

# The End of Gamers

DAN GOLDING

In fall 2014, the ever-present harassment of women in tech and gaming culture took a new and unprecedented turn with the Gamergate controversy. In reaction to a wave of new and progressive game criticism, the online hordes of so-called Gamergate made it their mission to silence their detractors. They claimed the identity of the gamer was being bullied by corrupt journalists in conspiracy with feminist critics. They were under threat, and this movement named for its Twitter hashtag #gamergate was a way to strike back. The strikes, however, had all the hallmarks of a reactionary movement—the Tea Party of the gaming world—and seemed more interested in harassment than anything else. In his take on Gamergate, Dan Golding presents a gamer identity that does not deny being threatened, but instead confirms and welcomes its imminent death as part of a narrow-minded, male-dominated subculture that has run its course.

**WHAT MAKES A GAMER? FOR A LONG TIME, THIS HAS BEEN** one of the most important questions, if not the key question, for understanding video game culture. Who is a gamer, and what makes it official? Is it an identity adopted by the individual, or imposed from the outside? Is the gamer a semi-autonomous, community identity, or a target demographic cultivated by multinational corporations? After the events of late 2014, the importance of these questions has multiplied. For all its intangibility—and for all its visible hate and utter lack of

accountability—the social media event that was Gamergate was waged under the banner of the gamer. To be a gamer now is to be, at least in part, marked by the color of Gamergate. What makes a gamer, indeed.

Gamergate was a semi-autonomous campaign that appeared online at the end of August 2014, giving a name and a brand to the ongoing harassment of women in games that has been growing louder in visibility and intensity for years. Ostensibly, it arose in reaction to a number of events that aren't worth going into; in reality, it is an extension of the kind of semi-organized harassment and misogynistic hate of the kind that fellow contributors to this volume, Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, have been receiving for years. But what is particularly interesting about its guise under Gamergate is that it is in part imagined as a defense of both video games themselves and the gamer—both of whom are imagined as under attack from “feminist bullies,” as one partisan journalist wrote. The gamer, according to this mentality, is at risk and needs defending.

In many ways, it makes complete sense that the gamer should be such a closely policed and defended identity. For decades, it has been a shield to hide behind and a banner to unite under. The gamer was, for many, the recognized enthusiast who was given a legitimacy of sorts through the depths of their passion and intensity of their fanaticism. Though video games themselves were often disregarded and belittled by the mainstream press, the gamer identity was a way of taking that denigration and re-routing it into a positive, almost belligerent enthusiasm. Putting on the gamer identity was how an individual was allowed to like video games. It was a recognizable role to play and a way of reclaiming the clichéd

signs of the video game fan that were stigmatized—the darkened room, the hypnotic glow of the screen, the junk food, the late obsessive hours. For each pejorative claim of the uselessness of video games, the gamer could present a flip side. Through this lens, the cliché of the gamer's social awkwardness became the myth of the elite gamer's spectacular playing skill. The stereotype of obsessiveness became the way a gamer gained status within the community through their very particular knowledge. The way the gamer served as a stand-in for the troubles of our times, at least for the tabloid press—as slackers and time-wasters—became for the video game community a way of responding to a world that doesn't care to look beneath the surface. The myth of ridicule from the mainstream—the “outside”—fed the burning need for gamers to stick together.

I remember being called a gamer by others long before I ever called myself one. This was during high school in a rural Australian town—already a context full-to-overflowing with tensions of outsider versus insider culture—and it was often by those who were uninterested in games, but who wanted to understand who I was. Small towns in Australia are, I imagine, much like small towns anywhere in the world, where most residents will recognize you at least by sight, if not by name. At the time, I was a nerd of the highest order—not just interested in games, but also the emerging Internet (which, let's not forget, was deeply uncool in its early years), books, and, most damning of all, big band jazz. I played the clarinet, and I played video games. Carrying a game cartridge from the only video store in town over the ten-minute walk home made me visible. My strange interests painted an unsatisfactory picture at the time of what a boy should be like. Acquaintances could not understand me. But they could understand a gamer. And so to them, I became one.

On a personal level, the term itself was never satisfactory. Later, at university, I developed a deep love of film—in many ways deeper than my appreciation of video games, even—and yet I never felt the urge to call myself a cinephile, let alone a film buff. “Gamer,” to me, even high school me, fed into too many associations and preconceptions that I didn’t like. I liked to think of myself as more than just the sum of my media interests.

The irony of this is, of course, that there were few reasons to exclude myself from the identity on a demographic basis. Nothing about my gender, sexuality, race, or class excludes me from the stereotypical gamer identity. As a straight, cis, white, middle class man, I had unencumbered access to the gamer identity when—though I did not realize it at the time—others did not. Maleness in particular is the invisible trait of the gamer that has been cultivated for decades.

The gamer identity is not the community-led, organic label that romanticized visions of video game culture would have you believe. Though it has served as a standard to bear against mainstream culture, it is in fact more of a fabrication of marketing departments than one of everyday people. The gamer did not emerge slowly to help give voice to disempowered communities. It was created.

