

NPC Empathy: A Philosophical Paradox

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INTRODUCTION

In recent work I propose the idea of NPCs as “digital homunculi,” a collaborative social artefact created by a group of real (but anonymised) game designers: voice and motion actors, story designers, writers, animators, and so on (Scriven 2023). What we might typically define as single-player roleplay in RPGs is thus not *entirely* a solitary endeavour; it is social, shared roleplay, mediated by time and technology. Game developers must anticipate the kinds of social experiences players will have with NPCs: we can “feel” the gaze of the NPC through its programmed expressions of approval, disdain or fear at our in-game actions; we recognise a cowering NPC as scared when we point a gun at it. It must also be noted that these interactions exist in a unique “province of meaning” (Gallese 2020; Schutz 1972), i.e., we know that such interactions occur in a fictional context of play between technologically mediated humans with ideal-typical intentions.

But this tells only part of the story: further work is needed to refine our understanding of the player-NPC experience, to investigate what is “given” to the player in immediate perception during a gameplay experience. This piece proposes for discussion and feedback a novel phenomenological position: a revision of our understanding of real-world, human empathy that allows for meaningful experiences with non-human actors. Against the backdrop of the empirical literature on NPC empathy, I articulate the philosophical tensions present in the phenomenological tradition and propose a solution that aims to sidestep the “other minds” problem by positioning empathy in the perceptible configuration of the other’s experience, and not their inner experience itself.

Witnessing a cherished non-player character (NPC) companion in a role-playing game (RPG) experiencing sadness or grief can leave us with a metaphorical pit in our stomach. But why? Is this not a visceral, “real” reaction to what is objectively a “pretend” event? NPCs aren’t conscious creatures, they don’t have agency, yet in many ways we interact with them as if they did. Fuchs (2014) calls this the split awareness of fictionality, presenting as a paradox in our lived experiences of empathy with fictional characters (including those in non-digital media). My discussion reports on a work in progress towards resolving this tension, inviting the audience to reflect

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on their own experiences of empathy with NPCs in video games. As part of a larger project by the author on the phenomenology of empathy, this article focuses specifically on NPCs.

There is a significant and growing body of empirical research suggesting the formation of emotional attachments with video game characters (Bopp et al. 2019; Burgess and Jones 2020a, 2020b; Coulson et al. 2012). Among the literature, a few common factors are present in relation to empathy and attachment between players and NPCs, such as narrative (Bopp et al. 2019; Heron and Belford 2014; Jørgensen 2010); a second is character design and believability (Emmerich, Ring, and Masuch 2018; Johansson 2013). These factors contribute to the immersive quality of the player-NPC interactive experience. Smethurst and Craps (2015) argue that interactivity and empathy foster "complicity" - a sense of responsibility for actions in the game world. Marsh, Yang, and Shahabi (2005) saw player-NPC interaction as a kind of "vicarious experience" similar to "telepresence" (115-116). More broadly, these factors frame a body of research exploring NPCs as "sociological agents" (Harth 2017) or "embodied conversational agents" (de Rosis et al. 2005), signalling that sociability in immersive NPC design and the quality of the factors of narrative and believability are intertwined with players' capacities to empathise with them.

But how can phenomenology define empathy as "the experience of foreign experience" (Stein 1964, 20), when NPCs can't, by definition, have their own experiences? How and why do we treat NPCs as interactive social partners, when they have no conscious intention to speak of? The other minds problem is associated with the notion that in order to empathise, that is, to understand the experiences of another, we need to, colloquially, "get in their head," or employ some form of mental simulation or mind-reading.

Positioning empathy in a perceptible configuration of (foreign) experience sidesteps the other minds problem by discarding the prerequisite presence of another mind to be empathised with, instead shifting the essence of empathy to perceptible behaviour in the lifeworld (the configuration): how the lifeworld mediates subjectivity, how a perceived expression, action, or artefact precedes our insight into the other *as* other. Our experience of the other manifests in our perceptual experience of that which *signifies* but not confirms the other as an experiencing subject by the manner in which the observer's body interacts and resonates with what is perceived (Gallese 2019). This allows the NPC as an interactive agent to perform intentionality, to be empathised with, minus the requirement it has a "mind".

BIO

Dr Paul Scriven is a lecturer in social research at RMIT University. An avid gamer and social researcher, he has a keen interest in understanding the unique nature of intersubjective experience in online spaces, and how these spaces contribute to new forms of social interaction. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, his research focuses on technologically mediated social interaction, and the emerging questions concerning our relationships with non-human actors including NPCs and generative AI.

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