Class Tourism, Empathy Machines And Videogames

Mia Consalvo
Concordia University
Department of Communication Studies
Montreal, QC Canada
Mia.consalvo@concordia.ca

Scott DeJong
Concordia University
Department of Communication Studies
Montreal, QC Canada
scottbdejong@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

As videogames grow in complexity, they have become part of a tradition of exploring cross-class differences in culture. This essay explores three such games that offer players an experience of "class tourism" by placing them into different socioeconomic positions. The games analyzed are *I Get This Call Every Day, Little Red Lie,* and *Invisible Fist.* To do this analysis the essay draws from Nakamura's concept of identity tourism as well as prior research on games and other media as empathy machines to explore their affordances and constraints. The essay also points to gameplay complexities such as agency and gamer mode that challenge the ability of a game to allow players to successfully 'experience the life' of the characters portrayed. Our findings push back against some common points of praise for videogames and instead challenges researchers to reconsider the potential of games as 'empathy machines.'

Keywords

Videogames, social class, identity tourism, empathy machines, narrative games

INTRODUCTION

Everybody knows what it's like to be hungry or exhausted or worried about money. Everybody I know anyways. Filling in those blanks is just the same as what you're doing with the pixel faces. It's an invitation. In a way it's asking the player to do even more work with me, so together between the two of us we can observe something more true than would have been possible otherwise (Richard Hofmeier, 2013)

Reminiscing about his 2010 game *Cart Life,* which tracks the lives of street vendors, Richard Hofmeier's above quote reiterates a common belief that games can let us experience different realities - in this case, the embodiment of working-class roles.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

With its drab pixelated aesthetic, *Cart Life* (2010) simulates the day-to-day challenges of an economically precarious existence. Players take control of three different characters' lives to feel the everydayness of the working class and (perhaps) draw parallels or differences to their own lives. With a focus on daily monotony, *Cart Life* was envisioned by Hofmeier as "a comedy, a humorous exploration of normality viewed through the lens of minimum wage jobs" but eventually became a "retail simulator" where the player follows three characters "as they attempt to survive an onslaught of misery" alongside their daily lives (Edge Staff, 2013). While many reviews of the game mention the "everyday" jobs the player undertakes and the realism they seemingly convey, no one mentions their working-class nature. But indeed they are working or service class and, importantly, are similar to jobs that Hofmeier himself previously held. *Cart Life* creates effective representations in contrast to a long history of media forms with more problematic depictions of class differences, an achievement that newer games struggle with. Those newer games, which we investigate in this essay, present different socioeconomic positions for players to explore. Is this a form of meaningful cross-class investigation, or is it surface level class tourism - where the player is offered banal class representations and made to feel they are 'really' experiencing a different way of life through those markers as they transiently pass through the experience? That is the central question this essay explores.

Lisa Nakamura's (2013) work on race within online social and game spaces provides an example of the challenges associated with digital games and expressions of identity. Nakamura borrowed the term 'identity tourism' from tourism studies to discuss the privilege and entitlement placed on tourists where, "to be a tourist is to possess mobility, access, and the capital to satisfy curiosities about 'native' life" (xv). Importantly, studies of identity tourism can also include consideration of socioeconomic influences alongside discussions of race, sexuality and gender (Adams, 2015). Nakamura's work argues that many individuals who adopt online personas that differ in their racial composition from their own often do so in stereotypical, surface ways. Nakamura's work raises concerns about players appropriating marginalized experiences while downplaying those of actual marginalized groups.

Following Nakamura, this paper investigates games that invite individuals to experience empathy with those from different socioeconomic class positions, particularly those in lower positions than the player. The analysis focuses on the narratives and mechanics of three digital games: *I Get This Call Every Day* (2012), *Little Red Lie (2017)* and *Invisible Fist (2019). I Get This Call Every Day* is a short browser-based game featuring narrative humor. *Little Red Lie* is a walking simulator depicting the lives of two individuals, and *Invisible Fist* is a card-based combat game. We examine how class position is constructed in these games, how they create different versions of cross-class understanding, and whether such games are instances of surface class tourism or offer a deeper understanding of class-related issues. These games were chosen because they foreground issues of class—something that games rarely do—but we do not claim they are representative of broader ludic trends. By analyzing these games, this paper seeks to identify the affordances of games in functioning as possible class empathy machines.

HISTORICIZING CLASS TOURISM: A REVIEW

The quest for understanding differing class-related realities has existed for more than a century. Activists and scholars have used diverse media forms to inform audiences about class-related social reform, working conditions, and concerns about gender

expression. Multiple studies have detailed how writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries sought to raise awareness about how the poor and working class lived and survived (Chura, 2005; Gandal, 1997; Pittenger, 2012). In 1887 journalist Nelly Bly went undercover to witness the working conditions in box-making factories. Bly details how she tried to fit in with the "girls" who worked there:

> I had put on a calico dress to work in and to suit my chosen trade. In a nice little bundle, covered with brown paper with a grease-spot on the center of it, was my lunch. I had an idea that every working girl carried a lunch, and I was trying to give out the impression that I was quite used to this thing (Bly, 2016).

