



MORAL COMBAT

After enduring a vicious harassment campaign designed to chase women out of the video game industry, local female developers are trying taking back the art form from commercialization.

By Sarah Burke

During the last weekend in August, Anna Anthropy was sitting before a crowd at the annual San Francisco Zine Fest, second-guessing what she had come to say. The local video game creator had been invited to participate in a panel discussion called “Race, Gender, and the Future of Zines,” along with two other Oakland-based writers. Anthropy is the author of the 2012 book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How freaks, normals, amateurs, dreamers, dropouts, queers, housewives, and people like you are taking back an art form*, and she was prepared to give a spiel that she has delivered countless times in the past. It echoes the basic argument of her book and a belief that has driven her entire career: that video games can be empowering and exciting for marginalized people like herself, even if they wouldn’t consider themselves “gamers.” But this time, she felt wrong about following through.

In *Videogame Zinesters*, Anthropy argues that we should start making video games that embody the same underlying ethos as zines. They should be homemade, self-published, personal, direct transmissions of creative expression from designer to player. Not only is this type of independent authorship empowering, she writes, it often yields non-commercial products that are far more artistically innovative than anything created by a massive, corporate team. She also discusses the various tools by which anyone can begin making games without having to learn how to code.

Anthropy, a transwoman, made a similar argument on stage that day, and then arrived at the point in her talk at which she usually encourages everyone to start making their own games. She looked around the room and saw a crowd full of women, queer people, and people of color, and she realized she couldn’t finish. In the past month, online harassment against women who create or write about video games had grown extremely severe. So for the first time, she felt she couldn’t justify encouraging members of minority groups to become involved in games when she knew that also meant encouraging them to make themselves potential targets for vicious online abuse. “That was a really sad moment for me,” she recalled in an interview.

Anthropy is not only an author, but also a respected game developer in the world of indie and self-published video games. In 2012, she

released a Flash game called *Dys4ia*, which reflects her experiences undergoing hormone replacement therapy. The game functions a lot like a journal, chronicling her frustrations throughout the process, including finding a doctor who believed her and coping with painfully sensitive nipples. There is no objective to the game, and no player skill or strategy required. Rather, each segment functions as a visual, interactive metaphor through which the player experiences emotions akin to what Anthropy was feeling at that time. In one segment, which includes the text, “I feel weirder about my body than I ever have,” the player is prompted to fit a *Tetris*-like piece through a hole in a wall that is simply the wrong shape, evoking a sense of inevitable failure that can’t be described through words.

Dys4ia is not Anthropy’s favorite of her creations, but it catapulted her to popularity because it’s different than any game most people encounter. It represents the experience of a marginalized individual in a poetic way, and feels more like an artistic expression, defying what most people would think of as a game altogether. An increasing number of these games are being self-published online, highlighting the potential of the medium to become an intimate art form rather than just a commercial product.

But as these self-publishing game designers have begun gaining recognition, carving out space in the commercial gaming industry for a more diverse representation of experience, they have been met by a fierce backlash from the male-dominated “gamer” community. In August, a female game developer named Zoe Quinn became the target of an extensive online harassment campaign that not only forced her to flee her home in fear, but also ignited a war against women in the gaming industry. Hiding behind the shield of anonymity, hordes of gamers attempted to ruin the careers of many prominent female video game figures using brutal online tactics, including defamation and threats of violence. It became known as the “Gamergate” controversy.

Indeed, the blowback against female gamers has been so strong that Anthropy and other women throughout the video game world are now hoping to separate themselves entirely from the industry. But for Anthropy, switching careers is no easy challenge. Now thirty years old, she has built her entire life around making games.



As a kid, Anthropy would have ideas for games but didn't know how she could make them come to life. When she was 24, she decided to go to school for game design, so she moved to Plano, Texas to attend the Guildhall School at Southern Methodist University. After just two semesters she was kicked out because she butted heads with professors who thought her games were too experimental. The video game industry wants people who will work overtime on a team to bring a game to market, but Anthropy was interested in following through on her own concepts and ideas. It became clear to her that the industry wouldn't be the right fit.

As Anthropy later pointed out in *Videogame Zinesters* (and as many new media academics have also noted), when computers were first plugged into the walls of college campuses and laboratories, only engineers had the access, leisure time, and technical education to make games on them. Those engineers were primarily white middle-class men, and they developed games that reflected their fantasies and experiences, thereby attracting more people just like them. The gamer community, both professional and player, was thus dominated by young men, and as the industry grew, the makeup of its members remained largely the same.

