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Making players care: The ambivalent cultural politics of care and video games

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Abstract

The relationship between care and video games is fraught. While the medium has the potential to allow players to meaningfully express and receive care, the cultural rhetorics that connect video games to care are often problematic. Even among game designers and scholars committed to social justice, some view care with hope and others with concern. Here, we identify and unpack these tensions, which we refer to as the ambivalent cultural politics of care, and illustrate them through three case studies. First, we discuss "tend-and-befriend games," coined by Brie Code, which we read through feminist theorists Sarah Sharma and Sara Ahmed. Second, we address "empathy games" and the worrisome implication that games by marginalized people must make privileged players care. Lastly, we turn to issues of care in video game development. We discuss Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* series (2012–18) and strikingly care-less fan responses to recent employee layoffs.

Keywords

care, cultural politics, feminism, labor, play, social justice, video games

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The relationship between care and video games is fundamentally fraught. In the present moment, care has emerged as a topic of interest among designers and scholars who approach video games through questions of social justice. Yet, among those committed to building a more inclusive future for video games, some view care with hope while others regard it with concern. In referring to "care," we understand the term to take on a constellation of meanings that reflect the complexities of its use in academic, industry, and popular rhetoric. Care evokes an action (to perform in ways that support others), an affect (to feel empathy or compassion), a mode of engagement (to "care about" a person or situation), a politic (to insist on the importance of caring), and even a tool for social change (whether for subverting hegemonic norms or justifying discrimination). Using analytical frameworks from cultural studies and intersectional feminism, we identify and unpack these tensions, which we refer to as the ambivalent cultural politics of care in video games. To do so, we present three case studies that demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of the current dynamics surrounding care, both as expressed through game design and through broader issues of audience reception.

First, we discuss the concept of "tend-and-befriend games," coined by game designer Brie Code. Games of this sort center caring rather than conflict and shift the medium toward what Code characterizes as more "feminine" modes of play. We look to the game *#SelfCare*, created by Code's studio Tru Luv, and read the game through feminist theorist Sarah Sharma's (2017) work on "exit" to explain how games about care may give marginalized players the energy to sustain the work of "feminist complaint" (Ahmed, 2014). Second, we address "empathy games"—a term that is often incorrectly applied to games designed by and about marginalized people. As many queer and transgender game designers and scholars have argued, the concept of "empathy games" is problematic because it sets the expectation that games of this sort are responsible for making more privileged players care. Lastly, we turn to issues of care in debates about the labor politics of video game development. We discuss Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* series (2012–18) . Ironically, though the games themselves foreground care, fan responses to the potential cancellation of the series illustrates an instance of care gone awry. Fans showed that they cared more about a fictional world than the struggles of those who created it.

Together, these examples serve as a window into the messy interplays between video games and care, which simultaneously have valuable potential and merit serious critique. Within design practices as well as popular discourse, care is increasingly central to how video games are conceptualized and valued. Yet, the case studies explored here make manifest the frictions that arise between different ways of understanding video games as technologies of caring. They bring into question the fundamental assumption that video games not only *can* make players care, but that they *should*. Though those who celebrate the connections between video games and care are well intentioned, it is insufficient to view this growing emphasis on care in a wholly positive light. It is also similarly insufficient to dismiss care outright because of its worrisome implications. Rather, we argue that a thoughtful consideration of care and its relationship to video games must confront the fact that the cultural politics of these dynamics are multifaceted, troubled, and, by extension, generative. This is why we conclude by likening the work of critique itself—both the critique of video games and the critique of the cultural rhetoric that surrounds

them—to the work of care. Critique here emerges as a vital process that occupies an unresolvable ambivalence, with the goal of imagining alternative futures for video games, game players, and game developers in the name of social justice.

Care in video games and theories of care

Care is a feature of many genres of video games. As both a representational element and a set of mechanics, care appears most prominently in games in which players take care of someone or something over time, such as an animal, a child, plants, or a town. Notable among these games are virtual pet simulators. As far back as 1996 with the release of Bandai's Tamagotchi, small, handheld technologies have been used as platforms for caring for digital creatures. This trend continued with games like the *Nintendogs*, released for the Nintendo DS in 2005, and persists today in the vast array of pet simulator mobile phone applications, such as *Neko Atsume* (HitPoint, 2014). Many games that foreground care fall under the nebulous but nonetheless culturally potent category of "casual games." As Shira Chess (2017) describes, these titles are commonly associated with women players, cute aesthetics, and forms of play that do not fit the aggressive, competitive interactions often found in games designed for men. Such games, while widely popular, are commonly regarded as less legitimate or "real" (Consalvo and Paul, 2019) in the dominant discourse of gamer culture, in part because they emphasize activities of care.

Yet, if we understand care to mean tending to or nurturing something—that is, helping it to thrive or grow—we can see many more genres of video games, including many that fall outside of "casual games," as games of care. Video games about cultivating ever-expanding farms or cities, for example, could be characterized in this way. Examples include *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) and *Cities: Skylines* (Colossal Order, 2015). *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) and other life simulation games could also be seen as games of care. Even in more "hardcore" game genres like action-adventure games and MMORPGs, players perform care work for their characters, whether by leveling them up or collecting resources to feed and heal them. Care can be considered a core element of many video games, even when it is sidelined or overlooked.

