

SWEDEN'S FEMALE-FORWARD CREATIVE INDUSTRIES



Hailey J. Austin



Abertay
University

Layout design by Faye Stacey
www.fayestacey-illustration.co.uk

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Foreword

In April 2022, my research trip to Stockholm, Sweden was funded by the SGSAH and Scottish Funding Council's Saltire Emerging Researcher Scheme. I spent one month in Stockholm interviewing people about Sweden's Creative Industries and what made them unique. I also got to experience the unique culture surrounding the creative industries first hand. Because of this, I can offer unique insights into Sweden's creative industries, including videogames, comics, fanzines and boardgames, from the outside looking in. This was truly a life-changing experience both personally and professionally. I cannot thank everyone who helped me enough. A special thank you to Dr Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari for being my mentor throughout this project and for inspiring me to think of myself as an artist.



Photo by Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari

SUMMARY

The main findings from this study include:

- Sweden's unique combination of Culture, Education, Infrastructure, and Investment in the creative industries has led to their continued success;
- Though compared to the United Kingdom there is a smaller percentage of women working in the Creative Industries, Sweden's Creative Industries have more women in leadership positions;
- Maternity and paternity leave as well as other forms of social care have contributed to the amount of women staying in Sweden's Creative Industries;
- (Fan)Zines and boardgames are both previous uncredited and integral parts of the Swedish Creative Industries.

INTRODUCTION

Sweden and Stockholm were truly games and comics heaven. I found games everywhere I went, even when I was just walking in the streets. There were interactive museum exhibits that involved digital, physical and tabletop games. Some games studios had interactive digital games on the sides of their buildings to showcase their new games. Almost everyone I interviewed played games regularly, even if they didn't think of themselves as a "gamer".

It was the same with comics. Comics were featured on the sides of buildings, used as part of the curriculum in language courses, available to purchase inside museums as well as plastered on the outside of museums to draw people inside. There were so many shops that sold not just comics, but also fanzines (of a quality and regularity that I hadn't seen in the UK).

While much of the success of Sweden's Creative Industries comes from investment (both companies and governmental) as well as Sweden's progressive maternity and paternity leave, the interviews in this report found that an underrepresented element of success in Sweden's Creative Industries is due to an emphasis on creativity, comics and games as part of the Swedish culture.

This study asked two main questions:

- What makes the Swedish Creative Industries unique?
- How did Sweden's Creative Industries become female-forward?

During my visit, I conducted over 22 interviews in 4 weeks while also visiting games museums to get a better understanding of the culture surrounding Sweden's creative industries. On one of my weekends off, my partner was visiting and we went to the Vasa Museum (Vasa Museet). The museum boasts a fully preserved 17th century ship that sank in Stockholm's harbour in 1628. When we got there, however, it became the perfect example of how comics, videogames and boardgames are deeply entrenched in the Swedish culture.

The museum is huge and not only holds the entirety of the giant ship, but also features comics, videogames and boardgames. As part of the interactive exhibits, there were digital games involving interacting with a recreation of the ship's wheel to traverse digital waters. There was an entire exhibit on the physical boardgames played on the ship, including a well-preserved Swedish

Tables game. Finally, in the gift shop there was a comic titled *Bamse on the Ship Vasa (Bamse och skeppet Vasa)* which showed the beloved Swedish comic bear Bamse exploring the Vasa ship. These elements showed me that the culture in Sweden surrounding the creative industries is deeply entrenched, as I found each of these elements in a historical museum about a war ship.

In Sweden, videogames, comics and games in general are a large part of the culture. People are exposed to them as both creative and professional pursuits from an early age. There has been significant government funding poured into the creative industries from funds that allowed people to buy their own computers, significant financial support for workers in the industry, as well as funded training and education for those entering the Creative Industries.



This report is broken into three main sections, exploring the significance of education, infrastructure and investment on Sweden's Creative Industries including videogames, comics and boardgames. At the end of each section, there is a focus on what makes the industry female-forward. Throughout the report, there are spotlights on participants that I interviewed with snippets of their interviews as well as pull quotes dotted throughout the report. The Videogames section includes an extra section titled "Retention of Foreign Talent" as this was a major topic discussed throughout the interviews with people working in videogames. The Boardgames section is significantly shorter than the other two sections because there is not as much information about the significance of Swedish boardgames companies available in academic journals or online. However, I still touch on how culture, education, infrastructure, and investment make the Swedish boardgame scene unique, as well as how it is also female-forward.

METHOD

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted over a 4-week period with over 25 people in Sweden (mostly Stockholm-based) about their experiences in the Creative Industries (including videogames, boardgames, and comics) and what they believe makes them unique. Participants were recruited online through the Women in Games Discord, LinkedIn and the STHLM Creative Industries webpage. The interviews were analysed in NVIVO and supplemented with desk research.

There is ample data available on Swedish videogames companies. However, there is limited data available for comics, boardgames and other creative industries. Thus, this report will focus on the qualitative data for these industries, and quantitative data mixed with qualitative data for the videogames industries.



SWEDEN'S CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

VIDEOGAMES

Sweden is home to many videogame studios, from internationally acclaimed AAA studios to single person studios. In 2020, there were an estimated 667 game development companies in Sweden, over 100 of which were in Stockholm (Dataspelsbranschen (The Swedish Games Industry), 2021). At the time, these companies had a combined revenue of €3.312 billion. Some of the most notable Swedish games companies include King (creators of *Candy Crush*), Mojang (creators of *Minecraft*), Paradox (creators of *Crusaders Kings*), DICE (creators of *Battlefield*) and Ubisoft (whose Stockholm studio are working on an unannounced IP using their new Ubisoft Scalar technology). However, 314 of the game studios in Sweden in 2020 were solo companies without any employees.

Part of what makes the Swedish Games industry unique is the amount of AAA studios. However, this comes with some problems. Because of the secrecy that comes with working on AAA titles, many people struggle to keep friendships with people working at other AAA companies (Tjerberg 2022). Even though companies are striving to be more sustainable and create a better work life balance, the culture surrounding them has become known as “golden handcuffs” (Tjerberg 2022). In the AAA games industry, people feel like luxurious captives because they are getting paid well compared to other jobs in Sweden so that they feel like they cannot leave (Tjerberg 2022).

SPOTLIGHT



Anna Högberg Jenelius - Founder and CEO at Valiant Game Studio AB

What does your company specialise in?

We make wholesome, meaningful games for underrepresented audiences.

What is the most challenging aspect of being a one-person studio?

Reaching out to people on the marketing side because I have to develop games, consult, market and run everything myself. But, I'm incredibly proud that the studio is still running! I started in 2017 and I'm still here.

What makes Valiant unique?

It's a one-person studio. That's not very common in this industry. I'd also say the focus on wholesome and meaningful games. Why are games always about war and killing and hurting? Can we tell other stories and try to empower other groups of people that aren't usually the heroes of the story?

Trying to make the games industry more inclusive and inviting to new players can feel like a tough challenge, but it's also very rewarding. As indies, we have more freedom than larger companies to express ourselves and be trail blazers, which can be both scary and incredibly thrilling.

This section explores how education, infrastructure and investment have created a unique culture surrounding Sweden's videogames sector. It also discusses how the industry can be seen as female-forward and highlights the unique problem of retaining foreign talent.

Education

Education is a huge factor in the success of the Swedish games industry. Creativity is emphasised throughout primary school and people can study how to make games in trade schools, dedicated games schools and even larger University degrees.

The culture surrounding the creative industries is garnered from a young age. According to Invest Stockholm, *“Creativity, culture and arts are an important part in the elementary school system [...] Something that really sets Sweden apart in the educational space is the system of public arts schools”* (2020, 16). Public art schools are publicly funded schools for children and adolescents. There are 283 arts schools in the 290 municipalities in Sweden, whose classes in art-related fields reach more than 230,000 children each week. The fee each term is only 643 SEK (€64) and the gender breakdown is 65% female and 35% male (Kulturskoleradet). The subsidised fees and availability in most of Sweden allows for more people to learn about creativity and the creative industries from an early age.

The successful development of the Swedish games industry is in part due to 15 educational institutions offering game development programmes (EGDF 2019). Among these are large universities, like Stockholm University, dedicated games schools like Futuregames, and even schools like Forsbergs Skola and Folkhögskola (Vriend 2022; Isaksson 2022). Folkhögskola is a form of adult education unique to Nordic countries that offer

trade school courses, short and part time courses and hobby and art courses that participants take for fun (Vriend 2022).

Skövde is a small town close to Gothenburg. Their university game development course, cheap housing and infrastructure led to an incubator of indie games studios (Jenelius 2022). One indie studio based there is Coffee Stain Studios, which developed the internationally acclaimed game *Goat Simulator* (2014).

Another program for making games is Future Games in Stockholm. The vocational education program focuses on hands-on learning from industry professionals and offers internships at leading game studios (Futuregames). In the 2-year program, students get the opportunity to make 3 games and are placed in a 6-month internship at a games studio (Isaksson 2022).

According to Anne Isaksson, an artist at Ion Game Design, *“FutureGames feels more like they take in people who already know what they’re doing, very talented and educated people, and then just polish them to become a good teammate and introduce them to Swedish and international companies.”*

Some companies are also trying to create further tech and gaming education in Sweden through their products. For example, ImagiLabs create edtech tools for young people, especially pre-teenage girls to get the interested in coding Python (Garfunkel 2022).

SPOTLIGHT



Nadia Garfunkel - Global Head of Partnerships at Imagi

Does your company make hardware or software?

Both. We have software for in-school (web platform and tablet app, imagi Edu) and at-home learning (imagi app on mobile). Kids learn Python through pixel art thanks to our proprietary curriculum and gamification. These connect to a wearable accessory, the imagiCharm, which is our landmark hardware

product that is meant to motivate kids to continue programming and expressing themselves.

What's the gender breakdown of your team?

We have the opposite gender issue of most companies, which is that we have an overrepresentation of women. As of summer 2023, we have two female founders and this likely explains why we attract a lot of women when we have job openings. And this is also

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explained by our gender-inclusivity-in-tech mission. We have had valuable men on the team until recently, and we are eager to bring on more during next hiring rounds/needs, but in general would never discriminate based on gender.

What is your mission?

We aim to build all kids' confidence and competence in tech through coding education, with special attention to girls. To ensure that more young people can pursue interest in STEM, we recently pivoted to focus on schools and teachers where computer science is now more popularly offered.

What's the game scene like in Sweden?

More of my friends work with gamification of apps or at gaming companies than I've ever been around before — so certainly prominent in Stockholm compared to New York City!

What makes your company unique?

We initially designed products for girls, who are famously underrepresented in Tech. Our consumer mobile app *imagi* for example is educational, but it is kind of veiled by gamification, where kids are learning how to code step by step in interactive levels. Paired with our digital social community and our wearable hardware, the experience of coding with *imagi* is very friendly to all pre-teens who like art and sharing; our App Store reviews of kids becoming obsessed speak for themselves!

How important is gender equality in what you produce?

It's the reason why we exist, unfortunately. Inequality and inequity is what we are fighting against. We aim to level the playing field for girls in tech with more creative and competition-free coding education.



