

Empathy Puzzles: Solving Intergenerational Conflict in Young Adult Video Games

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ABSTRACT

When Katie Greenbrier (*Gone Home*, 2013) and Edith Finch (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017) return to their family homes, they are confronted with the frailty and fallibility of their parents. Photo albums they were never meant to find, letters they were not supposed to read, and receipts that tell uncomfortable stories reveal to the teen protagonists the secret, and sometimes sordid, lives that their parents have kept hidden from them. In this article, I argue that the ‘exploration’ game mechanic in both of these texts equates the strategic need to examine a puzzle from multiple angles with a cumulative sense of wholistic, interpersonal understanding required for successfully challenging adult hegemony and bringing about intergenerational reconciliation. I posit that these games present cross-generational empathy not as an end-state to attain, but as a ludic skill that precipitates action, meaningful consequence, and structural change. In other words, these video games connect empathy to agency, positioning it as a tool for problem-solving, sense-making, and intervention. This article responds directly to Bonnie Ruberg’s call to “end the reign of empathy” in the critical and commercial discourses surrounding video games, and follows her precedent of unpacking the ambivalence and complexities of ‘playing-at-empathising’ in order to identify counter-normative models of connection and intersubjectivity present in these texts.

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INTRODUCTION

Two teenaged girls, Katie Greenbrier and Edith Finch, return to their respective family homes after long absences. The abandoned houses function as museums, mausoleums, and metaphors for their former inhabitants, whose stories stalk the corridors, suffuse the architecture, and haunt discarded possessions. As Katie and Edith move from room to room, the empty houses yield their secrets and reveal disturbing truths about the missing families.

Katie and Edith are the player-characters in two young adult video games: *Gone Home* released in 2013, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* released in 2017. It would be difficult to define these two games as ‘young adult’ solely based on the modal age of their playerships, or on the presumed age of their implied players. The marketing campaigns and distribution pathways for these games are not targeted specifically at young adults, and both games won the annual BAFTA Games Award for ‘Best Game’ (*Gone Home* in 2014 and *What Remains of Edith Finch* in 2018), indicating their broad appeal across demographics. For the purposes of this article, however, I am defining these games as ‘young adult’ in order to identify and centralise the common characteristics that I believe warrant placing these texts in conversation with each other: namely, that both games are focalized through a teenaged avatar; both games document adolescent identity formation through engagement with music, clothing, popular culture, and video games; both games are structured around a gradual but transformative anagnorisis; and both games mark the moment in which the asymmetric power balance between parent and child shifts, granting the adolescent protagonist greater self-determination, independence, and criticality. Furthermore, if these two games were placed in a wider panmedial constellation of YA texts, other shared patterns and motifs would emerge. Both games have thematic connections to young adult ‘problem novels’, with *Gone Home* relating the thrills and angst of queer sexual awakening and first love, and describing incidents of high school bullying, while *What Remains of Edith Finch* implicitly deals with the topic of teen pregnancy, explores death by suicide, and touches on substance abuse.

Gone Home and *What Remains of Edith Finch* are just two examples drawn from a growing medium-specific corpus of kindred games that explore the lives of young adults through intimate, interpersonal narratives that are shaped by player decisions. Recent games in this category include the *Life is Strange* series (2015-2019), *Oxenfree* (2016), *Night in the Woods* (2017), *Gris* (2018), *Florence* (2018), *Marie’s Room* (2018), *Tell Me Why* (2020) and the forthcoming *Goodbye Volcano High* (2021). Categorising these games as YA texts directs critical attention in interesting and productive ways, opening up new avenues for scholarly enquiry across disciplines. I believe that expanding YA corpora to include video games will enrich ongoing scholarly discussions in the field of young adult studies, introduce new critical material, and generate methodologies that are appropriate for increasingly panmedial literature ecologies.

Beyond their shared intersections with YA literature, *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Gone Home* bear a strong family resemblance to each other. They share a common setting – the *unheimlich* home – and a common imperative: find out what befell the absent inhabitants. They also share common game mechanics. Both games are experienced from a first-person perspective and their primary interactions involve moving through the gamespace, examining objects, and uncovering narrative embedded in the environment. Rather than framing their ludic challenges as a series of goal-driven interactions with clearly defined win or fail conditions, the games instead encourage players to engage in curious, considered exploration, to fill interpretive gaps, and to iteratively structure and synthesise new narrative information. The games test players’ understanding of genre conventions, their ability to infer the mental states of characters, and their aptitude for reading digital architecture and virtual props. The most proficient, diligent players are rewarded with a deeper understanding of the story events and additional insights into the characters’ inner lives. In this sense, both texts run counter to stereotypical ideas about what kinds of experiences video games are able to elicit. It is a widely held view that ludic media are most suited to action-oriented, fast-paced, plot-driven experiences with epic but ultimately shallow narratives, featuring “[p]rotagonists with a few memorable qualities, agonistic in their inclinations to solve problems through external action rather than internal angst” (Burn 411). These games challenge this generalisation: with their domestic, intimate themes and meditative, reflective moods, they demonstrate that rule-based systems and digital interactions can express quiet, inward mental processes and the subtle nuances of social relationships in profound, moving, and poetic ways.

