Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft

by Teddy Pozo

Abstract

Following critiques of the framework "empathy games" by queer games artists including EMPATHY MACHINE (merritt k, 2014), Empathy Game (Anna Anthropy, 2015), and empathy machine (Mattie Brice, 2016), this article historicizes the empathy debate, offering new directions for queerness and games in the realm of affect, intersubjectivity, and embodiment. Linking queer artists' critiques of empathy in games to feminist critiques of empathy (including Saldia Hartman [1997], Sara Ahmed [2004], and Clare Hemmings [2012]), the author argues that the genre of "empathy games" must be understood in a continuum of videogame studies, feminist theory, and history. Finally, the piece develops new terms for queer game studies drawn from haptic game design aesthetics, including consent, cuteness, and radical softness, through readings of Curtain (Lauraa Dreamfeef, 2014), Hurt Me Plenty (Robert Yang, 2014), SABBAT: Director's Cut (Eva Problems, 2013), and The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter (Jess Maricote and Dietrich Squiller, 2017).

Keywords: Queer Game Studies, Transgender, Genderqueer, Affect, Consent, Cuteness, Haptic, Empathy, Feminism, Aesthetics

Content note: This article includes discussions of transphobia and transmisogyny, sexual assault, abuse, racism (especially the history of slavery in the US), kink, violence, blood, Christian demonology, and body horror.

"hello friend," merritt k’s EMPATHY MACHINE (2014) begins. "have you ever thought / 'what if' / you were like, a different gender" Each line appears as gray Arial text on a stark black background, the final word glowing bold white. "can you imagine?" it continues. "of course you can't". The pacing is teasingly slow, as if telling a familiar joke to a friend who already knows the punchline. "but now," the text continues, "we can show you"/ "you can experience empathy" (emphasis added). The game goes on to ask the player to touch the screen. After a moment, it asks if the player feels differently after this gameplay experience. No? Of course not. Once advertised on the artist's website with a photo of a virtual reality headset, EMPATHY MACHINE critiques the notion that media—particularly virtual reality—can be used to translate experiences, helping those who have never experienced certain forms of oppression, trauma or disability to empathize with other people who have (See for example Alsever 2016). Some games have been designed to teach empathy to players in this way (See Belman and Flanagan 2012), but EMPATHY MACHINE implies the genre designation "empathy games" has been mis-applied to games about queer lives and by queer designers.

Particularly during 2012-2013, a small canon of primarily transgender women developers and their games gained unprecedented critical acclaim in the independent games industry. Anna Anthropy's Mighty Jill Off (2008), Lesbian Spider Queens of Mars (2011), and dys4ia (with Liz Ryerson, 2012), and her book Rise of the Videogame Zinesters (2012); Mattie Brice's Mainichi (2012); merritt k's Lim (2012); and Porpentine's Howling Dogs and Cry$al Warrior Ke$hla (both 2013); were all frequently cited as examples of a new wave of queer game design (or game design by LGBT artists). Sometimes linked with the increasing visibility of queer games fans at events like GaymerX, and the expansion of academic queer game studies at Different Games and the Queerness and Games Conference, this queer games scene was understood to consist of short-duration games made with accessible game design tools. Though these games were not by any means the only queer games made during this period, nor were they the first games about queer lives or by queer developers, the queer games scene roll-call mentioned above became symbolic of a desire for greater visibility in the videogame industry and in videogame fandom for LGBT people, and greater access to the tools to make videogames for industry outsiders. For fans of indie games—even many who did not identify as queer—games like Mainichi, dys4ia and Lim represented a hope that small games could diversify the industry through abstract, personal, and narrative pieces, and that more queer stories would be told. But readings of the queer games scene through dreams of diversity risked emphasizing the games' potential to teach cisgender straight gamers about queer and trans lives, over the artistry of their creators and their appeal to queer audiences.

Starting in 2014 with k's Twine piece, the same artists whose work built the queer games scene used physical movement, embodied closeness, facility, and texture...
to challenge claims that the use of empathy in games can bring players closer to the subjects of game narratives. In 2015, Anna Anthropy used the old adage of “walking a mile in someone’s shoes” in an installation called Empathy Game. Part of Babycastles Presents Anna Anthropy Presents the Road to Empathy. Attendees could literally walk on a treadmill in a pair of the artist’s old boots. Walk a mile to earn a single point, and write your score on an analog chalkboard. In 2016, Mattie Brice juxtaposed her critically-acclaimed Mainichi—a 2012 cyclical simulation of a single day in the life that draws from the artist’s experiences of street harassment—with her physical body in a performance piece titled empathy machine. Brice performed actions from the game in a loop, and transformed her body into a game controller using a Makey Makey and conductive fabric.

