

Speculative Capacitation: Remediation, Bioinformatics, and the Politics of Empathy Games

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New media scholars discussing empathy games often bring together a particularly heterogenous archive of texts. Ian Bogost, in an account of the empathetic potential of videogames in *How to do Things with Videogames*¹ lumps together an action-adventure game about a fictional character, a game designed explicitly to foster political action, and a lyrical meditation on a traumatic historical event. Critics and game makers such as Robert Yang and Ian Bryce Jones discuss videogames alongside virtual reality (VR) cinema.² Consequently, the genre of “empathy game” is less marked by its formal qualities and the conditions of its production than by its imagined functions and affective outcomes.

In order to examine this tendency, it is worth comparing a VR experiences such as *Clouds over Sidra* (2015) with an empathy games such as *Mainichi* (2012). *Clouds Over Sidra* is a VR cinematic experience that depicts the difficult daily experience of a refugee in the Zaatari refugee camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Narrated by its eponymous subject, Sidra, the documentary follows a linear path jumping from scene to scene alongside Sidra’s narration as Sidra goes to school, spends time with family, and eats. *Mainichi* also depicts its subjects quotidian experience of transphobia – its title, in Japanese, means “everyday.” It also follows a mostly linear path. In *Mainichi* the player character must get ready to leave the house and get

¹ Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames* (U of Minnesota Press, 2011).

² For examples of this tendency, see Ian Bryce ianbrycejones, “Feeling Through Computers: Videogames and the Bleeding Edge of Empathy,” *Intermittent Mechanism* (blog), March 27, 2017, <https://intermittentmechanism.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/feeling-through-computers/>, Robert Yang, “‘If You Walk in Someone Else’s Shoes, Then You’ve Taken Their Shoes’: Empathy Machines as Appropriation Machines,” *Blog, Radiator Blog* (blog), April 5, 2017, <http://www.blog.radiator.debaele.us/2017/04/if-you-walk-in-someone-elses-shoes-then.html>, Diana Pozo, “Pozo Queer Games as Haptic Media SCMS 2017,” accessed December 16, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/34622663/Pozo_Queer_Games_as_Haptic_Media_SCMS_2017, Brice, Mattie, “Empathy Machine,” *Mattie Brice* (blog), July 1, 2016, <http://www.mattiebrice.com/empathy-machine/>.

coffee with a friend. This involves making a series of decisions (to shower or not shower, to eat or not eat, to watch TV or not) and walking down the street towards the coffee shop.

Beyond a focus on the quotidian and a linear narrative structure, *Mainichi* and *Clouds over Sidra* do not have much formal overlap. Other than changing point of view, viewers cannot interact with the VR experience of *Clouds over Sidra* in any kind of robust way. Consequently, *Clouds over Sidra* is best understood as an intensification of an essentially cinematic experience, and as a part of a VR tradition that has more in common with nineteenth century panoramas than procedural simulation. *Mainichi* on the other hand does not attempt a high degree of graphical realism or sensory intensity. The game is not a robust realistic computational simulation of the world, involving complex AI behavior, or highly detailed textures and character models. Its only significant mechanics are walking around, choosing to interact with non-player characters or objects, and being seen and accosted by non-player characters. Nonetheless, *Mainichi* depicts experience through what Ian Bogost calls procedural rhetoric, “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.”³ Rather than being relayed information via voiceover, players actively make choices and intervene in the narrative, and see the consequences of their choices. In formal terms, this grouping does not really make much sense.

Neither does it make much sense when comparing the conditions and motivations of the production of both titles. While *Mainichi* is a game developed by a single individual, meant to express its author’s daily experiences in a personal fashion⁴, *Clouds over Sidra* was designed by a team of activists in order to spur political engagement and charitable donations. Speaking of

³ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2010), IX.

⁴ Mattie Brice, “Mainichi,” *Mattie Brice* (blog), November 6, 2012, <http://www.mattiebrice.com/mainichi/>.

an expensive project funded by grant money that exists to enact political activism in the same breath as an essayistic personal account risks eliding how the differing media are circulated and used in dissimilar ways. It instead reduces both to “empathy machines” – products whose main goal is to instill empathy in those interacting with them.

While the term “empathy machine” applies well to *Clouds over Sidra* (it is, in fact, a term popularized by the VR cinematic experience’s director in a TED talk directly talking about the film), and may quite successfully describe other intentionally activist games that work to create change through making players feel empathy (such as *Darfur is Dying*), the category of empathy machine exists to the consternation of many of those whose work is cited as exemplars of prototypical empathy machines. Mattie Brice, Anna Anthropy, and Robert Yang have all pushed back against their games as empathy games and the notion that their games can function in any capacity as “empathy machines.” Robert Yang notes that regarding his games as empathy games is an act of misrecognition. Yang does not design his games so that straight people can understand what it’s like to be queer. Rather, he does it to “imagine fantastic worlds where straight people aren’t as important.”⁵

Far from communicating that the genre category of empathy machine should be abandoned and not studied, this moment of misrecognition points to a need to articulate how and why so many games dealing with race, disability, sexuality and gender function as such a blind spot for so many professional games critics. In its act of misrecognition, the genre category of “empathy machine” functions as what Sara Ahmed might refer as a “straightening device.”⁶ Just

⁵Robert Yang, “If You Walk in Someone Else’s Shoes, Then You’ve Taken Their Shoes’: Empathy Machines as Appropriation Machines,” Blog, Radiator Blog (blog), April 5, 2017, <http://www.blog.radiator.debacl.us/2017/04/if-you-walk-in-someone-elses-shoes-then.html>

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 96.

as a speaker in Ahmed's work can't imagine Ahmed's lesbian partner as anything other than "a sister or a husband," it is as if the critics calling Anthropy and Brice's work "empathy games" cannot understand games depicting queer experiences as having any possible value beyond educating a straight audience. Critics who refer to queer games as empathy games assert norms about who the audience for videogames is, and uncomfortably slot the work of queer and trans artists into a role which decenters queer audiences and limits the ways the texts can be read. Critics who refer to these queer games as empathy games position what are often expressive accounts of experience as nothing more than tools that are instrumental for a straight audience to understand a politically marked other.

Empathy machines are worth addressing not because the category itself is particularly descriptive, but because the construction of such a category and its wide valorization points to popular understandings of the possibilities afforded by new media and simulation. In the advocacy of the potential efficacy of empathy games are imbedded a number of claims about the possibilities of representation, the value of simulation, the transparency of the body to bioinformatics, and the value of empathy. In taking on empathy machines as a topic, I have no desire to reproduce the ways in which the very existence of the genre creates a set of norms that circumscribe the potential of things dubbed to be empathy machines. Instead, I wish to follow Wendy Chun in examining not whether hype around new technologies is merited, but how the hype surrounding them arrives alongside a set of political fantasies.⁷ Conversation around such fantasies should not just be concerned with representation, but with a broader media ecology, one that takes into account what Richard Grusin refers to as the "affective life of media" and the

⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "WEIRD REALITY: Head-Mounted Art & Code :: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun" (STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, April 25, 2017), <https://vimeo.com/214713185>.

ways that media are used for affective off-boarding and securitization.⁸ In questioning the value of empathy games as a series of representations of debility, I do not want to repeat what James Berger identifies as the fundamental iconoclasm of disability studies critique⁹, but rather to use analysis taken from disability studies to more broadly to understand the underpinnings of fantasies surrounding empathy machines and the relationships between empathy machines, those who use them, and those whose experiences they are meant to portray.

In order to understand the limits of an approach centered on “empathy” and representation, I’ll first contextualize hype around empathy machines in terms of Richard Grusin’s and Jay David Bolter’s “remediation.” I’ll then turn towards games as vehicles for what I term *speculative capacitation*. Drawing on critiques of empathy games from within queer game studies, I will critique empathy as a means of speculation, and then argue that gamic representation has a particular set of informatic politics that must be taken in account. Turning towards disability studies, I’ll situate the remedial claims of empathy games within a bioinformatic context, and argue empathy games are harmful precisely in how they map a representation of experience onto an informatic exchange, that, through the process of biomediation, has significant political consequences. Finally, turning away from empathy games, I’ll suggest ways in which games have positive political potential.

