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PLAYING FOR WHOM? UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY AND TRAUMA IN  
POSTCOLONIAL AND GLOBAL SOUTH VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES THROUGH  
WITNESSING

by

JENN OLIVE

Under the Direction of Jay Rajiva, PhD

ABSTRACT

This project seeks to better understand representations of and interactions with postcolonial and global south identities via trauma narratives as they are encountered in new media, particularly videogames. Building on previous research on interactive media and narratological structure both in and out of trauma studies, I investigate the ways of representing trauma narratives within videogames, challenge existing models of understanding trauma narratives in videogames by bringing postcolonial and global south narratives into consideration, and present a different model and method of analysis for such narratives based on prior media that considers the ethics of rhetorical engagement with the content and the medium.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma, Postcolonial Literature and theory, Videogames, Global south, Witnessing, Empathy

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WITNESSING

by

JENN OLIVE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

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2020

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POSTCOLONIAL AND GLOBAL SOUTH VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES THROUGH  
WITNESSING

by

JENN OLIVE

Committee Chair: Jay Rajiva

Committee: Randy Malamud

Janet Murray

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

Thank you to my friends and family for making sure I made it through this process. I would like to thank my Aunt and Uncle, Gay and Brian Valimont, for their unwavering support through my graduate studies and making sure that I did some of the most basic things to keep me going. A special thanks to my uncle for being the only person in my family to read any of my published work—you are truly a saint.

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I cannot begin to express the thanks and gratitude I have for my wife, Anna Woten. You are my North Star, the voice of reason, and the best human I have ever met. When I was lost in the weeds of things to do, you helped me remember to take time to live. Thank you for putting up with me through this process, making sacrifices with me to get to this point, and for talking me out of quitting multiple times.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, the only person who did not freak out when I told my family that I changed my major from computer science to English. While everyone else was screaming about my life decisions in the next room after a day of bailing hay, you calmly looked at me, smiled, and said “Dr. Olive...now, that has a nice ring to it.” I finally did it—we have a doctor in the family.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: MAYBE IT ISN'T ABOUT YOU

In 2012, Anna Anthropy released her game *Dys4ia* on Newgrounds, which made her experiences as a trans woman accessible to a wider, online audience. Broken into four parts that the player unlocks in a unisequential<sup>1</sup> fashion, the game walked players through Anthropy's narrative of her dysphoria during the process of obtaining hormone replacement therapy. It wasn't the first game to touch on personal or even traumatic content, but its importance lays in its lasting impact on videogames and their potential as art becoming one of the hallmark games for several different movements, including queer games, independent games, and empathy games.

The last category was problematic to Anthropy as was evident by her reaction to some of the responses offered. Empathy games is a broad category of narrative games generally known for providing a space to tell personal and immersive stories, usually revolving around trauma, to which players have an affective reaction, typically described as “understanding” or “knowing” a perspective through the act of play. Upon receiving comments about the game and how it had affected players, she removed the game and tweeted her dissatisfaction of the game's use without her consent or consultation (Anthropy, “If you are a cis person...”). To a request for the game being exhibited as an installation piece about trans experiences, she sarcastically included another game that let people walk a mile in her shoes and record their own scores (Anthropy, “Empathy Game”). Her blog post called “Empathy Game” explained the exhibition as being:

about the farce of using a game as a substitute for education, as a way to claim allyship. . . . Being an ally takes work, it requires you to examine your own behavior, it is an ongoing process with no end point. That people are eager to use

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the implied linear structure of the narrative while recognizing the multilinear possibilities of the narrative format. Once unlocked, the player can go to any of the sections out of order.

games as a shortcut to that, and way to feel like they've done the work and excuse themselves from further educating themselves, angers and disgusts me. *You don't know what it's like to be me.* And yet, 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. (“Empathy Game”)

[emphasis original]

Anthropy's explanation of her project showed how the use of empathy games for betterment of a player centralized the player's experience over her own, the subject of the narrative. The move to objectify her experience into something that the player can use, she argues, is lazy in that it labels an activity allyship without any of the necessary follow through on behalf of the player to accomplish what allyship is supposed to accomplish. This call-out laid bare how well-intentioned assumptions cause real harm, forever changing the trajectory of empathy games.

Released around the same time as *Dys4ia*, Mattie Brice's game *Mainichi* (2012) focused on her daily life as a trans woman of color in a simple experience: meeting a friend for coffee. The repeating nature of the game in a *Groundhog Day*-esque pattern allows the player to make different choices to her routine in getting ready, going to the coffee shop, and talking with a friend. Even when everything is done “right”—as in making sure to engage in all of the minutia of presenting one's self to the world in order pass and be treated the same as everyone else—the player character still encounters street harassment around her perceived gender and tidiness of her racial characteristics, customer service confusion of whether or not she is attractive or who she says she is, and “well-meaning” friends who close off opportunities that are not within the “normal” trans narrative. The repetitive nature of the game drives home the fact that there is no

right way to exist in the world and having to deal with mistreatment no matter what one does takes a toll on a person.

With similar responses to her work as *Anthropy*, Brice developed a performance piece and explanatory blog post both titled *empathy machine* (2016). Players had to move her limbs and watch her perform daily tasks happening in the game like brushing her hair, taking away the separation between her experience and what happens on the screen.<sup>2</sup> As she explains in her blog post, the experience was a way to take back her work from the othering and appropriation of players who wanted to use the game to “understand” the trans experience:

My game *Mainichi* is commonly used as an example of how to teach cisgender people about the trans experience, yet its design, critical engagement with other games, and my future work that isn’t about painful experiences are completely sidelined. My game was exhibited at events without my permission, conferences only wanted me to talk about harassment instead of my work and ideologies, and eventually after being on the receiving end of large-scale harassment produced by the industry, left unsupported. This was my attempt to reclaim *Mainichi* on my terms. (“empathy machine”)

Similar to *Anthropy*, Brice was objectified by responses to the game where people wanted her to talk about her trauma over and over again rather than the brilliance of the game and how she made it over a weekend with no programming experience (“empathy machine”). This othering contained an even greater degree of racial insidiousness as *Mainichi* did not receive (and still does not receive) the same press and attention that *Dys4ia* received. *Mainichi* often exists in the

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<sup>2</sup> A video of this experience is also available in her blog write up about *Empathy Machine*.

in-between place of women's experiences, normative trans experiences, and experiences of people of color, meaning that it almost always gets erased.

While indie (independent) and queer games communities raised concerns about empathy in videogames, the videogame industry at large saw an opportunity. In his 2013 Game Developers Conference talk "Rethinking How We Build Games and Why: The *Papo & Yo* Story," Minority Media's CEO and Creative Director Vander Caballero talked about his own story of dealing with an abusive and alcoholic father through the allegory of Quico and his father in their debut game *Papo & Yo*. In this talk, he emphasized the power of games as a place in which to tell stories and how this newfound interest in what he was calling "empathy games," games with personal narrative experiences, for the industry showed the next step for games: a way to get at what was truly unique for videogames as a narrative medium (Caballero, "Rethinking..."). The next year at the same conference, he increased his stake in this perspective by calling for a unification of these kinds of games under the empathy games genre umbrella as a move that would better define the gaming experience for the player and, ultimately, help this kind of design thrive because it would make games easier to find for players and better communicate its characteristics for investors ("Empathetic Games..."). This talk was far more publicized than Anthropy and Brice's respective projects and addressed vastly different points within videogames. Focusing on the positive characteristics of the potential genre, of telling personal stories, Caballero sought a way in which to make these kinds of games more viable in a AAA-game market, games developed and published by major studios and franchises.

These examples, a microcosmic view of the larger debate, exemplify key issues of appropriation and alienation about empathy games and the prescient nature of the conversation. From Caballero's perspective, this debate for empathy games intertwines with the narrative

development of games continuing the purpose of literature to expose us to lives outside of our own. At the same time, we see pushback from some creators such as Anthropy and Brice in the Queer games movement who argue through their work that those experiences don't offer the enlightenment promised by the empathy/indie development talked about by Caballero and have the potential to cause harm. These two perspectives, Caballero's enthusiasm and Anthropy and Brice's disillusionment, provide a glimpse into the larger issues of appropriation and othering as well as potential around empathy games.

This dissertation intervenes within this history of empathy games to remind readers that we have been here before. Building on postcolonial and global south theory and literature, I show that the concerns of appropriation and othering remain in new media despite it being "new." By recognizing the history of oppression within the well-meaning intentions of empathy games and their rhetoric, I ask players to pause and take a closer look at what they are doing when they play empathy games and what they want to accomplish. In this pause, I offer an alternative model of understanding empathy games. Augmented from Dori Laub's model of witnessing, I argue that play is a form of witnessing in the context of empathy games. A witnessing model enables players to take pause and investigate not just where they are going but how they are getting there—how their actions within play can affect the change in the world they want to see.

In this introduction, I provide a history for contextualizing my witnessing as play model. I start by better defining what an empathy game is and contextualizing what it aims to accomplish in terms of affective engagement with a player. I further trace the affective engagement to similar past debates in videogames like violence in videogames and gamification. The goal of tracing this history is to see where the same argument structures have progressed

within new media around affective engagement and offer an intercession so we can stop repeating the same arguments. Next, I explain why I advocate for a witnessing model for my intercession. I parallel the history of trauma studies from focusing on the end point of trauma to the process of trauma by moving play towards Laub's model and how it mirrors what I am doing in empathy games. Using postcolonial and global south interventions in trauma studies, I emphasize how the arguments happening in empathy games go further than games studies and find familiar antagonism in postcolonial and global south theory and literature. Acknowledging the insidiousness in which these concerns continue in new media through the guise of empathy, I offer my augmented model of witnessing as a means of disruption. This means of disruption starts with the player and demands that they look at how they play empathy games and alter that play to break this cycle of violence.

### **1.1 Empathy vs. Violence/Utopia: The false dichotomy**

Arguably their own genre, empathy games are often lumped in with narrative games because, overall, they tend to rely more heavily on the story than other games. For example, it is in these games that the story is often seen as a highlighting feature of the game rather than as something in addition to the mechanics. This categorization, however, is not exclusive to other genre classifications. Just as not all narrative games are point-and-click like *Gone Home* or text-based like *Façade*, they may tend to also use mechanics and tropes from other genres to provide an engaging narrative experience for the user. In this way, narrative games like *Zork*, which relies on adventure mechanics and tropes, and *Lost Constellation*, which uses aspects of puzzle platformers in some sections, can potentially contain multiple classifications.

When used within a system that is designed to tell a specific story and generate empathy within the player, empathy games present as a bit of a contradiction. By providing an interactive



system with larger rules, subjective experience is provided for the player. At the same time, by providing a particular narrative, the one that is meant to cultivate the emotion of empathy, the subjectivity of the user's experience runs the risk of compromising the narrative aspect of the game. For example, how might the story of *Papers, Please* be different if you could just quit your job? The point, however, is to have the user engage with a particular experience—what happens when these decisions as to who gets into the country and who doesn't are made by *you*? More to the point, what do you feel as a player knowing that there is not anything you can do to change the game's outcome? Empathy games provide opportunities not only for us to think about how we interact with systems and experiences within the game but also how we connect to other people and issues that we seem to ignore otherwise. Realizing that you as a player are both part of the system, and yet, the story being told isn't yours to tell is where the power of empathy games lies.

A similar form to empathy games can be found within global south literature: writing back<sup>3</sup>. An excellent example of this in literature is Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, where she uses biting sarcasm to point out all of the things unseen by tourists who visit Antigua. Within the first few pages, Kincaid walks through the tourist journey into the island and makes notes about all of the things that a tourist wouldn't see from the lack of adequate medical care should something befall the tourist (7-8) to not knowing how the sewage is eventually emptied into large bodies of water given the lack of infrastructure (13-14). What Kincaid is pushing back against with this narrative is the idea that having a similar experience in a place can offer someone an exact replica of an experience. The tourist who writes about Antigua will never know or even have to think about the things that remain unseen behind their vacation. Instead,

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I'm playing on Bill Ashcroft's ideas and title for *the Empire Writes Back*.

Kincaid uses of her own voice in the novella to reprimand the reader for not putting in the labor to make themselves aware of their vacation's context, which offers an effective method of invoking empathy. Just as Lisa Nakamura does in her analysis of online cultures, Kincaid's novella provides a way of uncovering awareness as empathy because they both draw attention to the active nature of the reader's or user's role within the relationship. This focus provided to new media via Nakamura's concept of cybertypes is one that I would like to push further into games criticism using the ready example of empathy games. If global south literature and postcolonial theory have been making these moves towards decentering the audience's position, it makes sense to use them as guides for building a methodology going forward.

In preparation for applying global south and postcolonial literature and theory to empathy games, I provide a short history of the debate that produced empathy games as we know them. After the videogame industry saw its first large entrance to the market with arcade cabinet success in the 1960s and 1970s, the US market of this industry started to make its way into homes with consoles such as the Atari 2600 and Intellelevision in the 1970s and 1980s. As these gaming spaces converged with family spaces, increasing attention was given to the violent content of games. From their infancy, videogames have circulated around militarization from parent industries with military industrial complex ties to equipment that built off of military research such as the foundations of cybernetics and associative logic from World War II to the content, which often featured combat or war-based scenarios both on Earth and in outer space. One of the first videogames, *Spacewar!*, is a good example of this convergence of militaristic influences. Published in 1962, this game was the product of hacker culture at MIT and written for the PDP-1, which was designed with a significant focus on user interaction with the machine rather than just computational efficiency, and made its way through the students who had access

to the game and could make improvements (Donovan 10-11). The game's content revolves around resource management of weapons and fuel as you try to destroy an enemy ship. Such games only increased in popularity and made space for games like *Galaxy Wars*, *Asteroids*, *Tanks*, and later games like the now famous *Call of Duty* franchise. What is important to note here is the point that Patrick Crogan makes in *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture*, where he traces the roots of games through the military industrial complex: games have always been part of a highly militaristic genealogy (17). In this way, the militaristic content and preoccupation with war should not surprise anyone as a focus of videogames. But, that surprise overtook many who were not forced to confront this history until it played out on their living room televisions.

The popular cultural suggestion that videogames became more violent or are inherently violent fails to consider the correlation of timelines where this militaristic technology pushed into the boundaries of the home. The move from arcades to households enabled parents to see what was, up until then, out of sight in other venues. Once videogames were in the home, parents started to pay closer attention to content and vocalize fears associated with it. These fears manifested in psychological discussions recounted in Tristan Donovan's *Replay* examining U. S. Surgeon General Dr. Everett Koop's 1982 concerns about family violence and signs of abuse (95). Asked about videogames' effects on children, Koop cited their militaristic and violent content without directly claiming that they caused violent behavior (95)<sup>4</sup>. This speech was on the heels of other countries setting up restrictions and even bans on games and arcades (95-6). These events set the stage for future debates as the videogame market began to flourish in the home console market starting in the 1990s.

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<sup>4</sup> Koop would go on to acknowledge that this content was his own observations and not based on any scientific evidence (Donovan 95).

As videogames started to rise again in the U.S. after the market crash in the 1980's, these concerns once again reared their heads leading to the creation of entities such as the Entertainment Software Ratings Board in 1994, a non-profit company that continues to issue ratings for videogames based on things such as age of the player and violent and sexual content.<sup>5</sup> These events and trends stress that the closer games get to us—spatially, physically, and psychologically—the more we worry about the effects they have on the audience. Moreover, considerations of this debate within videogames as novel neglect these long histories as well as the foundational history of the medium in military technology<sup>6</sup> to avoid taking a good long look in the mirror and seeing where these ideas originated.<sup>7</sup>

In response to these negative views regarding videogames and the technology around them, creators and academics started to examine the positive applications of videogames. Such investigations centered around the same logic of videogames teaching or encouraging violent behaviors: if the negative or violent content within videogames could precipitate these negative behavioral responses, why could they not also cause opposite reactions of positive and altruistic behavior with the replacing of negative content with positive content? These views largely condensed into a section of scholarship and praxis known as gamification in the early 2000s. Basing on the same logic from the violence in videogames debate, scholars such as James Paul Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* argued that the simulation environment of videogames provided a perfect place in which teachers could re-think their pedagogy to encourage learning through participation rather than the “skill and drill”

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<sup>5</sup> These debates have not gone away, either, as is evident by the rhetoric and roundtable meeting on the subject by the Trump administration following the 2018 mass shooting in Parkland, Florida (Montanaro and Parks).

<sup>6</sup> See Patrick Crogan's *Gameplay Mode* for a detailed account of the military history of videogames.

<sup>7</sup> I'm not advocating that videogames are not violent in problematic ways—some are. My point in paralleling this debate with that of empathy games is to show that addressing the issue as either a problem for designers or players does not address the cultural contexts such as a proliferation of firearms or continued dehumanization and disenfranchisement of certain populations surrounding the videogames in question.

methods that had pervaded education in previous generations (67). Not only did he argue that this method was more effective, but he also argued that it could be used as a place in which positive behaviors could be taught and encouraged through as another mode of engaging cultural models (138). This “gamification” debate launched just as videogames were once again seeing a boom in the US economy and following the heels of several education games and their incorporation into classroom environments in the vein of *Oregon Trail*, *Reader Rabbit*, and *Math Blaster!* These games, all addressing learning in different ways for different subjects over a number of decades, were all adopted as more efficient ways of teaching children skills in an interactive environment, providing what Gee argues is the best way to learn those skills by making their processes and effects more tangible (67-9). Here, we can see how videogames were put in a more positive light by aiming to make learning more efficient.

Gamification’s benefits for children proportionally responded to the harms of videogames in that they promised a revolution regarding learning and pedagogy. This hyper-positivity contained a similar logical fallacy to the violence in videogames debate: eschewing the cultural context of videogames in favor of focusing on how games could be used positively affect the audience. This hyper-positivity precipitated ignoring the historical foundations of videogames in military technology resulting in an almost Utopian approach to what games could do. It is not a coincidence that such a movement occurred in parallel with the 1990s tech bubble, return of videogame market, and eventual .com crash. Many of the same attitudes towards technology and the amazing benefits it could have for humans regarding their social interactions can be found in both camps. From game advertisements that promised gamers the ability to live in different lives as well as the promise of educational games to offer ways in which to understand the lived experiences of others, these promises aimed high because they were not weighed down with

practicalities of history both in development and reception. This lack of scope regarding the context of videogames and their development shows a recursive pattern in logic that produces different arguments. I argue that the most logical way of dealing with these recurring arguments and the issues they produce is to redefine the premises of the logic in which they are grounded. Put simply, we need to examine our infatuation with the audience in videogames by taking a long look in the mirror and, in doing so, re-evaluate our model of how we play.

To start this journey of self-exploration and re-evaluation, we must avoid the pitfalls of the violence in videogames debate and the gamification debate when it comes to audience subjectivity. Within the violence in videogames debate, it is significant to note that the focus on the negative impact of videogames is on suburban cis-gendered, heterosexual, white, predominantly male, able-bodied (or “normative”) children. Moreover, the gamification debates centered on the positive impact of videogames in helping that same group of “normative” children expand their knowledge and education. As one of those non-normative kids, I sometimes wondered who these games were for. They weren’t speaking to me, a rural queer. My behavior did not become any more violent after playing fighting games at a friend’s house, and my education did not improve by playing the same edugames over and over so that our overworked and underpaid teachers could catch their breath. This focus on the audience in both models pays attention to a very particular set of people—the ones that we base everything else on, those who fit the definition of “normative”.

This hypocrisy of focusing on the audience can be seen in another parallel history: how videogames and other new media are made and marketed to us. The labor producing the games in question has a long history of benefitting off the labor of people of color in the global south. This history and its many forms is carefully explored and documented in *Games of Empire* by

Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter. In this book, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter discuss the mining of minerals and factory living in the global south to create the equipment on which games are stored and played to the exploitation of Chinese laborers to do grinding tasks in online environments such as gold farming in the face of a large demand and hate from the community that needs them: “Our hypothesis, then, is that video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire--planetary, militarized hypercapitalism--and of some of the forces presently challenging it” (xv). Here, just as part of my racially privileged experience shows, we can see who gets left out of conversations around videogames and why they matter when we are only focusing on a very narrow audience. This focus consistently robs the same groups of people of subjectivity in conversations designed to make the audience feel better about their own actions; so, why do we do it?

Just as with the physical labor to produce videogames and their resources, the focus on expanding the lived experience of suburban “normative” children also rested on the labor of people of color in the global south. First touted in books and movies, there are several highly successful promotional campaigns that promise to take us to places that we could otherwise never go such as the MCI, AT&T, and other advertisements touting connections to places such as the Amazonian rainforest or deserts in Egypt analyzed by Lisa Nakamura in *Cybertypes* (94-5). And, to some extent, these works are right. Many places and experiences are beyond our lived everyday experiences, and we rely on these narratives to make us aware of them in ways that enable us to broaden our understanding of the world around us. Meaningful engagement, however, cannot take place in a system designed to centralize one subjectivity over others because it suggests an arbitrary hierarchy. For Nakamura, the occupancy of space in those virtual spaces enables cyber tourism that not only is structured in stereotypes but also enables users to

re-affirm their own experiences at the expense of another: “These ads claim a world without boundaries, and by so doing they show us exactly where and what these boundaries are, that is ethnic and racial. Rather than being effaced, these dividing lines are evoked repeatedly. In addition, the ads sanitize and idealize their depictions of the other and otherness by deleting all references that might threaten their status as timeless icons” (94). Like the physical labor, the labor of helping the learning of normative children has less to do with understanding the issues of the global south and more about re-affirming the ontological and ideological centralization of the “normative” subject.

Nakamura’s critique of new media’s utopianism being founded in appropriation is the one currently being made against empathy games. In a 2017 blog post regarding the promises of empathy games within the burgeoning market of virtual reality, Robert Yang brings to light the appropriation of those lived experiences by uncritical audiences: “Ironically, as empathizers, they seem totally unable to empathize with the empathized, so let me spell this out. The basic problem with empathy machines is **what if we don't want your fucking empathy?**” (original emphasis) (n.p.). What is more helpful is that Yang also draws a parallel between this development and prior historical attempts to document the lived experiences of people of color in slave narratives where white interviewers and non-white interviewers received different responses as to the lived experiences of their subjects because of the power dynamics still very much at play even after slavery had been abolished in the United States: “Black people were just trying to survive white empathy” (n.p.).

