

## A Self-Made Game Dev is Changing the Industry On Her Own Terms

With determination and elbow grease, Renee Gittins went from biotech engineer to indie game studio lead—and helped create a new reality for female gamers

By [Victoria Rose](#)

“You don't need a college degree to make a game on your own,” says Renee Gittins, an indie studio lead and board member of the [International Game Developers Association](#). “All you need is the Internet, a computer, and your own ideas.”

For Gittins, a traditional gaming education was never the goal. The 28 year-old didn't study game design or software programming in college; instead, she taught herself coding, level design, and other key skills in order to simply learn new skills and create

first project, “[Potions: A Curious Tale](#),” began as a portfolio project; today, it’s slated to release soon as a full game on the Steam platform.

As an engineering student at Harvey Mudd College, Gittins wasn’t even aware that game design—the process of working hands-on to bring video games to life—was a viable career option. It was her active passion for gaming, as well as one fateful meeting, that led her to discover a new prospect, and sparked her passion for game design. “I was a really big gamer, and I was really into cosplay,” she explained. “And through that, I ended up meeting a game developer, and then met a bunch of game developers through him. After that, I thought, Wait, this is a career! I can easily do what these people are doing.”



Photo: Keith Morrison

After graduating in 2012, Gittins began working as a project manager in biotechnology. During that time, her own particular perspective of workflow grew and

took up coding on her own time and created programs using Cocos2D-HTML5 for her own research, mainly game-like programs intended to evaluate children that may have suffered concussions.

When Gittins decided to move forward with her game development work in early 2014, she realized that she didn't have a gaming-focused portfolio to show prospective studios. Moreover, she found herself lacking clarity about exactly what she wanted to be, and do, within the industry.

"I knew that I wanted to help make games," Gittins remembers. "I knew that my role could be programmer, since I taught myself programming while I was in biotech. I knew I could be a producer or a project manager of sorts and lead a team. One other role that I thought sounded interesting, but I had never pursued, was game designer."

She knew she needed to do something to show her potential—and through her combination of curiosity and drive, Gittins found the glimmer of inspiration that would set her new career in motion. "I didn't really know what being a game designer was," she says. "I thought the best way to practice would be to just design a game on paper. That was the first rendition of Potions." After putting that first iteration of "Potions: A Curious Tale" on paper in August 2014, Gittins quickly realized she had a project worth pursuing, and she moved forward to bring it to life.

"I thought, 'I need to practice my C++ programming, so why don't I design out this system in C++?'" she recalls. "And so I designed out the inventory and crafting in C++. Around that time I learned about [Unity](#). I had used it, but not really gone for it; I wasn't as used to graphical user interface-based programs. Then I decided to prototype the game, and it was fun! Everyone I talked to was interested in it."

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Photo: Keith Morrison

Gittins went on to found her own studio, [Stumbling Cat](#), and fleshed out “Potions” through her new platform. “Potions” continued to grow. In 2015, she demoed the game at PAX Prime, IndieCade, and GeekGirl Con. A year later, Stumbling Cat launched campaigns for the project on Kickstarter and the Square Enix Collective.

“Potions” was warmly received everywhere it went. Its Kickstarter campaign had a successful run that ended with its financial goal met, and a slot as a Kickstarter Staff Pick that led to coverage by a slew of well-respected indie podcasters. On Square Enix, it holds a 63% recommended rating. “What started out as something that was merely created to test my design abilities, my interest in design, and to build out my portfolio ended up becoming this thing that I wanted to bring to life— and that's what I've spent the last four years doing,” Gittins says.

"I hope that I can always inspire people to appreciate their interests and to not be bullied out of the things they love," Renee says.

beginning to confront the complexities of her world. For Gittins, bringing the game's message to a wide audience is as important as the game's success. "I remember all of the struggles I faced at that time [as a young girl], and a lot of them are struggles that Luna faces as well," she explains. "She's an adolescent coming to terms with not being a child anymore but not quite being an adult, figuring out what she's good at, and figuring out what her relationships are with the people around her. Luna quickly learns that just because someone is older than you, or has a fancy title, doesn't mean that they're a good person."