These interventions express how indie games’ longstanding interest in developing new forms of intersubjectivity and emotional expression had become problematic for the rise of queer games and the creation of a queer games canon, even as it initially helped personal games gain recognition in the field. In particular, “empathy” had allowed cisgender game fans to imagine they were closer to trans lives than they truly were. Digital distribution also allowed small games by trans women artists to circulate freely, limiting their ability to get paid and control the spaces and contexts in which their work would be consumed.

During a period of resurgent white nationalism, intense police violence against people of color, and rising murder rates for transgender women, it is difficult to maintain productive distance from audiences who do not share the experiences of haptic sensibilities and emotional expression. During and following discussions of “empathy games,” videogame scholars have become more sophisticated in their treatment of touch and affect, offering frameworks like feelings (Anable 2018) and being moved (Isbister 2017) to imply a continuity between physical and emotional touch in game design. This article is about this continuity as explored by queer game designers. However, in conversation with the history of feminist film theory, I am referring to the continuity between affect, tactility, feelings, and being moved in game design as haptic, both in the sense of Laura U. Marks’s arguments about haptic visibility as a feminist strategy (2000), and as part of a growing sense of games as inherently haptic (or touch-based) media. I begin by putting empathy in queer games in conversation with feminist discussions of empathy and intersubjectivity, and then with haptic visibility through a reading of Laura Dreamfeather’s Our Lady of the Lake (2014). Next, I discuss how queer game designers use the haptic beyond the audiovisual in innovative ways including Eva Problems’s (2013) use of weaponized cuteness to eroticize the strange and the painful in SABBAT: Director’s Cut; Robert Yang’s (2014) use of consent as a procedure of intersubjective engagement as conceptualized by Brice (2017) in Hurt Me Plenty; and Jess Março and Dietrich Squinkifer’s (2017) use of physically soft crochet and conductive thread to explore the gender and social dynamics of the “radically soft” in The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter. Building from the idea of the haptic as a strategy for maintaining balance between closeness and distance, I argue these haptic design aesthetics use haptic visibility, gestural distance, and textural gender to help queer artists reach queer audiences on a deep level, while maintaining productive distance from audiences who do not share the experiences being represented.

Empathy and the Queer Games Scene

Legendaary film critic Roger Ebert may be partially responsible for the scramble to associate media like VR and videogames with empathy, as he famously called cinema a “machine that generates empathy” (Holmes 2014). Ebert also shaped some of the key terms of games criticism when he repeatedly declared that games could never be art, an assertion videogame studies, fandom, and design have sought to disprove (See Parker 2018). In academia, empathy may be crucial for videogames’ survival as a medium and as a field of study, as Katherine Isbister (2017) persuasively argues. Scholars and artists in the field continuously face concern that videogames “numb players to other people, stifling empathy and creating a generation of isolated, antisocial loners,” to which we are often tempted to respond, as Isbister does, “that the reverse is true: that games can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences” (2017, xvii). Videogame scholarship must move past the question of whether all videogames turn their fans into psychopaths, while keeping in mind that certain parts of games fandom do use games as a safe space for violent right-wing rhetoric and activism. However, in conversation with the history of feminist film theory, I argue these haptic design aesthetics use haptic visibility, gestural distance, and textural gender to help queer artists reach queer audiences on a deep level, while maintaining productive distance from audiences who do not share the experiences being represented.

During a period of resurgent white nationalism, intense police violence against people of color, and rising murder rates for transgender women, it is difficult to recount the limitations of a framework called “empathy.” This moment needs genuine intersubjective communication and social justice education. However, the problematic ways games journalists and critics deploy empathy show that we need new frameworks for studying queer and activist feelings in games. As queer games scholars, we must be attentive to the stories we tell about our own movements, and how these stories limit our understanding of the past and of our future possibilities, as Clare Hemmings (2012) argues feminists must do.
Feminists and queer theorists in videogame studies have long been concerned with the complexities of gender, embodiment, and affect, and have approached the topic through ethnography and self-ethnography (SundÅën and Sveningsson 2012), frameworks from queer theory such as failure (Ruberg 2015), and the constructed nature of consumer gender identity (Chess 2017), to name a few.

