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# A Story About You: Feeling with Interactive Fiction Games


## Abstract

The idea that reading fiction is central to our development of empathy, our ability to feel for and with others, is a common one both in literary criticism and in literature pedagogy. In the Norwegian school curriculum fiction is consistently positioned as a way of better understanding the perspectives and feelings of others, suggesting that, as cognitive critic Maria Nikolajeva writes, "[i]n plain words, reading indeed makes us better human beings" (2014, 228). But what does empathy really mean in this context? This video essay approaches this question through a textual genre that has a peculiar relationship to this term - small-scale, often text-based digital games that focus on capturing the creator's own experiences and that are sometimes, controversially, called *empathy games*, with the suggestion that these games

give you a felt sense of an experience that might be outside the player's own. These games use text and game mechanics to evoke powerful feelings in the player - but do they actually make us feel *with* the game creator? Using text excerpts from the games and voiceover narration, *A Story About You* aims to play with the connection that we as readers and teachers of literature often make between reading and empathy.

Keywords: Interactive fiction, empathy, empathy games, literature didactics, affect

## Academic guiding text

Ella Risbridger wrote the interactive fiction game *Blood Will Out* for Blood Cancer Awareness Week in 2016, while her boyfriend was in treatment for what turned out to be a rare form of lymphoma. The game is autobiographical, a record and evocation of her experience of his early illness. But when you are playing the game, it is happening to you: you are the one whose boyfriend is obviously, mysteriously *wrong* in some way and refusing to talk to you about it.

In the early 2010s, the label "empathy game" began to be used to describe games that specifically try to let the player share the game creator's experiences of, for instance, precarious employment (*Cart Life*, 2010), gender dysphoria (*Dys4ia*, 2012), or having a loved one become seriously ill (*Blood Will Out,* 2016; *That Dragon, Cancer*, 2016). Literary criticism and pedagogy often link imaginative engagement with texts to the development of empathy in the reader - see for instance Nikolajeva's discussion of the role of reading in children's understanding of other people's feelings (2014), Suzanne Keen's examination of the links between reading and empathy (2007), or Laura Green's work on "literary identification" (2012). For me, as a literature and culture scholar working in teacher education, this has the practical benefit of justifying literature as central to learning: read this, it'll make you a better person! Narrative games seem to offer an even clearer path to empathy, because they tend to put you, the player, in the position of the protagonist in a more literal and direct way than other narratives (cf. Isbister, 2017; Tavinor, 2009).

As educators we might, then, be tempted to see games, and empathy games in particular, as a royal road to an imaginative understanding of others' perspectives; recently, educators, psychologists, and cognitive scientists have shown an interest in both creating games and using existing games to enhance pupils' empathy (see for instance Ling and Minkang (2019) and Ferreira et al. (2021)). But while some game creators have embraced the "empathy game" label (Caballero interviewed in Bartelson, 2014), others, like Anna Anthropy and merritt kopas, have critiqued it as overly simplistic, even insulting. These creators resist the idea that someone can gain a full understanding of their own complex experiences by playing a game - which might make us feel more uneasy about how often something like this claim is made about literature. I wanted to explore the question of textual emotion and empathy through text-based games in part to draw on these existing debates within game studies, but also to allow for useful defamiliarisation: the way text-based games work with player emotion can give us wider insights into how text makes us feel things.

Is *Blood Will Out* an empathy game? *A Story About You* suggests that its evocation of emotion has other purposes: partly the straightforward, practical one of making its audience more aware of the symptoms of this form of cancer, and partly a memorialising one.

> I must remember exactly what this is like, in case..in case..you don't articulate it. Not yet. But you remember it exactly, just in case. (Risbridger, 2016)

The creator preserves her own feelings, her own memories, *in you,* by evoking them in you as you play. At the same time, she reminds you of the stark difference between what you feel and what she felt - that you can just stop playing. If this is empathy, it comes in the form of a recognition of not the closeness, but the distance between you and another person. It could, then, be more useful to think of these games not as empathy machines but as machines for *feeling*: in the end, what they are about is you.

