WIG Summer Summit Series
June 23, 2021
“Dispelling the Myths of STEAM Careers: The Video Game Industry Is Powering Up”

Featuring:
California State Assemblywoman Autumn Burke (moderator)
Kayla Belmore, Senior Producer, Gearbox Software
Winslow Caliwag-Gomez, Video Game Producer, Walt Disney Games
Michael Lee, Senior Director, Next-Gen Talent & Global Co-Chair of BEAT!, the Black Employee Resource Group at Electronic Arts (EA)

Representative Christie Carpino: Hello everybody. Welcome to Women In Government’s Summer Summit Series event, “Dispelling the Myths of STEAM Careers and Creating Diversity in the Workforce: The Video Game Industry is Powering Up.” I’m Connecticut Representative and Women In Government Board Secretary Christie Carpino. We are excited to partner with the Entertainment Software Association and its philanthropic arm, the ESA Foundation, to bring you this insightful discussion with national leaders on innovation and inclusion in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math, otherwise known as STEAM.

Women In Government is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization guided by an all-legislator Board of Directors. We do have to keep a few housekeeping rules to make it a bit easier for everybody. Please introduce yourselves and where you are from in the Chat Box on the Zoom tool bar. If you have questions or comments during the program, please write them in the Chat Box at any time, and I am sure our presenters will do their best to make sure that they get you an answer. And please tweet at Women In Government today using the hashtags #WIGSummerSummit and #InvestInThem - very appropriately titled.

Thank you to our Summer Summit sponsors for making this event possible. We couldn’t do it without them. We would like to thank the Women In Government Business Council and our Associate Members for their unwavering support.

And now, I’d like to turn it over to Anastasia Staten, Executive Director of the ESA Foundation, for a few words to kick off this discussion. Anastasia, take it away.

Anastasia Staten: Thank you very much for that warm welcome. It’s nice to be here with everyone today. As it was mentioned, my name is Anastasia, and I am the Executive Director of the ESA Foundation, which is the philanthropic arm of the video game industry. And we are happy today to partner with Women In Government and our colleagues at the Entertainment Software Association for this second discussion in a planned series throughout the rest of the year.

I know that for us at the ESA Foundation, we spend a lot of time working on initiatives to provide educational opportunities for America’s youth, particularly focused on the STEM and STEAM fields. We have definitely found through our work in schools and after school programs but also our scholarship program that focuses on exclusively on women and minorities in video game arts and sciences that increasing women’s participation starts with debunking myths and perceptions and in discussing the need to build an intentional pipeline around these underrepresented communities.
The myths about women and girls and STEAM matter because children, particularly girls as young as six, start to show that they internalize stereotypes - one of them being that they are not brilliant, and they can’t succeed at science and math. And this can lead to what we have discussed in an earlier session with Women In Government, something called the “dream gap,” where girls fail to live up to their potential because they stopped dreaming about certain careers and internalized those stereotypes at such young age.

So, before we kick off and turn it over to Assemblywoman Burke, I just wanted to state a few facts, just to sort of frame our discussion today. Women make up 28% of the workforce in STEAM fields – which therefore, they are vastly outnumbered in majoring in most college fields as well. The gender gaps are particularly high in some of fastest growing and highest paid jobs of the future like computer science and engineering, and these are two highly sought-after career paths in the video game industry. Also, just to set the stage, these numbers - that 28% - also tacks to the number of women in the video game industry.

So, we are very much a reflection of the national workforce averages, and we hope to continue to partner with organizations like Women In Government and all our other partners to help those numbers go up. So now, let us turn it over to Assemblywoman Burke, our moderator today’s discussion. We hope that this series will be inspiring and help us all create and implement policies in our states.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** Thanks, Anastasia. Now, please join me in welcoming today’s panelists. In the interest of time, their full bios are posted in the Chat Box. Our panelists are Kayla Belmore of Gearbox Studios, Michael Lee of Electronic Arts, and Winslow Caliwag-Gomez of Walt Disney Games.

Video games are the world’s biggest form of entertainment, bigger than box office movies and music combined. I am so proud to have a number of these publishers and developers in my district. These companies offer a myriad of great career opportunities for talented and STEAM-focused women, including game designers, coders, software engineers, animators, and so much more.

The distinguished group of industry professionals joining us today will help us explore these opportunities by sharing their stories and experiences and show us how underrepresented individuals, specifically women, can pursue a growing number of STEAM careers. Like I tell the kids in my district, “Math leads to Madden.” So, to get started, I think it is important to hear from our panelists about the paths they took to land in their current roles. So, first, Kayla, let’s start with you.