Eric Schocket details how such white middle-class journalists, writers, and social researchers from the 1890s to the 1910s disguised themselves in order to "traverse with their bodies what they saw as a growing gulf between the middle class and the white working and lower classes" (1998). This frequently involved men putting on dirty mismatched clothing and wandering certain neighborhoods to "pass" and enter the world of vagrant men. These narrators saw their role as "translators of experience" (Schocket, 1998, p. 111), journeying in disguise to speak for the "miserable" lower classes who were seemingly unable to speak for themselves, "unable even to understand the dimension of [their] need" (p. 121). The goal of such pieces was often to reform the lives of those impersonated, but it also established the authority of the middle class in being able to speak for the "other." As Chura explains, the writers reserved for themselves the ability to decipher meaning from these experiences, claiming the ability to convey "'authentic' social knowledge" (Chura, 2005, p. 9).

This tradition has not died out, but rather has expanded. Between 1998 and 2000, writer Barbara Ehrenreich traded her middle-class life for that of a waitress, housemaid, and store clerk to see if one could survive doing minimum-wage work. In *Nickel and Dimed,* Ehrenreich reflects on the jobs she performed in relation to her own class position (Ehrenreich, 2008). While it paints a stark picture of the difficulties facing working-class Americans, Ehrenreich also points out that she is very different from the people she temporarily worked alongside, admitting:

> I was only visiting a world that others inhabit full-time, often for most of their lives. With all the real-life assets I've built up in middle age – bank account, IRA, health insurance, multiroom home – waiting indulgently in the background, there was no way I was going to 'experience poverty' or find out how it 'really feels' to be a long-term low-wage worker (pp. 10-11).

That key difference troubles easy ideas that we can understand different class positions simply by "trying them on" for a certain period.

Yet the urge to cross class boundaries has continued. Many popular media forms are lauded for their ability to foster a better understanding of disparate human experiences, through both their technological affordances and the narratives they convey. Film critic Roger Ebert claimed that movies "let you understand a little bit more about what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class …" such that "movies are like a machine that generates empathy" (2005/2018). The notion that media are capable of unproblematically instilling empathy in others soon spread to new media technologies, from digital

games to virtual reality (VR). The rudimentary promises of simplistic identification with "the other" that Ehrenreich warned us about have now accompanied the growing popularity of VR to create experiences that simply ignore that distinction.

In 2015, for example, filmmaker Chris Milk gave a TED Talk about his VR experience "Clouds over Sidra," which features a 12-year-old girl named Sidra in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. As he explains,

> …when you're inside of the headset … you're looking around through this world. You'll notice you see full 360 degrees, in all directions. And when you're sitting there in her room, watching her, you're not watching it through a television screen, you're not watching it through a window, you're sitting there with her. When you look down, you're sitting on the same ground that she's sitting on. And because of that, you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathize with her in a deeper way.

Milk concluded that despite VR being simply a machine, that "through this machine we become more compassionate, we become more empathetic" (2015) — words that reduce the experience into an outcome of technological determinism. Other advocates for VR as an empathy machine also point to its "cinema veritè approach" which allows "us to virtually walk in someone else's shoes to the point where our brains may not be able to tell the difference between what's reality and what's a simulation" (Voices of VR, 2017).

Robert Yang raises multiple concerns about the efficacy of such so-called empathy machines, inquiring why technology must be a necessary part of viewer empathy, writing rhetorically "do you really need to wear a VR headset in order to empathize with someone? Can't you just … listen to them and believe them (2017)?" Yet Milk (and others like him) sees VR as a way to "determine social change in a prescribed manner" (Dafoe, citing Kline, 2015). In response, Yang argues that VR empathy machines "are just VR Appropriation machines," "fundamentally about mining the experiences of suffering people to enrich the self-image of VR users" (2017).

Despite such warnings, the quest for creating empathy-inducing experiences has continued in VR and videogames. A Google search for "empathy games" reveals numerous sites with exercises, game examples and rhetoric that promise to "help students understand empathy" (Holderman, 2014) by arguing that "video games combined with pedagogy offer unique opportunities to help students understand perspectives for which they may have no lived experience" (Johnson, 2019).

Games can seemingly put the player in the character's shoes, suggesting that empathy is created through digital embodied play. Like the quests of early journalists, these games allegedly allow players to take on identities and experiences that differ from their own. Sherry Turkle's early work described the benefits such role-playing can provide (1997). Yet Turkle's work was based on a small sample of users, and other researchers have found that many people online default to largely similar versions of themselves or choose avatars that others will find socially acceptable (Martey & Consalvo, 2011).