Taken in its simplest, most basic form, a video game is a creative application of computer technology. This is something that not many people think about. Other media have a material basis that sets them apart (film, for example, is named after the celluloid material that underpins the form), but video games are simply made from computers, a medium that also powers scientific calculations, word processing, and the Internet. So the video game began its life as part of computer culture, as creative experiments with

new technologies. A number of these early experiments were in the masculine context of university computing labs, such as the MIT’s Tech Model Railroad Club, who in February 1962 created *Spacewar!*, one of the first ever video games. The Model Railroad Club’s image fulfilled the stereotype of the male nerd with an overwhelming interest in the technical world, boasting members with nicknames like “Slug” and “Shag.” Women have always been there for the creation of computing technology—and yes, video game technology, too—but their contributions have often been deliberately made invisible. Jean Jennings was one of five women who programmed ENIAC, the first general purpose computer, and although she was invited—required, even—to give a demonstration to the national press for its launch, neither she nor the four other women programmers involved were invited to the reception afterward. “We felt as if we had been playing parts in a fascinating movie that suddenly took a bad turn,” Jennings wrote in her autobiography. “We had worked like dogs for two weeks to produce something really spectacular and then were written out of the script.” Other women were early pioneers of the video game: Carol Shaw worked at Atari and then Activision throughout the 1970s and early ’80s, creating *River Raid* for the Atari 2600 in 1982, while Dona Bailey worked with Ed Logg to program the amazing arcade game *Centipede* in 1981. In 1979, Roberta Williams, with her husband Ken, founded a company that would become Sierra On-Line, one of the most influential video game developers of the ’80s. Women have always played video games, too. Carol Shaw told Polygon in 2013 that when working for Atari, no one spoke about the gender of their players, and it was never assumed, either. “We never really discussed who our target demographic was,” said Shaw. “We didn’t discuss gender or age.”

Yet throughout these early years of video games, something else was going on. Video game culture developed a limited, inward-looking perception of the world that marked game enthusiasts as different from everyone else. Game culture began to separate itself out from technology culture. The product was “the gamer,” an identity based on difference and separateness. The gamer was partly related to the geek and the nerd, stereotypes that suggest a monomaniacal interest in the esoteric and the technical. These are potent—and deeply inconsistent—stereotypes that have been wielded with bluntness over the years, both by the media and by technology enthusiasts themselves. The gamer has proven to be just as vague and indistinct a character, with a sense of otherness tied up in video game appreciation as perhaps the only consistent trait. To be a gamer is not just to be interested in video games—it is also to feel separate and to stand apart in one way or another. The gamer identity is therefore at least in part negatively defined. What the gamer is not is almost as important as what the gamer is.

In his book *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*, Graeme Kirkpatrick argues that the gamer identity became fully realized with the invention or discovery of the concept of “gameplay.” Gameplay is a somewhat ineffable term for describing the gameliness of a game; it is a quality that only the most experienced player, the true gamer, is best placed to identify. A gamer’s game possesses good gameplay above all else, as distinct from and sometimes in opposition to a game’s narrative, representational, or technical elements. This noticeable transformation occurred at some point in the ’80s. Kirkpatrick identifies March 1985 as the moment the term gameplay entered the lexicon of British video game magazines in particular. With the discovery

of gameplay, the gamer identity was more codified. The development of taste led to the development of identity. Again, this was partly a question of what the gamer was not, and it is reflected in Kirkpatrick’s analysis of what seems to be the imagined readership of these British magazines. The gamer was not interested in technology for technology’s sake. The gamer was not a parent looking to research educational video games for their children to play. And according to the picture painted by game magazines and their advertisers, the gamer was usually not a woman.

It was only five years earlier that a video game had been created specifically for women for what was likely the first time. Toru Iwatani, a designer working for Namco, thought the video game arcades of the era were offputtingly masculine. If the advertisements for Atari’s first arcade machine, *Computer Space*, are anything to go by, he was on to something: the adverts, a paean to 1970s chic, feature a Farrah Fawcett blow-waved woman with her underwear visible through a sheer white dress, leaning seductively against the machine. In an attempt to break down this male-dominated culture, Iwatani created a game called *Pac-Man*. It was a game that he thought might attract women and couples to the arcade. Iwatani’s reasoning? “When I imagined what women enjoy, the image of them eating cakes and desserts came to mind, so I used ‘eating’ as a keyword,” he told Eurogamer in 2010. “When I did research with this keyword I came across the image of a pizza with a slice taken out of it and had that eureka moment.” Condescending as they were, Iwatani’s actions reveal the invisible masculinity inherent in popular games of the era.

There’s a naïve optimism to video game advertising of the early 1980s that contains a kind of universalism not yet divided

by gender. Women—particularly girls—feature in advertisements for *Millipede* and the Atari 2600. In an advertisement for *Bandits* by Sirius in the September 1983 issue of *Electronic Games Magazine*, a cartoon girl defiantly tells a military man, “Girls like to play video games too!” She then defeats an invading alien force before telling “Captain Star” to “eat your heart out!”