merrit k's Empathy Machine became popular with videogame scholars as a lesson in "bad empathy." For Steve Wilcox (2014), k's game works as a humorous example of what not to do when talking about empathy in games: "I will not be arguing that games allow us to be more understanding because we have now experienced what it is like to be another person (Merritt Kopas has lampooned this idea rather well with her "Empathy Machine"â€œ). Instead, I suggest that empathy is a skill and that videogames can and do train that skill." Aubrey Anable (2018) reads Empathy Machine along with Anthropy's critically-acclaimed personal narrative dys4ia (2012) as an example of how affect in videogames must be understood in terms of relationality. Calling the moment when the player must place a hand on the cold screen "the paradox at the heart of . . . the videogame encounter" (56), Anable both claims videogames "can be profound empathy machines" and emphasizes that the way empathy works in games is through "differences and relationality" (58). She writes: "Empathy Machine and Dys4ia work as empathy machines not by using technology to create transparent simulations of experience but rather by making us aware of the complicated imbrication of our bodies and our devices and what we represent through them and about them" (58). Unlike Empathy Game and empathy machine, which address the artists' marginalization in the videogame industry and in critical discourse, Empathy Machine seems to be open to a distinction developed in feminist theory between "good empathy" and "bad empathy" (see Code 1995).

In 2015, k wrote in Videogames for Humans that Twin games are "far from . . . simple excursions in empathy tourism," and that these games "use interactivity to explore complex issues around embodiment and affect in wildly divergent ways" (14). Here k joins Wilcox and Anable, along with other scholars of videogames, in employing the idea of empathy tourism as an exception to the rule that conversations about affect, intersubjectivity, and embodiment must be central to videogame design and criticism. The "false empathy" of seeking to take another's place is problematic because it is lazy (Dean 2003); truly complex game design seeks to produce more challenging and nuanced relationships with the body and the emotions, among which may be built truer forms of empathy.

As site-specific installations drawing on and disrupting specific readings of their artists' work, Empathy Game and empathy machine challenged both the value of empathy in videogame criticism and the circulation of queer games to anonymous, potentially large, and geographically dispersed audiences. Anthropy confronted fans of her work with her own experience of its reception, beginning her (2015) artist statement on Empathy Game: "I hate dys4ia." The installation's low-tech or no-tech interface emphasized in its minimalism the emotional and physical labor designers are expected to do for their audience. The labor of scorekeeping, placed in the hands of players, asked audiences whether they were tempted to disengage or "cheat" by writing a higher score than they had earned. This stood in contrast to the high level of emotional labor Anthropy was asked to do as a figurehead for trans women in games, and the ways in which the discourse of empathy stood in for, or replaced, genuine care. After a Wall Street Journal editor wrote to Anthropy about "empathy," then asked personal questions about her body, the artist (2015) observed, "it seems like the people with the greatest investment in the 'empathy game' label are the ones with the most privilege and the least amount of willingness to improve themselves."

By changing the user interface of Mainichi to include physical touch between the audience and the artist, an encounter only possible at a specific location where the work was installed for a short time, Brice used empathy machine to challenge the power dynamics of independent game distribution. Mainichi had been distributed widely as an example of a game teaching empathy to cisgender players, often without Brice's knowledge or consent, and in contexts where Brice's scholarship and design innovation were eclipsed by her trauma (Brice 2016). empathy machine created a site-specific encounter with Mainichi in which the artist would be an integral part of the gameplay experience. These contextual pieces—available now only through documentation and artist statements—challenged both the value of empathy as a critical framework, and the terms of independent game distribution for marginalized artists.

In addition to responding to early queer games criticism, Empathy Game and empathy machine ask: who is feeling empathy, and who is the object of that empathy? Whose labor, affective or embodied, teaches empathy? Who consumes empathy? Game designers marginalized by gender, transgender experience, sexuality, and race contend with an ongoing responsibility to diversify the videogame industry by their presence (Shaw 2014, 5). If cisgender consumers of games by transgender designers learn "empathy" by playing these games, where does this empathy go as designers struggle to make a living from their work, or as their physical safety and privacy are threatened by cycles of harassment for their visibility?

By 2014-2016, when k, Anthropy, and Brice's critiques of empathy were released, the visibility and accessibility of women working in indie games had made these marginalized designers relatively easy targets of misogynist, racist, and transphobic attacks. The ever-growing demand for visible women in games to weather harassment reached a peak in 2014 through the beginning of GamerGate, a vicious online "terror dream" (Cross 2017, 183) during which self-appointed "inquisitors" (Quinn 2017, 59) sought to cleanse videogames of women
"Empathy is double-edged," Saidiya Hartman (1997) writes, "for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (19). Cautioning against "the dangers of a too easy intimacy" and "the violence of identification," she argues that nineteenth-century antislavery activists unwittingly objectified enslaved people through fantasies of empathizing with their experiences. Empathy in this case is about occupying the body and subjectivity of the object of empathy, as part of an emotional fantasy that seeks to expand the awareness and sensitivity of the person empathizing, rather than to communicate with or aid the person being empathized with. The empathizer becomes the subject, and the object "threatens to disappear" (19). In games, too, empathy implies difference, and, by emphasizing the differences between LGBTQ artists and other indie game developers, it marginalizes already-marginalized artists.