Other important educational institutions include *folkhögskola* which are similar to trade schools, but are unique to the Nordic regions. According to one participant, *folkhögskola* were historically created for people in remote areas of Sweden to get a one- or two-year degree irrespective of whether they have finished high school (Vriend, 2022). They also offer short and part time courses and hobby and art courses that participants take for fun (Vriend 2022).

In Sweden, people are encouraged to be creative and learn the importance of creativity from a young age. They also have the chance to learn how to make games in several different settings, whether in trade schools, dedicated games schools, or university degrees. There is also an emphasis on coding education for young people through the development of edtech.

Infrastructure and Investment

Infrastructure like the Kulturhuset (Culture House), games clusters, and support networks like Women in Games alongside the major government and private investments made in the games sector have also contributed to Sweden's flourishing games industry.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Since 1983 the Kulturhuset in Stockholm has been the city's creative hub for cultural experience, education, and production (Invest Stockholm 2020, 13). Having dedicated spaces for cultural exchange, libraries, and theatrical performances has added to the Stockholm's cultural backdrop. This will be further explored in the Comics and Fanzines section.



However, it is not only major cities that have infrastructural support. Different game clusters around Sweden also help people set up companies and educate the industry (Vriend 2022). These include region specific clusters like Arctic Games cluster in the north of Sweden and Sweden Game Arena whose cluster is based in Skövde. These clusters offer support and investment into the games industries across Sweden, with a particular emphasis on indie developers.

Similarly, games networks provide connections across the sector. For example, many of the participants in this project were found through the Women in Games network. Women in Games is an international organisation of activists who believe that getting more women into games and esports should be a national, international and strategic priority. The organisation hosts networking events and encourages members to become ambassadors around the world.

“Since I moved to Sweden, it has been hard to make connections with people in the industry here. But I started going to meet-ups and networking events like with Women in Games and Global Game Jam. That’s how I started meeting people in the industry. They encourage women to go into these careers without feeling strange or out of place.”

- AMBAR TROYA, FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR AND GAME ARTIST



“We have lots of experienced studios and a lot of games clusters who help with indie development. We have a great infrastructure for creating and helping new studios. I’m not going to say it’s easy to find funding now, but it’s a lot better than before. Sweden is a good place if you want to create or develop games.”

- JENNY OSTERLUND, CEO GAMES BOOST



SPOTLIGHT



Amanda Monfrooe - Content Marketing Specialist and Copywriter at Typey Type

How did you become a sole trader and make the leap into freelance work?

Well, I sort of had to. I left the UK where I had

been living in England the last seven or eight years before I moved to Sweden in 2019. I had been in marketing there and when I left, I left my networks behind. Coming here, I thought the clearest and most enticing service I could offer was native English language copywriting. That was true, but it opened the door to a raft of other things. Typey Type grew quite quickly because people needed copywriting, but also content marketing, and digital strategy.

How did you turn the focus onto games marketing and copywriting?

I took a course in 2020 on games marketing from Future Games. It was being run as a pilot with the guidance and driving energy of Tabitha Hayes. She's a fantastic, thoughtful leader, but also a highly experienced marketer who is extremely accomplished in games. The course was full of people who were experienced in

marketing and wanted to get into games. This led to me working with major games studios in Sweden like Star Stable and Ten Chambers as well as games start up hubs with copywriting and brand consultancy.

Do you play games at all?

No, I don't really play games. A lot of people are really shy about this, but I can market anything because all the same principles apply. I don't have time to be a gamer because I've got some many things to do by running my own business! But I also think this is a strength because if you don't have an interest in games, the objectivity that brings is really helpful. It means I don't slip into like a fan mindset. I'm able to have a kind of distance that allows me to do good digital marketing practice without falling victim to my own biases about the product.

I came across your name from your presentation at a Women in Games Conference. Could you tell me a bit more about that?

I attended a Women in Games networking conference in 2020 and just thought it was awesome. I networked! I don't network well



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or confidently, but I tried and it was great. And it worked. People were very open and really wonderful. I know Mary-Claire Isaaman and Sharon Tolaini-Sage, so I guess I was a bit emboldened by that. This was when I was working with Star Stable and we had the 10th anniversary of the game. We were looking for promotional PR opportunities. Then Elaine Glantz and I curated the panel you attended.

What makes Sweden's Creative Industries unique?

What's beautiful about this country is that it makes such a good environment for creatives, especially women. As you know, in the United States, the urban/rural divide is sharp and growing and politicised. In Sweden, that is true to an extent, but because of the way the taxes are distributed, the regional governments have power to influence things so there isn't a huge disparity between big cities and small cities or rural and urban to the same extent as elsewhere.

To my understanding, the government has fostered programmes for investing in the games industry not just in large cities like Stockholm, but in smaller and more rural places. There is a political will, based on evidence, that investment helps. But there's also a social infrastructure that allows people to grow, develop and find their way into the creative industries.

What would you say the difference is between the Swedish and UK Creative Industries?

I'll preface this by saying I haven't been an artist in Sweden, but I was an artist in the UK for a long time. There, it is a cutthroat competition all the time. Every day, every show, you're only good as the last thing you made because there's no safety net. There's no guarantee. There's not really a dependable welfare system. In Sweden, I've never met someone afraid of quitting their job. Because there's ways to be caught.

Have you noticed more women in the creative industries in Sweden?

I have noticed that because of the given maternity leave and pay, women come back to work after having babies. Whereas in the UK

and the US I saw lots of women lose their jobs or choose not to have families or put it off for a long time because it was too much of a risk. I haven't necessarily noticed more women in the industry. There have definitely been a lot of meetings where I'm the only woman in the room. But at Star Stable that wasn't the case.



Photo by Kristian Strand on Unsplash

What makes Star Stable unique in your experience of working with them?

The number of women in mid and senior level roles. I think 22% of women in the Swedish games industry, but at Star Stable they had 56% of their leadership identify as women and 54% of their overall staff identify as women. At Star Stable, there's a lot of women, a lot of smart women and a lot of them are in charge.

INVESTMENT

The Swedish Games Industry Report (Dataspelsbranschen 2021) notes that the factors contributing to continued growth in Sweden's games industry include investments in regional clusters, accelerators and trainings, more entrepreneurs, and the effects of large investments and acquisitions in previous years.

Government funding is also a huge factor for the success of the Swedish videogames industry. Sweden offers tax credits for Research and Development for innovation in games (EGDF 2019). Much of this funding comes from tax. The 10 most profitable companies in Sweden paid a total of over €140 million in corporate profit tax (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). These same companies have also paid over €130 million in social security contributions in Sweden. The Swedish Game Industry estimates that the tax revenue from each employee in the gaming industry is enough to cover the cost of an assistant nurse in the healthcare industry (The Swedish Game Industry 2019).

Historical investments in the Internet and computing have also contributed to the success of the videogame sector in Sweden. Sweden's home computer drive gave low-income houses subsidies to buy a home computer (Meza Graham 2022; Futton and Mukherjee 2021). The scheme ran from 1998 to 2001 and allowed for

850,000 home computers to be purchased, meaning 1 in 4 Swedish households did not have to pay for their home computers (Futton and Mukherjee 2021). Many company executives, including Klarna's CEO Sebastian Siemiatkowski, cite the home computer drive and Sweden's deep social safety net as reasons for their company's success (Futton and Mukherjee 2021).

Sweden also has strong support systems that allow people to act upon their creative ideas and ambitions. According to the Culture Industries Report, "With some of the world's best and most extensive social security, Stockholm allows people to take the leap of faith needed to bring their creative ideas to reality" while also offering a support system for entrepreneurs (Invest Stockholm 2020, 12). As such, Stockholm has been named the second-best city for start-ups in Europe behind London (Economist Impact 2022).

According to Ignacio Fernández, a game developer, "The industry is brimming in Stockholm; it seems to me that the legislation allows for new initiatives to happen, so that makes startups very easy; and on the other hand, the people themselves are very creative and they organise several different gaming meetups of different kinds after work. To top this all off, there are several game design careers in universities and high schools" (Fernández 2022).

// There is a political will, based on evidence, that investment helps. But there's also a social infrastructure that allows people to grow, develop and find their way into the creative industries.

- Amanda Monfrooe //

"I think there's a lot of money from the government being thrown into the industry. So much so that there are different game clusters around Sweden. There's also a really good work/life balance that companies are implementing and the government is enforcing."

- SITA VRIEND, PROGRAMME COORDINATOR OF GAME DEVELOPMENT AT HOLA FOLKHÖGSKOLA



There are also several private investment companies that continue to catapult Sweden's videogame sector. One of these is Aldeon, an investment company that supports games and tech founders in the early stages of their development.



SPOTLIGHT



Susana Meza Graham - co-founder and Chair of Aldeon

What does your company specialise in?

We are an investment company with three people. We've all done individual investments before in tech and games so we decided to pool our holding together in an investment company. We mostly invest in funding and supporting games and tech founders in the early stages of their development.

What companies have you invested in?

We have 22 holdings including a Swedish games company called Hello There games in Gothenburg and a Stockholm based company called Neon Giant.

What makes a company a good fit for you to invest in?

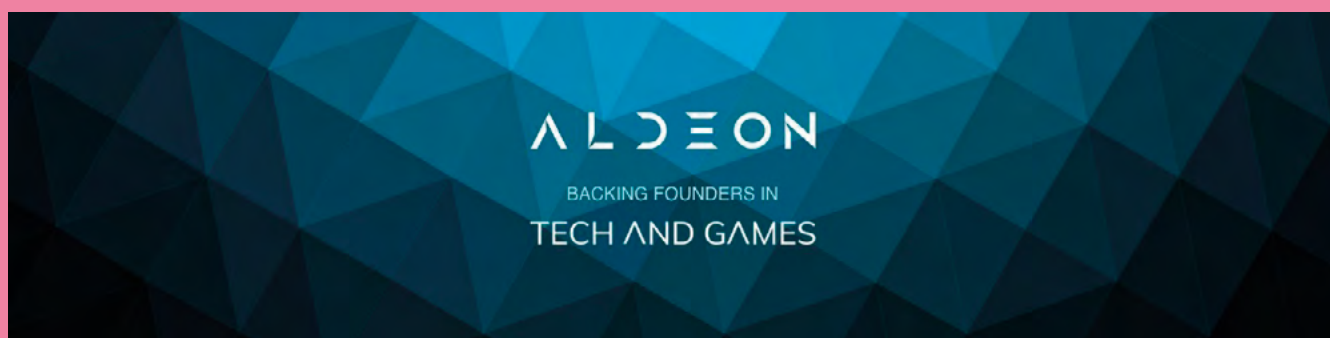
We need to feel like we can contribute. The three of us have very complementary skills and experience and we need to feel like we can add value. There also has to be a good level of trust and alignment in terms of wanting to build a successful company. There has to be some sort

You mentioned you're the only female founder and chairwoman of your company. Is that typical of investment companies in Sweden?

I think investment companies in Sweden are very keen to have diverse teams but I don't think it's a typical breakdown. I think a lot of companies recognise the importance of having varied opinions. Even with CEOs and founders, I would say the majority are men, but we do have several female founded investments.

How would you characterise the videogame culture in Sweden?