Based on our inferences regarding the invisible labor and labor practices within the videogame industry, it is no surprise that the games produced in the industry reflect its practices of appropriation in which games with assumed white male audiences are made to provide them



with experiences that they can inhabit and consume rather than deal with in a more complex relationship. My argument is simple: let's not keep doing that. Instead of having the same debates over and over again with different guises for privilege, let's ask a different question: for whom are we playing? Once we realize who we are playing for, we can work on whether or not we are okay with that and, if not, what we are going to do about it.

## **1.2 Ethical Empathy**

The potential within empathy games to reach across a centralized subject and incorporate a network of related subjects and their actions is where we should focus our attention. A similar vein of development regarding the expansion of the field can also be seen in the history of trauma studies. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that the aesthetic and structural construction of literary works can provide us with insight into the trauma of the narrating subject through the communication of aporia, or paradoxes, that she extrapolates from the Freudian tradition of trauma: belatedness and latency (16-8; *Trauma* 6-8). This model is significant in that it helped to bring the concept of trauma into humanities discussions and out of the medical realm in order to address significant experiences influencing and being represented in texts. This ontology, however, is not without its issues. As pointed out by other scholars in trauma studies, particularly Dominick LaCapra and, more pointedly, Ruth Leys, Caruth's theory of trauma's intersection with literature is problematic because it 1) holds the potential for recognizing perpetrators as victims, 2) promotes a symptomatology of trauma based on aesthetic characteristics, and 3) follows in the Freudian tradition of trauma in that it is based on a European model of trauma that does not adequately take into account perpetual or insidious trauma that can occur over generations as well as communities.

These issues identified within Caruth's work have since been taken up by other theorists, particularly those in postcolonial studies. Those concerns (primarily 1 and 3) are particularly well suited to be addressed by those scholars because they are at the heart of postcolonial theoretical inquiry. Scholars such as Steph Craps, Gert Beulens, Irene Visser and Abigail Ward, have taken up these considerations. Starting with the 2006 MLA session "Trauma, Narrative, and the Postcolonial," Craps and Beulens went on to co-edit a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* on "Postcolonial Trauma Novels" in 2008 before Craps went on to publish the anchor text that sought to examine the intersection between postcolonial studies and trauma studies in 2013, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. In response to the interest in this interdisciplinary focus, Ward provided a voice that problematizes the compatibility of trauma studies with postcolonial studies in her 2011 article "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies" and her 2015 article "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects." Further work was done on investigating the problematic historical tensions between the two disciplines by Ward in her 2013 article "Understanding Postcolonial Traumas"; however, she went on to further investigate the benefits of this interdisciplinary intersection by editing a collection of essays in 2015 entitled *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* in which she and other critics provided essays on how more beneficial textual readings could be when used together. The next step for this more recent theorization, then, appears to be its application to and influence by new media.

Some recent strides have been made towards the goal of exploring the intersection between trauma studies and new media as well as postcolonial studies and new media. In 2015, Steph Craps's advisee Tobi Smethurst completed a dissertation entitled *Playing with Trauma in Video Games: Interreactivity, Empathy and Perpetration*, in which Smethurst sets forward a model for

understanding how trauma is represented in videogames using a tripartite model of interactivity, empathy, and identification that ends in the player being complicit in the suffering of the traumatized character (163). This method acknowledges the different positions upon which player and character reside, but it is limited in its application as it suggests the ethical interaction with these representations is complicity with the traumatizer because it triggers a particular emotion that enables the user to reflect on their behavior as an agent exerting agency on the game (163). My work seeks to expand upon Smethurst's work by extending the working body, similar to the prior interdisciplinary work in these related fields, to include postcolonial and global south subjectivities to see how that might influence our understanding of trauma and how it functions in play.

Another recent stride has been taken by Souvik Mukherjee in his 2017 book *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*. In this book (his second on games), Mukherjee plants the flag in terms of postcolonial studies and its intersection with games studies in a formal way. As Mukherjee acknowledges in his introduction, there have been several forays into this intersection through articles and interest in cross-media connections to postcolonial questions, but a nodal point for such an intersection has not yet come to fruition. This book solves that issue by covering a lot of ground within its short chapters in order to provide people interested in this intersection with a more solid reference rather than the more nebulous histories woven through other media analyses. Of the chapters included in this book, his last three chapters are most interesting as they move on from the colonial representations from chapter one into how the medium is being used to offer voice back to those that it silenced in earlier decades from postcolonial perspectives. It is here that his tag line, empire plays back, an allusion to the 1989 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin book *The Empire Writes Back*, Mukherjee starts

to identify how videogames can use similar methods of the colonizer in videogames to give another voice to the historical narrative. This process parallels the same act of resistance identified in postcolonial literature like the example of Kincaid's *A Small Place* and highlights the beginnings of a rich field of study. My research aims to continue this trajectory defining ethical empathy through the process of play.

A similar experience can be seen in Dori Laub's analysis of the relationship between the trauma subject, the narrating of the trauma, and an interviewer. This methodology was designed during his work establishing the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony, which puts it in the unique place of taking into account the role that new media plays when it comes to the communication of traumatic content even if it does not directly deal with games. Laub's model is included within the school of trauma theory attributed to Cathy Caruth. The focus of this methodology around the act of witnessing at multiple levels with various subjectivities also short-circuits the problem of a centralized subject identified in prior interpretations. Laub's model of witnessing identifies three different levels of witnessing. Each of these levels works in a continuous process that focuses on identifying the difference between the interviewer and the interviewee in order to better understand how the interview is a process of constructing the trauma narrative rather than assuming a core "truth" that must be discovered about the trauma (61). Instead, it focuses on the phenomenon as an aggregate of performances connected in various ways to produce a unique experience with its own agency. Additionally, Laub's focus on the levels of witnessing does not focus on putting one experience of the traumatic content above another; rather, it seeks to explain how each of them work to create a particular phenomenon that simultaneously reflects and influences everything it touches. This non-hierarchical and

phenomenological approach is, therefore, a more ethical place from which to begin a critical analysis of empathy games.

### **1.3 Empathy Games and the Global South**

Building on a variation of Laub's model, this project seeks to better understand representations of and interactions with postcolonial and global south identities via trauma narratives as they are encountered in new media, particularly videogames. Building on previous research on interactive media and narratological structure both in and out of trauma studies, I investigate the ways of representing trauma narratives within videogames, challenge existing models of understanding trauma narratives in videogames by bringing postcolonial and global south narratives into consideration, and present a different model and method of analysis for such narratives based on prior media that considers the ethics of rhetorical engagement with the content and the medium.

In my investigation of Laub's first level of witnessing, the witness to oneself, I aim to investigate the role of embodiment and limits when it comes to ownership of trauma within gameplay of empathy games. To better explicate this point, I show that the embodiment of a character that experiences trauma within gameplay does not constitute a direct ownership of that character experience. I argue that such a conceptualization of the self falls into the trap of early phenomenology in which the self is the locus of understanding the outside world and does not adequately account for complex subjectivity and lived experience as non-hierarchical. In relation to this flawed conceptualization of being, I argue that a collapsing of limits in gameplay, especially when the content embodies a postcolonial and/or global south subjectivity, illuminates violence like postcolonial ideas of appropriation.

To counteract this understanding of embodiment in empathy games, I argue for the use of limits and more complex understanding of interaction via subject-to-subject relationships. This understanding emerges out of the philosophical understandings of later phenomenologically-influenced theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "rhizome" and Bruno Latour's "actor-network theory" as well as the critiques of these models such as Jacques Derrida's critique of Merleau-Ponty's "coincidence with noncoincidence" model of being (211). Ultimately, I use this distinction of self in the actions of gameplay to better understand how it relates to remediated versions of Laub's inside witness, those who directly experienced the trauma (65), as the character and outside witness, bystanders or those who saw what was happening to the trauma victims (65-6), as the player.

I investigate the remediated witness as described in Dori Laub's first level of witnessing through an analysis of Minority Media's *Papo & Yo*. Debuting as Minority Media's first game in 2012, *Papo & Yo* was an independent game acclaimed for its brilliant artwork and moving story. The game is set in an unnamed South American favela brought to life through magical realism and tells the story of Quico's relationship with Monster. The environment and plot come from the childhood of Minority Media's Founder/CEO, Vander Caballero, who dealt with an alcoholic and abusive father living in the suburbs of Bogota (Orlando). Packed with personal memories, this game addresses difficult topics often associated with empathy games: "That's the question at the heart of *Papo & Yo*: How do you handle an addict — or harder still, the memory of an addict — long after the harm's been done" (Peckham, "Papo & Yo")? At the same time, Caballero's push for including empathy games as a marketable category bring into conversation interesting topics prevalent in games containing trauma narratives (Caballero, "Empathy

Games”). This complex development, launch, and post-launch context makes *Papo & Yo* a great fit for investigating Laub’s first level of witnessing.

With these intersections in mind, my analysis of *Papo & Yo* interrogates the relationship between the inside and the outside witness remediated within gameplay. I interrogate how the game’s aesthetics and mechanics work to create a gameplay experience that is both authentic to the victim of the trauma and interactive for the player. Using this interrogation, I argue that the gameplay experience provides mechanisms for preventing the collapse of subjectivity associated with empathy games. I further argue that this separation of the witness in conversation with the content of the narrative provides an experience that confronts the player with the complex subjectivity of “the Other.”

Having identified the separation of ownership in the previous level of witnessing, my investigation into Dori Laub’s second level of witnessing, witnessing testimony being given, focus on the role of the player. In his discussion of this level, Laub recounts the role of the interviewer and how he “. . . actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event” (62). This conceptualization of the interviewer as an active participant in the creation of the trauma narrative is one that can also be seen in the role of the player. Building on the differentiation discussed in the last level of witnessing, I show how this level of witnessing encourages a partnership between the player and the creator with the game to produce a narrative. In this discussion, I carefully discuss how this relationship extends to the mediation of the narrative but not to the trauma, which prevents appropriation by the player.

To make this point, I interrogate the game as a body being created by both the player and the game system (the code) through gameplay. Using Alexander Galloway’s conceptualization of “gamic action,” I interrogate the rhetorical processes between the player and the machine to

explicate on how these processes contribute to the creation of Jean-Luc Nancy's "body." In "On the Soul," Nancy's explication on what defines a body is its non-passive extension into the world around it (131). As such, a body is not the dualized subject and object from early phenomenology but a singular subject throughout its interactions with others (131-2). Through the different modes of action discussed by Galloway, I argue that the narrative being created and acted upon throughout gameplay is a body. Such an understanding gameplay will also require further investigation into the limits of subjectivity and being.

The second chapter will further investigate the remediation witnessing by focusing on the interviewer's role through an analysis of Rasheed Abueideh's *Liyla and the Shadows of War*. This brief but powerful game focuses on Liyla's dad, a Palestinian father figure trying to get his family to safety amidst shelling, gunfire, and lack of light in Gaza. Most of the criticism and press around this game is indirect in that it focuses on the problems of its launch in which Apple asked the developer to remove it from the "Games" category and re-brand it as "News" or "Reference" (Kamen; Phillips; Franks). As such, the gameplay itself has received little attention despite its gut-punching narrative that brings to light Palestinian trauma. This release context as well as its gameplay provide a solid foundation on which to pursue my analysis and augmentation of Laub's second level of witnessing.

Given its in-game and development context, I investigate how *Liyla and the Shadows of War* uses gameplay to contribute to a remediation of Laub's second level of witnessing. Using the mechanics and aesthetics of the game, I argue that the interaction that the player experiences with the game itself produces a body that is not the same body as the player. Instead, I argue that the narrative created through the constant death and lack of choice embedded into its overall plot is representative of another body that the audience must recognize. This act of co-creation and



bearing witness, specifically to Western players, works to address problems of oversimplification and appropriation of war-time experiences in this region.

My investigation into Laub's third level of witnessing, the witness to the act of witnessing, will focus on the interaction between the player and the body produced in the last level of witnessing. Laub's description of this level of witnessing takes a removed perspective from the interview with the interviewee to help form the narrative being produced towards a kind of truth (62). While such a move makes sense in the tradition of trauma studies, it seems problematic to suggest that any part of postcolonial and global south narratives of trauma need to be guided to a "truth." Such guidance may be interpreted as another instantiation of violence against Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern" by negating the truth that such narratives bring to light. As such, my interrogation into this level of witnessing further investigates the potentially problematic ideas in this model concerning postcolonial and global south narratives of trauma while also exploring potential augmentations for a more holistic model.

The augmentations to this level of witnessing will consider the subjectivity within the content to avoid silencing, oversimplification, and appropriation by the player's subjectivity. For this level, I further investigate the conceptualization of the subject after a moment of encounter with another subjectivity. Pushing the limits of Laub's witnessing, I incorporate this model with Gerald Vizenor's indigenous American concept of "survivance." Using Elizabeth LaPensée's reimagining of survivance within videogames, I further use her conceptualization of "biskaabiiyang," an Indigenous American concern for iterative learning that LaPensée recognizes in game design, as a way of modeling the witnessing interactions between the player and the game and how they affect the broader connected realities outside of the game experience.

Using these formulations of survivance and the limits of subjectivity, I hope to provide an augmented level of witnessing that addresses critiques considered throughout the model.

My third chapter will focus on the remediation of Laub's third level of witnessing through an analysis of Upper One Games's *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*. Developed by Upper One Games (founded by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council), *Never Alone* is about Nuna, a young Iñupiat girl, and her fox companion. From battling the elements to running from colonial invaders, the game asks players to interact with a history that may or may not be very different from their own. In playing the game, players are constantly reminded through supplementary material and aesthetic choices of what Jessica Conditt identifies as "respect": "Respect for the Iñupiat, respect for nature and animals, respect for the things we can't control, and respect for those who try to change their community for the better." This unique relationship between the players and the game make *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* the best fit for elaborating on my augmentation of Laub's third level of witnessing.

Using the game as well as the context in which it was developed, I investigate how *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* serves as a text for understanding the augmentation of Laub's third level of witnessing within videogames. Through its aesthetics and mechanics, I argue that this game asserts a meta level of play into the player's environment that is in conjunction with the other two levels of witnessing. I further argue that the game's content foregrounds the actions of the players in a way that implies a separation from the subjective experience of the character. I further argue that this gap encourages the critical reflection of the players in connection with the cultural trauma they are helping to bring to light through play, which addresses concerns regarding appropriation and oversimplification of the subject.

Finally, I conclude this project by looking ahead to the horizon of empathy games. Just as global south literature and theory have not stopped but only expanded in light of world events, I also expect the focus of empathy games to expand. The most likely path of expansion seems to be the world of virtual reality; however, I am confident that the foundations laid out in this methodology provide the steps for further ethically empathic interactions no matter the process to which it expands.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

This dissertation explains my augmented version of witnessing as model for the interactions that occur within empathy games. To do that, I argue that it is necessary to understand how postcolonial and global south experiences shape these interactions. We have seen what happens when they are excluded; the good intentions of the global north settle on exposure instead of justice. My model intrinsically rejects exposure as the endpoint in empathy games by showing that exposure is just another way to make ourselves, particularly white people of the global north, feel better about how we play empathy games. By exposing the othering and appropriation in our current model of empathy games, I challenge us to respect rather than understand the insights of global south narratives and experiences.

Moving forward, I would like to challenge the reader to think about every place where one seeks to understand through play. Instead of seeking to understand, go deeper and ask how the process of understanding is like the postcolonial and global south ideas of othering and appropriation. The global north lineage of othering and appropriation within the global south is not new; therefore, not taking it into account in new media makes us part of the insidious violence against the global south rather than part of the solution. What my model offers is a way to stop the cycle of insidious violence by having us examine not only the goal of play but how

we get there. Looking into the process, I expose what we are doing rather than what we think we are doing. This work provides an opportunity for us to determine not what changes are needed but how we get there. It is time to dig in and do the work.

## 2 UNDERSTANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF PLAY AND BEING A WITNESS TO THE SELF

The breadth and scope of empathy games and their effects makes the task of even starting this work daunting. Empathy games are not specific to one issue or experience. Instead, they seem to broad range topics from LGBTQ+ issues to racial injustice and human rights. Each of these categories comes with its own challenges, processes, and vocabularies, which make a universal model of unpacking their complexities challenging. But, as I claimed in the introduction, “maybe it isn’t about you”, or me for that matter. In that sense, the most sensible place to begin this work is within ourselves.

In my introduction, I argued that the problem with the current understanding of empathy games was the emphasis on what they can do for the player. Instead, I argued, we need to reconceive of the relationship players have with these empathy games and how that model can focus more on the lived experiences of those depicted within a game’s contents. To do this work, we need to decenter the player within the model of play and consider the player’s responsibility in their relationship to the playable subject.

To better understand what is happening through this coalescence of design and content around empathy and traumatic experiences, I’ll analyze Caballero and Minority Media’s groundbreaking game *Papo & Yo* to explore how it both reflects and informs the simulation of another’s traumatic experiences and what that means in terms of how we understand the function of trauma and trauma narratives. The use of this game is also particularly important because it brings the focus of this analysis to the global south and how trauma functions specifically in postcolonial and global south contexts. As such, it not only informs trauma theory through new media but also seeks to build upon the theoretical critique of trauma theory as a Western theory

and how the use of postcolonial and global south subjectivity, as is argued by postcolonial trauma theorists, necessarily complicates models of trauma. This augmentation provides an alternative to the Utopian representation of empathy games by involving marginalized voices as subjects and expanding theories of play.

## 2.1 Self(less) Foundations

In looking at the current theories around empathy games and play, the need for a non-player-centric model is overwhelming given the absence of any other model. Using Martha Nussbaum's definition of empathy as "a compassionate shift in perspective to someone who is suffering, which does not involve identification", Mark Coeckelbergh's 2007 model seems the closest to my desired understanding of empathy games; but, the model only focuses on what the games can do for the player (221). Tobias Greitemyer, Silvia Osswald, and Markus Brauer's 2010 study on player behavior after playing videogames defined empathy as a "prosocial affect and schadenfreude as an "antisocial affect" (797). Contrastingly, Craig Anderson et al.'s meta-analysis on violent videogame effects gauged empathy as something a person already had and desensitization evaluations after playing violent videogames was the measure of if empathy was lost (156-158). In 2013, Greitemeyer continued that research in two studies investigating if cooperation in games had an impact on the empathic outcome in players. A 2016 literature review of computer games and serious games<sup>8</sup> by Boyle et al. found that interest and study of the benefits of games significantly increased since Connolly et al.'s 2012 review on the positive impact and outcome of games<sup>9</sup>. In these recent studies, prosocial behavior on behalf of the player

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<sup>8</sup> Serious games are often synonymous with what I am calling empathy games; however, serious games can be a bit broader in categorization in that the games can also focus on learning something or creating out-of-game changes. For more information on serious games, see Asi Burak and Laura Parker's *Power Play* (2017).

<sup>9</sup> The study, focusing on literature published between 2009-2014, contained additional conclusions such as skill acquisition being emphasized in design, the interchangeability of learning games and serious games in language, the

becomes the litmus test for whether an empathy game is successful. That criteria mentions nothing about the other entities involved within the play relationship. As far as these experiments go, they don't matter.

Addressing the issue of having multiple subjects involved within the process of play is at the heart of a model for empathy games, which is I believe that Dori Laub's model of witnessing is the best foundational point. In the first level of witnessing, Laub centers on the subjectivities at play within the witnessing process through "being a witness to oneself within the experience" (61). For Laub, this experience focuses on his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust. As a child survivor, he embodies a particular subject position as an interviewer who participates in producing a narrative of the Holocaust experiences of others. Without going into much detail about the shared experience, Laub leaves the audience with the understanding that being a child survivor puts him in a particular subject position in relation to the traumatic content being provided by the interviewee. As such, the narrating of the trauma will necessarily be different because it will affect him as a survivor in a subjective way as well as elicit a particular interaction with the interviewee. In other words, through the narration of the trauma, both Laub and the interviewee are coming to terms with their own experiences *because* they have a shared history in relation to an event.

What one might conclude from this relationship is that a shared experience is necessary for this witnessing relationship. Being a survivor himself, Laub can relate to the narrated trauma being produced by the interviewee and, thus, encourage a particular kind of telling from that individual. Because the relationship between these two entities is being formed by a shared experience both in the prior time of the trauma and in the current time of the interview, we could

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difficulty of putting these games into existing curricula as specific objectives are more desirable, and that development is challenging (188).

describe the relationship as empathy. But, what if the interviewer does not have a shared experience with the interviewee? In Laub's methodology, this is not excluded from the realm of possibility; however, his use of himself as an interviewer in the model suggests that the shared experience is a preferred qualification. Given how broad the potential relationship network can be in videogames, far removed from the intimate 1:1 relationship of interviewer and interviewee, I want to explore the less-travelled path of this model where the person in the interviewer role does not share the lived experience depicted on the screen. The addition of this path provides a more holistic model of witnessing.

This multivariate point of entry and progression builds on the connectivity of a rhizomatic model. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the rhizome as connections that are non-determinate and can connect with things that are not necessarily of the same strati within a hierarchical model (409). Hierarchical models can be used by humans to justify certain ontologies and their related ideologies. In games, such ontologies could be seen in a player-centered model in which what the player experiences or feels during play is the most important thing, putting any other experiences within the contexts as secondary to that primary play experience. Subverting the hierarchical model of vertical integration, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model enables a horizontal amalgamation, or an assemblage, of various rhizomes that connect and interact in various ways, which influence all other connections (409). This idea translates to games by refusing the idea that a game or game system or even the player or creator can remove themselves or each other from the world around them. For example, a player in *Papo & Yo* cannot separate themselves from the news reports they have seen on South American countries like Brazil, let alone even think of the names of different countries on the



continent<sup>10</sup>. That personal prior knowledge, or lack thereof, will influence how they interact with the game. Being intertwined and connected to larger systems around us as players is precisely the argument made by empathy games by highlighting “real relationships” as a feature.