Beyond the mid-’80s things shift dramatically. In 1998, an ad for the original PlayStation places a couple in a movie theatre. She’s bothering him, trying to get his attention from the film. Crash Bandicoot as the usher appears to berate the man, mocking him for being “totally whipped.” Then Lara Croft suddenly appears next to the man. “Would you rather be at home shooting a bazooka, or watching a chick flick?” asks Crash. Cut to the next scene and the man and Lara Croft are playing their PlayStation together at home while the man’s partner cries to be let in at the front door. Another ad, this time for the 2005 racing game *Juiced*, sees two men playing the game in their car. They realize their controllers are altering not just the video game, but also the clothes of a woman on the pavement outside. The men giggle as they use their controllers to strip the clearly horrified woman naked. The industry’s imagined target demographic for the video game is by this point utterly clear, not just in advertising, but in the branding of video game consoles themselves—GameBoy, anyone? This became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who plays video games? Young men and boys, such marketing claims. So who are video games made for and aimed at? Young men and boys. As a result, by the late 2000s, efforts to deliberately target women players seemed only to be possible through absurdly demeaning flourishes of the color pink, or with the “girls only” branding of Ubisoft’s *Imagine*

series (2007–2013). The gendered gamer identity helped demarcate the gamer as a targetable demographic for business. People always exist in multiple forms of identity simultaneously. I can be a man and a musician and a writer and a scholar all at once, for example. One could very easily be a woman and a gamer simultaneously, or queer and a gamer, or African and a gamer. Yet for the marketers, journalists, and developers who helped shape the world of video games in the ’80s and ’90s, only a few traits defined the gamer. The most immovable of these was that he was a man.

Unsurprisingly, shaped by the weight of decades of gendered and sexualized design and marketing, the gamer identity is deeply bound up in assumptions and performances of gender and sexuality. To be a gamer is to signal a great many things, not all of which are about the actual playing of video games. For her essay, “Do You Identify As A Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” Adrienne Shaw interviewed a selection of non-heterosexual, non-male, and not solely White or Anglo people who played video games. On the basis of her interviews, Shaw concluded there was “a definite correlation between gender and gamer identity.” Put simply: men were much more likely to identify as gamers, regardless of the actual quantity of video game playing in their lives. Other studies have also suggested that women tend to underestimate the amount of time they spend playing video games—and like Shaw’s study, Simeon Yates and Karen Littleton’s 1999 investigation, “Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach,” concludes that women are also less likely to adopt the gamer identity. This is not to say that no woman ever has identified as a gamer—this is patently untrue—but rather that through decades of built-up

pressure from marketing, branding, culture, and even the games themselves, women are less likely to take on the gamer moniker.

Despite all this, a substantial demographic variety has always been present in the range of people who play video games. Time and time again, each study has proven that not only a substantial number of women play video games, but that they play video games just as seriously and with the same dedication as their male counterparts. In late 2014, a small stir was created when the ESA released its latest survey of American gaming habits and announced that adult women represent a much bigger proportion of the game-playing population than teenage boys. Yet this has been the trend in video game demographic surveys for years for anyone who has been paying attention. The predictable response—"What kind of games do they really play, though—are they really gamers?"—says all you need to know about this ongoing demographic shift. The insinuated criteria of "real" video games is wholly contingent on identity (i.e. a real gamer shouldn't play *Candy Crush*). In a way, what we are seeing with these kinds of insinuations is the replaying of gendered debates that have been going on for centuries.

The gamer identity has also stagnated. Perhaps the biggest shift for the industry since the end of the arcade era occurred when Nintendo released the Wii in 2006. Almost overnight, the mimetic and accessible nature of the Wii seemed to open up video games to mainstream audiences. This is the narrative we hear about, anyway—the actual story is a bit more complex, given that people who are not straight white men have clearly been playing and making video games since their inception. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that after years of ignoring them, the video game industry could now allow itself to make

games that acknowledged the existence of a wide variety of gamers. We suddenly saw Nintendo ads featuring women, the elderly, and the non-white. This was not the discovery of video games by a new demographic, but the video game industry authorizing new stories to be told about its players. The image of gaming was changing—and in the case of the Nintendo Wii ads, it was changing quite literally. This change has only been amplified in the years since, with the social gaming boon on Facebook and smartphones that is stereotypically associated with women and other nontraditional gamer groups.

The gamer—an identity still tied up in ideas of otherness, outsider status, and masculinity—quite quickly started to become an irrelevant concept in the late 2000s. There was nothing exclusive about the Nintendo Wii. There was nothing about *Candy Crush* that signified a special insider culture. The gamer identity was not required to explain a player's enthusiasm; this was self-explanatory—video games were now in the mainstream eye.

When the playing of video games moved beyond the niche the industry had always targeted, the gamer identity did not adapt. It remained uniformly stagnant and immobile. As a defensive, negatively defined concept, it was simply not fluid enough to apply to a new broad spectrum of people. It could not meaningfully contain *Candy Crush* players, *Proteus* players, and *Call of Duty* players simultaneously. When video games changed, the gamer identity failed to stretch, and so it has been broken.

We have also seen a video game press—so long allowed to court a male audience—undergo a number of shifts. There has been an increase in the visibility of traditionally marginalized groups—such as women—among game journalists. Just as

women have always made and played video games, women have always written about them, too, like Joyce Worley, one of the co-founders of *Electronic Games*, the first video game magazine. Today, the boys club of the 1990s magazine era has become a different online criticism sphere populated by writers like Leigh Alexander, Patricia Hernandez, Cara Ellison, Lana Polansky, Maddy Myers, Jenn Frank, and Keza McDonald. Now more than ever, video game journalists are more interested in issues of representation, equality, and feminism, too. The stratospheric rise of a critic like Anita Sarkeesian is hugely significant, but must also be seen in context as merely the brightest star in an array of critics more vocally attacking sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism in video games than ever before. Video game criticism has shifted in a noticeably progressive direction, even if the games themselves have been slow to keep up.

