Contextual Design and Empathy Games

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Abstract

A great portion of scientific research has been dedicated to answering the question of whether or not and to what extent playing violent video games decreases an individual's capacity for empathy. It has not been until relatively recently that a new question has been asked: Can video games that are oriented towards prosocial, positive outcomes increase an individual's capacity for empathy, and, if so, what would such a game look like? This work has a threefold purpose: (1) to compile a body of research that explores the effects of empathy games; (2) to present a catalogue of existing empathy games and analyze in depth how each game is contextually designed by using three principles which will be defined; and (3) to offer balanced insight into both the values and dangers of empathy games.

Keywords: Empathy, empathy games, context, contextual design, review

Contextual Design and Empathy Games

Historically, video games have been oft dismissed as having little value in real-world scenarios. In their infancy, video games predominantly belonged to the domain of a younger consumer group that was being described as “a generation of mindless, ill-tempered adolescents,” as one concerned parent wrote to the *New York Times* (Cravenson, 1982). Thankfully, times have changed since the media panic of the 1980s. More interest has grown in using the power of video games for the creation of social good and fostering positive development in players (Stokes, Seggerman & Rejeski, 2016). The public is now being asked to consider video games as not only engendering the rhetoric of frivolity, as ludic theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) called it, but as a medium capable of producing good. One such genre of video games that has emerged in response to this paradigm shift has been dubbed “empathy games” for its focus on highly emotional, perspective-taking experiences. This work attempts to elucidate what makes a successful empathy game by providing principles of contextual design that align well with the goals of empathy games and offering examples of each principle in a modern empathy game. It also presents a body of research that explores the effects of empathy games in an effort to provide justification for the making of such games, and offers some opposing viewpoints that suggest there are ways that these games can be abused or exploited should we fail to understand that danger.

How Do We Define Empathy?

Before continuing on the subject of empathy games, it would be most beneficial to clearly delineate what is meant by the term “empathy” in this work. There are numerous definitions of empathy, some having roots in philosophy and others having roots in psychology and sociology. German philosopher Theodor Lipps recognized empathy as the “primary basis for recognizing each other as minded creatures” (Stueber, 2008). This definition in particular echoes most strongly another of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics of play: identity. The rhetoric of identity posits that humans play to maintain, confirm, or perhaps newly create a sense of identity. This rhetoric can be seen in a variety of different types of games played around the world—from cultural sporting events like Canadian curling (identity as a nation) to the intricate and highly immersive Nordic live-action roleplaying tradition (identity as an assigned character) (Stenros & Montola, 2010). The rhetoric of identity helps support the claim that video games in which players take on

the role of a certain character can indeed show those players what it is like to be the character—an important point to keep in consideration when evaluating the efficacy of empathy games.

While philosophers like Lipps may be more inclined to explore the ontological nature of empathy, researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology tend to agree on three facets of true empathy: the ability to share another person's feelings (emotional empathy), the cognitive ability to intuit what another person is feeling (cognitive empathy), and a "socially beneficial" intention to respond compassionately to that person's distress (Decety & Ickes, 2009). It is important to note that empathy is operationally defined as an ability that can be practiced, and any practicable ability can be honed. This view of empathy is critical in understanding the efficacy of the empathy game genre as a whole. For the purposes of this work, a game will be considered an empathy game if it employs cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, or both, in gameplay. Because of this definition's heavy reliance on situational and experiential nuance, empathy games are most suitable to being designed and built with context in mind.

The Art of Context

But what, exactly, constitutes contextual design? Contextual design is a way of creating any piece of art, not only video games, such that the piece allows those who interact with it to train their minds to create new contexts in which to learn new information. This principle can be analogized to the age-old axiom that states: "If you wish to be a good writer, then read." That is to say, to be a good writer, one must immerse oneself in the world of literature and find different contexts through exposure to different genres and authors. Only from exploring those contexts, does the budding writer learn something new that is practicable in their art.