The use of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblages and rhizomes, however, comes with its own issues about the quality of the rhizome relationships that comprise an assemblage. Conveniently, Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory comes across as universal and does not speak directly to the lived experiences of people outside of their own, most notably from the French colonies. In 1990, Édouard Glissant answered these criticisms in *Poetics of Relation*. Much like Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant expressed concern about arbitrary boundaries of identity and being as well as the networked relation of those concepts with others (11). Glissant’s theory of relation, however, is more concerned about the act of relation rather than the objects being related (14). By focusing on the action, Glissant’s theory encompasses a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics as they affect the identity of a given subject and how that poetics establishes identity in relationship between what a subject sees as the self and the Other. He builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept in a way that takes postcolonial and global south subjectivities into consideration: “Starting from the moment that cultures, lands, men, and women were no longer there to discover but to know, Relation represented an absolute (that is, a totality finally sufficient to itself) that, paradoxically, set us free from the absolute’s intolerances” (27). This expansion of assemblage theory to account for postcolonial and global south subjectivities posits that the experience of relation is ongoing, happening between entities in motion. Those entities carry with them the real effects of colonialism’s imagined hierarchies. Following Glissant’s lead, I am pushing the concept of empathy to encompass experiences that

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<sup>10</sup> Countries in South America include Brazil, Argentina, Columbia, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guyana, French Guiana, Suriname, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

may not be familiar and requires some self-examination in order to fully grasp the experience. Moreover, my move to expand Western theories of trauma studies and game studies with postcolonial and global south subjectivities helps to prevent problems of appropriation by establishing a reckoning in lived experiences for all involved.

These simulated relationships fall well within the concern of empathy games. Especially in the context of empathy games concerning minority populations, these games might introduce players to experiences with which they otherwise might not come into contact. Such exposure is part of the argument being made by Caballero in his GDC 2013 talk<sup>11</sup> as well as in *Papo & Yo*'s description. In *Papo & Yo*'s description on Steam, two of the five features listed are “real relationships” and “a personal story” with a third highlighting the environment as a “magical world.” Half of this game’s features (a game that has received “overwhelmingly positive” reviews from the player community<sup>12</sup>) highlight the narrative and aesthetic contributions of the game rather than the mechanics, which receives only one point describing the puzzle platform mechanic as “whimsical” rather than groundbreaking in any way. I bring attention to this description to highlight just how important these narrative features are for this game. Without these characteristics, *Papo & Yo* is just another puzzle platformer, another narrative game, another simulation. This distinction isn’t to diminish the importance of those game genres; rather, it helps highlight the importance of the narrative combination of both the traumatic and postcolonial experiences and how the game delivers them to the player through Quico’s story.

From one perspective, this introduction of Quico’s subjectivity is great because it does not shy away from tough topics. The entire game takes place in a favela-like fantasy environment, but it does not hide what the favela is when it comes to poverty. When the player walks around

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<sup>11</sup> For more about Caballero’s 2013 GDC talk, see the introduction.

<sup>12</sup> Community rating from Steam.

the fantasy favela environment at the beginning of the game, piles of trash like old tires, boards, and boxes litter the streets and roofs of multi-family houses. Buildings painted bright colors show signs of disrepair and often feature graffiti. While not shying away from the what the favela symbolizes in terms of poverty, Quico's interactions with the environment offer a much different sense of how residents define the environment. Quico uses trash and debris as tools to solve puzzles; the houses are magical creatures that move to help Quico navigate his journey; the graffiti offers scenes of beauty in something that is illegal. The environment enables the agency and depth of the main character. Through this interaction with the environment, Quico provides another story, much like what postcolonial literature strives to do as I noted with Kincaid's *A Small Place*<sup>13</sup>, to the player's expectation of a favela narrative—the favela, even with its poverty, is not prescriptive, and those who live there *live*. Their lives are not synonymous with the narrative told to tourists; but, they are impacted by tourists and the systemic oppression that allows for tourists. They are agents in their own narratives that not only exist in the environment but also create.

Much like Kincaid's tourist reader, empathy games like *Papo & Yo* reverse the expectations of the environment and its subjects by the player. As a player, presumably not from an area like this one, there are certain connotations about favela communities and their poverty being synonymous with crime and potential disease<sup>14</sup>. The subjectivity with which the player enters the game, then, is one of great distance—the player is somewhere else and about to enter a favela via this simulation for what may be the first and only time. The distance between the player and narrative subject provides an example of what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the Other.

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<sup>13</sup> See the introduction.

<sup>14</sup> For an example into these connotations, one need only look at popular coverage about favelas following the 2016 Summer Olympics such as Erik Ortiz's piece for NBC News "What is a Favela? Five Things to Know About Rio's So-Called Shanty Towns."

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak acknowledges that there is a distance between the colonizer and the colonized (whether current or former) and that this distance is a form of violence:

The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity. It is well known that Foucault locates epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century. But what if that particular redefinition was only a part of the narrative of history in Europe as well as in the colonies? (280-281)

Here, Spivak suggests that the colonial History is a singular narrative by the colonizer in order to maintain distance between the colonizer and the colonized, maintaining a hierarchical system that defines the Occidental colonizer through its difference to the Other colonized. Because of the creation and maintenance power behind History’s narrative, Spivak suggests that the most oppressed, the subaltern, “cannot speak” (308). This idea of silence, though, is one that the existence of *Papo & Yo* seeks to address by giving a platform for narrative to someone who could be seen as part of a subaltern group, Quico. By offering an experience of this place through Quico’s subjectivity, the space between the Other, the far away and intangible poverty of a Brazilian favela, is not just visible to an Occidental player but also humanized.

The humanization of the Other feels productive because it is working to undo the historical dehumanization that maintains Occidental power. At the same time, it seems arrogant to believe that fixing this one thing—recognizing representations of Others’ lived experience—would loosen the other knots of Occidental power in the assemblage of culture. If we are not continuing

the groundwork laid by representation and exposure, how are empathy games any better than the system that came before? Change without continuous systemic evaluation and change runs the risk of recreating the very power structures it seeks to dismantle. This problem is what we saw in Anthropy and Brice's responses to people who saw their representations in empathy games. Those audiences sought to use the exposure that their games provided to better themselves. They thought that playing those games made *them* better people, leaving out anything about the subjectivities they used to get that self-realization. Using empathy games as a method of "understanding" another's subjectivity is still appropriation; it is just a shinier version, appropriation 2.0.

The appropriation within empathy games echoes Laura Brown's idea of insidious trauma. In Brown's "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," she identifies insidious trauma, a concept built upon from the work of Maria Root, as traumas cloaked in normative systems that are continuously perpetuated against minorities (107). In her reading, she particularly focuses on women; however, racial, cultural, and ethnic subjects can also be included in this reading (107). As such, Brown's idea shows an expansion from Caruth's model of trauma as it recognizes that trauma cannot be contained within the continued returns to a singular experience and, moreover, can be perpetuated over and over again through normative power structures whether actively or passively. Despite how enlightened playing an empathy game may make a player feel, that experience is still tied to their definition of themselves. Now that "I" see the other experiences on screen, "I" can grow as a person. But, what about the subjectivity within the narrative the player just consumed?

The performance of insidious trauma in the act of play creates a subject/object relationship that places the player at the center. This ontology is familiar to philosophical constructions of the

Cartesian “I.” According to René Descartes’s famous thought experiment about the self, he comes to the conclusion that he can only be sure of the fact that he is thinking and, therefore, he must exist because he is a thinking subject (64). Everything else in this experience, however, is up for debate (64). In particular, Descartes emphasizes his subjectivity, that of a white man, as normative; anything not fitting that normativity is completely Other to him. Moreover, by establishing himself as a normative subject, he makes it impossible for anyone not occupying that selective subjectivity the opportunity to put themselves in that model. When we apply this model to videogames, the Other perspective becomes relatable and, therefore, “real” only when it becomes an experience that can be experienced by the white player.

Sarah Ahmed highlights the continuation of the problematic aspects of Cartesian thought throughout Phenomenological discourse when it comes to perspectives of non-normative subjectivities in *Queer Phenomenology*. Her third chapter specifically deals with how the relegation of the Orient to the periphery defines the subjectivity of the Occidental subject:

The Orient provides the object, as well as the instrument, that allows the Occident to take shape, to become a subject, is that which ‘we’ are around. The Occident would be what we are oriented around. Or we could even say that ‘the world’ comes to be seen as orientated ‘around’ the Occident, through the very orientation of the gaze towards the Orient, the East, as the exotic other that can just be seen on the horizon. (116)

This objectification of the Other’s experience is similar to the problematic one that I have identified when it comes to the player’s relationship with empathy games, particularly those focusing on the global south. In empathy games, the player-subject’s cognition assumes a hierarchy in which the “object” or the postcolonial trauma is secondary to the cognition of the player, which is the only thing that can be “known” from the player’s perspective. Therefore,

everything gets filtered through this subjectivity just to exist. To be, the Other must be absorbed or consumed by the normative player-subject for the player-subject's benefit. As such, the ontological experience behind empathy games brings back the problematic issues of Cartesian philosophy from which Phenomenology, as Ahmed makes clear in her work, has struggled to identify and incorporate into its own ontological models.

The player ontology that focuses on the centralized player as the lone subject is a form of insidious trauma that has roots in the classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist Cartesian I. As noted by Sarah Ahmed's critique of the Other in Phenomenology, the Other is not only secondary in such a model but also serves as a way to re-inscribe the centrality of the Occident (116). The centralizing of the Occidental subject at the cost of the Other subject is the same kind of violence identified by bell hooks in her chapter "Eating the Other." Here, hooks identifies that the purpose of such a system is to create and preserve power: "Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the 'primitive' or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*" (22). When we apply the system described by hooks to empathy games, we see the subjectivity of the Other that brings the player the perspective is always already secondary, an object from which the Occidental player can re-orient themselves at the center of the model of one's self. Such a use of the Occidental subject(s) as resources rather than subjects performs the power structures recounted by Nick Dyer-Witford and Greig de Peuter in their book *Games of Empire* when it comes to immaterial labor: "Immaterial labor is less about the production of things and more about the production of subjectivity, or better, about the way the production of subjectivity and things are in contemporary capitalism deeply intertwined" (4). The labor that goes into re-centering the

Occidental subject is performed at the expense of the Oriental subject. By profiting off such labor over and over again through empathy games, the Occidental subject continues to reinforce normative systems that keep the Other at a distance and away from the position of subjectivity.

In order to better realize the potential for empathy games, it is important that we move past this hierarchical construction of subject and object and, instead, consider a more rhizomatic and relative structure when it comes to play. To get to that point, we need to begin with considering the relationship between the player and the experience of play as it is mediated through the game. Starting with ourselves as players, we need to resist the urge to “understand” or, to use hook’s words, “eat the other.” Instead, we should look at boundaries as productive and explore what a subject-to-subject relationship rather than a subject-to-object relationship can do. One way to get there is to use a modified version of Laub’s first level of witnessing, where the player/interviewer connects to but actively does not overwhelm the agency of the game/character/interviewee. Using Minority Media’s *Papo & Yo*, a story of empathy game champion Vander Caballero’s own traumatic childhood relationship with his father, I show how such a model can help us see empathy games for their full potential.

## **2.2 Papo & Yo(u): The Ethical Separation of Witnessing Subjects**

The positioning of player in a play experience can be seen in *Papo & Yo* through the consideration of creation. In his GDC’13 talk, Caballero gave a background of his love of videogames and ties them back to the traumatic childhood he experienced with his father, the focus of *Papo & Yo*’s content. In recalling this history, he notes that it was his love of videogames, particularly the Mario franchise, that would enable him to escape out of his lived reality. As such, his aim was to create a world that could help others do the same.



In *Papo & Yo*, escapism is a prominent theme throughout the game. From the beginning, the main character, Quico, leaves a closet to travel into a magical portal that transports him to a fantastical favela where imagination is king. As such, the colorful buildings can be moved around using puzzles that Quico is able to activate and solve, portions of the landscape float in mid-air, magic is real and performed by the mysterious Alejandra, coconuts and frogs have mood-altering effects, and Quico's best friends are anthropomorphized objects and monsters. Most of the game's environment asks the player to buy into a magical realist portrayal of this narrative to progress in it. In other words, the player will not get very far if they do not interact with the environment based on these fantastical rules. In accepting these rules for the fantastical environment, the player buys into the normality of the game's fantasy. As indicated by Huizinga in his explanation of the magic circle in *Homo Ludens* the magic circle is a temporary demarcation between in-game experiences and those that occur outside the game (10). The fantastical environment becomes the norm much in the same way the environment in *Super Mario Bros.* asks the player to accept a world where plumbers reign supreme with anthropomorphic mushrooms and a transcontinental public transportation system via the sewers.

Yet, the fantasy world in *Papo & Yo* differs from that of many other escapist kinds of games in that some of its contents refer to an external, non-escapist world within the game. The external world to which this game refers has two layers. The first layer is within the game itself. At the beginning of the game, the player sees Quico hiding in a closet as a monstrous shadow passes by through the blinds before going through the magical portal of light at the other end of the closet. From here, we know that Quico has entered the second layer, a fantastic world. In contrast to the dark closet, the second layer is outside and shows the vibrancy of a Brazilian favela with fantasy baked in as buildings begin to move and the puzzles become the sole focus.

Despite these two different representations, the fantastic second layer contains familiar objects the first layer where Quico hid in a closet. For example, when a cardboard box is seen in this world, the player might recognize that it is the same box with the same serial number from the closet in which Quico hid in the opening scene while still in the first layer of the game. When playing, I thought that this was just an example of reusing visual assets within the game: why remake a bunch of boxes when you have a perfectly good model from a previous scene? However, I found this explanation less and less fulfilling as I started seeing more reminders of that opening scene of the first layer within the second layer that are more intricately related to the plot of the story. For example, the shadow of the monster outside the closet is the shadow Quico and the player sees for the non-player character (NPC) named Monster. Moreover, the robot Quico held within the first scene as he cowers in the closet becomes his autonomous sidekick and companion throughout the game named Lula. With multiple connections, these fantastical elements call into question the amount of escapism this game can contain, a game dedicated to Caballero's fellow survivors of abuse in his family.

Ramping up from the game's inclusion of objects from layer 1 to layer 2, the game includes two more direct approaches in connecting the two layers: involuntary flashbacks and puzzle reward revelations. The involuntary flashbacks happen to Quico throughout the story. For example, meeting one of the NPCs, Alejandra, within the first section of the story, Quico learns that he is "cursed," which leads to a series of flashback episodes triggered in greater detail throughout the game. These moments generally happen closely following some kind of violence to Quico such as learning he is cursed, receiving the first frog-induced rage of Monster, etc. These flashbacks refer to a scene of Quico running in the rain revealed in increasing detail as the flashbacks increase in frequency. During these flashbacks, the player is not allowed to anything

but move the player-character Quico along a white line in the scene that takes them through an alley following a car. Quico, who is holding Lula, is inside the car while Quico's father beats another person in the headlights of that car, producing a shadow of Monster on the background of the wall behind him. These flashbacks remind the player that the fantastical world of layer 2 is not real—it is a narrative layer on top of the in-game reality in layer 1.

This narrative technique of using involuntary flashbacks can be connected to trauma theory through Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness. According to Caruth's explanation in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, belatedness refers to the ongoing conflict in time that occurs between the time of the traumatic event and the time which the subject confronts that trauma since, by its very nature, the trauma cannot be experienced at the time of its occurrence (6). This concept is relevant for these in-game flashbacks. Triggered by specific instances of violence, these flashbacks reveal connections back to the trauma being recalled within the in-game reality of layer 1. For example, the first attack by Monster in the game triggers one of these memories back to the trauma that occurred in layer 1. This mechanic lets the player realize that the content in the game is connected to Quico's experiences of trauma. But, this realization is incomplete unless the player figures out their role in experiencing another's belatedness. What role do we as players occupy when the experiences on screen are clearly important but not related to our experiences of identity formation?

My expansion of Laub's first level of witnessing, a witness to one's self, can help us figure out the role of the player in this situation of reliving another's trauma. In Laub's first level, I want to explore what happens when the interviewer, unlike Laub as an interviewer for the Holocaust Video Testimony archive, does not have a shared experience of trauma. *Papo P& Yo* provides that opportunity. Being without the traumatic experience but seeing it through another,

the player fits the role of the interviewer in this expanded model whereas the one who experiences the trauma and the flashbacks directly, Quico, is the interviewee. Having undergone the trauma from layer 1, Quico is undergoing a process of discovery when it comes to why they are in this fantasy world and the purpose of the game. The process looks identical for the player as they try to navigate to the end of the game, but the experiences are very different. In relation to belatedness, the experiences are not the same because one has a referent, a traumatic event to which this experience is tied, and another's referent is ambiguous if not completely absent. What I'm saying is that Quico has experienced the trauma that has led to this belatedness--it is the reason that the player is seeing it at all. The player's experience of this belatedness, then, is necessarily different because of its foundation in the relationship of play between the player and Quico.

This reading may seem a bit prescriptive for the same reasons that Caruth's theory of trauma gets criticized for relying on a prescriptive linguistic foundation by presuming a direct line between the traumatic encounter and a reciprocal belatedness.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of trauma follows the structuralist interpretation of language provided by theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure; however, it fails to take into account other contextual variables. In other worlds, this prescriptive view sees language/trauma as a closed system where logic can be deduced from the cause and effect. Poststructuralists have questioned this idea of the closed system of language, which has led to the cultural studies interpretation of language and, more on an ontological level, the interrogation of subject and object.

Karen Barad establishes this history in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* by interrogating the apparatus within the scientific process in. Throughout her explanation of agential realism, she

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<sup>15</sup> See Ruth Leys's critique in *Trauma: A Genealogy*. (n.p.)

highlights how science as a closed system fails to consider many other factors that could influence what we as observers see as the truth via the results. One such example is her analysis of the cheap cigar experiment, which she argues shows how class, gender, and other factors within the apparatus of the experiment changed the results (165-8).<sup>16</sup> Barad's explanation, following the post-structuralist logic established by previous humanities scholars, shows that the establishment of a closed system, an apparatus with its own cultural history, will influence the results received from a particular experiment or case study, having the opposite effect from which it started. In bringing this logic back to trauma theory, we can extrapolate that this one-to-one establishment between the traumatic event and the belatedness does not consider certain factors of lived experience that might change how we see trauma.

We can complicate the relationship between the traumatic experience of the character and that of the player by applying Barad's poststructuralist complication of the apparatus back to our example of *Papo & Yo*. Without the referent of the trauma, it makes sense that the player's experience of the trauma depicted within the game would necessarily differ from that of the character; but, what does that mean for the evaluation of the play experience? If a player does not have the referent of the on-screen trauma, does that make their experience any less valid, less real, than another player's experience? Or, more to the point, if a player does not have a referent to the on-screen trauma, is the experience a failure in connecting to the player? This dissertation is precipitated by the strong reactions people have to empathy games; so, my answer to these questions is no with a qualifier: no, but it certainly is different. What I am proposing is not establishing a binary system of success or failure to empathy game experiences. Binary classifications carry the inherent problems of the referent system. To suggest that one experience

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<sup>16</sup> Her example Barad examines the Stern-Gerlach experiment and how the unintentional addition of a cheap cigar to the experiment produced unintended results and how that addition was influenced by social and cultural factors.

is more real than the other creates a secondary experience within the gameplay that is contradictory to what we know about empathy games and their effects on players. Instead, it makes more sense to conceptualize the play relationship through the poetics of relation to better account for those experiences without risking problematic assumptions about another's experience.

This conceptualization of the rhizomatic relationship between the user and the game is where the first level of witnessing can help to better understand player relationships to trauma representations in videogames. As mentioned in the first part of his chapter detailing his ontology for witnessing, Laub describes the first level through his experience coming to terms with being a witness to one's self (61-2). As a childhood survivor of the Holocaust, Laub has a referent to some of the traumatic experiences that an interviewee for the Fortunoff Archive may provide: "I have distinct memories of my deportation, arrival at the camp, and the subsequent life my family and I led there. I remember both these events and the feelings and thoughts they provoked in minute detail" (61). These memories are used later by Laub to connect his experiences to that of another interviewee and friend (62). At the same time, however, Laub carefully points out that his own memories seem inconceivable in their accuracy because they are "... far beyond the normal capacity for recall in a young child my age" (62). When faced with relating to another Holocaust survivor, Laub contextualizes that feat with his inability to fully grasp his own experiences. This contextualization highlights that in witnessing relationships, we bring ourselves, wherever we happen to be at that point in our own experiences, into a contextual connection with another just-as-complex subject on their own journey.

Similarly in *Papo & Yo*, the players affected by Caballero's narrative of childhood abuse and alcoholism by a parent may resonate with several players who have experienced similar

traumatic situations; but, they are different experiences. Those differences in experience need their own spaces to fully matter—they require distance from other experiences and the subject of those experiences that might seek to overlap and consume them. This difference through distance is what Laub refers to as a witness to one’s self. In recognizing a shared experience with the interviewee, Laub recognizes the need to deal with the witness he brings to this interaction of witnessing. Similarly, players who have experienced a related form of trauma in various distances from that being recounted by Quico in the game must recognize the difference of their own experience and the distance between themselves and the trauma on the screen. Similar to Laub, I argue that the player takes on the role of the interviewer in play and must necessarily recognize the experiential difference through distancing themselves from another’s experience so that the experiences to have room to matter.

While this model only directly speaks to players/interviewers with similar trauma experiences, I argue that the same model can apply to those without similar experiences. If empathy games have taught us anything, it is that these personal, often traumatic, stories affect the player. It feels so close that they describe the process as “understanding.”<sup>17</sup> What my augmented model of witnessing suggests is that the player recognize these feelings and put them into context, into relation with the story being told. Players can acknowledge the feeling of connection through the act of play in this narrative experience; however, they must also recognize the distance between their lived experience and that of what is happening in the game. This recognition goes farther than just knowing the difference between what is happening on screen vs. what is happening in their own lives. Instead, this move should express the equity of both experiences by giving the experience being told room to matter rather than just applying the

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<sup>17</sup> See my summary of the Tweets sent to Anna Anthropy over her game *Dys4ia* in the introduction.

same oppression in a new medium. This acknowledgement of distance between experiences so that they can matter is what I would consider the heart of Laub's model for this level of witnessing. Through such an acknowledgement, the connection that the player feels to the game through the act of play provides the necessary boundary for preventing an appropriation of the played experience as a lived experience for engaging in play as an equitable relationship. Miguel Sicart similarly makes this rhetorical move when discussing ethical systems in games. In *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Sicart moves to acknowledge the ethical system created by play and how the user participates in that system (226-7). Like Sicart, I argue that such a model of ethics concerning games should acknowledge the labor put into games by players and, by investing in these systems, require them to take responsibility for those interactions. Such a move, I argue, is an ethical one that revolves around the player. In this way, such a model takes some of the responsibility off creators and puts it on players rather than just focusing on what players get from the experience.