Photo: Keith Morrison

The game carries a message Gittins hopes young players can take with them. "The core message in 'Potions' is that you can use your strength to overcome obstacles, and to help other people," she says. "Luna is not a warrior. She doesn't win things through brute force, or strength, or swinging around swords. She wins through strategy, creativity, and quick wit."

that draws from Gittins's life, and its lessons of hard work and empathy shine through her career as well. In fact, her leadership work at IGDA began simply enough, when she engaged some of the group's leaders in conversation at a 2014 expo and offered her help and leadership expertise. She joined her local chapter in 2015 and worked her way up to the international board, on which she has served since April 2017.

Recently, Gittins published a white paper titled "[Social Virtual Reality Best Practices](#)" that discusses the ways in which VR developers can make their products as safe and accessible as possible. She was driven to take up this work, she says, after experiencing multiple disturbing encounters with men from her industry at an invitational event. In one instance, upon realizing he had a female avatar, a male teammate started gesturing at himself inappropriately. As an industry leader working towards diversity, Gittins gets to see change with her own eyes.

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Photo: Keith Morrison

“When I was demoing ‘Potions’ at GeekGirlCon in Seattle, there was this young girl,” she remembers. “She was eight, in second grade, and she was so excited about ‘Potions’—she was really, really happy. Her mother came up to me and said, ‘Thank you so much for being here. She loves ‘Minecraft,’ but she is bullied by the boys in her class for liking it because they say that girls shouldn't play games.’ [My being] there promoting a game that features a girl [protagonist], as a female developer, made her daughter feel like it was okay for her to like games.

“And that's amazing,” she continues. “It's so heartwarming to me. I hope that I can always inspire people to appreciate their interests and to not be bullied out of the things they love.” Gittins is excited that her work is making such a tangible impact, especially considering her first and most high-profile project to date began with her tapping into her own strengths and experiences. “I know that as a young girl, that was a game that I wanted,” she recalls. “And now I'm making that game for myself. It just happens that other people like it, too.”

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## This “Half-coordinated” Speedrunner Excels in Gaming and Disability Advocacy

Clint “Halfcoordinated” Lexa has worked through hemiparesis to speed through games, shake up the gaming industry and touch lives.

By [Victoria Rose](#)

If you’ve ever tried to finish a video game as quickly as possible, you’re in the ranks of “speedrunners,” who make fast gaming a game of its own. But try beating world records with only one hand on the controls. That’s how 30-year old Clint Lexa, known by his gamer handle “halfcoordinated,” became a top speedrunner. He’s also become an advocate for making video games accessible to the disabled, and his story and work are making a difference.

feeling in one half of the body, Lexa can only reliably use one hand to play video games, and for other day-to-day tasks. Using his left hand to manipulate the joystick and buttons by spreading his hand across the controls, he holds the controller up with his right hand.

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Lexa of Bassett, Virginia, opts not to be grouped with one-handed players, but instead competes with the general population of speedrunners, and is one of the most well-known and well-respected players active today. A speedrunner for over six years, Lexa dates his love for video games to when he was about two or three years old. He would play the Nintendo Entertainment System and computer games with his dad, who made DOS games and let him be an “honorary tester.” But his disability made it hard to play with the controllers used in that era’s games, until Sony released the Playstation 2 in 2000, and Lexa found his groove.

“I didn't start playing one handed until I got a PS2, with a controller that fit the sort of grip that I use,” he said. “In any case, I realized I was actually fairly decent at it at some point.”

Lexa dove into speedrunning after watching Games Done Quick, a speedrunning showcase, in the early 2010s. At GDQ, speedrunners from across the globe broadcast playthroughs of their favorite games live on Twitch, including such popular games as The Legend of Zelda and Resident Evil, as well as more obscure titles. The event also lets viewers and players donate to a designated charity.