In this context, what are we to make of Gamergate? On the evidence of its sustained and ferocious attack on women in games, what we are seeing is the end of the gamer and the viciousness that accompanies the death of an identity. The gamer identity has been broken. It no longer has a niche to call home, and so it reaches out inarticulately at invented and easy targets instead. That the supposed *raison d'être* of Gamergate was corruption and bias in the video game media makes complete sense; this is just another way of expressing confusion about why games the traditional gamer does not understand are successful, like Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, a video game about an emotional topic, made by a woman. That the game is made in Twine is yet another point of confusion for the traditional gamer, since Twine, being a text-based platform, does not stimulate the traditional taste for gameplay.

The gamer identity is under assault, and so it should be. It is also tied up in complex notions of consumption and capitalism: the gamer is someone who purchases video games, above anything else. The cries of Gamergate that claim consumers have been needlessly and wantonly attacked illustrate this nakedly. The gamer is, among other things, an identity that has for decades been framed at the financial heart of an entire creative industry. The gamer community has been told the consumer is always right—and that the consumer is mostly male. The “consumer king” gamer, as developer and writer Matthew Burns puts it, will continue to be targeted and exploited while their profitability as a demographic outweighs their toxicity, but the traditional gamer identity is now culturally irrelevant. The battles to make safe spaces for different video game cultures are long and they are resisted tempestuously. Given the extremes to which this conflict has been taken, I don't use the word “battle” lightly; with now-numerous women run out of their homes and threatened with rape and death, perhaps “war” is more appropriate. Through the pain and suffering of people who have their friendships, personal lives, and professions on the line, things continue to improve. The myth of the male gamer, once at the center of an entire industry, has been destabilized and replaced with a more complex picture. The result has been a palpable progressive shift.

This shift is precisely the root of the increasingly violent hostility of Gamergate. The hysterical fits of those inculcated at the heart of male gamer culture might on the surface be claimed as crusades for journalistic integrity, or a defense against falsehoods, but—along with a mix of the hatred of women and an expansive bigotry thrown in for good measure—what is actually going on is

an attempt to retain hegemony. Make no mistake: the death threats, the bomb threats, and all the words of violence on social media are manifestations of the exertion of power in the name of male-gamer orthodoxy. It is an orthodoxy that has already begun to disappear.

Gamergate represented the moment that gamers realized their own irrelevance. This was a cold wind a long time coming. For decades, the gamer was told by advertising, branding, and, most importantly, by gamers themselves, that they were the lords of their domain. The outside world may have contempt for us, the gamer imagined, but in here we rule. We may continue to ask what makes a gamer into the future, but what we have seen so clearly in late 2014 is what unmakes a gamer.

Video games are for everyone today. I mean this in a destructive way. To read the other side of the same statement—especially if you align yourself with the old-school gamer identity—video games are no longer for you. You do not get to own them. No single group gets to own them anymore. On some level, the grim individuals who are self-centered and myopic enough to be upset at the prospect of having to share their medium are absolutely right. They have astutely and correctly identified what is going on here. Their toys are being taken away, their treehouses are being boarded up. Video games now live in the world and there is no going back.

I am convinced this marks the end. We are finished here. From now on, there are no more gamers, only players.

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## A Game I Had to Make

ZOE QUINN

Game developer Zoe Quinn has described her game *Depression Quest* as “interactive (non)fiction about living with depression.” The game is interactive fiction by form, but nonfiction in how it attempts to capture the daily experience of living with depression as honestly as possible. In this essay, Quinn reveals the story of how the game came to be, and why it’s not meant to be fun.

**IT’S 2:00 P.M. ON A SATURDAY, THE MIDDLE OF THE WORKDAY,** and you’re sitting on a curb coughing and crying so hard you’re not sure which tears are from what. It’s the first time in a long time you’ve cried—normally you’re too low or too numb to even have the energy, but you’ve just found yourself with a window of opportunity thanks to losing your awful minimum-wage coffee shop job, having walked off after being denied a day off to try and get your pneumonia taken care of. This job was your only source of income. You don’t know what you’re going to do now.

You have one project half finished that you’ve barely touched since starting it with a partner who has left you hanging both as a collaborator and girlfriend. He bailed two weeks into the game and you can’t really blame him, since he’s wrestling with the enormity of his own depression, but you feel abandoned and the relationship is rapidly deteriorating around you. You’re

trying to be the strong one for him while fighting to keep your own head above water. You started out together on a mission to create a piece of media that would exist as an alternative to the false depictions of the illness you both live with. Since you see depression as a system with certain rules that you have to operate within and push against, translating that into a game mechanic made sense as a way to try to communicate your experience. It was a good idea, but your partner has been swallowed whole by the illness that was nipping at his heels, and you are alone now, having announced the game and thus staked your name on finishing it. You've been working on it after work when you can, when you aren't too exhausted, but the days only seem to get longer and your emotional condition worse.