Existing scholarship on the connections between video games and care has focused on questions about how games foster connections between players and non-player characters (Apperly and Heber, 2015; Chesney and Lawson, 2007), and whether games might teach prosocial emotions to children (Tsai and Kaufman, 2010). However, the prevalence of care-based play in video games and its implications extends far beyond any one genre or group of players. As Soraya Murray (2017) has argued, video games are important media objects that both shape and are shaped by contemporary culture. The place of care in video games and the way that care manifests in the cultures that surround video games represent a meaningful aspect of the medium that merits careful cultural studies critique.

In this spirit, we draw on theories of care from feminist and queer scholars to make sense of the cultural implications of care in video games, particularly as care relates to the popular notion of video games as a form of "escape." Sarah Sharma (2017) situates care as that which "stands in direct contradistinction" to what she calls "exit." Exit, for Sharma, is "a cultural fantasy" brought forth by "the pain of capitalism," which manifests as an unattainable desire to escape this larger system. Setting aside the fact that truly

exiting capitalism remains unattainable, Sharma (2017) sees this desire for an escape as problematic because exit is a fundamentally masculine fantasy: "a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy." Given the impossibility of exit from global capitalism and exit's resonances with patriarchal power fantasies, Sharma (2017) concludes that "so long as the fantasy of exit exists, care is in crisis." Key for an application of Sharma's work to the cultural politics of video games and care is her skepticism towards the "enclosed regimes of self-care" characteristic of neoliberalism, as well as her assertion that fostering of "collective communal care" is a better model for imagining alternatives to the dominant (Sharma, 2017). Yet Sharma's fundamental opposition between exit and care should also give us pause. By limiting exit to the context of global capitalism and patriarchy and suggesting that escape is a fantasy, Sharma undercuts the critical potential of withdrawal and overlooks the fact that, especially for minoritized individuals, exit can be necessary. Sharma's work also does not take into account the contexts in which staying is either an obligation or an impossibility. Staying is not always an act of care and exit itself is not always care-less.

To make sense of these complicated interplays between care and exit, and to recuperate what we see as the linkage between exit and care, we turn to Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on feminist complaint in the context of institutions. Ahmed herself became a prominent example of a feminist enacting exit when she resigned from a position at Goldsmiths, University of London due to their "failure to address the problem of sexual harassment" (Ahmed, 2016a). In Ahmed's case, the choice to exit was not made due to a lack of care on her part, but rather because the university had become a place she could "no longer inhabit" once it demonstrated insufficient care for both those who experienced sexual harassment and those attempting to rectify it (2016b). Whereas Sharma writes that the act of exit is not capable of fostering care, Ahmed takes a more nuanced stance, arguing that "sometimes, leaving can be staying, with feminism" while "other feminists in the same situation might stay because they cannot afford to leave, or because they have not lost the will to keep chipping away at those walls" (Ahmed, 2016b). For Ahmed, it is the work one does and not the context in which one does it that fosters care. Whether one stays or goes, one can continue to perform the work of care.

The relevance of these debates around feminism, exit, and care becomes clear when we consider them alongside the well-worn claim that playing video games is a form of escapism (Schwartz, 2006; Yee, 2006). While much work has been done to suggest that framing virtual worlds as escapist fantasies is an oversimplification, especially given that "the boundary between online and offline is messy, contested, and constantly under negotiation" (Taylor, 2006: 153), there is value in the notion that games can, to some extent, provide an "escape" from one's everyday life. Although Sharma suggests that one cannot exit from the patriarchy or global capitalism in the same way that Ahmed shows that one might exit from a specific institution, the suggestion that games can provide even a temporary reprieve from the logics of the dominant is helpful for envisioning video games as technologies of care.

If, as Ahmed suggests, "a system works by making it costly to expose how a system works," then games that center care in generative ways—as well as games that allow players to recharge by temporarily exiting experiences of oppression—may foster the requisite energy to maintain the endless and necessary project of feminist complaint

(Ahmed, 2018). Yet, as Sharma (2017) writes, "Every new technology brings with it the question, and often the answer, of what or who this new technology will take care of." Indeed, much work by feminist game scholars and practitioners could, in one form or another, be understood as asking, "What or who do mainstream video games take care of?" (Anable, 2018; Fron et al., 2007; Murray, 2017). Again and again, the answer that these scholars have argued for has been: young, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, white men with the time and the money to play. Yet, as the examples we explore below show, even video games of the sort that seem to center care can fail to nurture that affect in players. In addition, the desire to make players care through video games can itself be problematic in the way that it positions video games in relation to marginalized people. The tensions between Sharma and Ahmed's senses of exit and care have parallels in these ambivalent politics of care in video games, which demonstrate the messy implications of the drive to develop video games that serve as technologies of care.