Lexa practiced on his own and started occasional streams on the recordable live-streaming site Twitch, finding a new sense of enjoyment in games he already loved. The hobby truly clicked for Lexa when he found a community of fellow Super Monkey Ball racers.

“There was a small community back then that were doing races fairly regularly,” he recalls, “and I kind of just popped into that. It was just a very fun time to do those races with that group of folks, and that definitely made it a less lonely activity.”

than you might think. [Check out Alienware's study to learn more.](#)

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Lexa's spent years perfecting his gaming and is now a top speedrunner in his own right, breaking records in multiple games. That passion and hard work paid off when his application to become a showcased speedrunner at Games Done Quick was accepted. In his first speedrun at AGDQ, in 2015, he played Vanquish before a crowd that fundraised to opt him to play with "Soda%," which meant he would hold a soda in one hand while playing the game.



Since then, Lexa has attended a number of GDQ events as a player, helping to build the speedrunner community. "Doing a run at those is my way of helping, and I just love being a part of that. It's a very, very special, important thing to me."

knows only as Oyster, connected Lexa with a man whose 12-year-old daughter was battling brain cancer, and like Lexa, had lost control over one half of her body. So when the 2016 GDQ summer speedrunning event approached, at which Lexa planned to play “Momodora: Reverie Under the Moonlight,” Oyster put Lexa in touch with the girl, Samantha.

“He showed Samantha some of my past runs,” Lexa recalled, “and her response was 'I want to play games fast too', and basically learn to play games one handed and make that period a little better for her.” Samantha’s family made plans for her to attend the convention, but unfortunately, she could not travel to the event.



“I was particularly emotional for that run,” said Lexa. “I gave a little speech at the end about how I won't say that you can do absolutely anything, because that would be empty words, but it's important to take that which you have been given and just do

the results.”

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At the end of that event, Lexa was physically and emotionally exhausted. “I don't know if any moment, going forward, will really match that,” he said.

Samantha passed away later that year. Still, with GDQ growing bigger than ever, and with a cancer charity being the focus of the event, this speedrun and speech became an emotional moment that touched the hearts of speedrunners and viewers.

The experience motivated Lexa to devote himself to making gaming more accessible, and he's now a leading advocate to make online games and the gaming community more disability-friendly. In 2017, he was nominated for “Trending Gamer of the Year” award at The Game Awards.

*Just like Clint and his work in the accessibility space in gaming, Dell and Alienware are committed to inclusivity across the board. Check out more of their pledge [here](#).*



“There's a lot of things that developers and other players might not consider while making the game that can make a huge difference for those with disabilities,” he says. “And, often these features will end up benefiting able-bodied players as well.”

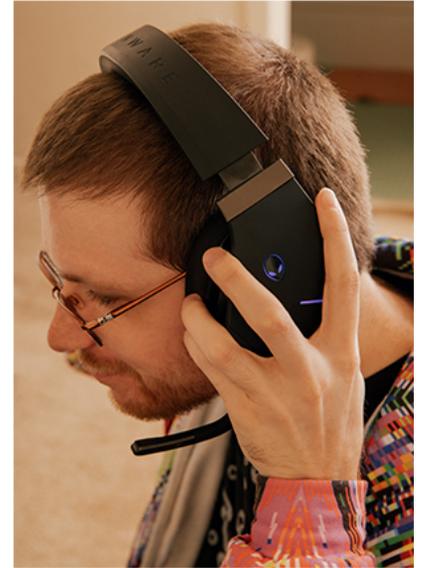
Lexa's already begun consulting to game design studios, helping developers create options for photosensitivity issues (such as epilepsy), colorblindness and subtitles, and to rethink things that players often take for granted. For instance, rebindable controls, which allow players to configure which buttons control what, are a necessity for physically limited players like Lexa.

Too often, says Lexa, developers treat these options as an afterthought. But as with any software project, it's difficult to just slip in major changes at the end.