I come from a more business angle rather than the creative side because I'm not a game developer myself. I ended up in the industry by chance in 2004 because the company I worked at at the time was looking for someone with an international marketing background to start building a publishing business. This was before the whole digital distribution took off. All the companies at the time grew together and then all of a sudden we had this massive phenomenon where the games industry is now our biggest export. We no longer have to travel to other countries. People come to us to learn from us. It's an ecosystem with so many



of degree of being open to having discussions about input and feedback, otherwise we're probably not the right investors. And then of course, it has to be something that we feel like we know and understand.

different parts from the investment side, listed/unlisted companies, education, representation. We have everything from one person studios to tech giants. We have such a rich and varied ecosystem here now

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Why do you think that is?

It's easy to look at something like that and say it must've happened over night, but there's tons of different reasons for it. I have found that the ecosystem is very collaborative. When you talk to people they are happy to make an introduction or help you out in anyway if they can. I think that has been the key contributor to success of the games ecosystem. There's friendly competition, but people are happy for others.

Also, people have been in the industry for a long time. There are long traditions of not just games, but creative expression which is sort of ingrained in our DNA. There was also a government programme that gave people access to computers.

Could you tell me more about the government programme?

I used the Internet for the first time when I

started University in 1998, but this was before that. There was a government programme where people got subsidies to get home computers. So, a lot of people got their start there.

Another reason for the success I think is that we have a lot of darkness and spend so many hours indoors each year. Then there's the fact that our personal market is so small that we have always developed for global markets. We are extremely literate in English. We have a high digital literacy. All those things combined I think have certainly helped to catapult the Swedish games industry into what it's become today.

*Since this interview, the Aldeon portfolio has undergone changes including several exits. The current portfolio is managed by the three partners, but no new investments are being made.

Other large investment companies are also based in Sweden, like the Embracer Group. The Embracer Group is a global group of entrepreneurial businesses in gaming and the entertainment industry, encompassing boardgames, videogames, and comics (Embracer). The Embracer Group has 12 operative groups, 138 internal studios, controls or owns 850 Intellectual Properties, and has over 16,500 employees (Embracer). Some of the larger digital games studios they house include Coffee Stain and Gearbox entertainment. Embracer has also started the

Embracer Games Archive which collects and archives physical videogames from around the world (Sunhede 2022).

The success of Sweden's videogame sector did not come over night. There have been years of government investment into Internet access, home computing, and infrastructure like games clusters to support the industry. This has led to a successful investor and start-up culture in Sweden.



Female-Forward

While men make up the majority of Sweden's gaming employees, the numbers of women working in games continue to rise each year. According to Statista, in 2020 there were roughly 5,186 men in game development while there were only 1,410 female employees (Clement, 2021). As such, women made up just over 20% of the game development workforce. Similarly, there were roughly 670 female game and digital media designers in Sweden in 2019, as opposed to 2,400 male designers (Clement, 2022). Thus, in 2019 women made up just over 20% of game and digital media designers in Sweden.

Women in the Swedish game industry tend to work in medium-sized and large companies (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). Only 31% of women working in the industry are in leadership roles, compared to 37.5% of men in leadership roles (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). However, the number of women working in games has been consistently on the rise. One participant said that this was because of

maternity and paternity leave, as well as affordable childcare (Anonymous 2022).

In Sweden, people are allowed to claim parental benefit (föräldrapenning) so that they can stay home with their children instead of working, looking for work or studying. Both parents received a combined 480 days' parental benefit for each child (European Commission).

Similarly, there is a cap on how much childcare costs in Sweden. According to a Guardian interview with a Swedish couple, "You pay 3% of your gross salary but there's a cap so you never have to pay more than 1,260 Swedish krona [currently €109] a month per child – and if you have more children, you'll pay a maximum of 420 krona [€36] for the third child and nothing for the fourth," Anna says. "The thinking is that every parent should have the same opportunity to have childcare, regardless of your income and circumstances" (Ferguson 2014).

INTERVIEW WITH ANONYMOUS

Why are there so many women in Swedish games?

It feels like there are more women working in the sector and I think it's because of huge cultural shifts around parental leave and childcare. As soon as childcare and parental leave for both parents become more affordable and more available, you allow women to work.

It's about availability and also the acceptability of kids, and birth and parental leave being seen as a normal and human thing to do and not just a weird woman thing.

If you don't have to worry about making ends meet while sacrificing your career to take care of children, you have more time and energy to put into creative pursuits, startups, and living your life.

Even though there is a smaller percentage of women working in the Swedish games industry compared to the UK games industry, most interviewed participants felt like they were more visible. Part of this is because there are more women in leadership positions, but this could also be because of various initiatives Swedish games companies have adopted.

Many of the large companies in Sweden have initiatives to diversify the gender spectrum of the industry. Paradox offered a game development course in 2020 that was aimed at women and non-binary people called "Games By Her". Coffee Stain had a funding initiative called "Levelling The Playing Field" that focuses on smaller

studios that employed the same number of women as men. Throughout the interviews, though, it can be seen that smaller companies like Wayfinder Games and Imagi are also striving for gendered representation (Tjerberg 2022; Garfunkel 2022).

Though the average percentage of women in the Swedish games sector is 20%, some companies have many more. In 2021 there were 70 companies that had a higher proportion of women than the average, with at least 22% female employees. (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). Similarly, 22 games companies in Sweden consisted of at least 50% female employees (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). The largest of these is Star Stable Entertainment.

SPOTLIGHT

Jane Skullman - Executive Producer for Star Stable Online Stacy Place - Game Director for Star Stable Online



Jane Skullman



Stacy Place

What does your company specialise in?

Jane: Games. Meaningful games with the depth to go beyond being shallow. We're trying to give some sort of value in both the game experience but also the lore itself. We aren't just a game company per se, but we want to give something to a minority within the player community that is meaningful for them.

And the minority you mean is?

Jane: It sounds so strange that the minority is women or girls, but games designed especially for girls and their needs and interests is considered not just niche but superniche. Our audience has a specific interest in animals and community. Our players say they come for the horses but stay for the community and friends they get through the game.

What is the gender breakdown of your company?

Jane: 54% women and 56% women in leadership roles.

What about diversity?

Jane: I don't know the percentage but I know we are 20+ nationalities. The different regions from

around the world are represented, like Europe, Africa, Asia, North America, South America, but I don't know the percentage for each region.

Jane: Diversity is good because we want to do games that appeal to a lot of people. So it's good to have these sorts of insights directly when creating games. For example, one of our Lead Game Designers uses they/them pronouns.

How important is gender and diversity in what you produce?

Jane: I think for Star Stable Online it started out with only the girl avatars, we don't plan on changing that. When it comes to other games we will produce in the future we are looking into different avatars and options. In SSO, we are looking to include everything from different sorts of body types, dimples, hairs and so on in the updated avatar.



Stacy: We're also trying to introduce more gender neutral hairstyles and things like that to the new character avatar in SSO. We have a lot of boys who play the game and while our character is female, we are inclusive to everyone. Everyone is welcome. We are trying to diversify the NPCs in the game as well. We have male, female, non-binary. We also have different backgrounds and disabilities. One of our main characters is blind.

What are you most proud of when it comes to Star Stable?

Jane: I'm proud of the people working here. There's a lot of passion in trying to make this a reality. I'm also proud that we've been around for 10 years and that people are not satisfied

...Continued overleaf





The Star Stable Offices

with what it... we are not just maintaining, we are challenging ourselves and the game and what it can be all the time and I'm super proud of that.

What's the most challenging part of working on Star Stable?

Jane: Legacy. We have been around for 10 years. We have to look forward and try to solve things from decisions that were made a long time ago with the information we have today. But we can only do things from the now and move forward. In 10 years of development there is also tech legacy and it's very

challenging to solve some of those things. But the team is so motivated to explore making it better. It is both rewarding and challenging.

Though the percentage of women working in the Swedish games industry is less than that of the UK games industry, more women are seen in leadership positions across the sector, with standout companies like Star Stable where women make up more than half of their staff (Skullman 2022; Place 2022; Monfroe 2022).



Retention of Foreign Talent

One of the themes that came up in several interviews was the need for foreign talent in the Swedish games industry. Companies are constantly recruiting fresh talent, often from abroad. In 2021, Swedish game companies were employing over 6,596 people on site in Sweden and 7,177 people abroad (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). However, companies often find it difficult to recruit Swedish staff, as well as retain foreign talent.

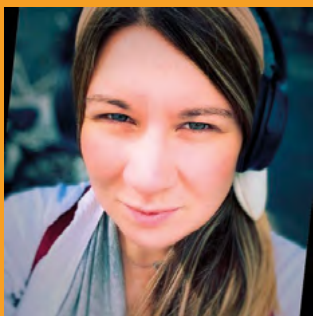
Stockholm ranks third in knowledge-intensive jobs (Sanandaji 2020, 17). While there are ample education programs for the videogames industry, each year there are significantly fewer games graduates than there are jobs. Since 2019, there has been a greater demand for videogame developers than are currently graduating each year (Dataspelsbranschen 2021). Thus, many companies look to attract foreign talent.

The majority of jobs in Sweden's Creative and Cultural Industries require post-secondary education (Invest Stockholm 2020, 16). However, it is difficult for new arrivals to find accommodation and receive a work permit (Invest Stockholm 2020, 25). Long processing

times and an inability to travel while waiting for permits, are further hindrances to foreign talent entering Sweden (Dataspelsbranschen 2021; Belfrage 2022). At least 5 interviewed participants moved to Sweden from outside the EU. One participant moved to Sweden from abroad for their partner's job and stated that the University's relocation department as well as Stockholm city provided a lot of informational videos about relocating (Anonymous 2022). The family continued to get assistance once they arrived in Sweden to help them settle. However, other participants had difficulty networking and freelancing in Sweden.

On average, foreign employees only stay in Sweden for 22 months (With Benja 2022). Aurore Belfrage argues that in Sweden there is a delta between how Swedish people think of themselves and how they are perceived by other people, especially when it comes to being friendly and open (With Benja 2022; Belfrage 2022). One foreign employee noted that the most challenging aspect of working in Sweden is the Swedish culture around too many meetings and fear of conflict makes things move slowly (Fernández 2022).

SPOTLIGHT



Fia Tjerberg - co-founder of Wayfinder Games

What does your company specialise in?

We aim to specialise in roleplaying games (RPGs) As far as we know we are the only game company in

Sweden specialising in this and we hope to be the northern Europe hub for this type of game.

What kind of role-playing game do you want to make? AAA or indie?

Most of us who work in the company right now come from AAA backgrounds and we are very familiar with that type of quality, but we are convinced it's becoming a dated terminology for games. We are calling it Triple I right now (III) which is triple quality for indie games. I prefer this term because

with Triple A comes a scope and a production value that doesn't necessarily add play value to the player.

What's the gender breakdown of your team?

40% Female and 60% Male. We want to stay around 50/50. As a female co-founder, I am able to utilise my networks, which are primarily male, but with a lot more women than most men have. I also try to help others realise they too can widen their networks so that we have diverse, not just genders, but backgrounds in general to pull from. Leaders of the past have told me there are no female game programmers, to which I respond: "... in your networks!"

What are you most proud of in your company right now?

I'm proud that we were able to hire such

...Continued overleaf

a senior, diverse and caring team who is deeply interested in making widely beloved games. Together we have the experience and the guts to go into the unknown to look for something which the market hasn't seen before.