"Tend and befriend": the radical potential of video games that center care

To explore the positive prospects of video games that center care, we turn to the concept of "tend-and befriend" games and the manifestation of care in a recent game-like application: TruLove's *#SelfCare* (2018). In a 2017 presentation at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) (Lemarchand, 2017), designer Brie Code made a compelling call for the development of video games that center care. Code opened by explaining that, while she loves video games, many of her (women) friends "find video games boring." In addition to cultural factors, Code attributes this lack of interest to "an underlying physiological reason": biological differences in stress reactions. In contrast to the flight-or-flight response, often presumed to be universal, Code describes the tend-and-befriend response. When a person experiences the tend-and-befriend response, says Code, "you become fearless and you are less sensitive to pain. You instinctively want to protect your loved ones and to seek out your allies and form new alliances." Code does not explicitly state that, in contrasting the fight-or-flight response and the tend-and-befriend response, she is contrasting the experiences of men and women. However, the explanation she gives for why existing science has overlooked the tend-and-befriend phenomenon, that "researchers traditionally prefer bodies that don't menstruate," makes these gendered overtones clear. In this way, Code presents games developed around tending and befriending as feminine-coded. Yet, responding to a long history of sexism and the marginalization of women in gaming, Code stresses, "I want to be clear that care is not weak or simple or cute and does not only belong in simple or cute games." For her, the fact that most video games cater to a player's fight-or-flight response rather than to a desire to care for others represents a gap in the landscape of video games, not just in terms of diverse representation, but in terms of gameplay itself.

In Code's framing, arguing for games to move toward opportunities for enabling protection and connection is a radical challenge to what Fron et al. (2009) have called "the hegemony of play"—the long-standing, patriarchal norms of video game development in which men and boys are imagined to be video games' primary players. Calling for games themselves to create opportunities for tending and befriending is, for Code, a way of

bringing the bodies and indeed the pleasures (the things they find "interesting") of alternative players into the design of video games. Of course, there are limitations and potential problems with Code's presentation of the tend-and-befriend response, in particular its overtones of biological essentialism with regard to sex and gender. By emphasizing physiology, often with reference to specific hormones and their neurological effects, Code associates gendered, culturally informed stress responses (and, by extension, modes of play) with biological "fact." In this sense, Code's argument merits critique from an intersectional feminist perspective that accounts for the experiences of transgender players and understands the desire to protect loved ones and form interpersonal connections as personal and/or shaped by societal forces. Still, there is indeed something revolutionary in the idea that video games—not just video games made for certain types of people or designed to serve certain types of goals—could center care and, in doing so, as Code (2017) writes in an article for GamesIndustry.biz, "take away the boys' games after all."

Since Code's talk in spring 2017, a number of independent games, made by individuals or small studios, have been released that emphasize tending and befriending (e.g. *Takeshi and Hiroshi* [Oink Games, 2019], *Toripon* [Victoria Smith, 2019], *[Kind Words] Stars Now* [Popcannibal, 2019]). Perhaps the most visible example is *#SelfCare*, which was created by Brie's own game development studio, Tru Luv. *#SelfCare* (2018) is a mobile application with game-like elements that Tru Luv (http://truluv.ai/selfcare) describes as a "free, simple, and beautiful AI companion for joy and self-connection." Put more concretely, *#SelfCare* is about staying in bed all day and engaging in calming activities: cuddling with a cat, lighting a candle, consulting tarot cards, etc. (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, though Code described the tending-and-befriending instinct as one that prompts people to protect their loved ones, the person whom the player tends to in *#SelfCare* is the self: both the character who lies in bed and the player's own body, which the game aims to soothe and center, through breathing exercises and references to how "we" are feeling as one plays. In an interview with Code and *#SelfCare* co-designer Eve Thomas (MacDonald, 2018b), Code states, "Giving yourself permission to play a game that will make you feel good instead of checking your work email is, in itself, a form of self-care." As the video trailer for *#SelfCare* makes explicit, the app intentionally eschews those traditional elements of gameplay that Code, in her GDC talk, associates with hegemonic masculinity and the adrenaline of fight-or-flight. It also disavows the capitalist markers of free-to-play games and apps (*#SelfCare* players may purchase items which alter the appearance of their bedroom, but these offer no gameplay benefit). "There's no skill, no winning, no failure," a slow, soothing voice intones in the trailer. "No ads, no difficulty, no notifications. There is just us and our feelings."

The reception of *#SelfCare* has been largely positive; even before its release, the app was being lauded in popular news outlets, with coverage from feminist voices at sites like *Bustle* (De Lorenzo, 2018), *The Verge* (Farokhmanesh, 2018b), and *Kotaku* (MacDonald, 2018a). The app has also been included on lists of resources for people from marginalized groups, for whom taking time to relax and rejuvenate in the face of oppression can be especially vital. For instance, *#SelfCare* is the only app on the list of safe space resources for a site called #EnbyLife (https://enbylife.net/safe-space/), written for non-binary and gender diverse people. Even so, *#SelfCare* must also be considered in light of critiques of self-care. Despite its admirable goals of creating a soothing,