DEFINING SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS RELATIVE TO VIDEOGAMES

Deery and Press offer a definition of class that sees it "expressed in lifestyle, values, behavior, [and] manners" (2017, p. 6). For them, everyday life is just as representative of class as one's job. While one's labor certainly influences one's level of economic security, class position also "affects *how* we live and how *long* we live, how we will be cared for and educated … and what experiences and pleasures are open to us" (p. 3).

Bourdieu provides a framework for understanding socioeconomic class that conceptualizes other forms of capital beyond the profit derived from labor, such as those generated through social and cultural knowledge and experience (1993). He proposes understanding lived experiences through the concepts of habitus and field. A person's habitus includes the 'natural' pre-dispositions they have towards the world around them. That world is constructed through fields, or distinct spaces filled with their own rules, relational structures, and specific knowledge. Both fields and habitus construct capital. Social class impacts a person's field, habitus, and capital by framing their experiences and comprehension of the world.

Bourdieu's framework allows us to ask how different characters' social and cultural positioning, their backgrounds and life experiences translate into value and status within a game world, beyond simply their jobs. Within this framework, we can consider how videogame characters and situations showcase understandings of the world that are connected to social, cultural, and political experiences in addition to economic ones. This approach pushes us to evaluate the class position of characters not simply in terms of their possible jobs or income, but also via the cultural dimensions that influence them and the social engagements they have. It reframes our understanding beyond considerations of who is rich and who is poor, to how different class positions can influence many different types of behavior and choice within a system.

In this study we focus on working and/or service class positionalities in games as they contrast with middle or upper-middle class characters and world views. As Li et al., differentiate, "service class, comprise[s] professional, administrative and managerial employees, and the working class [is] composed of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers" (Li et al, 2002, p. 618). For our purposes, the service class positions highlighted in the games we study are largely dead end, lower waged jobs. Working class jobs and positionalities likewise are bounded in terms of their lack of possibilities for further advancement. In applying Deery and Press's definition of class towards videogame characters, a study of socioeconomic class here would evaluate the conversations, environments, interactions, and choices made in their day-to-day lives as well as their background histories and contexts, such as education, family structure, and geographical placement.

Past work on class in games

Socioeconomic class in videogames comprises both the economic and social systems that impact characters, representations, mechanics, narratives, and various forms of player interaction. Class can serve as a framing device for the game's story, such as the miserable factory workers and the entitled rich in *The Outer Worlds.* But in many games, the player-character exists largely outside of class hierarchies and is the only one able to climb the ladder of success, saving the world as a self-sufficient, empowered protagonist (Paul, 2018; Consalvo et al, 2010). These tropes and systems

present socioeconomic class as a worldbuilding backdrop rather than an inherent playable aspect. However, when games do discuss social issues, socioeconomic class can be made visible in its relation to the player character's story. Class position can then influence the choices offered to a player when creating their character or progressing through the title (Iantorno and Consalvo 2022).

Videogames offer a distinct potential for exploring socioeconomic class because they allow players to take on specific character roles. However, these roles are rarely that of a working-class citizen or poor person, which are typically relegated to non-player characters (NPCs). This can range from tropes like the dirty-yet-sneaky street urchin or beggars asking for money[1]. Of course, some games do focus on social class position, typically through depictions of working-class jobs. In these games, the job usually dictates the game's narrative. For example, games that feature firefighters often portray them as heroes, 'plain speaking' men who are just interested in doing their job (Iantorno et al, 2020). In contrast, other working-class roles have been emulated in VR games[2], and are meant to be played for laughs, echoing the "working class buffoon" often seen in 20th century television sitcoms (Butsch, 2017).

However, most attention to class in games has focused on online multiplayer games with virtual economies.[3] Far more work has explored gender, sexuality and race as part of online play. Lisa Nakamura studied *World of Warcraft's* digital communities where racial stereotypes and the "playing" of race was embedded into the very core of the game's character creation and narrative (2013). Class position, however, falls to the backdrop in comparison with avatar and character roleplay. While a reading of social class position in *World of Warcraft* could be done, Nakamura and others have focused on the challenges associated with altering one's identity through created avatars. This missing piece is why we initially began exploring the notion of class tourism.

According to Nakamura, "The socially marginalized have a different relation to postmodernity than do members of majority cultures or races." (xv). This calls for a recognition of the distinction between the player and the character in the context of games. Game characters have been coded into the game's environment and narrative; their appearance and daily actions are predetermined by the game's designers. In theory, class tourism explores the difference between a player's own socioeconomic position and that of their character. However, as we are not studying players, our work evaluates how class consciousness is coded into the environment itself and the affordances players have for engaging with it.

