

## We Don't Need Another Hero: Understanding Digifeminism

An Interview with Angela Washko

Vanina GÉRÉ

**In a lively interview cyberfeminist Angela Washko explains how “digi-feminism” is currently challenging cybersexism and existing conditions of the web; she discusses her past and current video projects and how to fight harassment against cyberactivist on the web. And if you ask her what the political aspect of her work is, she will say “all of it is political”.**

Angela Washko, as she defines fellow artists and herself, is a “digifeminist.” Not a hacktivist crusading against corporations and crashing websites, no; not a cyberfeminist wishing to be a cyborg rather than a goddess, either.<sup>1</sup> Part of a generation of young net artists who are not so much after changing the structures of the existing – now almost completely-enclosed – web, but who use and question it as a sphere of social activity, Washko keeps examining the underlying social assumptions of digital culture in its many forms. Her practice cannot be pinned down to one medium or one type of activity. In turns writer, curator, digital archivist, performance artist, gamer and videogame artist, Washko combines a relentless feminist plea to open up the web to socially diverse voices, a pragmatic approach to cultural change, and a wry sense of humor.

Better-known for the [Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft \(2013\)](#), an ambitious project deriving from a desire to make the *World of Warcraft (WoW)* online community a more feminist space, Washko does not demonize gamers and cyberbullies for their (sometimes extremely violent) sexist behavior or speech acts. A sharp analyst of mass culture, Washko rather seeks to understand how gender stereotypes play a part in the construction of consistent (if alienated) worldviews and sense of self in individuals, and how those permeate online culture in return: one of her coming projects, a videogame of her own making, consists in experiencing the fact of being a woman at a bar who tries to tell nice guys just trying to reach out, apart from pickup artists, for instance.

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<sup>1</sup> I am of course referring to Donna Haraway's pioneer text, “Cyborg Manifesto”, first published in 1985, then in 1991 in Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. The term “cyberfeminist”, however, is drawn from the collective VNS Matrix's “A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (1991). Cyberfeminism was not so much a “movement” as many connected, non-hierarchical networks involving feminists interested in the web, code and machines as tools and means of emancipation. <http://www.cyberfeminisme.org/eventscf/zelig2.htm> Most heartfelt thanks to Peggy Pierrot, Nathalie Magnan and Joëlle Palmieri for their amazingly generous help on the subject.

In a wonderfully funny video entitled [And They Wonder Why We're Romantics \(2014\)](#), we see the artist under a tree, dressed and heavily made-up as a doe-eyed manga character, painstakingly trying to mimic the kitsch depiction of ecstatic communion with nature – a kind of flower shower – frequently associated with female heroines. Part of a series of videos debunking romantic tropes and clichéd feminine behavior in pop culture, this work is on the tongue-in-cheek side of cultural critique. In a recent game entitled *All the Places You'll Go (Women as Place)*, Washko further exposes the equation of the concept of Woman with that of Nature, pointing to the continuity of the commodification of women's bodies as advertising tools on vintage and contemporary images. Thanks to a tremendous selection of postcards which is also relevant to the artist's interest in the archive and its activist use, Washko's website hosts a "digifeminist" archive compiling "artists, writers, curators, and cultural producers" who use the web as a distribution tool and make it a "more inclusive space for women and their cultural work."<sup>2</sup> An invaluable source to anyone interested in net art and/or the viability of the web as a vehicle of democratic change, this blog sums up Washko's no-nonsense approach to contemporary forms of cultural and political resistance: hosting and sharing the right information; hearing as many diverse viewpoints as possible. In short, Washko is just as concerned with enabling democratic debate and transmission as she is with transforming the objects and *changing the subject* of the conversation. She also teaches at Carnegie Mellon University.