You are the protagonist of *A Story About You*, and I want you to feel addressed, interpellated, gotten at, throughout the video. What I couldn't have done in a textual format, and hope I've been able to do here, is to allow you not only to *understand* but also to *feel* how these games

produce emotion, while creating a space to question the assumption that you are *feeling with* the game's creator.

To do this, I use excerpts from gameplay footage, aiming to show how games that are almost nothing but text on a screen can still use game mechanics for compelling emotional effects, and accompany it with voiceover narration. In his reading of Allison de Fren's video work, Kevin B. Lee notes the relative absence of the female voice in videographic criticism, and asks what the effects of female-voiced narration might be in "creating auditory affects of authority as well as empathy" (Lee, 2016). My voice in this video is not scholarly; its authority is emotional, even emotionally manipulative, drawing semi-intentionally on ASMR, a vocal practice that aims to produce affect and sensation in the listener (cf Abrantes, 2019, who emphasises that sound is, literally, touch). The focus is on what *you* are feeling, which is why I decided not to include my face in the video - ultimately, what I want is to try to erase the screen between us, to have you looking over my shoulder as I play these games with/for you.

At the same time, thematising the video's interest in the limits of experiencing empathy through gameplay, I want this sense of intimacy to feel unsettling, wrong-footing. The gameplay itself, with its emphasis on your lack of agency, is part of this, as is the switching between speaking to you as viewer ("how do you feel?") and to you as game protagonist ("he's so angry with you all the time"). I want you to feel unsure of who exactly I'm addressing when I talk to you. The opening voiceover, where I read from the text of *Blood Will Out*, is presented initially without context because I want you to be at least briefly thrown off by it, to feel, perhaps, caught out. I'm talking to *you*, describing *you*, but it's not *really* you - is it? The use of rain sounds is also intended to contribute to this duality: as in Evelyn Kreutzer's *Footsteps* (2021), which uses the sound of footsteps against sparse text-based visuals to evoke a sense of space, the rain sounds act as a reminder of physical reality, pulling you briefly out of the game-space before throwing you back in.

Apart from the critical 'epigraphs', which are inspired by Catherine Grant's use of textual quotations, everything that appears on screen is either direct screen capture or assembled screenshots of gameplay. Where text in videographic criticism is often used for commentary

purposes (as in Grant's work), here the text is the object of study itself, used *as image* - a kind of 'found' typography. In this sense, the main videographic tradition I'm drawing on is the desktop documentary, though my work does not make use of this genre's often virtuosic use of apparent spontaneity (cf Kiss, 2021). As in Chloé Galibert-Laîné *Watching The Pain of Others* (2018), which screen-records their viewing of Penny Lane's documentary *The Pain of Others* (2018), the visuals I use are a record of my own experience, a representation of my own interaction with the games. In desktop documentary, the overlap between the filming and viewing medium - both are a computer screen - means that, in Galibert-Laîné's words, the viewer may have the sense that their 'device is suddenly possessed by someone else – it's like a ghost who is moving the mouse around' (DiGravio, 2019). Here, I try to use this effect to compound a sense of elusive agency: it *looks* as if you are making the choices on screen, but you aren't.

In *A Story About You*, I aim to unsettle or destabilise the idea of text as a straightforward or simple vehicle for feeling with another person. To that end, I hope the effect of the video is one of uneasiness - a kind of illusive, deceptive intimacy, a closeness that glitches.

## About the author

**Erika Kvistad** is Associate Professor of English at the University of South-Eastern Norway, and teaches English literature, culture and media in USN's teacher education programme. Her current research focuses on digital horror narratives, and her recent publication topics include Gothic interactive fiction games, horror webcomics, and hoax YouTube videos.

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