



EMPATHY IN GAMES



FEELING WHAT OTHERS FEEL, IMAGINING HOW THEY VIEW AND THINK ABOUT SITUATIONS, AND USING THAT KNOWLEDGE TO GUIDE YOUR ACTIONS.

Empathy is foundational to who we are as humans. It helps us to connect with others and build strong relationships. Empathy means feeling what others feel, trying to look at things from their point of view, and using our knowledge of others to guide the way we treat them. Empathy can be harder to feel when there is an imbalance in power or resources, or when people (and characters) aren't seen as individuals but as mere numbers, part of a mass outgroup that's perceived as very different from "us." In those situations, we need to work harder to care about and do the right thing for others. Games might provide opportunities to practice empathy when they let players act from different points of view (play as multiple characters with different traits and perspectives), make progress by seeking out and understanding other characters' perspectives, play through difficult circumstances they might not encounter in real life (like war or disease), and have to make choices that could help or hurt others. How would your game encourage players to feel or use empathy?

ELEMENTS TO ADD

- + Require the player to play from more than one point of view, or require perspective taking to learn different sides to a situation.
- + Use the game's subject matter to create understanding for specific circumstances.
- + Build a strong central narrative that helps the player care about the world and its characters.
- + Feelings travel faster than thoughts in the brain; building pauses into the narrative pacing could help thoughts catch up.
- + Reading emotions in others enhances empathy; offer dialogue choices that validate and reflect the feelings of other characters.
- + Universal themes such as loss can be used to find common ground; many of people's most memorable gaming moments involve losing something that has become important.

ELEMENTS TO LEAVE OUT

- Check and manage toxic player culture; offer real consequences for bad behavior and maintain a safe space for everyone.
- Cut down on gratuitous violence and the activity of killing for rewards.
- Heavily competitive and confrontational PvP free-for-alls increase the desire to "get" or "kill" someone else rather than the desire to understand, befriend, or be kind to them.
- Pay-to-win models ensure that there aren't any stakes that matter if you can cut to the finish by paying.

COMMON PITFALLS

EMPATHY vs. SYMPATHY

Confusing "sympathy" (acknowledging another person's emotional hardships and providing comfort) and "empathy" (understanding what others feel because you have experienced the same situation yourself or can imagine yourself in their situation) is common. How will your team explain this difference? How will your game distinguish and separate the two?

SIMULATED DISTRESS

Intentionally causing distress in players in the name of understanding and awareness is a practice that is not essential and is ethically questionable. It's not advisable, for example, to force your players to experience an anxiety attack to help them understand the problem of anxiety. How can you promote awareness and understanding without doing harm to your players? If you must have upsetting content in your game, what steps will you take to minimize or resolve distress? What kind of consent will you get from players for that experience and how?

EMPATHY vs. EMOTION

Just because a game makes players have feelings does not mean it creates empathy. How will you nuance your approach to address this difference?

GAME GENRES & TYPES



Story-driven



MMO and MOBA



Social Impact



Mystery



Multiplayer Strategy



Social Simulation

SPECIFIC MECHANICAL REFERENCES

Empathy for characters and game creators may happen when someone makes a game about their own experiences in an effort to **help others understand** a condition, a situation, or a way of life such as Inuit culture in *Never Alone*, LGBT issues in *Gone Home* and *Dys4ia*, or conditions like autism and cancer in *Max: An Autistic Journey* and *That Dragon, Cancer*.

Empathy may come into play when you must **make choices while considering the impact** on other characters or at a cost to yourself, such as *The Walking Dead*, *This War of Mine*, *Undertale*, and *Papers, Please*.

Oxenfree features **relatable** teen as well as drama and player dialogue and action choices that directly **impact relationships** with the other characters in ways that result in multiple possible endings.

When players have the opportunity to **investigate more than one side of a story** in order to make a decision, that is perspective taking, which is necessary to empathy...like when you **choose sides in a feud** in *Knights of the Old Republic*, or when you **interview characters** in a detective game like *Nancy Drew*.

In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, players explore the Finches' family home and consider a range of life stories in terms of connection, meaning, and coping with tragedy.

In most single player RPGs like the *Dragon Age* and the *Persona* series, players are given an opportunity to complete quests that teach more about the companions. Players help the companion achieve some important goal or right an old wrong, and in the process, **learn about that character's life and view of the world**.