As video game development became an extremely profitable industry controlled by large corporations, its core consumer base remained overwhelmingly male — especially at the most lucrative tier in gaming, referred to as AAA in the industry. Although statistics seem to show that the gaming audience has become more diverse over time, that is largely due to the inclusion of casual games, such as ones played on smartphones. The core video game audience that typifies the gamer identity — the demographic that doles out \$60 each for the high-profile, aggressively marketed games in the AAA tier — does not reflect the same diversity.

The games that these consumers want are violent, epic, and sexualized. According to the Entertainment Software Association, the top video games sold in 2013 were *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games) in which the player drives around a city killing people; *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (Activision), a military shooter; and *Madden NFL 25* (EA Sports), a football game. According to the same source, video games

played on consoles generated more than \$6 billion revenues last year. When including other platforms such as iOS, that figure swells to more than \$15 billion.

The huge amounts of money to be made selling video games to a narrow demographic has resulted in an industry that is risk-averse — a situation that favors the consistent regeneration of the same types of games with the same themes in slightly different armor each time. Prominent games publications, in turn, then write primarily about these games in order to generate enough ad revenue from the corporations who make them. That creates a cycle that stifles the medium's creative potential. Unsurprisingly, consumers from this dominant demographic are also often the people who end up entering the industry. In short, the video game industry has effectively built a fortress around itself that rarely opens its gates to people other than young, often white men.

Gradually, though, the landscape of video games began to diversify. In recent years, independent game developers have started chipping away at the fortress, using tools that allowed them to make games without the usual multimillion-dollar budget, often crowdfunding their financial support. Games like *Fez*, *Super Meat Boy*, and *Braid* excited critics and players with their refreshing puzzles and perspectives that ask the player to make his or her way through cute, Super Mario-like worlds that grow increasingly challenging to navigate. In 2012, *Indie Game: The Movie* bolstered the popularity of these games by documenting the stories of their development, and following the white males who made them.

Indie Game: The Movie is now a Netflix staple. It purports to provide an image of the games that are being made outside of the mainstream. But the young white males that star in the film also pretty accurately represent what the AAA tier looks like.

Beyond the indie gamers is the community of self-publishers of which Anthropy is part. These individuals make games almost entirely by themselves, and their work is fiercely personal and uncompromised. The same year that Anthropy released *Dys4ia*, a number of other queer developer underdogs also released several personal games.

Among them were Mattie Brice's *Mainichi*, which conveys her day-to-day experiences of depression and anxiety; Porpentine's *Twine Fiction Howling Dogs*, which deals with themes of escapism through a protagonist invested in virtual reality; and Merritt Kopas' *Lim*, which works as a metaphor for the pressures of normativity by positioning the player as a block that is attacked unless it changes to the same color as other blocks nearby.

However, the world of self-publishing is not an easy one to succeed in, especially if you want your games to be free to play, like those just described. In order to make a living, Anthropy has often had to sell her games to websites and sponsors who then gain rights to them. She sold *Dys4ia* to Newgrounds, but the deal only generated about \$3,000.

Recently, Anthropy and a few other self-publishing game designers and writers have begun making their rent via a platform called Patreon. The website allows supporters of an artist to give him or her a certain amount of money per month or per creation, almost like a monthly Kickstarter.

But being successful also requires a certain amount of visibility, which, in turn, exposes these daring creators to an onslaught of hatred and harassment.

In 2012, Canadian feminist pop-culture academic Anita Sarkeesian, who runs the blog *Feminist Frequency*, launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund an online video series called "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." In it, Sarkeesian planned to highlight harmful female stereotypes and unfair representations of women in video games.

The backlash was immediate. Shortly after Sarkeesian initiated the campaign, she was hit with an avalanche of online harassment. As *The New York Times* reported, she received rape and death threats, and was even sent drawings of her being raped by video game characters. She was also made the subject of a game that consisted entirely of punching her in the face and watching the bruises swell. Her online accounts were hacked, and her Wikipedia entry was smeared with porn and offensive



language.

After she posted examples of the harassment on her blog, her crowdfunding campaign took off. She received more than \$150,000 in donations — well over what she originally asked for. Sarkeesian subsequently went forward with “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” as the harassment directed toward her softened. But then two years later, the online attacks spiked again — this time also brutally targeting a game developer named Zoe Quinn.