Both games are narrated by eloquent, sensitive teenaged girls – by Edith herself in *What Remains of Edith Finch* and by Katie’s younger sister, Sam, in *Gone Home* in the form of epistolary journal entries written to Katie, which activate when Katie enters certain spaces or performs specific actions. The games also share a thematic interest in the tensions that characterise intergenerational relationships. Both games contemplate the asymmetric power distribution between parent and child, and question the assumed naturalness of adult hegemony. The teenaged protagonists mediate between generations and facilitate opportunities for reconciliation, but both games ultimately defer to the player to decide whether relationships predicated upon the dependency of children and the dominance of adults can ever be tolerable and just.

In this article, I focus specifically on how the interactive mechanics in these two games lead players and protagonists from innocence to experience, equipping them along the way with the information necessary to critique age-based hierarchies. I argue that the gentle puzzles in the games frame the unequal distribution of power between generations as a problem to be overcome, and that the solution to this problem is found in the gradual accumulation of interpersonal understanding that contextualises the flaws, frailty, and foibles of the older generations. I conclude by suggesting that, while the affordances of non-

interactive media can serve to elicit empathy in readers and viewers, ludic texts have the potential to go a step further by inviting players to make deliberate decisions with meaningful consequences informed by empathetic understanding. These decisions trigger dynamic feedback loops that make players feel accountable for the outcomes of their choices, as well as providing them with the opportunity to reflect on the value and efficacy of these outcomes. In other words, these games do not present empathising as a virtuous end-state to attain, but rather as an amoral skill to be honed in order to take moral action.

LUDIC EMPATHY

This article is indebted to Bonnie Ruberg's recent critique of "the increasingly pervasive rhetoric of 'empathy' that surrounds contemporary video games" (55). Ruberg documents the ways in which news articles, industry presentations, and promotional materials use the word 'empathy' to describe the purported ability of interactive media to allow players "to experience the feelings of others – with a focus on those who are seen as diverse or disadvantaged" (55). She uses the language of tourism and colonisation to expose the power dynamics that exist between privileged playerships and digital identities, arguing that "[u]nder the banner of empathy, players are invited to visit the experiences of others, trying on their identities like foreign attire and turning their lives into novelty destinations" (61). She notes that when the term 'empathy' is used in these contexts, it is often loosely defined as an educative experience designed to transform dominant social groups into 'better people' by encouraging a combination of perspective-taking and sympathising with "someone else's misfortune" (64). Approaching these texts as if they were lessons in socialisation upholds to the false notion that the default 'Player' belongs to dominant social groups, whilst also remarginalising minority groups – even as the games themselves specifically hail minority players and are created by diverse developers. Ruberg firmly rejects empathy, both as an interpretive framework and as a system of value, demonstrating that it facilitates "the appropriation and consumption of marginalized experiences" by allowing privileged players to indulge in "the self-satisfied feeling of allyship" (55) without hazarding their privilege in the service of real social change. She summarises:

Like empathy itself, the feeling of allyship, which may be well-intentioned but is also self-congratulatory and self-serving, should give us pause. Approaching video games as so-called empathy machines offers players the chance to feel good – and, more specifically, to feel like they have done good – by playing through another person's hardship. (64)

Ruberg's deliberate disentanglement of 'feeling' and 'doing' reflects the sentiments of a number of game developers whose works have been praised for their ability to elicit empathy, including Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, Natalie Clark, Merritt Kopas, and Robert Yang. As Yang writes, "what if we don't want your fucking empathy? [...] *I don't want your empathy, I want justice!*" (n.p.). Soliciting 'empathy' through games may not only be unnecessary for social change – it may be fundamentally incompatible with it. If dominant groups view empathising with a marginalised group as equivalent to, or as a stand-in for, acknowledging the ways in which dominant groups are complicit in, and benefit from, the oppression of marginalised groups, then they will not use their privilege to bring about real social change. Social justice cannot be approached as if it were contingent on the dominant group's ability to empathise – not least because it is all too easy to empathise with someone whilst maintaining power over that person – and the humanity of marginalised groups cannot be conditional on their relatability, palatability, or similarity to dominant groups. It is, therefore, dangerous to build interpretive frameworks for media analysis that overemphasise or undernuance the connections between empathy and justice. However, in this article I ask whether the affordances of video games might automatically require empathetic feelings to be expressed as moral actions: specifically dynamic interactions, wherein mindreading and perspective-taking can be course-corrected via ludic feedback loops. I take Steve Wilcox's assertion that "empathy is a skill and videogames can and do train that skill" (n.p.) and go one step further, to suggest that what video games actually train is how to take action that is motivated by empathy.