Multiple frameworks of difference useful for designating indie game development genres and cultures--such as "small games" (McCrea 2007), "personal games" (Parker 2013), empathy games (drawing from Bogost 2011), and "games you can't win" (O'Gist and Zhouhall-Worrall 2016)--tend to center the experiences of straight cisgender consumers. These players often reported greater interest in transgender issues after playing games like dys4ia, which recounted Anthropy's experiences accessing and beginning hormone replacement therapy in the San Francisco Bay Area. For queer and transgender players, however, the game could be consumed as a humorous guide to the often-difficult first steps of medical transition, its final scene of a rising sun providing hope and encouragement for the journey ahead. Readings of dys4ia using the framework of empathy instead assumed a player who was not in the process of considering or preparing for HRT, a player who was instead interested in learning about a version of the transgender experience from the position of a sympathetic outsider. In contrast, installation works critiquing empathy made it impossible for the artists to disappear. While Mainichi and dys4ia could all-too-easily circulate as documents about Brice and Anthropy, said to communicate their experiences in their absence, empathy machine can only exist with Brice present, and Empathy Game's use of Anthropy's worn boots gives the piece an indexical relationship to the artist.

Closer to the hearts of queer scholars and artists in games is the problematic relationship between empathy, pain, and love. "Love is often conveyed as wanting to feel the loved one's pain, to feel the pain on her behalf," Sara Ahmed (2004) writes.

This is love as empathy: I love you, and imagine not only that I can feel how you feel, but that I could feel your pain for you. But I want that feeling only insofar as I don't already have it; the desire maintains the difference between the one who would â€œbecomeâ€ in pain, and another who already â€œisâ€ in pain or â€œhasâ€ it. In this way empathy sustains the very difference that we may seek to overcome: empathy remains a â€œwish feelingâ€, in which subjects â€œfeelâ€ something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels. (30)
What alternate frameworks have queer artists used to describe the aesthetics and mechanics of emotion and intersubjectivity in games? What queer feelings exist "after empathy," after the moment of the queer games scene and its challenges to the empathy genre, and how do these relate to the concept of the haptic? In the series of short vignettes below, I draw out the relationship between haptic visuality as a feminist strategy and queer game design, in the surreal, pixilated exploration game Curtain. Next, I highlight several key terms for the study of queer games after the empathy debate. First, consent, understood as a way to build procedural empathy, works to produce intersubjectivity with non-player characters as in the "hunk spanking" simulator Hurt Me Plenty (Robert Yang, 2014). This aesthetic for games representing sexuality is a direct challenge to the emotional stakes of romance games of the visual novel, simulation, and role playing game genres. Second, I examine the issue of hard and soft texture in queer game design. Eva Troubleshooter's interactive body horror slash demon dress-up game SABBATH: Director's Cut (2013), understood through the concepts of cuties and cuteness as a weapon. Third, radical softness, also understood as a weapon, can be explored in game design through the use of physically soft materials like conductive thread and crochet. Jess Marcotte and Dietrich Squinkifer expand the framework of radical softness into the realm of tactility in The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter (2017).

**Distance, Feminist Film Aesthetics, and the Ethnographic Gaze**

Curtain (Llaura Dreamfeel, 2014) uses pixilated and impressionistic graphics that verge on illegibility. Yet to some, the game is so uncomfortably realistic and immersive as to be unplayable. A 3-D environmental exploration game in the style of Gone Home, Curtain represents the relationship between Glasgow bandmates Ally and Kacy by asking the player to click on the various indistinct objects populating their two-bedroom apartment. As the player guides Ally's first-person viewpoint around this limited environment and interacts with objects, two dialog boxes repeatedly appear. One, at the top, represents Ally's thoughts, rendered in the second-person "you" common to exploration games. The second box, blue, at the bottom of the screen, is Kaci's running commentary on the player's actions. When the player clicks away from an object, Ally's thoughts disappear from the top of the screen, but Kaci's blue dialog box remains, displaying her most recent (often dismissive or cutting) comment. As the player explores Ally and Kaci's apartment on the night their band plays their most successful gig, it becomes clear that Kaci is not just belittling, but isolating Ally from her friends and family and breaking objects around the apartment. Most ominously, Kaci is invisible yet ever-present, commenting every time the player character thinks or interacts, and sometimes when she is just walking around. Like ghosts, neither Ally nor Kaci appear on screen; even when the player looks in the mirror, there is nothing to see.