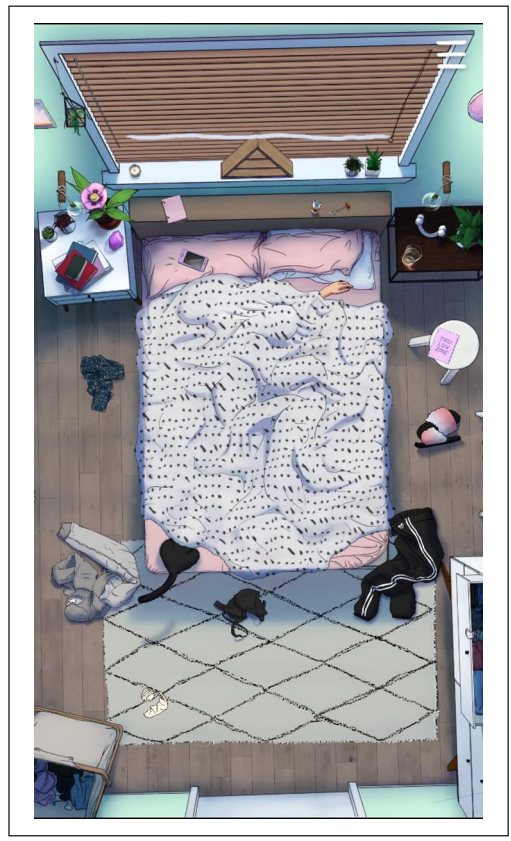

Figure 1. A typical scene from a play session of *#SelfCare*

feminine-coded play experience that challenges the norms of video games, *#SelfCare* by its nature (and its name) joins the dozens, if not hundreds, of mobile applications that promise to promote self-care. This concept has been critiqued from voices both within mainstream publishing and in academia (Michaeli, 2017; Ward, 2015). Many of these critics argue that self-care, as both a set of rhetorics and a growing industry, represents a neoliberalization of affect, a pushing of the responsibility for one's well-being away from the state and onto the individual. As such, some activists have instead called for community care (Dockray 2019), in which marginalized people collectively support one another instead of going it alone, as the player-character does in Tru Luv's *#SelfCare*. In this way, *#SelfCare* stands at an ambivalent juncture between a radical reimagining of gameplay and the neoliberal rhetorics (and a related slew of technological products) that place responsibility for self-care onto marginalized individuals.

This reflects one key tension in the relationship between care and video games: the question of whether (and when) creating and playing games that foreground care represents a radical or a hegemonic act. Despite its use of neoliberal self-care rhetoric, the

#SelfCare app has valuable potential, if we consider it in light of the feminist debates around care and exit discussed above. Even though *#SelfCare* is about staying in bed by oneself for the day, the game also incorporates the type of "collective communal care" that Sharma argues for. Through linguistic gestures like its use of "we" language in the text that the game presents to the user (as in lines like "Maybe we could remember a time when we were authentic with someone" or "We are enough") and repeated words of affirmation (as in "Caring for ourselves is a celebration" or "It's encouraging to be here together"), the game situates care as an endlessly necessary and necessarily endless process in which we must all participate. Indeed, if, as Ahmed suggests, "not coping [with institutional oppression] is how we create a collective" that is "feminist and furious," then perhaps playing games like *#SelfCare* is one way to make the work of community and care feel manageable. That is, perhaps such play can help us to cope with "not coping" (Ahmed, 2018). For figures like Ahmed's feminist killjoy, *#SelfCare*'s bursts of tend-and-befriend gameplay have the potential to serve as a temporary yet restorative exit that allows one to be ready to do the work of opposing the dominant. This is one of the ways that video games that foster care could support social justice and combat structures of oppression both in and around video games.

Empathy and the problem with making players care

Despite the arguably radical potential of video games to center care, the capacity (and, indeed, the supposed responsibility) of video games to "make players care" has also been the subject of well-deserved critique. Most notable in this regard are arguments—many from queer, transgender, and feminist game creators and scholars—against the concept of empathy. As Wendy Chun (2015), Teddy Pozo (2018), and Robert Yang (2017) have all argued, video games made by marginalized people are often met with the ill-conceived expectation that they will educate normative, privileged players about experiences of difference and oppression. As Pozo (2018) explains in their article "Queer feelings after empathy: Consent, cuteness, haptics, and feminist film theory in queer game design," game designers Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, and merritt k have challenged this notion through the creation of original games and art installations. In addition to virtual reality games, those video games that have been most often saddled with the rhetoric of empathy are games about queer and transgender experiences. They are commonly mislabeled "empathy" games: games designed to foster a sense of identification and meaningful understanding in straight, cisgender players. This perpetuates the problematic belief that video games not only can but indeed *should* evoke empathy, encouraging players to "engage in perspective taking, because [video games] do not just show aspects of someone else's life; they also allow the player to walk in someone else's shoes, experiencing life from their perspective," a capacity of video games which is widely celebrated (Rusch, 2017: xx). Yet, as Yang (2017) writes (echoing Chun, 2015), the rhetoric of empathy should give us serious pause: "When you walk in someone else's shoes, you've stolen their shoes."

