

Exploring the Human Condition through Empathy Games and ‘Other People Simulators’

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Abstract

The recent upwelling of indie development and the increasing prevalence of empathic narratives in video games calls for a radical shift in research towards the potential that the field has begun to exhibit for relating the human condition. Gaming is progressing beyond the sole purpose of entertainment, and the medium has vast potential for imparting social and emotional intelligence, evoking empathy, and better understanding our fellow humans. This maturation of game narratives signals the beginning of a critically important movement in video games, which research and media trends are failing to reflect.

An often divisive area of discussion being actively researched in modern sociology and video games scholarship is that of the various effects that playing video games might have on audiences. Concern over potential links to behavioral issues is becoming increasingly frequent due to the news media’s perception of games as predominantly violent and dangerous. In response to this public image, a large number of prominent game developers feel that the medium sorely needs to diversify its mainstream titles if it is to be widely accepted (Corriea, 2013). The current literature on social and emotional affect in games is similarly limited, as such concerns have driven research primarily towards the study of violence and aggression. This narrow focus has restricted the common games of study to such notoriously war-like or competitive titles as *Call of Duty* (Hasan, Bègue, & Bushman, 2013) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Gabbadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman, 2013), resulting in a gap in the literature where empathic games are concerned.

The rising prevalence of empathic narratives has even found its way into the first person shooter, which news media generally paints as the most dangerous and morally deficient genre of games. In a major evolution since the series premiered in 1981, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* uses its intensely violent and graphic themes to not only entertain, but to highlight a moral ambiguity in the way video games typically represent Nazis. Moral psychology studies have taken initial steps into observing the effects of this narrative design, claiming that pairing emotionally affective storytelling with interactive media can lead to the desire for moral cleansing (Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012), which is indicative of the ability for games to reach players on a very personal level.

This paper looks to expand the discussion by analyzing empathic games that feature complex and private themes; namely, issues of depression, family violence, disability, cancer, and suicide. Within the past few years independent developers have gained a strong presence within gaming culture, bringing about a shift in content towards such serious and profoundly affective themes – what many consider to be the new frontier of gaming (Campbell, 2013). Initial studies have shown that empathic and prosocial gaming may lead to a decreased experiencing of schadenfreude (Greitemeyer, Osswald, & Brauer, 2010), and many games with a central focus on emotionally affective narrative such as *The Walking Dead* – which won over 80 industry and audience-chosen awards – have received widespread acclaim. Through analysis of games featuring narrative and systemic empathy, and experimental projects known colloquially as

'Other People Simulators' such as *That Dragon, Cancer* and *Depression Quest*, the role of video games as a medium for relating the human condition is explored.

Keywords: empathy, video games, other people simulators, human condition, narrative