The puzzle reward revelations exemplify the mechanics behind this ethical system in *Papo & Yo* as they help to connect the fantastical narrative to the in-game reality for all. To achieve this connection, the puzzles use both mechanical and temporal characteristics towards different purposes. This mechanical characteristic is mostly used in the second half of the game following flashbacks. Here, Quico's reward for solving the puzzles is a narrative connection between the fantastical elements of the game (layer 2) and the in-game reality (layer 1). In one set of these puzzles, Quico watches stone statues of the fantastical world's characters and events transform into events happening in the in-game reality. Statues of Monster eating a frog transform into a statue of Quico's father drinking alone. In another, the death of Alejandra earlier in the game is transformed into a scene of Quico's father beating Alejandra. Piecing them together in



connection to one of the game advertisements, the player can see that the incident that set the game's narrative in motion was one where Quico broke something in the house and his father, having been drinking, took his anger out on his sister, Alejandra. In the final scene, Quico watches on a platform, parallel to Monster, as objects Quico sends via a pipe from either the in-game reality or fantastical world come out differently on Monster's platform. Dolls of Alejandra turn into Alejandra as she runs from Monster's rage; liquor bottles turn into intoxicating frogs that send Monster into that rage. These transformations turn everyday objects from layer 1, the in-game reality, into objects or characters in layer 2, the fantastical world. Mechanically, these puzzle revelations expose the connection between the two layers. Quico, no one else, must make the physical connects of turning layer 1 objects into objects and entities in layer 2. The player, while assisting Quico by pressing buttons and facilitating the in-game actions, is not the one having their reality and fantasy worlds collide during the revelation, emphasizing the difference in experience between the player and Quico.

What these final puzzles offer within the context of the game is much more active than the earlier scenes. In each of these sets of puzzles, notably easier than some of the other platforming aspects of the game, there is an active explanation of the action happening in the game and the information on the other side. Objects from one side transform after Quico places them into the pipe to what it reveals on the other side. The previous flashbacks more clearly relate to belatedness in that they are triggered memories of a traumatic experience. As such, the player's only option in those memories is to follow the line left before the character to see the scene frozen in Quico's memory. The path is one of revelation and not further interaction within the scene. This revelatory state does not remove agency from the player; but, it does differ from the

puzzle interactions. This difference, I argue, is important because it indicates a different relationship with the player.

The relationship experienced by the player with Quico in the puzzles is one of cooperation with the character rather than revelation. I am using the idea of cooperation because there is no automated process within the game that will complete the puzzles aside from the player's engagement. The player must be active in the relationship for progress to happen. During these actions, the player interacts with the character Quico to complete the actions required to move the narrative forward. In this way, the process is like Dominick LaCapra's concept of working through trauma. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra introduces the concept of working through trauma as a way of moving beyond Caruth's even-based model of trauma to one that was more focused on process and changes experienced by the victim. In particular, working through acknowledges that "[p]ossession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended and working through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all" (70). This concept addresses the problematic hole later addressed by Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in which the trauma was an unknown experience identified through belatedness. Following this logic, coming to an understanding or recognition of the trauma as such would lead to a "cure," often referred to as "the talking cure" by others familiar with the Freudian vein of trauma theory prior to Caruth. Instead, LaCapra argues that even the knowing of the trauma is a process rather than an event, and such a knowing may never be complete leaving the individual forever in the process both in their own life and the life of a community connected to the trauma.

I see LaCapra's concept of working through corresponding with the relationship being described by Laub in his first level of witnessing. While this is not directly made within the

theory, I argue that such an understanding of both concepts as complimentary because they both describe trauma narratives more holistically as processes. The working through of trauma, the gaining of perspective on the trauma and its effects is a process that can take many forms at various points of time and perspective for the narrator. In Laub's theory, part of that process is how the interviewee sees themselves and their relationship to that trauma at the time of the interview while working with the interviewer. Through the process of the interview, the interviewer interacts with the interviewee to produce a narrative. As such, it makes sense that the interviewer's understanding of themselves within this relationship and how they interact with the interviewee, how they facilitate a working through, also has impact on the working through and how the interviewee comes to see themselves.

Using LaCapra's working through as complimentary to Laub's first level of witnessing, we gain clarity around what happens in the last scene of *Papo & Yo*. Up to the last scene, both the player and Quico use these puzzles to process why he (Quico) is in this fantastic world. But, it is a mistake to think that Quico and the player have the same role within this process. This argument is best made in the final scene, which is a culmination of puzzles and imagery that blatantly connects the lifelong abuses of his father to Quico's trauma. In this scene, the player moves Quico along a parallel platform from which both Quico and the player watch the transformation of objects from reality into fantastic objects (i.e. liquor bottles into frogs, Alejandra dolls into Alejandras, etc.) drawing a clear connection between the fantastic imagery of the game and the real world issues that Quico encounters over and over in his lived experience of the game's reality. The last action that the player and Quico address together is what to do with Monster. With no cure for his addiction and his continued violent behavior despite the care of those around him, Quico must choose whether to stay on the platform where nothing changes

or move the platform with Monster to the edge where Monster falls off into the abyss below. If the player and Quico move Monster into the abyss, the game offers a path to the ending where Quico emerges back into the light, just like the portal through which he entered the fantastic world.

This final scene exemplifies the working through concept and the first level of witnessing in that it offers the player a choice that is not really a choice. This final boss battle has no bearing on the mechanical skills the player developed through the game; rather, the final puzzle and choice of what to do with Monster are more about how the player will help Quico in his own narrative. Staring at a sleeping Monster, Quico and the player have one choice left: whether to push Monster over the edge. The narrative will not progress without the push of the button. This lack of choice seems to fly in the face of the escapism that Caballero found so beneficial to games; but, it doesn't when we look at the play relationship as a witnessing relationship. By pushing the button, the player is not living Quico's experience. Instead, the player is assisting Quico in telling this last part of the narrative. The limitation of pushing the button or turning the game off forever incomplete reinforces this reading. Like a good interviewer, the player must realize that this is Quico's story. Quico's narrative has been a journey of self-discovery, of coming to terms with his life within the family that is both terrorized by and loves his father, of letting go of someone who keeps hurting him. The player, having been on this journey with Quico, has a different role here at the end, one that they have been prepping for throughout the play experience.

### **2.3 Conclusion: Building for the Ground Up**

In his 2013 and 2014 Game Developer Conference talks, Vander Caballero came off of finishing *Papo & Yo* excited about empathy games and their possibilities. Everything about this

game defied conventional expectations for games. The game's success inspired Caballero to share his enthusiasm so that empathy games could grow and, hopefully, push videogames towards new objectives. While I disagree with how he saw empathy games making this radical change, I do agree that it happened: empathy games provide a way for us as players to re-examine how we interact with games. Caballero and other empathy game advocates want to show how these games affect players, how "understanding" can make us better people. Instead, I want to encourage us to stop asking how games can make us better people and consider what we are doing with them that could help us be better people, especially for those who we continue to marginalize by claiming their experiences in these games. Using an adjusted version of Dori Laub's model of witnessing, I believe that the first step towards that goal is to not understand other people. If you want to understand something, understand where your boundaries can be used to enable others to matter.

This chapter introduced the foundation to my model of play as witnessing. A play experience in which a player assumes a direct correlation to the on-screen experience runs the risk of cheapening that experience as they have not had to endure the lived experience that came with the trauma, especially those experiences of global south trauma. As such, these readings of empathy games run the risk of perpetuating the insidious trauma of larger global systems perpetrated against the global south and repeating the technological Utopianism that seems to cycle through new media studies at various point of history.

Instead, I argue that a critical re-examination of the roles within the play that occurs in empathy games reveals a much more integral act. This act is similar to the first level of Dori Laub's act of witnessing, which focuses on being a witness to one's self. Despite the unknown background of the player, they can occupy the role that Laub associates with the interviewer in

that they assist in creating a narrative through the interaction taking place during play. This creation of a narrative does not necessitate subjective collapse. Instead, it further solidifies the role of the player as separate from the narrator and a need to recognize that separation in order for a narrative to be successfully and ethically created. To show how such a process benefits our understanding of games, I provided an analysis of one of the most well-known empathy games, *Papo & Yo*. In my analysis, I argued that the player is necessarily separated from Quico's trauma, which enables the player to assist in the process of working through that Quico undergoes throughout the narrative. Such a reading, I would argue, provides a more holistic view of play as well as the significance of this game to the historical and mechanical understanding of games like it.

### 3 PLAYING THE WITNESS

My last chapter established the need for a model that includes ethical boundaries between a player and an empathy game. Using Sara Amhed's concept of queer phenomenology, I elaborated on the violence that collapsing the lines between players and empathy games creates. I connected this elaboration with current work in game studies around global labor practices from Miguel Sicart and Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig DePeuter in order to contextualize the separation between game and player as an ethical issue related to postcolonial and global south studies around trauma. This contextualization informed my proposed methodology as I augmented Dori Laub's first level of witnessing, being a witness to one's self, for consideration in play. In looking at the act of play as a form of witnessing, I argued that we can establish ethical boundaries to play that enable us to get at what makes empathy games so important. This chapter will expand on this methodology by asking what happens after we acknowledge these boundaries: what are we creating in empathy games?

In this chapter, I investigate how the act of playing *Liyla and the Shadows of War*<sup>18</sup> gives lips to the unspoken trauma of Palestinian identity. Building on the separation of the player and the character established in my last chapter, I continue in my augmentation of Dori Laub's model of witnessing as a method for how play functions in the postcolonial and global south narratives of the empathy games. Focusing on Laub's second level of witnessing, witnessing testimony being given by another, I argue that the process of play in these empathy games is one of creation between the player and the videogame rendering the simulation. Through an analysis of actant, assemblages, agency, and poetics via Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Karen Barad, and Édouard Glissant, I explain who the agents are involved in this process and

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<sup>18</sup> I'll be using *Liyla* to refer to this game throughout the rest of the chapter.

how they have agency to create something new that has larger implications on culture. Continuing the phenomenological and ethical readings of the body by Jean-Luc Nancy and Frantz Fanon, I argue that the creation of a narrative body from empathy games carries with it the cultural and ethical considerations of how to create it and interact with it based on its creating agents. This body and its act of creation, I argue, push the boundary of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model into something that is more collective by using nonhuman and queer theories of phenomenology from Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, and Sara Ahmed. The creation of this collective narrative body through play enables identity formation in a way that is unique to empathy games in that it provides an avenue for creation where other ways have been dismantled by systemic oppression.

Using this model of play as witnessing, I examine the significance of play in *Liyla* as a postcolonial and global south trauma narrative. I argue that the two agents involved, the human player and the nonhuman videogame interact through play to create a narrative body. Focusing on the nonhuman agency of the videogame, I show how the videogame uses its programming to elicit a specific relationship with the player in order to create that narrative body. Based on real events, the narrative body from *Liyla* cannot be isolated as one person's story. Instead, I argue that its creation speaks to larger issues of Palestinian identity shaped through war and silenced by colonialism.

### **3.1 Play as Witnessing, Witnessing as Play**

In augmenting Laub's methodology for games, the second level of witnessing most closely aligns with the concept of play as a process. Laub's second level of witnessing originally focuses on the interviewer's role and responsibilities during the witnessing process and how that person "actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event" (62). Building on



the first level of witnessing, which establishes boundaries to the different experiences of the interviewer and the interviewee, this level is not suggesting a merging of player and creator experience. Instead, Laub's model focuses on the actions or processes taken by the interviewer who has already enacted the first level of witnessing by establishing ethical boundaries. Here, the interviewer assists the interviewee in connecting the trauma to a narrative expression. Working together, a narrative emerges as the product of their interaction.

Like the second level of witnessing described by Laub, the process of play focuses on the creation of a narrative within a particular boundary of time and space. According to Johan Huizinga, play is

a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

(13)

A cultural anthropologist, Huizinga primarily works on how play connects to larger systems of culture. While his use as an anthropologist may be dated, his work introduced many to the serious work of games within culture. Along these lines, Huizinga's definition of play describes something that is both part of and separate from lived experience. Huizinga's idea that a space demarcating itself from reality, his concept of the magic circle, does not take varied lived experiences into account. For example, race and gender are not given critical consideration in his one-size-fits-all approach to explain play as something that happens across cultures with cultural

ramifications. But, his lack of specification allows us to fill in the gaps. Huizinga did frame play as a process in which players can come from their lived experiences and create something, a narrative in our case, that could not exist had that process not been undertaken. As such, both Laub's second level of witnessing and Huizinga's idea of play emphasize the process of creation and its larger cultural significance within their respective contexts.

Bruno Latour's concept of actant provides helpful information for better understanding how these connections between the act and its larger cultural significance, or assemblages, contribute to cultural identities.<sup>19</sup> In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Latour builds on assemblage theory by attributing agency to certain groups of interworking assemblages called cultural objects. Because of their composition from other assemblages, Latour argues that cultural objects not only reflect the society from which they were produced but also influence that society by becoming another node in the larger rhizomatic structure of culture (83). Using Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage, Latour expands on the idea of the body without organs as culture. The cultural identity, its bodily composition, depends on the creation and continues interaction of assemblages. When connected back to witnessing and play, these processes produce the assemblages that sustain the cultural body, making them integral to its establishment and sustainability. In other words, processes like play and witnessing are not only similar in practice but also in facilitating the existence of cultural identity.

The similarities between witnessing and play diverge when it comes to who performs the actions within both processes. Of the two subjects involved in the creation process, Laub's model of witnessing assumes that they are both human. However, some more recent considerations of play, especially considering the creation of single-player videogames, allow for a non-human

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<sup>19</sup> The concept of assemblage is from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* on which I will expand further into this chapter.

subject. In “Gamic Action, Four Moments,” Alexander Galloway uses the term “actions” to describe play in a way that makes room for nonhuman subjects: “Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code” (2). For Galloway, the process of creation within play occurs between the human player and the nonhuman machine. This distinction expands the limits for who can be subjects involved in play. Just as the similarities between play and witnessing invite productive consideration of how they might inform each other, I argue that this difference provides an opportunity to further interrogate the restrictions on subjectivity in Laub’s model of witnessing. What I argue in this chapter is that the difference between human and nonhuman (machine) subjects is arbitrary and, when put into consideration with postcolonial and global south trauma narratives in empathy games, may be harmful. Instead, I propose that the consideration of nonhuman subjects in play can help productively augment Laub’s model of witnessing to expand its ethical application to new media.<sup>20</sup>

The obfuscation between subject and object enables us to consider how nonhuman subjects can exhibit characteristics and consequences typically reserved for humans. Due to the collaborative nature of play, agency in nonhuman subjects is of primary concern as it has a direct impact on the product of play. In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karan Barad pays great attention to nonhuman agency and how it affects a process she refers to as inter-acting. For Barad, the classifications of subject and object are not innate and, therefore, bear no consequence on how humans and nonhumans exhibit agency (178). As such, she defines agency as “‘doing’ or ‘being’ in its intra-activity. Agency is about changing possibilities of change entailed in

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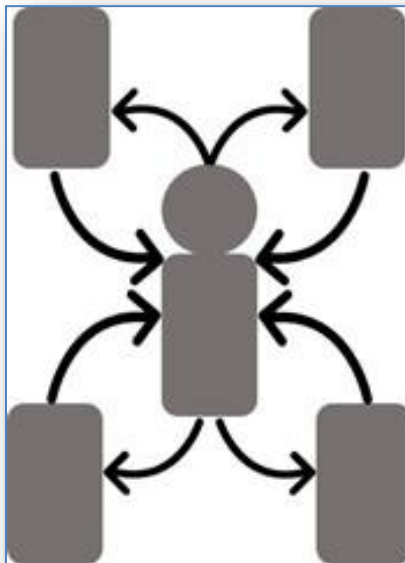
<sup>20</sup> This argument it not to say that Laub was not working with new media. His use of VHS technology was quite groundbreaking and used the new media at his disposal for the time of the model’s creation. Where our approaches differ is the assumption of only human subjects. My method, instead, investigates how such an exclusion is not necessary and may harm more recent narrative expressions that use newer new media like videogames.

*reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure [emphasis original]*” (178). What Barad’s understanding of agency provides is a way of disentangling human-centered language from what we observe. As such, nonhuman subjects, like videogames, can exhibit agency and become more like human subjects than we originally conceived.

This understanding of agency also affects the mutually created narrative because changing the variables of the process also changes the product. To better encompass this seemingly paradoxical process of both being part of and being distinct from the originating subjects, I will revisit Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of assemblage in more depth. According to Deleuze and Guattari, an example of an assemblage would be a book since it is “a multiplicity—but we don’t know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive” (4). In this example, the book’s existence depends on the sources from which it originated. It is also distinct from its original subjects, the strata, because it has become something “substantive” through this process (4). The production of this new entity is significant because it is part of the process of becoming for the larger system, the body without organs: “You have constructed your own little machine, ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines” (161). Deleuze and Guattari’s connection of the assemblage to the body without organs shows how the isolated act of creation between two subjects can, influence something much larger. In this way, it is like Huizinga’s concept of play, which also proposes that the isolated creation within play contributes to larger cultural significance. To further challenge the subject/object dichotomy using Deleuze and

Guattari's body without organs, I argue that the product of play/witnessing in empathy games, the narrative, is a body.

Phenomenology provides several concepts that help us consider the classification of the narrative as a body and the implications of that classification for play and witnessing. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty described existence as strings of sensations that tell subjects about the world around them, and the body that perceives also sends out signals about itself (expressions).



*Figure 1 Merleau-Ponty's ontological model of perception in which a sensing human is centered subject interacts with other object/subjects in recursive feedback loops. The centering of the human subject is important in this model as it communicates a hierarchical categorization of subjects and relies on a "normal" (read cis, white, male, able-bodied, ect.) body having agency.*

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of perception is made up of feedback loops. Here, the perception of something else, subject or object, is based on a centered subject's act of sensing. Likewise, the perception of the self by a subject relies on how the self as a subject senses another's perception.

For Merleau-Ponty, we sense ourselves based on how others perceive us, and we read ourselves from their behavior: “we literally are what others think of us and we are our world” (109).

Merleau-Ponty’s prioritizing of sensing in the world around us helps my augmented model of witnessing because it denies inherent characteristics and, instead, relies on sensing for identity. In other words, if a player senses a narrative and perceives it as a body, then it is a body.

While this phenomenological model is helpful for envisioning the narrative as a body, it also requires augmentation. Like the original model of witnessing, Merleau-Ponty’s model centers the human subject in a way that keeps it from being better integrated in a culturally rhizomatic model. Merleau-Ponty argues that the subject, the point at the literal center of the model, perceives. In other words, everything centers on the subject and their search for who they are: “For if it is true that I am conscious of my body through the world and if my body is the unperceived term at the center of the world toward which every object turns its face, then it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world” (84). This solipsistic model means that anything being sensed must not be the subject; instead, they are objects. Quite literally, Merleau-Ponty’s model encourages objectification. This objectification of the unfamiliar, anything not the sensing subject, introduces a hierarchical element to the model that becomes the justification for potential human rights violations.

The inequalities between self and other are even more apparent when considering postcolonial and global south narratives. In my last chapter, I traced how the distinction between the Occidental Self and the Oriental Other by Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and bell hooks conveyed systemic disenfranchisement of postcolonial and global south identities. The system critiqued by these scholars and their related disciplines is on display in Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of what constitutes a self. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains

that “things” are not ourselves; instead, things are objects, the antitheses to our cohesion: “For our existence, the thing is much less a pole of attraction than a pole of repulsion. We do not see ourselves in it, and this is precisely what makes it a thing” (338). Merleau-Ponty’s model of the self creates a hierarchy familiar to postcolonial and global south models of power because the perceiving subject (the sensing I) is always the norm or center surrounded by everything else.<sup>21</sup> So, how can we prioritize phenomenology’s sensation and phenomena in a model of play as witnessing without carrying over its inequalities?

A more ethical model is, therefore, incomplete without a critical examination of lived experience for the postcolonial and global south subjectivities to gain insight into more privileged models of the self. In the “Lived Experience of the Black Man” chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon dramatizes the lived experience of the black man that he has theorized throughout the book itself. In it, he acknowledges the microaggressions that happen in everyday interactions on a train and the internalized trauma-filled monologue of the black man who is experiencing them. Fanon’s take-away from this experience is to remind his reader that “[o]ntology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (89). Fanon rightly points out that any ontology regarding experience where it imagines a centralized subject interacting with the world such as an ontology of phenomenology does not account for the black man’s lived experience.

Moreover, their subjects are not bound by the history and racially oppressive systems that continue to impact the black man. Fanon argues that these ontologies are built on the labor of the

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<sup>21</sup> To give credit to Merleau-Ponty, his argument is that everyone perceives the world; so, each of us are simultaneously subjects and objects depending on whether we were perceiving or being perceived. However, any explanation that classifies an Other as not be human, even if only for part of the act, is dehumanizing and would potentially do more harm to those who are less like us, or whoever has power to declare the official “us”.

black man because they are defined in their difference to him. In relation to the centralized subjects of Merleau-Ponty's model, it is significant to note that the subject experiences none of the additional barriers described by Fanon. We see the frustration in the tone of Fanon's writing, especially in "Lived Experience of the Black Man." Written in a style akin to stream of consciousness, the chapter walks through the identity-based response to the experience of being Black, particularly a Black Algerian, in France. His emotional response proceeds from hyper awareness to anger before resigning in nihilism as Fanon realizes that there is nothing he can do to pacify his fellow train riders and retain his dignity and sense of self.<sup>22</sup> This failure to consider the phenomenological complexity of such lived experiences by people like Merleau-Ponty leads to problematic ontologies that claim to apply to everyone but really exert more violence by cutting out people from how we conceive our reality and abandon them to hopeless realities that prop up white identity.