**Kayla Belmore:** Hi, my name is Kayla Belmore, and I am a Senior Producer at Gearbox Software, currently working on the recently announced “Tiny Tina's Wonderlands.” So, my path to get into the games industry certainly wasn’t easy or straight. I did not grow up with a lot of money and didn’t really know what opportunities were open to me, so I wanted a quick degree that would get me a decent salary in a decent career to help support my family. So, I went to college for engineering with hopes to be a biomechanical engineer. That didn’t quite work out as planned. I ran out of money and needed to
help support my family, so, I dropped out of school for a little while, having learned a lot at least from being in school for a few years.

I got the opportunity through a friend who had worked retail with me who had gotten into the video games industry as a Personal Assistant. She asked if I wanted to do a job like hers, and I interviewed and got the job and started in the games industry in a more female-centric career as a Personal Assistant, just getting people's coffees and sandwiches and scheduling meetings.

But I leveraged that opportunity and what I had learned in engineering school to take all of the lessons I could about tech, about the industry, and about production specifically because I worked for the director of product development. And I “yes”-ed everything to death - everything they had me try, everything they had me learn, and this was all in 2010 to 2021. And I got to be the boss of my own project at any given time. We have about 200 people working on it, so it is pretty huge. But it took a long time to get there, and it certainly wasn’t an easy road, nor was it one that I felt was open to me. I didn’t know I could ever work in games. It is a dream.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke**: Thank you for that. And Winslow, what about your path?

**Winslow Caliwag-Gomez**: Yeah, so my name is Winslow Caliwag, and I am a producer at the Walt Disney Games team at the Walt Disney Company. And just like Kayla mentioned, I did not know working in video games was a path for me until the opportunity presented itself, and it was a dream of mine. I started as a Games Intern at the Walt Disney Company right out of college.

So, like most of us, right when we graduate, we kind of start job hunting and searching, and I graduated with a business marketing degree, thinking that I would go work at a marketing agency or company and their marketing team. But then came across this Game Productions internship at Disney, and I thought, “Wow what an awesome, cool opportunity! I am passionate about video games. I play video games all the time.” It was a hobby, and I thought you know, maybe I should apply, maybe my passions will come through, and maybe I could get this opportunity. And it was always a dream of mine to work for the Walt Disney Company.

And when applying the recruiter thought, “Oh my God, you are the perfect candidate. Let us put you through.” Thus, then getting the internship and kind of seeing what it takes to make a video game, it was super insightful. It was also super awesome just to be doing something that I love in my career. And from there, I kind of worked my way up from an intern to now being a producer, and I get to manage and teams for upcoming games and getting current live op games that we have. I work with teams and developers around the world, which is super awesome. So, just making those connections and networking and just building those relationships with other game developers out there is really cool. But yeah, that’s kind of my path and how I got here. I have been in the game industry for about six years now with Disney, and it’s just been a super great opportunity to be working in video games.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke**: Thank you. And Michael, what was your path?
Michael Lee: Yes, I got into the gaming industry quite late in my career. I graduated from Vanderbilt University in ’92 with a degree in mechanical engineering, and in 1990, that was when it was announced that Atlanta would win the Olympic Games for the Centennial Olympics. And I was like, “I have to work there,” so I ended up finding a role there, and it just opened up my eyes to some opportunities of working in entertainment and games. So, I think that was kind of like a precursor to my current role.

But most of my career has been within IT project, program, and portfolio management. I was actually living in the Netherlands from 2010 to 2016 when the opportunity came up for me to repatriate back into the country and move to the West Coast for the first time and to join EA. They needed someone to come in and stand up the Product and Program Management team dedicated to our Enterprise Security portfolio. So, I joined the team as a part of IT, with a dedicated line in to our Chief Information Security Officer to stand this team up and professionalize and improve the process by which we execute our security projects.

That same year, I was asked to be one of the founding Board members for an Employee Resource Group (ERG), which I had never heard of before I joined EA, that would be dedicated to our black professionals at EA. So, we stood up BEAT!, which the organization eventually named it, and through BEAT! And through our Black Employee Resource Group. I then got involved with our other employee resource groups dedicated to women, to Latinx, to people who have different abilities, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and the common thread with all of these ERG’s is to provide more exclusive opportunity for underrepresented talent, including women, including Latinx, including African American/Black.