In doing so, I aim to bring together the fields of game studies and disability studies. The purpose of this is in large part to make an intervention in game studies, which takes a number of aspects of interface, player interaction, and capacitation for granted. Disability study’s critiques of disability simulation can bring much to bear on conversations of simulation within game

⁸ Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 90.

⁹ James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (NYU Press, 2014), 165.

studies. In addition, I want to make an intervention within the field of disability studies as well. As I will argue, games provide a privileged medium for understanding how understandings of disability have shifted within a society of control. As Jasbir Puar notes, “Biopolitical apparatuses of control are invested in modulating a prolific range of affective bodily capacities and debilities—‘differential normalities’—that invariably render rights-based interventions unable to fully apprehend the scenes of power.”¹⁰ Videogames, as a medium that involves *speculative capacitation*, provide an occasion to look at how bodies and actors are mechanically represented through a range of capacities and tendencies rather than through an abled / disabled binary.

Remediation

Advocates for empathy machines, whether in the form of VR cinema or videogames, understand lack of empathy to be—at least in part—a technological problem. The hype around the forms of new media they advocate come from the assertion that such forms of media are superior to older forms, which did not have as much impact because they could not convey things in a realistic or immediate enough way. Consequently, arguments about the efficacy of new media in fostering empathy can be understood in terms of Jay David Bolter’s and Richard Grusin’s (henceforth B&G) term “remediation.”¹¹ In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, B&G claim that all forms of media function by responding to, redeploying, or competing with older forms of media. They claim that either implicitly or explicitly, all media, by way of remediation, can be understood as a kind of reform or rehabilitation of other media or of reality itself.¹²

¹⁰ *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), 43.

¹¹ J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 2000).

¹² *Ibid.*, 55.

Advocates for empathy machines, whether in the form of VR cinema or videogames, can be understood to engaging in this narrative remediation, though two distinct, if overlapping logics—advocates of VR cinema through a logic of “transparency immediacy” and advocates of empathy games through a logic of “hypermediacy.” B&G define transparent immediacy, henceforth transparency, as an attempt to create an interface that “erases itself so the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in relationship to the content of the medium.”¹³ Hypermediacy functions by doing the opposite. It focuses itself intently on the interface of the medium. While hypermediacy does not offer the fantasy of transparent relation, it offers something just as compelling: the experience of immediate relation to the medium itself as an avenue for expression of a desire for real.¹⁴ The real that both transparent and hypermediated objects strive for is not the real in a metaphysical sense, but the real defined by the viewer’s experience of an immediate, intense, and seemingly authentic emotional response.

The case for VR cinema functioning through a logic of transparency is a clear one. B&G themselves refer to VR cinema as a prototypical example of the logic of transparency, stating “virtual reality is immersive, which means that it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear.”¹⁵ In a TED talk where he discusses *Clouds over Sidra*, a VR film depicting life in a Syrian refugee camp, Chris Milk clearly draws on a logic of transparency himself:

And when you're sitting there in her room, watching her, you're not watching it through a television screen, you're not watching it through a window, you're sitting there with her. When you look down, you're sitting on the same ground that she's sitting on. And because of that, you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathize with her in a deeper way.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Chris Milk, *How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine*, 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine.

The comparison of looking through a window to being in the room is a remediatary claim. In making such a comparison, Milk juxtaposes his fantasy of VR to an old fantasy of television and cinema. No longer is the screen a portal or a door. It is a literal recreation of space. No longer is there a frame as an interface. Instead the interface has become transparent, and therefore the experience is more immediate. Not only does one feel like they are there, one feels the impact of such media in a deeper way.

The rhetoric that Ian Bogost uses to valorize what would later be called “empathy games” is also deeply tied to remediation. Although games cannot aspire towards transparency, they can successfully work through hypermediation. Games, Bogost argues, work through procedural rhetoric, and procedural rhetoric is more immediate than visual or textual rhetorics. In *How to Do Things with Games*, Bogost argues that procedural rhetorics are particularly convincing because they are (using a term from Charles A. Hill) intrinsically more “vivid”:

Procedural representation is representation, and thus certainly not identical with actual experience. However, procedural representation can muster moving images and sound, and software and videogames are capable of generating moving images in accordance with complex rules that simulate real or imagined physical and cultural processes. Furthermore, procedural representations are often (but not always—see below) interactive; they rely on user interaction as a mediator, something static and moving images cannot claim to do. These capacities would suggest that procedurality is more vivid than moving images with sound, and thus earns the second spot on the continuum, directly under actual experience.¹⁷

In Bogost’s ideal case, procedural rhetoric remediates according to both logics. It is not only a complex set of rules, but is capable of generating convincing moving images and sound. A number of so-called “empathy games,” however, cannot be said to be particularly visually “realistic”. Bogost considers them vivid nonetheless, in the ways that they let players understand processes and put themselves in the shoes of the other.¹⁸ By consciously interacting with the

¹⁷ Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

medium of the videogame, players have the opportunity to learn something about the real in a way that is emotionally immediate.

At their core, both Milk's and Bogost's positions retain much of their force because they do not function as absolute claims, but rather comparative claims with older methods of representation. Bogost's vividness has its analogue in VR theorist Morton Helig's "sensory overwhelmedness."¹⁹ Although it's an exaggeration, Milk imagines his viewers literally occupying the same space as the people he depicts. Bogost understands games such as *Darfur is Dying* (2006) and *Hush* (2008) to be powerful affective experiences that let players experience something like what the characters in the game suffer. Bogost can valorize procedural rhetoric in general and videogames in particular because they contain more process vividness than other media, and can better portray certain kinds of experiences. Milk envisions viewers of *Clouds over Sidra* as essentially experiencing being in the same room because of the removal of the "frame" that exists with looking at media on a screen. Somehow a claim of degree (some media are better at depicting experiences than others) transforms into a claim of kind (these media are so good at depicting experiences they're doing something other media can't) and ultimately a strong claim, one that must be approached suspiciously, that the successful full representation of the experience of another is possible at all, and that such a representation has immediate political value.

Speculative Capacitation

In order to begin to address these issues, it vital to understand videogames as vehicles for what I want to call *speculative capacitation*. By capacitation, I refer to taking on the ability to

¹⁹ Pedercini, Paolo, "Stranger Playthings: Remaking a VR Counterculture," Blog, molleindustria, July 14, 2017, <http://molleindustria.org/StrangerPlaythings/>.

affect or be affected by a particular affect. Sharpening a knife capacitates it to cut through material. Within affect theory, capacitation refers not just to any abilities which one might imagine inhere as properties in a given body or individual or object. Rather, neither come ready, whole, and complete to their interaction with the world, but are constantly bodied in relation. Capacities to affect and to be affected are deeply tied to each other. In Manuel DeLanda's example, the knife's capacity to cut only exists in relation to something else's capacity to be cut.²⁰ Properties do not just determine capacitation of objects and the objects those objects interact with; capacitation determines what properties are emergent. The language of capacitation provides new media theorists a powerful tool to discuss the pre-subjective aspects of media experience, especially those who wish to discuss how the body does not exist prior to the technical. Deployed in political registers, capacity provides an opportunity to discuss how participation in networks, use of technology, representational and juridical structures, and a number of other factors play key roles in regulating individuals by capacitating bodily habits and affective tendencies.²¹ Such a deployment, Jasbir Puar argues, is a necessary amendment to affect studies, which "posits the endless capacitation of the individuated body, even as it might always see that body as relational."²²

Players of videogames are capacitated by a human-computer relationship and through the interface, which controls what they can and cannot do and what they can and cannot perceive. Players can input controls, and can also be directly affected by machine actions. Even non-interactive media provide capacitation, insofar as each form of media has specific affordances and is accessible to some and not to others. On the most direct and simple level, capacitation in

²⁰ Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (A&C Black, 2011), 4.

²¹ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 41

videogames can be understood through game mechanics. All game mechanics at their core are a form of capacitation. Mechanics involves both “activities” (ability to affect) and “passivities” (ability to be affected). Jagoda and McDonald define game mechanics as, “the set of techniques for interacting with a game world, which are arbitrarily mapped through an interface to player gestures, and which are both constrained and enabled by a games platform.”²³ On a diegetic level,²⁴ a player controlling a character / avatar of Mario can mechanically jump and use power-ups, and can also be hit by enemies and lose health.