METHODS

This paper evaluates the three aforementioned games using Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) methodological framework. Their approach asks researchers to consider the objects in the game, the interface that shapes the player's experience, the interactions that occur between characters, and the overall world of the game recorded through gameplay logs. Focusing specifically on the concept of class, each author played the three games, taking notes and screenshots throughout. We also met regularly to discuss our progress within the games, initial reactions to them, and differing experiences. Upon completion of the playthroughs we analyzed our game logs with a focus on the class position(s) presented in each game. We asked what the habitus was for the characters, the fields that were showcased, and the cultural capital that the characters seemed to display or strive towards (or against). We also actively reflected

(separately and together) on our own class positions to consider how the games might function (usefully or not) as class tourism machines.

The next sections provide summaries and analyses of each game. First is the browser game *I Get This Call Every Day,* then longer analyses of *Little Red Lie* and *Invisible Fist.* Finally, all games are brought into discussion with each other to explore their successes and failures in offering players classed positions to embody and understand.

I GET THIS CALL EVERY DAY

I Get This Call Every Day is a point and click adventure made in 2012 by David S. Gallant. Based on his time as a call center employee for the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA), Gallant's short game asks players to role-play as a CRA agent trying to verify the identity of a customer who cannot remember basic information from their past, such as previous addresses. Gameplay lasts a few minutes at most – there is only one caller to process – but the game can be replayed to experience alternate choices and outcomes. Players need to balance proper job expectations and the increasingly annoying and annoyed customer. The game's challenge is to see how long players can appease the customer while maintaining job protocols. In some, players get to keep their job, however the only reward is being asked to take another call. In other storylines, the player can be fired for receiving too many complaints. In playing, the game offers insight into Gallant's life as a service-class employee.

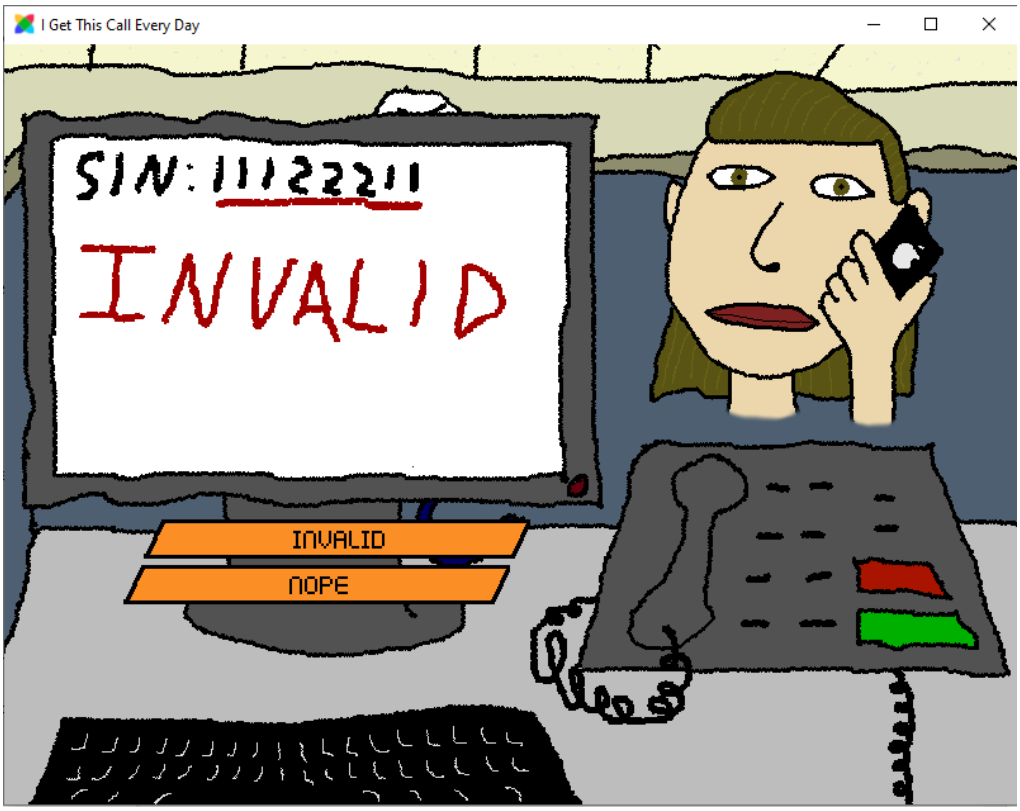

Figure 1: *I Get This Call Every Day*, image showing limited narrative choices for the player.