Even in the face of these pointed critiques, empathy remains an important consideration as we map the ambivalent cultural politics of care and video games. This focus on empathy is still prominent, for example, in another area of the video game landscape:

serious games. The annual event Games for Change, along with a number of educational institutions, have hosted design "challenges" (Games for Change) and game jams focused on the development of games promoting empathy. This interest in empathy is reflected, for instance, in Doris Rusch's 2017 book, *Making Deep Games*, which offers guidance for designers interested in developing games that tackle important social and personal topics. *Making Deep Games* makes explicit the connection between empathy and care. One of Rusch's focuses in the text is her proposed method of using metaphors to invite players into difficult experiences. Rusch advocates for translating real-world issues into symbols or fantasies, which serve as a "magic door to topics that are otherwise hard to stomach or potentially unappealing to a gamer audience." Referring to the game *Papa y Yo* (2012), Rusch asks, "Who really wants to play a game about bullying or dealing with abusive parents?" (2017: 96). To overcome this, she writes, the game's developers identified a way "to make the player care about a game": turning the realities of alcoholism and abuse into a fantasy of monsters and puzzles that "stimulate[s] imagination" (2017: 96). Such approaches, while optimistic, implicitly understand players as fundamentally uncaring—or, at best, uninterested in understanding others' suffering for its own sake. Rather, in Rusch's formulation, fostering care and connection requires creativity, ingenuity, and work-arounds on the part of game designers. Making players care, far from being an inherent feature of video games as an interactive medium, takes work (a perspective that we explore in more depth in our discussion Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* [2012] later in this article).

As Rusch argues, the rhetoric of empathy extends not just to games about queer and transgender people, but also to "deep" topics with clear connections to care. In her book, Rusch discusses her work developing games about mental health. She illustrates her use of the metaphorical technique to foster empathy by describing her collaborative work on a series of games created as part of *For the Records*, an interactive documentary project. These games were designed to reflect the experiences of individuals with mental illnesses, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, and eating disorders. Each game uses a different gameplay metaphor to invite players into the experience of mental illness. The game *FLUCTuation*, for example, is a platformer in which moving too high in the playspace represents mania and moving slowly represents depression. Rusch explains the goal of the project:

> [These games] were meant to raise awareness for mental health issues. We deliberately did not aim to present the illnesses we portrayed from a clinical perspective but rather to capture the subjective experience of them.. . . Games that raise awareness for a cause do not necessarily teach the player much about that cause (e.g., For the Records only communicates salient aspects of what certain mental disorders feel like, but it doesn't teach the player anything about how to diagnose or treat them). Their main goal is to bring a topic to the player's attention with whatever means are most effective. (2017: 122)

Also notable is the fact that, while the *For the Record* games were informed by interviews with individuals with mental illnesses, they were not created in collaboration with people who had lived experience of these illnesses.

What is striking in this description of designing games to raise awareness about mental health and other issues associated with medical care is that this approach does not aim

to communicate practical information but rather to awaken a player's sensibility towards an imagined other. These games are invested in prompting players to *care about* others rather than in giving them the tools to *care for* others. Work of this sort emphasizes the capacity of games as what Aubrey Anable (2018) has called "affective systems." In Rusch's words, these games "capture the subjective experiences" of others and "communicate . . . what certain mental disorders feel like" (2017: 122). To put this otherwise, the purpose of such an approach to designing serious games is first and foremost to make players care. The actual experiences of people with the mental disorders in question function as mere springboards for these games, whose primary purpose is to resonate with the emotions of players who do *not* have a mental illness.

If this is empathy, then empathy names having the experiences of others handed to us as briefly consumable curiosities that, if successful, manipulate us into caring about those whose struggles are different from our own. Serious game designers may see this as a powerful, hopeful capacity of video games. Yet those speaking from the perspective of critical disability studies or lived experiences of mental illness may well see it in a far more worrisome light. This approach to developing video games for "empathy" becomes especially worrisome when such games are being designed to prompt compassionate feelings in normative people, without having been meaningfully shaped by or built to serve the very people such games are designed to make players care about. This shows us another facet of the ambivalent cultural politics of care and video games. Though experiences of care and caring facilitated through play may sometimes offer much-needed escape to marginalized people, games designed to make players care can unintentionally re-marginalize those they seek to support.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and the limits of how and when players care

While the preceding sections have shown that games are capable, for better or for worse, of fostering forms of care in players, our third and final example demonstrates how this care does not always translate into compassion for people outside of video games. Based on the popular graphic novel and TV series of the same name, Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*, 2012–18) video game series has been lauded for the strong emotional connections that it fosters in players towards the games' stories and characters. Whereas most games set in a zombie apocalypse consist largely of fight-or-flight action such as gunning down the living dead, *TWD*'s tend-and-befriend gameplay centers care and the importance of relationships between people. In the first game (or "season") of *TWD*, players control Lee, a history professor convicted of murder whose ride in the back of a police car is cut short when the car collides with a zombie. Lee escapes and encounters Clementine, an 8-year-old girl who has barricaded herself in her treehouse to hide from a zombified babysitter. Lee rescues Clementine and becomes her guardian, and the two search for Clementine's biological parents, meeting other survivors along the way. Thus, from the very opening moments of the series, the player is thrust into the role of "tending" to Clementine and "befriending" other survivors to seek strength through numbers.