One of the capacities that games enable in and of themselves is a capacity to speculate about other’s capacitation. A player might claim to understand Mario insofar as a player might claim to control Mario or understand Mario-ness based on their mechanical control and interaction with the game character / avatar and its representational nature. This kind of speculation can be tied to a speculative ethological tradition that goes at least as far back as Baron von Uexkull’s *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*. Uexkull’s work can be read as a proto-procedural text. Uexkull describes a tick as having several senses that compose its sensory world (*merkwelt*) – temperature, smell, and pH detection. He describes a tick as having several actions it can actively take (*werkwelt*) such as moving and biting. Altogether the process of a tick eating can be productively misread as a sort of game design document, or at the very least an imaginative simulation of what it is like to be a tick. One aspect of the speculative capacitation of video-gamic representation can be understood in this ethological mode.

²³ Patrick Jagoda and Peter McDonald, “Game Mechanics, Experience Design, and Affective Play,” Forthcoming, 179.

²⁴ For criticism of a diegetic / non-diegetic distinction in games interfaces, see Ian Bryce Jones, “Mapping the Synesthetic Interface,” 2014. While I retain skepticism about the value of the distinction in such contexts, here it maps an important difference and distance between mechanics and what they are supposed to represent.

Empathy, too, is fundamentally a speculative exercise about the other. As Marjorie Garber notes, empathy came into English as a translation of a German technical term, *Einfühlung*, and specifically referred to projecting one's own personality into an "object of contemplation."²⁵ Although the meaning of the term has broadened in its popularization, empathy generally refers to something more than emotional contagion or affect flowing between two people. Empathy instead is a form of projection, a way of thinking, a conscious form of cognition. While similar terms like sympathy and compassion do not necessarily do so, empathy suggests a fundamental understanding of the experience of another, and posits that such a thing is truly knowable. Empathy games present themselves as ways of learning about an otherwise opaque and potentially unknowable subject. Even though empathy games involve difficulty and frustration, they come with an enjoyment of disillusionment. Even the most negative emotion or affect can potentially become infused with positivity when it is rehabilitated by learning something.²⁶ The desire to empathize is not just a drive to feel or a drive for some kind of emotional connection or contagion, it is a will to know.

Saidiya Hartman points out the pitfalls of empathy and the potential violence of empathetic identification in *Scenes of Subjection* where she analyzes an account of a white audience listening to a and recounting a slave narrative. For Hartman, empathy is something fundamentally slippery. The projection of a subject into an object of their emotions often results only in a facile intimacy that stems from an "obliteration of otherness" that "fails to expand the

²⁵ Marjorie Garber, "Compassion," in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Routledge, 2014), 24.

²⁶ For the compensatory potential of learning in the case of negative affect, see Laura Quinney's discussion of the differences between disillusionment and disappointment in: Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery* (University of Virginia Press, 1999).

space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.”²⁷ Empathy, Hartman further argues, is not harmful because this represents some fundamental narcissism, but because empathy, while capacitating the empathizer, happens at the cost of the person being empathized with. This is especially true in the case of slave narratives:

Empathic identification is complicated further by the fact that it cannot be extricated from the economy of chattel slavery with which it is at odds, for this projection of one's feeling upon or into the object of property and the phantasmic slipping into captivity, while it is distinct from the pleasures of self-augmentation yielded by the ownership of the captive body and the expectations fostered therein, is nonetheless entangled with this economy and identification facilitated by a kindred possession or occupation of the captive body, albeit on a different register.²⁸

While Hartman's comments on empathy are local to the example of slave narratives and a particular Black context, something more can be drawn from them. In cultural works meant to generate empathy, there is more at issue than the accuracy of representation. A number of concerns arise surrounding the uses and costs of media, who media enable and capacitate, and who media harm. Although it may be step too far to connect empathy games to the physical ownership or possession of debilitated bodies, empathy games can be understood as a form of value extraction from debilitated populations. The material of an experience of another is used is used as a mined for information and recirculated as media.

It is this value extraction that links one meaning of “speculative” to another. Much of the work of Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim* consists of connecting disability to capacitation in this broader sense. By approaching disability through the lens of debility and capacity, Puar is able to discuss disability from a different perspective than those of the social and medical models of

²⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

disability²⁹ and to pivot towards an approach that she deems more appropriate for the context of what Gilles Deleuze identifies as societies of control.³⁰ A key component to her approach involves the relationship between financial expropriation and speculation. According to Deleuze, instead of dealing with people on an individual or mass levels, as in societies of discipline, societies of control exert influence on what he calls a “dividual” level, regarding people as “masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks,’” collections of information, bundles of tendencies, multiplicities to be controlled not primarily through the disciplinary application of force on bodies but through a subtler affective modulation³¹. Such modulation is accomplished by affecting – deforming and transforming – the orbits individuals find themselves in and the networks they are attached to. Although Deleuze does not use the word speculation himself, his characterization of control economies is one where economic activity is by and large inherently speculative, an economy that “is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed,” where people are not controlled by being physically enclosed but placed in debt, where corporate activity is defined by financial speculation and the creation of new financial instruments. Through technologies such as credit rating and actuarial assessments, capacity is controlled by speculation, and speculation is motivated by capacity. Both become sites of struggle and the production of economic value.

Similar to how in the representational economy of empathy games all bad affect is mobilized towards productive ends, in bioinformatic frames “there is no such thing as nonproductive excess but only emergent forms of new information.”³² Such information is ripe

²⁹ For the conflict between these models see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2008), 25.

³⁰ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 42.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 6.

³² Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 36.

with possibilities for profitability. As Puar notes, the “revaluing of excess is potent because, simply put, debility is profitable for capitalism.”³³ This profitability does not only arise from standard forms of biopolitical control in which debilitated populations are worn out, taken advantage of, and subjected to “slow death”³⁴, but also by entertainment industries and a medical-industrial complex that profit off providing either temporary relief through pleasure or distraction or medical care to the populations such biopolitical control harms, maims, and disables.³⁵ In addition to this primary targeting for value production, empathy games target subjects who do not experience the kind of debility or difficulty due to being marked subjects that they depict. Such an audience is portrayed as having a fundamental lack. The problematic excess that leads those depicted in empathy games to suffer is transformed into an information that those who lack it also lack. Empathy games are sold as a remedy to that lack, and function as a second stage of value extraction. Consequently, the circulation of empathy games can be thought of in terms of what Puar calls “piecing,” or “a recruitment into neoliberal forms of fragmentation of the body for capitalist profit.”³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death,” in *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 95–117.

³⁵ Berlant’s discussion of diet in “Slow Death” suggests the ways that structural conditions not only cause illness, but configure access debilitated populations have towards “the good life” or forms of relief that frequently overlap with things that are themselves not necessarily conducive to good health. My concern with this conceptual frame is not necessarily from the view of a subject who exercises lateral agency in engaging with pleasures that interrupt liberal and capitalist subjecthood, but rather in the set of conditions generating value both from such pleasures and from the necessary rhythms of life as a capitalist subject.

³⁶ Ibid., 54.

populations by targeting those that debilitate them while at the same disenfranchising them. Here empathy games, much like compassion, serve as what Lauren Berlant calls “a social and aesthetic tool of belonging”³⁷ by separating the world into those who can empathize through technologically mediated means (normate bodies with technological access and whose ability makes them full, proper political subjects) and those who need to be empathized with (subjects marked by race, gender, class, and disability, and whose potential lack of access to empathy media may in and of itself be cause for exclusion). Not only is there the immediate extraction from debilitated populations (in Hartman’s example, the economic production of slavery) but a second through media representation and consumption (those who profit, financially or otherwise, from the circulation of slave narratives).