Video games in particular are quite good at creating contexts for the gaining of new knowledge, owed to the ease with which digital worlds can be created and manipulated dynamically. But empathy games can only succeed when both design and rhetoric meet: If a player cannot easily step into the digital shoes of a character, there is little social value in the experience, and perhaps the only thing the player will remark upon is the character's unrelatability. If a player identifies as a character in a video game and experiences

different contexts in which to learn about a particular situation as that character, they are exercising their empathy skills. Similarly, if a player then turns off the game and acts differently or perhaps more purposefully on their newfound knowledge, they are exercising their empathy skills. The question then becomes: How best to create such contexts and scenarios?

Empathy Games and the Making Of

Designing with context in mind aims to ensure that the main goal and impetus in making a game is not entirely lost on the player. Nothing is more important, perhaps, to the genre of empathy games. To answer the question of how to create contexts and scenarios that promote empathy in the most effective way possible, certain design principles and examples of each being used in a modern empathy game will be explored.

Contextual Design Principles

Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) present an impressive work in which they posit contextual design principles that should govern the creation of empathy games. In the interest of showing how these principles of contextual design can be seen in the games that will be presented in the following section, a brief summary and a specific name for each principle will be provided.

Conscious Effort. The first suggestion given by Belman and Flanagan is that designers ask players to make an effort to empathize, either overtly or more subtly, at the outset of the game. For the purposes of organizational thinking, this principle will be referred to as the conscious effort principle. Overt direction might look something like a disclaimer at the start of the game that says the game is best experienced if the player immerses him or herself completely in the world. Subtle direction might take the form of cleverer copy, as one of the games presented will demonstrate.

Empowerment-Feedback. They also posit that players be informed as to how their actions can directly address certain issues in the game, suggesting that there should be a strong emphasis on the power of the player to change the given situation. Equally important, and tacit in their suggestion, is that players

see the result of their actions. Giving players feedback in a game, whether it is positive or negative, is critical. Author and game designer Jane McGonigal (2011) writes that when you "strip away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation." In empathy games, a feedback system is more critical due to the emphasis placed on understanding how the player's actions change the world and, indeed, the context in which he or she is situated. For these reasons, this principle will be referred to as the empowerment-feedback principle.

Magnitude of Change. The third principle given suggests that if significant shifts in players' beliefs about themselves, the world, or themselves in relation to the world are an explicit design goal, then the game should integrate both cognitive and emotional empathy, as previously defined. This principle exists to ensure that the effects of cognitive dissonance are mitigated as much as possible by means of appropriate compensation. Where perspective-taking alone may fail to instill empathic concern, the inclusion of an appeal to ethos may succeed, and vice versa. This principle will be referred to as the magnitude of change principle.

Similarity. The last principle posited by Belman and Flanagan states that empathy games should emphasize points of similarity between the player and people or groups with whom the player is supposed to empathize, without provoking defensive avoidance. If a game does so, it may be easier for the player to identify with the persona they are supposed to assume, thereby providing the means through which cognitive and emotional appeals may have a greater chance of resonating with the player. This principle will be referred to as the similarity principle.

Relations to the rhetorics of play. It is interesting to note that these design principles are indeed mirrors of some of the rhetorics of play put forth by Sutton-Smith in his aforementioned work. The conscious effort and similarity principles echo the rhetoric of identity (step into the character's shoes, as

they might not be so different); the empowerment-feedback principle mirrors the rhetoric of power (a player's actions have significant, meaningful consequences); and the magnitude of change principle echoes the rhetoric of play as progress (changing beliefs about oneself encourages self-development). Together, these rhetorics provide a "recipe" for creating meaningful, empathic experiences, and these principles lay the foundation for contextual design. But to what extent are they displayed in some of the extant titles of this genre?

The Principles in Play

The games presented in this section are considered some of the most well-known empathy games that exist today. A brief description of the object of each game and the environment in which it places the player will be given. In the interest of extending the principles of design set forth by Flanagan and Belman, each game was chosen to demonstrate particular principles in practice. An analysis of how the principles are utilized will be provided.

