

# Posthuman Empathy – the lived experience of gaming

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## Abstract

In gaming an empathic connection is formed between the player and their avatar – the character that they play as. This empathic connection means ‘entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. [...] It means temporarily living in his/her life’ (Rogers 1975: 4).

In this paper I will therefore seek to explore the empathic connection between gamer and character, and discuss the ways in which this manifests itself in the lived experience of MMORPG gaming. By considering personal autoethnographic/autophenomenographic field notes from gaming I will consider my responses to narrative in gameplay as well as embodied, affective responses to the experience of the avatar. I will further consider the ways in which this connection and experience forms the creation of new subjectivities.

On the basis of my field notes, I argue that we should consider that games are used ‘as an apparatus of a technological subjectivity’ (Crawford et. al. 2006) and the new subjectivities formed there are housed between the game software and the gamer. Whilst the technology of the game can help to facilitate the shift to this new subjectivity, the game and the identities within it are experienced subjectively. As such, the subjectivity requires equal input from both game and gamer.

We could therefore argue that the melding of game and gamer constitutes the posthuman subject that is ‘an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction’

(Hayles 1999: 3). Maintained by both the game and the gamer this posthuman subjectivity is a form of shared, interdependent agency, a blend of material gamer and informational avatar/character as created and hosted by the game. ‘The subject (player) and the “other” (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore – they become one’ (Filiciak 2003: 91).

## **Empathy**

To account for the posthuman subjectivity of gameplay, this paper considers posthuman subjectivity as a form of empathy. By exploring the way in which empathy can manifest between the gamer and their avatar, I suggest that empathic connection is a useful conceptual framework for thinking differently about the relationship between gamer and game.

When applied to the human world, empathy is generally understood as ‘entering another’s world’ or ‘stepping into their shoes’. (Finlay 2006: 4).

Empathy is a fascinating concept that has come to explain how human beings relate to each other in the world. Empathy allows us to understand others thoughts and emotions:

It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgements, [...] for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self and this can only be done by a person who is secure enough in himself that he knows

he will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and can comfortably return to his own world when he wishes. (Rogers 1975: 4).

### **Posthuman subjectivities**

If we read empathy as a posthuman affect, our concept of subjectivity becomes one that resists the idea of the human as a fixed and bounded entity by demonstrating the ways in which human beings are permeable through their ability to affect and be affected by circumstances, environments, and feelings beyond what is housed in the boundary of their skin. The posthuman model understands that ‘human functionality expands because the parameters of the cognitive system it inhabits expand’ (Hayles 1999: 290-291) and that rather than *transcending* the body we instead *extend* our embodied awareness. We could therefore suggest that empathy is a tool or skill that facilitates this expansion of awareness.

For the gamer, the “posthumanising” of empathy is made more apparent precisely through the fact that the body which one is empathising with and the environment in which it navigates its experience is a digital construction, a virtual technology. This does not, however, serve to disrupt the affective flow – as demonstrated by the field notes discussed below, the digital experience of gaming is very much felt to be one which does not bifurcate the experience as “real” vs. “virtual”: Broadhurst puts it, ‘[r]ather, than being separate from the body, technology becomes part of the body and alters and recreates our experience in the world’ (2012: 9).

Through the gamer’s empathic response to the virtual world and their acknowledgement and acceptance of the life within the avatar the gamer concedes that the avatar too is permeable and capable of both affecting and being affected. The very fact of the MMORPG gamer’s agency within the gameworld does mean that the narrative, world, and body of the avatar

only constitutes part of the story and the subjectivity, as the gamer brings their own body, objectives and perspective. As Hayles states: 'the world we understand is also the world we make' and the 'binary division between means and metaphor misses something crucially important: that means and metaphor are dynamically interacting with each other' (Hayles 2006: 163). Accordingly,

[t]he transgression and erasure of boundaries between human and animals, the organic and inorganic, and between human and machine, which are represented by Haraway's 'cyborg' have undermined the inviolability of the human and have thereby opened up new, posthuman, perspectives (Herbrechter 2013: 41-42).

What occurs then, between gamer and avatar and game is a compromise and negotiation of agency as the player's capacity to act is channelled through the avatar and for the avatar to progress with the in-game quests the gamer must allow the avatar's motivations to be projected onto the player themselves. In this way there is a sense of empathic connection as the gamer melds their own desires with that of the objectives given to the avatar.