Recent critiques of empathy games target this double expropriation, albeit in other terms. Robert Yang rails against the “appropriative” nature of empathy games.³⁸ In a write up of his game *The Tearoom* Yang forcefully rejects categorizing his game as an empathy game, instead calling it a “historical public bathroom simulator about anxiety, police surveillance, and sucking off other dudes’ guns.”³⁹ The game is heavily based off a 1970 sociological study by Laud Humphrey called *Tearoom Trade*. The floorplan of the bathroom in the game is modeled on diagrams appearing in the study and gameplay is based on Humphrey’s accounts of cruising activity. In the game, players stand at a urinal urinating, looking to make eye contact with other men in the bathroom. While making sure not to look for too long, they must gauge the other men for interest. If interest is reciprocal, players then proceed to a stand in for fellatio, licking a large

³⁷ Lauren Berlant, “Introducing Compassion (and Withholding),” in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Routledge, 2014), 5.

³⁸ Yang, “If You Walk in Someone Else’s Shoes, Then You’ve Taken Their Shoes.”

³⁹ Robert Yang, “The Tearoom as a Record of Risky Business,” accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.blog.radiator.debacl.us/2017/06/the-tearoom-as-record-of-risky-business.html>.

gun emerging from the non-player character (or NPC)'s pants until it fires in a representation of orgasm. Upon the completion of that task, players are awarded a trophy and repeat the exercise.

If the NPC is a police officer, players are arrested, and all their progress is erased.



Figure 2 Getting arrested in Robert Yang's "The Tearoom"

Yang's assertions that the game should not be misread as an empathy game suggest that the game being read that way is a possibility, and is perhaps even something that is common. The modeling of the game on actual historical contexts, existing space, sociological observation, and statistical models certainly fits with empathy games' general function to represent the actual. Yang's goals of representing police surveillance and anxiety work towards similar ends of empathy games in that both strive to represent bad feelings. Yet, to read the *The Tearoom* as an empathy game is to ignore the richness of the game and the degree of interpretative difficulty present. It does not account for the games' excessively accurate rendition of a bathroom replete with period-accurate light switches and faucets as well as a hand-modeled period-appropriate

“Hinsdale” urinal, set to scale using the original patent drawings. It does not address how such excess ties into a tradition of “pointless expensive videogame bathrooms.” It does not address the racial component of the game or the potential pleasures of the cruising simulator. It does not open the game to being read as a way of using cruising spots to think about the potential of public space, of the erotics of contact, and the unique form of interaction that cruising spaces afford.⁴⁰ Instead, reading *The Tearoom* as an empathy game reduces it to an experience of anxiety and difficulty, and to being nothing more than a direct representation of experience. All the capacities within the game are reduced to merely representing an identity category, gay men. All interpretative difficulty is removed. All other difficulties are represented as things that inhere within the experience of being a gay man, and everything within the game is assimilated into difficulty and bad affect. To read *The Tearoom* as an empathy game is to flatten it and establish too pat a relationship between all of its components and to read it as if its only possible audience is a straight, normate one that cannot, but in order to be good citizens socially must, understand gay cruising.

The nascent field of queer game studies has produced a number of convincing critiques along these lines, with a particular emphasis on the politics of audience and representation⁴¹. Game makers and scholars such as Yang repeatedly gesture towards new pleasures and utopian possibilities outside what’s commonly understood to be the purview of mainstream games. With a similar impulse, Wendy Chun grounds the remedial claims of VR in a historical context.⁴² The first wave of VR, Chun asserts, cannot be understood outside of the fantasies of William

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For a compilation of work in queer game studies, see Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1950562>.

⁴² See Hui Kyong Chun, “WEIRD REALITY.”

Gibson's cyberspace. Rather than grounded in some kind of sober technological knowledge, Gibson's cyberspace is strange, psychedelic and hallucinatory, drawing on personal experience and punk culture much more than any kind of familiarity with the internet technology that would eventually be referred to as "cyberspace." In pointing out this lineage, Chun highlights the large gap between cyberspace as imagined and digital media technology as it exists. She notes that in the period of the early development and its popularization as a kind of "cyberspace," VR referred not to the reality we all experience, but to "a habitat for the imagination." In these fantasies, virtual reality did not augment reality; it displaced it. Its goal was not to depict the actual, but to engage a different kind of world altogether. Chun argues something different is going on with the current wave of VR. No longer is the fantasy about a radically different kind of embodiment, of leaving embodiment behind, but now replicating the experience of another. The imagined ability of VR to overcome embodiment transforms from a fantasy of impossible embodiment to a fantasy of complete knowledge and understanding. The problem that some subjects are marked by race and gender will not be solved by erasing all of those markers (the much-discussed fantasy of anonymity on the early internet) but rather by making everyone feel enough empathy to create a just world. Chun, alongside Yang and Paolo Pedercini all push towards a different kind of speculation, a speculation not about modeling the actual, but the otherwise, often the fantastical, a way of envisioning new spaces and creating room to maneuver.

Read in this light, *The Tearoom* can be placed alongside work such as Samuel Delaney's *The Motion of Light on Water* as a project turning towards the past to look for queer possibilities in the present and future, an exercise in queer retrosexuality.⁴³ Far from simple nostalgia, *The*

⁴³ For discussion of *The Motion of Light on Water* as an example of what Nishant Shahani dubs "queer retrosexuality" see Nishant Shahani, *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return* (Lexington Books,

Tearoom, in such a reading, positions itself as something more nuanced where the possibilities and pleasures of the game are counterpoised against the structures of legal enforcement that made cruising spaces necessary, risky, and at the same time, vibrant. In this, cruising spaces could present a vision of new forms of community, sexual and otherwise. While such a pivot may address some of the issues the representational component of empathy game raises, it does not sufficiently address their bioinformatic context. Even read as something other than an empathy game, something about the mechanical functioning of *The Tearoom* remains disturbing. Turning towards statistical modeling for the purpose of “imbuing politics within the game code itself,” Yang makes 23 percent of the NPCs police officers, basing that number off of the statistic from a 2015 study that, “of LGBT people who have survived abuse of violence from a stranger, police officers were 23% of perpetrators”⁴⁴. Yang similarly bases the player’s chances of encountering a Black character on another study. Gamic representation is of particular interest because of the way it represents identity categories through mechanical capacity and debility as particular qualities are procedurally rendered. The use of probability in strategy games echoes the use of statistical probabilities in policy and medical administration. The division of levels of sight in table top RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons* mirrors the way that, while society may have identity categories of the blind and the non-blind, it treats people differently based on how well they can see.⁴⁵

2012), 48. Shahani uses retrosexuality as a concept to describe the myriad positions retrospection takes in queer life, most importantly the ways in which retrospection provides means of disidentification, reparative return, and the possibility of smuggling in alternative imaginaries of what the future could be.

⁴⁴ Yang, “The Tearoom as a Record of Risky Business”.

⁴⁵ Characters are not just sighted or blind. They can see set things in a set distance under certain conditions. Some kinds of sight exceed normal human sight. For example, those with darksight can see in the dark, and those with blindsight are aware of creatures within their radius without needing to see or hear them.

Critics of empathy games from approaches grounded in queer theory quite successfully address the politics of particular kinds of “speculation” involved in how many games engage in speculative capacitation. The field of queer game studies offers a number of robust critiques of representation within games. At the same time, scholars adopting approaches from queer game studies would do well to acknowledge the ways in which their approaches are biased by what Puar identifies as the way queer theory “functions as a machine of capacity in and after the cybernetic turn” despite its deployment of negativity, negative affect, and deconstructive reading methods.⁴⁶ Puar draws a direct connection between queer theory’s machine of capacity to bioinformatic logics. I would like to take that one step further and connect it towards games’ nature as a medium that communicates through capacity in order to highlight what looms as a potential blindspot within queer game studies, a gestural habit towards imagining gamic representation outside the context of its informatic structure and methods of control, a habit paradigmatically represented by an article in which Miguel Sicart, after lucidly critiquing controller interfaces as methods of control, turns towards sex toys (as if sex toys are not dogged by similar issues in terms of interface and access) to imagine the ways in which, “a queer controller gives meaning to the body at play, and turns that body into a source of pleasures.”⁴⁷

As Alexander Galloway argues, videogames necessitate informatic critique. At the informatic level, as a medium, games offer a speculative ontology of how bodies are built and exist within the world. In *Insect Media*, Jussi Parikka traces a line between the city simulator genre (*SimCity* and *SimEarth*) and an important 1970s simulator of ants, *AntFarm*, a simulation where artificial organisms resembling “ants” were equipped with a “sensory array” that was able

⁴⁶ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 36.