Later phenomenologists and those interested in an interdisciplinary approach to phenomenology provide some critical bodily boundaries that help move the phenomenological model of the self into more ethical territory. In "On the Soul," Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the difference between a body and a mass is the soul, or the ability to extend the sensing feedback loops into the world around it rather than being closed off (126-8). Here, Nancy blurs the distinction between subject and object by relying on a mixture of the sensing subject's perception and the perceived subject/object's agency of extension. Nancy also uses this inclusion of agency to provide a more ethical consideration of the phenomenological self because it accounts for

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<sup>22</sup> By invoking Fanon, I am in no way establishing him as a paragon. As Jay Rajiva explains in *Postcolonial Parabola*, Fanon's focus on psychoanalysis and blatant disregard for the experiences of black women is palpable in his work (23). Instead, I am using Fanon as an example of where we see work telling white people about a black experience rather bluntly, showing how it is a foundational element of white identity.



humans not like the subject and even nonhumans.<sup>23</sup> His model accounts for machines by suggesting that the incorrect notion of the soul, the one in which the soul is a possession of the body, is just a gatekeeping mechanism suggesting little more than hypocrisy on behalf of humans:

At any rate, when we speak about the body, we are soon all too ready to reject, to ‘excrete’ something (bad, ‘material’ . . . ), by denouncing, for example, the ‘objectified body.’ Machines are reputed to be inhuman, soulless, and bad for the body, even though at the same time we’re quite content to use them. In wanting to keep a ‘good,’ ‘signifying’ body, we reproduce the same schema of the exclusion of the body by the soul [sic]. (133)

By including nonhuman subjects within his model, Nancy provides a much-needed ethical move that is critical to both videogames and postcolonial and global south narratives. Specifically, Nancy calls out the innate hypocrisy with the Western model of the self and uses the context of the Bosnian genocide to illustrate the very real consequences of such a model in the global south. He necessarily complicates the centered subject (read white, cis, straight, male, able-bodied, etc.) by challenging how they categorize objects. Such complexity concerning the subject makes it harder to dehumanize objects and, thus, harder to justify violations of bodies that are different.

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<sup>23</sup> The complication of subjectivity and what that meant for humans and nonhumans alike did not start in the 1990s with Nancy. Becoming rather popular following World War II, military scientists began seeing how these boundaries bled into one another through the extension of military technological equipment from the centered human subject. From there, the development of that technology into what would become known as artificial intelligence through the work of scientists funded and hired via the military industrial complex like J. C. R. Licklider helped shape much of the design choices that went into the creation of modern computing. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that these conceptions of the machine, much like the older conceptions of phenomenology, tend to revolve around the centralized human subject. When attempts were made to see the machine as a subject in and of itself, it was either seen as a non-issue because the sensing of that entity was routed through humans as was the case with Alan Turing in his explanation of the Turing test or met with fear and warning as was the case with Joseph Weizenbaum’s concerns about decision-making processes derived solely from logic. It is not until later philosophical turns in understanding nonhumans that a decentralized model of the self was developed in what might not be seen quite as related disciplines (women, gender, and studies, ecocriticism, etc.).

This move is important in discussing postcolonial and global south narrative bodies as bodies in empathy games because it establishes the ethical considerations attached to the narrative as a body.

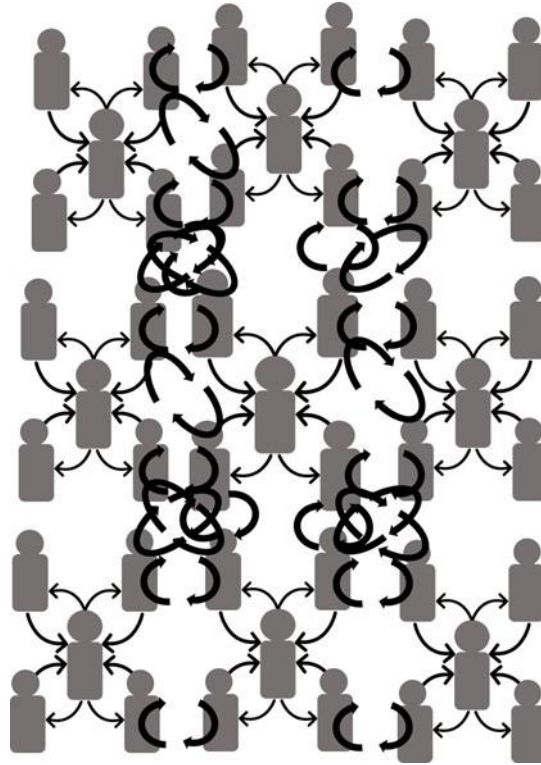
As seen in Nancy's theory of the subject and the soul, the aggregation of sensing over a lifetime could potentially constitute an identity for a subject. But, if that identity is only referencing a "normalized" subject, identity can suffer from similar issues to "understanding."<sup>24</sup> In *Postcolonial Parabola*, Jay Rajiva grounds his phenomenological model of postcolonial trauma by expounding on the limitations of Nancy's model. Rajiva's critique of Nancy revolves around his focus on the western body: "The 'foreign bodies' about whom we apparently know nothing end up telling us something vital about trauma: the possibility of postcolonial literature and its metaphors as prosthetic supplements to the representation of trauma, supplements that originate in the reader's encounter with the text itself" (19). Rajiva's critique of Nancy's ability to fully incorporate non-normative, or "foreign bodies", not only highlights the issue but also presents postcolonial literature and theory as an avenue forward for dealing with it. My argument continues to walk along this avenue.

Along this avenue of argumentation, I find that Édouard Glissant paved the road with *Poetics of Relation*. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant identifies the lack of consideration regarding non-Western forms of identity such as collective identity rather than the individualistic model suggested by the centralized subject of phenomenology. Glissant questions a Western rhizomatic model's ability to consider the lived experience of places long used as an object to centralize the white experience such as the Caribbean. Instead of these models that aim to understand everything, Glissant proposes a process or poetics of relation in which one can understand a

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<sup>24</sup> See previous chapters where I discuss the problems of "understanding" as a synonym for appropriation.

moment rather than a totalized identity (192). Relation, according to Glissant, is an incorporation of everything, not just what fits the models we ascribe to what we see in our existence. It encompasses the understood and the chaos of reality (133; 174). The poetics of relation refers to the process of constant movement in which these forces exist: "For, in reality, Relation is not an absolute toward which every work would strive but a totality--even if for us this means disentangling it, something it never required--that through its poetic and practical and unceasing force attempts to be perfected, to be spoken, simply, that is, to be complete" (35). While such thinking may be uncomfortable for Western subjects, Glissant argues that this model is more ethical. Without taking these perspectives into account, subjects that interact with postcolonial and global south narratives run the risk of perpetuating the insidious trauma Glissant recognizes in his argument regarding the centralizing of the white experience. Rather than continue the insidious trauma, when interacting with postcolonial and global south narratives in new media, we should use our moment of re-evaluation to ask what we have been missing, or more poignantly, ignoring.



*Figure 2 An expanded phenomenological model that foregrounds how a centralized subject is not feasible, let alone accurate. Here, every node is a potential sensing subject, which more accurately diversifies the potential identity of a subject.*

Souvik Mukherjee's *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* is a formal starting point at unraveling the poetics of relation within videogames. Published in 2017, Mukherjee's work serves as a nodal point for the intersection of postcolonial theory and game studies. In his covering of various sub-topics within the topic of postcolonial theory and videogames, Mukherjee unearths something about play that drives forward Glissant's previous discussion: "Play, therefore, also is a way of constantly subverting the 'centres' that colonialism tries to construct" (21-22). Mukherjee's emphasis on play as a disruption process is parallel to Glissant's poetics of relation. Both identify how the process of arriving at our cultural systems is just as valuable as the entities for creating models while emphasizing how the process can subvert colonial systems incorporated into dominant cultural systems. Building on this

importance of process, specifically play, I align my discussion of Laub's second level of witnessing with play to further develop their ethical relationship.

Much of the problem of poetics and play as process rests in the understanding of subjectivity. Specifically, many models hinge on whether an entity is a subject or object in relation to another. Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* uncovers a similar process that problematize subjectivity between human and nonhuman actors specifically humans and nature. Drawing on Donna Haraway's<sup>25</sup> argument that nonhuman actors are not just extensions of a human subject, Alaimo rightly points out that there is no separation between these two actors (nature and humans) as processes flow through each to contribute to the next process in another (2). This trans-corporeal blurring of boundaries is not meant to do away with human subjectivity; rather, it provides a way of understanding the interactions between human and nonhuman subjects and how they can provide tangible results that manifest in different ways. In other words, it "calls us to somehow find ways of navigating through the simultaneously material, economic, and cultural systems that are so harmful to the living world and yet so difficult to contest or transform" (18). In my discussion of play, the manifestation of a narrative is one such example of the results of interaction between human and nonhuman subjects, meaning the narrative embodies a set of trans-corporeal ethics as it deals with the different power contexts of postcolonial and global south trauma narratives.

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<sup>25</sup> In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway argues for feminism to move out of the nature-centric second-wave space to one that considers identity and subjectivity from women's experiences as more rhizomatic: "[p]erhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos. From the point of view of pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions, made inevitable by the social relations of science and technology, there might indeed be a feminist science" (530). Her figure of the cyborg suggests a subjectivity that lives in and through the interactions of the human subject with other human and nonhuman actors. In this way, subjectivity is always already plural. This plurality, she argues, is truly transcendent (as in non-normative) as she asserts that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess (535).

So far, we understand that narratives, particularly those concerning postcolonial and global south trauma can be considered bodies, which affords them certain ethical boundaries and embodies trans-corporeal concerns. Next, I establish how that classification of a narrative as a body affects play as witnessing, how it can contribute to a more ethical understanding of play as witnessing, by examining the corporeality of the narrative process. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* argues that a body is a product of process and does not have a core subjectivity in and of itself (1). In one of her early examples, she points out how the body of a pile of garbage in the street not only could be considered a body and nonhuman subject of its own but also had an identity in the moment that she perceived it that made it something completely different (4-6). In that moment, Bennett and the garbage performed an interaction to create a new identity in a way that she describes as vibrant. "Vibrant" here is meant to convey something that is always in motion and has no core subjectivity (23). The subjectivity depends on the actions being taken at any given moment in time and what that interaction produces (i.e. how things, to use Barad's words, come to matter). In putting trans-corporeal subjectivity into a videogame context, I argue that the creating subjects, the player and the non-human machine, create a new, vibrant narrative from their interaction.

While phenomenology and nonhuman theory offer promising ways of better understanding play as an act of witnessing, the work of these theorists still need much in the way of additional ethical interactions, especially when it comes to dealing with postcolonial and global south trauma. Merleau-Ponty continuously uses the phrase "normal" to refer to the ideal subject and, in that regard, is rather ableist. Nancy did not address the specifics when it comes to the privilege and power dynamics at play in systemic forms of oppression that could be considered violence and the consideration of those acts on identity. Specifically, what happens

when we do not assume a cisgender, straight white male subject (i.e. a “normalized” subject)? Neither Bennett nor Alaimo address the critical history of power that goes into being able to craft their models in their respective works, which becomes its own silent critique. For Alaimo, this critique can be found in the theoretical genealogy that seems to neglect the contemporary work of some scholars and rely on others such as Elizabeth Grosz, who exhibit problems of neglecting issues outside the consideration of white feminism. Additionally, Bennet ignores the historical consequences of certain power dynamics that could critically factor into her model in more meaningful ways. For example, she argues that distributive agency prevents us from assigning blame to singular individuals such as President George W. Bush and the Iraq Invasion (36-8). In these instances, the creation of a more rhizomatic model of the self neglects the privilege of being able to ignore some of these power dynamics raised by postcolonial literature and theory as well as race theory and queer theory.

Working towards a more ethical phenomenological model means that evaluations and theorizations of new media should include a critical awareness of what it considers “normal” and a more concrete move to identifying and integrating queer lived experiences. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed uses her subject position as a queer person of color to theoretically discuss what a queer phenomenology would look like, not just in terms of identity but also in its politics. Her third chapter, “The Orient and Other Others,” explores these concepts in relation to race and colonialism and pushes us to consider disorientation as a process in her conclusion, “Disorientation and Queer Objects.” This process, she argues,

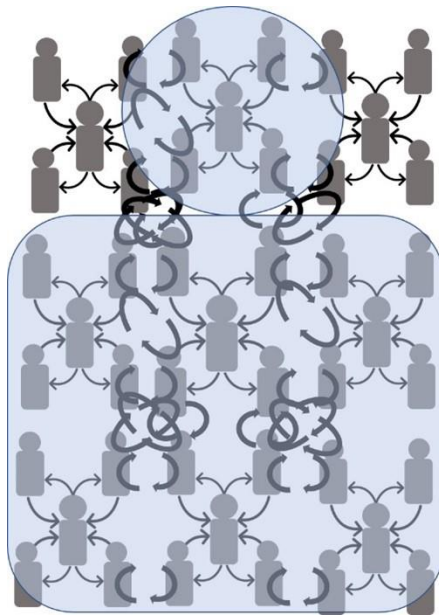
. . . involves becoming an object. It is from this point, the point at which the body becomes an object, that Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body begins. By implication, we learn that disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than

others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more ‘involved’ in some bodies than in others. It is not just that bodies are directed in specific ways, but that the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others. (159)

Here, Ahmed acknowledges the differences in subjectivities unaccounted for in earlier phenomenological models and suggests that the way for us to move forward in complicating these models is for those who are traditionally seen in subject roles to put themselves in the position of the object and center the model there. Ahmed’s model solves several ethical issues by finally accounting for more subjectivities than the “normative,” but it still poses a problematic subject/object dichotomy. The move from a centralized subject to a centralized object does not solve the hierarchical issues involved in this model; rather, it just switches the positions of the subject and the object. Moreover, switching positions between these entities while still holding onto the idea of a subject and an object invokes the problematic consumption action of “understanding.” If put into action, someone becoming an object might constitute an issue of claiming someone else’s lived experience as one’s own. In our discussion of empathy games, an example would be having played through a simulation of a traumatic situation, the player would “know what it is like to go through or be \_\_\_\_\_.” While I think such repositioning is important and vital for recognizing other experiences in the world, I argue that “becoming” may not be the most ethical choice as it leads to a possible appropriation. Instead, a more holistic way of thinking about these experiences would be to address the subject/object dichotomy of these phenomenological models and, instead, consider subject/subject relational models in order to avoid these issues.



The move towards a subject/subject relationship is my suggestion for moving our understanding of play as witnessing closer to rhizomatic model that provides respect for all subjects involved and works to legitimize narratives outside of traditional Western power dynamics. If we consider player and machinic action as a bounded point in time rather than a thing to possess, the narrative takes on a literal body that embodies the features, from scars to smiles, of that encounter while reminding the player of their own embodied experience as a separate agent in a shared moment of time. In looking at *Liyla*, I argue that we can see how playing empathy games as a process of vibrant creation in which the trans-corporeal ethics of Palestinian identity come to matter as a body for witnessing.



*Figure 3 When looked at as a whole, the diversified subject model becomes a larger body—a body without organs.*

### 3.2 Liyla as a Witness of War

In 2016, Rasheed Abueideh caused a stir with his mobile game *Liyla*. At first glance, *Liyla* borrows mechanics common in puzzle platformers<sup>26</sup> like *Super Mario Bros.* and shadowy aesthetics like *Limbo*, but the story is quite different. The game tells the story of a Palestinian father (the playable character) trying to get his family to safety during the Israeli-Gaza conflict of 2014. The game's puzzles center around choices such as whether to go into a school to escape shelling or put the playable character's daughter in an ambulance heading for safety, but these choices all led to the same terrible outcome of the game. In this game, there is no winning, no safety. There are only stolen moments of terror that prolong the narrative to its deadly conclusion where everyone around the playable character dies. The weight of the narrative equals the weight of the game's promises. Within less than 30 minutes, this free-to-play mobile game promises that players will "[w]itness the actual events of war from different point of view" and that the experience will "[p]rovoke different feelings in a short space of time" ("Press Kit"). The weight placed on players and distributors not only exposes what happened and is still happening in Gaza but also raises questions about this kind of game: Should games cover this kind of content? If so, how should they handle it?

To answer these questions, I have chosen to examine *Liyla* because of how it facilitates creation by exposing traumatic histories through play. In particular, the game exposes the traumatic history of what on the surface seems like a minor conflict and connect it to a colonial history. The Israel-Gaza Conflict of 2014 is one of the most recent conflicts between Israel and Palestine and is the focus of *Liyla*. Officially, the conflict lasted two months with a ceasefire

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<sup>26</sup> Puzzle platformers are a subgenre of platforming games, named for their use of platform surfaces on screen per narrative segment, that primarily use puzzles built into the platform environment to move the narrative along to the next beat.

agreement marking the ending on August 26, 2014 (Human Rights Watch). During that time, there were attacks on both sides; but Israeli attacks carried much larger proportion of destruction and civilian casualties. According to the World Report of the events by Human Rights Watch, 1,500 of the 2,100 Palestinians killed were civilians as identified by the United Nations. Palestinian attacks, notably less sophisticated and targeted than those of Israeli forces, resulted in the death of 71 Israelis, 5 of which were civilians (Human Rights Watch). Moreover, the bombings destroyed a large portion of the civilian infrastructure in Gaza from homes to power plants, causing the displacement of 108,000 people and continued interruption of basic utilities such as water and electricity (Human Rights Watch). From these figures, there is an obvious imbalance of power at work that connects to the larger history of the Nakba as colonial history.

Questions regarding the game's depiction of the 2014 Gaza Conflict have deep roots in the Nakba and Israel's statehood. In 1948, a war broke out over the cession of Palestinian land to create Israel: a nation of rebirth for Jews following the horrific events of the Holocaust and prior persecutions throughout European history (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 4). The creation of Israel out of Palestinian land displaced Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza (Dawen n.p.). As noted by Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu Lughod, the effects of this displacement are what lent the Nakba its name and legacy: "For Palestinians, the 1948 War led indeed to a 'catastrophe.' A society disintegrated, a people dispersed, and a complex and historically changing but taken for granted communal life was ended violently" (3). This analysis of the Nakba and the cultural effects on Palestinians might jar audiences unfamiliar with the narrative. To most of the Western world, the creation of the Israeli state was meant to be something good coming out of the carnage of World War II and the Holocaust. The consideration of the Palestinian perspective of that war and the

events following it such as the 2014 Conflict depicted in *Liyla* provides a much different narrative grounded in an imbalance of power following World War II.

This continued imbalance becomes obvious when we look at responses to the deadly figures of the 2014 Conflict. In his introduction to the edited collection *Letters to Palestine*, Vijay Prashad asserts that most countries backed the UN Human Rights Council's vote to investigate alleged Israeli war crimes against Palestinians; but there will likely be no tangible result of the investigation: "[A]ccountability there will not be. Indeed, there is barely memory. Palestine is forgotten" (4). In speaking on the absence of the Palestinian perspective throughout history, Abu-Lughod and Sa'di note that "[w]ithout lips, of the political sort, Palestinians could not make themselves heard over the louder story, the one that for Europeans had been vigorously put forth for decades before the Nakba, the one framed in terms of the powerful imagery of redemption, the one told by European Jews who stressed their alliance with the cultural and political values of the West" (11-12).<sup>27</sup> Both Prashad's and Abu-Lughod and Sa'di's statements connect the events of the 2014 Conflict to the larger cultural memory of Palestinian trauma linked to colonialism. Like the Nakba, the 2014 Conflict contributes to the continued trauma of Palestinians being colonized because there is no memory of their experience. Despite overwhelming evidence, power imbalances of colonialism influence the historical narrative to the point that Palestinian identity becomes hollow, something to be used in telling Israeli story rather than their own. Moreover, there is no connection between it and the larger historical narrative, leaving a population voiceless in a history that talks about them but never with them. Within this historical silence, *Liyla* is interesting because it disrupts the historical narrative

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<sup>27</sup> This reference to lips comes from Abu-Lughod and Sa'di's reading of an interview with an elderly Palestinian woman who remarks on the interviewer's question on her silence regarding her experience in the Nakba with the question "How can those without lips whistle?" (10).

through play. What this game and its fictional depictions of the atrocities of the 2014 Conflict provide are the metaphorical lips with which another's attention could be drawn to a Palestinian narrative. By giving Palestine a narrative body, *Liyla* succeeded in creating justice where other more formal justice systems failed.

In this section, I explore the significance of my augmented model of play using *Liyla*. By foregrounding the videogame's stakes and analyzing how it creates a narrative body, I show how this augmented witnessing model contributes to a larger conversation about Palestinian identity and postcolonial and global south power structures. To see the stakes and effects of this second level of witnessing and its process of creating a narrative body, we need not look further than *Liyla*'s release and development. For starters, Apple's App Store refused to release the game in the game category during its debut in 2016. As noted on the game's Twitter account on May 18, 2016, "Unfortunately Apple rejected the game as a game,they say its not game,it has a political statement [sic]." This justification by Apple that *Liyla* was not a game based on its potential political connections seemed contradictory since other games were not asked to meet the same criteria. As Tom Phillips notes in his *Eurogamer* article on this issue, several Twitter users brought attention to how Apple had recently published another game, *Israeli Heroes*--a game like *Angry Birds* in mechanics that uses Israeli missiles in the ongoing Israeli and Palestinian war scenario, as a game in the same store without incident. While both *Israeli Heroes* and *Liyla* differ in their approaches, both games cover the same issue: the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The unfettered release of one game while, almost simultaneously, rejecting another reaffirmed how power structures allow one perspective (Israeli) to speak while silencing another (Palestinian) in various ways. Ultimately, Apple overturned their decision and published *Liyla* in

the Games category; but, the existence of the original justification begs the question of who can speak in these contexts and why (Phillips n.p.).