Washko's artwork and its reception has shown how urgent and much needed such change is, considering how little space there is for alternative voices and representations in digital cultures – and how aggressive a reaction feminists – or, for that matter, any woman evincing independence of mind – can bring upon themselves when they challenge or question the status quo. Washko's courageous and open-minded inquiry into the twisted worldviews of the founder of the masculinist movement caused her to be trolled and harassed, in the wake of the Gamergate phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Upon the occasion of the cyberfeminist symposium organized by the Centre Hubertine Auclert pour l'égalité femmes-hommes ([Hubertine Auclert Center for Gender Equality](#)) on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at École 42, Washko presented her numerous online projects. She was generous enough to spend some time for the following interview, in which she discusses her understanding of online feminist strategies, "digifeminist art" and her own practice, cyberharassment, videogames as an artform and the need for inclusivity in that field; the alternative art scene in New York state and NYC; her influences, and, last but not least, art education.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://outofthekitchenarchive.tumblr.com/#about>

<sup>3</sup> Gamergate was a controversy within the independent videogame community, prompted by a smear campaign against game designer Zoe Quinn in 2014. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate\\_controversy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy) Extremely violent at times, the controversy was evidence to the male chauvinism pervasive in the indie game community, reflecting a climate of hostility against women and minorities on the web. It took place after Sarkeesian, a alarmingly hateful backlash against online blogger Anita Sarkeesian for her documentary series *Tropes vs. Women in Videogames* (2013) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toa\\_vH6xGqs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toa_vH6xGqs). Both Sarkeesian and Quinn received death and rape threats; so did many of the women who showed their support to them online.

## Cyberfeminism: A Definition

**Vanina Géré:** In a very [recent international conference on cyberfeminist](#) organized at the Ecole 42 in France (“Les cyberactivismes féministes à travers le monde,” October 2015), which mainly focused on how different waves of feminism present themselves on the web, the web was conceived as an extension for older strategies, just like a ‘new medium’. How would you define cyberfeminism today?

**Angela Washko:** A lot of the talks were focused on using the web as a distribution tool, or a tool for visibility. For me, that hasn’t much to do with cyberfeminism. For example, the [Guerilla Girls](#) have a website, but I would never call them cyberfeminists. I would just call them feminist activists, who happen to have a website. We didn’t get to talk about the tactics of using the web, or any form of ways of thinking about using the web as a unique space. For me, cyberfeminism is much more about thinking about the ways that the structures of the web impact behavior, organizing, or social exchanges, etc. Also, I thought that the term “cyberfeminism” is quite dated for me; when I think about cyberfeminism, I think about Net 1.0, the [VNS Matrix](#), and people like that who were writing manifestos, the [Old Boys’ Network](#), a group of international feminist artists making hacking products, with mottos like “Code is the medium, code is the message.”

I’ve been using the term “digi-feminists” to think about the newer generation of feminists coming up on the web and making work specifically in response to the conditions of the web. “Digi” is for “digital.” It’s the kind of people I’ve seen up and coming, the selfie generation of feminists who may be a lot less outwardly radical in that way. The web has been around for a long time now, it has changed a lot, we have moved away from the web as this mysterious land of possibilities and performance to an era of surveillance and, quite frankly, a really boring web – a social web. We are all connected and we all know what everybody’s doing, so I think there is a lot of work being made now about the transition into that web.

**Vanina Géré:** Would you describe those digifeminist practices as practices of resistance against this evolution of the web?

**Angela Washko:** In the way that I’ve seen it framed, I think it encompasses some resistance but the strategies – if they are there – are often less didactic, more integrated into social media. The performances and the actions are a lot more embedded into everyday life, and less openly confrontational.

In terms of practices, I’m thinking about people like [Morehshin Allahyari](#). She and I have a lot more in common than I do with some of the artists I’ve mentioned, and she has become much more radical and more critical of what ‘radical’ can be. She creates environments with 3-D scanning, but she became quite famous recently for [[Material Speculation : ISIS](#), ongoing] creating models of objects that have been destroyed by ISIS, and then embedding USB sticks into them. She’s kind of the counterpoint to the rest of the women that I’ve

talked about, because she has much more in mind the traditional activism [of original cyberfeminist groups].

She has been in contact with a lot of archivists, who have been able to find photos – actually there very few photos of the objects that have been destroyed in the archive – of the objects that have been destroyed, and she is able to reconstruct them through a 3-D image technology and then she recreates them and also embeds them in a USB stick, an SCD card, both loaded with information that she collected from those archives about the history of those objects that have disappeared. She is from Iran. [For a project entitled [Dark Matter](#) (2014)], she used 3-D printers to create objects that are forbidden in Iran. For instance, she had a dog with a dildo and a satellite at the end. You can't have dogs, you can't have satellite dishes, or dildos. I think she is a bit of an anomaly in this “digi-feminist” group...

