Video games, feminism and blogging:

An interview with Alex Layne

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Alex Layne loves video games. She loves playing games, talking about them and writing about them. She also loves teaching about them. As an assistant professor in the Communication, Writing and the Arts department at Metropolitan State University, Layne has helped to pioneer the Gaming Studies minor at Metro. She has recently become the first director of Metro's Center for Game Design and New Media Studies. This spring, she is teaching a new course: Video Game Culture.

Layne is a co-founder and regular contributor to the blog Not Your Mama's Gamer. I recently met with her to discuss the mission and perils of feminist video game blogging.

**So you write for Not Your Mama's Gamer?**

Yes, Not Your Mama's Gamer [is] a blog and podcast. The goal was to do a feminist but academic perspective into the video gaming world. We started about four and a half years ago. We do a podcast every two weeks and we write daily content.

**What do you write about?**

We all have our different niches. Mine is talking about the video game industry. My theory is that a lot of the problems with Gamergate [A controversy that began in August 2014, involving video game reporting and the treatment of female gamers] and the harassment of women and things like that stem from inequality in the industry itself. So if you think about [it], a lot of these game companies started as two buddies in a garage who were like, “We've been playing Donkey Kong forever, let's make our own game.” So they make this game. And then the game all-of-a-sudden blows up. Candy Crush Saga, makes $800,000 a day.

And so their game blows up, they make all this money, they hire a bunch of people. And I don't think any of the companies set out to disparage women or be misogynistic, but they maybe haven't considered the implications of things. For example, many video game companies don't have sexual harassment policies. They don't have family pay. They expect 13 to 16 hours a day during crunch time, when women are still responsible for a majority of the household of things. That's a big barrier.

So there's all these procedural and policy things in place that bar women from entry into the industry. And I think that's where a lot of the problems in the industry start. So it's not that “Oh, games don't even have women that you can play” or “They have women, but they're in chain mail bikinis.” That, to me, is a symptom of the problem in the industry itself. So that's my theme that I usually write on.

**Do you get negative reactions get from readers?**

I personally haven't received the worst of the worst that other people in my field have. For example, another professor who talks about this stuff has been swatted [a type of prank where someone falsely reports an emergency situation so that emergency services, including SWAT teams, will be unnecessarily called to the victim’s residence]. So that's happened to a few women in my field. The big thing that we get at Not Your Mama's Gamer are sort of vague threats. For example, “I'm going to ruin your career.” But we, because of that, moderate comments on the site. We want to create a forum where people can have healthy discussions and share their experiences. So, while it's not the policy of everybody's site to moderate comments, we do.

**Did you get a huge spike at the time of Gamergate?**

Oh yeah, definitely. Whenever we have a Gamergate article or we get brought up in someone else's article saying “Oh, these crazy femanazis over at Not Your Mama's Gamer said this,” we'll get a big spike. Almost every time.

When we've gotten brought up in Gamergate-specific threads on Reddit, some people will be like, “Let's bring them down, oh my gosh. They're terrible, these awful people.” And then some people will say, “No, they said they have a feminist site that does a feminist perspective on games and they're a blog, not a news site. So, why are we so mad?” But that will be one voice in 200.

**Do you have a feel for why? Why do people oppose what you have to say so harshly?**

Yeah, we talk a lot about something that is really controversial, which is critique. We critique games and we say, “Oh, this game, this is really problematic the way they represented race in this game or gender in this game.” And we talk about that. And I think people hear that as, “We think games are bad, we think these games need to change.” Which is not what we're saying at all.

We try to say, over and over, that we love games. Our whole lives are games. We write about them. We talk about them on podcasts. It's everything. We love them. And we just want them to be better and more inclusive. But when people hear criticism of a game, they think that we're trying to take something away from them or make them feel like bad people for liking the game, and that is so far from what we're trying to do.

We're just trying to say, “We can do better. The games industry can do better.” The programmers in the game industry are 90 percent male, and let's make that more equal. Then you'll have better characters, and you'll have better storylines, and you'll have a more diverse staff, and it'll be more innovative. Games don't have to stay the same. And they don't have to totally change either.

That's really threatening to people, especially if you grew up and games were one of your most important things. But I'm not trying to be threatening. Games were all I cared about growing up too. I just never got to see myself on the screen like most Gamergaters did. And I now I'm like, “Hey, I want to be the default sometimes.”

**So do you feel there's a way to reach out to people who may have an emotional reaction to what you say? Or is that just something that's always going to happen?**

I hope there's a way to reach out. I think one of the [good] things that Gamergate did, even though it's overwhelmingly horrible. It gave people a voice to their concerns. So the hate and the threats and things like that had always been there, but it gave women and people who had been abused in these online situations a thing to point to. Finally, a way to name the things that had been happening to them.

Being able to say “Gamergate, that's the type of stuff that's happening to me,” is really powerful, but I think on the reverse side, it gave people, mostly men I would say, a thing to point to and say, “Yes, I don't want these feminists coming and PCing our games up. Games are supposed to be about the freedom of exploration and identity and things like that, and they're ruining it and trying to whitewash it.”

I think we have a better chance of reaching people now because they've come to terms with their own view of games and the way that they want change to happen. So I would hope that they would be more open to listening to our message. I worry that people that would be pro-Gamergate and against us aren't ever going to come to Not Your Mama's Gamer and read our stuff. But I guess just putting out rational arguments and trying to get to the source of the problem, which I think is in the industry itself, not in the community, I think that is one way to go about it.

Photo: Alex Layne.jpg

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Alex Layne

Caption: Alex Layne is an assistant professor in the Communication, Writing and the Arts program.