

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of “Empathy” in Video Games

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This article analyzes the contemporary discourse that surrounds video games. Specifically, it confronts the rhetoric of “empathy,” which has become a buzzword in North American industry, academic, education, and media conversations about video games and their supposed power to place players into others’ shoes—especially those games created by queer or otherwise marginalized people. Scholars like Wendy Chun and Teddy Pozo and game designers like Robert Yang have spoken out against this rhetoric. Building from their writing, as well as critiques from the creators of queer independent games commonly mislabeled as “empathy games,” this article delineates the discriminatory implications of the term. Rather than simply dismissing “empathy,” however, this article unpacks it, turning to textual artifacts like news stories and industry presentations, as well as the 2016 video game Unravel (ColdWood Interactive), to deconstruct the term’s many meanings and to identify alternative (queerer) models of affective engagement with video games.

Keywords: Video Games, Cultural Discourse, Empathy, Queer Games, Politics of Affect, Appropriation

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Video games are a widely popular and influential mass media form. According to a recent report from the [Electronic Software Association \(2018\)](#), 64% of all U.S. households own a game console or other device for playing video games. In addition to studying the content of video games, it is important to study the paratextual elements and cultural systems that surround them ([Consalvo, 2009](#)). One such system is the network of discourse that circulates around video games, which sets the terms for their broader reception and interpretation. This discourse is generated by a wide-reaching network of actors, including those from within the game development industry, news outlets reporting on games, player communities, game education, and academic game research. Taken together, this discourse plays a crucial role in

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shaping how video games and their meanings are understood within contemporary North American society. Video games that do not fit the dominant norms of the medium, such as the growing number of queer-themed, independent video games, are particularly affected by this discourse. Since many players and readers (e.g., of news articles) are not yet familiar with these games, the language that is used to describe them has a considerable impact on how they are perceived. To understand the place of video games within society, it is crucial to analyze the ways that these games are talked about, not just the people and stories that these games represent.

To this end, this article critiques the increasingly pervasive rhetoric of “empathy” that surrounds contemporary video games. Over the last half a decade, “empathy” has become a buzzword in the networks of games discourse. In news articles, industry presentations, and promotional materials related to video games, “empathy” is now commonly used to describe the purported ability of video games to allow players to experience the feelings of others—with a focus on those who are seen as diverse or disadvantaged. My critique starts from, but is not limited to, a consideration of the problematic ways that empathy, as both an interpretative framework and a system of value, has been applied to queer indie games. As a number of scholars and game designers have argued, the case of queer indie games demonstrates how the rhetoric of empathy, while often well-intended, promotes the appropriation and consumption of marginalized experiences. Here, I extend these existing arguments by moving beyond queer indie games, looking at how the rhetoric of empathy is being applied to video games more broadly. My contribution to these conversations also lies in the fact that, rather than simply dismissing “empathy” for its problematic implications, I linger with this discourse in order to lay bare the cultural logics that underlie it. I deconstruct the uses of “empathy” in order to disentangle and delineate the multiplicity of meanings contained within this rhetoric: that is, to resurface the experiences and feelings currently grouped under the umbrella of “empathy.” Some of these feelings, such as the self-satisfied feeling of allyship, indeed demand stringent critique. However, others—such as experiences of caring, heartbreak, and even a kind of intimate queer entanglement—demonstrate that already contained within the marginalizing rhetoric of empathy lies the potential for envisioning alternative and more socially-just ways of how video games allow players to feel with and for others.

In my analysis, I am indebted to critiques of “empathy” by queer and transgender game developers and scholars, including Anna Anthropy (Priestman, 2015), Mattie Brice (2016), Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas (2015), and Robert Yang (2017). Wendy Chun (2016) and Lisa Nakamura (2002) have likewise offered important insights into the worrisome implications of cultural narratives about how digital media invites users to inhabit the experiences of marginalized subjects. I also draw inspiration from work on affect and video games by scholars such as Teddy Pozo (2018), Whitney Pow (2018), and Aubrey Anable (2018). In addition, deconstructing the rhetoric of empathy allows me to confront the politics of affect in video games more broadly. For this reason, this work draws from theorists at the intersection of affect and politics, such as Sara Ahmed (2015), Lauren Berlant (2004), and Brian Massumi (2015).

Much like Berlant writes of compassion, in the context of video games, empathy has become an “emotion in operation” (Berlant, 2004, p. 4). Here, I offer an analysis of a variety of textual objects, including news articles, industry presentations, publicity materials, and academic publications—as well as a game, ColdWood Interactive’s 2016 *Unravel*—in order to understand how the rhetoric of empathy is being put into operation: how it is deployed, what cultural work it performs, and what alternative forms of interpersonal, affective connections this rhetoric simultaneously obfuscates and imagines.

