, the Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles will learn how to make video games and earn a Video Game Design patch so they will be prepared for a future in STEM.

First announced in April, the Video Game Design patch is an initiative lead by Women in Games International in partnership with E-Line Media, publisher of game-based learning products that engage, educate, and empower.

Nine-to-fourteen-year-old Juniors and Cadettes will begin using Gamestar Mechanic to design video games in workshops led by local game developers starting in January, but Girl Scouts of all ages who visited the STEM area at Girltopia on November 9 got an advance chance to test Gamestar Mechanic.

Girltopia, the biannual GSGLA gathering at the Los Angeles Convention Center, attracted more than 12,000 Girl Scouts and their guardians—and at times it appeared most of them were gathered around two computers running Gamestar Mechanic.

E-Line Media learning content producer Katya Hott flew in from New York to (wo)man the booth alongside WIGI VP Amy Allison and volunteers, localization producer Seher Basak, Game Mentor Online coordinator Christine Farmer, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment associate producer Victoria Setian and me, Ashley Zeldin, an independent game developer.

“Volunteering at WIGI’s Girltopia booth was an inspiring experience, and it reaffirmed that young ladies are not only interested in playing video games but also in creating their own as well,” said Christine, who is learning game

development herself by taking classes at Santa Monica College. “It seemed like second-nature to them. I could clearly see that they were in flow with the E-Line software.”

“So many girls came up to us, explaining that they’ve always wanted to make their own games, and they can’t wait to earn a patch for their efforts,” Katya added. And with Gamestar Mechanic, they’re making it happen.

Moments after creating her own level, a Brownie from Inglewood demonstrated Gamestar Mechanic patiently to another member of her troop, echoing Katya’s walkthrough. “What does a game need? An avatar!” she prompted while pointing to the “avatar” tab on the UI panel.

Though disappointed to learn she wouldn’t yet be eligible to earn the patch, the Brownie was heartened by her troop leader reminding her she’d be a Junior soon enough. Sensing the potential interest amongst her Girl Scouts, her troop leader inquired about running a session for Juniors and Cadettes in the area.

Meanwhile, a newly-minted Cadette from the San Fernando Valley explained the rationale behind her level, which evoked Chip’s Challenge with an assortment of locked rooms full of items and strategically placed keys in close proximity to enemies.

“If it’s too easy, you’ll solve it too quickly and won’t want to play again,” the precocious Cadette rationalized as her mother and I studied her level behind her, the timer ticking. “It has to be a challenge—and get harder as you go.”

I exchanged a bemused glance with her mother and informed her of a nearby session in February. The sixth-grader’s eyes widened with excitement. “You’re already signed up,” her mother quipped.

Christine also observed positive responses to the program from parents. “Parents were very excited to hear that the patch workshop would be available in the near

future, and were supportive of their daughters' participation," she noted.

Geared towards eight-to-fourteen-year-olds, Gamestar Mechanic teaches systems and critical thinking, iterative design, creativity and collaboration—skills applicable in game development and across many other STEM disciplines. A 2011 IndieCade finalist and 2011 International Serious Play Awards gold medal winner, Gamestar Mechanic was created by Gamelab and the Academic Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Lab with support from the MacArthur Foundation, and is currently developed by E-Line Media and the Institute of Play. Gamestar Mechanic has been used to create well over 350,000 games in more than 100 countries. Kids build, publish, play and share games in a safe space.

“It seemed like second-nature to them,” Christine said. “I could clearly see that they were in flow with the [program].”

Participants in the Video Game Patch program receive a lifetime premium educational pack to continue making games beyond the scope of the workshop. Aside from working with Gamestar Mechanic to create video games, Girl Scouts will learn about STEM and games industry careers.

The Video Game Design patch sessions will supplement STEM education in the Los Angeles council, which serves some 40,000 Girl Scouts. GSGLA is home to award-winning robotics and rocketry teams.

WIGI and GSGLA hope the Girl Scouts of the USA will adopt a video-game-design-specific badge nationwide to complement game-related badges already offered. The Making Games badge challenges Brownies to create analogue games. “Dig into video game development” is one of the suggested activities for Juniors to earn the Entertainment Technology badge, which is actually more focused on physics; think rollercoasters and soundwaves. For Seniors, the Game Visionary badge has less to do with tapping into their inner Peter Molyneux than teaching organizational thinking and event planning.

The April announcement came just a month after the Boy Scouts of the USA introduced their Game Design badge, the extension of a two-year exploratory Video Game belt loop and academic pin program for Cub Scouts. Whereas the Boy Scouts' Game Design badge allows for individual development of electronic, sport, tabletop or role-playing games—for which boys analyze elements of games, test modifications to existing games, then design and iterate on their own game—the Girl Scouts' STEM-aligned program deals exclusively with video game development and supports in-session collaboration.

“It's so important to recognize that many girls are gamers and budding game designers, and Girl Scout patches are a great form of recognition,” Katya affirmed.

WIGI and GSGLA anticipate the Video Game Design patch program will inspire other Girl Scout councils nationwide to develop similar programs with support from WIGI chapters in Seattle, San Francisco, Austin, and Chicago. The eventual goal is to expand the Video Game Design program into an official GSUSA badge, with additional requirements for Seniors and Ambassadors to fulfill as well.

The first-ever Video Game Design patch workshop will take place January 11 in Palmdale, followed by sessions January 25 in Long Beach, February 1 in Woodland Hills, February 15 in Santa Clarita and March 8 in Montclair. Session registration is \$10 and must be done in advance on the GSGLA website. Though most sessions are already sold out, more will be added throughout the year. As the program branches to other cities, WIGI will be seeking teaching and administrative volunteers. Contact Amy Allison to get involved.

*Ashley Zeldin (@snidelyhazel) is an independent game developer in Los Angeles. An ardent supporter of women in games, she volunteers with WIGI to lead Video Game Design patch workshops. She quit the Girl Scouts as a Brownie, but if there had been a Video Game Design badge, she totally would've stayed with it.*

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