What is the most challenging part of your company right now?

Whenever there is a diverse set of people working or living together, folks with different cultures, backgrounds, expectations, etc. there is going to be more friction than when there is not. When we founded the company, there were only four of us and we were very like-minded. We didn't always have to talk to understand each other. But when growing the team with different native languages, different references and backgrounds, different likes and dislikes... we all need to push ourselves to be openminded and listen a lot to take advantage of the diversity that we have.



SPOTLIGHT



Aurore Belfrage - Tech Investor and Board Professional

Could you tell me a bit about your multiple roles?

I run a Think Tank called Sustechable at the intersection of technology and sustainability. I have also worked as an independent investor and have different types of board positions and advisory positions within them. I am a Senior Advisor to AI Sweden, the Swedish AI coordinating body and I'm the co-founding Chairwoman of a remote tech talent recruitment company Söderhub. Söderhub provides Swedish tech teams with tech talent from Egypt. So, many different roles and different countries.

What is Sustechable trying to achieve?

We have a few different things. One is that we're not tech optimists. So, tech won't save us from the climate crisis and the collapse of the biosphere. However, once we figure out the planetary boundaries and make peace with the fact that when we need to price in things like carbon, water, pollution, etc. then there's market elements that can support the transition. Technology is a very powerful tool and it is important to use it wisely. For us, the green transition isn't a business opportunity. There are business opportunities within the green transition, but its secondary to our civilisation's survival.

Do you think there is a potential for games to be used in sustainability and green needle moving efforts?

Yes. Everyone needs to contribute and everyone needs to be aware. One element in the green transition is behavioural change. And another is the importance of science fiction in understanding different types of futures. I think videogames, documentaries, film,

culture and the arts have a huge role to play in setting the scene of what life could look like in a setting where the penny drops. Even though you intellectually know these scenarios are a risk, once you're in it, when you see it or play a game or watch it, you understand it. You can emotionally connect with the risks.

What cultural differences do you notice between working and personal culture between the UK and Sweden?

There are many factors to it with differences in sectors and everything. But, if you heavily generalise, Swedes don't mix. You have work and work friends who you do work stuff with and have lunch with. But then you go home and have other friends at home.



Photo by Linus Mimietz on Unsplash

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In an interview I saw you post on LinkedIn, you were talking about Sweden's problem retaining foreign talent. What do you know about this overarching problem?

There are several answers to that question. First, is that there is a need to attract talent to Sweden. There is a skills gap. We have a relatively cumbersome migration process, so people coming from outside of the EU with different types of skills sit in red tape for months which makes it hard to choose Sweden. And then once you get through that, it's not that easy to penetrate the fabrics of society, make friends, go out for dinner, or have coffee.

There's a delta between what we think about ourselves and how people perceive us. In that conversation we were reflecting on the fact that Swedes think highly of ourselves as being



progressive and open and welcoming and liberal and friendly. But in the comment section of that video, people painted a different picture saying "sure, you're polite but you're borderline cold. I haven't been invited to anyone's house." And these are multilingual, talented people that have lived around the globe who when they move here are surprised we aren't as friendly as we claim to be, from their perspective.

For me, what other people see as cold is actually that our reservedness and politeness borderlines cold. We don't want to impose ourselves. For me, asking someone to come to my house feels a bit pushy, whilst in another culture it would be normal. I think as Swedes we would all benefit from having an honest conversation about how we're different from other countries when it comes to this. I don't have any answers, I just think there's a conversation that's missing.

Pointing fingers and blaming people in this conversation is not beneficial for actual change. In order to be inclusive, you need to be inclusive. We need to recognise people's support needs and create opportunities for them as opposed to making judgements.

Do you think Sweden is unique in how many women it has in tech or the creative industries?
In the Middle East, there is much more diversity coming out of engineering and universities. So from that perspective, I'd say Sweden still have further to go. I'm pleased to hear you think there are more women here, but there's still work to be done.

"I've talked to quite a lot of studios as well asking what they are looking for so that I know what I should be teaching. One of the things I've noticed is some companies aren't 100% sure what they're looking for."

- SITA VRIEND, PROGRAMME COORDINATOR OF GAME DEVELOPMENT AT HOLA FOLKHÖGSKOLA



Retention of foreign talent in Sweden is a complex, multi-pronged issue. The findings from these interviews suggest that foreign workers do not stay in Sweden in part because of working visa restrictions, problems finding housing, and the lack of friendships outside of the office.



Photo by Pragii on Unsplash

Key Takeaways – Videogames

Sweden has hundreds of videogames studios, ranging from large, international AAA studios to one-person studios. This has been made possible by **education, infrastructure and investment** specifically in games. Education ranges from large university courses to trade schools and games and hardware designed for education. The Swedish government has invested in infrastructure that has ensured the success of the games industry, including home computer grants and investment in games clusters. This has also allowed for private investment in games and tech companies, making Stockholm one of the best places for start-ups.

Though there is a smaller percentage of women working in the games industry in Sweden compared to

the UK, they are more visible. This is because Sweden's games industry is **female-forward**, with women being seen in more leadership roles than in other countries. Part of what allows women to go into and stay in the games industry is progressive maternity and paternity leave, a cap on childcare costs, and in-studio diversity initiatives.

One of the biggest problems in Sweden's videogame sector is the **retention of foreign talent**. On average, foreign workers only stay in Sweden for 22 months. While this is a multi-pronged issue, the interviews in this report suggest that this is because of the complex migration system, problems getting housing, and making friendships and networks outside of the office.

COMICS AND FANZINES

Comics and fanzines are popular in Sweden and have both influenced and intersected with the other creative industries. Comics and fanzines led to the popularisation of the creative industries in Sweden and helped kickstart the country's serious adoption of pop art. Sweden has a unique comics and fanzine style and culture that is deeply rooted in the country's feminist movement and underground culture.

Comics and fanzines are an ingrained part of the Swedish culture and have shaped the current games industry there. There are also historical connections to comics in Sweden. Fredrik Strömberg surveys Sweden's comic development from the end of the 18th century, but also argues that Viking stone etchings can be considered comics (2010). Because comics and zines were considered art early on in Sweden, they were better integrated into society. The 1964 art exhibition titled "*Amerikansk popkonst. 106 former av kärlek och förtvivlan (American Pop Art. 106 Forms of Love and Despair)*" was the first Pop Art exhibition ever held by a major European art institution (Andersson 2017, 45). According to Krantz, this was a transformative part of comics and fanzines in

Sweden (2018, 268). This led to the first comics exhibition *Seriernas fantastiska värld (The Wonderful World of Comics)* opening in December of 1965 (Krantz 2018, 268). The culture surrounding art in Sweden led to the popularity of comics, fanzines and other forms of 'pop' art. Hegerfors' 1966 book *Svisch! Pow! Sock!: seriernas fantastiska värld (Swish! Pow! Sock!: The Fantastic World of Comics)* is considered instrumental in the creation of Sweden's comics fandom that in turn led to the creation of fanzines (Krantz 2018, 269; Ribe 1976, 17). *Serieframjandet (The Swedish Comics Association)* was founded in 1968 and solidified a change in the Swedish culture that showed comics and pop art were taken seriously as objects to both consume and create.

Swedish comic artist Moa Romanova told a German magazine, "*Compared to other countries, comics are well thought of in Sweden. They're accepted in the fine art world*" (Exberliner 2020). This culture, combined with the education, infrastructure and investment in comics has led to the successful and unique creative industries in Sweden. Like the videogame sector, Sweden's comics sector is female-forward.

Swedish Comics Identity

There is a distinct comics style in Sweden, one of powerful black and white images and art that tends to be scratchier and evocative of underground comix in the US in the 1960s. Kristy Beers Fägersten notes that Swedish comic strips tend to emphasize dialogue, "especially with regards to the conventions and mechanics of face-to-face conversation" (Fägersten 2019, 146). Thus, many Swedish comics tend to be autobiographical. A noteworthy aspect of Swedish comics is the focus on language, speech and human interaction (Fägersten 2019, 151).

According to Fägersten, "While text in the form of conversation is foregrounded and unequivocally the driving force of comic strip production, image is no less important. The few and slight variations in panel images are not trivial, but in fact their significance can be considered in inverse proportion to their scope: the slightest change in image may be critical to the reading of the depicted conversation" (2019, 158).

The Swedish comics identity is also classified by its association with the feminist movement. Classon Frangos and Österholm have noted that Swedish feminist comics also tend to focus on representing 'bad feelings' in a

critique of happiness (2023). This will be explored further in the Female-Forward section.

Another aspect of Swedish comics' identity is the locations of the comics hubs. One participant stated that there are two comics hubs in Sweden: Stockholm and Malmö. Stockholm is home to most publishing houses, several comics stores, and the comics library, while Malmö has the comics school (Medin 2022).



SPOTLIGHT



Moa Romanova *Illustrator, Sculptor & Comics Creator*

How did you get into comics?

I used to do fine art like oil painting and stuff. I decided that was what I wanted to do, but

I didn't get into the fine art school I wanted to go to. I looked at what other art schools I could go to. I had already been to a one year "pre-art school" and knew I couldn't do one of those again. So I made my first comic and submitted it to the comic art school in Malmö.

So, you went to Malmö?

Yes. I applied for it with the first comics I had ever made. I got in and spent two years there learning how to make comics basically. If it wasn't for this comic school, I wouldn't have started making comics.

How did you go from your first comic getting you into comics school to having published a full-length graphic novel?

When I was doing fine art, I remember putting like 90 hours into a painting to make it more detailed and lifelike. But at the comic school in Malmö, they had a 24-hour comics day where they locked the school door and you had to make a 24 page comic in 24 hours. I was like 3 weeks into one drawing and then had to make six drawings on one page in one hour. I was just allergic to feeling like I sucked at something so the first year was



really hard. There were a lot of good assignments to get you to accept that you suck at something. I needed to accept that I was awful at doing comics in order to get good at doing comics. So that was a huge step for me.

What was the best part of art school?

Getting to do my art. To suck and get better. Sometimes only have art beside their regular job, but with Sweden's education system I had the leeway to try comics. I think that's what stands out about Sweden. For this school, I had good attendance for the first time in my life. The second year of comic school you have to apply with an idea of a book. It's the only reason I have a full-length book.

So, Goblin Girl was the book you applied with?

Yes. I made the whole book in 10 months.