Now, you feel completely lost. Even though you hated your job, it was your source of income. You sink your head in your hands, hyperventilate through wheezes, and panic, until your sense of shame at crying in public overtakes you and you make your way home. You look through job postings for all the local game studios, despite being asked at your last interview at a studio what you did to deserve sexual harassment in the industry. You come up empty-handed. You don't even want a studio job, but you have no savings or family support and would prefer it to being on the streets again, and it seems like a cushy position compared to cleaning bathrooms despite being able to program. You apply to a swath of manual labor and entry-level positions on Craigslist, and feel desperate. You know this is what you have to do every day for *who knows how long*, and that this part beats the part after, where you've applied to everything you can and are just alone with your thoughts—the same thoughts

that lately have felt like your brain turning on itself in an act of autocannibalism.

Now *what?* you wonder.

You half wish that you'd stayed at your job and just let the pneumonia get worse because at least you'd know you have somewhere to live next month. You don't really know anyone in your neighborhood well enough to talk to, other than your similarly afflicted partner, and you're trying hard to keep it together for him.

You open Twine and look at your game about depression. You figure you might as well finish it, given that you have all the time in the world combined with the crushing weight of your illness on your back. But you need to promise yourself. You need a motivator to keep you from falling off the tightrope you feel like you have only one toe left on.

You set up a camera. You haven't announced a launch date for the game and now is as good a time as any—publicly posting it forces you to then do *something* about it, and maybe the game's impending release will motivate your partner to action too, even if that just means being supportive of you while you finish it. But when do you release it?

Valentine's Day is two weeks away. Is that too snarky? Do you really care if it is?

Most launch dates come with a trailer. How do you make a trailer for interactive fiction? You can't exactly mimic the industry standard of slapping dubstep on some slow-motion shots of your grizzled protagonist doing something summarily badass. Your game is full of words and focuses on wrestling with your mental states. How do you show that on camera?

You set up your webcam, deciding to try to communicate the

overall point of the game instead of doing some kind of features list. The game is all about how the illness removes choices and takes things away. You do what seems most honest while staying true to what you're actually feeling. You decide to take a risk and be vulnerable because that's what the work is all about.

The trailer becomes thirty seconds of you in bed, eyes still red from crying and coughing, staring at the wall. You superimpose the title of the game and the release date on the empty white walls of your room, promising to ship the game a mere two weeks from today. Apathetic from a day of high emotion, you emotionlessly post it online, hoping that you can fight your demons hard enough to finish the game in time. You accept the possibility that you'll lose and destroy your reputation, but you have no one to talk to and don't know what else to do.

You sit down and do the only thing you feel like you can. You code.

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It's 4:00 a.m. on launch day. You've barely slept this week, having written over 38,000 words, plenty of which will not be seen on a given playthrough. You've taught yourself enough After Effects to animate four images for every single image in the game. Each image has a level of distortion correlating to the player's current level of depression. You've figured out a way to digitally duct-tape three layered tracks of music to play simultaneously, two of them dynamically generated based on player action. All of this is done for a game you think maybe a total of five people will play, figuring that four will not understand it and one will maybe go, "Huh, okay."

You pass through it to give it a fifth or so edit and bug check.

Seeing it almost finished like this is weird. You can see it as a whole instead of a series of things it could be. What you've ended up making is a second-person interactive semifiction that shows the player a series of everyday events and gives them options of what they would like to do. The first option is always the healthy, "correct" option that people who haven't struggled with depression would choose. That one is crossed off in bold red in front of the player. The rest of the options are less ideal and based on what is more realistic for someone struggling with depression. More and more of them get crossed off based on how the player has played, and how well they've managed their depression so far. Eventually, they get an ending based on a lot of factors decided during play, but you've made very sure that none of them result in "Oh, hey, you're cured. Good job, you won!"

The game you've made isn't fun, but that was never the point. It doesn't have a 3D or even 2D you can interact with. Despite being able to program those kinds of games, you've pushed their formats aside in favor of focusing on words and internal mental processes. You've made every design choice to serve the ethos and point of the game—to show what depression is like for people who don't have it, and to reach out to other people suffering with it to try to let them know they're not alone.

You weren't able to include everything about depression, and you decided early on not to try to. You thought about trying to tackle the huge topic of therapy and medication, and how depression sufferers can spend years trying to find just the right dose of just the right pill from just the right therapist, but in order to tackle that subject at all, and to do it justice, you'd have to make an

entirely separate game. Similarly, you decide to stay away from the topic of suicide because in spite of it being related to depression, your own experiences with it make it feel like too big a subject to tackle in a game that is only two hours long for a playthrough. You also worry about players playing the game to try and make the point-of-view character kill themselves, or otherwise using it as a tool to be sadistic. You're not trying to make emotional snuff.

Part of you also secretly worries that if you go down that route, you'll end up in a worse place yourself. Writing the game has been emotionally gut-wrenching. While your own relationship was crumbling around you, writing the parts where the love interest is supportive and understanding was even harder. You had to enforce a policy on yourself to actively stop writing if the encounters turned into a litany of you simply berating yourself.