And I would constantly be engaging with our Talent Acquisition team, so much so that, when the previous Director of our Universal Relations team stepped away for a new opportunity, our VP of Talent Acquisition asked me to step in and take over the role, even though I do not come from a talent acquisition background. So, that made the transition initially on a secondment that’s now become an indefinite or permanent role to run our Universal Relations team which we rebranded as a Next Gen Talent, and here we are five years later.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Thank you for that, Michael. I have no idea what an Enterprise Security portfolio is, but I am glad you are there doing it. So, we will move on. Thank you all for sharing your stories. I think your collective stories and experience add an important context to the next part of the discussion, the myth busting part of the discussion.

So, we will start with myth number one, “Girls and women just aren’t interested in STEAM careers.” I hope that no one on this call actually believes that. It is a myth, and rates of female participation in STEAM fields correlate not with interest but with inclusivity. Women and specifically women of color are often discouraged from pursuing their dreams. In fact, I have a colleague in the Assembly who was basically told by her high school counselor that she was never going to amount to anything, and had she listened to him, she would not be a member of the State Assembly today.
We have to build a community that encourages women and girls to dream and to dream big - and I know that our speakers have already spoken to that - and that they can be anything they want in this world. That is certainly what I tell my daughter every day, and I heard someone say that people may be telling girls they are not brilliant, or they think they are not brilliant. I dare anyone to tell my daughter who is turning seven this week that she is not brilliant. She is 100% sure. She is quite intelligent, and probably smarter than I am, but that is a different story.

Kayla, growing up, the schools you attended did not offer the same access to engineer training. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? Despite that, in college, you pursued a degree in biochemical engineering. The ratio to men and women in engineering was 10 to 1, and you felt behind other students who had the opportunity to participate in pre-college engineering programs. Tell us how that’s brought you to your success today.

Kayla Belmore: So, the vocational and technical schools around did offer some of the programs in drafting and basic electricity. Schools that I went to just didn’t offer that, and those programs were not really as much advertised or geared towards women. So, getting into those, I had never seen the program AutoCAD. And everybody else in the class had had a mini-certification or touched it. So, there were a lot of moments like that. My first time at a circuit board, I panicked because they are like “Oh, this could electrocute you and kill you.” And half the class already knows how to use one, and you don’t. So, there were just a lot of moments there where I felt like I did not fit in. I felt like I did not have the prerequisites, even though we were all starting out in 100’s and 101’s, most of the male students definitely had a leg up in the way that they were able to approach it and understand the subject matter.

But I kind of hit my stride, ironically just before I had to leave school, when we did a class on robotics where the entire class was in project management and had to build a robot, present it to potential buyers, and then show its functionality off as part of the MATE competition. And even then, I wasn’t a coder. I wasn’t a great electrical engineer. I didn’t know as much about how to do all the circuitry off the bat. And I certainly was not our best CAD designer since everybody else had already had a certification. But what I could do was help them manage time, write reports, translate everything that they were saying into the kind of language that you present to a buyer or a potential safety inspector, and keep everything together and keep the team on time and on task. I wished at that time that there was a career that allowed me to do that because I thought, “Gosh, I’m pretty good at this.”

I did not know that project management with something open to me, and at the time, nobody had even suggested that, like, “Hey, you seem to have some skills here.” It wasn’t until I started working in the games industry for someone who was a Project Manager that I realized that there is something I can do that I have natural skills in, and that I don’t feel behind in, and I fit into. So, it took a good long time to find that, and it certainly wasn’t something I learned in school previously to that in middle school or high school or was encouraged to do before I got into the games industry.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: It’s very interesting and actually quite unfortunate, but I’m super glad that you ended up where you are. Thank God you found your path.
Michael, from your position, through your professional lens in your current occupation, what would you do to encourage the next generation?

Michael Lee: Well, there are a number of things that we can do in both the private and public sector. Privately, I think initiating programs in underrepresented communities that expose young women and girls to opportunities in STEAM like the pilot program that we initiated in 2018 and 2019 called “Spawn Point” that may serve as the first entry point or the first point of exposure for young women to careers in STEAM and specifically careers in in gaming.

And then, providing the encouraging language that this is not something that is solely for men or for boys, to provide an encouraging atmosphere, to let them know that this is something that they could pursue, present examples of how they can do that - like people that they can model themselves after like our current Chief Studios Officer Laura Miele who is responsible for managing all our studios or our VP of Technical Services, our General Managers for some of our studios, all women at EA.