Although Chris Crawford's definition of ludic interactivity as "a cyclical process in which two actors alternately listen, think, and speak" (5) has been rightfully critiqued (see, for example, Stang), the idea of a bi-directional exchange between game and player draws attention to the fact that games influence and condition player behaviour as much as they respond to and execute player commands. Some games use this "interreactivity" (Smethurst and Craps 269) to create the illusion of intersubjectivity: the sense that when players are experiencing a game, they are engaging with a separate agent that is in possession of an independent, divergent will, and priorities, desires, and drives of its own. Unlike a novel or a film, an interactive text can comment on, challenge, or reject player's actions. It can deliberately alternate between modes of domination and submission, familiarity and unknowability, and closeness and alienation, depending on the player's input. Furthermore, the loop between game and player can be used to simulate the sustained process of requesting and granting consent in interpersonal relationships. In other words, rather than players projecting themselves onto in-game characters, or using their own personal experience to make assumptions about the inner-life of a character, the interactive nature of video games can facilitate conversations in which the player can be wrong, and the limitations of their position and perspective can be called out. This ludic interactivity could ensure that empathy is always experienced as an evolving process and as one facet of

problem-solving: empathy is not something that players can expect to consistently ‘get right’ first time. Finally, assuming the mantle of ‘player’ is a constant reminder to those engaging with a text that they are not merely observers of a rule-based social system, but participants with circumscribed roles within that system. Their capacity for empathy may not always map onto their ability to act.

Ruberg is clear that she “would like to see an end to the oft-repeated and widely circulating rhetoric of empathy” in the gaming industry (62). However, she suggests that, “for the moment, rather than dismissing ‘empathy’ [...] there is value in lingering with this discourse in order to deconstruct its meanings” (62). In its substantive analysis, this article ‘lingers with’ the discourse of empathy, closely examining how perspective-taking, emotional contagion, and sympathy are instrumentalised in *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, with a specific focus on what kinds of ludic interactions are prompted and informed by empathy. The goal here is to suggest another way of connecting empathy and interactivity – to argue that empathy might be reframed as an amoral, ludic skill that players master by developing an understanding of the rule-based structures that produce marginality, as well as the plight of marginalised individuals.¹ To put it another way, this article asks whether the interactive affordances of video games transform the YA ‘problem novel’ into a space for ‘problem-solving’.

As I turn my attention to the games themselves, I build upon a close reading methodology outlined and developed by Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum enumerate the challenges faced by researchers conducting close readings of video games, including the indeterminacy of digital, ludic texts, the broad scope of virtual worlds containing multiple agents, the varying – and often customisable – levels of ludic difficulty, and the necessity of researchers oscillating between positions of critical distance and playful engagement. To manage some of these challenges, I turn to Diane Carr’s recent work. Carr’s method involves “playing the game through several times and then engaging in a closer consideration of particular moments within the game through forms of fragmentation (repeated play, taking and reviewing screenshots). These fragments [are] then fragmented in turn, their elements ‘unpacked’” (711). Carr uses her “experience of playing the game [as] the basis of a decision about the richest and most relevant or evocative levels or chapters for further analysis” and rejects the concept of an ‘implied player’ in favour of positioning

1 I focus on the social identities produced by heteronormativity (Nikolajeva) and consider the intersections of heteronormativity with heteronormativity in *Gone Home*, but I do not examine how racialised identities, gendered identities, or disabled identities are produced in games. A number of critics have written extensively on the construction of these social identities in games (see Leonard (2003, 2006), Brock (2011), Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014), Waddell et al. (2014), Russworm (2017), Hutchinson (2017), Stone (2018), and Carr (2019)), and although the term empathy is not always explicitly used in their work, issues surrounding identification, appropriation, and emotional affect are discussed in depth.

herself as the ‘player-as-analyst’ (716). Following Carr, I also adopt an autoethnographic stance, rooting my critical analysis in my own subjective experiences of these two texts.

I am mindful of how my identity and beliefs – as well as the socio-temporal contexts of my playthroughs – shape my responses to the games, but I am careful not to draw overly reductive links between my sociocultural position and my interpretations. However, my approach diverges from Carr’s in the manner in which I record my playthroughs. Carr encounters issues wherein the “role of the player-as-analyst [blurs] into the role of the sort-of-player-as-earnest-yet-thwarted-archivist” (715), and she also finds that the time-consuming, repetitive nature of the fragmentation process dulls her usual sense of curious, creative enjoyment that she experiences when playing video games for other purposes. I have tried to retain an element of creative play in the archival process, whilst also separating archival work from analytical work as much as is possible using the following method: having selected a section of the text for close analysis, I play it through pausing only briefly to note down plot points, key dialogue, and important controller inputs. Immediately after completing the section, I write a short prose anecdote detailing my experience of this playthrough, using figurative, literary language that attempts to capture both the nuance of my visceral, kinaesthetic, embodied reactions to the text and the expressive eloquence of the text’s non-verbal signifiers. The ludic challenge of this process, as I have argued elsewhere (Reay 2018), is to transcribe the somatic, tactile, visual, auditory, ludic, and performative signifiers into verbal language, without narrowing their communicative breadth or arresting their transient nature – one could think of it as an extensive, multimodal crossword puzzle. Thus, through the two subsequent sections of this article, I do not claim to have created an objectively accurate verbal transcript of specific sequences within *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Instead, I have endeavoured to preserve the aesthetic experience of an individual and potentially unrepeatable playthrough while bringing to the fore the most impactful and significant of the texts’ formal properties.