**Ann Hirsch** is an artist that I look up a lot. She makes a lot of performances about her childhood growing up on the early web, the social web. She got on a reality TV show; she also created a YouTube persona called the [Scandalicious](#). Performing as an 18-year-old-college freshman, she would just dance, and confess her feelings. It became this huge viral thing. Ultimately she was looking at the construction of the YouTube celebrity; she had a lot of people sending her videos, and so on. She ended up in a weird place where people realized that she wasn't who she said she was, being extremely disappointed... She mined questions about authenticity and the web, etc.

I think that there are a bunch of much younger artists who are indicative of a shift away from a more direct criticism to something that's much more about testifying women's experiences, so there's a lot of crossover 'alt-lit' [alternative literature] net-based writers, like Bunny Rogers, I think, who crosses between being a poet and a visual artist, etc. She's making really beautiful, laboriously hand-stitched work, and performances and second life, and then also books of poetry and online blogs of poetry; she has a sort of 'young-girl' aesthetic, and is also very unforgiving, intense, and can be extremely sexually explicit. I see her attitude as indicative of a shift in the younger generation of artists who are interested in not having to be overtly political, but for whom the kind of testimonial value of the work in itself is powerful in its own way.

There is also **Marie Calloway** – Marie is specifically a writer. She wrote an amazing book, which sparked a lot of controversy – it was largely about being a teenager and getting into sex work and many forms of coercive exchanges throughout her adolescence<sup>4</sup>. It's pretty brutal. So I think *that* kind of activism – which I would still say is a form of activism, although not the kind of activism which we would typically categorize as radical – ends up being pretty powerful and radical, despite not following a model, if there is one.

### Archival Projects as A Form of Activism

**Vaniné Géré: Besides your art projects, you carry out archival projects. Could you describe how the archival project feeds into the idea of activism?**

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<sup>4</sup> Marie Calloway, *What purpose did I serve in your life ?*, Tyrant Books, 2013.

**Angela Washko:** I think one of the issues in this kind of work is that, as it's emerging, has no form of canalization that's happening for it. A lot of these things that are happening, if you're part of it, you realize are connected. But from the outside, I don't think people would normally think that. There are already many connections and conversations happening between all these people and organizations, and all these alternative publications. So I thought that at least creating some kind of platform for all these things and putting them all together was a bit of an activist axe for me... reframing it all as something that's connected, that is a part of potentially changing the way that the Net works, without being as obvious as a self-identified collective.

**Vanina G  r  :** How do you select the material that you archive?

**Angela Washko:** That's really tough. [It's still open](#) – for instance, some of the things that I saw at the conference will definitely be added to it. There is also a submission system, so people regularly submit material to add. In terms of the criteria, (which are also posted, because I did have an issue with somebody who just started listing themselves and all of their performance artist friends, some of which weren't particularly in relation to the Net), the rule of thumb is you have to be a self-identified feminist, working in some way in relation to the conditions of the web, and the conditions of the web as they relate to being a woman, or that the web is your primary way of distributing your feminist work. So for example, the Illuminati Girl Gang is in the project. It is a publication project, but both in its way of gathering contribution, and the way that it is distributed: it is largely online. It doesn't have a physical publication and was basically created via the Net; its organizer, Gabby Bess, had many women sending her interesting facts about being a woman. I also have a list on the site that is much more articulate and specific.<sup>5</sup>

### **Inventing a New Genre of Videogames**

**Vanina G  r  :** You mentioned a new videogame project about a woman at a bar, surrounded by pickup artists. Would you consider making other videogames about typical daily life situations in which a woman would find herself in – not necessarily a tight spot, but situations in which she'd find herself feel uncomfortable – I don't know, harassment at work, or interactions with sexist co-workers...