So, providing a picture of where they can be so that they don’t limit themselves to the opportunities that they envision for themselves, I think, is going to be huge. And then making sure that they have the technological resources and access to those resources in order for them to put in the 10,000 hours or so - so they can hone their skills and hone their capabilities so that when opportunity presents itself, they will be adequately prepared for it.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: And can you repeat the name of that program again?

Michael Lee: Yes, it is called “Spawn Point.” It is a program that we piloted in 2018, that summer of 2018, just in the East Bay area for underrepresented talent that was Black and Brown and female as a partnership between BEAT!, which again is the ERG that I co-chair, as well as Somos EA which is our Latinx Employee Resource Group.

We brought in about 30-some odd students from Oakland in the surrounding area and provided a two-week immersive program to expose them to what a career would be like at EA and the gaming industry. We performed another pilot in the summer of 2019, and now we are taking those lessons learned to think about how we can scale that for the near future outside of just California.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Fantastic! So, moving on to myth number two, “Year after year, students of color increase their share of earned bachelor’s degrees in STEAM.” The fact is that years after GAIN and despite an increase in federal funding to encourage the pursuit of STEAM degrees, the racial and ethnic gap of bachelor’s degrees in STEAM going to black students keeps growing. That is according to the national data from the National Science Foundation, and that gap gets even worse when you apply the gender lens. I would like to ask you to speak to your experience in that. Winslow, would you mind going first?
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Winslow Caliwag-Gomez: I think that, being a woman in the video game industry, it is a male-led industry, and I love seeing women of color like myself trailblazing through. And going through school, bachelor’s degrees in STEAM did not seem like an opportunity for myself. Again, I think there are those stigmas growing up that we are taught very early on. But now, being in this industry and seeing women just kick butt in these engineering and coding roles, I think, is super awesome. And I encourage students that I speak with today, especially women of color, to break those boundaries and to keep pushing. I think it’s just a great opportunity to be a part of kind of this glass breaking ceiling within the industry and with STEAM careers for potential students.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Thank you. Michael, your thoughts on the gap?

Michael Lee: It’s a complex problem because I think the environment that we find students in contributes a lot to their vision of who they can be. Our previous reliance upon standardized testing, which I think we have demonstrated has a lot of bias in that, can unintentionally weed out a lot of talent from the funnel that leads into careers within STEAM. Again, people need to be able to see what the opportunities are. They need to be able to mirror or reflect the career aspirations that they have in their mentors and in the community that they see. So, I think all those things are contributing to possibly the diminishing.

There is an economic component to those that goes beyond just the educational funding that provides a barrier or an obstacle for them to overcome in order to get into these opportunities, so I think it is going to require a collaboration between the private and the public sector in order to democratize these opportunities and provide equitable opportunities. There are other forces at play that are acting as negative friction to get this younger generation of talent into STEAM careers and into technical majors at universities that allows them to be able to get to these careers. And that’s before even getting to the bias in the recruiting process for the employment opportunities that we’re trying to neutralize.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Right, and to your point and so many of you on the panel, it is so hard when you just don’t even know what exists for you. I know young people in my community, especially people of color, don’t even know that college is an option. So, those degrees - that is their first challenges. They don’t know anybody who has gone to college, and even if they get into college, the fear of entering a university when they have never seen one or been to one - all those things are just at the beginning of the process of not knowing what is available to you. And I am sure many of the State Representatives on this call have that experience in their districts. So, thank you all for pointing that out.

So, now we will move to myth number three, “STEAM professionals are not creative.” Well, I definitely think our panelists have cleared that up. But the fact is that obviously hard sciences like mathematics have their place in STEAM professionals, but so do other skills like problem solving and critical thinking. There are plenty of STEAM-related degrees in technology and engineering that need big picture, mission-driven thinkers, which speak to the video game industry.
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Winslow, it is my understanding that during your internship at Disney you discovered so many other roles you didn’t know existed, especially in the making of video games. And Kayla, you have spoken to a similar experience. I think it’s critical to remember that A in STEAM because we can’t forget the arts are critical to the video game industry. I would like for the two of you, as well as others, to join us in explaining the importance of big picture thinking and arts in the development process. Winslow, would you get us started?

Winslow Caliwag-Gomez: Sure. Starting in the gaming industry as intern, again jumping in knowing nothing about what it takes to make video games, I was actually pretty shocked to see how many creative roles there were in the game developing process. For example, a narrative designer. So, we have a narrative designer on our team, where they are the backbone in creating the stories that we tell in the video games that players play, and they create back stories to the characters. They build world rules. And all those creative ideas and stories really come from somebody who does not 100% came from an engineering background or is great at technology. They came from more of a creative background and an English background. They are needed in the process through developing a game.