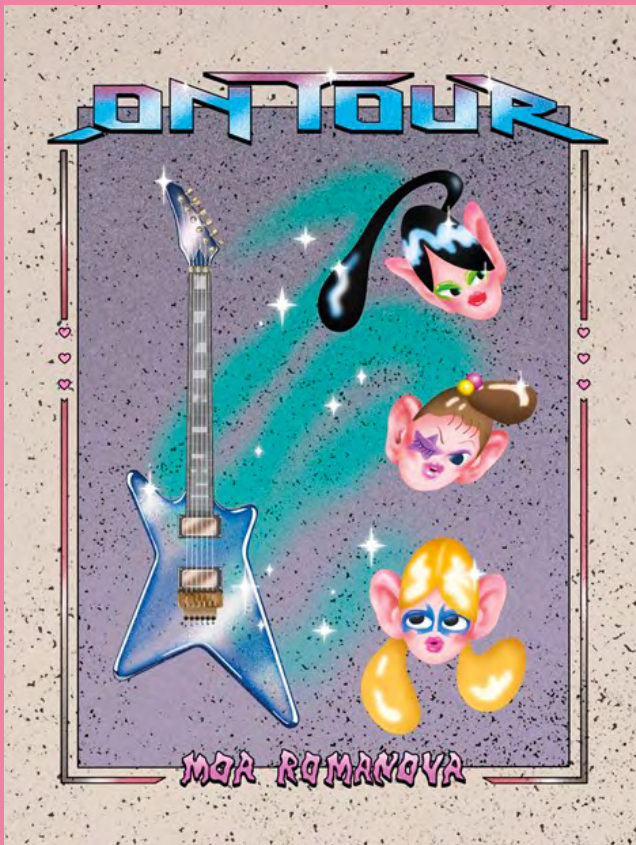
Was the anatomy in that comic a conscious choice or based off anything?

It's not based on anything. I remember just doing



Photo by Hailey Austin

...Continued overleaf



a lot of bad comics and going through 10 pages I hate and seeing how I kept drawing broad shoulders or super big hands in one frame. So I thought 'I'm gonna take this with me. The rest can go in the trash.' It was sort of like the weird proportions resonated with me, because I always really liked the artwork for Yellow Submarine.

How did you get it published?

I had some sort of semi-clout being a blogger when I was a fine artist and I had like a micro Instagram celebrity going on so I think that upped my chances of getting published because they can see there is already an audience. I had maybe five or six thousand followers on Instagram so it wasn't crazy but I feel like that piqued their interest. That and I came in with a new style. People have been doing the same thing in Sweden for the past 20-25 years which is like shitty drawings in like satire, political autobiographical and self-deprecating manner. Then I asked Fantagraphics to publish the English and other translated versions.

What are you most proud of as a comics artist?
Finishing projects. That's really cool. It's a very

definitive ending to a project. Holding the book. I'm very proud about finishing my first book and now my second book. I feel like if I died, it would be okay. That's a huge stress for me when making the books and giving it to the publishers, but now I can relax now that they're out.

What's the most challenging part of being a comics artist?

The economics of it. I think there's a few things that are difficult, but mostly the money situation. I have probably one of the most translated comic books in Sweden and last year, I couldn't have lived on it. Once I got the fees, I was barely making minimum wage. So imagine the artists who only put out books in Swedish. They make very little for their whole books. So I've had to balance that with other income, like being an influencer.

But, in my opinion, working as a freelance artist is good in Sweden. When I was making this new book, I applied for a scholarship with the Swedish Association of Writers to travel with my friend and it got funded. They sent me the money the next week and trusted me to do the work without asking me where it was all the time. The government also gave me money during COVID to keep creating.



Photo by Hailey Austin

Fanzines

(F)anzines have also had a large impact on Sweden's Creative Industries. Zines are “non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves” (Duncombe 1997, 6). Also known as fanzines, zines are considered DIY (do-it-yourself) publications that express “all variety of personal and political narratives” (Peipmeier 2008, 214). They have historically been used as a way for marginalised communities to express themselves and disseminate information. The rise of the feminist movement played a large role in the number of women making and consuming comics and fanzines. Zines also share commonalities with media used in earlier women's movements, such as scrapbooks, manifestos and pamphlets (Creasap 2014, 157). Zines have allowed women and girls to write about issues that were not written about anywhere else (Flannery 2005; Piepmeier 2008; Creasap 2014).

Sweden has had a long-running interest in fanzines and they have been well documented. Krantz and Ingemar



Photo by Hailey Austin



Photo by Hailey Austin

Bengtsson (ed.) created an in-depth Swedish Comics Index in 2001 that detailed all the artists of fanzines at the time (Krantz 2022). Several participants noted that they created fanzines to test out comic ideas as well as part of their comics school (Romanova 2022; Medin 2022; Skogberg Nord 2022).

The number of fanzines available to purchase in newspaper shops in Sweden, as well as their high-quality printing, surprised me. There is even a dedicated comics museum with an entire section of local fanzines which will be further discussed in the Infrastructure and Investment section.

Education

Part of the reason Sweden has a unique comics culture and a successful comics industry is because of the country's several layers of comics and creative education. Comics have risen in popularity and have been adopted as part of the culture. As such, comics are taught in classrooms for young people, people learning Swedish and are also offered as University specialisations.

Classon Frangos finds that Swedish feminist comics have risen to popularity in parallel with the development of 'norm-critical pedagogy' education – which is “an approach to anti-discrimination in the classroom based

on queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive education” (Classon Frangos 2021). The Swedish term *normkritik* [norm-critique] promotes social change by challenging social norms in the classroom from an intersectional perspective (Laskar and Alm 2017, 137–138; Björkman and Bromseth 2019, 23–28). Thus, the feminist comics movement has mapped onto the comics boom in Sweden. This as well has come from the cultural adoption of comics as art as well as comics creation as a creative industry. Participants also noted that comics are used in the official classroom syllabus for people learning Swedish (Anonymous 2022; Troya 2022).

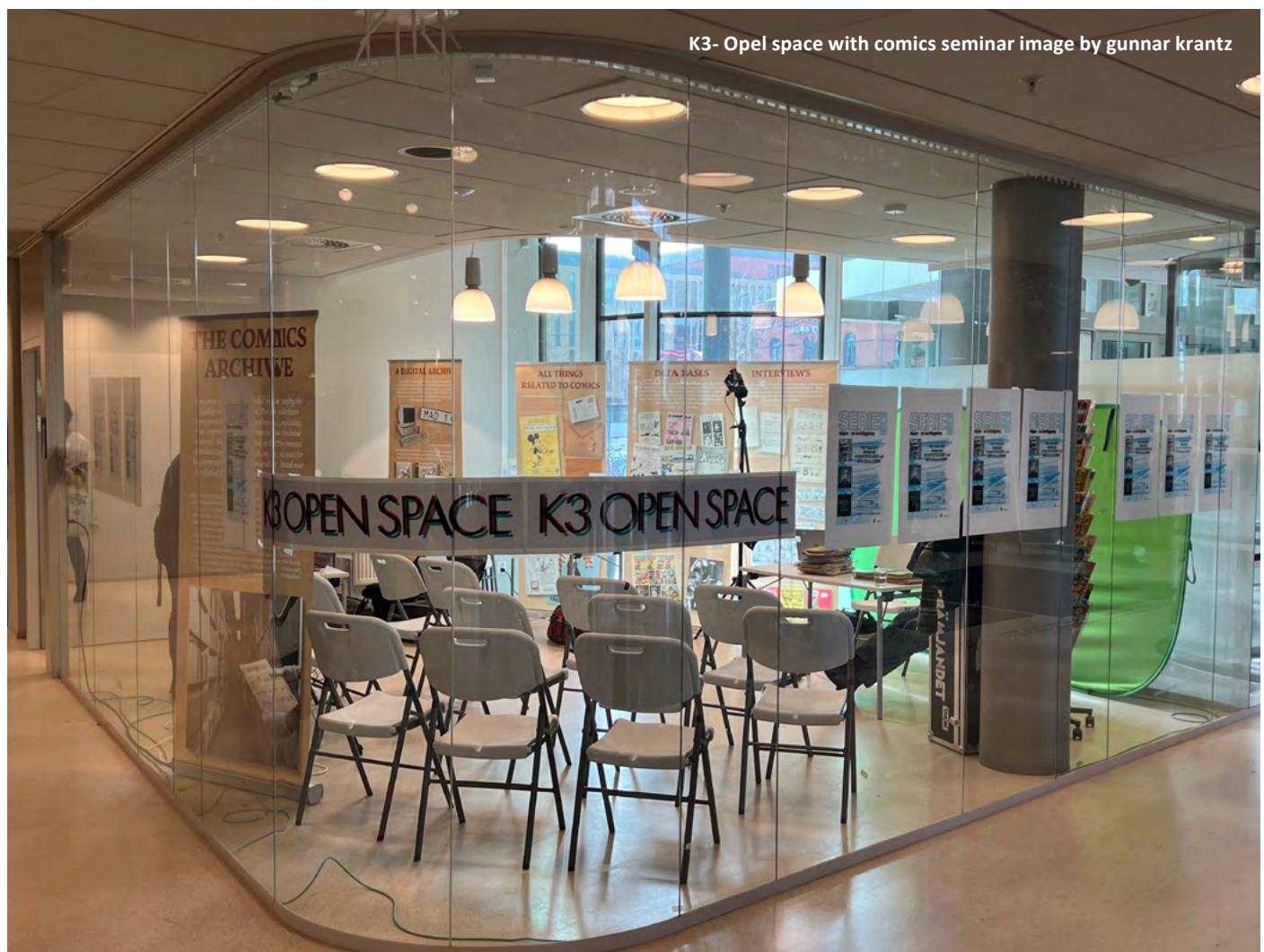
There has been a steadily growing interest in studying comics in Sweden over the last 20 years. Much like the videogame industry, there are several universities that specialise in comics including Malmö University's comics school. Gävle University, also known as the Hofors comics school, was an immensely popular course in the 2000s, but was discontinued in 2011 (Medin, 2022). In 2016, Strömberg noted, "There have been courses on comics in Sweden, both from a historical/cultural studies perspective and with a more production-oriented angle at the universities in, for instance, Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala, during the last decade. The longest running was the fulltime, 2-year comics course *Serie- och bildberättarprogrammet* (Comics and Picture Storytelling Programme) at Gävle University. It was started in 1992, became a university-level course in 2003 and was run by comics artist Johan Höjer until it was cancelled in 2011.

Other long-running courses have been given at arts and crafts universities, such as *Seriekonst och avancerat bildberättande* (Comics Art and Advanced Image Narrative), a one-term Master's course at the School of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg, started by comics artist Gunnar Krantz and now run by comics artist Joakim Lindengren. Another long-running course is *Storytelling II/Graphic Novels & Sequential Art*, given as a part of

the master's programme *Storytelling* at the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, under the helm of comics artist Joanna Rubin Dranger. Both courses were started in the middle of the first decade of the twenty first century.

Malmö University has furthermore, in 2011, added two new, on-going courses: *Comics, International Perspectives*, a full-time, one-term, cultural studies and graphic design-oriented course, run by Associate Professor Jakob Dittmar; and *Serieteckning och visuellt berättande* (Comic Art and Visual Narrative), a more creation-oriented course geared towards contemporary comics, run by comics artist Krantz. Both courses are organised by the School of Arts and Communication" (Strömberg 2016, 15).

The comics university programs focus on comics art and narrative and are often taught by comics creators themselves. Several participants noted that in Malmö University's comics school they had to focus on creating an entire graphic novel for the second year of the course (Romanova 2022; Skogberg Nord 2022). The graphic novels made in these courses at Malmö or Konstfack were often published after the course (Wallander 2022).



K3- Opel space with comics seminar image by gunnar krantz

SPOTLIGHT



Photo by Magnus Denker

Gunnar Krantz - Professor within the Arts in Visual Communication at Malmö University

How did you first get into comics?