Remembering this, you delete several nodes that are unlinked to any content, remnants of those entries. You try not to read several thousand words written to yourself, telling you how awful at life you are. You've already tried to strike a balance between being honest while drawing on personal experience and making the game about the illness, not you. To create distance, you have given the protagonist every advantage in life you wish you might have had—a job, a loving family, a supportive and understanding partner, pills that work, and a therapist who could be effective—while in reality you have none of these. It is more important to focus on the fact that depression can strike anyone regardless of their station in life, as well as to show how all of those advantages can be impacted by the illness. The game is meant to be a 101 introduction to the concept, not a definitive tell-all.

You have left the point of view character genderless. It was

easier for you as a queer person to write from this perspective. The love interest started out genderless as well but morphed into a coherent person cobbled together from a cluster of past girlfriends of yours and your partner's—you take the plunge and make her a woman. Gender in games matters to you as someone so constantly alienated by how it is usually portrayed, so you try to do the right things in your own work.

The game seems as finished as it's going to be. You've uploaded the game, making it browser based and free. All you have to do is post a link. That's the only thing left.

You stare blankly at your monitor. Part of you is convinced that no one is going to play this or understand it even if they do. Half of you is fairly sure you're outing yourself as a nutter, exposing to the entire world all these parts of yourself that you hate and wish were gone, but you take a small comfort in knowing that likely no one will choose to play it. The other half of you stands behind your work and sincerely hopes that in doing something as terrifying as indiscriminately outing yourself as mentally ill and drowning in it, maybe you can help someone else. Dear god, you hope you can help someone else. You're similarly split over hoping that you're the only person who feels this way because feeling this way is terrible, and hoping you're not alone and can help a hypothetical someone else.

Either way, you're fairly sure most people will write you off as crazy.

You push the button to tweet out the link anyway.

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It's a little over a month after launch, and you're in San Francisco during the Game Developer Conference. It's the first time you've been around so many developers, and you are overwhelmed by how many of them know who you are. *Depression Quest* has been receiving steady critical acclaim since its release and you've already reached ten thousand times the number of players you were expecting. There have been think pieces on it. Before this, you had no idea how many people were suffering from depression around you, likely because you were always too scared to out-and-out admit you were depressed, which seems to be a common thread in the conversations around the game that are ones of commiseration.

You are starting to meet people whose work you've looked up to since you started in game development a year and a half ago, and a lot of them have been touched by your work. You have always suspected that a lot of creative people have wrestled with depression, but since shipping the game, you've gotten a way better feel for exactly how many, and it's staggering. You're continuously shocked by how many people tell you their stories in hushed tones, usually starting with the sentence: "I've never told anyone this but . . ." You desperately try to put your near-crippling social anxiety aside to listen to these intense and personal stories told to you by other depression sufferers. You know exactly how it feels to reach out about it only to be met with disappointment. Several academics and therapists tell you they're incorporating the game into their work, and it breaks your brain. You stop arguing with people who tell you your work matters to them when a friend points out that you're shitting on their opinion, and even if you don't agree with them about the quality of your work, you can at least respect their

opinion. You don't know how to handle this many people knowing you exist, much less caring about your work.

You have inadvertently become a beacon for the cause of depression. A massive conversation has begun around the game, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. The chief criticisms are of the protagonist's situation and positive experiences with therapy and medication; you took a calculated risk in depicting them as such. Your heart aches when people who have situations more similar to your own than to your protagonist's say they didn't see themselves in the game. Regardless, you're happy that a lot of people feel like they can talk about this enormous, invisible thing they have always been unsure of in the public eye.

The emails are harder to deal with. You made the game and put it out into the world hoping you could let people know they are not alone and that someone else shares their feelings. What you weren't expecting was how much you would get back. You get upward of ten lengthy emails a day from strangers, telling you their stories in more detail than anyone would dare face-to-face. The stories are beautiful, they are heartbreaking, and you are frequently moved to tears when these people tell you that your game helps them. Several of them have adopted cats, gone back into therapy, or sought help because of the game. A few say you saved their lives, and those are the ones who instantly cause you to break down. They don't know that you almost successfully ended your own life and that the only reason you're alive and could make the game in the first place is because of the intervention and care of a single person, the best human being that you have ever met in your entire life and the reason you try so hard to pay it forward. You don't know how to deal with it.

You swear to devote time to answering every single email. This feels impossible because every time you try to thank someone, or try to tell them how much it means to you that you could do some real good with a video game, everything you say feels like a platitude. It sounds cheap in comparison to how it all feels.

There is some bad too but it's minor. You get the normal batches of creeps online that send you grossly sexual messages or tell you to get back in the kitchen. This barely fazes you because you have been online for a long time and are unimpressed at the lack of originality. Sometimes you respond with pithy short messages mocking them, sometimes you genuinely engage them if it seems like they are simply ignorant and not mean, and other times you just send them pictures of cats hoping that it helps them get over their own damage. It's nothing you can't handle, and you are too overwhelmed by the good to care too much about it.

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It's eight months after the game has been released, and you are on top of a roof freezing your ass off and stuffing sequins into an *Angry Birds* piggy bank with a friend. The day has been a nightmare and you've resorted to absurdism as a coping mechanism.