The politics of affect in video games and the rise of “empathy”

The rhetoric of empathy as it appears in the contemporary discursive networks surrounding video games is fundamentally concerned with experiences of feeling. Empathy can be broadly defined as the ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings or experience. In discussions of video games, however, this definition is commonly simplified as feeling what someone else is feeling. Often, this language of feeling is translated into embodied metaphors, such as the image of walking in someone else’s shoes or seeing through someone else’s eyes. As a blog post from the [Electronic Software Association \(2013\)](#), a major trade organization for the U.S. video game industry, proclaims, “Gamers are walking a mile in others’ shoes by experiencing what it is like to live with real-world diseases (...) through a video game genre known as ‘empathy games.’” The issue of how games can foster empathy in players has become a standard talking point in many current conversations around video games in professional, academic, and popular media spaces alike, from debates about whether video games should be considered art (Wells, 2016) to efforts to design games that foster “prosocial behavior” (iThrive). Often, proponents of empathy as principle of game design frame its value through the feelings that it inspires in players, not only while they are playing a game but also after. Video games that engender empathy, write Michelle Bertoli and Heidi McDonald (2017) in a post for the educational game development company iThrive, “leave players [with a] hankering to do good.” In this sense, empathy is imagined both as a feeling and as a call to feel. It is also presented as a “good” feeling, placing it in opposition to the “bad” feelings that the general North American public has long associated with video games, such as anger and isolation (Isbister, 2016).

This question of how video games make players feel, and how the discursive networks that surround games suggest that games *should* make players feel, is fundamentally political. This point is crucial because it is common for reactionary “gamers” to insist that video games are apolitical (Cross, 2016). Arguments against the idea that video games have political meaning are prevalent, vehement, and at times rise to the level of harassment. In a number of recent incidents, representatives from the video game industry have vocally disavowed the political implications of their games. This has sparked debates about the inclusion of pseudo-political content in big-budget, “AAA” video games more generally (Campbell, 2018). However, affect is an equally

important, if under-recognized part of the cultural politics of video games. As [Anable \(2018\)](#) argues, video games and affect are inextricably linked; video are themselves “affective systems” (p. xii). Writes [Massumi \(2015\)](#), “The concept of affect is politically oriented from the get go (. . .) Affect is proto-political. It concerns the first stirrings of the political, flush with the felt intensities of life. Its politics must be brought out” (p. viii–ix). If video games are affective systems and affect is fundamentally political, the affective dimensions of video games are themselves, by nature, political. In the current cultural landscape of video games, these affective politics have direct implications for diversity, discrimination, and social justice. In his writing on gamer nostalgia, John Vanderhoef explains that dominant cultural logics about how video games feel can privilege or marginalize certain types of players ([Vanderhoef, 2017](#)). It is into this political landscape that the rhetoric of empathy makes its entry. Like nostalgia, “empathy,” as a construct, participates in these palpable yet often unspoken dynamics of belonging that set the terms for what sorts of players and what sorts of feelings are valued within the cultures that surround video games.

The rise of empathy within discussions of video games is part of a longer history of the politics of affect and games. Before empathy, the long-reigning centerpiece in conversations about video games and “good” feeling was fun. Like fun before it, the discursive push for empathy in video games contributes to a “hegemony of feeling” ([Ruberg, 2015](#)) that is “bound up with the securing of social hierarchy” ([Ahmed, 2015](#), p. 4). The oppressive potential of this hierarchy can be seen most clearly in the rhetoric of #GamerGate, which has targeted marginalized developers whose games are condemned for being boring and therefore no fun ([Parkin, 2014](#)) as well as feminist game studies scholars who are harassed for taking the fun out of video games ([Chess & Shaw, 2015](#)). Through these examples, the case of “fun” makes the political stakes of how affect is discussed in relation to video games strikingly apparent.