And then we also have concept artists as well. So, not an animator or a coder and engineer, but someone who just works and makes concept designs for potential worlds or characters - even for game features as well. And additionally, leadership I considering being an art as well - being able to creatively problem solve and think on the fly to be able to push the game and lead a team to the finish line. And so, there are a lot of creative roles, other than what you may think just from a technological standpoint. You don’t have to be good at math, and you don’t have to be good at science to be in this industry. So, there are a lot of creative roles. We can give an opportunity to those who are looking to be in the industry but do not maybe see themselves being an engineer or a coder.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Thank you. Kayla, your thoughts?

Kayla Belmore: Very much the same experience as Winslow coming into the industry. Surprised, and especially in project management, when you look at a holistic view of the project, just how many creative roles there are in the arts. The games cannot happen without fine artists as well as technical artists like effects artists and animators. Sound designers, composers make the music that creates the ambience in the game, the narrative designers create the stories we listen to, actors and actresses that provide the voices for the characters to make us feel something while we are playing.

All of these things are not necessarily the most tech focused. They’re all within the arts, and some even are high up in the fine arts, and they are absolutely needed to make a game look and feel immersive. And those are some of the first things that might grab you before you even touch the gameplay or the design of it. And even the more technical people have to be creative. Finding the fun and making something fun is challenging and a huge creative challenge.

Even some of the things we ask of our incredibly technical people like our programmers involve creative problem solving. We’re not just recalling files or doing basic look up tables. We’re asking them to make
weapons, shoot weapons that run around and talk to you. That is something we have done at Gearbox, so, our coders are very much appreciated there. No matter what you are doing, you have to be creative in the games industry, but you do not necessarily also have to be technical.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke**: Thank you. And Michael, your thoughts?

**Michael Lee**: Well, I actually had to do a little quick research on our intern program. We’ve got hundreds of interns working with us this summer right now, and we’ve hired even more in the springtime. Some of the roles that we have are in user experience, and user interface, graphic artists, tech artists. We have our first music intern in a while. We have concept artists, environmental artists, animation, and narrative.

I agree with Kayla that the technology enables us to be able to produce the games, but it’s the stories and the visuals that actually provide the captivating element that makes it so engaging for players of all ages and from all walks of life. And even our marketing internships run the gamut of strategy and brand and media planning and public relations. All of those also have components of creativity in them as well. So, there are quite a few opportunities. You don’t only have to be a computer science major wanting to code games to be working in the gaming industry. I guess our stories and definitely my story is an example of that. I don’t come from a coding background. I’ve got a mechanical engineering degree, and here I am.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke**: Anyone who’s seen a video game of late knows that they are incredibly creative. There are worlds unto their own, and they are amazing to look at.

**Michael Lee**: I might add that they are also an opportunity to reflect and influence the culture, too. So, even though I’ve been working in IT and security and talent acquisition, I’ve had the opportunity to influence some of the narratives of our games, whether it be representing a fictional Southern city and need for speed and the dynamic of, let’s say, Cuban American citizens that serve as non-player characters in our games, to just the way and how people of color are presented in some of our other properties as well.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke**: Yeah, the cultural component is really important. In the video games I’ve seen they do enhance the richness of the games, and it did take me a minute to learn what a non-player opponent is. I do know who they are now, so I am slowly catching up.

But moving on to myth number four, “Girls do not test well in math and science.” This is a completely dangerous narrative. Racial bias is persuasive, and according to a study in the “Harvard Educational Review,” the SAT’s are no exception. A study found evidence of racial bias in the SAT that was rooted in the economic disadvantages experienced by communities of color, and I know Michael had brought that up earlier. This bias plays a role in creating some of the racial inequities in our college system.
I was happy to hear the UC system will no longer use the SAT or ACT scores as criteria to determine admission to our colleges or award scholarships. As a legislator and a Black mother, I welcome those systematic changes in our UC system, but there’s so much more work we need to do to encourage girls to see themselves in STEAM professions. The truth is, given equal resources and the absence of systematic bias, the conversation no longer centers around naive myths like this one.

I know you are all are not test experts yourselves, but I would like to hear your thoughts on this subject and how changing the way girls are taught STEAM subjects and evaluated so that their true knowledge and talents might help lead them to careers in the video game industry. Kayla, let’s start with you.