Accepting the equality of both gamer and avatar in this posthuman construction is key, as different desires and goals are played out as a reconciliation of the two into one. As Herbrechter writes:

a new paradigm of thought has been emerging which is characterized by its opposition to and its transcendence of humanism. This paradigm, Franklin writes, opposes the separation between human and nonhuman environments and, instead, emphasizes the complexity and interrelatedness of human and nonhuman forms of agency (3548) (Herbrechter 2013: 41).

In this interrelation of the gamer and the avatar we could therefore argue that the melding of game and gamer constitutes the posthuman subject that is ‘an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction’ (Hayles 1999: 3) and that posthuman subjectivities are formed. We can see this relationship in previous gaming research – for example, Jenny Sundén explores the complexity of her relationship with her avatar Bricka and their romantic desire for another gamer/avatar. Sundén questions her desire of the avatar “Slap” and the gamer who controls her, asking:

Was it her, regardless of the game? Was it her through the game? Was it her through the orc woman and the ways in which she moved and talked and somehow managed to reach out to me and touch something within me through the screen? Most likely, it was all of these things combined (Sundén 2012: 169).

In this example Hayles’ assertion that ‘[t]he chaotic, unpredictable nature of complex dynamics implies that subjectivity is emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it’ (1999: 291) is made evident. There is acknowledgement that Slap is not the player, but nor is Slap not the player, and these occurrences, confusions and blurrings are repeated throughout the article: ‘Bricka’s heart would skip a beat. Or was it mine? Does it matter?’ (Sundén 2012: 168). The duality is shown to be experienced not just by Sundén but by the subject of her desire who positions the avatar as separate from the player yet together with them when she writes to Sundén ““Hi Jenny and Bricka! I smile. Slap grins. We flex our muscles”” (ibid.: 174).

Sundén describes her relationship with her avatar Bricka as ‘[p]art identification, part desire’ (ibid.: 177) and writes of enjoying Bricka’s company and being attracted to and absorbed with her. This relationship, which Sundén describes as ‘an intriguing part of game experiences’ (ibid.), is what I seek to study further in my own research project. Maintained by both the game and the gamer this posthuman subjectivity is a blend of material gamer and informational avatar/character as created and hosted by the game. ‘The subject (player) and the “other” (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore – they become one’ (Filiciak 2003: 91).

The data that I use to explore this concept has been gathered over a series of gameplay sessions which track my initial foray into *World of Warcraft*. This ongoing autoethnography has been conducted in order to explore the subjective lived experience of MMORPG gaming, with particular focus on the relation between the gamer as a “posthuman” performer. As such, the priorities which have been used to guide the production of relevant field notes have been descriptions of the lived experience of gaming; particular moments of affect or empathy; performative aspects of gaming; the relationship between gamer and avatar (embodiment, subjectivity etc.); and the relationship of human with machine.

Whilst Jin has ‘hypothesized that people playing a prosocial character’s role would experience greater empathy with the character than would those playing a violent character’s role’ (2011: 1176) it is perhaps more useful to discuss the ways in which empathy is elicited rather than falling into the trap of idealising the connection with the character through perceived “good” and positive deeds.

Tronstad (2011: 251) writes about the spectrum of empathy as ranging between emotional contagion and perspective taking, with true empathy requiring a folding of mind/body that

avoids a dichotomy but highlights moments of the interlinked concepts of embodied empathy and narrative empathy. This could also be related to Blackman's notions of 'instances of affective transmission' (2012: 82) and the comparisons and links between emotional mimicry and conscious synchrony. I will accordingly be considering how empathy is made manifest when the mind/body you are empathising with is that of an avatar, and the perspective you are taking is one which exists in a fictional world. The examples given will therefore serve to highlight the blurring of boundaries between bodies and perspectives to demonstrate the emergent posthuman subjectivity formed from gameplay.

### **Embodied empathy**

Martin explains that in gaming 'the human form means the avatar retains the capacity to arouse pathos, admiration and identification' (2013: 319) meaning that we are able to empathise with the avatar as a character involved in a particular situation or situations. The gamer's own body is then implicated in the action as '[e]mpathy caused by the response of mirror neurons to the game's audio-visual information activates the player's motor systems, recreating the conditions of the virtual world in the body' (ibid.: 317-318).

When we talk then of embodied empathy, this is understood as an affective bodily response to what another body is experiencing. In gaming this is often an unconscious act, as the avatar body becomes that which we navigate the world through. It is therefore felt not only to be an object of perception, but also a means of perception (Martin 2013) that makes our engagement with it more akin to that of our own physical body; it is an essential component in our experience of the (game)world. When the gaming environment or the mobs within it affect this avatar body we therefore find our own bodies to be affected along those channels of feeling.