With the rise of empathy has come an even more pressing need to question the politics of affect in video games. The rhetoric of empathy, it seems, is suddenly everywhere. Empathy appears regularly as the subject of news reports about the supposedly unprecedented power of video games to allow players to “see through the eyes” of those who are less fortunate ([Delahoussaye, 2015](#)). Psychological researchers publish arguments and counter-arguments about how video games either foster ([Chen et al., 2018](#)), erode ([Gabbadini, 2016](#)), or do not affect ([Szycik, 2017](#)) player empathy. From 2013 to present, each year of the annual Game Developers Conference has seen multiple talks promising to teach attendees how to design empathy into their video games. In 2016, iThrive, one of the most vocal evangelists for empathy, began hosting regular “empathy jams” at universities across America ([McDonald, 2018b](#)). The organization Games for Change now runs a “Kindness and Empathy” challenge for student game designers. The word “empathy” adorns the names of tech startups, such as the narrative design software company Empathy Box. In these spaces, the rhetoric of empathy has been applied to video games that address a wide range of topics, from the queer love story *Gone Home* ([Riley, 2018](#)) to *Bury Me, My Love* ([The Alternative, 2018](#)) a smartphone game about escaping the civil war in Syria. What

emerges from the examples of this rhetoric, taken as a whole, is a vision of “empathy game” as a blithely repeated catch-all term for any video game that tackles difficult subjects, encourages players to interact with each other in more socially acceptable ways, or includes representations of diversity.

The rhetoric of empathy is also highly corporatized. “Empathy” is increasingly being used as a selling point or a marketing tool for video game technologies and game-related initiatives. In these instances, affect is presented as a commodity: an experience that can be bought and sold, or which can boost further sales. Empathy Box, the software startup mentioned above, prominently features the following sales pitch on their website: “Story-based games are a 3.8 billion dollar industry that has doubled in the last 5 years. (. . .) Interactive stories are a huge market that is vastly under-served.” Admittedly, the developers who run companies like these may be attempting to leverage the profit-driven interests of corporations to convince their clients to change their games for the better. However, the “hankering to do good” that Bertoli and McDonald describe takes on a more nefarious valence when we consider that this hankering is part of what the rhetoric of empathy, as well as those attempting to profit from it, is selling to consumers.

Only a few years ago, the idea that video games and empathy might be part of the same conversation seemed unexpected (Wilcox, 2014). Now, for some readers of this article, such as those already familiar with recent conversations within queer indie game making communities (as well as intersecting communities of indie game makers of color), the empathy debate may feel *passé*. However, outside of these circles, the rhetoric of empathy in video games is only growing in scope and prominence. Indeed, while revising this article, I was contacted by a journalist writing yet another story about how video games with queer stories foster empathy in straight, male players. In October 2018 at IndieCade, the popular independent games festival, I ran a panel on games and activism featuring a number of indie activist game developers. I had not planned to ask the panelists about empathy, but as soon as the topic came up, it became the focus of discussion. While the marginalized game developers on the panel (most of them queer people, people of color, and women) jumped at the opportunity to argue vehemently against the notion of “empathy games,” a number of white male audience members approached me after the session to insist on the value of empathy for encouraging more privileged players to support diversity in video games. These are anecdotes, but they gesture toward the ongoing presence—and, indeed, the growth—of the rhetoric of empathy within the discursive networks that surround video games. They also speak to the tensions inherent in these conversations. Despite protestations from many marginalized game developers and scholars themselves, empathy is still widely seen as the new frontier of video games. Interrogating the politics of empathy represents an important component of critiquing narratives of diversity in video games, considering how these narratives intersect with affect, and questioning whom these narratives serve.

Queer games and critiques of empathy

Though empathy is increasingly being used to describe video games of many kinds, two types of games have been most commonly framed through the rhetoric of empathy: virtual reality games and games developed by independent queer and trans creators, contributors to what has been termed the “queer games avant-garde” (Ruberg, 2018). This first category, virtual reality, is not the focus of this article, but it plays a notable part in the discursive landscape of video games and empathy. In TED talks (Milk, 2015), news commentary (Alsever, 2015), and even PR campaigns for consumer-grade virtual reality technologies, virtual reality is lauded as the ultimate “empathy machine,” allowing players to better empathize with others because they feel like they are “really there.” Interestingly, the proposition that virtual reality technologies create empathy has been the subject of considerable critique in popular media venues (Kang, 2017; Bloom, 2017). By contrast, this second category of games—queer independent games—is still widely and often uncritically described by those outside queer games communities using the rhetoric of empathy. Considering the example of queer indie games and their relationship to “empathy” is a helpful starting point for confronting the problems with the rhetoric of empathy as it is applied to video games more widely.