When the player has explored every element of the apartment, dialog boxes make it clear that Kaci forces sexual contact. Ally wakes up feeling sick, wanting to take a shower. Did Kaci rape her? The game portrays much through omission, forgoing the visual representation of violence and sex stereotypically associated with many videogame genres, and opting instead for a cinematic fade to black. In the shower, one of the only places the player character can be alone, the player discovers a curtain of water. In a twist on a common videogame trope, behind this falling water curtain is a long secret passageway, which leads to the even darker future of the relationship. By navigating across this curtain, between the relationship's future and its past, the player helps Ally escape Kaci, despite lost connections with friends, relatives, and community. Curtain's repetitive electronic soundtrack complements its graphics, which slide back and forth with the player's viewpoint, as if the player character is intoxicated. Yet the sense of mental fogginess portrayed in Curtain is more reminiscent of traumatic memories than drunkenness. The game represents memory, specifically the memory of trauma, in an impressionistic style that distances players from the confessional mode of autobiography. While games challenging "empathy" have engaged with the terminology used to describe queer games, Curtain challenges the gaze of the player on queer experience, asking players to approach issues of trauma through the lens of memory, as a person with similar experience.

In an informal Twitter interview, Llaura Dreamfeel wrote that her game is less about "seeing oneself reflected" and more about "being able to see oneself in a new light." Dreamfeel "didn't want to impose [herself and her] view onto the player." Instead, the game emphasizes what the player feels and brings to gameplay. The artist wanted to "give them space. . . . By respecting [the] player as a peer the creator/game is both close and distant, both listening and detached." Dreamfeel's profile picture at the time—a still from Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)—signaled a familiarity with the history of feminist film and feminist film theory, and the formal aesthetics of Curtain reference distancing strategies feminist filmmakers have used to challenge dominant Hollywood cinema. This discussion of Curtain playing with closeness and distance, listening and detachment particularly recalls Laura U. Marks's discussion of the mournfulness of haptic visuality, the distance between the visual haptic and the experience of touching a distant loved one (Marks 2000, 192). Curtain not only plays with the distance and closeness of player and game, player and author, but it also helps players put distance between themselves and their own experiences, and to re-experience them in conversation with the game and the author.

Marks developed her framework of haptic visuality to describe the very strategies used in Curtain. She identifies common aesthetic strategies of haptic visuality,
Haptic Aesthetics Beyond the Visual: Hurt Me Plenty, SABBAT, Curtain

The voice of the game refuses the probable desires of the player for Ally to have a to be: she is writing comics, she has friends and/or family, she is independent. The events of the game. Ally is becoming the person the player has noticed she wants

As in the shower, when the player must see the hallway behind the curtain of water, players must look past the curtain of the game itself to attempt to navigate and make sense of the environment.

Haptic visuality also describes an aesthetic critique made by marginalized filmmakers of normative terms of visuality, narrative, and cultural difference. The Skin of the Film relates a trend in art and scholarship of exploring the tactile to the ways in which film and video artists critique visuality itself, refusing viewers the ability to passively absorb information in familiar narrative or ethnographic modes.

One of the problems with empathy is the way in which this framework has turned a persistent ethnographic gaze on the queer games movement, focusing on the biography and embodiment of individual artists. Curtain shows how visual aesthetics used to resist the ethnographic gaze can translate to interactive digital art in queer games. Rather than explaining queer experience in an accessible way, queer games that use haptic aesthetics can hail queer players not only through the representation of queer characters and queer narratives, but through affective familiarity, representing experiences players may relate to, or fantasies players may share. In this way, queer games can use the haptic to retain the specificity, complexity, and unknowability of their individual narratives, while inviting players to relate these narratives to their own lives, as tools for learning about others and about themselves. Queer games with this haptic aesthetic provide open-ended imagery and narratives which players are invited to fill with their own experiences and interpretations, exploring their own lives and memories in conversation with a game, rather than touring the lives and struggles of others.

If Curtain encourages players to engage with its content through memory, which memories does it access? In many cases, Curtain engages painful memories of abusive relationships, which queer people, particularly queer and transgender women and genderqueer people, may be more likely to experience than their straight and cisgender counterparts (Glass 2014). This may be why some among the queer and trans gamers and game designers attending the 2014 Queerness and Games Conference had trouble playing Curtain to what hard-core gamers might designate as "completion." That is to say, playing the game multiple times, exploring all its available actions and discovering its narrative "ending." In playing to completion, gamers must be open to exploring memories of personal trauma they may try to leave in the past. The itch.io page for Curtain includes a "content warning"-- omnipresent in online spaces, particularly in queer spaces and those of fan culture (Lothian 2016)--for "non-explicit themes of abuse," so consumers are prepared to revisit these memories, if they so choose.

