Brianna Wu makes stand at PAX East

Game developer defies threats by shadowy group

Brianna Wu (right) spoke during a live taping of the Isometric podcast at PAX East in Boston this weekend.

By Hiawatha Bray | Globe Staff | March 08, 2015
There was plenty of simulated digital violence at the PAX East gaming convention this weekend. But happily, that was as real as it got. A defiant Brianna Wu, the Arlington video game developer who has received dozens of death threats from a shadowy movement called GamerGate, safely kept her vow to appear at the convention.

Last month, Wu announced that Giant Spacekat, the video game company she cofounded, would not set up a display booth at PAX East, one of the nation’s largest gatherings of game fans. The reason: fear for the safety of her employees.

“I’ve had 48 death threats now in six months,” Wu said in an interview Friday. “To stand up to GamerGate, that’s my choice. I can’t make that choice for the women I work with.”

But Wu made two public appearances at the convention, including a Friday night live edition of the gaming podcast Isometric. Even though the GamerGate controversy has made national headlines, Wu’s appearance did not attract a large crowd. The podcast took place in a room designed to hold hundreds, but about 70 turned out. These included two plainclothes security workers, gruff and denim-clad, who cast suspicious eyes toward anybody who got near the stage.

But Wu could not entirely avoid hostility. While she was on the exhibition floor at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center Saturday, she posed for a photo with someone who posted it on Twitter. That soon elicited a tweet that said in part, “YOU COULDA WENT IN FOR THE KILL.”
Brianna Wu on why GamerGate trolls won’t win

Threats are keeping my female game developers from PAX East, but they’re not going to silence us.

In private twitter messages to the Globe, Wu acknowledged seeing the threatening tweet, and added, “This is my life now. It’s constant. It’s exhausting.”

In her Friday interview, she discussed the months of death threats, saying, “The ones that just say, ‘I’m going to kill you,’ I just laugh them off. But when they say who, when, where, why, and how they want to kill me, I take that seriously.”

A Boston Police Department spokesman said Saturday evening that police were aware of the threatening tweet, but deemed it “not credible.”

“We work very closely with this event,” Lieutenant Michael McCarthy said. “We have officers on scene and will respond to any credible threats.”

Wu’s travails began last October, when she posted a Twitter message making light of GamerGate, a movement that describes itself as an effort to fight corruption in video game journalism. But some who associate themselves with the movement have also criticized efforts to increase the number of women working in the game industry, and to include more female characters in games.
After Wu criticized GamerGate, the threats began.

While Wu agreed that video game journalism is in need of ethics reform, she had nothing but contempt for GamerGate. “It’s a pretext,” she said. “This is an actual hate group . . . they’re upset and threatened by women who are being very outspoken about feminism.”

Backers of the GamerGate movement say the behavior of a few extremists is being used to smear their entire movement.

“You can’t say that all people who support GamerGate hate women, just because one person in GamerGate might really hate women,” said PAX East attendee Andrew Sampson, a 20-year-old software developer from Atlanta.

Sampson insisted GamerGate isn’t a war on women, but on corruption and dishonesty in video game journalism. “Video game journalists for the longest time have been colluding together,” said Sampson. “Basically taking bribes, taking offers to publish positive reviews.”

According to Sampson, pressure from GamerGate has already caused some game publications to revise ethics policies.

PAX East attendee Cortney Zamm, 26, a sales engineer from Norwalk, Conn., has mixed feelings about the controversy. “As a woman, it’s a little bit difficult to talk about it without getting angry,” she said.

While she’s repulsed by the threats aimed at Wu and other female game developers, Zamm agrees with GamerGate backers about ethical problems in game journalism. She complained that a solution is nowhere in sight. “It’s a lot of people yelling and not enough listening on both sides,” Zamm said.

Wu would welcome a truce. She said she’s met with a prominent GamerGate supporter, seeking to understand their viewpoint, but she doesn’t believe they’ll ever find common ground. “These people are not interested in that,” she said. “They cannot be reasoned with. They’re extremists and they’re sexists.”
For Wu, the solution is simple — start throwing some people in jail. “I have spent so much time trying to get the FBI to arrest some of these people,” she said. “I’m working my butt off to get consequences added to the equation. . . . Once people go to jail for doing these very illegal things, it may wake some people up.”

Wu also expressed admiration for a different kind of gamer, former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling. Last week, after a flood of harassing Twitter messages were aimed at Schilling’s daughter, Gabby, Schilling struck back by tracking down the identities of the senders. One of them, a community college student, was suspended, and another, a part-time employee of the New York Yankees, was fired. In addition, Schilling has threatened to file lawsuits against all those who sent the messages.

Wu praised Schilling’s response. “He took law enforcement out of the equation, which hasn’t been working, and he appealed directly to their employers and their universities,” she said.

But Wu didn’t say whether she plans a similar counterattack. For now, she’d be content if the bullies would simply stop. “This has been six months of pure hell for me,” she said.
The huge PAX East convention was held at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

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