Starting around 2012, the video game landscape has seen the ongoing rise of independent video games made by queer creators that either represent or are inspired by the experiences of queer people. Many of the best-known examples of these games, like Merritt Kopas’ *Lim* (2012), Anthropy’s *Dys4ia* (2012), or Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi* (2012), have been repeatedly characterized as “empathy games” (Wells, 2016). In news reports, industry presentations, and areas of academic scholarship, these games are praised for supposedly offering players the opportunity to get a first-hand view of the challenges that queer people face: such as the challenges of gender passing in *Lim*, or gender transition in *Dys4ia*, or the day-to-day aggressions faced by a transgender woman of color in *Mainichi*. As a self-proclaimed straight, white, cisgender, male blogger wrote in a post titled “Playing with Empathy” about his experience playing *Dys4ia*, “By the time the 15-minute experience was over, I was closer to understanding the ‘T’ in LGBT than ever before. And not just from a factual standpoint. *I understood the feeling*” (Gann, 2013; emphasis added). Though it is feasible that some marginalized game makers may intentionally strive to foster empathy in their players, it is crucial to note that these queer indie game developers rarely use the rhetoric of empathy to describe their own work. Rather, this discourse, which is generated and perpetuated by the games’ straight reception, is being applied to video games made by queer developers from the outside. These are the terms set for queer indie games, their meaning, and their value by the broader discursive network of games and games culture, not by queer people themselves.

Indeed, queer indie game makers have been among the most vocal critics of the rhetoric of empathy. Some of their critiques have come in the form of written commentary, while others manifest as new games or other creative work that parodies

the false promises of empathy. Examples include kopas' tongue-in-cheek Twine game *Empathy Machine* (2014), Anthropy's interactive installation *Empathy Game* (2015) (Solberg, 2016), and Brice's *Empathy Machine* (2016), in which the artist transforms her own body into a controller. As Teddy Pozo (2018) writes in their article "Queer Feelings After Empathy," these queer creators use "feeling design principles" to challenge the ill-conceived logics of empathy as a construct that has been applied to queer video games. A number of these works are designed in part to demonstrate the absurdity of believing that a video game could engender meaningful feelings of empathy in its players in the first place. Related objections have emerged from the creators of other games commonly described through the rhetoric of empathy, such as the 2012 game *Papa & Yo* (Minority Media), which addresses experiences of alcoholism and abuse. A member of the team that developed *Papa & Yo* told a reporter for *The Telegraph*: "People use 'empathy games' as a blanket term for many types of entertainment (. . .) ranging from edutainment to games that feature characters and stories that don't fit in the typical genre canon. *Papo & Yo* is not an educational game. (. . .) We are not trying to teach" (Wells, 2016). In insisting that the game should not be understood as educational, this sentiment echoes frustrations voiced by many queer indie video game developers whose work is being similarly mischaracterized.

What makes the rhetoric of empathy as it is applied to queer indie games (and other video games by, about, or for marginalized people) so problematic? First, as many of those who have condemned this rhetoric have pointed out, it minimizes the lives and identities of those who are seen as "different" or "other." Although a video game may offer a glimpse into queer experience, for example, no game can replicate the fullness of lived queer experience or the real stakes of being a queer body in the world. As Anthropy told a *Motherboard* reporter in response to comments from players like the blogger who believed he understood what it felt like to be transgender after playing *Dys4ia*, "If you've played a 10-minute game about being a transwoman don't pat yourself on the back for feeling like you understand a marginalized experience" (D'Anastasio, 2015). In addition to minimizing marginalized lives, the rhetoric of empathy wrongly assumes that so-called empathy games have been developed primarily for the edification of more privileged, normative players. For example, describing queer game as empathy games implies that the purpose of such work is to educate straight, cisgender players—to invite them to "understand and share" the feelings of queer people. In reality, many queer indie game makers report that the intended audiences for the games they develop are other queer people. To frame these games through the rhetoric of empathy is to insist (or simply presume) that video games belong by default to players who represent dominant positionalities within games cultures and society at large.

Another problem with the rhetoric of empathy is that it promotes the appropriation of affect, as well as what Lisa Nakamura (2002) describes as "identity tourism." As Wendy Chun noted in her talk "Ditching the Empathy Story" (2016), "When you walk in someone else's shoes, then you've taken their shoes." Queer indie game maker

Robert Yang uses this quote as the starting point for his own polemic against “empathy machines as appropriation machines.” [Yang \(2017\)](#) writes:

I’m very familiar with people annexing other peoples’ experiences under the banner of empathy. Specifically, I’ve been making realistic 3D games about gay relationships (...) and the vast majority of my players and fans happen to be straight people. This leads to a widely-held but incorrect assumption that I make my games for “straight people to understand what being gay is like.”