The experience of recovering from trauma can often feel like a series of mental games: how could I have avoided this? How could I have reached the "best" ending? In Curtain, all roads lead to the same abrupt dismissal. As the player gazes into a blank mirror in their new home, to which Ally has escaped from the family and the homeland. The soundtrack blasts a punk anthem, and the screen fades to black. For the first time, the game mimics the sound of the main characters' band, in an energetic departure from the rest of the game's sound design. The text at the bottom of the screen also contradicts the events of the game. Ally is becoming the person the player has noticed she wants to be: she is writing comics, she has friends and/or family, she is independent. The voice of the game refuses the probable desires of the player for Ally to have a swift happy ending, as well as the assessment the player may have of Ally's current situation. By refusing to end well, Curtain insists on its own point of view, and releases the player from their own memories.
While Curtain’s low-resolution style and highly audiovisual content lends itself to the use of film theory in its interpretation, many queer games that engage the haptic do so less visually and more through bodily movement, texture, and tactility.

The first edition of Robert Yang’s Hurt Me Plenty, for example, critiqued the cut scenes, gift exchanges, and puzzle-like dialogue trees used to represent sexuality in many games by instead offering the opportunity to virtually spank a hunky submissive using a gestural interface, the Leap Motion controller. Building from Mattie Brice’s suggestion that kink might be a better model than empathy for thinking about intersubjectivity in games (2017, 79), Hurt Me Plenty models kinky play in three stages: Consent, Scene, and Aftercare (Brice 2017, 80-81). Each gesture the player must make legible to the Leap Motion seems simple, but the distancing effect of the gestural interface leaves players productively uncertain of their ability to meet the computer partner’s standards. First, an up and down motion simulates hand shaking (consent); next, moving side to side with different speeds and wavelengths simulates heavy or light spanking (scene); and finally a circular motion simulates rubbing the submissive’s back to listen to his impressions of the scene (aftercare).

The game is somewhat didactic and idealistic in its sequential modeling of a consensual scene, but it also builds consensual affect and simulates kink forms of tactility. Trying to spank a computer partner through a gestural interface opens the user to much uncertainty, hesitancy, and failure, productive affects for the representation of consensual sexuality. As in a live scene of spanking, the player must be observant, gauging the submissive’s vocalizations and body response: Is the skin pink? Red? Is the submissive slumping or panting? The lack of direct tactility in the Leap Motion version of the game, and the limited tactility of the version that uses a mouse or touchpad, encourage the player to move cautiously and with care. In this way, by positioning the player as a dominant in a spanking scene, Hurt Me Plenty balances closeness with a productive distance between player and submissive AI.

In particular, Yang uses an “energy cooldown timer” - a technique usually employed by mobile games to extract money from players - to model the submissive’s reluctance to play again if the player violates their consent. If the game is being played in a group setting, the refusal of the submissive to play after one player has violated his boundaries ends the game for the rest of the players.

This, Yang (2014) argues, may simulate the way in which abuse destroys the community, in addition to harming its direct victims. In using consent to produce a type of empathy with an NPC, Hurt Me Plenty demonstrates several registers of queer feelings after the empathy framework. First, it plays with the desire for tactility and the inevitable distance between player and non-player character. Second, by using consensual procedure, Hurt Me Plenty provides a context for the player to explore their feelings about kink and sexuality.

While Yang’s use of Leap Motion plays with the impossibility of physical touch between gamer and game character, Jess Marcotte and Dietrich Squinkifer use physical touch and texture to play with the difficulty of building emotional connections between game players. The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter is part of what scholar-artist Jess Marcotte (2017) has called “queering game controls,” a process of expanding the mechanics and affordances of control in electronic and physical games. Marcotte has worked with Dietrich Squinkifer, also known as Squinky, to create a series of games about social dynamics and physical touch, building from experiences navigating the social world through non-binary gender. As “Handsome Foxes in Vests,” the two form a development team that also created Most Sincere Greetings, Esteemed One (2016) and Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly: An ASMR Plant Dating Simulator (2017).

Troubleshooter consists of a hard-shell vintage suitcase filled with soft objects, a cloth embroidered with conductive thread, an earpiece, and a game manual. In the fictional world of the tabletop game, this is a “SUITCASE Unit,” a high-tech device useable only by troubleshooters with degrees from the Institute of Emotional Labor. After the two players—the troubleshooter and advice-seeker—both create fictional characters to represent themselves based on charts within the manual, the advice seeker presents a problem, and the troubleshooter uses the SUITCASE Unit to find solutions to the problem among the set of soft objects which whisper in their ear through the earpiece. The troubleshooter then presents possible solutions, and the advice-seeker provides agreed-upon payment for a job well done.