Kayla Belmore: So, this is a really fun and interesting one for me because I grew up being told, “It’s okay if you don’t understand math. Girls just aren’t as good.” For some reason, the science component escaped my household there. So, I always thought I was great at science but terrible at math, and that became pervasive into all of the courses that I took. I would get to algebra and feel scared or have anxiety during tests and not be able to do well at some of the basic stuff. But in chemistry class, I could balance an equation with no problem, and I didn’t make the connection that that was also math because it was not labeled as just math. It was labeled as science.

It wasn’t until college that I met people that said, “Oh, you’re not bad at math. You just need to learn how to study.” And I worked with a study group and ended up getting A’s and B’s in all of the hard calculus courses just because I tried. I wasn’t told, “You cannot do that,” or “That’s natural for you,” or “Just don’t even bother. You’re bad at it.” I just had to have somebody give me that confidence that I could try and learn a different way and be able to accomplish that.

And in terms of testing, the actual SAT Prep teacher at the school had already made sexist comments to me about girls not being as smart or as good at all sorts of certain subjects - and certainly not people who are into comic books and video games - and that I was inappropriate in my existing. So, I was at a disadvantage from the get-go because I refused to take an SAT Prep course, which was the only semi-free one near us, at least lower cost because it was provided by the school, because I didn’t want to be taught by that person and berated every class.

So, it really makes a difference what you’re told and the language we use around it, what people believe, especially when that starts as a young kid. And if we have a lot of bias in the teachers and in the educators, that’s going to discourage people from pursuing their dreams or feeling like they are smart or belong.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Thank you Kayla. Very, very well said. Winslow, your thoughts?

Winslow Caliwag-Gomez: Yeah, I think growing up in and going to school, there weren’t many STEM opportunities or any clubs or anything that may have pointed out some interest in math or science that may have also facilitated the creative side of me. Going through school, I was really great at math. I love math. I had teachers who would point out, “You’re in this lower-level math class. You need to be in an
honors, or you need to be elevated to a different math class.” It was super great to hear, and it made me feel good. But at the same time there wasn’t really anything that would help facilitate my great ability for math but also my great ability for art - because I also did have a passion for art. I actually started college as an art student but then diverted to business marketing.

But at a young age, if someone were to have a club or have something to have my interest in math but then also let us be creative - I have siblings now where there are STEM programs. They are seeing programs in their schools, and they are part of them, and they get to build cool robots and build a community together and build friendships. And I think that’s so awesome, and that is something that I wish growing up that I had in elementary school or middle school or even high school. So, I think opportunities like that, where there are STEM programs that reach school districts across the nation, are really important to help bring out those kinds of opportunities or those interests in the younger generation and women and young girls and young girls of color.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** And Michael, your thoughts?

**Michael Lee:** I totally reject the false notion that women and girls don’t test well in math and science for the obviously stated reasons. Again, we’re not experts on testing procedures, but we know that we tend to standardize on one teaching method when we know that individuals have different learning styles. If we standardize on one teaching method, who defines what that standard is?

Well, if it is white males that are making the decisions, and if we are modeling our tests practices primarily on males or a particular ethnic group, then it’s going to be borne out in the results of those exams. I think that we need to take a little bit more nuanced and academic approach. If we really want to provide opportunities for young girls, for girls of color for different communities, we need to study the best ways to be able to instruct them.

We need to negate any notions that this is about balancing out some sort of inherent deficiency but recognize that we just need to eliminate the biases in the way we think, in order to be able to deliver that academic lesson to that child and then make sure that we are providing encouraging language in an encouraging environment so they never feel like, “I am going against the grain by pursuing this career.”

There are plenty of anecdotal examples of people excelling within math, women specifically excelling within math and science, so it just does not bear that out. We should not even be operating from that from that the false premise.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** No, absolutely. Everything all three of you said are good reminders for all of us on this phone call as we design and look at, from our state’s perspective, our education system, so thank you.
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So, moving to our last myth number five. And after that, we will move to questions. For those who have questions, please just put them in the Chat Box. We will do our best to pull them out as quickly as we can.

Myth number five, “Girls of color are not interested in and, therefore, do not perform well in math and science courses, which discourage them from pursuing STEAM careers.” We did just talk about that, but the fact is that recent studies show that race and class-based prejudices - not ability - help determine whether students of color pursue math and science studies and STEAM careers.

Moreover, given the opportunity and tools to do so, women and girls of color outperform their male counterparts in interest and in performance. We know it will take a village, including private sector, to create more equitable access to education and opportunity. So, my question for all of you is are there examples of work companies, possibly your own, are doing to counteract these class and race-based biases and enable girls of color, in particular, to engage with STEAM?