I first got into comics through the Swedish Comics Association and their fanzines. I found a copy at a local library, and immediately got into writing about comics and reviewing them. I started out like how most artists start out now in Sweden – as an amateur comics creator. I was sending my own comics in to fanzines to be printed.

I eventually started sending comics to Semic Press, a publishing place with a comic book aimed at up and coming talent. I was initially refused, but then there was a boom of fanzines in the 80s. I then published my first professional book in 1986.

How important are fanzines to the Swedish comics culture?

Incredibly important! Reviewing fanzines is part of the critical view of culture. It is grassroots, and shaped emerging comics artists. Fanzines continue to foster new generations of comics artists.

There was also a boom of alternative comics and amazing creators like Liv Strömquist published fanzines of their own. Then their fanzines

would be sent to publishing companies as proof of concept for larger comics works. This was one way to foster communication between comics and artists. As well as the networking of the Swedish Comics Association – feedback, reviews and fanzine fairs starting emerging.

What's next for Sweden's comics culture?

I think webcomics, scrolling comics and digital comics are huge with students right now. They may even be the new fanzines.



Diversity has also been important in the education side of comics. According to Krantz, when the comics school in Hofors started there were some female students, many of whom went on to become professional artists (Krantz 2022). In the late 1990s, there tended to be a 50/50 split between male and female students, but now usually more than half of the students are female (Krantz 2022).

Comics are such an ingrained part of the Swedish culture that they are embedded in education beginning in primary school through *normkritik*. Comics are also part of the official curriculum for people learning Swedish and several universities have courses in creating comics and/or dedicated comics schools.

Infrastructure & Investment

Another aspect of Sweden's unique and successful comics industry is the infrastructure around creative work in general and comics specifically. This includes libraries, the Kulturhuset as well as online forums to promote creators' work. However, many participants felt that the comics industry had much less investment and infrastructure than the games industry (Wallander 2022; Skogberg Nord 2022; Medin 2022).



Photo by Keren Fedida on Unsplash

There are several guilds and associations that comics artists can be a part of, such as the Comics Association, the Guild of Illustrators, the Writers Guild, and the Association of Swedish Illustrators and Graphic Designers (Medin 2022). The Association of Swedish Illustrators and Graphic Designers was founded in 1955 and currently has 1500 members (Svenska Tecknare). The association is concerned with safeguarding the intellectual property rights of its members and mediates financial and social insurance agreements with members and those who are commissioning them (Svenska Tecknare).

Similarly, there is the Illustratörcentrum (Illustrator Centre) which is an online platform where people can find and commission artists specialising in illustration, comics, graphic design, animation and beyond with the consultation and mediations being free of charge (Illustratörcentrum). They also publish a book titled *Swedish Illustrators and Graphic Designers* each year with exemplary work by Swedish artists, including comics creators.

Libraries have been cited by several participants as enabling them to be exposed to and able to read comics in multiple languages across Sweden (Troya 2022; Malin 2022; Bryson 2022; Medin 2022). Comics creator Malin Skogberg Nord said she remembers going to the local library and discovering the comics section (Skogberg Nord 2022).



"I got into comics through the comics in my small town's library. But once I visited Stockholm, I knew I had to move there because they had so many comics. I moved to Stockholm when I was 16 and found the Comics library and it was there where I was inspired to make my own comics and fanzines."

"I started out making fanzines when I was 19 and then I went to comics school and made some more zines. Then to get a bigger reach I applied for ISBN which is free. These ISBNs granted me the ability to spread my works to different libraries, sell them in online stores and do things like a small press."

- LISA MEDIN, COMICS CREATOR



SPOTLIGHT



Malin Skogberg Nord - Comics Creator and Educator

Could you tell me your job title or role?

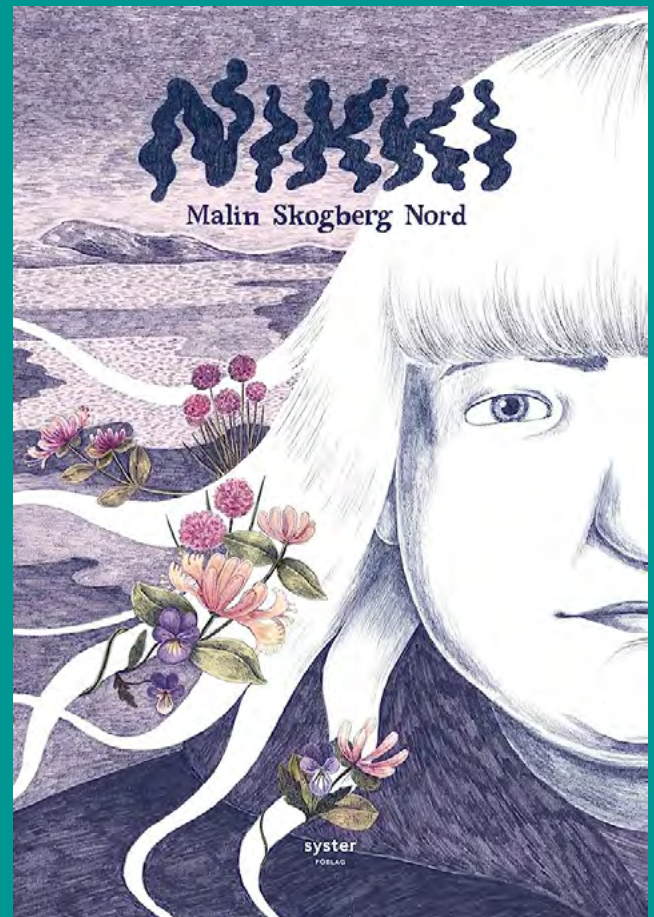
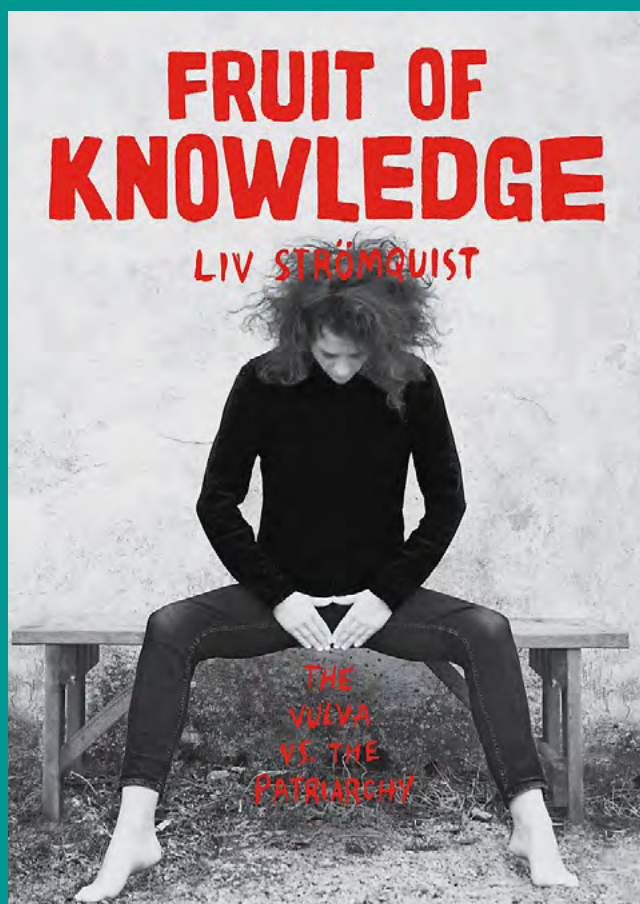
I work in libraries doing mostly comic workshops with kids. My role is to make kids want to read more and visit the library. I work there part time and it's my main income, but I also freelance as a comic artist, graphic designer and illustrator.

How did you get into comics?

I have always liked comics. I found comics when I was really young. I remember in primary school finding comics for adults in the local library. The artists I read there really inspired me to make my own comics and blogs about comics. Then I went to the comic art school in Malmö between 2015 and 2016.

How did you hear about the comic art school?

I knew some people who went there some years before me and said it was a great school, so I decided to apply. I also knew about Dotterbolaget, a social group and professional network for women and trans folk who make comics. I knew that a bunch of great female comic artists went to the comic art school and started Dotterbolaget there. I also joined Dotterbolaget in my hometown Goteborg before starting the comics art school.



Do you feel like there are a lot of women in the Swedish comics scene?

The feminist comic scene has been really big for many years. When I went to the comic art school there was the 10 year anniversary of dotterbolaget. I think they really started the trend and got more and more women into

...Continued overleaf



comics and I think there are a lot more women in comics now in Sweden.

Why do you think more women are into comics now?

I think that if you identify as a feminist you get inspired by other feminist women making comics. Comics is just a great medium to express different feminist ideas like Liv Strömquist and

her book *The Fruit of Knowledge*. It's a really good medium for self-expression.

What kind of comics do you make?

I draw mostly autobiographical comics. My full-length comic book *Nikki* is not autobiographical but inspired by things that happened to me and others I know. It's about sexuality, body acceptance and friendship. I really like good dialogue and everyday situations in comics.

What are you most proud of as a comics creator?

I'm really proud I made a full length comic book. I didn't think I would do it because it's really hard and takes a lot of times. I questioned my decision a million times. It took me 5 years to complete it on the side of other things, but it's done and I'm really proud of it.

What's the hardest part of being a comics creator?

Earning money? There's a lot of challenges but that's a big one. It takes a lot of time. And if you don't have a lot of money you have to do it in evenings around your main job so that's a huge challenge.

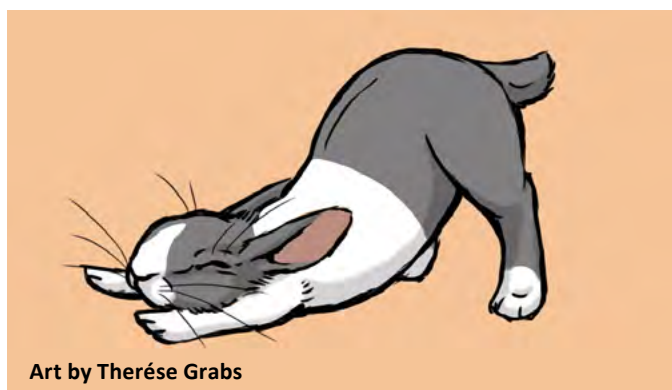
Kulturhuset and Serieteket

While libraries in general have aided in curating the comics culture in Sweden, the Kulturhuset (Culture House) Stadsteatern in Stockholm and Serieteket (Comics Library) within the Kulturhuset have been sites of cultural importance.

In 1986, there was an exhibition of comics on at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm titled *Serier (Comics)* where art historians and other researchers published about comics (Sommerland and Wallin Victorin 2017, 3). There was

also a catalogue that accompanied the exhibition titled *Boken om serier [The book about comics]* that coincided with the collection of several prominent feminist comics creators such as Christina Alvner's *Coco* in 1985 in 1985 and Cecilia Torudd's *Familjeliv [Family life]* in 1986, *Ensamma mamman [The single mother]* in 1988 and *Mera familjeliv [More family life]* in 1989 (Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019, 81).