Pieces of conductive thread are embroidered through the drop cloth beneath the suitcase, as well as on the surfaces of the sewn, crocheted, and crafted objects within, including a fish, a beaker, a scroll, an eyeball, an anatomical heart, a potted plant, and more. To get advice, the troubleshooter and advice seekers must ground themselves by placing hands on the embroidered hand prints on the drop cloth. When the troubleshooter touches an object in the box, they complete the circuit, prompting the small computer inside the case to send a signal to the earpiece, where a voice recording offers humorous thematic advice. It is the troubleshooter’s responsibility to translate these secret whispers to advice relevant to the advice seeker’s presented problem. The game contains affordances for multiple levels of emotional engagement, from humor to roleplay, self-revelation, and connection. However, it also plays with the texture of gender, in particular the idea of softness when juxtaposed with masculinity.

In an interview with the author, Squinkifer defined radical softness as part of a nonbinary transmasculine identity that approached queer femme. “A nonbinary (gender) identity has been very helpful in reclaiming more femme aspects of myself and my interests, without the trauma of having those things be used to
misgender me," they told me. "What kind of person do I want to be? A lot of times the answer is, I’d love to be . . . an embodiment of radical softness." Coming from a transmasculine perspective, radically soft game design is a way to explore gender through tactility as well as affect and emotion. Radically soft games like Troubleshooter value and teach (radically) soft skills such as listening, and are queer as in the queerness of textile art, which uses materials associated with kitsch, craft, and "women's work" to express experiences from queer life. Their tactility, sculptural qualities, and installation formats promote embodied intersubjectivity, in the manner of zines and cÅ rdenas’s (2016) concept of the stitch.

The "hard core" of dominant gaming culture has often been opposed to the small, or to the casual (Juul 2010). Softness, the invisible other that constitutes the hard, has been a more recent addition to the conversation about video game aesthetics, but it has long been a part of queer art, zine-making, and DIY culture. If queer games is a movement made up of videogame zinesters, this may be particularly true when art games appear as installations in convention spaces, and when they involve unique physical interfaces. When created from crochet, embroidery, and hand-sewn patches of conductive fabric, these DIY projects exist in a history of what Ann Cvetkovich (2012) has called feminist "craftivism" (176). Moreover, these unique game art installations draw from the sculptural qualities of the zine medium, which Alison Peipmeier (2009) argues connects zine creators’ and zine audiences’ bodies, building intersubjective engagement through tactility and even the sense of smell. In their exhibition and catalog Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community, John Chaich and Todd Oldham (2016) ask, how does the proliferation of textile art by queer artists relate to queerness itself? In interviews, the artists link their work in embroidery, latch-hook, weaving, knitting, and crochet to queer femininities, from lesbian feminism to gay male femininities, to the femininity of trans-masculine artists and their work.

For queer game design, softness is not yielding. Lora Mathis defines radical softness as "the idea that unapologetically sharing your emotions is a political move and a way to combat the societal idea that feelings are a sign of weakness" (McLean 2015). The dynamics of radical softness in Mathis’s work lie in the battle to maintain an ethic of healing and care while fighting daily experiences of patriarchal, racist, and homophobic oppression, as well as echoes of trauma from these experiences. Though the use of conductive textiles in videogames made by transmasculine-identified artists, and the term "radical softness" to describe this turn, are relatively new, conductive textiles are part of a recent history of transgender art practices related to speculative futures and dreams of healing and community. For example, micha cÅ rdenas’s Local Autonomy Networks (Autonets) (2012) uses conductive textiles to imagine a network that could tie together trans communities of color, and reflects on the ways fabric holds the warmth and scent of the body.

The core mechanic of SABBAT (Eva Problems, 2013) is transformation into a demon and destruction of the world. In the game's Director's Cut, sparse reverberating guitar chords rise in volume from the simplistic Twine interface as the player uses a text-based menu to decide which parts of their body they will anoint with essence of snake, crow, goat, wolf, and centipede. As candles flicker, the player character invokes a litany of demons and the souls of burned and tortured witches of centuries past, and THEY ANSWER. Depending on the player's choices, the player character undergoes a series of gleefully gruesome transformations, and the game rewards the player with a cutely embellished custom demon sprite in the manner of a dollmaker game. Acting as their demon avatar (which remains at the bottom right corner of the screen), the player can make out with a witch, fight an internet-obsessed Christian forum user, and inspire all humanity to rise up in anti-capitalist revolt.