*Liyla*'s creator, Rasheed Abueideh, showed how the development of *Liyla* and its aftermath also speak to the unspoken presence of Palestinian identity. In his 2016 GDC talk on the *IReasonToBe* panel, Abueideh began his talk by clarifying his national identity: "So, let's do that again. My name is Rasheed Abueideh, and I'm from Palestine. It's not Pakistan. It's not Phillipines." Here, Abueideh's comments addressed how international colleagues did not know about Palestine's existence, much less that there were people living there creating art. Abueideh also showed a screenshot of his home on Google Maps, which listed it as "Unavailable," to emphasize the extent of the silence around Palestine (Abueideh, "IReasonToBe"). As Abueideh's presentation shows, these microaggressions, whether intended or not, contribute to the global historical silencing of Palestinian identity.

The maintenance of Palestine's historical silence creates real-life consequences on game development that are unique to their situation. A banal issue with huge consequences is not being able to receive money for games or even having games displayed in app stores because some Palestinian addresses are "unavailable" on some maps (like Google Maps) used by banks and apps, making it impossible to create accounts with certain platforms much less receive money for their work that could facilitate future work (Abueideh, "IReasonToBe"). In relation to *Liyla*, some of Abueideh's employees either left or asked to not be named in the game's credits because of fears that the game's narrative against this historical silence would make them targets of violence (Abueideh, "IReasonToBe"). Abueideh's discussions around voicing one's experience in this project expose the very real consequences facing those who dare to speak against the historical narrative because the act of speaking is dangerous to those maintaining power.

The stakes of this game match the gravity of how we play it. Upon opening the game and selecting a language, a black screen with white writing tells the player that the game is “based on real events” and recommends playing in a dark room with headphones. These notes before the game even starts shows that the game seeks a certain relationship with the player. By connecting the play experience to “real events,” the game prepares the player for how the game’s activities will bleed into their outside world. Here, the game promises no refuge from the outside world; rather, it proposes that the player prepare to accept the game’s contents as a truth that may not reconcile with their current knowledge of these events. At the same time, the game also signals this play session as something private. By asking the player to shut themselves off from the rest of the sensory world, the game establishes an intimate relationship with the player, one usually reserved for interactions between humans.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the context of their interaction, the two actors, the human player and the nonhuman videogame, also establish a relationship of facilitation. As the opening of the game indicates, the videogame assures the player that the things they are about to see in the game are based on things that happened in Palestine. The need to establish this context suggests that the player is assumed to be either an outside who does not know the events occurring in Palestine or is someone who needs reassurance that the events they have witnessed outside the game are indeed real. This positioning of the player by the game suggests that the player is not in a position of power in this relationship because they need to know what the videogame has to tell them. The fact that the game even tells the player how to play it (in a dark room with

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<sup>28</sup> I’ve observed how people react to this privacy in a discussion group I led for a series called Playtest. During the session, there were two overall reactions. One response was a player who covered their head with their jacket in order to create the experience requested by the game. Others who did not go to this length noticeably got quieter as they progressed through the game. This experience was quite different from other interactions I saw in this series where gameplays became a mostly collaborative space or even spaces to metagame. Instead, silence and seriousness dominated the session.

headphones) shows that the videogame wants the player to be in a certain context and state of mind in order to interact with it. As such, the videogame establishes that it has an undeniable agency in this process and that the player's role is to facilitate the process as programmed by Abueideh and his development team.

The game also leaves a certain actor out of the intimate process of play, Liyla. On the title screen, players see a young girl that we can assume to be Liyla. Once we start the game, however, we find that we are playing as a middle-aged man. Eventually, we meet a character like the person on the title screen called Liyla as the playable character's daughter. She is not an option for us to play; she is an NPC.<sup>29</sup> Instead of allowing players to occupy Liyla's subject position as a playable character, the game reinforces the player's role within the play process as a caretaker.<sup>30</sup> We, as the father, must guide her through the game to safety. This adjacent narrative position parallels the witnessing model in that the player is not telling the story; rather, the player is helping to facilitate the telling of Liyla's story.

Now that we have established the agents at play, we should focus on the processes that occur between them. The play process in *Liyla* consists of the player inputting certain actions into the game and eliciting a response from the program. Specifically, the player can go left or right, jump up, duck down, push debris, and make either-or decisions. The player communicates each of these inputs by selecting them on their smartphone screen via specific buttons. These options are not always present on the screen; rather, they appear when those actions are necessary to move the narrative along by solving a puzzle. For example, players are only given

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<sup>29</sup> Non-playable character

<sup>30</sup> There is one part of the game in which the player can control the timing of Liyla's jumps over street fires. While given control of Liyla, the player is still in control of the father as well. This scene, rather than disrupting my theory, serves to reinforce it as the player is functioning as a caretaker to tell Liyla when to jump. The lack of any other movement options for her in any part of the game or even this part supports this reading.



the push debris button when encountering a very specific platform puzzle requiring a section of a building to fall and make the hole for the player to use a trashcan as cover from stray bullets. The lack of options to players at all times helps point players in the direction they need in order to solve a puzzle. Those limits to agency, especially regarding what the player cannot do, remind the player that the story being told is not totally theirs. Instead, the nonhuman actor of the videogame provides certain actions to accomplish a task as a way of saying “we are going to need this in order to get to the next part.” As such, the nonhuman agent exhibits agency over the narrative even when it is not the one pressing the buttons.

Additionally, the game uses a harsh death and replay policy as a means of reminding the player of its agency within the play process. Through the either-or decisions that the videogame offers, players must make impossible decisions while a timer runs out at an alarming rate. All of these choices are coded as right or wrong choices in the game. I do not mean morally, ethically, or safely right or wrong; rather, I am referring to whether or not a choice will lead to immediate death. For example, when Liyla sees a group of children playing football on a beach, she asks her father if they should come with them. If the player affirms her decision, everyone will be killed in an offshore missile attack that the player does not see until after the decision is made. The other option, the one where the father encourages Liyla to just keep moving, means that the children playing on the beach will die in the offshore missile attack while he watches in horror with Liyla. Another choice shortly thereafter is whether or not to hide in the UNRWA school, Liyla’s school, as a place of shelter. If the player agrees, they will both be killed as the school is bombed from above. If the player suggests they keep moving, the two characters will survive with injuries from the blast as they watch the school explode. The binary coding of these decisions between life and death tells the player of the reality that is living in Gaza. The things

that you want to do or think may be safe are not safe and thinking like that will get you and others killed. None of your options are great options, but the ones that do not end in your death or Liyla's death at least keep the story going.

Presenting these choices with steep penalties to the player, the videogame is once again communicating with the player. The communication of these "right and wrong" decisions remind the player who is unfamiliar with the situation that life here is different. These are actual choices that people must make in this environment, and the choice that a player makes has a 50% chance of getting them killed. As such, it asks the outsider as player to reconsider what they think they know about the experience of Palestinians in Gaza and offers a counternarrative that they may not otherwise see. For the player familiar with these events, the one that needed confirmation that what they have seen is real, the binary choices can serve as a very concentrated reminder of their situation. Surviving trauma is often met with what Primo Levi, memoirist from Auschwitz, describes as a feeling of having survived a trauma that was not likely to be survived, more commonly known as survivor's guilt. As such, the choices in this game can serve as a comfort by acknowledging that these choices are hard and have no great outcomes. It offers recognition and solidarity for those who survived. Both experiences show how the player and the videogame interact with one another in order to get to these realizations. Both agents must do their parts in order to move the narrative along.

In moving the narrative along, the player and the videogame create a narrative. Comprised of the choices made by the player and the feedback loops programmed into the videogame, the narrative builds on one action to another to the end, at which point we have a completed story. The videogame signals the end by taking away the narrative choices from the player. The last playable scene in the game, after the player character/father and Liyla walk,

injured, away from the UNRWA school wreckage towards an ambulance with room for one, gives you one last choice about who to put in the ambulance. The mechanism for delivering the choice is like all the other either-or decisions in the game except that there is one choice: put Liyla in the ambulance. After selecting the only available option, you and the playable father character watch as the ambulance takes off only to be blown up from the air out of nowhere, Liyla ejected from the ambulance. After that “choice,” the player no longer has the action options available for the rest of the game, which consists of an extended ending cut scene. The move of taking choice away from the player, even when the player knows this decision will lead to Liyla’s death, signals that the narrative is ending. The videogame’s agency is once again shown here in that it gets to decide when this part of the process is over.

The kind of narrative created takes shape during the final cut scene of the game. Here, the ending sequence focuses on the father character holding Liyla’s body in the road as the first sounds of music come to the player. As we watch, a blue orb that takes the shape of Liyla floats up from her body and joins a similar orb shaped like her mother, an NPC who died earlier in the game. Holding hands, they float past the top of the screen and followed by 21 additional orbs, roughly the same size as Liyla. The blue orbs, representing a spirit or soul for those that they resemble, proceed off the screen before moving the player to the next part of the ending cut scene. This scene brings the title full circle with the play experience. In this narrative, Liyla has not survived to tell her own story; but, her story lives on through the narrative created by the play process. The entire purpose of playing this videogame is to help facilitate the telling of Liyla’s story. As such, the narrative created through play and witnessed by the player who facilitated the process, I argue, is Liyla’s narrative body.

Creating a narrative body for Liyla is an interesting choice considering that Liyla is not a specific person. The rest of the narrative cut scene goes into detail about how statistics from the 2014 Gaza Conflict influenced design choices. For example, the phosphorus bomb that went off causing the playable character to have to crouch behind debris is revealed to be a banned weapon by international law but used routinely in Gaza despite Israeli reports to the contrary. The UNRWA school and ambulance's destructions served as a symbol for the many educational institutions and health resources that should have been off limits during the conflict as they served civilians but were destroyed. And, perhaps most hauntingly, the boys on the beach playing football represent the four boys who were killed during an attack on Gaza City beach on July 16. Each one of the boys' names and ages given space: Ahed Baker, 10 years; Ismail Baker, 9 years; Zakariya Baker 10 years; and, Mohammad Baker, 11 years. In all these elements, nothing specific that connects Liyla to a singular person is mentioned. The reason, I argue, is because Liyla's narrative is not just the narrative of one person but a narrative of Palestinian identity as impacted by the traumatic violence of the 2014 conflict. Liyla's narrative is a narrative for all of those who cannot tell their story whether they are still silenced, like some of Abueideh's development team, or did not survive to tell it, like Ahed, Ismail, Zakariya, and Mohammed.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Drawing attention to the absent body of Palestinian narratives is the radical act of creation for all the actors involved in the actions of play because it succeeds in bringing recognition to Palestinian identity. This act of recognition does not depend on a Western savior to come and bring it to light or interpret it through their experience of the game; rather, recognition comes through an act of intimacy, of witnessing a body through the process of play.

The conception of play as an act of witnessing is vital to our understanding of empathy games because it enables the maintenance of agency on behalf of the postcolonial and global south narrators producing these games. Considering the videogame as a nonhuman agent able to contribute to the creation of another body actively decenters the player as the center of the model of play. Instead, it asks us to consider the contexts from which these games were created as well as those they influence as they are played. These considerations open ways for us to consider the uniqueness and powerful impact that empathy games can have without falling back into structures of oppression, contributing to the insidious trauma that continues to plague postcolonial and global south communities.

In *Liyla*, the acknowledgement of play as an act of witnessing enables a more critical understanding of the game as it fits into a larger cultural conversation about Palestinian identity. By acknowledging the agency of the videogame, we can see how the game is not about us as players. Rather, the videogame succeeds in maintaining its own agency throughout the play process to craft a narrative that belongs to Palestinians. Moreover, that narrative succeeded in doing something that the world's governing bodies have yet to achieve—providing a way for Palestine to speak about the lived experiences of its citizens.

My analysis of *Liyla* shows the significance of interaction with regards to new media narrative in empathy games and points towards a more ethical way in which to move the discussion of empathy games. While the 2014 Conflict has concluded, the regional issues show no signs of slowing down and is exacerbated by outside influence. At the time of my first draft of this chapter in 2018, the Trump administration officially moved the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, claimed by both countries, on the 70th anniversary of the Nakba and resulted in protests and the murder of 55 Palestinians by Israeli military forces (Halbfinger, Kershner, and

Walsh). On July 19, Israel's parliament passed a law that identifies Israel as a primarily Jewish state, removes Arabic as an official language, and established Jerusalem, a contested city, as its capital (Al Jazeera). This short game able to be played for free on a mobile device shows how games can be used to produce radical acts through the production of narrative. My hope is that this analysis provides the critical foundation for future applications and augmentations to continue the critical work of all the disciplines involved and those narratives they represent.

#### 4 *NEVER [PLAY] ALONE: WITNESSING THROUGH PRESPECT IN PLAY*

Last chapter, I furthered my augmented model of witnessing by arguing that the interaction between the human player and the non-human game parallels Dori Laub's concepts of interviewer and interviewee. The parallel establishes play as an act of partnership creating a trauma narrative. Players must assume responsibility for their role to co-successfully create the trauma narrative. The assumption of responsibility, however, raises several questions about ethical limits: how can players ethically exercise their responsibilities? How can responsibilities account for contextual limits? How do games position players into culturally specific roles?

By asking ethical questions, I am interrogating the *raison d'être* of play in empathy games: why play? What does play add to witnessing? What are the rules for bearing witness in games? I have argued that play makes us responsible for the connection between ourselves and the narrative witness, making the testimony to matter to the world around us. Players of empathy games must reconcile their responsibility with the lived experiences of the creators and themselves, which can contain layers of complex interaction. If we know how such a process can ethically occur, then we can realize the full significance of empathy games. In other words, we need to know the rules in order to play the game.

In this chapter, I complete my augmentation of Laub's witnessing model for play in empathy games by investing the significance of the player's responsibility outside of narrative creation. Using Laub's third level of witnessing, being a witness to the process of witnessing, I consider the lived experiences existing outside of the game space. Knowing that the game will end, I investigate the limits of player responsibility by identifying how players can ethically integrate these experiences with respect. By centering my investigation on ethics, I offer a critique of player responsibility from Jane McGonigal and Tobi Smethurst, both of which depend

on play producing social guilt. Furthermore, I challenge conventions of responsibility by augmenting Western witnessing expectations with culturally specific concepts such as Gerald Vizenor's and Elizabeth LaPensée's survivance.<sup>31</sup> Lastly, I explore how games position players into culturally specific roles through an analysis of *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, the debut production of the first indigenous-owned game studio that re-tells the folktale of "Kunuksaayuka" in response and resistance to the erasure of their culture by the Western world. I explain how "empathy games" can cultivate an ethical witness through play by disrupting the assumption of "empathy games" as consumptive experiences.

#### 4.1 Revisiting Respect in Witnessing

In Dori Laub's third level of witnessing, being a witness to the process of witnessing, he poses a critical look at how the process of witnessing interacts with the world around it. Laub describes this level as a process in which he, the interviewer, "observe[s] how the narrator and myself as listener alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth that we are both trying to reach, and this sense serves as a beacon we both try to follow" (62). Here, Laub identifies the goal of the witnessing process, what we, as listeners, expect to gain as "truth."

Laub's definition of truth differs from other conventional explanations. His chapter "Bearing Witness" in *Testimony* provides an example to help us better understand what he means by "truth." His example is a story about a testimony from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies in which the narrator testifies to her time in Auschwitz through a story of defiance when internal resistance forces blew up four chimneys (59). According to Laub, several historians took issue with the testimony. Because the number of chimneys destroyed in her story

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth LaPensée's use of survivance builds directly from Gerald Vizenor's development of the concept.



did not match historical evidence (one chimney was destroyed rather than the four claimed by the interviewee) some historians argued that her testimony was not accurate, or truthful (59-60). Laub staunchly disagreed with the historians' assessment on the basis that the narrator's testimony reflected how she viewed the events from her embodied perspective: a major upset to a foe in a place where all hope was lost (60). Laub uses this story to argue that truth in witnessing is less as an objective fact based on historical evidence. Rather, testimony, garnered through the process of witnessing, is a truth that gives insight into an experience of history. Denying that truth would diminish the significance of testimonies, a continuation of the violence initially perpetrated against them (66-67).<sup>32</sup>

In augmenting Laub's "truth" for empathy games, one could argue that empathy is the end goal, or "truth," for the player. This idea, however, sets empathy up as a commodity—something a player receives for engaging the game. If empathy is a commodity, then I would argue that the only thing novel about empathy games are their cheapening of empathy by making it more convenient to obtain for individuals with resources. In a capitalist system, individuals with resources usually occupy one or more privileged groups: white, heteronormative, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical, middle class or above, and masculine. These privileged identities are typically also oppressors of global south and postcolonial peoples. Empathy games played for the sake of gaining empathy, then, is similar to Laub's conclusion about requiring historic veracity in testimony: the system is unnecessarily policed, focused on the wrong subject, and continues the same system of oppression the narrator identifies as adversarial. Instead, I argue that we, as

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<sup>32</sup> Describing the process of witnessing and its importance in *Testimony*, Laub argues, "what precisely made a Holocaust out of the event is the unique way in which, during its historical occurrence, *the event produced no witnesses*. Not only, in effect, did the Nazi's try to exterminate the physical witness of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its victims" (80).

players, must work towards centering the narrator's story over our own experience. With that foundation, we can better realize the goal or "truth" of play in empathy games.

Laub emphasizes the role of the listener for getting to "truth." As a partnership, witnessing must facilitate rather than hinder the narrator's testimony. According to Laub, the key to such facilitation overall is respect. In his example of the Auschwitz survivor, Laub asserts that his role was "to respect—not to upset, not to trespass—the subtle balance between what the woman *knew* and what she *did not, or could not, know*" (61). This balance of knowing and not knowing facilitated through an interviewer, Laub argues, is precisely what enables the testimony to exist (61). Instead of making demands on someone else's testimony, an ethical partner in witnessing recognizes the limits of their own agency. The enforcement of those limits by the player removes previous obstacles that prevented the centering of the narrator's story, a facilitation of "truth."

Laub does not give a lot of detail about creating respect within witnessing; but, based on his discussion of the Auschwitz testimony example and the trajectory of his prior two levels, I argue that Laub implicitly creates respect through making space and taking action. Making space happens in his example of the Auschwitz survivor through his prioritization of the narrator's story. In fact, he posits that the respect of prioritizing her experience enables the telling of what she "*did know* in a way that none of us did" (61). Making space for the previously unknown narrative starts with the first two levels of witnessing and extends that work by facilitating its focus on the narrator's "truth." Laub also shows how taking action can prioritize the narrator's testimony. Taking action in Laub's model is more about restraint. For example, Laub notes that even if he knew all of the historic facts about the destruction of the chimney at Auschwitz, he probably would not have asked the survivor about it "since such questions might have in effect

suppressed her message, suppressed what she was there to tell me” (61). This act of restraint respects the boundaries of the narrator in a way that facilitates the narrative they came to tell rather than shaping it into something for the interviewer. Both making space and taking action create respect for the previously un-centered subject by prioritizing their narrative from their lived experience.

We must determine what respect means in play to augment Laub’s third level of witnessing for games. I have already established the parallels between a player and an interviewer, play as interview process, and gameplay as testimony. Continuing this trajectory, I will consider how a player can create respect through making space and taking action. Making space in games is similar to an interview in that the process enables respect from the player during play by posing the question of how the play space permeates into the player’s lived experience. Going back to Johan Huizinga’s magic circle, we can see the importance of play in our lived experience through culture. Huizinga argues that play predates culture; it is something that can be seen in our most sacred practices and upon which culture comes to exist (4). According to Huizinga’s argument, play is more foundational to our reality than some of the most serious practices (24). The larger significance in which Huizinga places play in relation to the sacred in culture provides an opportunity to consider how play works in other cultural concepts. My conception of play and Laub’s third level of witnessing posits that play is foundational to Laub’s “truth.” Here, play enables a space for the narrator to tell their story using the player as a facilitator. Play is, quite literally, what enables the narrative progression creating the testimony. This body of testimony demands recognition in its existence, its coming to matter. Making space in games, then, is the enabling of the creation process in a way that consciously centers the narrator and enables their truth rather than the needs of the player.

Enabling respect by taking action in games also parallels the interview process. Taking action in games, however, can be a nebulous concept creating more questions than answers. In “Gamic Action, Four Moments,” Alexander Galloway argues, “*video games are actions*” highlighting the importance of user interaction in videogames (2). To help tease out different interactions, he identifies four types of gamic action, diegetic machine acts, non-diegetic machine acts, diegetic operator, and non-diegetic operator, by separating the types of gamic actions based on primary performer (human or machine) and contribution to the story (diegetic or nondiegetic).<sup>33</sup> Within Galloway’s model, a player’s particular actions carry a level of responsibility. I am arguing that players cannot just consider their actions in terms of what they want. They must also consider the scripted effects and the responses of the machine as well as how those responses affect the overall play experience. By acknowledging how we share a play experience with the game’s creators, we accept responsibility for our actions even if that means restraining our own agency. Agential restraint is not, however, a loss of our goal. Acknowledging that all actions in the game space are for the narrative’s benefit and not the player’s fundamentally centers the narrator and their “truth” within play.

My augmented method play as witnessing is very different from other social justice methods in play. For example, Jane McGonigal’s assessment of games and value hinges on how games make reality better. In her first book, *Reality is Broken*, McGonigal uses her background in performance theory to better understand how reality pales in comparison to the productivity we achieve through gameplay. In addition to the collective hours we spend in games, McGonigal

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<sup>33</sup> I find Galloway’s categories helpful for identifying differences in the kinds of actions happening in play, but I do not agree with his division between the diegetic and non-diegetic. Galloway is careful to note that he does not want to “privilege either play or narrative, another tendency that is common in other approaches” (37). Here, I assume he is referencing the narratology vs. ludology debate. As a literary scholar, I do not have the same reservations and believe that all of the actions contribute to the diegetic story, though in different ways.

argues that games are more efficient than reality and can be used to make our reality a better place by coordinating our efforts through play (13-14). Throughout the book, McGonigal shows how videogames such as *Free Rice*, a trivia game that rewards players by giving 10 grains of rice to someone in need produces prosocial, “real” world effects (234-236). Using these examples, McGonigal argues that the combined minimal labor of many people harnessed through videogames can help others (234-236).