The Serieteket is Sweden's foremost specialist library for comics, cartoons, zines and graphic literature. It was founded in November 1996 by Kristiina Kolehmainen and Elisabet Andersson as part of the Stockholm public library system on a small street in Södermalm (Gardner 2016). It was launched as a way of organising comics collections by genre rather than to fit the Swedish classification system (Gardner 2016). In October 1999 the Serieteket moved to the Kulturhuset in central Stockholm (Gardner 2016). The Serieteket then began hosting Fanzine heaven which later became known as the Small Press Expo (Gardner 2016). In 2016, the



Art by Therése Grabs

Serieteket boasted a collection of 12,000 comics, the largest selection of books about comics in Sweden, 25 magazine subscriptions, a historical archive, comics in 15 different languages and approximately 100,000 visitors and 40,000 loans each year (Gardner 2016). There is even a section of the Serieteket that collects locally made fanzines and allows people to loan them out.

Serieteket has hosted artists' exhibitions and signings, as well as published books since 2006 (Gardner 2016). They also hosted workshops for all ages to create comics and meet other artists in the Kulturhuset. The Kulturhuset and Serieteket also host zine fairs and comics conventions every year to promote local comics and zine makers.

One participant said that when he first moved to Stockholm, he practically lived in the Serieteket on his days off because of the novelty of having a library specifically for comics with comfy chairs and an amazing view of the city (Bryson 2022). He now owns and operates the comic book store called Comics Heaven.

Another participant, Therése "Fonfe" Grabs was interviewed about the significance of the Åberg's

Museum which boasts being one of Sweden's best comics and toy museums (Grabs 2022). The museum, like the Kulturhuset and Serieteket, has featured exhibitions and signings by Swedish comics artists like Maria Fröhlich who is the first Swedish woman to have her own comics published by Marvel (Grabs 2022). The museum also has a female CEO, Carina Åberg who is the daughter-in-law of the owner and museum namesake Lasse Åberg (Grabs 2022). Therése Grabs has worked at the museum for many years while also being an artist. In 2023, she came in 2nd place in a comic-strip contest arranged by the Kulturhuset for Stockholm's International Comicbook Festival with her first attempt at a comic strip titled Rabbit Yoga. The comic was then featured on the outside of the Kulturhuset in the centre of Stockholm.

The Kulturhuset and Serieteket, and Åberg's Museum are infrastructures that have positively impacted the comics community, industry and culture in Sweden by championing comics as art, gathering and amplifying the work of Swedish creators, and hosting exhibitions and signings. They were either started or have been run by women and continue to influence Sweden's unique comics culture.



Image by Therése Grabs

Investment

Many participants noted that there is more funding and investment in videogames rather than comics (Medin 2022; Wallander 2022; Romanova 2022; Skogberg Nord 2022).



"I know quite a few people who work in the videogame industry. You can't really make money off comics like they do in games. I have to find ways to make money despite the fact that I'm making comics. My way forward has been to do lectures and workshops and draw chapter books and odd illustration jobs so that I can make it. You still have to do a lot of stuff and if you're not up for it you can always join the games industry. But it's never been an option for me because I like the freedom of comics."

- LISA MEDIN, COMICS CREATOR

Though it is less than the investments available in videogames, there are some companies who invest in creating comics. This is often from their own IP. Videogame companies like Star Stable produce comics, books, animations and original music to engage with the passions of the players in their community (Place 2022; Olsson 2022).

Similarly, the Embracer Group's CEO Lars Wingefors' first business was selling used comic books in primary school and running Sweden's largest used comics store by the time he was 15 years old (Embracer Stories).

Female-Forward

Women have been a vocal part of the comics industry in Sweden and Swedish feminist comics are often thought of as being their own genre. The rise of the feminist movement played a large role in the number of women making and consuming comics and fanzines. In Sweden, feminist comics started to become visible during the second-wave feminism in the late 1960s through the journal paper *The Women's Bulletin* (*Kvinnobulletinen*) (Schmitz 2007). The journal was linked to Group 8 (*Grupp 8*) which argued that both childcare and adoption should be free (Schmitz 2007). The comics within *The Women's Bulletin* mirrored the issues raised in the social movement (Ney 2014; Blom 2017, 11). For example, the comic strips "Lena i livet: jag skulle söka jobb alltså..." (Lena in life: I would look for a job then...) urged women to demand higher salaries and "Lesbeth" addressed the lesbian movement (Ney 2014; Blom 2017, 11).

According to Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin, comics in feminist journals *Kvinnobulletinen* [*Women's Bulletin*], *Vi Mänkor* [*We Humans*] and *Fnitter* [*Giggle*] in the 1970s and 1980s established comics as a feminist medium (Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019, 77). These comics and fanzines were part of the women's liberation movement and the socialist women's movements in the 1970s that were attempting to use activism and social movement to change the patriarchal world (Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019, 78). Debates around gender norms such as the gender pay gap and childcare continued to be told through comic characters in Sweden (Ney 2014; Strömberg 2010; Blom 2017, 2).

While in the 1970s there were only a few female comics artists active in Sweden, by the 1980s the number of women publishing comics in independent fanzines and comics anthologies had grown (Nordenstam

The Embracer Group continues to invest in comics. In March 2022, The Embracer Group acquired Dark Horse Media, who have published legendary comic creators like Will Eisner, Neil Gaiman, Dave Gibbons, Faith Erin Hicks and Moebius as well as have holding the licenses toward comics and graphic novels for *Stranger Things*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Minecraft*, *The Witcher* and *Halo* (Dark Horse Media).

Some successful videogame companies have invested in creating and disseminating comics, but there is room for improvement in Sweden's investment into comics.



Photo by Hailey Austin

and Wallin Victorin 2019, 79). In the 1980s, Swedish female humourists were working to be visible in the male-dominated cartoon landscape (Lindberg 2016, 5). Women's creativity was restricted in the 1990s because comics creators and editors were male dominated (Lindberg 2016, 6; Strömberg 2012). While *The Women's Bulletin* may have published its last issue in the mid-1990s, feminist comics and fanzines have continued to circulate.

In another interview, Moa Romanova stated, "There were some names in the 1990s like Martin Kellerman who kind of lifted the comics scene. In the 2000s more female comics artists became popular, Liv Stromquist being the leader of the pack. I think they both opened up the world of comics in Sweden" (Exberliner, 2020).

Swedish media has considered the early 21st century as the mark of new wave feminist comics (Lidén 2013; Blom 2017). Since the early 2000s, Sweden has been interested in raising the voices of female creators. In 2009, the editors of Galago officially and radically redressed the imbalance of women's involvement in their published comics. They devoted themselves to equally publishing 50% women and 50% men (Lindberg 2016, 6; Klenell 2010). Since then, several feminist comics networks and artists have been publicly recognised, including Polly Darton and Dotterbolaget, female and transgender comics networks formed in Sweden around 2005. These comics collectives publish fanzines and comics anthologies while also encouraging female writer-artists to support each other. Dotterbolaget started in Malmö to push against patriarchal structures. The network today still exists and has now expanded to both Göteborg and Stockholm with a few hundred members (Blom 2017, 12). The Swedish feminist comics produced during the 21st century use humour and satire to visualize, criticize and challenge social structures from a feminist perspective (Strömberg 2010; Blom 2017, 12). In 2011, 58% of all comics albums published in Sweden were male creators while 42% were female creators (Lindberg 2016, 6).



Photo by Hailey Austin

SPOTLIGHT

Disa Wallander - Comics Creator



Did you grow up reading comics?

Yes, I used to read the comics section in the newspaper. And then I got into manga as a teenager and after

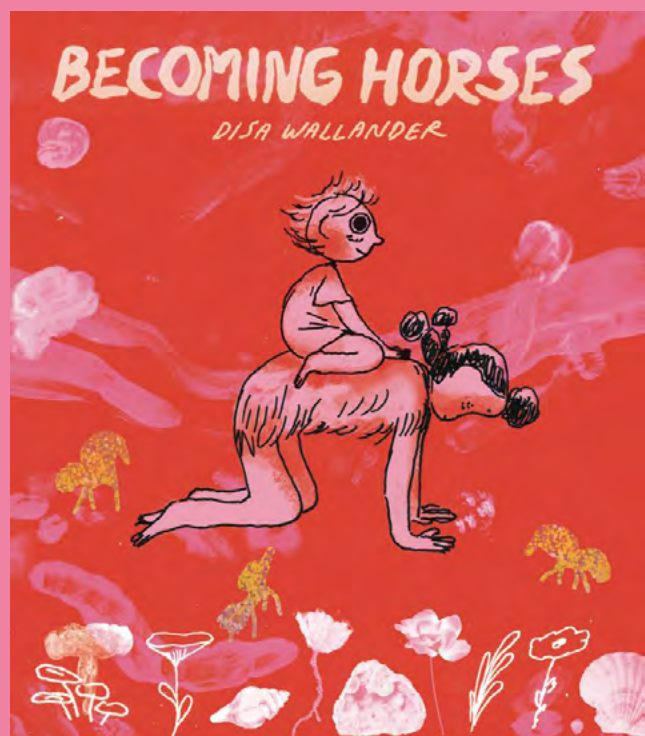
that it was on to indie comics that I found in the comics library.

That's where I found your work!

Really? Wow!

When did you start making comics?

I made some attempts before when I was a teenager, but I didn't get very far until I started doing my illustration degree in Brighton. It was a really nice, open degree. They gave us a paper with quotes from philosophers and writers and



...Continued overleaf

told us to take it and do what we want with it. I was floundering a bit. I had ideas, but it didn't feel sufficient to just make an image. So it made sense for me to add writing as well to give context and balance out the images.

Becoming Horses is that blend of image, collage, words, ceramics. What was the idea behind the different forms?

I didn't really even understand it myself. I was studying aesthetics, the philosophical subject. I did one term of like Philosophy 101. It was just an opening, sort of pretentious ideas about aesthetics that I wanted to explore in my own practice. That was the start. Then I ended up finding lots of things I was interested in, like a journey and all these conversations. I wanted the book to be what it feels like when you study something you don't quite grasp yet. I was trying to use it as a way of learning about different things.

Was it originally in Swedish or English?

English. I write all my comics in English. I think because I started making comics while living in Brighton. Then I sort of developed the language. When I try to write or buy comics in Swedish, it just doesn't work. It's a different tone. For me, it's easier to do wordplay in English.

So, Becoming Horses is published by Drawn and Quarterly right? How did that journey begin?

I was doing a Master's degree in visual communication. You had to make a proposal for a long term project and I proposed a comic book with this vague idea. So when I got in, I was posting my work on Twitter as I was making it. Drawn and Quarterly got in touch with me and asked if I would send them something. Once I felt like I had something at the right stage, I

sent it to them and we started the publication process.



My publication experiences have been really easy. Most of them, I just finish a comic and someone wants to publish it. I've been lucky so far.

Are you a full time comics creator?

No. Not by any means. I have a main job as a graphic designer for a Swedish news broadcaster.

What are you most proud of as a comics creator?

I'm most pleased that it's something that brings me joy. I'm really happy I've managed to find a way of working that doesn't stress me out. That feels like an accomplishment.

What's the most difficult part of being a comics creator?

Probably that there's no money. I would like to make it more of my profession, but I feel it's just so difficult.