A few days ago, you recieved an anonymous email from a fan telling you that they loved *Depression Quest* and had to give you a warning. An Internet forum dedicated to depressed virgins had found out about your existence and they were pissed. The email told you to look out for phone calls and other things in the coming days, since these people were looking for you and were out for blood. Ignoring their warning, you google around

and find the subculture in question and their threads about you. You laugh as you see them unironically write things like "women can't have depression they can lay in the street with their hole open and any man will come along and solve their problems," because it's so cartoonishly awful you can't take it seriously. You screengrab some of the worst stuff to send to a friend over Instant Messenger and think no more of it.

... until they start calling your phone a few days later. On the first call, you can clearly tell, someone is jerking off on the other end, grunting and making gross wet noises. Shortly after you hang up, another stranger calls and yells as many rape threats through the phone as he can before you hang up. You remember the warning email and put your phone into airplane mode, then you make a post on your private Facebook telling people to contact you through email or IM for the next few days. You ask them not to speak of it publicly because doing so would only make things harder on you. The game is already in *Steam Greenlight's* Top 100 and getting on the platform was imminent anyway. You worry that if you say anything publicly people will attribute all of your success to people harassing you when you already had it in the bag. You were content to leave it at this.

A few months back, you put *Depression Quest* on *Greenlight*, the gateway to the largest digital distribution platform in the world, hoping to get the game to a wider audience that might not otherwise see it, and maybe to reach some new people that could be helped by it. *Greenlight* requires that small independent games be voted on by their community, leaving curation in the hands of a community known to shout racial slurs over voice chat and to use the word "rape" as a shorthand for nearly everything. Shortly after posting the game, you started receiving dozens of sexually

explicit messages, detailed plans of how they were going to come to your house and rape or murder you, and other things of that nature. Given that you've been online since you were a little girl, this was nothing new to you and merely made you tired.

Then you had a message sent to your house. A handwritten note was delivered to your mailbox, talking about what they wanted to do to your body against your will. There was something chillingly personal about seeing it handwritten out like that, and given that you had enough going on at the time, you pulled the game off *Greenlight* as soon as the company announced they were eventually going to find a better way to operate.

Months passed and *Greenlight* remained (and still remains at the time of this writing) unchanged. You showed the game at a few festivals in the meantime, winning awards right and left, and meeting people really affected by your work. This made you bold again. You decided that if the game reached one more person that could be helped by it, then you could deal with the hate. It was a net positive in your mind. So you put the game back up.

But this time, they found your personal information. You made it semipublic while living in Boston during the Boston Marathon bombing because you coordinated a blood drive and efforts to shelter people displaced by the bombs. You knew the risks when putting your information out there, but it still seemed like the right thing to do.

You had not figured this would be the outcome.

Earlier in the day, when checking Twitter, you saw yet another scandal over a woman in game development having the audacity to do something. In particular, there was a conversation in which someone said the controversy had nothing to do with her

gender. You look at your phone, unable to use it because of the harassment and rape threats that would blow it up if you turned it on. You think back on how this kind of thing happens multiple times a month, how that's only the ones you hear about, and how every single time people do the same mental backflips to try and say every incident is isolated, with no perception of how often they seem to be saying that.

You get mad.

You post the screengrabs that you snatched up a few days ago, daring anyone to tell you again that sexism in games isn't real when you can't even use your phone. You rant. You stand up for the other woman while knowing this will only really make things worse for you because any time you speak up, people seek to knock you down and call you a shrill harpy feminist. All you're doing is saying things that have happened.

Then a press outlet picks it up. Then another. Then another. With every one, the harassment intensifies. With every article about harassment of women in games, people come out of the woodwork to harass you for saying you were harassed. They do it with a level of self-awareness beneath that of a toddler.

Finally, you leave to go blow off steam with a friend who has nothing to do with games. You get perspective on how small the video game industry really is and how nice it is to step outside of it. When life feels heavy, it can be really important to remind yourself of how big everything else is and how in the grand scheme of things nothing can really be THAT big of a deal.

You decide to cope with everything feeling too big and too serious the best way you know how: by being totally absurd.

You and your friend find an *Angry Birds* piggy bank and fill

it with sequins because, let's face it, you're still a game designer and care about particle physics. You climb up to the roof of the theater where he works at two in the morning, throw the stuffed bird off the roof, and scream "FUCK VIDEO GAMES!" into the night as a sacrifice to the gods of gaming for better luck. It's ridiculous. It's asinine. It's cathartic.

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It's over a year after the release of the game, and you're at Game Developer Conference again, but this time you're on stage. Your hands are shaking as you scroll through the notes of your talk on all of this and what it means and how to deal with it. You hope you don't sound as nervous as you are.

Your talk is a call to action.

Your conclusion is that Internet harassment is not something we can simply avoid or ignore. When digital distribution is the primary market of indie game developers, the Internet has become part of your workplace. Beyond that, the Internet is where so many of us find each other—where we build community—and for some developers who can't travel, it's the only community they'll ever have. Simply ignoring the problem in the hopes that it will go away doesn't do the value of these things justice.