**Angela Washko:** Well, this whole idea was brought about by a year of somewhat brutal research into Roosh V., the pickup artist and anti-feminist activist that I talked about at the conference that you saw.<sup>6</sup> In the ongoing aftermath of his community harassing me, I realized I had so much material for this project, I had done so much reading, that I felt there was still something to be done, something that had such a broader context than focusing

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<sup>5</sup> Washko, "A Note on Criteria for "A Feminist Art Movement Online", 2014, [https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/5554064/digifeminism\\_criteria\\_for\\_blog.pdf](https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/5554064/digifeminism_criteria_for_blog.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Washko, in "Les cyberactivismes f  ministes    travers le monde", 15 octobre 2015, 4<sup>th</sup> conference of the *Hubertine est une Geek* cycle organized by the Centre Hubertine Auclert, [http://www.centre-hubertine-auclert.fr/sites/default/files/images/programme\\_cha\\_cyberactivismes\\_151015.pdf](http://www.centre-hubertine-auclert.fr/sites/default/files/images/programme_cha_cyberactivismes_151015.pdf).

on him specifically anymore... Also, through some of the conversations that I'd had with members of this community, I started to realize that there was a very complicated field, with a lot of people actually becoming more confident and better people through some of the strategies that are taught by *some* teachers in the Seduction community. Some of the teachers in the Seduction community focus a lot more on highlighting the things that make you weird, or unique, and trying to use that, and turning those from what you see as negative things – like, maybe you are nerdy, and maybe you're a computer geek, like me, or whatever – and instead feeling like that as something holding you back, making it into the thing that makes you interesting. [...]

I talked about gender studies, I talked about queer theory – I tried to, *maybe*, get at the fact that there are answers in some of these fields for some of the disillusionment that he is feeling... but as soon as you say “queer”, it's not going to go over well. He went into a ‘biological determinism’ sort of point – “women are like this, because of evolution, it's nature, they're supposed to have babies...”. You can't really go very far when you get stuck in there.

**Vanina Géré: So all of that material is going to go into this videogame.**

**Angela Washko:** I guess so, I don't like to work in a medium specifically. Right now, making a game makes sense because I want to put the players in the position of having the vision of *this* woman who is undergoing *this* experience, and also having the experience of not being able to distinguish pickup art from nice people who are just trying to figure out to connect with somebody – and having *that* side of things as researched and worked out as the woman's experience. Because I think that in a lot of games – there's a lot of writing about this – you're either on the good side, and the good side has a lot of information, you know the back story, you know the history of your character, etc., while the bad guys are just terrorists and you shoot them – all you know is that they're a problem. They don't have any complexity, they're just evil.

So I wanted to “un-Other” the pickup artists, whom for a while, at the beginning of my project [about Roosh V.], I had been unfairly “othering” as well. So, it is about having a more fleshed-out depth of research for both sides. [...]

Right now, it's tentatively called ‘The Game,’ based on Neil Strauss's book, *The Game*. Neil Strauss is also one of the characters.<sup>7</sup>

### **Fighting Cybersexism and Trolling**

**Vanina Géré: Can we discuss your experience with cybersexism? You have been receiving threats simply for being engaged in the project with Roosh V., and the initial response you got for your *World of Warcraft* project was terribly negative...**

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<sup>7</sup> Neil Strauss is an American writer and journalist most famous for the book mentioned in the interview, a testimony of Strauss's experience with the seduction community and as a pick-up artist. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil\\_Strauss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Strauss)

**Angela Washko:** It wasn't terribly negative at first; actually the response to that project was pretty positive until [Gamergate](#) happened. One interview with me prominently mentioned Gamergate, which I wasn't even very interested in discussing... Gamergate was originally a campaign launched against Zoe Quinn, who made a game called [Depression Quest](#), which is a beautiful game made with Twine, a very accessible, simple text-based program. It's a really lovely, intense game, where you play a woman who is experiencing depression and having a hard time doing her basic tasks, etc. The fact that this game launched a complete attack on games that are independent or unusual, games that are not easily classified as games, games that are an opportunity to have empathetic experiences, games that are made by people who are not interested in mainstream games – *that* started out as a campaign that claimed that Zoe Quinn's game was getting a lot of press because she'd slept with all these guys. It was generated by a statement from an angry ex-boyfriend.