Adding accessibility options to a game after it's been designed and coded requires a lot more effort than planning to make a game accessible, says Lexa. “If you start early

all by comparison”  
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While he waits for designers to make the next generation of games accessible, Lexa has grown a small community of loyal fans and friends on Twitch, and he feeds their appetite for clips of his speedruns with his own MacGyvered video system of a camera taped to a broken desk lamp.

Now, Lexa is hoping he can support himself with his accessibility consulting. He recently left a job at a call center for a power company. With so much work to be done to make gaming a better place, he said he felt obliged to make the jump.

“It's scary, that's for sure,” he said, “but people have been very supportive, and I've been able to keep going, and I'm very thankful for that. Extremely thankful.”

but important advice: Pick games you enjoy. Don't worry about viewer counts. Try less-popular games. And, given how much you'll play, find games with soundtracks you won't get sick of.

"You're going to hear that music a lot."

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## With Extra Life, Gamers Come Through to Help Children in Need

A Texas radio host turned his passion for gaming marathons into a charity that's raised more than \$40 million for children's medical treatment.

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Jeromy Adams likes the idea of playing video games for hours on end. For money, sure, but not for himself. For charity.

A decade ago, Adams was a happily employed assistant program manager at a Houston radio station when he hit upon the idea that would eventually make him a fundraising superstar: Why not hold video game marathons to raise money for good causes?

So he started an organization, [Extra Life](#), as a side project to raise money for children's medical treatment. The first year, more than 1,000 gamers pledged more than \$120,000 for Texas Children's Hospital. The amount was a dozen times the original goal. The second year, contributions topped \$170,000. Adams realized he was onto something more important than a few extra points in Call of Duty or NBA 2K: It turned out that the gaming community was not only caring, but generous.



Extra Life is now a break-away success, tapping into the hearts and wallets of video gamers to raise money for the Children's Miracle Network, which supports children's medical treatment and research. Since 2008, the organization has raised some \$40 million for sick and injured children, according to its website.

Chapters known as "guilds" have formed across the country, attending gaming conferences and other geeky gatherings to raise awareness. In recent years gaming companies have participated as sponsors and charitable participants, [including the PC gaming brand Alienware.](#)

Aside from giving players an excuse to log a little more screen time, Extra Life has made it easy to participate. Individual video gamers host their own marathons and select a hospital to support. They get a dedicated page with a space to talk about their special causes. There's an easy link allowing participants to donate directly. Then the play begins. And the money comes rolling in. One gamer has raised more than [\\$750,000](#) for the organization.

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There's even an annual convention in Orlando, Extra Life United, where children benefiting from the Children's Miracle Network are invited to meet other gamers and celebrities. Companies including Twitch, Disney and Marriott have helped to pick up the travel costs.

In fact, Adams recalled, it was at one such event in 2014 where he witnessed firsthand the power of video games to inspire.

Celebrities in attendance, including the legendary TV singer Marie Osmond and former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Steve Young, could barely get the attention of many kids, Adams recalled in an interview.

content creator. One girl looked up and saw him, and she quickly got her brother to look up from his Game Boy. They were awestruck by his appearance, Adams said.