When it started happening to you, you wanted to find out *why* people act like this online, and more importantly, how they might eventually stop or grow out of it. So you started talking to people. You put out a call saying, "Hey, if you used to do these things and stopped, please talk to me. No judgment, no call-outs, just casual conversation." And since then, you've talked to

about three hundred people who have shared their stories with you. You've seen the following things over and over.

The number one thing they all had in common was that to some degree they didn't think of the person on the receiving end of their comments as a person. They depersonalized them as an abstract concept.

When asked about the ways that changed, almost all of them said that they "got better friends who wouldn't reinforce or tolerate their behavior" or "heard about it enough to realize it was a problem." Others said they ran into some small thing that humanized their targets.

None of these things were a specific turning point. Change moved at a glacier's pace and was cumulative, but this does give us some tools to figure out how to effect change now.

This means that "don't feed the trolls" has become largely useless advice. Calling this behavior "trolling" isn't being completely honest; it's harassment, pure and simple. You call on people to start calling it what it is. Suggesting that people stay silent in the face of harassment only makes it harder for others to understand how these things impact people, and it doesn't move the needle that much closer to changing minds and behavior. It also isolates the people going through these things and makes them feel that speaking out or venting is somehow the wrong thing to do.

This also means that as hard and exhausting as it is to keep talking about and hearing these things because sometimes it feels like it's not actually helping, in reality you're putting drops in a bucket that will lead to things getting better. It's important to remember that every time you get stressed out by telling

someone, “Hey, that’s not cool,” when they’re being awful to someone else, you’re really pushing progress forward even if you can’t see it in the moment.

You know it’s likely that not everyone can change or grow out of this behavior, but it’s still a good assumption to start with since you can’t tell who will or won’t.

You say that taking care of ourselves and each other is important too. You tell the audience what helped you in the hopes that if they ever find themselves in a similar position, and you hope they don’t, then this will maybe help them.

You tell them about the *Angry Birds* piggy bank and throwing it off the roof. You tell them it was completely asinine but it felt good to break from the feeling that everything was heavy and serious and stressful, and to just be goofy for a minute.

You say it also really helps to talk to people who have nothing to do with games at all, to mentally take a break from our microcosm. It helps to realize how small our world really can be in the grand scheme of things sometimes, and to remember there’s a life outside video games.

Another thing you say is to save the worst of the harrassment and do dramatic readings in goofy voices with close friends. This especially helps if you do it with other developers who can do the same with their own awful comments. You feel that humor is an amazing way to heal yourself and others.

Additionally, when you’re having one of those days where the Internet can feel like a place full of raging jerks, it helps to go do something nice for someone else. Doing this provides immediate proof that our microcosm’s not all bad because you’re going out there and actively making it better, and it’s a reminder that

in spite of how bad things can be sometimes, there’s also a ton of good being done in and by online communities.

You encourage people not to feel bad about these things affecting them, either. “Should” can be the worst word in the English language—if someone feels like they *SHOULDN’T* care because it’s “just the Internet,” or because they know that these nasty comments aren’t something to take seriously, it doesn’t really mean much if they still *DO* feel that way. And that’s fine—everyone’s feelings are totally valid. Asking people to toughen up and “grow a thicker skin” doesn’t usually result in anything other than having one more thing to feel like you’re not doing right. There’s no “right” way to feel, there’s only how you’re actually feeling. And it’s important that people let themselves have that.

You hear a lot of developers who are privileged in one way or another tell you they don’t feel like they can even be upset about the harassment they get when they compare it to what others from less privileged backgrounds receive. You ask them not to invalidate their own feelings just because they are socially conscious of their privilege. A straight white man will have a very different hate mail bag, but that doesn’t mean it’s empty or irrelevant. Instead, you ask people to try and use that feeling to build empathy for those who are worse off, not to disengage entirely.

You try to encourage everyone to talk about harrassment in any way they feel comfortable. If that’s “not at all,” that’s fine as well. You encourage people to try and look out for themselves and to make sure they’re okay first and foremost. Not everyone can try and fight back—even those who can can’t do it every day—and that’s not something to feel bad about either. You know it’s asking a lot, but you ask people to be open if they can, to show how it’s

impacting them, to not retreat into a show-no-weakness PR voice. You acknowledge that it feels like opening yourself up for more hate, but being impacted and having feelings isn't a weakness, it's a simple reality. And hearing about that can not only change someone's mind and make them realize the consequences of their hatred—your voice can also end up being a positive force for other developers who might be feeling the same thing. They'll now know they're not alone, that someone else understands, and maybe they'll even find something in your story they can use in their own life to get through hard times. Someone might even reach out in response, give advice, stand up, or even just commiserate.

To you, that's really where the indie community shines. We excel at building communities, and the Internet community is one that needs some help to be better, safer, and less hostile. You tell the crowd that everyone has a game in them and a story only they can tell, and that for all the bullshit that happened to you, you don't regret making *Depression Quest*. Nothing can take away helping the people you helped. You claim that games are a powerful medium that can do a lot of good for a lot of people and tell stories and demand empathy through interaction in ways that other art forms don't, and as such, games matter. Nothing can make it not worth it, especially not Internet commenters with axes to grind.

You close by asking that instead of not feeding the trolls, we feed ourselves and each other.

*Zoe Quinn is the developer of the critically acclaimed and award-winning game Depression Quest.*