Darfur is Dying by Susana Ruiz and mtvU.

As described on the game's website, *Darfur is Dying* (Ruiz, 2006) is a "video game for change that provides a window into the experience of the 2.5 million refugees in the Darfur region of Sudan." The overarching goal of the game is to keep the player's refugee camp functioning in the face of possible attack by Janjaweed militias. At the start, the game shows the pictures and names of members of a family living in a refugee camp. It then asks the player to assume the persona of one member of the family in an attempt to go out and forage water that will nourish the refugee camp for the days to come. Whilst foraging, the player will come across vehicles full of armed men who will attack the player on sight—running and hiding are the only two options the player has at this stage of the game. If the player succeeds in getting water and bringing it back to the camp, the second stage of the game begins: managing the refugee camp. This task entails bringing water to those in need, using the water to harvest crops for food, and defending, as best the player can, from militia attacks. If the player can successfully keep the camp functional for 7 days, the game is "won."

This game provides an excellent example of the conscious effort principle in the simple form of the start screen. The traditional "Start" or "Play" button seen in games is replaced by the words "Start Your

Experience." From the outset, the designer of this game wishes to establish that it is not a game to be played for frivolity's sake, but it is a game that is meant to be experienced. While this decision may be a subtle, semantic one, it coheres to the more mature contexts and content that the game espouses, and establishes a more serious tone from the very beginning.

Consider for argument's sake the change in tone if the button were to read "Play" instead. It would suggest that the player is making the lives of those refugees—lives that have truly been lived—mere playthings. The genre of the game might be construed as horror or survival in this case. To be sure, there is plentiful horror in the life of a refugee in this game—but the emphasis is never on the horror itself. There is a difference between understanding that the massacre of innocents is horrific, and the realization that thousands of real people in the world, even today, are subject to being massacred. This game places emphasis on the latter—on what the player should recognize as truly horrible. The characters portrayed in the game are not simply tokens to manipulate; they are *people*. They are people who lived, and some who may have died. The designer of this game made the conscious decision to emphasize the fact that the only way to understand their struggles is to *experience* them; thus, the deliberate copy. The player willfully submits to the designer's call to empathize by clicking the "Start Your Experience" button. For such a seemingly small design choice, it carries grand implications.

Darfur is Dying also utilizes the magnitude of change principle quite well to accomplish its goals by incorporating both cognitive and emotional empathy appeals in gameplay. While the game may not be demanding *significant* shifts in the player's beliefs, it would be fair to say that it asks the player to be aware of something that they may not have been aware of prior to playing. The cognitive aspect of empathy is embedded simply in the player's choice of family member. By taking on the persona of a character, the player is adopting their perspective—he or she will see and experience what the character sees. But sometimes, seeing is not enough to bring about realization or revelation—one has to feel something, too. Emotional empathy is embedded in what the player is allowed to do and the choices they are given. The player could very well choose not to go out and forage for water, which would eliminate the risk of death from marauding Janjaweed militiamen. But this choice would cost the entire community a

valuable resource needed to survive—a more selfish option that the player feels the consequences of immediately. Should the player decide to forage water, the game transitions to a segment where the player character is shown hiding among rocks and other cover-providing objects. Armed men in trucks will every so often drive by. The player must move from safe zone to safe zone as they attempt to get nearer to the local well. But one false step could mean death for the character. It is in these segments of the game where the fear becomes palpable, where the realization that *an actual person did this* comes to a head. It is there, in the ruthless African desert, that the emotional aspect of empathy is the most powerful.