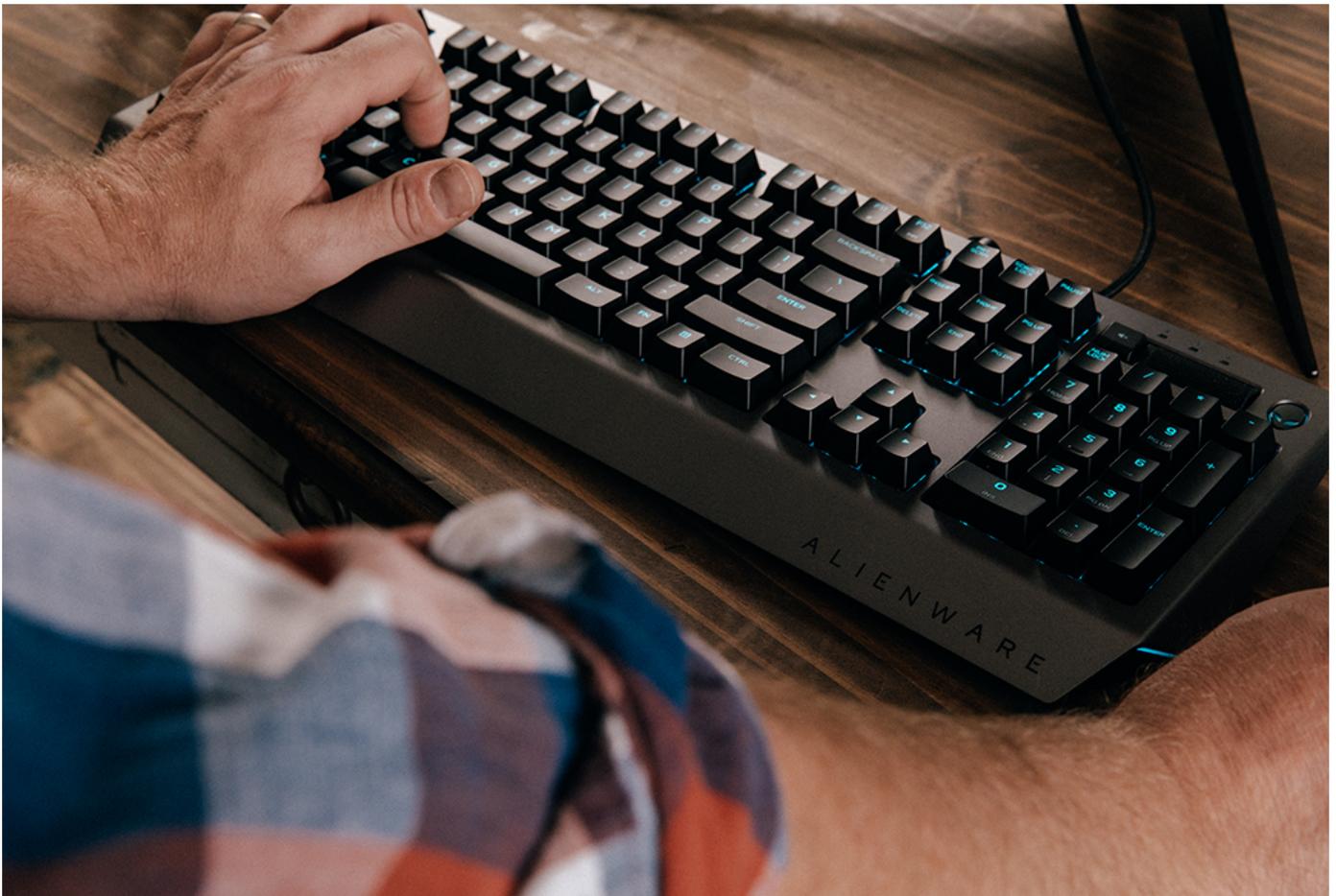
“Along comes CaptainSparklez,” Adams said. “All of my peers at CMN Hospitals were like, ‘What is happening? Who is that guy? I don’t know who he is.’ But the kids know who he is.”

**Just like it is to Jeromy, non-profits and doing good for the community are important to Dell and Alienware. Check out how they give back [here](#).**

This past September, Adams says, he stepped back from the organization to focus on his family. But as he recounts the early history, there’s one particular girl who looms large: Victoria Enmon, known by her nickname “Tori,” who suffered from acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

children as part of an annual fundraising drive in connection with a local hospital. Adams bonded with Lori over their mutual passion for video games.

The next year, Adams met Tori again. After a period of remission, her cancer had relapsed. Adam noticed she was keeping herself occupied with an older PlayStation. In a blog post, he asked supporters for help in acquiring newer consoles. It worked.



“Money and games and consoles came from all over the world,” he said. “It was really an incredible thing to see.”