In *1979: Revolution*, players learn about the civil war in Iran in the 1980s. As the main character, players must **make decisions that affect others**, and also, in a moment of perspective taking, must choose what to photograph and whether to turn over the photographs, when they might not be used in a way the player approves of.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EMPATHY

Greater Good Science Center: <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/empathy>

Start Empathy: <https://startempathy.org/>

Roman Krznaric: How to start an empathy revolution. www.tedtalks.com

Brené Brown on Empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Krznaric, R. (2014). *Empathy: Why it matters, and how to get it*. New York: Perigree.

McLaren, K. (2013). *The Art of Empathy: A complete guide to life's most essential skill*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True, Inc.

Winerman, L. (2005, October). The mind's mirror. *Monitor on Psychology*, 36(9). Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>

Shellenbarger, S. (2013, October 15). Teens are still developing empathy skills. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com>.

Stern, R. & Divecha, D. (2015, July 7). How to avoid the empathy trap. Greater Good Science Center. Retrieved from <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS ON

EMPATHY IN GAMES



SYMPATHY

vs.



EMPATHY

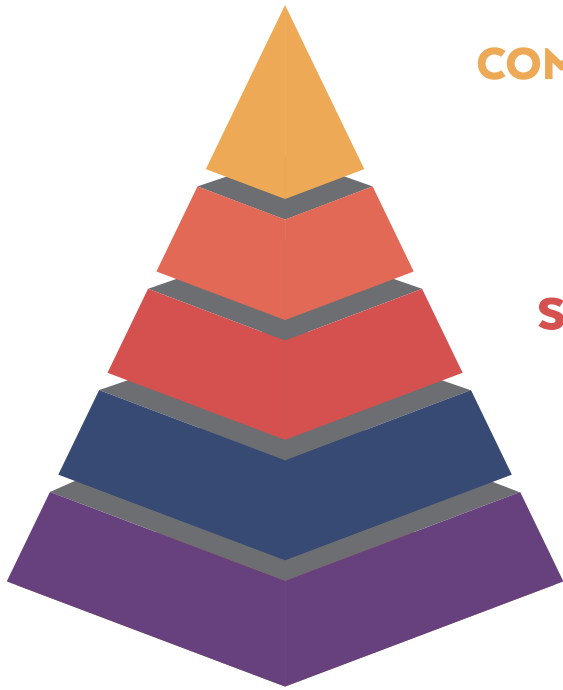
I FEEL BAD
FOR YOU.

I FEEL
HOW YOU
FEEL.

EMPATHY IN GAMES



THE PYRAMID OF FEELS



COMPASSION

Empathy put into action.

EMPATHY

Empathy is about bringing people closer and sitting with another in their discomfort. "I know what it feels like and you're not alone."

SYMPATHY

Feeling sorrow for someone else's misfortune. Sympathy is about pushing people away, creating distance between yourself and the discomfort.

PITY

"Sucks to be you."

APATHY

"I don't care how you feel."

COMPONENTS OF EMPATHY

PERSPECTIVE
TAKING

EMOTION
CONTAGION

PERSPECTIVE
ENGAGEMENT



EMOTIONAL
REGULATION

CONCERN
FOR OTHERS

EMPATHETIC
ACCURACY

EMPATHY IN GAMES



GETTING TO EMPATHY

RATIONAL

Understanding emotions

PERCEPTION & AWARENESS

Requires sensory input such as seeing someone, hearing a story, smelling something familiar, etc.

EMBODIED

Emotional reaction & connection

COGNITIVE/ THINKING

Take another's perspective
Accurately recognize the emotional state of another
Understand how someone feels and/or what they may be thinking

↓ EMPATHY POWER ZONE ↓

AFFECTIVE/ FEELING

Feel what another person is feeling
Be affected by another person's emotional state
Feel motivated to respond appropriately
Connect emotionally

COGNITIVE EMPATHY ALONE

Understanding without emotional connection /
Lack of emotional motivation to respond

AFFECTIVE EMPATHY ALONE

All emotion with little or no understanding /
Inability to regulate emotion

Understanding others

Connecting with and recognizing others' experience

Sitting with the feeling rather than pushing it away or denying it (i.e. sympathy, pity).

NOTE: Taking action is not required for empathy.