

Encounters with the Self as the Other: Empathy in the Games of Nomada Studio

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a shift in the discussion of empathy in videogames from its traditional other-oriented conception to one of self-empathy. Using the games of Nomada Studio, known for their abstract narratives and evocative gameworlds, the analysis emphasizes moments of narrative distance and aesthetic convergence that allow players to encounter themselves as the other in these games.

Empathy has become a buzzword with significant disagreement about a unifying definition (see Cuff et al. 2016). Most approaches fall into a binary distinction between affective empathy, or “empathy proper” (Song 438), which depends on (mental) mimicry (Smith 2011, 101) or emotional contagion (Davies), while others view it as a cognitive process of imaginative perspective-taking (Maibom 2022). Most definitions agree on empathy’s other-oriented stance and self-other differentiation. For the purposes of this paper, empathy is defined as a process in which an “empathizer (1) understands, (2) feels, and (3) shares another person’s world (4) with self-other differentiation” (Eklund and Meranius 2021, 305; Coplan 2011, 17).

Similarly, much ink has been spilled about what empathy is and what it can or should do in videogames (see Schrier and Farber 2021 for an overview). Games’ simulation environment, coupled with players’ agency, results in an embodied experience that parallels real-world experiences (Bogost 2007; Bogost 2011; Gee 2014). This is why many see games as uniquely capable of fostering empathy, a notion supported by the numerous labels bestowed upon them, including “empathy machines” (Bowman 2021), “empathy games” (Belman and Flanagan 2010), “persuasive games” (Bogost 2007), and “games with a message” (Frasca 2007). There are two main reasons for this. First, videogames’ “safe grounds” allow players to experience situations without personal aversive costs (Sicart 2013, 19). Second, videogames take on metaphorical meaning by externalizing the ‘rules’ by which other people live (Parkin 2014).

Proponents of empathy in videogames see developers as “emotioneers” (Freeman 2004), who can make players undergo emotional and cognitive experiences to yield a specific effect at a certain time. Relevant for these processes are players’ affective

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matching with the player character (Coplan 2011, 17) or taking on an agentic role for “greater experiential and emotional proximity to the event” (Maibom 2022, 76). Critics, in turn, highlight the “rhetoric of empathy” prevalent in videogame scholarship (Ruberg 2020). The hallmark of empathy is not only ascribed to any game that deals with a difficult topic, but it has also been commodified to boost sales and promote a “pro-care” narrative of gaming (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker 2020), turning it into an “affective skill or capacity with a market value” (Pedwell 2012, 164). Some scholars warn of dissonant empathy processes and the potential harm of players assuming they know how it feels to experience discrimination, live with a disability, or endure a challenging time after playing a game (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). Rather than fostering a greater understanding of others' experiences, opponents of empathy view this type of engagement as promoting toxic embodiment and identity tourism (Nakamura 2020).

This presentation aims to further nuance the role and effect of empathy in and through videogames. Through the jump-and-run puzzle game *GRIS* (Nomada Studio 2018) and platformer *Neva* (Nomada Studio 2024), I argue that videogames can move beyond a narrow definition of empathy as affectively and imaginatively relating to another person's experiences by appealing to players' own selves. *GRIS* and *Neva* are representative of videogames with abstract narratives and evocative game designs. Both foreground topics of grief and loss, yet a distinct narrative remains implicit by eschewing almost any form of verbal communication. Instead, the games use their characters, worlds, and game designs as means of representation, creating space for players to project personal meaning onto them. To analyze players' (empathic) experiences with the games, the paper proceeds in three steps, addressing 1) what aspects of a game players deem pertinent to forming an empathic connection 2) how videogames can evoke empathy in players, and 3) what effects this form of empathic engagement entails.

First, a qualitative analysis of selected Steam reviews will be conducted. Approaching these reviews in an “exploratory mode” (Caracciolo 2016, 27), they are treated as a shorthand for players' experiences, interpretive efforts, and the emotional impact. The selection of reviews focuses on posts that reveal something about the player's emotional, affective, or empathic responses to the games. Players' responses can be condensed into five analytical categories: color and visuals, sound and score, and game mechanics and game design (see also Harrer 2018). These categories serve as “evocative narrative elements” (Nitsche 2003, 38; Jenkins 2004, 8), which players can leverage in forming an empathic connection.

Second, players' responses will be distilled into what Jason Begy has termed an “experiential metaphor” (2013; see also Rusch 2009). Through this conceptual lens, videogames carry metaphorical meaning as externalizations of other people's lived experiences not only as rule-based systems, but also in how a gameplay experience can stand in for emotional processes or mental states (Rusch 2009, 2). The abstract narratives and evocative elements of *GRIS* and *Neva* invite this form of engagement, in which players fill in the gaps left open by the games with personal meaning (Lamerichs 2021; Carleton 2019). In other words, these games do not impose interpretations, nor do they feature fully-fledged player characters. Rather, the games' evocative elements facilitate players' projection of themselves into the gameworld.

The resulting effect that such games have appears to differ from traditional conceptions of empathy as an other-oriented process. After all, these games invite players to use them as a canvas onto which they can project their own meaning. To describe this effect, the third step adapts the concept of “self-empathy” from psychology. This term refers to a derivative of other-oriented empathy directed toward the self (Sherman 2014; Carleton 2019): After empathically engaging with someone else’s experiences, individuals may adopt the same stance toward their own lived experiences (Harrer and Schoenau-Fog 2015). The games of Nomada Studio create this incentive for players to reflect, allowing them to project themselves into the gaps of the abstract narrative and redirect empathic feelings toward themselves.

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