In fact, it was too much.

much money. We couldn't spend that much on one hospital room. "We ended up getting to a place where we would give to Tori, and then she would give to other kids that were stuck in the hospital."

Yet another year, Tori's condition had worsened. Suffering from late-stage cancer symptoms, she could barely stay outside for a few minutes to take a look at the glowing holiday lights. Still, she braved it out long enough to take a picture with Adams in front of a Christmas tree. She died a few months later. The picture still sits on his desk.

"It keeps me thinking correctly," Adams says. "This is a little girl's legacy."

Upset and frustrated following Tori's death, Adams started looking for a way to honor her. He found inspiration in a bicyclist friend's charity drive: It was a bike-a-thon of sorts. If people could bike for charity, why couldn't they play video games for charity? Well, he would find out, they could.

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It hasn't always been easy. In 2013, on "game day," the Extra Life site was shut down by a "distributed denial of service," or DDoS attack, where computer servers are intentionally overwhelmed by artificial traffic. The setback created difficulty in processing donations, but the organization still managed to raise \$4 million.

**Check out Dell & Alienware's multi-year commitment to children's cancer initiatives that have helped nearly 30,000 children today [here](#).**

Adams said he has relocated to a small mountain town in eastern Tennessee, where he now owns and operates a donut shop. He's also a realtor, he says, and involved in business development work for clients in the area.

What he won't forget are the hardships faced every day by kids like Tori.

"These kids are looking down the barrel of a gun called cancer and smiling at you, and they just want a hug," he says.

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# Fighting Hate Through Empathetic Game Development

Daniel Kelley is making game development kinder by helping gamers become better allies

By [Victoria Rose](#)

As hate speech and bigotry explode online, video game developers are trying to stomp out toxic environments in their games and communities. But if bigotry and hatred are so increasingly common in gaming, why not flip the board by making empathetic games? That's the challenge Daniel Kelley is putting to game developers across the U.S.

Kelley is associate director of the Anti-Defamation League's Center for Technology and Society, where he's tasked with curbing what the group calls "cyberhate" and

Semitism, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment.

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With 65 percent of American households counting at least one member who plays games three hours a week or more, says Kelley, targeting hate speech and promoting inclusivity in the gaming community are critical. “[Part of it is] trying to change hearts and minds,” he adds, “so people will understand that this is a real civil rights concern. In many ways, this is the medium of our times.”



Hate speech has grown across online platforms, including video game communities. From Facebook, Reddit and Twitter, bigots use a slew of tactics to attract insecure or hateful gamers. When they're not secluded in private group chats, they can go on targeted harassment sprees, using popular platforms to harass and threaten game designers and players.

When the League organized the first Being An Ally Game Jam in 2017, in which creators are challenged to pitch and create games within the event's time scope, Kelley was impressed by the level of commitment exhibited by the developer community.

“People in the gaming community who attended the event were really hungry to engage, [to discuss] how we talk about serious issues in game development,” Kelley recalled in an interview. “It was clear to me that there are people in this community who really want games to be a force for good in the world. Part of our goal is and should be to help to lift up people who are creating games that [reflect these values].”

***Technology and gaming can highlight the darker spots in our communities, but they are fundamentally drivers of what's good. Check out Alienware & Dell's commitment to doing more good for the world in their [Legacy of Good Plan](#).***

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The logo for Waypoint, featuring the word "waypoint" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The "w" is white and the "aypoint" is teal. The logo is positioned on the left side of a teal banner at the top of the page. The banner also contains the text "Partner Content" on the right and a small white alien head icon in the center.

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The Game Jam, as it's known now in its second year, is a small but important event in The AntiDefamation League's multifaceted approach to tackling hate speech, with about 100 developers across eight physical locations and online across the globe. While its primary mission is to prevent anti-Semitism, the organization's anti-harassment, anti-racism, and other social justice focused research has attracted the attention and allyship of other targeted groups in the U.S. and beyond.