The job in *I Get This Call Every Day* is designed as irritating, monotonous, and performative. Playthroughs inevitably generate frustration from being forced to listen to the customer continually fail to answer basic questions. If those checkpoints are

passed, other questions appear that are seemingly guaranteed to lead to failure, such as asking the customer for their last year's net income. Because the game only revolves around one phone call and limited options for how to handle it, gameplay choices are limited. Yet through repeated playthroughs both authors employed a variety of strategies for handling the customer, including trying to help him, then to annoy him, and finally to let him know how bothersome he was. The game invited the player to try different types of responses, and to push the player to see how much it would take for them to crack and give up on a polite façade. As Scott put it in their gameplay notes,

> I would do it again, and again. I started doing playthroughs where I attempted to see just how rude I could be before they complained to management, and I got fired. It was a fine line and one that was slightly more satisfying than bowing to their every whim.

The ability to play this way – to be as rude as we wished - highlights the safety net that a game holds. Neither of us lost a real job or were in danger of doing so. Despite being humorous and showing the tedium that working at a call centre can entail, the game offers no larger examination of class. The consequence of getting fired is minimal – if desired we can simply relaunch the game and try again.

I Get This Call Every Day lets the player embody a classed position but is so limited in scope that we categorize it as an insightful *statement* about different social positions under contemporary neoliberal capitalism. It offers a quick glance into another's social position rather than sustained engagement. In comparison, the two games examined next – *Little Red Lie* and *Invisible Fist* – provide multiple, more involved class depictions and have more to say about how people experience their lives differently depending on their incomes, education, and other life choices.

LITTLE RED LIE

Little Red Lie is a 2D narrative walking simulator where players alternate between two disparate characters' lives. Released in 2017 and developed by Will O'Neil, the game compares the lives of Arthur Fox, a rich, sleazy middle-aged financial guru, and Sarah Stone, a Gen X office administrator who has just moved home to live with her parents and sister after losing her job. While their paths never explicitly cross, the events in their stories mirror each other to make an argument on how class position impacts the everyday. The game points an unflinching lens at each character as they lie to alleviate challenges, or just get by. The game's title is a play on its chief narrative mechanic, which highlights text in red when the character is telling a lie, either to themselves or others. The game also features hypertext links that can advance the story, so that players must then opt in to "lie about the service" for example. Lies can be innocuous ("I'm fine") or major ("I wasn't drunk"), but either way the player cannot control the telling of such lies, and neither can they impact the game's storyline or ultimate conclusions. The mechanic offers deeper insights into each character's inner thoughts and daily routines, showing just how much we all lie to ourselves as well as to other people.

Even more so than *I Get This Call Every Day*, *Little Red Lie* offers no variation in its story, even though the player is offered choices for how to respond to certain situations or questions. No matter which option the player selects, the narrative continues its predetermined track. The game fits the genre of walking simulator,

where dialogue and action choices make no difference to the story's outcome. This lack of control across both characters' stories transforms the player's role to witness, able to guide or move the character, but only able to watch events as they play out, rather than affecting them. As players alternate between the two characters and their respective wealth and precarity, the game draws comparisons between the two worlds, highlighting how class alters one's experiences beyond one's job.

The stories that Sarah and Arthur tell illustrate how wealth and poverty impact multiple aspects of their lives. Juxtaposing them reaffirms their disparities. For example, Sarah has returned home to live with her retired parents, afraid to tell them that the college education they paid for resulted in low-level service jobs that did not allow her to afford rent. Her story contrasts her parents' Baby Boomer era middle-class existence against her own debts and lack of career advancement along with the increasing worry that she will never have a traditional family life, a worry that many millennials and Gen Zs feel today (Rockeman & Saraiva, 2021). In contrast, Arthur leads a privileged upper-class lifestyle, selling people questionable self-help books while he drives (and crashes) expensive cars, regards his wife as a(n aging) trophy, and regularly spouts and enacts sexist and racist nonsense. While he too complains of the "emptiness" of his life, it comes with a large house, lots of money, and regular bailouts. One prominent example of these characters' juxtaposition is their experiences in health care. During one scenario Sarah must navigate the Canadian public health care system for her ailing father, who is stuck in a crowded ward with little care. Arthur, who is admitted to hospital after a drug overdose, has his own private room, treats health care workers like his private staff, and ultimately gets his employer to pick up the (hefty) tab.

Little Red Lie does a good job of illustrating how each character sees the world through the lens of their own social position. This also relates to their respective experiences with sex and intimacy. Partway through the game, a prospective love interest (Zoze) takes Sarah on a date to the town fair. Zoze is treating Sarah to this experience, paying for her to play games and go on rides. This scene is a rare opportunity for Sarah to experience happiness. Yet all of Sarah's dialogue options negate any hope for a relationship to develop further by shutting down Zoze's advances. Displaying Sarah's thoughts during these exchanges, the game demonstrates how her economically precarious past makes it hard for her to trust others.