That was the start of it all, when it became a fact about ethics in game journalism. Originally, it was just this one thing against this one woman. That created huge visibility for the very obvious issue – now – that is happening in the games' community, and that is, people being very unwelcoming to other voices in gaming; other voices asking, "Why can't games have more contributors, more diversity, more complex representations of women, LGBTQ people, racial minorities, etc.?" When Gamergate happened, during the summer 2014, I was working on this big essay for my *WoW* program, and I never would have thought that Gamergate readers would read the [Creative Time](#) reports, but it got re-syndicated through a ton of other news sites, and I got so much hate mail, and so much feed on Tweeter for that. People didn't really read past this tagline that *Creative Time* had added to the article – which read like, "Before Gamergate, there was Angela Washko, talking feminism in *WoW*"... Because of the timing of the issue, a lot of people didn't really read the essay, you know.

I got labeled as a 'social justice warrior.' Do you know about this? It is so sad – there is a movement in Gamergate where anybody making any form of political work about the conditions of games, or asking questions about representation, the targeted audience of games etc., get labeled as "social justice warrior." I thought, "Ok, I'll take that as a compliment." The term got shorted to 'SKW.' This label was enough to get me into a sort of attack pool; I ended up on all these weird lists. It was a very weird time, I think its moment has finally passed, I feel very much relieved, but I think that a lot of people left game making after this, a lot of people lost their faith in games as a potential powerful medium, because of the life-altering responses they got.

There are also a lot of people in indie games who have said, "I am done with games because of Gamergate." I think that's really a shame, but I also understand it; I know that my relationship to sharing my work changed, in relationship to both of these projects. I have been re-thinking how to distribute what I do and ways to protect myself from the backlash; it is hard to do this kind of work as a single person, wake up everyday to ten e-mails insulting you, sexually and for the content of your work – you know, with comments like whether or not somebody would bang me...

**Vanina G  r  : What do you think are the best strategies to fight trolling on the web? Apparently, building a community of women and online solidarity is crucial, but aren't there other ideas?**

**Angela Washko:** Well, I think a lot of people who are dealing with this are starting to think about ways to dealing with this – some people who have gone through similar situations, like [Leigh Alexander](#), who wrote for *Gamasutra*, a really well-known game, who ended up leaving after one of their advertising sponsors pulled out after a campaign from Gamergate to fire her... I saw her remove herself from the web, like a lot of people. That's one strategy: temporary removal; blocking is another strategy, but I think that what anybody knows when they're dealing with a really good troll, is that blocking doesn't do shit. Blocking is stopping one person temporarily; if they're a real troll, they will create an infinite number of accounts from which to attack you...

Somebody who is really an experienced and committed troll who is going to get at you, especially when they know that they bothered you. I think that it's also one of the big things; when you're visibly annoyed by their behavior, it fans the flame, it gives them reason to continue engaging. On a personal level, one of the strategies I've used is not to engage at all. That gives them very little reason to keep harassing me, because if I don't respond, then their insults may never get seen, they never land... In terms of ways to combat trolling, dealing with it on an individual level is a problem. A lot of people end up being afraid to speak up back, because, well, you don't want to end up being the target.

The legal system isn't prepared to know what to do yet, they're becoming more prepared because of the visibility of the bomb threats against [Anita Sarkeesian](#) when she goes to talk at universities; because of people who have actually left their homes because of this kind of harassment. It is starting to be something, but it is not really figured out on the legal end yet. There needs to be something done by a system to handle it, rather than just individuals who cannot deal with it on their own. Zoe Quinn actually started something called [Crash Override](#), which is definitely a start.<sup>8</sup> There are a few other things popping up, like organizations who want to come up with strategies for dealing with these situations. There's also been a shift in the legal field for this sort of stuff. For instance, people who've created revenge porn sites are now going to jail for that.

Also, the platforms themselves need to do a better job of defining what harassment is and making it easier to report. I've had to report people through Twitter, and the amount of documentation that you need... And if I block somebody, then I lose all the documentation I need, so I have to unblock them to get those conversations I need to report them; then I open myself to more issues... there needs to be a system where you can just block someone without losing all the tweets.

