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News & Inspiration / Interviews

Anna Weddell is Using Code to Raise Eating Disorder Awareness

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INTERVIEWS (/WEB/20170322084839/HTTP://PROUD2BME.ORG/CATEGORY/INTERVIEWS-NEWS-INSPIRATION)

By Diana Denza--Anna Weddell is a college freshman who's using code to create change. A Girls Who Code (https://web.archive.org/web/20170322084839/https://girlswhocode.com/) alumnae, Anna is working on an awareness-raising game that simulates what it's like to struggle with an eating disorder. We had a chance to chat with the Big Apple native about being a young woman in a male-dominated field, diversity in video games and the great things she has planned for the future.

Diana Denza: What sparked your interest in computer science?

Anna Weddell: I've always been super into video games thanks to my tech-oriented dad, who had me typing on a keyboard before I could even spell. He's helped me to foster an interest generally in science, as we would often visit the Liberty Science Center on weekends (when I'd get to visit his house in New Jersey); but, him being an ex-programmer, it's no real wonder that any of our at-home projects primarily dealt with computers and circuit boards.

DD: Did you get any criticism for being a young woman in the field?

AW: For sure! And it's always a bit of a drag... I'm featured in a CoverGirl video for their #GirlsCan campaign, and so many of the comments are beyond ignorant, claiming that men's brains are simply structured "better" to code, that women who claim to code are liars, et cetera. It can be disheartening but I struggle to channel it

into motivation. Actually, when I started a Girls Who Code program at my old high school to allow young women (who were unable to attend the summer program) to learn to code, many of my male peers were a bit aggressive, claiming that what I was doing was sexist or harmful—but it's far too obvious to me that a lot of girls may need a safe space. Not that girls necessarily need protecting; we're just doing it ourselves.

DD: Did you ever feel like you couldn't do computer science and how did you overcome these fears?

AW: Honestly those garbage YouTube comments can be pretty hurtful, but you just can't feed the trolls. If anything I'm more likely to become insanely frustrated, rather than fearful, whilst building or debugging code. Having my dad to talk to is helpful (even though the main body of his programming work was in the '80's, major #tbt in the world of technology), but having fellow girl (& non-binary) coders to chat with or even read about is so comforting.

DD: What do you think is missing from video games today?

AW: Diversity, absolutely. When something is "different" from the norm in a video game, it's often made the focus for the sake of entertainment — for example, a character struggling with mental health may be made the focal point in order to display an intriguing contrast to the thought-process of a neurotypical player, or the fact that a protagonist is a woman means that her typically overt sexuality is her main selling point, perhaps even made synonymous with her identity as female. And yeah, video games are supposed to be entertaining, so I get it; I don't think there have to be explicitly malicious intentions when such characters or plot lines are created. But I would love for certain elements of the human existence, like race, gender and body type, to name a few, to simply become normalized. People of color play video games, transgender people play video games—it's not all just white teenage boys, and it'd be awesome to have avatars like us!

DD: What do you hope your game about eating disorders accomplishes?

AW: Above all I want it to evoke empathy. So many people have no idea what it is like to struggle with something so insidious as disordered eating, or the depression that so often accompanies it. While right now we are more in the ideation phase and are looking for support to bring the game to life, I ultimately want it to be comparable to a simulated experience of such mentally and physically taxing struggles. Of course I can't really squeeze one lifetime of my own, let alone the millions of others out there facing such internal adversity, into a single video game, but I'm hoping for it to be somewhat of a window into the use of creative coding.

DD: I think your love of programming is awesome! What tips do you have for newbies who don't quite know where to start?