Michael, I know you have a lot of experience, and you have spoken to it a bit, but we will let you go ahead and elaborate.

Michael Lee: Yeah, you are asking what we can do in the private sector?

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: Yes, I know you spoke to some of what you are already doing, but anything else that that you think would be helpful that this audience could use.

Michael Lee: Yeah, so there are a number of things that we’re doing that I would say fall within two categories, which is pre-skilling talent and then removing bias in our systems of recruitment and evaluation.

So, in the pre-skilling area, I mentioned the pilot program that we did in 2018 and 2019, “Spawn Point,” and that we are reevaluating it to provide more scale so that we can relaunch it in other locations as well. We also are piloting a program called a “Virtual Experience Program” with a company called Forage. We’re providing a software engineering virtual experience program that is complimentary to all students and provides them a view or taste of what it would be like to work as a software engineer at EA. And we just rolled that program out and want to continue to roll it out at academic institutions, specifically, the core schools that we’re particularly targeting to raise the level of underrepresented talent that we deliver.

Also, we are reevaluating our recruiting process and where we recruit geographically in order to again provide more equitable opportunities for underrepresented talent, especially when it comes to women. So, doing a better job of recruiting in the Southeast, doing a better job of recruiting at schools that cater to more women in STEAM and more women in careers like Smith College or Spelman College in order to negate some of the legacy challenges that have prevented or have served as a slowing force for bringing in women and talent.
And then making sure that we are promoting women and giving them equitable opportunities in succession plans into positions of leadership so that they can mirror for that new generation what they can attain.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** Thank you. And Winslow, what are you and your company doing to break down some of these biases and racial stigmas?

**Winslow Caliwag-Gomez:** Yeah, so within the Walt Disney Company, we have several programs that kind of speak to specific biases, and in our group and division, with the Games Interactive Experience side, we have programs like Girls Who Code and Women In Tech. We want to instill confidence in our employees and in women that they can be also in tech.

Girls Who Code is not necessarily a program for our existing coders and engineers, but it’s actually open to our entire company. So, for those women who have interest in coding and may not have a role in tech at the present moment, they’re able to join this program, learn how to code, and kind of brush elbows with our employees who do know how to code and are in those roles and kind of give them that confidence and also education of what their abilities are in tech.

We also do have D&I program as well, diversity and inclusion. The stories that we create in games are interactive experiences. We want to make sure that we’re also representing everybody, and that way the younger generation seeing the stories that we’re telling now within our games see that representation and break that bias. We are having people of color in our games, we’re making sure we are touching upon all groups as well as all our characters within Disney, and we want to tell those stories. But I think the biggest thing is just with our employees that we are doing internally is just giving them that confidence that all our roles, women roles especially, do not have to be Executive Assistants or something within the arts. You know, there are tech roles. So, I think from the Walt Disney Company, that’s what we’re doing.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** Thank you, and seeing ourselves in the actual video games is an incredibly important part of the whole fabric of what we’re talking about. So, thank you for that, and Kayla, what would you say?

**Kayla Belmore:** So, Gearbox internally, we have a saying that “Our job is to entertain the world, but to entertain the world, we have to be of the world,” which means putting a focus on diversity and inclusion.

So, we have started up a diversity committee to sort of take a whole bunch of disparate efforts that people were doing - like some of the coders and the code team were working with Girls Who Code. I had a particular interest in early childhood outreach to get a face in front of kids saying, “Yes, you can do this job. It does not matter what background you come from. You can absolutely do it.” And then the diversity and inclusion group sort of came together, created working groups for various interest...
backgrounds and race and sexual orientation to help us look at how we’re recruiting, where we recruit, which colleges we’re looking at, and what kind of programs we are doing.

And actually, we get buy in from our executive level and C levels to help us with our outreach and better do these programs, which has been super exciting. We have done some things through that program like the “See Myself” program that sends messages to underrepresented populations and kids, specifically for STEAM, letting them know that someone that looks like you is showing up to say, “You can do this.” And it’s been absolutely a joy to watch the groups grow and the working groups be able to suggest things to management that are taken to heart.

Recently, we started a thing that we don’t look for cultural fits anymore because that sort of has an idea that everyone is going to gravitate towards what’s familiar. We look for cultural addition instead - who can add something to it, who can enrich our environment, who can we have that has a superpower, as my boss Ray would say, that makes Gearbox better? And all of those start with changing how we look at how we’re recruiting and how we can maintain and make sure that we have people that are from marginalized underrepresented groups stay and feel welcome at our company.