**Vanina G  r  : So you think the idea of cyber self-defense via hacking is neither productive nor feasible?**

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<sup>8</sup> Crash Override is a network aimed at providing help against online harassment. <http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/>



**Angela Washko:** I just don't know, at least not from where I am with my politics... Through these projects I've been doing, I was holding an old-school activist stance in the beginning, thinking, "I'm going to make *WoW* a much better place for feminists, to more people," "I'm going to change it, etc." Same thing with Roosh V.: I thought, "Ok, I'll find all these women, and I'll write this book so that everybody knows what it's like to deal with all this stuff, etc." But as I've gone through the projects, I've always ended with a much more nuanced understanding of why these temp marginalized spaces are happening, and when I actually go in and talk to people – particularly with *WoW* –, I just end up not being so militant anymore. I'm much more interested in listening.

For many of the men I talked to on *WoW*, I was the first feminist they ever talked to... Being an example of a feminist who was interested in learning more about their perspective, but also who wants to share that feminism isn't all of the things that they've attached to it, that it's something that is much more about bringing visibility to the experiences of women, bringing visibility to the history of women's achievement and that it doesn't have to be something that is trying to change them – the biggest responses I always get are that feminism is just about emasculating men, which is a deep-rooted belief... That strategy of just going in can be productive. On the contrary, fighting back the same way as your oppressors doesn't make sense to me. I want to think about feminist strategies that demonstrate the future kind of exchanges that we want to have, that are not about doing the same things as the people we are fighting against, do. So when I realized that my initial strategies were similar to those of the people I wanted to confront, I started to rethink them, to rethink a way that would be more in line with the future of feminism...

**Vanina Géré: Despite Gamergate, would you say that video games today can be an empowering form of art, because of the possibilities of narration and character exploration that they create?**

**Angela Washko:** It depends. I don't think it's that big of a battle, but there's definitely a school of thought around the fact that games are not preparative devices, games actually are formal mechanics that create a specific sort of possibilities that would be impossible in an other medium. And there's another side that says, "games are great storytelling tools," "games are really great at putting you in the perspective of somebody or something, or whatever, and really allowing you to embody that, and go through a story in that way. There's a somehow divided school of thought on that, but I think there are lots of interesting people making amazing, independent games, using a set of tools that are very accessible. As an activist standpoint, [Anna Anthropy](#) has been a very important voice, saying very loudly and proudly, "everybody should make games, *you* should make games, you should make games if you're weird, if you're queer, if you're a woman, if you're a woman living in this or this country..." Basically, she's saying that there aren't enough voices in games, and that there should be, and "here's a start; maybe you can't code, that's ok, here are some setup tools, and here's how to use them." She wrote an awesome book called *The Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. The idea is to think of videogames as zines, thinking about ways that you can make quick games that you distribute that don't have to be masterpieces. Out of that, there's been a huge movement of interesting games made in the program Twine, a

text-based hyperlink generator that I use sometimes. There's a whole community around that now. [Merrit Kopas](#) has recently published a book called *Videogames for Humans*<sup>9</sup>, a collection of conversations among Twine game makers.

So there is a lot of crossover between art and videogames happening right now: some of these games that are being made in this new genre or new kind of independent, underground context – they are different, they are not like mainstream games; they don't have the same replay value – they don't give you 80 hours of playtime, they're more like experiences. So they are more in line with sitting in a gallery and watching a performance artist, etc. But they still have the formal mechanics of games, so they inhabit a kind of strange space that is evolving. There are a lot of possibilities in this area for an expressive art form. But I would never say that every videogame is art, or that art should be videogames. There are lots of possibilities for telling narratives that are not dominant. As for the powerful ability to put somebody into the position of being an experience that is not part of their ordinary lives, I think that that itself as a mechanic can be really powerful. I think Anne Anthropy and Zoe Quinn exemplify that well.

### **On Being an Artist, a Feminist and a Teacher**

**Vanina Géré: How did you become a feminist? When did you start being feminist in your practice?**

**Angela Washko:** Well, my undergraduate degree was in painting. I feel like I came out of a very formal school in a lot of ways, and that I ended up having developed, at the end of my time there, an organizing practice – a practice of bringing people together for talks, or exhibitions, or conferences, and things like that, because of a desire to contribute something that had some kind of social value, and that painting for me was essentially not that (although it turned out I was a decent painter). After school, I was dissatisfied with formal art making, and ended up being just an organizer of things for a while. I did residencies, I also taught elementary school at that time... Then I moved to a very strange town called Troy, NY. It's in upstate New York, very weird, postindustrial, and poverty-stricken, but there's a very interesting scene of artists there. I was doing an artist residency at Contemporary Artist Center at Woodside, in an 1880s church. There was a really interesting electronic arts MFA and Ph.D. program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (R.P.I.). There are all these people there, like Igor Vamos from the Yes Men, Nao Bustamante, a really amazing performance artist, Kathy High, who's an artist who's been a part of Paper Tiger TV, Branda Miller, who's been part of this organization that's also in Troy, called, the Sanctuary for Independent Media... all these interesting people and this great stuff going on in this little town.