This seemingly hard fantasy plays with texture and gender in a way that complements the radically soft Troubleshooter. The joy of unrestrained transformation and destruction in SABBAT is made possible by its weaponization of cuteness, through which the culturally-threatening becomes familiar, desirable, and erotic. Cuteness does not require a particular embodiment or identity for inclusion: its mimetic quality makes affective appreciation of cuteness instantly transform into the admirer's own cuteness (Ngai 2012). For this reason, cuteness is a productive category for expressing queer sexual value. In order to avoid gendering terms, one might use the term "cuties" to refer to attractive people, or dating partners, as cuteness adheres to a variety of genders, body types, and identities. Aevee Bee (2014) writes, "cutie is a way to say 'you're attractive to me and others in a way that our language doesn't have precise wording for because it's deliberately excludes and shames and punishes people for looking like you do, but I value you and think you're neat!'" In this way, cuteness becomes a way of identifying someone as an erotic commodity without gendering them and without making reference to existing beauty standards, a particularly useful tool for genderqueer, genderfluid, and transgender people. Weaponized cuteness also offers an aesthetic mode for resistance that explores trauma, violence, and oppression while emphasizing the attractiveness and of the cuties resisting, as well as their worthiness of care. By offering gender, emotional expression, and embodiment in the form of mood and texture, SABBAT and Troubleshooter invite players to explore the contours of their own genders. Because our genders can be so close yet so distant, seemingly able to be touched yet slipping away, the aesthetic mode of the haptic is particularly productive for representing gender as inherently trans.

Our Laura Mulvey Moment: Queer Game Design as Haptic Media

The story of empathy games could be understood as one of loss: how the Bay
In the introduction to their 2017 anthology Gaming Representation, Jennifer Malkowski and TreAmanda M. Russo worm ask, “where is this field’s Laura Mulvey moment?” (1) “Film studies enjoyed a long post-Mulvey period when explicitly feminist topics and methodologies were not just accepted but dominant—when, to hear our senior colleagues tell it, work that neglected to account for gender, where relevant, struggled for acceptance for the first time” (1-2). Asking for videogame studies’s Mulvey Moment—in reference to the scholar’s famous 1975 essay on the gaze and psychoanalysis in Classical Hollywood Cinema—is a refreshingly interdisciplinary approach to the study of representation in videogames, though it too sounds like a feminist narrative of loss. Queerness and games may be enjoying its moment right now, characterized, like Mulvey’s has been, by cycles of self-questioning and critique (including Mulvey’s own [1981] self-critique). These critiques built the field of feminist film theory, so it follows that the empathy debate may remain relevant to queerness and games for years to come. Empathy does not define the haptic in queer game design, however. As queer game studies incorporates more theory-practice approaches, the ways that queer game design operates as theory will become ever more important to helping scholars be responsible to queerness in our continued conversation about feelings in games, a topic central to women in games and feminist videogame studies. Moving forward from empathy, rather than leaving it behind, helps link queerness and games to the history of feminist theory, and the potential pitfalls of this history.

Acknowledgments

Endless thanks to Amanda Phillips, Bo Ruberg, and Game Studies for putting together this special issue highlighting work on queerness and games. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers who pushed this article forward with their insightful and constructive comments. Conversations and relationships with scholars, artists, colleagues, and mentors supported my research on the haptic in queer game studies. In particular Anna Everett, Mireille Miller-Young, and Constance Penley helped me decide to include an early version of this research in a dissertation submitted to the University of California Santa Barbara’s Film and Media Studies department. Conversations with Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, Jess Marocite, Dietrich Squinkifer, and other games artists, teachers, and writers also greatly influenced my understanding of game design theory and practice. Early versions of this article appeared at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, where co-panelists Aubrey Anable, Christopher Goetz, Whitney Pow, Bo Ruberg, and Ricardo Zulueta offered important feedback to the project.

References

Brice, Mattie. (2017). "Play and Be Real About It: What Games Could Learn From Kink." In Adrienne Shaw & Bonnie Ruberg (Eds.), Queer Game Studies (pp. 77-


Ludography

Anthropy, Anna. (2015). Empathy Game. [Installation], USA: Babycastles Presents Anna Anthropy Presents The Road to Empathy.


Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft. by Teddy Pozo. Abstract.Â I begin by putting empathy in queer games in conversation with feminist discussions of empathy and intersubjectivity, and then with haptic visuality through a reading of
Laura Dreamfeet's Curtain (2014). As queer games scholars, we must be attentive to the stories we tell about our own movements, and how these stories limit our understanding of the past and of our future possibilities, as Clare Hemmings (2012) argues feminists must do.