EXPLORING THE NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE

I’m just going to start at the beginning, with the house...The truth is, even after I inherited the house, I never thought I’d come back to it. But now I had questions about my family that only the house knew the answers to...As a child the house made me uncomfortable in a way that I couldn’t put into words. Now, as a seventeen-year-old, I knew exactly what those words were. I was afraid of the house. (Edith, *What Remains of Edith Finch*)

In line with Edith’s precedent, my analysis begins by interrogating the games’ houses. Henry Jenkins has suggested that game designers should be seen “less as storytellers and more as

narrative architects” (674). He describes gameworlds as “evocative spaces” (677) that can function as “memory palace[s]” (682) with narrative information “embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery” (682). The houses in *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Gone Home* are much more than story-receptacles: they are active, responsive communicators that function as both accomplices and antagonists. The power that Jenkins attributes to game designers to create “obstacles [that] thwart and affordances [that] facilitate the protagonist’s forward movement towards resolution” (679) is bestowed by proxy upon the houses, which seem to act as independent agents in an otherwise unpopulated gameworlds.

Built by Great-Grandmother Edie and her husband Sven in the middle of the isolated, sea-bound forests of Orcas Island, the Finch family home is distinctly arboreal. It grew organically as the family grew, with rooms added for each new child, and extra floors constructed for every subsequent generation. It tapers and teeters into a precarious tower, scaffolded by stilts and the thick trunk of a native redwood that grew through the conservatory roof. Rope ladders and plank bridges connect the extensions to each other. In its state of abandonment and dilapidation, the house’s wooden cladding and beams are being re-wilded by indigenous plant life, and this windblown verdure compounds the sense that the house is very much alive. Light and shadow roll across its walls like flickering eyelids, floorboards groan in resignation, bending corridors beckon like crooked fingers, peep holes tease, and doors slam in sudden fits of indignation. Edith’s narration – which is heard as audio as well as visualised as reactive, animated written text – not only anthropomorphises the derelict building, but also anatomises it, ascribing it human body parts. She comments, “nothing in the house looked abnormal. There was just too much of it. Like a smile with too many teeth”. This simile succinctly captures the *unheimlich* allure of the building: it is simultaneously welcoming and menacing – indeed, the sense that the house is somehow predatory is linked to its seemingly generous hospitality. Behind the jumbled, cosy abundance of belongings is a gaping maw ready to swallow Edith whole.

The house’s vitality is juxtaposed to the hushed, yawning absence of its former owners. The unfortunate Finches have all fallen victim to a family curse that causes many of them to perish in childhood. Those who are lucky enough to survive into adulthood meet sticky ends in freak accidents. Seventeen-year-old Edith is the last living Finch and, following the recent death of her mother, she has inherited the creaking, blank-windowed, timber-framed succubus that is her family home. The player shares Edith’s trepidation as she makes her way up the long, overgrown drive. The charming but ominous music box melody in Jeff Russo’s wistful soundtrack combined with Edith’s own poignant reflections on the unnatural coupling of childhood and death ready the player for a haunted house scenario. No matter which path players choose to take through the swaying foxgloves and ferns, they end up at the foot of the house, creating a sense of fateful inevitability. The player’s desire paths are both permitted and manipulated by the game in a way that draws attention to the limits of the player’s agency, as well as to themes of predestination and responsibility. That is to say,

irrespective of player choice, the game's structural design controls all possible outcomes in this opening scene – both Edith and the player are powerless to alter the rigid code that underpins the apparent freedom suggested on an audiovisual level. In this way, right from the beginning of the game, players do not simply align themselves with Edith's perspective, but are subjected to the same structural limitations and rule-bound systems as Edith. This means that players experience Edith's disempowerment first-hand, even as she functions as the vehicle that grants players agency within the gameworld. In affording the house such impressive and oppressive presences and by limiting the remit of the avatar, *What Remains of Edith Finch* emphasises the fact that individual identities are products of their environments.

Players also share Edith's strategic focus on understanding and resolving the Finch family tragedy: both player and character approach the house as a legible object – an encrypted crypt to be deciphered. “I had questions about my family that only the house had the answers to”, narrates Edith, priming the player to snoop, pry, and interrogate in the manner of a detective. However, the ‘clues’ that the player must collect are not simply logical, objective facts and authentic histories to be sequenced and corroborated. Instead, the player is invited to interpret visual, verbal, audible, and mechanical metaphors, and to find subjective meaning in the loose, lyrical associations between moods and motifs as one might when reading a poem. Whereas other game genres might explicitly affirm a correct answer to a puzzle – perhaps with a scoring system, a check box, or a positive audio cue – *What Remains of Edith Finch* evades valuing player solutions. The order in which players access certain rooms, the comprehensiveness of their exploration, and the time spent on each puzzle is not quantified by the game.

The game's reticence here encourages subjective interpretations, embracing variability and ambiguity in a way that undermines the possibility of uncovering a singular, univocal, objectively correct ‘reading’ of narrative events. Players are barred from occupying a ‘god's-eye’ perspective and are forced to settle for partiality rather than totality. What is more, they are also excluded from fully embodying Edith's subject position. Edith's narration addresses an unknown person. If her narration represented the contents of a private diary, players could assume it was addressed to them as they ride shotgun in Edith's consciousness, but it is revealed in the final vignettes in the game that Edith is not writing to herself: she is writing to her unborn child. The fact that the player does not realise Edith is pregnant until the last moments of the game underlines the fundamental separation of player and character, and the limits of what can be known through perspective-taking. The revelation makes the edges of empathetic overlap between players and characters painfully clear. So much of Edith's story is kept from the player, preserving her privacy in a game that's central mechanic is snooping. Furthermore, the sense of player-avatar bodily connection is shown to be a presumptuous on the player's part, suggesting that this kind of ‘identity-tourism’ is always incomplete and fragmentary.