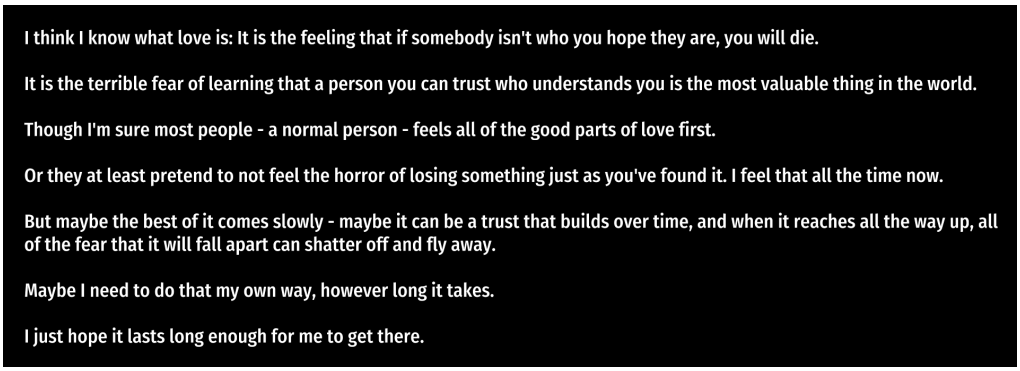

Figure 2: Sarah's inner thoughts during her date with Zoze.

Sarah's life of poverty, debt, and constant worry makes her view romance as something impossible to pursue. For Sarah, love is not something that she can afford.

Despite these doubts Sarah eventually becomes involved with Zoze, flirting with the possibility of happiness. Yet here again the game denies any form of happy ending, as Zoze turns out to be a con artist who swindles Sarah out of what remains of her family inheritance. The lack of choice the game saddles the player with during Sarah's narrative further denies any sense of agency in the events that unfold.

Figure 3: Sarah's conversation with Zoze, detailing her inability to contemplate a middle-class family existence.

Like Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest (2013)*[4]*,* the game shows how even if we know other choices are supposedly available, sometimes we simply cannot act on them. With Sarah, *Little Red Lie* constructs a character caught in neoliberal capitalism with a diminishing safety net. Even as it can be difficult to play as Sarah, it ultimately demonstrates the limits of agency for individuals if they are not wealthy.

In contrast, Arthur also generates frustration but for different reasons. Arthur is driven by his wealth, ego, and ability to manipulate his audience. These influences drive his sexist, racist, and even illegal acts, which the player cannot alter. This peaks during an elevator scene involving Arthur and a young female intern, who he had just bullied into drinking with him after a public event. Despite there being possible dialogue options that seem neutral and designed to possibly defuse the situation, no choices made a difference, and Arthur still made inappropriate advances on the intern.[5] The elevator scene intersperses conversation between the two with Arthur's personal thoughts. This inner dialogue illuminates how Arthur's experiences with women have been shaped by his wealthy upbringing. His party lifestyle, whiteness, and economic privilege all urge him to take whatever he wants in life. His economic position has framed his social and cultural understanding of what is acceptable when engaging with women. Likewise, his wealth usually allows him to escape the consequences of his actions, as he can often buy or bribe his way out of trouble (if it even still exists after consideration of his race and class). Players remain trapped as spectators to these experiences, offered no agency to change the story.

Little Red Lie pushes the boundaries of what a "real game" is with its lack of choices and extremely linear gameplay (Consalvo and Paul, 2019), but effectively tells its story. The game makes the player enact the experiences of both Sarah and Arthur, entrenching each in a designed habitus to show how their past experiences are derived from their class positions, and how those positions delimit and shape their present and future actions.

INVISIBLE FIST

Invisible Fist is a roleplaying digital card game developed by *Failcore* and *Pineapple Works* in 2019. Gameplay progresses through three different characters' stories, who each come from distinct class positions and have their own narratives and card decks. The goal is always the same, to defeat the *Invisible Fist* - an embodied manifestation of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' created by capitalism. The game asks players to balance the competing demands of work, stress, and sleep to get through a week of the Invisible Fist's barrage. Cards represent life actions and either harm the fist or reduce the damage it does to you. Play is interrupted by narrative vignettes which can unlock special cards based on player choices.

Players take on different socioeconomic positions through three characters and their storylines. Play begins with tech billionaire Jeff Whiz, moves to middle-class university student Rena Bennet, and finally ends with factory worker Dian Hua. Each character has their own aspirations that drive interaction, with the cards played reflecting tropes and stereotypes of their differing class positions.

Figure 4: The three playable characters and their character traits.