***Papers, Please* by Lucas Pope and 3909 LLC.** Described by its creator as a dystopian document thriller, *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) puts the player in the shoes of an immigration inspector living in the fictional authoritarian, Communist state of Arstotzka. It is the player's job to allow or deny passage to the incoming throngs of people from neighboring states. But the people who seek entry into Arstotzka are not all peaceable, innocuous visitors and immigrants looking for work—amongst them are terrorists and spies and wanted criminals. Using the game's inspection system, the player must ensure that all people seeking entry have correct, current, and sufficient documentation to enter. Failing to follow proper protocol will result in citations and wage penalties given by the Arstotzkan government. On top of all this is a fight for survival; the player must perform well in order to have enough money at the end of the day to keep their family members alive and healthy. But sometimes, performing well is not enough, and the player must choose between keeping the heat on and paying for medicine for their sick son. The player will lose the game if all of their family members become sick and die as a result, incur debt, or make fatal errors in judgment as the inspector (i.e. attacking military personnel).

Papers, Please is a strong exemplar of the empowerment-feedback principle, and the game utilizes it to great effect. At all times, the player knows what will happen if he or she does something, or in some cases, fails to do something. The player follows two moral codes, essentially: the code the player brings into the game, and the code handed down to them in the game by the looming Arstotzkan government. Where the utility of the empowerment-feedback principle shines, however, is in the tension between those two moral codes. Failing to follow protocol by the letter will result in docked wages, which will lead to not

being able to keep the heat on, which will result in cold, unhappy family members who will probably get sick. But there are times when everything is not so black and white, and the player may be tempted to neglect the duties given to them by the government. These times are marked by moral dilemmas, similar to the one discussed in the previous section on *Darfur is Dying*, which are not easily solvable when put into the contexts that the game provides.

For example, the player will be made aware by the fictional newspaper in the game, *The Truth of Arstotzka*, of a man wanted for murder in a neighboring state. The same man will eventually show up at the checkpoint, but all of his papers and documentation are perfectly in order. Recognizing his name and detaining him will result in his arrest, as the next issue of the newspaper will detail, but failing to do the job by the letter will result in a citation and docked wages. Allowing him entry will not result in any citations, as all his paperwork checked out, but he may never be brought to justice. And indeed, the next issue of *The Truth of Arstotzka* will only vaguely say that the murderer was spotted somewhere in Arstotzka.

The game gives the player the power of choice, and then asks the player to live with the consequences. The player has the chance to do something honorable and good by detaining and aiding in the arrest of this murderer, but at the cost of some provisions. Similar dilemmas will pop up throughout the game, including the choice to aid a known dissident organization that claims its goal is to remove the "greedy and corrupt" leaders of Arstotzka from power. There is credence to their claim, as events in the story unfold. But whose side the inspector takes is a matter of player perspective—a perspective that may change with the tide of colorful characters who enter the checkpoint with complex, and often tragic, stories of their own. And indeed, the choices made in these dilemmas will often be based on whom the player empathizes with more.

***SPENT* by McKinney.** *SPENT* (McKinney, 2011) is a game created by the ad agency McKinney for their pro bono client, the Urban Ministries of Durham (UMD). The UMD has as its mission to provide food, shelter, clothing, and other services to those in need, and they wished to put forth an empathy game to

help those above the poverty line understand the difficult lives of those below it. In the game, the player takes on the role of someone down to their last $1000. The object of the game is to make it to the end of the month without going broke—a challenge that is not easily overcome. Indeed, the UMD recognizes the challenge for what it is, and at the start of the game, they ask the player to “prove” that they would not need their services should the player ever find themselves below the poverty line.

SPENT succeeds in establishing a believable “this could be you” atmosphere, and in so doing, utilizes the similarity principle of contextual design. It continually draws on events that happen to everyone. The player needs a steady job to accrue a weekly income but things like health insurance and payments to keep their car road-legal can be ignored in the interest of saving money. Living closer to your job will mean the cost of rent is high, and the opposite being true as well, but living farther away will mean more money spent on gas to get from place to place and more chances for your vehicle to break down, resulting in more payments. You want to keep your child happy by allowing them to participate in activities like club sports, but you may not be able to spare the money to buy the necessary equipment for them. Random events will occur in the game like a bad toothache that turns into a $400 root canal, or the death of a family member that requires the player to spend money to travel to the memorial or to skip it entirely if the player does not have the necessary funds to do so. Everyday events like these, constrained by the amount of money the player has, provide for moments of dramatic tension that hammer home the game’s message. These events are where the similarity principle shines. Never does the game step into the incredulous or unbelievable; it is always grounded in a firm sense of reality. While a toothache may seem a mundane problem to some, to others, the game suggests, it has far-reaching consequences. To those who have never experienced these dire situations in the context that the game presents, it can be harrowing to realize just how harsh the reality is.