The distinctive shape of the Finch house is reflected in the structure of the Finch family tree, which appears at each save screen to record the player's progress. As Edith learns the unhappy fate of each her ancestors, she adds their names and faces to a pencil sketch of her lineage in a notebook. The central trunk of this hand-drawn family tree marks the precarious continuation of the Finch bloodline, while single leaves indicate in-laws. Slim, abortive branches stretch laterally across the page, showing the short, stunted lives of the of the Finch children who succumbed to the family curse before they had the opportunity to procreate. The strange layout of the house – with its long lower level that rises seven storeys to a single annex – has a metonymic resonance with the sketch of the Finch genealogy, making the family tree almost like a map or floorplan of the house. The visual association between family tree and family home seems to affirm the supernatural connection between the Finches and their abode. The symmetry between the architecture of the house and the family tree affirms that this game is fundamentally about intergenerational understanding. That is to say, entering a room in the house becomes a form of perspective-taking.

As Edith and the player enter a room in the house, there is sense that they are meeting the former inhabitant. Initially the player gains a first impression of the characters, encountering their outward selves that they share openly with the world. However, once the player and Edith start to explore the intimate spaces of their bedrooms by opening drawers, thumbing through bookshelves, and peeking into troves of souvenirs, they move beyond these superficial, constructed selves, uncovering the throwaway minutiae that reveal each character's private fears and passions. The player becomes familiar with each character, learning the honest, mundane, unthinking habits of each Finch and seeing amongst these daily rituals humanising idiosyncrasies that converge to shape a complex, individuated identity. Making the characters' acquaintance in this way is both uncomfortable and thrilling. Rather than suggesting that perspective-taking is a wholly positive social action, *What Remains of Edith Finch* positions the player somewhere between trespasser and confidant – a violator of personal space as well as a listening ear.

An invasion of privacy equally shapes the experience of exploring the house in *Gone Home*. The first communication that the player and Katie receive from Sam is a note pinned to the front door, which includes the instruction: "Please, please don't go digging around trying to find out where I am". It is explicitly without Sam's consent that the player and Katie ransack the Greenbrier house for narrative clues as to Sam's fate. This disregard of Sam's right to privacy continues throughout the game, during which players access documents that Sam has labelled "Private! Do Not Read!!" and crack the code on Sam's school locker to examine its contents. Empathy with Sam should inhibit players' desire to violate her privacy, but the game's interactive possibilities encourage action that runs counter to empathetic identification, introducing from the game's outset the distinction between feeling and doing. Much like the Finch family home, the Greenbrier house is filled with locked doors, secret cubby holes, hidden entrances, and disguised passages. Since the ludic challenges in both

games are to break into sealed-off rooms and discover new pathways through the houses, the 'win' conditions approve of, and value, this route to intimacy. However, atmospheric cues complicate this ludic approbation by generating feelings of ambivalence and discomfort, primarily experienced as a prickling anxiety that another character will suddenly enter the virtual space and catch the player snooping.

The house in *Gone Home* has recently been inherited by Katie Greenbrier's parents following the death of their estranged, reclusive uncle. It is an enormous, remote, colonial American homestead in the middle of a wood. Katie and the player arrive on the porch during the darkest part of the night whilst a violent thunderstorm is raging. Katie has been away for a year travelling around Europe, and so, conveniently, her first time at the house coincides with the player's first time there too. While the geographic location of the house is vague, its location in time is precise: it is set in the early 1990s, and the music, technology, and interior design document this era with museum-like fidelity. It is a gloomy, imposing, oppressive house, and the unease felt by the new inhabitants is evident in the unpacked moving boxes dumped throughout the rooms – the Greenbrier family clearly hasn't quite worked out how they fit into the space yet. The dark, haughty grandeur of what was once clearly a place of wealth and importance insists that the building is still a symbol of traditional, conservative, heteronormative ideals. However, the house's outward façade barely manages to suppress the chafing unconscious that lurks in every closed drawer, behind every locked door, and under each bed. Seemingly prosaic items – a shopping list, a spilled drink, a postcard to a friend – connect to form a narrative web that allows the players to reconstruct the events leading up to the disappearance of the Greenbriers.