⁴⁷ Miguel Sicart, “Queering the Controller,” *Analog Game Studies* (blog), July 31, 2017, <http://analoggamestudies.org/2017/07/queering-the-controller/>.

to sense “food,” “nests,” and “pheromones,” and then sent to collect food and ideally find “optimal behavior.” The *AntFarm* simulation, and object-oriented programming, defines its actors and environments by their capacities, affects and relationalities. Both *Antfarm*’s simulated ants and gamic avatars function much like the body as theorized by Deleuze and affect theory more broadly, where, “a body’s [C.F. avatar’s] structure is the composition of its relation. What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected.”⁴⁸ In a videogame, a player is given the opportunity to figure out a new system and set of relations. This, however, does not mean that games are a site of unbridled possibility. On the informatic level, all capacitation in videogames is always already social, always already a site of control. All actions taken by a player are co-actions with a machine. As Alexander Galloway notes, “to play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel ‘allegorithm’).”⁴⁹ Putting aside Galloway’s emphasis on winning, one can take away that when one engages with a game, they are not just interacting with what is represented, but directly with the machine in a relationship of control that is anticipatory and modulated through affect.

In empathy games, this relationship is deployed towards representational ends, in particular towards representing subjects whose experience is marked by difficulty and who are notable for their suffering and debilitation.⁵⁰ As such, empathy games can be thought of as a “difficulty genre” or a genre that is defined by a particular relationship to difficulty. In his talk “On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect” Patrick Jagoda presents a

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (MIT Pr, 1990), 198. Also see Massumi

⁴⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (U of Minnesota Press, 2006), 95.

⁵⁰ One does not say they “empathize with someone else’s happiness.”

taxonomy of difficulty in videogames.⁵¹ He divides difficulty into three broad categories: mechanical difficulty, interpretative difficulty, and affective difficulty. Mechanical difficulty broadly refers to the “challenge” posed by a game. Interpretative difficulty refers to difficulties that arise during interpretation that make it hard to understand. Finally, affective difficulties refer to the experience of negative or difficult affects or emotions that players may encounter while playing a game: sadness, boredom, frustration, feeling caged in. The lines between these categories are not hard and fast and one kind of difficulty may lead to others (a mechanically difficult segment may make it hard to absorb and interpret a moment of a game, which might lead to some kind of affective difficulty.) Nonetheless, such a taxonomy is useful for understanding empathy games, which tend towards a particular arrangement of different kinds of difficulty. Empathy games aim to make the player undergo some kind affective difficulty (a feeling of frustration, anger, sadness, overwhelmedness) in order to understand the difficulty of the person they are supposed to empathize with. This is frequently, although not always, accomplished through mechanical difficulty that results in an experience of “mechanical enfeeblement.”⁵² At the same time, games regarded as “empathy games” tend to be regarded as having low amounts of interpretive difficulty. Such games are not understood as complex works that are hard to understand, but rather direct communications of what it is like to be like a person marked in a particular way.

As an illustration, on a representational level *Mainichi* is a game that presents affective difficulty through narrative character interaction. The affective difficulty of *Mainichi* is reliant on the player identifying with the player character as she goes about her day, descriptions of her

⁵¹ Patrick Jagoda, “On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect,” *Critical Inquiry*, Forthcoming.

⁵² Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames*, 23.

morning routine revealing struggles with mental health issues, and the reactions of NPCs showing the pain she experiences due to those who misgender her and express transphobic sentiments. While *Mainichi* is a game that few would categorize as mechanically difficult – it does not require a great degree of physical dexterity or manual coordination, it does not have a clear “win” condition and getting through it does not promote much of a mechanical challenge – it is still a game that relies on mechanical difficulty to fully produce the affective difficulty it has. The most emotionally difficult parts of the game are when the main character is accosted in the street and subjected to transphobic language. This moment is a moment where the movement mechanic is interrupted. The player becomes aware they have lost the capacity to move effortlessly across the screen and aware of the avatar’s capacity to be accosted and capacity to be seen as they are subjected to being stopped by an NPC that causes a text bubble to come up. While an aspect of this interaction is diegetic (it is a character stopping another character) the pop-up of the on-screen text bubble and the forced cessation of movement is in excess of the diegesis,⁵³ calling attention to the interface and interrupting the smoothness of the narrative world, and functioning in part as what Alexander Galloway characterizes as a “disabling act,”⁵⁴ a machine action that leads to interruption in player action and has a negative effect. This is a moment of affective difficulty rendered through a relative mechanical decapacitation.

⁵³ I’m not particularly sold on the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic aspects of game interfaces. For more, see: Jones, “Mapping the Synesthetic Interface.”

⁵⁴ Galloway, *Gaming*, 31.



Figure 3 Transphobic street harassment in Mainichi

It is important to note here that the feeling of disempowerment that comes from priming.⁵⁵ When difficulty is depicted through decapacitation in empathy games, it is never in absolute terms and only in relation to the capacities afforded by the game in the first place. A player only feels a “disabling act” done by a machine actor to be disabling because interaction with the machine was enabling before. These represented sites of bad affect and discipline are moments when social discipline within the game is aligned with an informatic act that chastens the player. This is common in titles regarded as empathy games. In *Depression Quest*, players are presented with options that are crossed out and cannot be taken because the protagonist is too depressed to do

⁵⁵ For a short definition of priming see Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

them. In *Mainichi*, free movement is interrupted by a dialogue prompt. In *Lim*, the free movement of just directing the avatar around is compared to being attacked and obstructed by NPC cubes and to the slow, difficult crawl that occurs while blending. In empathy games, what is read as macropolitical representation that is meant to be consciously understood is mapped onto a micropolitical experience. The political representation of the game is inextricable from the affective politics of its interface and relation with its player.

Alexander D. Ocias' *Loved* foregrounds this relationship in its gameplay. A browser based flash platformer, *Loved* opens with a question: "Are you a **man** or a **woman**?" No matter how the player answers, the presumed narrator corrects the player. This is an inversion of the process of character / avatar creation that begins a number of games, particularly RPGs. It serves as a reminder that no matter how free character creation is, it is always limited to the parameters allowed by game program and the machine running it. This feeling is echoed later in the game when the narrator asks "Do I own your **body** or your **mind**?" Once again the player feels the constraints of binary logic and participation in the game. The first moment of the game sets the stage for the rest of the game in other ways as well. The narrator is an aggressive and dismissive interlocuter that also provides instructions and appears to have a great degree of control over player experience. The identification of the interlocuter with a character creation screen, and with providing instructions as if the entire game is a tutorial level, points to the ways in which games structure their experiences of difficulty in order discipline and teach their players. The verbal praise or feedback is a more visible, and crude, version of feedback games provide themselves in terms of points, damage, and powerups. How well such instructions are obeyed directly affects the playability of *Loved*. As a player ignores the interlocuter's instructions, the game becomes more and more colorful while its obstacles become harder to identify, potentially

ultimately rendering the game unplayable depending on the degree of deviation. *Loved* foregrounds and centers the ways in which games modulate affect and serve as a site of control. In connecting this theme to identity and body image, it presents a problem for those who approach the potentiality of queer games with unbridled optimism. Although play and subversion are possible, coerciveness is always directly baked into game mechanics and interfaces.⁵⁶



Figure 4 Getting berated in *Loved*⁵⁷

It is only after considering informatic critique that the full stakes of arguments surrounding empathy games become clear. The political accounts advocates for empathy games tend to articulate do not take into account the affective politics inherent in videogames. Their vision of politics is one of conscious rationality. Although there is space for emotion and affect – Bogost and Milk envision political action motivated by feeling – both are subsumed into a

⁵⁶ Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of games for occupational therapy. As a child, I was first introduced to games by an occupational therapist in order to improve hand-eye coordination and motor function.

⁵⁷ Image taken from <https://www.theloop.com.au/ocias/portfolio/loved/149832>

fantasy of deliberative political process that does not take into account the pre-deliberative affective politics inherent to the medium and the current political regime. It is here that a turn towards disability studies can introduce a negativity much needed to address this situation.