Also, this academic program had interesting grad students, engaged in activism and art, who were really involved in making things happen in the town. It was an incredible mix of

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<sup>9</sup> For a review of the book, see here: <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/05/videogames-for-humans-edited-by-merritt-kopas.html>

people, and I started working with a duo of filmmakers, Bojana Rosa, a very well-known Bulgarian performance artist, and Oleg Mavromati, a Russian artist who has become famous for crucifying himself in a gallery. Bojana was making contemporary American restagings of Eastern European films from the '60s and the '70s. I feel like working with her was one of my first strong engagements with someone who was looking at feminist theory and incorporating it into the work in a very clear way. Working with all the activists in Troy and being a part of this community made me start thinking about possibilities for making work that was more related to a social element that made sense to me, in terms of my interest in engagement with art at all.

A lot of experiences also made me rethink the way that women experience the world in a different way from men. Thinking about that became a focus, in making visual art again. I made a lot of video art during that time. I also did a long project where I replay a lot of videogames that I grew up with, and then only presented the scenarios that involve the women characters – who usually end up being reduced to either women dying, women running and being scared, women being really dependent on main male characters, women begging for men to not leave them, women feeling like they're missing something because they don't have a man in their lives, etc.

It started as a video project, then it also became – because I accumulated so much footage and so many really weird, emblematic scenes – a print project, from hundreds of prints from stills of the games that were so obviously pathetic, for instance there were ten “Don't-leave-me-s” from ten different games – “Don't leave me!” said by all these characters in the games, and then comparing them, where it's evidence that this is happening over and over and over again, even in more contemporary games.

**Vanina Géré: Do you – and if so, how – weave your feminist position into your teaching?**

**Angela Washko:** I don't want to overtly influence my students in a particular way... sometimes, I teach video; right now, I teach an introduction to interactivity class, which is more code-oriented, and then I also teach digitally-mediated performance conversation with mainstream media – it's an advanced class, where we look at ways of performing in relationship to existing cultural work like that. One of the ways that feminism ends up inhabiting one of my teaching practice is in the way that I relate to teaching and hierarchy. I feel strongly about creating a participatory environment, and being open to question myself, allowing students to know that I'm not an absolute authority; making space for discussion that is a lot more horizontal, and more democratic in that way. I still have to grade everybody, so I can't say that I don't have any power, because I do, a lot... Teaching puts you in the position of the (un)questionable authority sometimes, and I think that is something that I'm inherently against. That aspect of rethinking a relationship to my position of power is important to me in the classroom. It becomes complicated when you're a woman and you're younger than your students – you open yourself up to a kind of vulnerability that can be a problem – that's a tricky line that I'm trying to figure out: how

to make space for having frank, open conversation and challenging everybody's pre-existent notion of everything.

**Vanina Géré: What do you think are the tools an art student should master these days?**

**Angela Washko:** That's an interesting question. I guess one of the things that I've noticed in my new teaching context is that a lot of students come assuming that their worldview is universal. Especially because I'm teaching at a very competitive, prestigious school – students assume that their experience is how everybody experiences the world. One of the tools that they should learn is that that's not the case, and they should try to think about their experiences as subjective and specific. So mostly, I would suggest that the tools they need are conceptual and behavioral, instead of tool-oriented: at this point, we have access to so many ways of learning things on our own; for example, sometimes I sew, and I can learn a new sewing technique on YouTube; I can teach myself pretty much most of the tools that I want to learn from a lot of different sources. But as to learning about the ways to inhabit the world as an artist; asking yourself about the role of the artist, thinking about what relationship you want to have to culture at large – that's a different question.

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