Very similar to *Papers, Please*, this game also utilizes the empowerment-feedback principle, mainly by placing the player in the tense situations described above. During such moments, the game provides the player with the power of choice, and feedback is, of course, delivered in the form of consequences that are immediately shown following the player’s decision. For example, depending on the job the player

takes, he or she might be presented with the opportunity to unionize at their place of work. Unionizing usually means having the ability to collectively bargain for higher wages, which is an incredible prospect for someone in such dire need. But there is an element of risk involved—the backlash from higher-ups. And indeed, if the player should decide to unionize in an effort to increase his or her monthly income, he or she will immediately be fired. While this might seem unfair to the player, the game makes the poignant effort to note that even though firing employees over union activity is illegal, *it still happens*. And it more often happens to those individuals who lack the resources to fight such discriminatory action. This somewhat jarring realization draws on the well of emotion to drive home the game's point. While these choices and their consequences may not be very "empowering" by the word's definition, they align with the message intended by the creators: It is incredibly difficult to survive below the poverty line *without any help*. The empowerment-feedback loop at play in this game serves to move forward that idea, and exists to help the player understand that those who are disenfranchised experience daily many unsettling choices between two evils.

The Case for Empathy Games

With the contextual design principles defined and analyzed in modern empathy games, the larger question remains: Even if an empathy game was designed according to those principles, do these kinds of games have any real-world transference? Can they truly make an impact on a player's thoughts or actions *outside* of the game world, outside of the contexts presented? Are there any drawbacks to using empathy games, and can they ever be abused? In this section, some literature concerning empathy games is compiled and summarized in an effort to answer these questions.

Studies of Empathy Games

Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos, and Raphael (2012) performed a study of a virtual reality empathy-based simulation. Their experiment had students playing the *REAL LIVES* (Educational Simulations, 2001) simulation game, which allows players to live the life of a person from a different country. Using real-world data about the countries in the game, the player guides their avatar through the various stages of life—schooling, employment, marriage and children, etc. Students in the study were given lists provided by teachers, and those students in the experimental group played a character from at least two countries on

those lists. They demonstrated that students who played the simulation were more likely to show greater global empathy and scored significantly higher in posttest global empathy as compared to the control group. In the same study, they demonstrated that students who played the simulation would show greater interest in future learning about the people and their issues in the target countries studied, as compared to the control group. And finally, they demonstrated that character identification was positively associated with posttest global empathy for those students who engaged in the simulation, again reinforcing the rhetoric of identity and its importance in empathy games. This study in particular seems to suggest that at least on short time-scales and in young students, there is a degree of real-world transference of intent. No follow-ups on the students were mentioned, and as such, whether or not they actually did make the effort to learn about the different peoples and their countries as a result of playing the game remains in question.

Eric Gordon and Steven Schirra (2011) sought to transform the often-mundane process of community planning into an engaging simulation game in their experimental study of *Participatory Chinatown* (Engagement Game Lab, 2010). In their study, 48 local residents of Chinatown in Boston, Massachusetts gathered to play the game. Following the game, 38 players responded to a survey that asked questions relating to empathy. Gordon and Schirra found that most participants thought about their characters and their characters' needs when making important life decisions in the game. They also found that participants would be able to tell someone "a lot" about their virtual character's life and unique struggles. One young player, who played the elderly Mei Soohoo in the game, commented in a post-test interview: "I consider Chinatown a community I'm familiar with, but I've never thought of it from the perspective of an elder. It's nothing I've really considered. I thought that was really interesting. Just for [Mei] to find seniors to associate with and have a community with so she wouldn't have to live alone." While not very empirical, this study demonstrates in qualitative measurements a successful perspective-taking game. The player that was mentioned was brought to a new awareness because of the game—but, at the same time, only one player felt affected enough to remark upon their experience. It would be interesting to see in future research if it takes a certain kind of person to walk away with a newly discovered viewpoint, and whether or not susceptibility is largely determined by personality.