My main concern with McGonigal’s work on prosocial videogames is its dependence on precarious labor. Much of McGonigal’s prosocial gaming model relies on what she describes as the engagement economy, how game designers maintain player participation (227-228). She notes that paying people to do prosocial game labor does not really work in terms of numbers and limited financial resources since we see higher engagement in unpaid places (i.e. mods, wikis, etc.) (242-243). Her solution to motivate engagement is emotional investment (243). This solution seems to solve the variability of the engagement economy; but, we can see ethical problems from the bottom up. Using McGonigal’s emotional investment technique, game designers/creators, more than likely curating and facilitating someone else’s experience, contribute to the social good using someone else’s story and labor. McGonigal seems to suggest that emotional investment replaces money or other concrete forms of compensation for labor. After all, who does not want a better world? What kind of person would not spend their free time making reality better?

When scrutinized, McGonigal’s model does not address power imbalances; rather, it depends on them. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue in *Games of Empire*, “video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism” (xv). Just like in Empire, videogames have inherently unbalanced power structures favoring those who

are already in power. So, we must ask, who is really benefitting from the prosocial labor in videogames? To answer this question, I will use the Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's idea of immaterial labor<sup>34</sup>, which "is less about the production of things and more about the production of subjectivity, or better, about the way the production of subjectivity and things are in contemporary capitalism deeply intertwined" (4). Here, Dyer-Witthford and dePeuter focus on the labor of making games, but I argue that this idea also extends to the player realm. By capitalizing on players' emotional attachment, play becomes a source of productivity. In a capitalist system, a system of Empire, those who can monetize that productivity are those already in power, not the people for whom the labor is given (i.e. marginalized groups). For example, *Free Rice*'s beneficiaries are the banner advertisers. They get the attention of potential buyers for their products under the guise of giving, creating a false association between the company and the cause as well as potentially extracting more screen time from potential buyers. The labor in this game is the answering of trivia questions, which the player completes. The idea of not performing this labor comes with a sense of guilt built on the idea that games are wastes of time—we could be using our free time to save the world, but we are playing a game instead! In Empire, this guilt provides another opportunity for exploitation rather than prosocial change.

We all know the system could be different, but it is not because Empire constantly depletes our resources. By leveraging player guilt, these games operate on the idea that our time was never truly ours. Instead, Empire uses certain games to systematize a loss of "productivity" as guilt—we convince ourselves that we are selfish by "wasting our time." This emotional extortion is similar to the other videogame labor issues highlighted by Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter from mining for materials to designing directories. Both players and producers have their

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<sup>34</sup> Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's built on the idea of immaterial labor from prior work by Hardt and Negri, Lazzarato, and Virno.

love for videogames used against them by making the act of play into an economic exchange. McGonigal ends her book with the very true statement that “[l]ife is hard, and games make it better” (349); but, it demands a follow-up question if we are to prevent repeating the same systems of violence that those same power structures have perpetuated globally: for whom?<sup>35</sup> Because emotional investment seems more dedicated to maintaining the status quo than disrupting it, I argue that it is not the model needed for understanding empathy games.

By decentering the people for whom the project is ostensibly about, these capitalistic structures remediate the colonial dehumanization that Empire perpetuates in various places that do not center conventional views.<sup>36</sup> My augmented model prioritizes play as a process rather than as a goal and its benefits to the most vulnerable among us. In Laub’s consideration of the experience of witnessing at the third level, one must acknowledge the purpose of the experience for the narrator. Such a focus centers the marginalized voices within the experiences and de-centers the interviewer as the beneficiary of the process and. In paralleling this experience within gameplay, I argue that the experience must be read as one that is not for the player as a capitalistic entity in totality. Rather, if we re-center the experience around the marginalized voices narrating their experiences, players practice ethics that expose how games can benefit society as a whole.

Another model of player ethics, especially one with no shared lived experience, comes through putting the player in the role of the perpetrator. In her 2015 dissertation work around trauma narratives in videogames, Tobi Smethurst challenged the dominant model of sharing a lived experience through play. Smethurst’s three-part model of interreactivity, empathy, and

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<sup>35</sup> I would also argue that the labor is unnecessary. Nothing about answering trivia questions harvests rice. Moreover, if truly altruistic, the companies paying for the rice could just give the money freely without the player labor.

<sup>36</sup> By which I mean white, middle class or above, male, cisgender, straight, able-bodied, and neurotypical views.

complicity identified and described how players interact with trauma narratives. The goal of trauma narrative videogames, she argues, pushes beyond identification with the character on the screen and into self-reflection. Instead, Smethurst argues that the player must feel guilt for putting the character into the traumatic on-screen experience (108). Here, Smethurst rightly invokes, without naming, the privilege of play; we do not have these traumatic experiences, but we want to engage with them. For example, she notes in her analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* how players commit horrible acts of violence against Vietnamese citizens to see how their actions in the game affects others (150). This putting aside of one's own comfort in order to do the work needed to move the narrative forward puts the player in the position of always causing the on-screen violence to the character. Therefore, recognizing one's self as the perpetrator of the violence, complicity in the trauma, is the most ethical move a player can make in Smethurst's model.

Smethurst's positioning of the player as a perpetrator in the on-screen trauma is revolutionary in its move against the player's benefit; but, it does not answer all affective situations in videogames. More specifically, is there room for discarding complicity? The key to answering this question is in Smethurst's choice of games for her analysis. These games exist in a reality far enough removed from a player that appropriating the trauma in the empathy stage, one of the stages in her model, is not a concern. For example, a player is not likely to fall into the identification/appropriation trap from playing *The Walking Dead* or *Limbo* because the post-apocalyptic settings provide enough distance between the player and the events on-screen. But, what happens when we put players in contact with trauma that is closer even if tangentially to their lived reality?<sup>37</sup> When issues of social justice come up, how can we ask players to interact

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<sup>37</sup> I concede that *Spec Ops: The Line* defies this observation; however, it is dealing with a historic event rather than a current social justice issue. Those with close connections to the game's contents are most likely to experience the



ethically with these narratives in the same way? Does every game producing a narrative about trauma require player complicity?

My model of play answers these questions by using Laub's third level of witnessing to look at a larger cultural significance of the games. In games where postcolonial and global south communities tell their own trauma narratives, my model engages players in facilitating the needs of the victim. By focusing on identifying the player as a perpetrator as in Smethurst's model, we center the player as a consumer, repeating a Western model of play that has either ignored or actively harmed the narrators. Moreover, the identification of one's complicity and affective guilt on behalf of the player is functionally useless in that it does not provide a clear trajectory towards change. Instead, I advocate for a model of play focusing on the narrator and emphasizing ethical interaction to create a trauma narrative. My augmentation to Laub's third level of witnessing enables our on-screen experiences in empathy games to take meaningful steps toward ethical engagement with postcolonial and global south traumas on the victims' terms.

## **4.2 Ethics of Surviving**

Consideration of postcolonial and global south perspectives in my augmented model opens unique opportunities for witnessing to push against a hegemonic definition of trauma. Deborah L. Madsen highlights the need for such an intervention, specifically in an Indigenous American context, in "On Subjectivity and Survivance." Here she puts pressure on the Western notion of trauma's tendency to elide or erase non-white experiences and how that exclusion leads to systemic violence within trauma discourse. According to Madsen, the purpose of Western

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affective response of empathy games, those who were a part of this event in some way, are outside the scope of my analysis and are better served with Smethurst's model.

trauma theory seeks, whether explicitly such as in Caruth or implicitly as in LaCapra, the unification of a subject broken by trauma (64). Madsen logically connects such action with colonialism by likening the unification of an indigenous subject to assimilation and production for the West (64). Madsen exposes the insidious nature of trauma theory: it centralizes an unnamed white subject as “normal” and demands conformity from non-centralized, non-“normative” subjects. A more ethical practice of dealing with trauma narratives in games must recognize these insidious power structures within Western trauma theory.

An ethical way of interacting with Indigenous trauma and exploring a more ethical definition of trauma is through survivance. Coined by Gerald Vizenor, survivance is an Indigenous American term encompassing a broader understanding of trauma based on their various experiences<sup>38</sup> with European settlers. Vizenor defines survivance as “an active sense of presence over absence deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent, Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name” (1). Vizenor also describes survivance as “the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance” (1). Vizenor’s definition proposes that the current definitions of trauma cannot describe trauma for Indigenous Americans because it would put them squarely in the role of the victim, further displacing their agency. Trauma roles, he argues, are inaccurately narrow in their understanding of subjectivity and continue to perpetrate violence against Indigenous Americans. Vizenor uses survivance to identify the continuous trauma Indigenous Americans and enables them to tell their stories on their terms.

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<sup>38</sup> Vizenor uses the term as a broad one to talk about the larger shared experiences of Indigenous Americans; however, I should note, as he does in his writing, that he is writing from an Anishinaabe perspective.

The parallel between survivance and witnessing hinges on the recognition of agency. In Vizenor's concept of survivance, the way the community tells, remembers, and embodies trauma for the community rather than its benefit for the colonizer/perpetrator shows agency. Likewise, Laub's third level of witnessing takes great care to move away from historicized truth in order to help a victim/narrator tell their story—it prioritizes the victim's needs. In both Vizenor's concept and Laub's method, we must center the narrator's needs and facilitate a telling of their truth, especially because it may differ from a larger historical narrative. It is through this centering that both Vizenor and Laub revise Western forms of trauma to account for all narrative experiences ethically.

Videogames hold a particularly interesting place when shaping the incorporation of meaningful action to reposition the victim at the center of trauma. Elizabeth LaPensée intertwines survivance and game design in an article on her own game *We Sing for Healing*. Specifically, she argues that survivance “can inform how a game is developed, how a game is played, and what representations and aesthetics are found in a game” (91). For her purposes, LaPensée imagines the creator and the player of the game coming from Indigenous American communities. As such, she likens the design and play experiences to that of “biskaabiiyang,” a cyclical presence connecting seemingly unconnected experiences (93). I argue that the consideration of survivance in game design can expand to groups outside the indigenous community because biskaabiiyang not only parallels the familiar industry practice of iterative design but also removes the hierarchical understanding of game design (94). Survivance practiced through the biskaabiiyang design process puts all actors of the game design and play process into collaborative roles rather than production for the player.

LaPensée's praxis of survivance via biskaabiiyang parallels Laub's idea of witnessing because both the interviewer and the interviewee arrive in the interview experience for a very particular interaction. For LaPensée, play is part of an iterative learning cycle for all parties. What we learn and how we learn it may look different depending on one's role. Therefore, it is the interviewer/player's responsibility to identify their position upon entering the interaction and to incorporate the experience into their lived experience respectfully.

By broadening potential interactors to those outside of the shared lived experience community, videogames introduce new ways for us to interact with others; but it raises familiar questions from Smethurst's work: what about potential interactors (players) without a shared lived experience? Is it ethical to engage in narrating the traumatic experiences of others, especially those experiencing ongoing trauma by groups connected with the player/interviewer? To see how empathy games connect the experience of the game and the lived experience of the player in a meaningful yet respectful ways, I will look at how playing E-Line Media and Upper One Games' *Never Alone/Kisima Ingitchuna* creates a witnessing environment and what that environment contributes to the narrative significance.

#### **4.3 Playing the Past for the Survivance of the Future in *Never Alone***

The game *Never Alone* breaks several norms within the gaming world. Its inception did not follow traditional models of game development because the group controlling the project was not a game studio. The game originated with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, a non-profit organization supporting education, training, and support within their Indigenous community, in an effort to diversify their income rather than depending on US government funding, a mechanism that has a less-than-stellar record of helping this and other indigenous communities (Cook Inlet Tribal Council 21-22). Creating an educational game was not without risks,

including not only investing a lot of money into a new venture but also finding a partner organization with whom the Cook Inlet Tribal Council could entrust the game's development. After much research, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council contacted E-Line Media, a company with a portfolio of educational games and ethical partnerships such as MinecraftEDU, The National STEM Video Game Challenge, and The Center for Games and Impact (E-Line Media). The partnership of both the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-Line Media focused on bringing members of both teams, Indigenous people with varied backgrounds as well as video game developers at every level, to create something truly equitable, well-designed, and focused on the narrative.

The creation of the game was particularly interesting because of the roles negotiated for both the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-Line Media. The first negotiations began by inviting E-Line Media representatives to Alaska during a blizzard in January 2012 (Cook Inlet Tribal Council 23-24). This first exploratory meeting demonstrated the willingness of E-Line Media to center the needs of the indigenous group over the technology. Moreover, each step in the development respectfully engaged with the content. One example included requesting permissions from the family of Robert Cleveland whose version of the "Kunuksaayuka" story they used as the frame for the game. This partnership created Upper One Games, the first Indigenous-owned game company in the US through *Never Alone*, a project embodying survivance through witnessing (NeverAloneGame.com).

*Never Alone* is a narrative-driven videogame re-telling the Iñupiaq folktale "Kunuksaayuka" while incorporating communal changes. The story used in *Never Alone*, Robert Cleveland's version of the "Kunuksaayuka" story, is an oral Iñupiaq tale of a young boy providing for his family. Unable to hunt for caribou, Kunuksaayuka cannot provide for his

mother and himself; so he journeys from home to find the cause of the blizzards, a giant man breaking up the tundra's ice and tossing it into the air ("The Story of Kunuuksaayuka (Part One)"). Using the breaks in the man's work as cover, Kunuuksaayuka sneaks up on the giant and steals his adze, a tool used to break up the ice ("The Story of Kunuuksaayuka (Conclusion)"). By outrunning the giant, Kunuuksaayuka gets him to promise to stop the storms ("The Story of Kunuuksaayuka (Conclusion)"). Moreover, Kunuuksaayuka only returns the adze to the giant after ruining the blade on a rock ensuring the giant would not cause more blizzards ("The Story of Kunuuksaayuka (Conclusion)").

The videogame version of this story contains many of the major plot points from the original folktale with some notable changes. The main character, reimagined as the girl Nuna, and her companion, reimagined as the animal/spirit Fox, travel across the tundra searching for the cause of the blizzard. On the way, Nuna learns about her community's history through obtaining culturally significant tools and solving culturally specific puzzles. The audience learns with her through narrative education breaks, called "cultural insights," about the game's design choices and their connection to Iñupiaq culture. Throughout the game, Nuna encounters environmental obstacles such as an angry polar bear, cultural obstacles such as the Manslayer, who will stop at nothing to take Nuna's bola, and even supernatural obstacles such as the aurora borealis and spirits who carry away people. All of these obstacles culminate in Nuna challenging the blizzard-causing giant and stealing his adze to stop the blizzard's devastation.

*Never Alone* encourages witnessing through its remediation of the source material narrating practice: telling an Iñupiaq folktale. As noted in the introduction to the source material on the game's blog, the writers note that the way Robert Cleveland would have initially heard the Kunuuksaayuka story would have been in a community house called a qargi. Play mimics the

community atmosphere of the qargi through narrative deliveries. The progression of the game depends on the player progression, which begins chapters with an omniscient elder narrative voice that frames the upcoming part of the game in the style of an oral storyteller in the Iñupiaq language. This framing technique and its similarities to traditional storytelling in Iñupiaq communities are part of what Warren Cariou argues is a technique of creating community with the player by treating them as insiders rather than outsiders. My issue with Cairou's reading is the unfamiliar line where community ends and appropriation begins. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, players do not come to games as blank slates; they bring their lived experiences with them and return to them after play. Therefore, it does not seem as though a simulated community relationship is a realistic expectation, especially one that pursued by a community already in this venture in order to become self-sustaining. Instead, I am more inclined to agree with Melanie Braith's critique of Cariou from the same series of essays arguing that the relationship created is something more akin to allyship than community.

Braith's critique mentions several ludological factors contributing to the creation of allyship within the game. From the side-scrolling third-person view to the rails on which the story proceeds, Braith's analysis highlights how the game excels at providing an "interplay of strategies that foster immersion and self-awareness [that] allow for the gamer to feel included in a community without appropriating an identity." Braith's suggested move from community to allyship rightfully highlights the different lived experiences of the players and the community. While allyship acknowledges distance between the player and the game, it does not explain, however, the active role of the player within play. Without considering this part of the relationship, we miss facilitating the narrator's agency, which risks perpetuating ongoing systemic traumas. I argue that the player's role extends beyond allyship into witnessing by

encouraging players to interact respectfully with the narrative's augmentations. I will take a closer look at several of the game's key narrative points not included in the original "Kunuksaayuka" source material. Specifically, I am interested in how these changes encourage players to create space and to take action signaling a respectful interaction with more on the line than just educating the player.

#### **4.4 Game Changers: Case Study of *Never Alone*'s Narrative Changes**

Throughout the game, several content points not included in the original "Kunuksayuka" story become rather prevalent. The most prominent, mentioned directly within the game's blog and cultural insight videos, is the change of the main character to a girl rather than a boy, renamed Nuna rather than Kunuksaayuka. Additionally, the companion to the main character changed from the original story's mother figure to Fox, an arctic fox/spirit companion. Even in replacing the original son/mother relationship with Nuna and Fox, the plot of the narrative does not change—Nuna ventures out to find the source of the blizzard and challenges the giant. The only difference here is that Fox is available to help Nuna whereas the mother character stays at home not playing an active role in the original folktale. Given that these changes do not affect the plot, the audience may be left asking why they are included at all.

By looking at the gameplay as witnessing, these seemingly surface-level changes to the story establish the kind of the space created within the game. The reason for such a change given by project members justified the move from Kunuksaayuka to Nuna through need to present a strong role model for girls in a medium that often times stereotypes them ("Why a Girl?"). The story did not merely buy into the "Mrs. Man" trope that has often plagued games in hopes that a



gender change would right the misogynistic wrongs perpetrated by videogames for decades.<sup>39</sup> Rather, the change to a girl protagonist gives the game's story its own identity, Nuna from *Kunuksaayuka*, and a non-human companion, Fox, from the unnamed mother character. These minor changes mean much in terms of respect because they establish a new space from the traditional community space. The changes enable the game's narrative to take up space in a way that not only recognizes the traditions of a community but also establishes the ways the community has come to changes over a longer period. Rather than falling in line on historical accuracy regarding the story, the characters become distinctly visible to the player from the source material. In other words, the change privileges a showing of the community as it is rather than as some ideal, which might encourage colonizer behavior of engaging the narrative on its historical veracity rather than what it is trying to communicate about the community now.

In addition to engendering respectful interaction on behalf of the player through creating space with Nuna and Fox's addition, the game encourages the player to take action, quite literally, as a player character. Much like Quico from *Papo & Yo* and the unnamed father figure in *Liyla and the Shadows of War*, Nuna does not speak much, if at all, in the game. Instead, Nuna serves as a player interaction mechanism with the narrative. Here, the player's actions propel the narrative forward. Nuna is the character that triggers every narrative beat within the game based on her actions. Additionally, Nuna's movements, much like the other player characters discussed in earlier chapters, have right and wrong movements. In the game, deviation from the narrative often results in rather gruesome protagonist deaths, the ending of a turn, and the re-starting of play the player over at the last checkpoint. This steep punishment, I argue, is the game's way of maintaining focus on the narrative. In other words, the game argues that by not facilitating the

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<sup>39</sup> See Anita Sarkeesian's work on this trope in the Feminist Frequency series of *Women vs. Tropes in Videogames*.

narrative of the community through exercising restraint on player agency within the game, the player character contributes to the killing of the narrative symbolized by Nuna and Fox.

Combined with the space made through the addition of Nuna and Fox, the game encourages respectful interaction with the community narrative facilitating a more ethical experience that focuses on the community rather than the player or the player's idea of the community.

The most obvious break in the structural layout of the story, the cultural insights, also enable players to see how the changes in the Kunuuksaayuka story encourage respect. These short videos are extra-narrative<sup>40</sup> content containing information about the Iñupiaq culture relevant to particular sections of the story. While they cover a broad number of topics from the cultural significance of certain artifacts to personal narratives from cultural advisors within the Iñupiaq community, each video contains video footage of a cultural ambassador from the Iñupiaq tribe along with images of the people and environment. These short videos serve a dualistic purpose to bring the player both in and out of the game. They bring the character into the game by providing more information about the culture; however, they also are not integral to completing the game. Players can unlock each cultural insight by completing a particular task in the game marked by an owl. Once the player reaches an owl, the related cultural insight becomes unlocked. At that point, the player has the option to watch the clip(s) or save them for later. The game only regulates which cultural insights become unlocked based on the location in narrative and actions taken—the player chooses when and where to watch them. As such, one could assert that the cultural insights are not essential to the game. So why are they included? What purpose do they serve?

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<sup>40</sup> Extra-narrative here refers to their taking place outside of the main “Kunuuksaayuka” narrative. This use should not be confused with these narrative pieces not being part of the larger narrative, but it does acknowledge that they are not replacing or revising the same way as described in the last paragraph with the addition of Nuna and Fox.

One of the purposes of the cultural insights is to create a vulnerable learning space for non-Iñupiaq players. The game created a new, unfamiliar space in its existence. This space was full of unknowns for the creators, who made a game that would be unfamiliar to the non-Iñupiaq audiences finding this game on large distribution platforms like Steam. The willingness to engage that vulnerability of both the creators and the players manifests in their interaction, the creation of the narrative through play. The cultural insights embrace parts of this interaction for education relate to the concept of survivance by making space for active learning that centers the narrating community. This education, however, centers around actions the narrative community needs the player to take in order to move the narrative forward. Through that shared vulnerability between creators and players, we make a space through play to witness respectfully the trauma narrative.