AW: There are a ton of online resources! For girls who are in high school, I'd definitely recommend checking out Girls Who Code (https://web.archive.org/web/20170322084839/https://girlswhocode.com/), but there are also tons of totally accessible, absolutely free applications to help teach you the basics, like those featured on Khan Academy (https://web.archive.org/web/20170322084839/https://www.khanacademy.org/) and Code Academy (https://web.archive.org/web/20170322084839/https://www.codecademy.com/). Teaching yourself can be a little daunting, but even just messing around with the HTML on your blog (or Neopets account, which may or may not be how I really got started), or watching video tutorials on using Unity is a great method for self-teaching.

DD: I heard that you're planning to possibly start your own gaming company one day. Can you tell us a bit about your vision for that?

AW: It would be totally a dream come true to be able to start from the ground up, to be the head of my own company, especially for something to which I attribute my continued presence on this planet—video games. More than anything I would love for a company to be constructed with meaningful diversity. Of course, this is more of a fantasy than anything, as I would be happy to bring the pieces of myself that align with such ideologies into any other gaming company that would accept them.

DD: Can you tell us a little more about your personal struggle with eating disorders?

AW: I've probably struggled on and off with disordered eating for the past seven years or so. I'd never been especially confident in how I'd looked—always felt somewhat ugly as a kid, despite appearances not being deemed too important to my pre-teen self—and at some point I figured, "Well, if I can't fix my face, I can at least try to make my body [what society would regard as] attractive." I mainly became obsessed with playing *Dance Dance Revolution* as a form of exercise, and I limited my calorie intake considerably.

Before a middle school dance I once didn't eat for three days so I would be "pretty" for the occasion—and I still felt absolutely repulsive (which is not really all too surprising when you deeply hate yourself). I started seeing people on the street as numbers for weight or BMI rankings, too eager to compare myself to others' aesthetic success (as perceived by my mentally unstable self). Eventually restricting lapsed into constant cycles of bingeing and fasting, and I really became pretty obsessed with relying on laxatives (and even later, diet pills). These things are still not completely gone from my life. I do love to work out at my gym (and am always sure to bring my Nintendo 3DS with me while I use the elliptical), but I wish I weren't still so focused on counting calories (either consumed or burned) or the rates of change I see on the scale.

DD: What advice would you give girls who want to raise awareness about eating disorders?

AW: I myself am personally very open when discussing this stuff, which I think is incredibly important—though I realize how hard it can be to make public such private and intrinsically personal changes in one's life. I think it is important to foster communities beyond forums, but also to work on generating empathy even from within these digital congregations. I've seen so much hatred spread within ED-centric online communities, especially regarding sharing harmful "advice," where people requesting diet tips or support through recovery paranoia are often antagonized by other members who seek to protect others from picking up the same habits; it's important to remember that those people are obviously struggling, too. The main thing we can do is stick together as a community—for both ourselves, to create a support system, and for those who are trying to understand, as educators, and who can only attempt to look in on a foreign experience.

DD: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

AW: I guess this is kind of random, but I am super stoked about certain advances I've seen in fields of gaming and animation, and they definitely inspire me. News just came out about the next *Pokémon* game, including the fact that the protagonist can now customize skin color beyond degrees of whiter tones, which is something I'm so happy to see finally happen.

Other series are starting to include LGBT+ themes and in-game options, like *Fire Emblem*, and as I identify as pansexual, this is super exciting to me on a personal level. Being able to see diversity reflected in fictional worlds I hold dear to me has helped me push through insecurities, even ones that promote mindsets with an inclination towards morbidity... *Steven Universe* is one of the shows that has honestly willed me to live through its inclusivity; it's moved me to tears (happy tears! And joyous sobs, if we're being real) a ridiculous number of times. I can only wish that any of my contributions to the world around me could possibly do the same for someone else!

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Proud2Bme is an online community created by and for teens. We cover everything from fashion and beauty to news, culture, and entertainment—all with the goal of promoting positive body image and encouraging healthy attitudes about food and weight.

This site was developed in partnership with Riverduinen and made possible by generous contributions from JPMorgan Chase, Globant, the University of Delaware, and The Hilda & Preston Davis Foundation.

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