As Yang’s comments suggest, the rhetoric of empathy runs the risk of making the lives of “others,” such as queer people, appear consumable. A video game player who attempts to “share” the feeling of a character represented on screen, especially when that feeling emerges from experiences of marginalization, is involved in affective appropriation. Under the banner of empathy, players are invited to visit the experiences of others, trying on their identities like foreign attire and turning their lives into novelty destinations. We might even say that the rhetoric of empathy promotes a colonizing of affect: an invasion, occupation, and subjugation of others’ experiences. In particular, empathy names a kind of embodied colonialism, reflected through the aptly corporeal metaphors of “seeing through someone else’s eyes” or “walking in someone else’s shoes.” As a proposition for what it should feel like to play video games, empathy is not so much about “understanding and sharing” as it is about inhabiting: taking up residence in the experiences of another.

Additional critiques of the empathy rhetoric that surrounds video games have rejected the way that empathy, as a construct, instrumentalizes and de-radicalizes (queer) experience and feeling. As [Clark and Kopas \(2015\)](#) write, the logic that underlies this rhetoric is built on a “utilitarian narrative,” a belief that “the worth of games come from their role as productive members of society.” This logic insists that what makes feelings like those found in queer indie games meaningful is their social or capitalist use-value. We can see this, for example, in the language of the Games for Change “Kindness and Empathy” student challenge, which describes its mission as “[driving] real-world change using games and technology (...) to make the world a better place” ([Games for Change, 2018](#)). [Bertoli and McDonald \(2017\)](#), in an article published on iThrive’s website titled “Video Games Can Boost Empathy,” similarly highlight the use-value of empathy when they assure readers that “there is growing scientific evidence that prosocial video games—those with opportunities to help instead of harm others—can boost players’ empathy and prompt them to be more helpful towards others in the real world.” The instrumentalization of affect as demonstrated through the rhetoric of empathy suggests that “understanding and sharing” the feelings of others through video games is valuable when (and because) it supports a neoliberal agenda. Ahmed writes, “If good emotions are cultivated, and are worked on, and toward, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions” ([Ahmed, 2015](#), p. 3). According to the critiques of queer game makers and socially-engaged scholars, as an emotion in operation, “empathy” takes the transgressive feelings of marginalized people, such as anger in response to oppression,

and makes them safe and “good” by repackaging them as briefly challenging but ultimately uplifting experiences that privileged players can relate to.

Deconstructing the meanings of empathy: sympathy, depth, and allyship

Like many others invested in queer games and queer game communities, I would like to see an end to the oft-repeated and widely circulating rhetoric of empathy, especially in its un-interrogated form. However, for the moment, rather than dismissing “empathy” (on the many grounds described above), I believe that there is value in lingering with this discourse in order to deconstruct its meanings. There are a number of questions we can ask to complicate the rhetoric of empathy and explore its ambivalences. In what way might this rhetoric itself offer a meaningful point of resistance for those committed to exposing its limits and identifying its alternatives? Can we find, within the rhetoric of empathy, better ways of framing and valuing how video games make players feel? Existing critiques of the empathy rhetoric, while powerful and insightful, have not yet sufficiently accounted for the fact that, within these discursive networks, “empathy” in fact means many different things. The term is bandied about within games industry, games news, games education, and games research settings as if it had one clear, stable definition that all interlocutors agree on. In truth, however, when deployed in relation to video games, “empathy” is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of affects and modes of interpersonal relationality. If empathy means “sharing the feelings of others,” then, often, those who profess the power of video games to engender empathy are not actually talking about empathy at all. What then are these contributors to the current discursive networks that surround video games really talking about (and notably not talking about) when they talk about empathy?

Deconstructing the rhetoric of empathy reveals a constellation of meanings, many of which admittedly raise red flags of their own. Often, in academic, educational, corporate, and media reports, the term “empathy” is used as a shorthand for a jumble of emotions and experiences. An article on the psychology website [PsychCentral.com](https://www.psychcentral.com) (Pedersen, 2018), which discusses video games and empathy in the context of education and neuroscience, states that playing games can boost empathy in teenagers. Yet it uses “empathy” as an umbrella for a variety of emotional and interpersonal skills, such as “perspective taking” and “emotional regulation.” Peekapak, a company that develops and sells “games for emotional learning,” promotes their products on their website with the proclamation, “Teaching social emotional learning skills like SELF-REGULATION, TEAMWORK AND EMPATHY has never been more fun!” (emphasis in original). In this example, empathy is grouped together with other “positive” skills as part of an undifferentiated cluster. Heidi McDonald, in her 2018 Game Developers Conference talk “Making Them Care: The Narrative Burden for Creating Empathy,” offers titles like *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) and *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016) as examples of video games that promote empathy (McDonald, 2018a). Interestingly, these games are not about marginalized

experiences or even education; they are narrative-focused games that use exploration of unique and mysterious landscapes to tell stories about human relationships. These examples illustrate that empathy, as a construct within the discursive networks that surround games, means different things to different people at different times. It also means many things at once. Therefore, though the rhetoric of empathy presents the concept as solid and stable, “empathy” is itself a messy construct full of ambiguities and slippages.