While there are vignettes of 'fight-or-flight' combat, the vast majority of *TWD's* gameplay consists of making dialogue or action choices in various contexts. All episodes

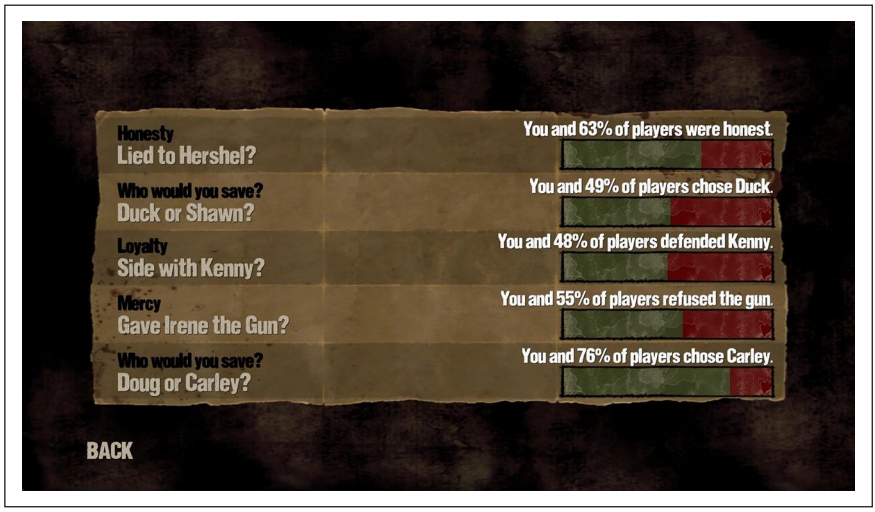

Figure 2. The global statistics relating to "big" decisions that players see after one episode

feature several "big" decisions, the impact of which is amplified at the end of the episode when the player is shown statistics for what other players chose to do in these difficult moments (see Figure 2). Even choices that are not tracked in this way are still made to matter to players through warnings that a given character "will remember that" response. Until one completes an entire season of *TWD*, there is no way of knowing which choices will matter most. This uncertainty, coupled with the nature and context of the choices being made, is designed to make the player "care" about their actions. Core to *TWD* games is gameplay structured around an implied understanding of what makes us human: caring for one another.

Despite *TWD*'s reputation as a game that engenders care, an analysis of *TWD* series' narratives reveals an ambivalent politics of care all its own. Because players of Season 1 not only make their choices with Lee in mind, but also share his desire to protect Clementine and teach her how to survive, the game is often cited with reference to the "dadification" of video games, a term referring to the prevalence of "digital games in which the player is positioned in the role of a father/father figure" (Voorhees, 2016). Designing games in this way has been described as "an effective way of getting the player to feel something" (Totilo, 2010), but others have shown that such narratives pose the risk of normalizing the masculine figure of the protector and justifying violence for the sake of a weaker, often feminized, individual (Brice, 2013; Stang, 2019). Russworm (2017) has found that while many of the game's scenes serve "as a powerful critical retraction of the dominant negative imagery around black fathers", Lee's eventual death "reveals the limits" of the game's emphasis on "humanity, empathy and intersubjectivity [. . .] when it comes to minority characters" (2017: 121, 124). Despite these important critiques, Telltale's *TWD* series has been successful at putting to work the desire to care for vulnerable others in ways that were notably impactful for players and critics alike (Miller, 2012).