"When we had the opportunity to do this Game Jam, I took that as a way to start having these conversations with the gaming community," said Kelley. In fact, for the previous year, he'd been talking with activists and developers who have been working to make gaming more inclusive and more respectful.

It's hard to quantify such occurrences, says Kelley, he cites several recent examples. In Red Dead Redemption 2, players were permitted to kill suffragettes, and videos of the online slaughters were posted on YouTube (gamers often post videos of their favorite moves). Discord, a popular chat site for gamers came under fire for allowing a number of white supremacist and other hate groups to organize on the site. In the massive competitive community for Super Smash Brothers Melee, players often tussle publicly with bigots and harassers.

One of the most popular games in the U.S. even allowed players to rape female characters if the gamer could crack a code to enter a hidden portion of the game. Now, games including Ubisoft's competitive first person shooter Rainbow Six Siege, eject players who spew hatred while playing.

For Kelley, the job was a perfect fit. As a kid, he huddled over PC games with his younger brother. "I was really into Dungeons & Dragons, ports and boss games," Kelley says. "I was way into Dark Sun: Wake Of the Ravager and Dark Sun: Shattered Lands. This was in the '80s when you had one computer, and you sort of waited with bated

time running around in mythical 8bits and battling Thrikeens and giants and stuff.”

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Moving on from battling primitive monsters, playing more advanced games like Warcraft II and Diablo helped Kelley make friends as an awkward middle schooler, “This is a language that created a shared identity with my peers,” he recalled.

When Kelley grew older, he started out with a playwriting and tech operations background, then moved into financial technology, working with with startups and hedge funds.

Eventually, he decided to apply his skill set and knowledge to a position that would allow him to do more social good. CTS was a natural fit for his mix of abilities and

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This year, with the help of an ADL fellow, Dr. Karen Schrier of Marist College, participants created a new framework that uses anti-bias concepts to help developers use the game design process to explore issues of identity.

“It could've been a one-off,” said Kelley, “but we felt there was a real hunger from people in the gaming community for an organization like the Anti-Defamation League to stand up and say, ‘This medium is important. As an anti-hate agency focused on protecting civil rights, we think this is an important place for us to be.’”

***The gaming community is just that: a community of people with shared values and a love for gaming, the people it brings together, and the tech behind it. Check out what Dell and Alienware are doing to uplift the community with social change at large [here](#).***

The ADL also created the Hate Crime Map, a digital map of the United States that pulls information from reported hate crimes. A virtual reality version of the map was unveiled at the League’s annual conference in Washington, DC, running on an Alienware laptop bought at the last minute after their original hardware broke. “That was a really great success,” said Kelley. “People of all kinds ended up taking a look at the map. They were able to see it, and able to experience a more visual and more visceral understanding of hate crimes.”

The ADL has widened its scope of digital work to combat cyberhate. One project aims to utilize social sciences combined with machine learning to make algorithms better understand hate speech patterns. Another project compiles examples of how the Holocaust has been, and can be, respectfully depicted and interpreted in gaming. Other work goes beyond gaming: CTS Belfer Fellow Dr. Patricia Novick, who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the ‘60s, is working on an augmented reality app that will provide tours of historic Chicago communities of color.

educators, and civil rights advocates to brainstorm classroom-friendly civil rights projects in San Francisco, in an effort to head off cyberhate among young gamers and schoolchildren. One group of participants suggested creating an immersive VR narrative, in which players actually speak out against harassment in historic settings — and now, it's becoming a reality. “We’re working with a VR developer using AI technology that allows for voice recognition,” he explains. “In this experience, you'll actually be able to use your voice to speak out against hate, and influence key moments in history.”

*Just like Kelley, Alienware & Dell are excited about the vast amount of opportunities that VR has for gaming. [Read more here.](#)*

This confluence of academia, social justice, and gaming excites Kelley. “There isn't really a strong pipeline between people who are doing scholarly work in games, people who are studying games as a medium, and industry.” Daniel Kelley’s work may very well be building a bridge to a more empathetic and inclusive gaming community.

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