At times, the term “empathy games” seems to be used simply as a synonym for video games that are meaningful or “deep.” A news write-up about McDonald’s talk on empathy, published on the video game industry website Gamasutra, opens with this quote: “We have a generation of new developers who want something deeper” (Kidwell, 2018). The concept of “deep games” (Rusch, 2017) itself raises questions. What makes a game deep? When a game offers its players a deep experience, whose depths are those players exploring? As a framework, depth calls to mind images of excavation, resource extraction, and penetration, suggesting that “going deep” may itself be a questionable framework for understanding what makes video games meaningful. Relatedly, a number of sources equate empathy with the immersiveness of video games. A 2017 report on “The Limits and Strengths of Using Digital Games as ‘Empathy Machines,’” authored by Matthew Farber and Karen Schrier for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, frequently associates empathy with immersion. For Farber and Schrier 2017, immersion is defined as “the ability to engage an audience and invite them to step inside an imaginary world” (p. 10). This definition clearly resonates with descriptions of empathy as “stepping into the shoes” of others. Immersion, it seems, broadens the scope; players step not into the shoes of individuals but into an entire world. Such a resonance suggests that immersion too may be ripe for critique. What experiences and feelings does immersion value? Who has the right to be immersed and whose experiences are they immersed *in*?

Some of the messiness around the meanings of “empathy” is the result of semantic confusion. In the discourse that surrounds video games, empathy is often mixed up with “sympathy,” which can be defined as pity or sorrow for someone else’s misfortune. Yet, more than a mere mix-up, this too is telling. The so-called empathy games offered as examples of the “genre” by participants in this discourse typically depict experiences of “misfortune.” In addition to the queer games described above, which include representations of the discrimination faced by LGBTQ people, news articles about empathy point toward video games about topics like the hardships of poverty or the emotional trials of death (Farber, 2018). As Bertoli and McDonald (2017) write in their article on how video games can boost empathy:

[Through video games,] I inhabit difficult circumstances. Even though I may never do it in real life, I can experience the perils of war in *This War of Mine* and *1979: Revolution*, embody someone who is different and marginalized in *Dys4ia*, see the world through the eyes of a boy with autism in *Max: An Autistic Journey*, and care for a child with a terminal illness in *That Dragon, Cancer*.

What becomes clear in writing such as this is that the emotional engagements that journalists, industry members, and others are describing as empathy are, in many instances, better described as sympathy. Rather than feeling what someone else is feeling (the definition of empathy), this rhetoric presents video games as opportunities for players to feel pity for someone else's misfortune (the definition of sympathy). In these discursive moments, players are encouraged to approach "empathy games" as theaters of misfortune. Rather than feeling what someone different from you is feeling, "empathy," as it has been constructed through discussions of video games, is frequently actually an invitation to feel *badly* for someone different.

This blurring between empathy and sympathy goes hand in hand with another meaning of the term "empathy" as it appears in the contemporary discourse that surrounds video games: allyship. Like empathy itself, the feeling of allyship, which may be well-intentioned but is also self-congratulatory and self-serving, should give us pause. Approaching video game as so-called empathy machines offers players the chance to feel good—and, more specifically, to feel like they have *done* good—by playing through another person's hardship. Such an invitation gives players the sense, too-easily-won, that they have proven themselves to be allies to those who are marginalized without putting their privilege to use toward any actual social change. In this sense, though it presents itself as invested in the "feelings of others," the rhetoric of empathy acts in the service of players rather than those with whom those players might empathize. Though it is rarely made explicit, the promise of empathy is a promise that video games will make players, the consumers in this neoliberal affective economy, into "better people."

What "passes" for empathy: compassion, sorrow, and queer entanglements

For those committed to social justice in video games, the additional meanings contained within the rhetoric of empathy that I have delineated thus far hardly seem more promising than "empathy" itself. Yet there are other meanings contained within this rhetoric: a set of emotions and experiences that are less commonly found in discussions of video games. These meanings have counter-normative and arguably radical implications for the politics of affect in video games. Some of these include caring, compassion, respect, the sorrow of loss, intimacy, love, and a surprisingly queer kind of interpersonal entanglement. These are emotional orientations that have rarely been foregrounded in the discursive networks that surround video games, formerly dominated by a reverence for fun and presently hooked on the empathy buzz. Together, these additional unspoken meanings of "empathy" suggest alternative models of togetherness that can be identified and valued in video games. Ironically then, contained within the rhetoric of empathy—or, more accurately, "passing" under the rhetoric of empathy, to borrow a term from discussions of sexuality and race—is a richer set of possible frameworks for challenging dominant notions about which feelings in video games matter and to whom those feelings belong.