The cultural insights also encourage players to take action in narratively endorsed ways. My understanding of how the cultural insights work in terms of taking action took several play sessions. In the first replay, I would watch the videos when I was having difficulty in a particular section, taking a break from my frustration at dying a lot. In following sessions, I watched the insights as close to the trigger point, the point at which they were narratively unlocked, as possible. I learned that the more I watched them, the more I noticed how these videos encouraged specific actions on my part based on culturally-specific information that were not necessarily based on my initial reaction to similar situations in other games. For example, watching the videos about the ice and remaining patient in the face of adversity made the game more meaningful in that it brought me into a culturally specific situation that required specific actions to solve the puzzle. Much of what I originally thought were glitches<sup>41</sup> when it came to

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<sup>41</sup> This explanation of glitches is not to say that there were no glitches at all. The subsequent updates that followed the game shows that there were, as there are in any game development process. The instances of what I am

delays in controls or frequent deaths connected to the synchronicity of mechanics and narrative stressed in the cultural insights. In watching the cultural insights, those culturally specific ideas about ice helped relate to larger concepts about the environment as an outsider. The cultural insights helped me to learn about the environment I was entering as a player. As such, I learned repeatedly to put my cultural assumptions aside, including those deeply ingrained within my play style, and exist in the vulnerable position of not knowing. Recognizing that vulnerability was uncomfortable for me as a player, evident through my frustration and frequent deaths. However, it served as a constant reminder that the space I entered was not mine and, therefore, to allow myself to facilitate rather than to win the narrative within the game.

Additional narrative changes in *Never Alone* have close connections to cultural allusions. Of *Never Alone*'s Iñupiaq allusions, there are two that ethically recognizing the colonial presence in Iñupiaq culture: King Island and the Manslayer. The King Island stage of the game is not part of the original "Kunuksaayuka" story and occurs once the Manslayer chases Nuna and Fox off the main shore. After a narrow escape, Nuna and Fox arrive at this bleak location: the wind howls, the crumbling stilt structures creak in the wind as you navigate the terrain, and, just in case you didn't think the place was unforgiving enough, spirits swoop down from the skies to take characters off screen to their deaths. At first, this place seems like a place filled with fear, but the cultural insights, particularly the one called "King Island" shed light on its history. The cultural insight for King Island explains that the location is beautiful. Through archival photos and film footage, the player can see the connection between the unnamed space in the game and the place discussed in the video, but the initial affective response of fear seems to contradict the loved description by the Iñupiaq people on screen. This initial disconnect between the in-game

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discussing here are the ever-present timing delays and switches between characters that make it seem like the game was poorly designed to someone who was not paying attention to the game as a whole.

environment and the archival testimonials enables King Island to be a place of discovery. As a player, I wanted more information; so, I went looking for answers as to what caused the disconnection I saw on-screen.

Because its main interaction happens in a cultural insight, the King Island allusion creates space through vulnerability. The bleak game space does not align with the joyful space in the video. The disconnection between these two spaces identified as the same puts the player in the vulnerable position of not knowing. The vulnerability, however, does not signal helplessness. Rather, at the end of the cultural insight video for King Island, a piece of information opens up King Island as a place of possibility, of creation: a cultural ambassador saying, “People have returned to King Island. It’s a growing community as the people return back to their island.” That final bit of narration creates a space of potential knowledge. Tellingly, the narrative does not give the player more information, which would close off the potential of investigation into King Island by the player. Instead, the narrative carefully draws our attention to the space between what we know and what we do not know so that we can take action.

In creating a space for the King Island Iñupiaq narrative, the cultural insight also prompts players to take external action. As noted in the creation of space, the game does not give answers to the player; instead, players must find more information connecting the dots themselves. As a player, I went looking for information outside the game, which was, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, hard to come by. After some digging, I eventually found a narrative by Deanna Paniataaq Kingston in *The Alaskan Native Reader* on teasing cousins that contained a bit of information as to what happened at King Island. In her brief section on King Island, she notes that the centralization of public services on the mainland in Nome during the 50s and 60s contributed to the island’s population decline (264). Additionally, the Bureau of Indian Affairs

closed the school on the island in 1959 “claiming that it was unsafe and isolated for teachers to live there” while still threatening the population that their children must attend school, which was now on the mainland (264). The removal of basic services and education forced many families with children to relocate to the mainland (264-265).

The ending to the cultural insight on King Island prompted my research, but it did not do the work of that research for me. Instead, it prioritized the safety and narrative of the Iñupiaq culture by giving me a direction and leaving me to take action. The game was not here to recount the terrible history of King Island. It was here to tell a story of survivance. By removing a colonial narrative and looking forward to what the island is becoming serves as a declaration of identity: the Iñupiaq are still here. Moreover, the positive light argues that they are thriving, taking back their land, and creating a future of possibilities. If we, as players, need answers about what happened at King Island, we must take action to find it instead of putting that burden on the Iñupiaq. Moreover, we should facilitate the narrative of the community behind *Never Alone* as a story that deserves to be told.

A similar allusion that encourages respectful play as witnessing is the Manslayer. The game introduces the character as someone who destroys Nuna’s village looking for the bola, a traditional hunting tool, which a spirit gave to her for her communal quest. This character is noticeably different from the other characters in the game with his angry face, pale skin, and short bristly hair. One could argue that he looks European, but the game clarifies nothing about his race, ethnicity, or external allegiances. All we know about this character is his drive to obtain the bola, stopping at nothing to get it. He will kill for it, which he eventually does by murdering Fox. There are no options for appeasement in the game—just getting close to the Manslayer ensures death in the game. Interestingly, the Manslayer is not part of the “Kunuksaayuka” story;

so, why is he in *Never Alone*? I argue that the Manslayer helps the player focus on the community narrative.

The inclusion of the Manslayer creates a space for discussion around the character's significance to the play process. Anyone not familiar with Iñupiaq literature may be unaware of the character's significance elsewhere in the Iñupiaq cannon. What every player will know within their initial encounter with the Manslayer is that the character personifies death—touching him will trigger the game's death mechanic. Players carry this morbid association with us most of the game until the unlocking of the Manslayer cultural insight, which will not trigger until after his defeat. The cultural insight explains some of the information behind this character in Iñupiaq literature. The character is a recurring figure defined by his self-interested nature. In stories, he is a villain for a hero returning the narrative focus back to the community rather than on an individual communicating the communalism of Iñupiaq culture. The cultural significance of the character, especially after he has terrorized the player and killed Fox, rings a bit hollow—I've hated this character for most of the game, and I need a place to direct my anger and triumph over defeating him! Nevertheless, the game does not offer that resolution. Instead, it creates another vacuum of knowledge, similar to King Island, in which an outsider player is vulnerable. Instead of providing answers, this vacuum is a space for the player to interrogate what the narrative needs from us rather than our need for answers as players/outsideers.

Working through this vulnerability with the resources available in *Never Alone* establishes the action needed for the narrative community rather than the player. This vulnerability is significant because of what it does not say. My first instinct as an outsider was to search for more information. Given my background, I was almost certain represented colonization; the pale skin, his need of cultural artifacts, his relentless destruction of a

civilization to get that artifact, and his appearance at the end of the King Island sequence all seemed like clues towards this revelation. However, my conspiracy board of close readings kept dancing around the identity of this character in unproductive ways. By focusing on where to direct my emotions, I focused on my own catharsis—I needed resolution, to know the enemy that I had defeated. That resolution, however, is not the point. The point of the experience is to focus on the cultural significance of defeating this self-interested character.

As a narrative device, the Manslayer reminds listeners that community is most important. The cultural insight on this character reveals this canonical role in Iñupiaq literature after the Manslayer's death. This reveal rather than one attributed to outside sources is important because it reminds players that community is the goal—we must defeat personified self-interest to get anywhere near the conclusion of this narrative. Moreover, the additional narrative changes already point to how this narrative is not just about the past but also the present and the future for this community. By deliberately discarding player catharsis and establishing of space to interrogate the narrative needs, the player assists the community's survivance narrative. From that experience, the player then has to figure out where they are going from here: how might we take action to create more spaces that focus more on what is important to the survivance of the community in this play experience?

#### **4.5 Conclusion: World Games?**

In playing games such as *Never Alone*, players interact with communal traumatic narratives from an indigenous perspective. Rather than appropriating those moments in terms of what they can mean for the player, games like *Never Alone* provide opportunities for the player to facilitate the narrative of the community. Through an understanding of play as survivance, the witness of *Never Alone* tells a story about a community that continues. The narrative created



through play is not burdened with educating the player or focusing on their satisfaction. Instead, the narrative can move the community forward through embracing their history and speaking to their perspective. Games provide a unique experience in which such actions can occur because they allow players to better distinguish the act of witnessing happening on screen with their positionality to that narrative, being a witness to witnessing, and what that means in a larger cultural context.

Looking at games that contain cultural trauma, especially postcolonial trauma, games show players how to move forward in our responsibilities while centering postcolonial and global south communities. In the case of *Never Alone*, the narrative constantly puts the player in a position of vulnerability through frustration and cultural ignorance that forces them into action. The actions taken on behalf of the player through restraint provide the narrative space in which the community can bear witness. Reaching outside of that experience is unethical as it seeks to add something to the witness of another person. Instead, the act of witnessing provides the information needed in order to proceed with a witness representation that authoritatively<sup>42</sup> represents and influences the community. In this way, trauma does not define the community. By moving out of the way, we are able to better establish what an ethical relationship looks like and, use the model as we move into other interactions in our lives.

I specifically chose to pair Laub's third level of witnessing with *Never Alone* because of how the game has redefined the empathy games genre. The creators, though, see *Never Alone* as part of a new genre: world games. The creators describe the genre as one "which would highlight the shared values that tie people together across cultures by presenting traditional stories through the digital medium, while remaining faithful and authentic to the people and culture to whom the

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<sup>42</sup> Authoritative as in "power," not as in "truth".

stories belong” (Cook Inlet Tribal Council 28). As anyone who teaches “world” anything will tell you, the “world \_\_\_\_\_” designation is often used as a catch-all phrase to lump non-European cultures into their own category despite giving “American” and “British” disciplines their own studies. However, we need to remember that the process is not about us. If we focus more on the opportunities for making space and taking action within the description of world games rather than the objects to which it refers, we see the possibilities. The actions of “presenting” and “remaining faithful” bringing more present-minded and future-minded actions. In this new category, we can focus on the ethical interactions between the player and the game, the interviewer and the interviewee, rather than wondering what the player/interviewer gets out of the experience. Perhaps world games is the answer to the baggage this dissertation has unpacked around empathy games.

## 5 CONCLUSION: DO THE WORK

In the first half of 2011, Syrians took to the streets to protest President Bashar al-Assad's government and its failure to meet the people's needs. Riding the momentum of the Arab Spring movement, the opening of the conflict in Syria seemed like a pro-democracy wave of change initiated by citizens who had seen that they could enact change in their government. They were quickly met by government forces that escalated from protests into a civil war. In 2013 and 2014, news started to spread to the United States of Assad's forces using chemical weapons against citizens including sarin--the same nerve agent used in the 1995 Tokyo Subway attacks. These human rights abuses as well as the horrors of war forced 5.6 million people to flee the country, not including the internally displaced 6.2 million refugees. Now, the civil war involves powers from all over the world including the United States and Russia claiming to "take a side" in response to the events happening within Syria. It is worth noting that the civil war is ongoing as I write this conclusion in 2020. While the conflict continues, international powers have, instead, been arguing over how many refugees they can take and which country takes on more risk and responsibility in accepting portions of the refugee population.

As the Syrian civil war gained global attention, Klaus Schwab, head of the World Economic Forum, commissioned Emblematic Group--a studio of journalists, game designers and developers, and filmmakers making virtual, augmented, and mixed reality projects--to make a project to raise awareness about the crisis confronting Syrian refugees, particularly children. Led by Founder & CEO Nonny de la Peña, "The Godmother of Virtual Reality", the team created *Project Syria*, a virtual reality experience that uses reconstructed Syrian scenes including a neighborhood street in Aleppo turned war zone by an act of terrorism and a refugee camp near the Syrian border with Jordan. The experience involves users putting on a virtual reality headset

and materializing into recreated digital scenes, where they are bystanders listening to traffic and a child singing before grappling with an explosion and its aftermath. The project premiered in 2014 and made its way around the world including distribution on the PC game store Steam, travelling to film festivals, and bringing installation experiences to museums.

One of the experiences included an installation in a tapestry room at London's Victoria & Albert Museum where visitors could play *Project Syria* and write comments in a guestbook. The corpus of that guestbook totaled 9,545 total words (2,292 unique words) and averaged 12.4 words per sentence. Those comments captured the feelings of people right after the experience, many still processing what they just witnessed. Using their words, I wanted to know what it was that people thought, felt, experienced in this exposure to the trauma of a civil war and one of the most magnanimous refugee crises any of us have ever seen. Did this experience, more immediate than empathy games but very much doing similar things, make audiences empathetic? By experiencing these traumatic virtual events, did players feel like they had a deeper understanding of the Syrian civil war and what it was like for children? Was the connection in empathy games missing VR's immediacy or, as this dissertation has argued, is there a through line in the connection between acknowledging and respecting another person's experience?

As I read each comment, it became evident that the experience deeply touched players from all over the world at various ages. Calling the exhibit "[a] shocking visual experience" or noting how they "never got this sort of feeling from news", players talk about the benefits of such an experience can and does have on them by "seeing and feeling it". In almost every comment, players talk about how the experiences affected them, which correlates to the emotions and sensations players of empathy games. What these players talk about experiencing is exactly what Vander Caballero wants to see in this new narrative form.



Figure 4 A word cloud of the unique words within the Project Syria feedback. The larger the word, the more often it was used within the corpus. The image was produced using Voyant Tools' Cirrus feature and excludes stopwords relevant to my annotations.

At the same time, there is also evidence of how such an experience can produce less than these ideal results. One user, safely playing/experiencing *Project Syria* commented on “How Sad to see such Barbarism in the 21st Century” [sic]. The use of barbarism in connection to the global south from the seat of colonialism in London shows how the insidious trauma of colonialism and racism serve as the foundation for how we think about events that happen “over

there.” Another user notes the visceral connection to the experience as “[d]ifficult to describe the experience but an interesting new way to ‘virtually’ engage with something so real and which links us to those people on a very human level” [sic]. This statement implies that, despite the hundreds of thousands of deaths and displacements that had already been related to the user in other channels, this experience was what it took to get a “human” connection, as if the actual lives of Syrians did not justify the player’s involvement by just existing. One user even noted that the experience commented on “man’s inhumanity to man repeated” as if the situation was beyond them and their experience to do something, as if their acknowledgement of recurring trauma did anything for Syrians. All of these reactions from users show some of the casual ways in which we use empathy as a shortcut. Despite feeling something and gaining knowledge about a situation, some users still did not necessarily stop to wonder why they were able to have this virtual experience rather than it being their “reality.” Instead, their comments enforced the existing power structures that continue to displace the global south from the center of models of our selves and humanity.

The comments above were by far in the majority; however, there were some outliers that exposed the rotten roots of this kind of empathy. One user commented that the experience was “Loud + Real. made me feel uncomfortable. Reminded me that ‘The West has gone soft!’” Another, meaning well, called it “A shocking visual experience. Its so refreshing to find a way to feel more connected to the overwhelming numbers that we constantly see in the media. A fantastic educational experience.” Others went on to complain as to why the authors chose Syria because other places were “even worse than Syria” and used the past tense to describe the conflict as if it was not still happening. In all of these experiences, the well-meant empathy from the last paragraph finds its origins. The ideas that the West has to do something about the global

south, that the global south has to work harder to be of interest to the West, or that the global south is not worth the mental space of continued engagement grow from the ideas of colonialism, racism, and other hierarchical structures of power. By centering those concerns, the global north becomes humanized while the global south necessarily gets pushed to the margins. While we in the global north think we are becoming better, we are just reinforcing the same systems of oppression over and over again.

This project has been about how to acknowledge and address this problematic rebranding of insidious trauma as empathy. Instead of marveling at videogames that bring affective engagement through personal narratives and trauma, I have pushed us to look more critically at what our empathy is doing. By showing how current cultural models of empathy games encourage old behaviors of appropriation and othering, I asked what we could do that would be worthy of the expectations we have for empathy games. One method of doing this, I have argued, is by considering the way that we play empathy games as a witnessing relationship rather than player-focused model. Using Dori Laub's model of witnessing to describe the process of witnessing for obtaining and observing Holocaust survivor interviews on VHS, I investigated how being a witness could help us get to the goal of being better people by using privilege to step aside and let other narratives matter. My goal for this methodology was not to find a way to "help" the global south but to acknowledge the work already being done in these narratives and encouraging us to consider how we as players could do our part of the work.

My first chapter took a closer look at Dori Laub's first level of witnessing and augmented it for use in play. In Laub's first level, being a witness to one's self, he established owning one's own experience in relation to the interview subject. For Laub, owning his experience involved reckoning with his own past as a Holocaust child survivor. Taking this perspective, I asked what

happens when we consider someone in the interviewer's role that may not have a traumatic referent that links them to the interviewee. This question helped to center the methodology away from players and more on the narratives being told within the games. By building the methodology out from a position in which boundaries were necessary, where no understanding of an experience can occur, the model actively moves away from problematic appropriation of the experiences on screen.

To show how this model could impact empathy games, I analyzed Minority Media's *Papo & Yo*. The use of a game so central to the empathy game movement, the game from which Minority Media's co-founder Vander Caballero built the buzz around empathy games as a genre, showed the significance of this model. I argued that the player occupies their own experience within the game, which, while following, is not the same as that of the main character Quico. The boundary between the subjectivities of Quico and the player exposes a relationship between the player and the game that is more akin to witnessing. The narrative events within the game speak to Quico's journey of working through trauma and self-discovery. The player's actions help Quico unfold that complicated narrative as they push buttons, much like an interviewer enables a survivor to tell their own story. This foundation fundamentally changes how we view the game as an empathy game. No longer would a player "know what it is like" to experience the trauma from the narrative. Instead, their role is to use their privilege in a way that enables the formation of the narrative.

In chapter 2, I expanded my augmented version of witnessing as play to Laub's 2nd level of witnessing, witnessing testimony being given by another. Looking into the connections that we as players have to other people and systems, I asked why we would not extend such complexity to game narratives. Just as Laub's interviewer, I argued that the player should



recognize the complexity of the empathy game narrative and the work that it is doing for a larger cultural body. When considering the lived experiences of already marginalized people, this act of recognition uses the player's privilege to facilitate frequently forgotten bodies, enabling them to matter. To make this literal, I argued that the body of the narrative becomes a body through the process of play. The body created through play, then, requires attention and respect.

Analyzing Rashid Abuedeh's *Liyla and the Shadows of War*, I showed the significance of this model in action. I chose to use this game because of how it speaks to the hidden narratives of the Nakba using one conflict, a conflict that is both recent in time and removed from the historical boundaries of the Nakba, as an example. As players progress through the game, they see how the game does not allow the player to create a narrative as much as it connects the pieces of an existing narrative together. Focusing the player into a role that is not the title character ensures that they prepare themselves for a removal from the center of the narrative. The silence of the main character further emphasizes the actions within the game as the narrative being produced. Finally, the connection of these elements to external events and alleged war crimes against Palestinians without justice shows the range of how bodies can exist and how power, power that most likely benefits the player and enables certain bodies to matter over others.

My last chapter looks at the broader impact of empathy games as an augmentation of Laub's 3rd level of witnessing, being a witness to the process of witnessing. As Laub argues in his example of the woman's Holocaust testimony that contained historical inaccuracies, I argued that the purpose of empathy games was not one of helping the player experience something as much as it was about respecting the narrative created within the process of witnessing. This

purpose puts how we play empathy games as an ethical issue, connecting it to the ongoing ethical issues faced by the global south in relation to colonialism and postcolonialism.

I analyzed *Never Alone*, the first game of the first Indigenous-owned game studio, to better explore the ethical considerations of how we play empathy games. Focusing on the retelling of a folktale, the game shows how the considerations of its narrative are not just present or past concerns; rather, they are continuations of the same issues that have repeatedly disenfranchised the Iñupiaq. The way the game engages with contemporary content alludes to the ethical conundrums relevant to the culture and, through play, engages in the practice of survivance. The haunting incorporation of ghosts stealing children mythologize the systematic disenfranchisement and legal separation of families on King Island. Incorporating the Manslayer character personified the colonial actions of objectification and dehumanization taken by colonizers. All of these narratives, connected with cultural insight videos throughout, show how these allusions connect the games we play to the world in which we live. As such, the game demands the respect long removed from the global south within the larger cultural narrative and asks the player to consider what they will do now. When games are not made for global north consumption, how can we continue to meaningfully engage the global south in ways that do not repeat the same oppression of previous movements?

As the works of the Emblematic Group and Nonny de la Peña have shown, empathy games are moving into VR, which means that this discussion of ethics in play seems due to be revamped once again. The comments from *Project Syria* show the immediacy of the narratives for players increases with the submersion into virtual reality. When you can look all around you and exist in another environment, when it's like you are there, how can we begin to separate ourselves in order to continue this ethical work into play as witnessing? Moving forward, I aim to take up

these questions and investigate them using player data to better understand what needs to be further augmented in this methodology for VR and how this methodology can further impact game studies.

In conducting the research for this conclusion, I recognized that I do not have a perfected methodology. In the comments left for *Project Syria*, I saw some people who seemed to get that they were experiencing something other than a simulated experience. One user carefully hedged their short experience with the reality of what is happening in Syria: “The experience was illuminating and although it can only be a tiny imitation of what life must be like in Syria, it really opened my eyes to how it must be like to be in a war zone.” Several went on to describe the experience as “voyeuristic” in an attempt to acknowledge the friction between the reality of the experience and the reality in which they lived. One comment even asked if they were a bad person if they didn’t feel anything. These comments show some recognition of a relationship in play that is not solely centered around the player. As such, I would like to further investigate how VR could help expose a witnessing relationship rather than an appropriation of the experience.

Additionally, I would like to further investigate the schism around empathy games within gaming communities. One of the things that I have noticed in reviews for the empathy games I have been discussing is the intent of some to diminish them through exclusion. Specifically, one of the main insults to empathy games seems to be that they are not games. A good example of this phenomenon can be found in looking at *Project Syria*. The comments left from participants at the Victoria & Albert Museum were overwhelmingly positive, which is in stark contrast to the reviews left on the game’s Steam page. Of the 71 reviews, 36% are negative with players describing it as an experience or game within quotations to indicate sarcasm. Mechanically, this

argument holds no weight in game studies; however, I'm interested to see how the difference in communities and play experiences affects how players interact with the game and if there is any connection to other discussions surrounding toxicity.

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