The deafening thunder claps, Sam's Ouija board, the flickering lights that suddenly fuse and plunge the player into darkness, and a voicemail message of a distressed young girl weeping incoherently down the phone prepare the player for a haunting – perhaps an encounter with the ghost of the dead uncle, or the thing responsible for the uncle's unexplained death. Once Katie and the player learn of the homophobic response of Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier to Sam's coming out, an urgent dread develops of finding Sam swinging from the rafters or bleeding out in the tub – fulfilling the 'bury your gays' trope. As kopas summarises:

This is a video game. About girls in love. That shouldn't be exceptional in and of itself, but it is. And because it's a video game about a big empty house and because it's a story about girls in love, anyone who has any familiarity with either of those genres is going in expecting the worst to happen. Because seriously, setting a lesbian love story in a creepy old mansion is the perfect confluence of terrible. So from the start you're thinking, okay, ghosts. Or suicide. Or probably both. (146)

In fact, one heart-stopping moment involves finding Sam's bath filled with red stains, only to later discover that Sam had been helping her girlfriend colour her hair, and the only thing that dyed was Lonnie's mohawk. In this way, *Gone Home* thwarts pathways to empathy based on the idea of sharing in another's suffering or taking a 'trauma tour' by upending clichéd expectations about the misery of minorities.

Players begin with an architectural blueprint of the Greenbrier home that grows and gains detail as they explore new areas of the house. The repression of Sam Greenbrier's queerness at the hands of her parents and her small-town school is expressed metaphorically in the floorplan. Sam is pressed into the very walls of the house, forced to hide parts of herself behind panels, in the basement, and in her darkroom in the attic. She is squeezed out from the main thoroughfares and forced to exist in its margins. Areas of the house that Sam favours are scrawled on top of the printed plans, suggesting that Sam has to creatively 're-write' domestic spaces in order to accommodate her non-normative presence. Katie learns about her sister's sexuality and developing relationship with love-interest Lonnie by exploring the liminal spaces that Sam sequesters herself in. However, even the most meticulous players are likely to miss some small tokens of Sam's queerness. The love notes she swaps with Lonnie in class, for example, are balled up in wastepaper baskets – I only discovered them on my third playthrough. A diary entry containing details of Sam and Lonnie's sex life is suddenly folded away by Katie without the player's input and is not recoverable. Environmental storytelling permits Sam a continued secrecy and privacy that would be difficult to replicate in other media, and asserts that the player is only glimpsing a small part of a complex identity. As with Edith's pregnancy, even players who take a rigorous, 'completionist' approach to exploring the Greenbrier house are reminded that they cannot wholly occupy another's lived experience.

ELICITING JUDGEMENT

The house in *Gone Home* is not merely a symbol of heteronormative pressure: it is also directly used as a form of punishment by Sam's parents when they 'ground' her after finding out about her relationship with Lonnie. Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier, however, also struggle to live up to the standards of a traditional, Christian, straight marriage. The player finds evidence that Mrs. Greenbrier may have had an affair with an employee, and Mr. Greenbrier seems to have an alcohol problem. Depending on the objects that the player chooses to examine and narrativise, the various hypocrisies of the older generations reveal themselves in different ways. Mr. Greenbrier's reaction to his daughter's sexual 'deviance', for example, loses some credibility if the player has uncovered Mr. Greenbrier's stash of pornographic magazines, and Mrs. Greenbrier's lack of compassion seems particularly callous considering her bedside drawer contains both a bible and a letter confessing her adulterous desires to a

friend. The game's conclusion – the solution to the puzzle of determining what has happened to the Greenbrier family – is that Katie's parents are on a marriage counselling retreat, and that Sam has run away from home to be with Lonnie, cutting all ties with her parents but leaving her big sister Katie an encrypted explanation for her disappearance.

It is clear is that Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier reacted in a homophobic way to Sam's coming out. Even if players do not find the newspaper clipping enclosed in a TV Guide detailing an 'intervention camp' for deviant and homosexual youth, or if they do not infer that the vandalising of Sam's school locker was an act of homophobic abuse, they will understand that Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier's parenting has caused Sam pain. In her audio diary, Sam muses,

Katie, you know how mom and dad are. Not exactly... super open-minded. About things. It feels like every minute I don't spend with Lonnie, I spend worrying about them finding out about us. And what would happen if they did...You know dad's "joke" about "the nunnery" that he'd tell whenever you brought boys around the old house? I wonder where he'd want to send ME... (*Gone Home*)

Sam's need to deceive her parents is clearly a protective pose, and there is something violent about exposing Sam's carefully concealed queerness throughout the duration of the game: Sam is seemingly 'outed' against her will. On the other hand, Katie and the player's rehabilitation of Sam's queerness in the domestic space of the house functions as a second chance for Sam to come out, this time to a more caring, attentive, and supportive audience. Unlike Katie and the player, who devote time and attention to understanding the intricacies of Sam's life, Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier seem oblivious to Sam's woes and dismissive of her joy. Their proximity to their daughter in the house has not translated into intimacy or even familiarity, and since the main mechanic of this game involves making a conscious effort to understand others, the insularity and self-absorption of Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier almost positions them as antagonistic to the game's central mission.