One of these more promising feelings, simultaneously contained within and obscured by the rhetoric of empathy, is caring—and, by extension, compassion. States McDonald in her 2018 Game Developers Conference, “We create empathy for the player when we create empathy from ourselves. Use your joy, use your pain, use your sadness. That’s what is relatable to other humans. Don’t be afraid to reach deep. (. . .) You will make them care” (Kidwell, 2018). This quote demonstrates how the problematic elements of the rhetoric of empathy can be found interwoven with moments of potential. McDonald repeats the language of depth, yet intriguingly encourages game developers to draw from their own experiences in order to create empathy, turning empathy as an act of appropriation (“sharing” the feelings of others) into empathy as an act of giving (“sharing” one’s own feelings with players). A blog post about video games and empathy published on the Electronic Software Association’s website demonstrates how this caring can translate into compassion, again under the name of “empathy.” The post offers the following description of *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), a game about a family with a young son who is dying:

“As they navigate the virtual world, players discover there is often no real way to advance through the levels. Instead, players must work through distressing scenarios which provide them with a deeper understanding of what it is like to live with chronic illness. Throughout the game, players become more comfortable discussing emotional topics and sharing personal memories, and learn to find hope even when faced with death.”

Though the notion of a “deeper understanding” still sparks skepticism, what emerges here is a picture of the constellation of feelings and modes of interpersonal connection that get wrapped up in the seemingly simple term “empathy.” According to this account, the player feels distress but also hope. Rather than living *inside* the experiences of another, the empathy that *That Dragon, Cancer* is described as engendering is about living *with*. Chronic illness, difficult emotional conversations, and personal memories shared in the face of death become the player’s companions. Empathy, in this instance, describes the affective process by which fragile, intimate, and uncomfortable companionships are formed.

Indeed, loss is another unexpected thread that crosses the rhetoric of empathy. For example, the authors of the iThrive post “Video Games Can Boost Empathy” write: “When I lose characters or companions who have helped me or kept me company throughout the game. (. . .) I wonder if there was something I could have done differently to save them. I have to strategize about what I’ll do without them and adapt to their absence. I might feel more empathy for the experience of loss in general.” It is worth questioning the idea that strategizing about how to respond to losing a character in a video game makes one generally more empathetic toward loss. Nonetheless, it is notable that, under the umbrella of empathy, absence and death are presented as forces that form connections: bridging the space of the game and the world beyond it. If empathy in its most basic definition, understanding and sharing the feelings of another person, is about forming affective connections between people,

in these examples of the empathy rhetoric those connections take on forms that defy simplistic notions about “hankering to do good” or allowing players to become “better people.”

In addition to feelings of caring, compassion, and loss, “empathy” is also sometimes used as the name for forms of interpersonal, affective relationality that can be understood as queer. A striking example of this can be found in the video game *Unravel* and the ways that the game’s developers have deployed the rhetoric of empathy. Released in 2016, *Unravel* is a tenderly rendered, visually rich, seemingly unassuming puzzle platforming game. Its main character is Yarny, a small, fragile creature made of yarn who traverses environments in the Swedish countryside using his own slowly unraveling body, which is made of one long strand of red yarn. As Yarny, players of *Unravel* leap between obstacles, wrapping their trail of yarn around tree branches, bicycle handles, and other objects to allow them to swing to new heights or cross wide distances. Yarny’s progress (and his body) are always precarious. If the player is not careful about when and how to use Yarny’s thread, he will unravel completely before reaching his next checkpoint. There are a variety of affects at play in *Unravel*, including a backdrop of nostalgia and an aesthetic of cuteness that is at once charming and overwhelming.

However, the game’s developers have discussed *Unravel* using a different framework: the rhetoric of empathy. In 2017, Martin Sahlin, the director of the studio that designed *Unravel*, gave a presentation at the Game Developers Conference talk called “Empathy as a Game Mechanic” (Sahlin, 2017). The title of Sahlin’s talk suggested that he would be offering a how-to for developers interested in designing empathy games of their own. However, though he presented them as examples of empathy, the emotional experiences that Sahlin discussed bore little resemblance to the more common meanings of “empathy” within the discursive networks currently surrounding video games. Instead, Sahlin talked about heartbreak. He explained how Yarny as a character—soft but also frail, always in danger—was to designed provoke in players a mixture of affection and anxiety. “Yarny was someone people could care about, and care for,” Sahlin said. Yet the experience of “empathy” that *Unravel*’s developers sought to facilitate for their players was about more than caring. Sahlin continued, “I wanted to make players fall in love, and then break their hearts!”