When I met Quinn in July, she was sitting quietly in the Indiecade Arcade at GaymerX2, a small LGBTQ-centric indie game convention held in San Francisco. We spoke about her game, *Depression Quest*, which was receiving a bit of attention lately, and had been chosen to be featured at the convention. *Quest* is an interactive fiction game in which the protagonist is a woman suffering from depression. As the player goes through day-to-day life, he or she must make decisions about whether to succumb to the depression or fight it by choosing between options like staying in or going to a party. But the consequences aren’t simple; they present difficulties, like social anxiety and unfulfillment, gleaned from Quinn’s personal experience as someone who has suffered from the disorder for much of her life.

Quinn, who has lavender hair and cyborg-inspired tattoos down her arms, was soft-spoken yet approachable when we talked — open to discussing her game, yet obviously feeling a bit vulnerable having to relay that the inspiration for her game came from personal struggle. At the time of our interview, there was nothing especially remarkable about her. But a month later, online forums would be covered with her name, attached to elaborate conspiracy theories about how she was covertly controlling the video game industry with her sex appeal.

Quinn had released *Depression Quest* about eighteen months earlier, in February of 2013. At the time, she received hate mail for it, but nothing as bad as what Sarkeesian had endured. Like many female game developers, Quinn let the harassment be the white noise background to her life. But then in late August, she launched the game for free on Steam, an online video game marketplace that also has an active online community of gamers.

The game’s page on Steam immediately filled up with nasty comments, claiming that Quinn’s creation wasn’t a true video game. Shortly after, an ex-boyfriend of Quinn’s posted a long, detailed and hateful letter describing intimate aspects of his and Quinn’s relationship, and accusing her of sleeping with video game journalist Nathan Grayson while they were together in order to receive a favorable review for her game. In response, Grayson clarified that he had indeed had a romantic relationship with Quinn, but had only once written about her game, merely announcing its existence — and that was before he had become involved with her. Yet despite the fact that Grayson had never actually reviewed *Depression Quest*, Quinn was soon at the center of the biggest blow-up that video games had ever seen.

First, Quinn was “doxxed,” a term that means her personal information was published online. And then the abuse got really bad. Hackers dug up nude photos of her and sent them to her professional contacts. Someone called her dad, and yelled, “Your daughter is a slut.” Eventually, the threats of being hurt, raped, or killed grew so intense that Quinn left her home out of fear and began living on her friends’ couches.

When I tried to contact Quinn afterward, she was no longer interested in talking to the press. However, on September 16 she wrote a piece for *Cracked.com* titled “5 things I Learned as the Internet’s Most Hated Person.” In it, she described the night that her ex had posted the hateful letter. She learned that his rant was quickly sweeping the forum-sphere, and when she checked to see if her Wikipedia entry had been mucked with, she realized that someone had edited her date of death to “soon.” She did, indeed, become the internet’s most hated person. “The ceaseless barrage of random people sending you disgusting shit is initially impossible to drown out,” she wrote. “It was constant, loud, and it became my life.”

Online forums exploded with accusations about Quinn sleeping with games journalists for positive press, which grew into an elaborate conspiracy theory involving her using sex to rise to fame. Although the conspiracy was bogus, it nonetheless incited a panic over the ethics of games journalism as a whole, and the harassment began spreading to a web of other female game developers and writers.

Around the same time, the online harassment of Sarkeesian grew increasingly hostile as well. She, too, fled her home after receiving messages via Twitter from people who threatened to kill both her and her family members.

Two men positioning themselves as “social commentators” had launched a Patreon account to fund a proposed feature-length film called *The Sarkeesian Effect* to expose the ways in which Sarkeesian is allegedly leading a movement of “Social Justice Warriors” to destroy the gaming industry under the guise of political correctness in order to further her own career. “Is there really a targeted effort on the part of the white male dominated gaming culture to exclude women and minorities from participating or is this a ruse perpetrated by a bunch of scam artists and perpetual victims for their own fame and glory and financial benefit?” asks one of the campaign’s videos.

Although the mainstream press usually leaves matters of the gaming world untouched, the level of harassment that Quinn and Sarkeesian were experiencing was too much to ignore. Publications nationwide erupted with coverage of the ways in which the gamer community was fervently attempting to chase women out of games, deeming the tactics misogynistic and unfair. The gaming press, meanwhile, largely avoided condemning the harassment that their readership has likely perpetrated.