Disability Simulations

While disability studies scholars have been slow to begin addressing videogames as a medium, and have not addressed empathy games at length, disability studies and activism surrounding disability both contain a number of critiques of such analog, live action disability based simulations. Scholars such as Vic Finkelstein⁵⁸ and Sally French⁵⁹ and organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind hold that “awareness activities” cause misconceptions that can have serious negative impacts on those who are disabled.⁶⁰ Allison Kafer argues that that blindfold simulations of blindness stipulate that the meaning of blindness is “completely encapsulated in the experience of wearing a blindfold.” Kafer asserts that in doing so, disability simulations portray disability as a “knowable fact of the body.” The fantasy of empathy machines is that experience can be fully transmitted. Such a fantasy relies on an epistemology where embodiment and subject position do not pose significant limits in terms of the possibilities of understanding, and where information is not fundamentally affected by embodiment. This runs directly counter to epistemologies of human experience advanced in critiques of disability simulation put forward by Kafer, as well as phenomenological accounts of disability by theorists

⁵⁸ Vic Finkelstein, "Disability: An administrative challenge? (The health and welfare heritage)", *Social Work Disabled People and Disabling Environments* (1991) 19-39.

⁵⁹ Sally French, "Simulation Exercises in Disability Awareness Training: A Critique," *Disability, Handicap & Society* 7, no. 3 (January 1, 1992) 257–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02674649266780261>.

⁶⁰ "An Open Letter to Our Friends and Families About the #HowEyeSeelt Campaign," National Federation of the Blind, accessed December 19, 2017, <https://nfb.org/blog/vonb-blog/open-letter-our-friends-and-families-about-howeyeseelt-campaign>.

such as Vivian Sobchack and S.K. Toombs in which experience is always intimately tied to embodiment, and embodiment retains a fundamental opacity to those who experience different kinds of embodiment. Such understandings posit that knowledge gained from empathetic projection is not the same as having a particular experience, as it necessarily takes place under different conditions and temporalities.⁶¹

Even if disability simulations work at recreating some aspect of disabled embodiment, Tobin Siebers argues that there exist serious problems in terms of duration. Disability simulations fail because, “they place students in a time-one position of disability, before knowledge about disability is acquired, usually resulting in emotions of loss, shock, and pity at how dreadful it is to be disabled. Students experience their body relative to their usual embodiment, and they become so preoccupied with sensations of bodily inadequacy that they cannot perceive the extent to which their ‘disability’ results from social rather than physical causes.”⁶² In only focusing on physical simulation, disability simulations posit a simple version of embodiment based on a medical model of disability that defines disability through individual impairment rather than the more complex models of embodiment put forward by Sobchack, Toombs, Kafer, and Siebers that emphasize the ways in which social representations of the body and environmental factors complicate embodiment and mean that the experience of disability is not just the experience of a given physical circumstance, but an experience of orientation and

⁶¹ A vision of media that address this problem is available in Hollis Frampton’s “A Pentagon for Conjuring Narrative” where he recounts the tale of a friend who dreams of himself living two lives: the life of a woman, and then the life of her son, whose only experience is watching a film of her life. While this vision of what might be speculatively dubbed empathy media is highly ocularcentric and does not take many factors of embodiment into account, it begins on one level or another to address issues of duration in knowing and understanding the experience of another and challenges. See Hollis Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* (MIT Press, 2009), 140.

⁶² Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2008), 28.

horizon, of a cultural milieu, composed of material and material environments, that include or exclude individual bodies from public life. As Thomas Abrams argues, drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology, "the bodily 'I can' does not just fall from the sky."⁶³ I would add the bodily "I can" is not experienced the same way by everyone.

Drawing on such critiques of disability simulations, it's possible to criticize the commonplace in conversations about the potential of empathy machines that asserts they are valuable in how they enable their users to "walk in someone else's shoes."⁶⁴ In *Empathy Game* (2015), Anna Anthropy, in an incisive act of critique, presented a game that literalized the trope in a response to an event organizer looking for games that examine "how games and simulations can make us empathize with others by letting us walk a mile in their shoes."⁶⁵ In Anthropy's words, the game was a commentary on the incommensurability of experience and absurdity of playing an empathy game as a form of allyship.

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 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.⁶⁶

What Anthropy does not mention is the way that the materiality of the game pushes the metaphor by centering the materiality and physical specificity of the body. If, as advocates of empathy games assert, to play an empathy game is to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, then the

⁶³ Abrams, Thomas. "Disability, Queer Phenomenology, and the Politics of Personhood." 3.

⁶⁴ For a paradigmatic example see Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames*, 35. "How to do things with games"

⁶⁵ Anna Anthropy, "Empathy Game," accessed April 30, 2017, <http://auntiepixelante.com/empathygame/>.

⁶⁶ Anthropy.

possibility of sharing an exact experience is radically delimited by having different feet. The extreme specificity of the interface that Anthropy provides for her game (shoes of a particular size – and the requirement of physically walking) highlight the normative assumptions about bodies that go into fantasies surrounding empathy machines. Playing “Empathy Game” at all may in fact be close to impossible to for those who do not fit into size 13 heels (the majority of the population)⁶⁷ and impossible for those who cannot walk. As such, the extreme specificity of the interface that Anthropy provides for her game (shoes of a particular size – and the requirement of physically walking) highlight the normative assumptions about bodies that go into fantasies surrounding empathy machines. Further, such a simulation can in no way account for where Anthropy herself is coming from. Entwined in the experience of walking in heels surely is a complex net of personal experiences and associations, of embodied knowledge (learning how to walk in heels) and past experience.

Auti-Sim (2013) provides another useful case. In *Auti-Sim* players are given first-person control of an avatar traveling around playground inhabited by children. As time goes on, the volume increases and the screen is filled with visual noise until the game becomes nearly unplayable. Echoing Kafer’s criticism of blindness simulations, in *Auti-sim*, the experience of autism is treated as if it is completely encapsulated by the experience of sensory overload. Apart from a basic movement mechanic (which includes moving in first-person and jumping), the only mechanic the game has is a sensory overload mechanic. There is no interaction with the faceless 3D models meant to represent other people. There is no interaction with any sort of object. Instead, the player’s only real experience is a difficult-to-view screen and a harsh cacophony of

⁶⁷ William J. Bodziak, *Footwear Impression Evidence: Detection, Recovery and Examination, SECOND EDITION* (CRC Press, 1999), 185.

noise. While feedback on the game's website is generally positive, critics of *Auti-Sim* raise criticisms that echo Siebers' critique of disability simulation in general: "They worry that having taken part in a simulation exercise, non-disabled people will believe they fully understand disability. They say that unless you are disabled and live with the knock-on consequences like unemployment, pain and prejudice, it doesn't give a true picture."⁶⁸ While such a criticism may fall outside the stated purview of the game (to model sensory overload),⁶⁹ it is worth taking seriously. Perhaps understandably, then, the model of disability that *Auti-Sim* seems amenable to is a medical model, one that understands disability as something that arises from individual abilities and deficiencies rather than social and political infrastructures. This may explain why several players of the game with autism worried that it presented people with autism as entirely antisocial.



Figure 5 Sensory overload in *Auti-Sim*

⁶⁸ Emma Tracey, "Not Just a Game," *BBC News*, June 11, 2014, sec. Ouch, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-ouch-27763085>.

⁶⁹ "Auti-Sim: A Short, Overwhelming Look into Autism and Sensory Overload," *Games for Change* (blog), accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.gamesforchange.org/2013/04/auti-sim-a-short-overwhelming-look-into-autism-and-sensory-overload/>.

