

Feeling with, or Feeling like? Empathy, Identification, and the Pleasures of Self-Reflection in Story-Driven Games

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, empathy has become a key term in both game studies and industry discourse. Empathy is regularly invoked as proof of video games' cultural value, with particular attention to so-called 'empathy games' that promise to help players understand the experiences of marginalised others (Ruberg, 2020). At the same time, there is growing scepticism about empathy as a design goal and its political effects. Drawing on an online qualitative survey with twenty adult players, this paper examines how empathy, pleasure and identity intersect in players' accounts of story-driven games. A reflexive thematic analysis identified three interrelated themes: morality, identification, and personal growth. Participants described pleasure in moral deliberation, identification shaped by biography and intersectional position, and learning experiences often framed in terms of self-development. The findings suggest that empathy in games frequently serves players' own moral and reflective projects rather than sustained engagement with others' structural disadvantage.

Keywords

Empathy; Player Identification; Affective Play

REFERENCES

Ruberg, B. (2020). Empathy and its alternatives: Deconstructing the rhetoric of "empathy" in video games. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 13(1), 54–71.

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