Women from within the gaming industry who attempted to call out the misogyny in the situation were immediately added to the list of targets. Jenn Frank, an award-winning video game critic and journalist, was one of those women. On September 1, she published a piece in the *Guardian* called “How to Attack a Woman Who Works in Video Gaming,” which outlined the specific ways in which online harassers had attempted to ruin Quinn and Sarkeesian’s careers. “The endgame is to frighten *all* women out of the video games industry — no matter what they write, film, create, or produce — and to additionally frighten anyone who would support them,” the piece read.

Frank’s article resulted in an onslaught of the exact kind of harassment that she was condemning. Gamers accused her of being biased because she contributes to Quinn’s Patreon account, and because she had once met Sarkeesian — details that she had initially disclosed in a footnote in her piece but were taken out by *Guardian* editors. Soon after, Frank announced that she had decided to quit video game journalism altogether.

When I contacted Frank via email to discuss her reasons for quitting, she said she has declined every interview request she has received but offered to briefly defend her decision to retire. For her, it was clear that

the criticism she was receiving had nothing to do with her journalistic ethics. “I have always willingly lived under a microscope,” she wrote. “This new era is not a microscope; it’s an excuse to Google anyone another person has ever known, and harass that person in turn. It’s six degrees of Who Can I Harass.”

By mid-September, most of the media commotion surrounding Gamergate had calmed down, but as I sat in an Oakland cafe with Anthropy, she was obviously still very frustrated. “This whole Gamergate bullshit has happened under the guise of journalistic integrity,” she said. “But it’s so clear that it’s only about misogyny — only about punishing women for their sexuality.”

Anthropy and many others believe that the attacks on the journalistic integrity of Frank (and other similarly minded writers) were merely an excuse by gamers to justify the harassment of all women in games. Just recently, someone published Anthropy’s birth name, her partner’s birth name, and the names and jobs of her family members online. Mattie Brice, a transwoman of color who has self-published video games and is a well-known, outspoken critic of the video game industry, said she is accustomed to receiving long emails detailing how the sender would like to mutilate her.

For them, the most frustrating issue is the extent to which they feel that the games industry is complicit in the harassment. “The Big Games industry, where people actually have money, will lavish games journalists with prizes and bribes for good reviews but the only cases that these gamers are prepared to call journalistic integrity about are cases of poor women who are struggling to get any press at all,” said Anthropy. (At the beginning of the statement, Anthropy was referring to the common practice for big-budget video game companies to wine and dine press at fancy events and give away free products like new game consoles. At the end of it, she was also partially talking about herself.)

For instance, during the Gamergate outrage, a video game reporter named Patricia Hernandez was called out online for not fully disclosing that she was friends and former roommates with Anthropy despite having written about her work multiple times for the online video game publication Kotaku. Meanwhile, other accusations were being hurled at journalist Ben Kuchera claiming that he had an undisclosed conflict of interest when he reviewed Quinn’s Depression Quest in March for the online publication Polygon because he contributes to her Patreon account. As a response to both debacles, Kotaku’s editor Stephen Totilo declared that all of its writers should immediately cease contributing to all Patreon accounts in order to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest. Polygon editor Christopher Grant, meanwhile, published a blogpost reminding readers that “like Kickstarter, these contributions aren’t investments. There is no equity to be gained, there is no market to capitalize on.” Still, he ended with the declaration that henceforth all Polygon writers would disclose their Patreon contributions after their bylines.

For Anthropy, this reaction was a solid slap in the face. She was taken aback that Kotaku, which positions itself as a supporter of indie game developers and women in games, would opt for a solution that only hurts self-publishing game developers who are struggling to make a living. Most of all, she was disgusted by the fact that these publications were willing to even acknowledge the demands of the angry mob, thereby legitimizing their attacks, while never acknowledging that their female journalists need support for their health and safety.

Anthropy views these publications as cogs in a corporate machine that caters to a specific group of people who relish in their collective ability to control it. Their decisions are informed by their readership, as much as their readers’ tastes are informed by them.

In a recent post on her blog Ellaguro, Liz Ryerson, a trans writer who lives in Berkeley and makes music for video games (including for Anthropy’s *Dys4ia*), argued that Gamergate was not entirely about the pure hatred of women. She thinks that underlying all of that hostility, is a deep, collective fear that the gaming industry will soon experience a metaphorical coup, and the campaign to chase women out of games

is an attempt to maintain exclusive ownership over the industry. Anthropy expressed the same sentiment, saying that the reason gamers are playing so rough is because they can feel their fortress beginning to crumble around them.