Appealing to logics of hypermediacy, *Auti-Sim*'s depiction of autism is framed by medical and scientific sets of knowledge about the body. While the design team that worked on *Auti-Sim* would have liked to include someone on the design team who had the personal experience of sensory overload associated with autism, they did not deem it necessary. Instead, the game's creators consulted early education professionals and autism researchers, drawing on bodies of medical knowledge in order to model what the experience should be like. At the same time, *Auti-Sim* appeals to the pole of transparency in its direct depiction of embodiment and lived experience. In doing so, *Auti-Sim* posits a fundamental continuity between biomedical forms of knowledge and lived experience. The remediatory claims of empathy games do not only rely on assertions about how well an individual medium can represent experience, they also rely on how well experience itself can be captured. Consequently, the remediatory claims of empathy machines are not just claims about videogames or VR cinema as mediums, but about the body itself as something that is both medium and mediated. Advocates of empathy machines posit a fundamental transparency of the body and of experience. Empathy machines cast experience as something that is digitizable – something totally available for affective capture and something that can be transcoded and circulated. The hypermediated becomes, in some sense, coequal with the transparent. Such an approach to the body exhibits a logic that Katherine Hayles would characterize as “posthuman.” As Hayles defines it, “in the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.”⁷⁰ As such, the remediation within *Auti-Sim* can also be broadly categorized under the term “biomediation” or understanding the body in terms of “biomedia,” a term Eugene Thacker uses to refer the

⁷⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

convergence of biological science, information science, and media in depicting the body as fundamentally informatic. In addition to referring to individual instances of the body understood as information or as media (hormones as biocodes,⁷¹ DNA as instructions and protocol), and the sensorium depicted through new media, biomedica also refers to occasion for the discourse as a whole.⁷²

Here, once again, disability studies provides important resources for the stakes of empathy games. In “Disability and Biomediation: Tinnitus as Phantom Disability,” Mack Hagood expands on Thacker’s concept of biomediation by placing it in the context of forms of biopolitical governance and control. Hagood is interested in practices in which the body is remediated through bioinformatic discourses. Such practices include:

(1) setting scientific and social norms for the conditions and abilities of human bodies generally; (2) compiling and disseminating medical knowledge; (3) sounding and screening individual bodies for compliance with the aforementioned norms and knowledge; (4) cataloging and regulating individual bodies and their access to care; (5) mediating individual bodies for corrective or therapeutic purposes; (6) advocating for group disability recognition, identities, rights, and funding; (7) shaping “accessibility” in everyday media technologies (usually according to dictates of the medical model, which often result in new forms of exclusion); and finally, (8) representing bodies and medicine in popular media.⁷³

⁷¹ For more on hormones as biomedica, see Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).

⁷² First, biomedica is not exclusively a concept, nor is it exclusively a technology, a “thing.” Biomedica can be thought of as the conditions in which the concept (recontextualizing the biological domain) and the technology for doing so (e.g., bioinformatics tools) are tightly interwoven into a situation, an instance, a “corporealization.” Therefore, we can variously speak of biomedica as a single concept (that necessitates a grouping of particular technologies and techniques), and a technology (that requires a certain enabling conceptual organization). See Eugene Thacker, *Biomedica* (U of Minnesota Press, 2004), 28.

⁷³ Mack Hagood, ““Disability and Biomediation: Tinnitus as Phantom Disability,” in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, 2017. 283.

This context complicates the representation of disability in *Auti-Sim* in particular and empathy games more generally as it links the representation of disability directly to medical practice and forms of social discipline and control. This ties together the informatic and representational critiques of empathy games. *Auti-Sim* was created for a *Hacking Health Vancouver* event that sought to help “health professionals and technologists to work together to prototype and problem-solve new ways to deliver healthcare.”⁷⁴ Increasingly, empathy games are understood to be public health solutions in and of themselves. Games such as *Bystander* (2015), *At Risk for College Students* (2016), and *Cops and Rubbers* (2013) are designed to address issues of sexual assault, mental health, and the sexual health of sex workers. Here, a number of forms of biomediation come into play. All of these works compile and disseminate medical knowledge and provide the frame for screening individual bodies for compliance with such norms and knowledge. *At Risk for College Students* directly aims to help students recognize (and in some sense diagnose) mental illness amongst their peers. In a public health model that envisions health outcomes to be reliant on social identification and medical intervention, empathy, understanding, social interactions, diagnostic technologies, and medical administration are imbricated. While *Auti-Sim*’s creators do not identify a particular case in which the game might be useful, or directly link it to this kind of policy, the context surrounding the game and its creation place it within this the realm of this discourse.

In their position at a particular nexus of micropolitics and macropolitics, of affective politics and representation, empathy games provide a dangerous mixture of speculation about the other and social discipline. In remediating the body of the other, they subject it to transformation and distortion. In their informatic content, they engage in an affective politics of priming, and

⁷⁴ “Auti-Sim.”

they frame their content in disciplinary terms that are by and large taken at face value and have broader biopolitical stakes. Biomediation is not just a factor in the representational content but also in concerns around interface and accessibility. Titles frequently described as empathy games are typically produced with low budgets, and do not include accessibility features. This exacerbates the already fraught biopolitics of game interfaces as objects of industrial design, tools of informatic capture, and as sources for direct capacitation. As David Parisi notes, the design of game controller interfaces involves targeting a specific demographic as ideal-type users and using bioinformatic techniques to design around the desired norm so that game machines can interact harmoniously with players.⁷⁵ This process, by its very nature, requires the establishment of a normate body whose ergonomics are taken into account, resulting in game interfaces that are designed to “face”⁷⁶ a particular subject:

In reconceptualizing the design of their console controller for the release of the Xbox One, Microsoft reportedly mocked up hundreds of different prototypes, experimenting with different shapes, sizes, and button configurations, while spending over \$100M on development and testing. Of paramount concern was ensuring that the final design would mesh seamlessly with the so-called “golden hands”—Microsoft’s internal shorthand for a class of “core” gamers who were the primary audience for the redesign. Crucially, Microsoft did not take aim at the normal, or seek to determine the statistically-average hands of game players, but instead turned to those “hardcore gamers who end up understanding the minutiae of the controllers better than the people who designed them.” The interface embodied a marketing strategy, where Microsoft hoped its controller would appeal to gamers in the burgeoning e-sports industry; the design of the Xbox One controller expressed a fantasy of its desired subject.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ David Parisi, “Game Interfaces as Disabling Infrastructures,” *Analog Game Studies* (blog), May 30, 2017, <http://analoggamestudies.org/2017/05/compatibility-test-videogames-as-disabling-infrastructures/>.

⁷⁶ I’m using this term in Sarah Ahmed’s sense in *Queer Phenomenology*.

⁷⁷ Parisi, “Game Interfaces as Disabling Infrastructures.”

Here Alexander Galloway's informatic critique can be placed into a broader biopolitical context. Not only are players controlled and disciplined by individual machine actors, but by an entire regime of production that is constantly attuning itself to players through informatic capture and training players to better interact with computational machine technologies that are themselves used for economic production. The virulent sexism and ableism of Gamergate⁷⁸ do not only have precedent in videogame representation, but also in the very design of game interfaces for a demographic of young adult men with a normate sensorium. By designing controllers in this fashion, Microsoft made its products relatively hostile to those whose financial impact was deemed to be less or those whose impact was not visible enough to be quantified. Microsoft set bodies outside of its desired norm up for failure. Informatic critique necessitates thinking through human legibility to machines, and how design processes affect accessibility. This has broader political stakes than just who gets to play games. The capacities afforded by a networked first-person shooter may be mapped onto representations of shooting, moving, and being hit, but also involve taking part in online chat and participating in a networked activity that might involve content creation and contain a number of social and political valences. Games capacitate more than just gameplay. Consequently, game interfaces are a site of broader political struggle.

Here another meaning of "remediate" must be considered. B&G note that remediation comes from the same root as "remedy" and remediation, for them, does not only necessarily encompass media repairing a fault or fulfilling a lack in a predecessor, but also can imply reform in a social or political sense.⁷⁹ The fantasy of empathy machines is a fantasy of the rehabilitation of society. The problem of difference and discrimination becomes a problem of the capacity for

⁷⁸ For a brief summary of Gamergate, see Patrick Jagoda, "Videogame Criticism and Games in the Twenty-First Century," *American Literary History* 29, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 205–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajw064>.

