

Big Opportunities Are Everywhere for Software Developers...

Q & A with Laura Grondahl

Want to build virtual worlds that can help people do their jobs better? That's just what computer scientist Laura Grondahl spends her days doing. Laura is a software developer at LlamaZOO Interactive, a growing VR/AR/MR 3D visualization company based in Victoria. She works in a diverse group building software for clients in a variety of industries, and leads a team in building data fusion applications for mining.



Laura graduated from the University of Victoria with an honours combined physics and computer science degree. During her education, she completed four work terms at Forte Consulting, Isolation Network Canada, Nokia (in Ottawa) and at UVic's Computer Science department. Laura also served as president of Women in Engineering and Computer Science at UVic, where she provided leadership to its student members.

With this in mind, we asked Laura a few questions about her path in the tech world.

Q: *What were some of your challenges as a woman in the field of technology?*

A: University is meant to be challenging, which is why completing your degree is such an accomplishment. However, I've seen this challenge grow to an unfair level for women in the field who are not supported and are treated differently based on their gender. As I approached my degree and worked through the many years of hard work to complete it, I was fortunate to have family and a significant other who never questioned my program choice. Not once did they say, "Don't you want to try something less technical?" or "Wouldn't you be happier in a field where you're not the minority?" To my frustration, these types of questions were asked by others around me, including counsellors and peers, but those most important to me never questioned my goal and I think that's critical.

Q: *What kinds of supports could make a difference in keeping more women in the area of computer science, engineering and mathematics?*

A: In addition to the support I received from my loved ones, I was also supported throughout my degree with scholarships. Looking back, I feel that in addition to providing financial support, these scholarships acted as personal confirmation that I belonged in this degree and was capable of success. When classmates assumed I would fail and assignments challenged me, I had this secret notion of

positivity in the back of my mind which assured me I was already succeeding. I find that too often we focus on the negative — we warn young women of the struggles they will face, rather than highlighting the positive aspects of the field itself. We should be supporting those who have found their way into the field, and with ongoing scholarships we can reconfirm their belonging and encourage them to continue through positive reinforcement and support.

Q: *As you see it, where are the biggest opportunities for women in tech?*

Big opportunities are everywhere! If you are in the field or entering it, please don't feel that you need to consider your gender when choosing your career goals. Think instead of what problems you're interested in solving and what products you would be passionate about developing. In my opinion, people grow to their full potential when they work in fields that are meaningful to them.

A: *What advice do you have for women who are just starting down this road?*

My advice would be to remember that the technical world is forever changing and you will never run out of things to learn. This means that there will be countless times in your education and career when you find something you don't know, but don't let these situations discourage you. When you're confused about a concept that others around you have mastered, remind yourself that you have also mastered concepts which will confuse them. Be confident in both learning and teaching along your journey because that's all part of the fun!

Thanks, Laura. Not only do you have a pretty cool job, but you're an inspiration to other women who are embarking on this path. Lead on!

Stay posted for more Q&A profiles over the coming weeks. And spread the word about the *Women in Technology/Aboriginal Women in Technology Scholarships* offered by the Irving K Barber BC Scholarship Society www.ikbbc.ca These two new scholarships present a real opportunity to support women's advancement in the fields of engineering, math and computer science.