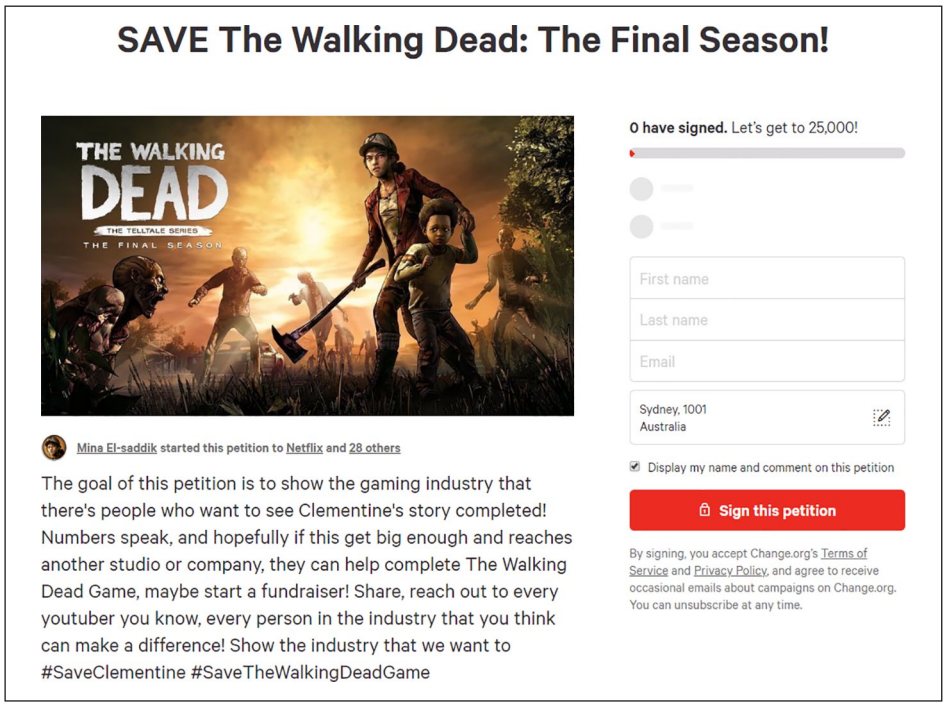

Figure 3. A screenshot of the original petition taken from the Wayback Machine

With over 28 million units sold and a design which centers care, *TWD* series would appear to be an ideal case study for the generative potential of care in mainstream games. However, as a recent incident demonstrates, these apparent successes came at the expense of care for the actual people whose labor produced these stories. On 21 September 2018, after several seasons of *TWD* and many other successful titles, Telltale terminated 250 of its employees in what was called a "majority studio closure" (Farokhmanesh, 2018a). When the news of the layoffs became public, it soon became clear that this decision also meant that any ongoing or future projects, including *The Walking Dead: The Final Season* (Telltale 2018), were effectively cancelled. Just as they had while playing *TWD*, fans of the series again faced the choice of whether or not to care: not for in-game characters, but for the hundreds of developers who had helped create the games they loved and who had now lost their jobs.

Unfortunately, many fans of the series responded to the layoffs with a striking lack of care. While a number of individuals expressed regret about the fate of Telltale's employees, this largely came from other people within the industry (Ranta, 2018). The prevailing sentiment among many fans was not concern over the fate of Telltale's staff, but rather the fate of Telltale's games. One player went as far as to create a petition on Change.org to 'Save *The Walking Dead: The Final Season*' which accrued over 34,000 signatures. While the original text of the petition was eventually altered, it is still accessible on the Wayback Machine (see Figure 3).

Looking at the comments left by signees, it is striking how many emphasize that this movement is "for the fans" or for "seeing the end to Clementine's story" rather than for Telltale's ex-employees. The petition's text was later changed to a much more celebratory "IT IS SAVED!" in reference to the fact that a separate company had stepped in to finish *The Final Season*. The fate of Telltale's former staff was once again left unscrutinized, demonstrating that fans cared more about the game series and its fictional characters than they cared about the flesh-and-blood people who had worked to craft these experiences.

In this way, the rhetoric of care and video games intersects with issues of fan entitlement and its troubling labor politics. Out of a "devotion to their interests" and "invested time and money," many fans feel they are owed influence in the production of media (Shaw et al., 2016). Given the history of fan pressure altering various franchises, this is not without precedent. True to form, when Telltale announced the closure and mass layoffs, many fans took to Twitter and *TWD*'s page on the online sales platform Steam to express their frustration, demanding that the game still be finished. In a post titled "*TEAM SHOULD WORK FOR FREE*," one commenter wrote that "if TWD cast, crew, actors and developers REALLY cared about this franchise like they claim on twitter etc., then they would return to the studio, finish the remaining two episodes and THEN call it a day. If modders can do that, why can't regular professionals?" (GamerTakes, 2018). In this comment, a player suggests that developers' investment in the franchise, whether financial, temporal, or emotional, should be justification for former Telltale employees to be obligated to finish the game without being paid. This was one of many such fan responses showed a remarkable lack of care for the fates of real people. For this player and many others, their responses to the premature end to Clementine's story suggested that they felt that their own care for the franchise was being under-rewarded. Their vitriolic responses seemed fueled, in part, by a concern that the termination of the series meant that all of their prior care was going to waste. The idealization of "modders" as seen in this comment is also salient because it makes reference to a different form of potentially exploitative, care-based labor: the free labor of people outside the formal games industry, such as fans (de Kosnik, 2013; Terranova, 2000). As Stanfill (2019: 19) notes, "Fan work does not seem like labor because they do it out of love," and yet it is labor all the same.

In this way, the question of care and video games is also an important part of ongoing questions about the labor politics of game development. In a now famous blog post, Erin Hoffman (2004), going by ea_spouse, outlined the exploitative working conditions that her partner was experiencing at his job with Electronic Arts. This was one of the first major instances of working conditions in the game industry being shared with the broader public, though certainly not the last. At the time of writing, more narratives corroborating such experiences at a variety of studios continue to come to the fore and the push for unionization is growing (Chironis, 2019; Marchand, 2019). As representatives of the Game Workers Unite movement explain, game-making is overwhelmingly framed as a "'hobby' industry, where the prevailing messaging is that you're 'lucky' to be doing a job that you 'love'" (Game Workers Unite, n.d.). Hundred-hour weeks and a lack of job security seem commonplace in industry workplaces, and Telltale Games is unfortunately no exception. The San-Francisco-based studio told employees that they would be dismissed

without severance and that their health insurances would lapse "by month's end – just nine days" (Farokhmanesh, 2018a). Individuals who had moved from across the country to work at Telltale would soon be jobless in one of the world's most expensive cities and employees with work visas were suddenly without sponsors. Like the characters of *TWD*, Telltale employees were being forced into survival situations, left to fend for themselves by a company that showed a shocking lack of interest in the very thing that its games foreground: human caring.