Examples of this affective flow are made apparent throughout my own autoethnographic field notes from *World of Warcraft*.

*I'm completing a quest underwater, diving for relics in a deep, wide lake. I'm absorbed in my task, deep beneath the water where the colours and sounds are dulled and I am lulled into that ethereal state of being. Etyme's air supply seems ample – until suddenly it doesn't and I am forced to ascend. I begin to worry when I don't break the surface – I hadn't realised I was so deep. I need to get Etyme to the surface and I find myself holding my own breath, a worried look adorning my face as I watch the air supply dwindle and watch her body rise... - I make it, and breathe again.*

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*I round a corner at one point, climbing a tower, and suddenly encounter a mob which, for one reason or another, I wasn't expecting. "Whoa, fuck!" I involuntarily gasp, my heart lurches and I quickly scramble to regain equilibrium and kill off the offending mob. It is unlikely that it would actually succeed in killing me but there is a particular kind of vengeance I feel towards it for having taken me by surprise and I dispatch it quickly - in my mind brutally. It panicked me, disrupting my equilibrium and shaking me from my perceived skill and feeling of prowess. I take a moment, and vow to be more diligent as I scrutinise the remaining enemies below. I drop down on them from above, and unleash my anger in efficient blows.*

Both of these accounts highlight the subjective, visceral experience of the gamer's body in tune with the avatar body. In both cases, although the gamer's body is in no danger, the threat that is perceived against the avatar body is felt by the gamer. These examples therefore demonstrate the blurring of boundaries which occurs in gaming, where the boundaries of



gamer and avatar are experienced as permeable. We could link this phenomenon to Blackman's description of automatic transference of emotion or affect as non-conscious mimicry or attunement, which is 'not about conscious recognition but about forms of bodily affectivity' (2012: 82). Blackman suggests that '[l]ife is defined by the flow or exchange of a vital force – an *élan vital* – that connects rather than separates and is felt and registered within the body through a subtle sensing' (ibid.: 85). Based on my own gaming experiences this connecting flow or exchange is precisely what is nurtured between gamer and avatar. As Martin explains: '[u]nlike hammers, pens, or other kinds of equipment, the avatar is represented to a greater or lesser extent as a sentient being with its own character, awareness and intelligence and this encourages an empathic as well as a practical relationship for the player' (2013: 317).

### **Narrative empathy**

Further to the embodied feelings of contagion or mimicry between the bodies involved in gaming there are also, on the other side of the same coin and experienced in tandem, responses which are elicited from engagement with the narrative. It is useful to note that empathy does not necessarily differ between fictional or "real life" circumstances as '[e]mpathy, emotion, and imagination use many of the same neuronal pathways in response to fiction as they do to daily life' (Kemp 2012: xviii). This means that in gaming although the situational circumstances are highly fantastical, the use of our imagination can elicit as much of an empathic connection with the content as if it were real. We achieve empathy by imagining ourselves in the fictional circumstances portrayed by the story, by engaging in Coleridge's famous "willing suspension of disbelief" and being wilfully, consciously involved in the story.

In gaming this is highlighted as we are an active participant in the game, and therefore our involvement in the narrative is active as, particularly in MMORPGs, we have a particular degree of agency and input to the narrative – we are not merely a passive audience but function as both producers and consumers of the games we play (see Crawford et. al. 2006). In many ways the fact that the gamer is an active participant and contributor to the world and action around them should mean that a sense of having empathy with the narrative is facilitated, as the gamer-as-avatar must action the events that unfold.

At times however, this sense of narrative empathy, or taking the character's perspective, can be disrupted by the game mechanics – for example when a ferocious foe has been meaningfully dispatched, there is barely time to revel in the glory before another has regenerated to take its place. This is an issue that is highlighted by MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler in their account of 'Role-play vs. Gameplay: The Difficulties of Playing a Role in *World of Warcraft*'. For them there are certain in-game issues that actively disrupt the level of player intervention in *World of Warcraft* and the regeneration of monsters (mobs) are highlighted as a problem for role playing and a sense of narrative transformation and meaningful impact on the game. Instead the regeneration gives the impression that 'the role player has no lasting effect on the gameworld and might rightly assume that their character has [...] no importance in the narrative of the world as a whole' (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2011: 236), thus contributing to the argument that gaming cannot provide a meaningful lifeworld. Further to game mechanics, however, this narrative empathy is also down to the gamer's desire for involvement with the story.