Within the “hegemony of feelings” that has long dominated the politics of affect in video games, valuing love and heartbreak is a radical notion. This is especially true for a game like *Unravel*, in which love does not take the form of heteronormative romance, but rather the ambivalent, bittersweet love a player might feel when they make themselves emotionally vulnerable to a game. *Unravel*, as Sahlin described it in his talk, is designed to pull on the player’s heartstrings. The game literalizes this metaphor in the form of the long, tangled trail of red yarn that both tethers Yarny and, when pulled gently, allows him to venture into the world. If what *Unravel* offers is indeed an experience of empathy (and that is debatable), this is a vision of empathy that is not about appropriating or instrumentalizing the feelings of others. It is also not about learning or becoming better people. This vision of empathy is

about building precarious yet vital connections between points by following indirect paths constructed using one's own body. It is about queer entanglements, a network of individuals connected by a series of knotted paths that is not straight and cannot be straightened. In this way, though it uses the rhetoric of empathy, Sahlin's talk and *Unravel* offer an alternative model for understanding how one might feel for and with others through video games. Rather than valuing video games that allow players to walk in someone else's shoes, what if video games took a queerer approach and valued games that challenged the straightforwardness of interpersonal connection?

This article began by building on critiques from queer game developers and scholars who resist the assumption that queer video games (should) foster empathy. In many ways, the discourse of empathy has served to straighten queer games, reimagining them as serving straight players. It is ironic then that from the very same network of discourse have emerged instances in which "empathy" takes on unexpected or counter-hegemonic meanings, including an instance in which empathy describes a kind of intimate queer entanglement. It would be possible to dismiss Sahlin's talk as one more example of a game developer taking advantage of the current empathy hype. However, framed through empathy, *Unravel* offers a valuable example of how a game can offer players more complex, challenging, and even queerer emotional experiences—which might themselves pass under the radar of video games' "hegemony of feelings" by assuming the rhetoric of empathy. The fact that Sahlin's talk was presented at the Game Developers Conference, arguably the most hegemonic game industry space of all, suggests that leveraging this rhetoric can provide cover for emotions and experiences that might not otherwise make it past cultural gatekeepers.

The end of empathy

It is time to end the reign of empathy. Understanding video games, and especially games by and about marginalized people, through a focus on "empathy" establishes and justifies discriminatory beliefs about how video game should make players feel and who has the right to experience those feelings. When it comes to the video games that are described using the rhetoric of empathy, the real trouble does not lie in determining whether or not these games create empathy (as so many journalists, industry members, and academic researchers have attempted to establish). Rather, the trouble lies in empathy itself as a framework through which to approach video games and the politics of affect. Here, I have deconstructed many of the assumed and unspoken meanings of "empathy" as the term circulates through the contemporary discursive networks that surround video games. My goal in this work has been to demonstrate that, while undoubtedly problematic, the rhetoric of empathy contains within itself unexpected complexity and even the potential for alternative frameworks for understanding and valuing video games, feeling, and interpersonal connection.

Having given empathy this careful consideration, we must now move beyond empathy. It is time to stop talking about empathy games, stop designing empathy

games, and stop teaching students to play games for empathy. It is time to start calling the emotions and experiences that currently cluster under the umbrella term “empathy” by their names. Out in the open, without the cover of empathy as a catch-call buzzword, sympathy, depth, and allyship become more visible and therefore more accessible for critique. Caring, compassion, sorrow, loss, and queer entanglement are powerful concepts that deserve to be spoken out loud, not lost in the rhetoric of empathy. This is easier said than done in a landscape of video games and game cultures that has long valued certain affective modes and marginalized others. It is also important to reflect on the implications of “outing” queer feelings that currently pass within a broader discourse dominated by heteronormativity. Yet calling these alternatives to empathy by their names represents a valuable step toward questioning the fundamental values on which the rhetoric of empathy is founded. To value empathy is to value “understanding and sharing.” Yet “understanding and sharing,” while they have their uses, can themselves be counterproductive for social justice. More valuable than a video game that allows players to identify with someone else is a game that requires players to respect the people with whom they cannot identify. The rhetoric of empathy promises that video games can help us understand one another. Yet it is equally important, if not *more* important, for video games to show us we can value those we do not understand.

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