Peng, Lee, and Hester (2010) performed an experimental study on *Darfur is Dying*. Using undergraduate students from two large classes, they randomly assigned participants in this study to either play the game, or read an informationally comparable text. Following either reading the text or playing the game, participants were asked to complete a postquestionnaire that measured role-taking of the Darfurian featured in the game or in the text, willingness to help the Darfurian people, and demographic information. They discovered that those who played the game were more likely to donate money to fund programs to raise awareness of the crisis than the text readers; more likely to sign a petition to build political pressure that would end the crisis than the text readers; and more likely to discuss Darfur with friends and family than the text readers. They also confirmed that those who played the game had greater role-taking than text readers. Overall, the study suggests that *Darfur is Dying* serves as a better motivating tool to help the Darfurian people than simple infographics or written descriptions of the events going on. It is more effective because of its excellent adherence to the previously analyzed principles of contextual design.

Nilsen, LeDonne, Klemperer, and Olund (2011) undertook a study to examine the effects of playing another well-regarded empathy game, *Peacemaker* (ImpactGames, 2007), in which the player seeks to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict peacefully. They had a participant pool of 30 people, and these participants were assigned to spend one hour in the lab either playing the game or reading about events similar to those in the game. Measures of empathy and attitudes were taken before and after playing the game or reading about similar events. Nilsen and his research team discovered that those who played the game had a more positive outlook on the conflict and the actors involved in it than those who just simply read about the events. Participants who played the game believed more sincerely that peace was an achievable goal and rated the actors and actions in the conflict as significantly more positive than the reading group. This study, though measuring attitudes and not actions, shows how a game can foster positivity by taking different perspectives and understanding the situation as a whole. Again, however, how the participants felt long after the study remains in question.

Gina Roussos and John Davidio (2016) put forth a publication that investigated *SPENT*. Their experiments were concerned with the game's ability to reduce prejudices toward the poor in those who play. In the first of their studies, they took pre-post attitudinal measurements of participants. They discovered that those who played the game did not have measurable changes in attitudes compared to their pre-tests, but those who *watched* someone else play the game did show increased positive attitudes, empathic concern, and support for government-funded anti-poverty policies. In the second of their studies, they scored those who played the game in the first study on a meritocracy scale—a high score meaning the player believes very strongly in working hard in life to earn rewards. Interestingly, Roussos and Davidio found that those who scored high in the meritocracy scale saw poverty as more personally controllable. More empirical than the other studies listed in this section, this particular study suggests that watching someone struggle in a challenge like the game of *SPENT* fosters more positivity and empathic concern for the poor than playing the game itself—an interesting conclusion that deserves further research.

As can be seen from the above studies, there is a paucity of quantitative research on what happens after players turn off the game. But the above studies show on the whole that empathy games indeed do make measurable qualitative differences, at least in the attitudes and beliefs of players. Actions that participants might have taken based on new attitudes and beliefs were never mentioned in any of the studies. Future research will have to answer that part of the question.