*In gaming to achieve this sense of immersion through the narrative – which is not the only method of immersion but a valid one – the gamer needs to be paying attention to the story. If the gamer is an “achiever” in Bartle's (1996) terms with less care to why*

*they are doing what they are doing they will be less concerned with reading the reasoning behind the tasks that are given. However the empathic gamer must understand their characters motivation, and to facilitate this in gameplay there are specific texts from the NPCs to describe what needs to be done and, crucially, why.*

Whilst this is an issue that MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler don't highlight within their chapter, the depth with which players read the story certainly makes a difference in a gamer's narrative immersion.

Further to the player vs. environment (PvE) narrative, 'through devices like deeds, quests, and guilds, *WoW* as well as many other games of its ilk, provides affordances—often necessities—for significant interaction among players, to work together for common goals or against common enemies' (Laurel 2013: 124).

Taking this into account, some of the times that have felt most meaningful in my own gameplay experiences and in which I have felt a sense of narrative empathy have been when playing in player vs. player (PvP) scenarios and battlegrounds. Whilst engaging in all of the overlapping and complex side stories in the PvE narrative may not be of interest to everyone, all *World of Warcraft* players understand at least one basic rule of the story: Alliance vs. Horde. The battlegrounds that facilitate these two opposing sides coming together are where tempers really start to rise, and encourages the feeling that your gameplay has a real, meaningful impact on the environment.

*I seem to be succeeding more in battlegrounds, achieving more killing blows dealt to other players and not dying quite so frequently. I realise I feel really proud of these achievements, like me and Etyme have become a more formidable team, working together and eliminating our foes. We're a real asset now to the Horde side, and I feel*

*myself become involved physically in the battle, my heart feels like it is beating faster and I enjoy the sensation of dealing damage to opposing players, taking pride in watching their health bars taking a knock from the force of our blows.*

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*There is such a level of pent up excitement on these battlegrounds, and even when you spend much of your time dead (as I do) this is made more obvious through the forced procedure of waiting the allotted amount of time before you can resurrect and get back to the fight. At one point I engage in one-on-one combat with another hunter: we both circle each other slowly, our awareness of the space reduced to that which flows between us and ignoring all of the other players who flow around us. Our ranged attack on each other is interrupted by the end of the battleground.*

Farrow and Iacovides suggest that ‘[a] more immersive or convincing sense of embodiment within digital worlds may also depend on experiencing a convincing, meaningful world within which the player has a sense of choice and responsibility’ (2012: 9) and this would certainly fit with the battleground set up, when you are working in larger groups (usually 15-20 gamers) and you effectively need to pull your weight. This is highlighted in the field notes when I write about becoming an asset and feeling pride in this achievement. Whitlock suggests that the “reality” of playing with others facilitates adrenaline: ‘[c]hallenging and outwitting another human as opposed to the artificial intelligence of the computer increased the sense of ‘winning’ adding to player satisfaction’ (2004: 124).

Further to both the adrenaline and the sense of significant impact that playing against other players can provoke I would also suggest that part of the allure and affect is in the knowledge of the continued affective flow between gamer and avatar, avatar and avatar, avatar and

gamer: knowing that there is another playing body behind the opponent, that they will be being affected as their avatar is. This therefore demonstrates how embodied and narrative empathy and interrelated and co-dependent. In the acknowledgement that 'we are not singular and bounded, but rather permeable and open to being affected and affecting' (Blackman 2012: 77) we therefore seek to both be affected and to affect others, and gaming affords us this opportunity, with and through both human and non-human others.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested that we could consider empathy to be a posthuman concept that disrupts the idea of the human as a bounded and fixed self and instead emphasises relationality, intersubjectivity and permeability. In gaming this is made apparent through the affective and cognitive involvement of gamer and avatar, and these affective flows which transcend the boundaries between human and non-human. This allows for a space where posthuman subjectivities are formed. These subjectivities are emergent and require an equality of bodies, both virtual and physical. This is a posthumanism which acknowledges the importance of embodiment and affect along Braidotti's lines: '[a] posthuman notion of the enfleshed and extended, relational self' which 'allows us to respect the bond of mutual dependence between bodies and technological others' (2013: 90-91). The gamer/avatar as posthuman subjectivity is an empathically connected construction of gamer and avatar through both perspective-taking and embodiment, and demonstrates an intimacy between material and immaterial.

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