“When I started in comics I think it was 50/50 gender split. Historically it was thought that only boys liked comics, but when I started comics school, manga had broken through and started to be a big thing so some women were drawing comics because they wanted to emulate the manga style. There was also the feminist movement at that time and in my experience there has always been like a 50/50 split with a slight tilt towards more women in comics.”

- LISA MEDIN, COMICS CREATOR



In another interview, Moa Romanova describes why she does not like her comics being labelled as feminist: “I’m a young woman in my twenties, I’m obviously a feminist. When Goblin Girl came out in Sweden that was the label used everywhere to describe it. I feel like this is so undermining to comics that are actually political. I’m only given this label because I’m a woman talking about my life. I’m not like Liv Stromquist, she knows her shit – that’s who you should read if you want a political comic. People are always suggesting to me that it’s super

hard to be a woman in comics. Actually, it’s not that hard” (Exberliner 2020).

Though they were often excluded in the early days of Sweden’s comics culture, female-forward and feminist comics have made a significant change in the country’s creative industries. Swedish comics and fanzines have their own identities largely because of the Swedish feminist movement. Unlike the videogame industry, Sweden’s comics industry is seen as being nearly evenly split between male and female creators.

Key Takeaways – Comics and Fanzines

Comics and fanzines have greatly influenced Sweden’s creative industries. Part of the success of Sweden’s Creative Industries is due to the early adoption of **comics as art**. Swedish comics have their own unique identity, usually revolving around autobiographical storytelling that is heavy on dialogue and human interaction. The art style tends to be scratchy and black and white. However, **fanzines** have also had a large impact on Sweden’s Creative Industries. They utilise similar methods and dissemination patterns as the women’s liberation movement and have historically been used to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups.

Much like videogames, comics are a part of Sweden’s **education** and have been implemented in primary schools, Swedish language courses, as well as University courses. There are also dedicated comics schools, like Malmö University’s Serieskolan.

The **infrastructure** surrounding the comics industry, such as libraries, comics associations and illustrator forums have had a significant impact on the Swedish Creative Industries. Specifically, the Kulturhuset and Serieteket have championed comics and zines and created an environment where they could be read, made and studied. There is **significantly less investment** in

the comics industry when compared to the videogame industry, but some videogame companies have created and sold comics.

Sweden’s comics industry is **female-forward** because of the popularisation of comics as a medium mapping onto the country’s feminist movements. Swedish feminist comics have their own identity and have encouraged other women to create and disseminate their work.



Photo by Hailey Austin

BOARD GAMES

Physical tabletop games, as opposed to digital videogames, are also a thriving industry in Sweden. However, boardgames are severely under researched. As such, this section is shorter than the previous two. However, many participants noted the overlap between videogames, boardgames and comics in Sweden (Medin 2022; Uyanik 2022; Issakson 2022). Thus, this section will provide new insights into boardgames as part of

the Swedish Creative Industries, through their history and spotlights of successful companies. Then, this section will begin the conclusion by comparing boardgames with the previous videogames and comics sections.



“It feels like everyone who likes games and comics likes boardgames. It’s not exactly the same as role playing like pen and paper, but there is a definite kinship between comics, zines, RPGs and boardgames.”

- LISA MEDIN, COMICS CREATOR

Boardgames have been significant in Sweden’s history. There have been several studies of the Viking Era showing the significance of boardgames. Mark A. Hall finds that several boat burials “in the second half of the first millennium AD across Northern Europe [...] included equipment for boardgames (surviving variously as boards and playing pieces, playing pieces only, or dice and playing pieces” (Hall 2016, 439). One of the oldest games

in the world, and one that was likely played by these Vikings, is Hnefatafl also known as The Viking Game, The King’s Table or Tafl (Boardgamegeek “Hnefatafl”; Crown 2018).

At the Vasa Museum (Vasa Museet), they salvaged a well-preserved boardgame from the rear of the ship called Swedish Tables, a 400-year-old variant of *Backgammon*



Hnefatafl board game pieces, Christer Åhlin Swedish History Museum 1996-01-08 Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Sweden, <https://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=18435&page=1&in=1>

² This data was acquired by counting the number of boardgame companies in the list as well as a few listed in the comments as suggestions.

(Vasa Museet 2022). The museum now hosts game nights every week where anyone can play the game and see the exhibit with the original board (Vasa Museet 2022).

There have been over 60 successful boardgame companies in Sweden from the early 1900s to 2012 (Magnusson, 2012). Some of these include Alga, Kärnan, Fria Ligan and Ion Game Design.

Alga is considered the largest board and tabletop game publisher in Sweden, having published 700 games since 1930 (Boardgamegeek "Alga"). They rose in popularity when the company won the *Monopoly* licence in 1930. They also reportedly published children's books and comics in the 1940s (Boardgamegeek "Alga"). Alga was purchased by BRIO in 1984, who had been producing boardgames since the early 1900s (Boardgamegeek "BRIO"). Both Swedish games staples were acquired by the German game giant Ravensburger in 2015 (Boardgamegeek "BRIO").

Kärnan was a Swedish boardgame and children's book publisher founded in 1958. It is still the brand name of Scandinavian publishing house Egmont Media Group. The Egmont Media group acquired the license from Disney to publish *Kalle Anka & Co*, a Donald Duck comic magazine in Sweden in 1948. They also publish *Bamse*, Sweden's beloved children's comic.

In March 2022, The Embracer Group acquired the French boardgame company Asmodee Group, whose boardgame IP catalogue includes *Catan*, *Ticket to Ride*, *Exploding Kittens* and *Dobble* (Asmodee).

Fria Ligan (Free League) are another Stockholm-based company who have produced boardgames like the *Crusader Kings* boardgame adaptation (Uyanik 2022).

One of the largest boardgame studios in Stockholm is Ion Game Design which ships globally and places an emphasis on historically and scientifically accurate games. On top of their own games, they also localise games like the Swedish version of *The Witcher: Old World* boardgame (Uyanik 2022).

SPOTLIGHT



Besime Uyanik - CEO of Ion Game Design

What does Ion Game Design specialise in?

We design and publish boardgames that are based mostly on reality or have a base in reality. It's

fun with boardgames because it gives you an alternate source of what can happen and we start the discussion not in a serious tone. This makes it so that you can discuss things that are difficult to discuss otherwise in a more relaxed environment.

How did you become CEO?

Jon Manker founded the company and I became CEO in 2015 because we had other projects together and I thought that boardgames are



such a fantastic market because it's creative and it makes people happy. I always wanted to make a difference and I think, as I said, you can make a difference with boardgames if you treat the material right.

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How do you attract talent to Ion Game Design?

We offer internships through Future Games. They have really talented artists.

How do boardgames fit into Sweden's games industry?

We have some employees who have worked at digital games studios like Paradox so we still have contact with digital games, but other than that we are separate from the others. I do hope to change this in the future because a lot of the

processes are the same when it comes to game creation.

What makes Ion Game Design unique?

That we have so many females! We are a 50/50 split.

We have a studio model with 2 illustrators and artists in house as well as other designers in house. We do a lot of research when it comes to art and game mechanics to ensure that our games stand out when it comes to being based in reality or history.



How important is diversity in what you produce?

It's very important to me. It's a really conscious decision every time we create characters. In our game StationFall, our design Bjorn took the time to research the diversity of the world and reflect that in the game both ethnically and gender-wise.

What are you most proud of as CEO?

I'm proud of the team we have built here. I think it's a fantastic team or people working here and we are creating amazing products. When you finally hold the product in your hand and see people playing the games and getting so involved it is just amazing to see!

One participant noted that there are many shops and creators in Sweden that specialise in modern boardgames, saying she has a large collection of boardgames at home and plays regularly with her kids, friends and family (Tjerberg 2022). Another noted that tabletop, card and drinking games are a large part of the Swedish culture (Garfunkle 2022).

More research is needed to better understand the impact boardgames have had on Sweden's Creative Industries, including how education, infrastructure and investment have impacted the culture.



CONCLUSION

It is not only the videogame industry that has contributed to the success of Sweden's Creative Industries. Sweden's unique culture around creativity, combined with education, infrastructure and investment have led to its continued success.



The early adoption of comics as art led to their implementation in education. As such, creative industries such as comics and games have been implemented in education from a young age and are seen as legitimate careers. There are now ample opportunities for people to study comics and videogames in multiple locations from trade schools and University programmes, to dedicated craft schools.

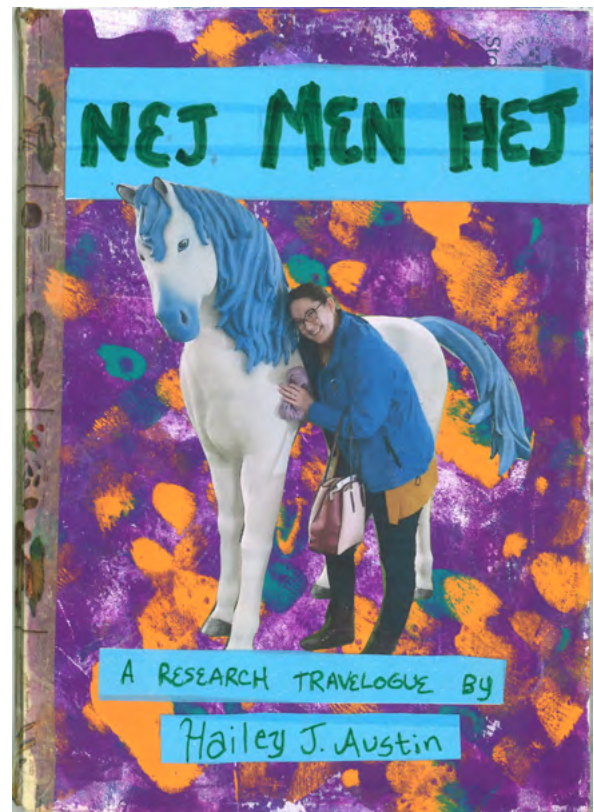
Infrastructure like the Kulturhuset and Serieteket have had a significant impact on the availability of creative materials like comics and fanzines and have championed the creative industries while giving people the space to explore them. They have positively impacted both the comics and videogames industries.

Fanzines are an uncredited and integral part of the Swedish Creative Industries, mapping onto the feminist movement and sharing many distribution methods. Zines have also allowed many comics creators to try out ideas and get feedback before creating entire graphic novels.

Government investments into home computer grants and games clusters have led to a progressive uptake of

technology and coding. This has also allowed for private investment in games and tech companies, making Stockholm one of the best places for start-ups. There is room for improvement, however, when it comes to investments into the comics industry.

Sweden's Creative Industries are able to be female-forward because of progressive government policies, company initiatives, and the feminist movement. Maternity and paternity leave, affordable childcare, and having women in leadership positions have made it so that women can both succeed and stay in the creative industries. Though Sweden's videogame industry is only made up of around 20% female employees, women are visible and the need for diversity is present. There are several stand out companies like Star Stable that have significantly more female staff. When it comes to comics, there is now nearly an even split in men and women in the industry. This is due to the Swedish feminist movement adopting comics and inspiring more women to create them.



For more research content, see *Nej Men Hej: A Travelogue Zine*, a creative practice companion zine to this report. <https://rke.abertay.ac.uk/en/publications/nej-men-hej-a-research-travelogue-by-hailey-j-austin>

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