The character of Katie Greenbrier is something of a cipher in this game who does not express judgement, and so the player is left to decide whether or not to forgive Mr. and Mrs. Greenbrier. Players may sympathise with Mr. Greenbrier's career anxiety and his own unhealthy relationships with the generation above him, and they may understand why Mrs. Greenbrier is tempted by her younger colleague. However, anger is as much an option here as is compassion: players might choose to wreck the house, becoming the supernatural poltergeist that the game's gothic tropes promise but never deliver. Players might carefully conceal Sam's secrets, returning objects to their original hiding places out of respect for her privacy. Players might vindictively leave Mrs. Greenbrier's adulterous letters on the marital bed to be discovered. Actions such as these do not directly change the plot, but they provide space for the player to express judgement. *Gone Home* seems to posit that family unity at any

cost manifests as the maintenance of the status quo, and suggests social change cannot happen without the destruction of established familial power dynamics. It asks whether one should empathise with another's lack of empathy, and whether one should try to humanise those behaving in an inhumane way. In other words, although the player connects with each of the Greenbriers through the same empathetic process, empathy for individual family members is ultimately separated from moral cognition and the allocation of justice. At the end of my playthrough, in celebration of Sam's liberation and in retaliation against Katie's homophobic parents, I carried hundreds of items from around the house – mugs, toilet rolls, photo frames, handbags – and dumped them all in the main foyer. It was a deliberately childish act of spite and rebellion: a defiant 'No!' to adult tidiness, uniformity, rationality, and control. It was an act of solidarity with Sam, and a refusal to empathise with Sam's parents.

What Remains of Edith Finch invites the player to judge the in-game adults in a different way. A secondary mechanic in the game requires the player to temporarily assume the subject position of each dead Finch in a flashback that revisits the final moments leading up to their deaths. Edith discovers a piece of media authored by, or written about, the character – a photo album, a letter from a therapist, a funeral elegy, a comic book, and a divorce contract, amongst other things – and this initiates the body-swap. As the transition occurs, a different variation of the soundtrack's melodic theme begins, a new narrative voice is heard, the font of the verbal text changes, and the simple controls become momentarily unfamiliar as the buttons are ascribed new functions. However, the player soon gets comfortable in the ancestral body and there is a metaleptic sensation that just as the player is possessing Edith, so too is Edith 'mastering the controls' of a new avatar. This game-mechanic metaphor does the work of explaining these exorcisms without explicitly designating the nature of the temporal and corporeal transportation. This fits with the game's coy magical realist style, where competing truths allow supernatural myths to co-exist with mundane explanations as mutually enhancing paradoxes. It also draws attention to the conditions of the emotional labour involved in 'perspective-taking'. The layering of consciousnesses (the player's, Edith's, and Edith's ancestor's) turns 'walking a mile in someone else's shoes' or 'seeing through another's eyes' into an overt game mechanic. The fact that neither Edith nor the player know which item will trigger a flashback – and the fact that there is no way to cancel the flashback once it is triggered – speaks to the fact that emotion contagion is often not voluntary, and that empathising is often a skill developed by oppressed social groups in order to predict and manage the behaviour of dominant groups.

It is suggested that in order to avoid the implications of accepting responsibility for the deaths of her children, Great-grandmother Edie dogmatically pushes a supernatural curse explanation for the Finches' misfortune. Edith's mother Dawn, in contrast, vehemently rejects what she sees as, at best, a delusion and, at worst, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Dawn believes the 'curse' is only inherited by future generations because Great-grandmother Edie insists on chronicling it and offering it as an interpretive key to their lives. Following the

deaths of her two sons, Dawn leaves the house, taking Edith with her and abandoning Great-grandmother Edie to her fate. Dawn's final, damning rejection of this charismatic matriarch who, rather suspiciously, outlives almost all of her descendants, positions Edie as the villain in Dawn's story and leaving the house as an escape from parental control. Edith, however, treads a middle ground between her mother's bleak but practical realism and her Great-grandmother's fatalistic magical thinking. "Maybe the stories themselves are the problem", Edith muses. "Maybe we believed so much in the family curse, we made it real. Maybe it would be better if it all died with me". Edith recognises that the Finches themselves sustain the curse, even as the curse annihilates the Finches in a dynamic of deadly co-dependence.

Edith's ambivalence devolves responsibility to the player to decide how to allocate blame or absolution for the deaths of the Finch children. This is a difficult, confronting task. The death of Edith's older brother Lewis by psychosis-induced suicide is perhaps the most beautiful and the most painful of the game's vignettes, not least because of the complexities surrounding suicide and agency that are explored in the relationship between Lewis and the player, who steers the character towards his demise. The player is permitted to experience first-hand Lewis' psychotic delusions in which he is a voyaging king conquering imaginary lands, as well as the gory reality of his job at a fish cannery where he repetitively beheads salmon with a mechanical guillotine. The player strongly shares Lewis' desire to retreat into the bright, cheery, musical world of his psychosis to the point the player's desire for free exploration in this joyful hallucination comes to represent and be synonymous with Lewis' suicidal urges.

The death of one-year-old baby Gregory, who drowns when he is left unattended in the bath, also induces uncomfortable feelings of guilt and complicity. In another medium it might be easy to blame Gregory's death on adult negligence, but when one is forced by the game to open the tap that floods the bath and drowns the baby, the alternate narrative of an inevitable curse seems more appealing and better fits the experience of being coerced by the game system. Gregory's drowning is narrated by his father via a letter to his ex-wife that he scribbled on back of their divorce papers. The vignette has the player and Edith wave Gregory's lovely, chubby arms like a little conductor, while Tchaikovsky's *The Waltz of the Flowers* plays and his bath toys perform a balletic dance. Rubber ducks, a wind-up frog, stick-on bath letters, a bottle of shampoo, and a squirty whale bounce and twirl around the bath in response to the choreography communicated through Gregory's gestures. It is charming and joyous, until the player gradually realises that the game will not progress until the wind-up frog – directed by Gregory, Edith, and the player – turns on the tap to overflow the bath. The water rises above eye-level, *The Waltz of the Flowers* reaches a merry crescendo, and Gregory's plump, pink hands become green, webbed, amphibious limbs. Even if the player attempts to guide Gregory to swim upwards for air, the game prevents Gregory's head from ever breaking the surface. He must swim after a parade of bath toys and dive headfirst down the plug hole into a diminishing pool of white light.