Unlike the narrative-centred titles discussed above, *Invisible Fist* focuses on card battle mechanics to make (allegedly) humorous claims about socioeconomic positioning. For example, the work, relax, or sleep cards that characters can play usually default to stereotypical or even offensive embodiments of what it means to be rich, middle class, or poor from different raced or gendered identities. While white tech billionaire Jeff Whiz is a college dropout and only suffers from social anxiety, as shown in figure 4 above, the middle-class Black university student Rena is presented as a "bisexual stoner" and has the option to grow and sell "weed." Dian, an Asian woman, must rely on a lifestyle of fast food, sex, and heroin to survive.

Stereotypes aside, the game does use difficulty level as a marker of class position. Like John Scalzi's 2012 blog post describing the white male identity as being the "lowest difficulty setting" in life, *Invisible Fist* makes a similar claim that the college dropout white man will have an easier path to success than the middle-class woman still in university, and an even easier time than the poor woman of color. This argument is embodied in the procedural difficulty of the game, where the player progresses through each of these classed positions as a sign of mounting challenges.

Players start with Jeff, and if successful, unlock Rena and then Dian, moving up in difficulty as they move down the socioeconomic ladder. With that descent, damage cards become weaker, cards cost more resources to use, some actions can cause self-harm, and players are offered less protection from the Invisible Fist. Achieving your dreams as Dian is much harder than doing so as Jeff. In this way the cards and overall

mechanics, despite their often crass nature, truthfully showcase how class position impact one's chances for success. The game mechanics further reflect this by adding more challenges around balancing a personal budget alongside health and stress as the player advances past Jeff. Some of Rena's and Dian's cards cost money to play (none of Jeff's do), and subsequently can place them in debt, a worry that Jeff never encounters.

The experience of playing *Invisible Fist* was quite different from the other games discussed here. Gameplay focused on card play over narrative progression, and gameplay had a steep difficulty curve as the player progressed from one character to the next. This impacted encounters with Dian in particular. As Scott noted in their fieldnotes,

> "survival seems to become the only method of success for Dian. I never "won" as Dian, but I did survive 8 weeks. To do this, I had to forgo balancing her mental health, instead consuming opioids whenever I got the chance. By the end, Dian was severely in debt, dealing with five different mental health afflictions, and I was only successful in running out the clock against the Fist instead of actually defeating it. I felt forced to accept help from her sexually inappropriate coworker Mitch and completely ignore my dreams for stardom while I consistently used heroin to make it through each week. I did not feel victorious. … Reflecting on this, my player choices made Dian's life much worse than before I took control. The jokes being made and the stereotypes that were placed upon the character further soured my experience, where I left the game feeling frustrated with its problematic tone and description more than the gameplay."

In *Invisible Fist* the story is told through gameplay itself. Attempts at satire in the cards and game narration try to make light of class and life divisions but often fell flat or were simply offensive, preventing any empathy from taking hold.

THE LIMITS OF CLASS EMPATHY

Games that offer players different social class positions do so in a variety of ways, with varying levels of sophistication. They model the tedium of service jobs, show how downward class mobility affects more than one's cash flow, and how different identities are presented with, or barred from, perks or roadblocks to advancement. Yet, just as with early progressive journalists and more recent writers like Barbara Ehrenreich, players will still go back to their own life at the end of the day, and the repercussions of player decisions can fail to have a lasting impact on their life. Class-crossing is temporary, and because of that the stakes or precarity of class are removed. As with tourists, players only see what was designed and presented to them. While they might get to see the impacts of class precarity on a character's life, the player is always distanced from those concerns.

To call such games empathy machines recalls discourses of technological determinism. The problematic nature of class tourism within these games shows how this rhetoric reaffirms a flawed notion that the system-as-looking-glass will allow players to 'experience' empathy. In our examination of play in these titles, it became

clear how much more complex games would need to be in order to achieve those goals.

Players will always bring their own experiences and knowledge into gameplay, meaning that play is an expression of both one's individual habitus and that of the designed characters. Each character's story has the potential to become meaningful for players, where knowledge and decisions are tied into specific narrative motivations and environmental pulls. This was particularly true during *Little Red Lie* when Arthur and Sarah are offered choices that do not align with what a player might want to do. Here, player agency is almost non-existent, but the player is encouraged to feel connected to the characters because we can read their thoughts, see the impacts of life on their decision making, and recognize their struggle.

Class tourism is ostensibly meant to help players empathize with the class positions and choices seen in a game. They offer a chance to see or "feel" the larger class structures that impact everyday thoughts and decision making. However, in these instances, class tourism (and empathy) fails. Player responses and actions are always gated by what has been coded into the system. While playing, the player can always goof off or reframe the narrative, subsequently removing the sincerity of a scene. In *Little Red Lie* players can be on the phone or eating their lunch as they click through the experience of Sarah losing both of her parents to an inadequate healthcare system. *Invisible Fist's* focus on "winning" forces class tourism to become optimized, where empathy for those in different socio-economic positions is traded for efficient play. Characters' lives and player motivations will always exist in a disconnect where the game world, even if based on reality, becomes reframed through how individuals play (or chooses not to).