The fan response to the shutdown serves as a revealing, if discouraging, counterpoint to the preceding discussions of care in games. This also has bearing on larger discussions of labor, particularly within the technology sector and the gig economy. It is a reminder of how the post-Fordist notion of labors of love can be deployed in exploitative ways. The response of *TWD* fans is complicated by the fact that game makers themselves are expected to love video games and, with them, their jobs. As an anonymous Telltale employee noted after the mass-firing, "We really did love our company and we really believed in it" (Farokhmanesh, 2018a). Whether we are speaking of *TWD* fans at large or Telltale's fan-employees, both parties responded to the studio closure with the desire for what they were "owed." However, in only one of these cases was repayment a necessity for survival. Although the game was ultimately rescued and Clementine's story did come to a narratively appropriate end, this striking range of fan responses to the mass-firing of Telltale staff offers a salient lesson about games and the limits of care. Just as it is important to highlight and reflect upon successful deployments of care within game worlds, so too is it vital to account for where the limits of such projects may lie.

Conclusion: reimagining games as technologies of care

Together, these examples map the ambivalent cultural politics of care that surround video games. They demonstrate the productive messiness of the idea of video games themselves as technologies of care—that is, technologies that *can, should*, or *do* engender feelings of care in players. The case of the game-like app *#SelfCare* demonstrates how video games can create spaces of temporary "exit" for players, potentially allowing marginalized people to recharge while inhabiting spaces of community care. *#SelfCare* simultaneously falls within the purview of critiques of neoliberal self-care discourse. Developing games to make players care can itself be problematic, as we demonstrate in our discussion of empathy. It places the value of games on those who do the caring rather than those who deserve to be cared about. Finally, the case of *The Walking Dead* games and Telltale's 2018 layoffs demonstrates how video games that center care can actually become fodder for entitled responses from fans who value their own investment over the fates of individuals who create the video games that they love. As stated above, care is a crucial component of many genres of video games. In this sense, video games more broadly are marked by these ambivalent cultural politics that simultaneously have the power to support and undermine the cause of social justice.

Our work here also serves as evidence of the many forms that care itself can take in relation to video games and, by extension, other technologies and digital media. Care might be an in-game activity, as is the case in casual games or simulator games, in which gameplay is focused on caring for pets or tending to a farm. Care might also take

the form of interpersonal ties that a player works to build between characters, like in *The Walking Dead* games. At the same time, care can also take the form of a connection between players and games—the ways that fans build attachments and come to care about a franchise. TruLove's *#SelfCare* shows us an example of how video games can be tools for dispensing care (in this instance, care for oneself) and how the very act of playing might be understood as an act of caretaking. Care might also be the affective response that a game aims to spark in a player: a call to care for others, often those who are marginalized, who exist outside the game. In these senses, care can be both something that players do in and/or through games and something that games do to players. These complexities bring us back to the importance of asking ongoing questions of care, as prompted by scholars like Sharma and Ahmed. When video games and care meet, who is cared for? What is cared about? Does this create new possibilities for resistance or does it reinforce the status quo, a system of privilege that dictates which lives merit care and in which ways.

Identifying these complexities does not mean that we should dismiss care. Much to the contrary, the ambivalence of care—the way it is both troubled and creates trouble—is precisely one of its values as a meaningful framework for thinking about the radical potential and cultural value of video games. Though we are critical of the contemporary rhetorics of care that surround video games, this critique is a first step toward a reclamatory reimagining of care. We see care in the collective efforts of Game Workers Unite, a movement which argues for communal forms of care by fighting for a video game industry that values and respects its employees. A commitment to care is also a characteristic of Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy, who resists established systems and norms precisely because the killjoy is invested in the communities they improve—that is, because they care. As Brie Code states, care is not necessarily soft or cute or easy. Under many conditions, care is hard (both difficult and unmovable), but, for this reason, it is also tenacious.

Critique itself, which values nuance and contradiction, represents its own form of care, driven by the instinct to nurture and explore new ways of seeing. This is true for critiques of video games as well as critiques of many kinds. Critical thought and interventions of any sort entail tending and attending to a set of texts or phenomena (such as video games and the cultures that surround them), approaching an object with and through care. Critique here similarly represents an affective investment. Like the work of care, the work of critique is endlessly necessary and necessarily endless. It is a commitment to caring about the object of critique as it stands today and imagining alternative ways of being for its future. Framed in this way, critiques of digital media serve as an important and constant reminder to remain wary of narratives that either wholeheartedly celebrate or denounce technology on the grounds of its supposedly positive or negative effects. As we have shown through the case of video games and care, the reality is far more ambivalent.

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