Anthropy argues that the video game industry doesn’t have to function this way. Although up to this point games have largely been dominated by a specific demographic, there is endless untapped potential for the medium to appeal to audiences outside of that — people who, because of the conventional understanding that non-iOS or Wii games are mostly oriented toward violence, would never imagine themselves enjoying a video game. At this point, it’s financially risky to attempt to appeal to those audiences, but Anthropy believes that a shift is gradually taking place. Publishers and publications are slowly going to recognize that audiences for other types of games exist, and the white male monopoly will eventually dissipate.

Brice agrees that eventually games will become more inclusive, but says that for the time being, the women who have been fighting for that inclusion should not be ashamed to back out and take time for themselves. She is confident that, like in other forms of activism, when passionate people decide their work is done, others inevitably step up to the plate to continue their advocacy.

Meanwhile, the communities of people who are interested in games as art are becoming more active and concentrated as they separate themselves from mainstream video game culture. They are building space online and in the cultural consciousness for the definition of games to be reimagined and the potential of the medium to be creatively reclaimed.

For many people, the initial draw of video games is the community that they offer. Youth who are bullied at school, or have trouble making friends, often turn to online communities for connections that they don’t have access to locally, and to online spaces for opportunities to play out their identity in ways that are inhibited by physicality and social norms.

In her 2014 book, *ZZT*, Anthropy writes about Tim Sweeney’s 1991 game *ZZT*, which also functions as an easy platform for players to build their own worlds and design their own games. Among many other things, she describes how being offered the agency to modify existing games, or create your own, is incredibly empowering because it gives you the ability to personalize, push back, and manifest dreams. It can be understood as a tool for resistance, for recreating what has been handed to you, and for questioning the status quo.

At the end of the book, Anthropy recalls how she spoke with the first transgender person she ever met through the *ZZT* community, and how she had shared a poem with her called “Children of the Glow.” “The glow was the glow of the computer screen, this strange machine that we weirdos, queers, and outcasts huddled around like campfires,” Anthropy writes. “The pale bright light of IRC [chat] text was our one connection to these people, who, bodiless, understood us better than anyone who filtered us through our teenage bodies, awkward and cumbersome and wrong.”

But for adults wanting to become creatively or professionally involved in video games, anonymity isn’t as much of a protective option. That safe community can be compromised by individuals who hide behind the same protective shield in order to harass others. And so the reaction is to also build safe communities in the physical world, and to concentrate on fostering local creative centers and support systems. “The industry can be a place you work and somewhere else can be your community. We can create something else,” Brice wrote in an August 30 blogpost called “Moving On.” “Create new spaces that don’t have industry and business as the main component ... collaborate with people local to you instead of trying to create a large replacement for a global industry.”

Brice is the co-founder of the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), an annual event held at UC Berkeley, which was organized for the first time last fall. QGCon, like GaymerX, Lost Levels, and an



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I'm safe. Extra security measures taken. Authorities notified. But the whole gaming industry must take a stand against the attacks on women.

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increasing number of other small video game gatherings, is different from a typical convention because it focuses on games that veer from the norm, and aims to create a safe, inclusive space. There, all types of video game appreciators — including some who often feel unwelcome at public events — can come together to celebrate an art form that they love without having to worry about discrimination. A radical feeling of acceptance electrifies the air at these events, lighting up faces that look like they might have been searching for that their entire lives.

Brice was not involved in the organization this year, but her co-founders have worked with other organizers to present it again. The free event will take place on October 25 and 26 at UC Berkeley with the theme “Difference at Play.”

These kinds of events bring hope to people like Anthropy, who believes that they represent where the video game industry is ultimately headed. For now, the reality is that the harassment of women and minorities in games will continue. But platforms like Patreon ensure that a paradigm shift is approaching, because they enable a retreat away from traditional methods of funding. That means opening up an expanse of expressive possibilities.

Anthropy believes that eventually the video game industry is going to look completely different, as well as the games coming out of it and the culture surrounding them. “The truth is that these people who are harassing women so much right now are doing it because they are clinging to an identity that’s going away,” she said. “They’re not who the gaming industry is going to care about in a couple years from now. They are going to turn into dust and blow away and no one will remember or mourn them.” ●