"Criticism" and Value

A very strong and appreciable warning in the use of empathy games comes from the indie developer Anna Anthropy (2015), also known as Auntie Pixelante. On a page from her website, Anthropy discusses her art installation that became known simply as "Empathy Game." This piece was designed such that gallery-goers could step into the boots that Anthropy actually wore, and for every mile they walked while wearing them, they earned one point. Points were recorded on a chalkboard set up next to Anthropy's boots. Taking her argument out of context feels inappropriate, and to that end, her full quote will be given here. She says: [block quote] "Empathy Game is about the farce of using a game as a substitute for education, as a way to claim allyship. You could spend hours pacing in a pair of beaten-up size thirteen

heels to gain a point or two—a few people did!—and still know nothing about the experience of being a trans woman, about how to be an ally to them. Being an ally takes work, it requires you to examine your own behavior, it is an ongoing process with no end point. That people are eager to use games as a shortcut to that, and [as a] way to feel like they've done the work and excuse themselves from further educating themselves, angers and disgusts me. You don't know what it's like to be me." [block quote] Anthropy's thoughts here successfully lampoon the idea of the "empathy machine"—that all that needs to be done is pull a lever and out will pop some empathy. She warns against the rhetoric of power—playing empathy games only in an insincere effort to claim understanding. Provided that her words are heeded and empathy games are not used simply as substitutions, this genre of games still has much value.

While it has been noted previously that there is little research on the long-term effects of playing empathy games—and indeed, even on short-term effects that do not use self-report measuring systems—this genre of video games deserves more attention than it has been getting. Games like the titles that have been analyzed have the ability to encourage exploration of societal issues and learning through experience the truths of these problems, and they have this distinct ability precisely because they were designed with context in mind. It is context and voluntary discovery of knowledge that will make these games stand out as true games for social change. Through new contexts like these, people are able to practice their empathy skills in ways that they cannot or otherwise *would* not do.

Discussion and Future Study

While some would claim that true understanding only comes from truly living something, empathy games offer something else, and in a safer manner than walking in a minefield to truly understand what it is like to be in a combat zone. Successful empathy games engender the right combination of rhetorics and contexts that provide for powerful experiences—experiences that can reduce cultural bias, racial bias, religious bias, political bias. These experiences can help improve attitudes toward the poor, the disenfranchised—those actors on our world stage who are often overlooked. They provide new ways of thinking about love and gender, new ways of thinking about mental illness and the serious problems it

causes in those who suffer. At its very core, this is a genre that is about *new ways of thinking*. And it brings about these new ways of thinking by putting the player in the context appropriate for what the game is attempting to convey.

In the case of *Darfur is Dying*, the combination of its deep respect for the issue and its attention to the harrowing yet compelling details of the life of a Darfurian refugee makes for a powerful message: that what the player is experiencing is a lived experience. Similar to the other games analyzed, it reminds players that there are those in our society who truly do need help, compassion, and understanding, and that their suffering is not as remote or unbelievable as some would have us believe. *Papers, Please*, with its emphasis on choice and consequence, compels players to reflect on the ever-present struggle of deciding for the good of the few or the good of the many, and suggests that that choice is sometimes not as clear-cut as it seems. And *SPENT* offers players a relatable, digestible perspective on the disenfranchised and the poor. It reminds its audience that, yes—life sometimes is not exactly fair. But it is often more unfair for those without the support to combat the daily vicissitudes of life.

These new thoughts and realizations are good first steps—but did they amount to any action? The studies summarized previously suggest that these games do indeed have the ability to promote prosocial, empathic outcomes in beliefs and attitudes of players—albeit only on short timescales, and perhaps only in certain individuals or groups of individuals. A causal, or even a correlative, link between action and thought as a result of playing empathy games has yet to be established. And what of the player unknowns? Does it take a certain type of person to see results in action? Is action only dependent on the strength of the game to import its message on the player? There is still so much to explore. To that end, this author calls on the research community to continue exploring this exciting field with experiments looking at longer timescales, lasting effects, and different persons with different personalities. In addition, future studies on empathy games may wish to adopt more objective measurement systems. While self-reporting systems are important for qualitative assessments of participants' thoughts and feelings, the importance of demonstrable effects of games on empathy cannot be overstated. And it is in this particular

genre of game, solely by its nature, that actions should speak louder than words most of all.

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