So, it takes a lot, and it takes both looking at the here and now and looking at the future of game development and STEAM careers to make sure that we’re also putting outreach to those who haven’t seen us yet and making sure they know that they are part of our thinking and our future and careers too.

Assemblywoman Autumn Burke: I want to thank you all. We’re not done with you yet, but I wanted to take just this quick moment to thank you for your insightful comments so far on our myths and all the work that you are doing. It gives us all something to think about when we consider our contributions and our responsibility in the public sector. So, thank you for leading the way on some of these things. We’ve really enjoyed the discussion, but now we are going to take questions and answers from the audience.

I am going to go through the Chat Box. If you haven’t submitted questions yet, please feel free to do so. I did also see Michael put a link in the Chat Box to some of his programs. I’d like to invite Winslow and Kayla to do the same.

Let’s start with the first question I have here, which is from Florida Representative Marie Woodson. What would you say to young women who want to enter the tech world? We can start with Winslow.

Winslow Caliwag-Gomez: Sure! For young women who want to enter the tech world, I would say that any social biases that you may have heard while growing up or from fellow teachers or anything like that or fellow students, there is no limit to what you can do, especially in technology, math or science or coding or engineering or anything within a tech career. There is no limit. I would say that yes, there might be hurdles that one young woman may have to go over going into the tech career, but I think nowadays there are a lot of programs and a lot of foundations and a lot of school districts who are
making sure that we are breaking down those barriers and we are breaking down those stigmas and biases to make women feel more comfortable for roles in tech that they might want to pursue, or they might want to even take interest in.

I think for young women, seek out a program or a club or something within their school that they may be able to find people like them who are interested in tech, math, and science. And that having a community gives them that confidence booster to actually pursue what they want, especially as a woman in technology.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** Thank you, and Kayla, would you like to weigh in?

**Kayla Belmore:** Sure, for younger kids in middle and elementary school, finding clubs like when Winslow said is absolutely key if you can if you have access to them. Even stuff on the Internet - there’s a ton of different programs on the Internet that help you build games that will help you understand how even Minecraft - people can modify it. It is very easy to start there, so try everything you can because if you don’t know what you want to do, maybe it might help to just put your hands in a few things and give it a shot. And if it’s not your thing, try something else, and clubs, activities, and online resources can help you do that.

For high schoolers thinking about what they’re going to do with the rest of their lives, it helps to do a little research. Look at tech companies, video game companies, and the kind of jobs they are hiring for and that are available. Then, you’ll see things like marketing and project management, all those other things that aren’t quite so obvious career paths that will get you into a tech industry, the games industry, any of the STEAM careers.

So, it might not be something as obvious to pursue, and there might be more options for something say like project management, because that is close to my heart, that are easier to find as careers or college programs. It’s very easy to find a scrum master program. It might not be as easy to find a game design program.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** Great, and Michael?

**Michael Lee:** Yeah again, I’d love to be able to at some point in the near future be able to say that we’ll have a “Spawn Point” program that will support middle school and high school students. In the meantime, I think the Forage thing that we shared is one mechanism by which they can gain exposure.

There’s tons of free material on YouTube and Twitch to learn about games. We really do appreciate people that show a natural passion for it. So, even if they are not developing the game on their own, if they blogging about games, or they are providing some sort of social media content around games, that shows interest and also helps them to delve behind the scenes beyond just playing the game.
There are free game platform tools that they can practice like the Unreal Game Development platform. Yeah, I mean, I am jealous of this generation. They've got so many resources available to them at their fingertips. It’s just a search away if they are truly motivated.

**Assemblywoman Autumn Burke:** That's great. I want to say thank you to all of you, and thank you for everyone for joining us. I want to also thank the panelists. I’m an African American woman who has a daughter who is going to STEAM camp for two weeks this summer, and really it's because so many of you have created that pathway for her. So, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for everything that you've done and everything that you are doing.

To the state legislators and those on this call, thank you for having us today. Stay tuned for the upcoming WIG-ESA webinar coming later this year. All Summer Summit resources will be posted on the WIG website following each day's program. I also encourage everyone to check out the Policy Library featuring WIG’s newest tool kit on [Malnutrition](http://malnutrition.com).

We hope to see everyone tomorrow at the Summer Summit Series session. Check out the link in the Chat to view the full agenda. Thank you again for joining us today, and thank you to our panelists. You all have been wonderful.

We will see you all soon. Stay safe and healthy.