⁷⁹ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 59.

empathy, and that problem is understood as a technical problem. Not understanding others becomes an issue of a constitutive lack or inability that can only be solved through the technological prosthesis of new media, which reconfigures our relationship to reality and to each other. Disability studies furnishes a number of reasons to be wary of such fantasies of remedy and cure. Eli Clare asserts that violence is inherent to the logic of cure, an ideology he argues is centered on eradication.⁸⁰ Allison Kafer ties an emphasis on cure to a dangerous form of futurity in her concept of a “curative imaginary” in which there is “an understanding of disability that not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention.”⁸¹ The curative imaginary envisions a future without room for disabled bodies, and is willing to subject such bodies to an ethics of deferral that not only does nothing for those who are disabled today, but potentially harms them by playing into eugenic logics that promote institutionalization, sterilization, and eradication. Such a suspicion around cure is not meant to demonize those who seek medical intervention. Instead, it interrogates the logics that dictate that cure is something to be universally desired and opens room to question who such interventions harm. If fantasies of empathy machines present empathy as a technological problem that needs to be solved, and as a requirement for full informed civic action, then what becomes of those who cannot use their interfaces? Is there space in Chris Milk’s vision of political decision makers for the blind, for those who cannot undergo his tailored VR experience like the audience he showed *Clouds over Sidra* to at Davos? Who is capacitated by fantasies surrounding speculative capacity? There is a certain irony that empathy games as a genre are particularly inaccessible to

⁸⁰ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 28.

⁸¹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 28.

many of those with disabilities—including those who are blind—both for physical and financial reasons.

Towards Opacity

In marshalling such critiques against empathy games, I do not wish to deny the possibility of good uses for gamic representation for learning about aspects of another's experience. The positive response of many with chronic illness to Christine Miserandino's "Spoon Theory" has proven that game form has uses in representing disability and disability advocacy.⁸² In "Spoon Theory," Miserandino describes an exercise she developed for a friend that is fundamentally a resource management game. In an attempt to describe the fatigue associated with Lupus, Miserandino told a friend to collect twelve spoons. Miserandino asserted that those who are healthy get an infinite number of spoons, and those who are suffering chronic illness only get a fixed number. She then asked her friend to list the tasks that the friend tended to complete in a day. Afterwards, Miserandino told her friend that she should plan out a day and assign a spoon to each task she wanted to complete. According to Miserandino's account, her friend became emotional once her budget of spoons ran low. Whether Miserandino was aware of it not at the time of the creation of spoon theory, the exercise she devised is essentially another version of an energy management mechanic present in games in the form of mana, spell points, or energy bars.⁸³

⁸² Miserandino's essay on "Spoon Theory" has proven popular enough that many with chronic illness refer to themselves as "spoonies."

⁸³ For a list of games with energy bar mechanics, see "Stamina Bar Games," Giant Bomb, accessed December 19, 2017, <https://www.giantbomb.com/stamina-bar/3015-3569/games/>. For a history of "mana" in games (a related concept) see Golub, Alex, and Jon Peterson. "How Mana Left the Pacific and Became a Video Game Mechanic." *NEW MANA* (2016): 309-373

Instead I want to point to concerns around the fantasy of empathy games and how such a fantasy fails to take into account important social and political contexts, and to challenge assertions about the possibilities of technology before they become commonplace and habitual, while they are still in a sphere where they can be more easily acted upon.⁸⁴ By commenting on biomediation, I do not wish to claim there is not a use for medical knowledge. By questioning remediatory claims about empathy games I do not wish to declaim intensity. By engaging in an informatic critique of videogames, I do not wish to deny the ways in which they open up productive spaces for play. Instead, I want to disentangle claims about the political uses of games from a number of assumptions about the primacy of deliberative politics, the rationality of neoliberal political subjects, and the value of the judgment processes of technoscience. By turning an eye towards disability studies, I want to re-introduce a much-needed negativity into game studies critique, one that posits a fundamental opacity of experience and understands capacitation to always be a site of political struggle.

Videogames have value in precisely the way they can communicate the contingency of capacitation. Following Ian Bryce Jones,⁸⁵ I find that more potential lies in “fumblecore” games such as *Surgeon Simulator*, *QWOP*, *GIRP*, *Octodad: Deadliest Catch*, and *Getting over it with Bennet Foddy*, all games that represent debilitated or incapacitated bodies in one sense or another, but in comedic fashions that lay no claim to realism. Such games force their users to contend with difficult interfaces that highlight the mediality of games. This preference for a hypermediated form is different than those who support empathy games for the reason that, in this case, the object to be understood is not

⁸⁴ See Wendy Chun’s arguments in Hui Kyong Chun, “WEIRD REALITY.”

⁸⁵ Ian Bryce Jones, “Do The Locomotion: Obstinate Avatars, Dehiscent Performances, and the Rise of the Comedic Video Game,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 77, no. 1 (February 7, 2016): 86–99.

the experience of another, but rather the conditionality of one's own capacitation. In this case, the speculative capacitation is not an occasion to speculate about another, but rather about capacitation itself. A videogame as an event, as any other event, provides an occasion to reflect on augmented or diminished capacitation as the body changes from one state to another. If games offer any positive knowledge, it's in their process of defamiliarization, of announcing that their capacitation is speculative, the way in which they become allegories for their own methods of control and capture. Games provide special utility in the way they frame capacitation to be contingent on another actor, the way in which they are allegories of their own control, the way that games highlight capacitation as an affective opening rather than some inherent quality.

This understanding, perhaps, provides room for a different kind of opening, for rationality to be moved to the side to make way for passion and sympathy. In describing the outcome of *Spoon theory*, Miserando reflects on the game's success:

After we were emotional and talked about this for a little while longer, I sensed she was sad. Maybe she finally understood. Maybe she realized that she never could truly and honestly say she understands. But at least now she might not complain so much when I can't go out for dinner some nights, or when I never seem to make it to her house and she always has to drive to mine.⁸⁶

The possibility I find most liberating here is the second. It is not that Miserandino's game only communicated a new form of knowledge to her friend, but something fundamental about the opacity of experience. Because of that, it was perhaps all the more effective of a form of contact. If there is political potential in videogames, it is not political potential that is in accord with individualist liberal models of empathy and rational understanding of another's suffering. It does not come through the sort of systems thinking that Bogost and Milk advocate. It instead comes

⁸⁶ Christine Miserandino, "The Spoon Theory," *But You Don't Look Sick*, 2003.

from a more diffuse lower level of affective politics, something like Brian Massumi's conception of dividual sympathy. Here, depicting difficulty and the affects associated with it offer potential, once shorn of a realism tied to an ideology that undermines any sort of political efficacy that "empathy games" as such may have.

My desire to move away from "empathy games" is not just a desire to re-examine the informatic context of games themselves. It is a push towards reconsidering empathy as a mode of political relation. Instead of accepting empathy games at face value, I would like to reach towards games that offer other kinds of knowledge. The pivot away from a particular kind of speculation about the other is not just a turn towards solipsism. Such a movement is not only a desire for opacity to bioinformatics.⁸⁷ It is instead an acknowledgement that thought of the Other is not sufficient without the Other of thought. In Édouard Glissant's terms:

Thought of the Other is sterile without the other of Thought. Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth, mine. But thought of the Other can dwell within me without making me alter course, without "prizing me open," without changing me within myself. An ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it. The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange.⁸⁸

Turning against empathy games is not turning against all forms of representation of the other. It is instead beginning to question what is removed in the process of gamic representation, who bioinformatic assertions stand in for, about the political fantasies surrounding empathy and games as a media. Turning towards other kinds of speculation is not a turn towards away from

⁸⁷ For an articulation of Glissant's work in relation to biometrics, see Zach Blas and Jacob Gaboury, "Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 (92) (September 1, 2016): 155–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-3592510>.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

representing the other, but rather working to imagine what new forms of politics videogamic interfaces might enable. Unlike empathy, other forms of speculative capacitation require no single subject to identify with or to project oneself into. They do not necessarily make the same informatic knowledge claims about the other and they do not necessarily require identifying with another at all as much as treating an avatar or game interface as a vehicle. Unlike empathy, other forms of speculation about debility may not play into such a problematic bioinformatic context. What would happen if we left behind the desire for games to realistically model the actual? What would happen if we instead understood games as a mode of defamiliarizing speculative capacitation? What if we design games to be and critique games more as forms of poetic knowledge than scientific knowledge? What if we pivot towards valorizing interpretative difficulty, and understanding part of the value of games as language lies in how they act as commentary on the culture around them?⁸⁹

⁸⁹ See Boluk and LeMieux's discussion of the Hellen Keller simulator in Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).