GAMER MODE

In his work on wargames, Anders Frank (2012) introduced the concept of "gamer mode" which refers to players "gaming the game" rather than engaging with its educational objectives. In Frank's case, players would ignore the simulation's learning goals so they could win, making decisions such as sacrificing weaker medical units in order to preserve combat troops. Unlike "power gaming" where players optimize play for a specific goal (Taylor, 2006), gamer mode specifically highlights how play optimization runs counter to a game's learning objectives.

The notion of gamer mode hints at another challenge that games face in trying to be class empathy machines. As players gain agency in a system and are given goals and motivations, their desire to play (and win) can override the game's design goals and objectives, letting players avoid class empathy. This is reflected in our playthroughs of *I Get This Call Everyday* where we began playing the game with goals that did not align with the stated objectives. *Invisible Fist* is an even more salient example, where the difficulty challenge of class positions forces play optimization that players might not want. In our playthroughs of *Invisible Fist* we found that using cards that represented more physically or emotionally demanding activities was necessary in order to succeed, causing us to focus less on the game narrative and more on the numeric value of possible actions.

Class crossing fails in this regard because play can then completely ignore class dynamics. Other than the forced readings in *Little Red Lie,* where choice had no impact on the outcome, the other games offer some agency which impacts how players fully

interpret and engage with the situation. Agency is critical to games, but also provides the means through which class empathy will struggle to succeed. As play goes on, class consciousness fades into the background as playfulness and the desire to win reassert themselves.

CONCLUSION

The ability of games to "tour" class or function as empathy machines remains an optimistic reading of the medium's potential. Just as Ehrenreich recognized her role as "visiting a space" rather than living inside of it, games can offer a snapshot as presented through a designer's eyes and interpreted by a player's actions and comprehension.

Players can always turn off the game. The game world they are in will always be a constructed reality that contends with both the designers' interpretations of the scene and a player's understanding of it. When agency is removed (like in *Little Red Lie*), players are frustrated at their inability to alter the narrative. When agency is given, players can circumvent the narrative and game world by focusing on specific play approaches and gameplay optimization.

In this regard, seeing games as empathy machines and spaces for class tourism fails to consider the interactions players will or will not have with the system. Technological determinism imputes agency to the machine, and here we can see the limits of such belief systems in player pushback. We do not argue that games should stop confronting issues of social class position, but instead consider how players are encouraged to experience it and reflect on the limits of the medium. Bringing class to a point of focus exposes players to meaningful questions and interactions, just as *Cart Life* did more than a decade ago. Likewise, encouraging developers to tell stories reflective of their own lives can result in a greater diversity of stories being told, with which players can then interact.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This can be seen most in MMORPG style games, where questlines invite players to visit small towns or villages and help the population. The street urchin child is a common example employed across media (Tv Tropes, 2022).

[2] Some examples include window washing simulator *Pane in the Glass (2016),* or office simulation *Job Simulator (2016)*

[3] Indeed, one of the earliest papers to bring significant attention to virtual worlds examined the economy of Norrath (the world of the game *Everquest)* and tried to estimate "nominal wages," finding that "the distribution of wealth in Norrath is apparently significantly less equal than its distribution in post-industrial societies on Earth" (Castronova, 2001, p. 36). Even so, about 40% of players reported that if they could make a living wage in the world, they would quit their day jobs "and devote their labor hours to the Norrathian economy" (p. 22). More socially focused environments such as *Second Life* have also prompted extensive research on their economies, cultures and communities, where differential socioeconomic classes emerged. Jennifer Martin (2012) emphasizes that *Second Life* is filled with economic inequality, concluding the game is a "Utopia of inequality" (p.187). For Martin, the ability to consume and own objects in the game has created differing types of social capital due to the number and types of virtual materials owned. However, because *Second Life* is digital, the class stratification tied to the ownership and control of such items is reduced (Martin p. 190). In a digital economy, the consequences of capitalism are not as deeply felt by players, because the virtual space limits how severely someone is sanctioned for not possessing such capital (Martin, 192). Martin recognizes that the digital form of the game's economy lowers the socioeconomic impact of having or not having such capital. In other words, virtual spaces struggle to effectively show the impacts of real-life socioeconomic precarity. The difficulties that Martin lays out also hint at the problems tied to individuals "playing as" a specific character online.

[4] For those unfamiliar, in *Depression Quest* choices become grayed out based on events that occurred. This visually shows how one's decisions alter how the game will play out and function. This is not the same in *Little Red Lie* where the choices do not seem to impact the narrative.

[5] Other players have had similar experiences of disgust with this scene (and Arthur), leading one reviewer referring to the game as an Interactive Sack of Misery.