In his narration, the grieving father tries to exonerate and forgive his ex-wife, and, by extension, the player, for Gregory's death. He says:

I know how silly it sounds, that I worried about a baby being too happy, but I could feel him slipping away. I know you did everything you could. Maybe if I hadn't called that night...There is so much I don't understand. About Gregory. About everything. But I know what happened wasn't your fault. I'm sure he's happy. And he'd want you to be happy too. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*)

The player feels the father's desperate need to narrativise this awful event, not only vicariously through empathy, but also through the player's own desire for personal absolution for the role they played in Gregory's death. As Smethurst and Craps write, "due to the unique ways in which players engage with them, games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events" (277). The player's actions in this sequence are both purposeful and accidental, voluntary and coerced, regrettable and necessary all at once, and this prompts the same dissonant feelings that are expressed on an audiovisual level, where the happy swelling of orchestral music, the saturated colours, and balletic animations are at odds with the tragic event being described.

Unlike *Gone Home*, *What Remains of Edith Finch* does not provide the player with the opportunity to vandalise the family home as a form of protest against age-based hierarchies. Instead, the game ends with a cutscene of Edith's young son placing lilies on her grave in the family cemetery. The final image in the game is of the impossibly-shaped Finch house rising above the treetops, and then the player is returned to the main menu and invited to begin a new game. The inescapable omnipresence of the house and the hold it seems to exert over the Finches makes it a metonym for the way familial ties can be simultaneously caring and controlling, suffocating and sustaining, vital and fatal. The fact that players cannot alter the house in any way suggests that they are powerless to change the intergenerational dynamics that imperil the Finch children. The invitation to begin a new game brings to mind Edith's musing: "maybe it would be better if it all died with me". The player's decision to play again becomes a question about the ethics of procreation – if there are no new environments to accommodate the next generation, is it fair to subject them to the rules of an unwinnable game?

CONCLUSION

Ruberg's concerns about inappropriate and potentially harmful uses of empathy are not unique to video games: documentaries, television series, and novels marketed to young adults also engage in a similar rhetoric. This article has argued that what video games bring

to broader discussions about arts-based empathy is a sense that empathy expedites action. By connecting empathising with interacting, video games not only hone the skill of empathy, but also train players to intervene, mediate between agents and systems, hazard their own privileges and simulate the consequences of doing so. That is to say, the strategic, puzzle-solving approaches that ludic texts invite can shift empathy towards moral cognition and solidarity that manifests as action. Since video games communicate via rule-based systems – and gate their content behind ludic challenges – progression through a text depends on players’ understanding of how coded structures produce both specific outcomes and specific identities. Positionality and relationality defined by encoded rules are experienced firsthand by the player, as well as vicariously through the game’s characters, and so players are encouraged to walk a mile in their own shoes alongside a character without having to co-opt that character’s footwear. Furthermore, gaming interfaces can draw deliberate attention to the limitations of embodiment – to what is unseen, unfelt, and unknown – and to the imperfections of avatar-player connections established through continually updating, dynamic feedback loops. This preserves the specificity, the complexity, and the private nature of the lived experiences of others.

Even in games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Gone Home*, where player-input is essentially limited to the verbs ‘move’ and ‘inspect’, empathy is instrumentalised as a tool for sense-making and problem-solving. In *Gone Home*, inferring the emotional states and thought processes of characters allows player to navigate the Greenbrier home, unlocking new areas for exploration and ultimately solving the mystery of the missing family. However, *Gone Home* also permits players to assume the role of a gothic ghost that exploits the simple ‘pick up’ and ‘move’ game mechanics in order to desecrate the house, which is an oppressive symbol of adult normativity and heteronormativity. Empathy is a puzzle-solving tool that can be used to understand how agents exist with systems, but empathising does not always result in conciliatory or constructive actions. ‘Winning’ this game does not require the player to act compassionately towards the older generation of Greenbriers. In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the intergenerational structures that scaffold the family are shown to be foundational and inescapable: these interpersonal systems are ‘set in stone’, so to speak, because they are physicalised in the architecture of the house. What is more, underscored by the rumination on the existence of fatal curses, *What Remains of Edith Finch* uses perspective-taking to create a sense of player-complicity in the game’s tragic events, reminding players that systems consist of active participants. The player’s inability to act to subvert or dispel the metaphoric meaning of the house is felt intensely because it is presented in an interactive medium. The transition between the final cutscene, in which agency is wrested from the player, and the main menu, in which the player is able to restart or quit the game, implies that empathy alone is not enough to challenge power differentials. If the rules cannot be changed, then sometimes it is best to stop playing the game.

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