

# Designing For Empathy

A workshop in 60-90 minutes, for 6-18 participants.  
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## Workshop Synopsis

Want to design games? Want to learn how to use game design to foster empathy, share experiences, and build critical vocabularies? This workshop involves group discussion, personal reflection, and collaborative game design exercises.

## To Prepare

As the facilitator, read over this whole document beforehand. Make any changes you want! Gather a marker and four index cards for each participant. For every three anticipated participants, assemble a [Design Considerations](#) envelope (see the final page of this document for details).

## Acknowledgment of Land

(four minutes)

As the facilitator, introduce yourself. Take a moment to acknowledge the space you're using for the workshop.

If you're on occupied or colonized land (like Canada or America, for example), take a moment to acknowledge the traditional land you're on. If this isn't customary for you, some research and forethought might be necessary. It's an important thing to do at more events, but especially at a workshop around empathy practices.

*"Before we get started, I want to acknowledge that this workshop is taking place on unceded Coast Salish territory, in the traditional home of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waluth people."*

## Check In: Who We Are

(four to eight minutes)

Go around, letting every participant state:

- their name,
- preferred pronoun(s),
- whether they have any accessibility concerns they want to let the group know about,
- the question or inquiry that they hope the workshop will help them answer.

If desired, you can also ask everybody a light-hearted icebreaker question, like "What did you have for breakfast today?" or "What's the last movie you watched and liked?"

Make note of the questions that people are hoping to answer. Jot them down. During the workshop, look for opportunities to segue naturally into answering them.

If you've got nametags, suggest people list their names and pronouns on them for ease of reference.

*"My name is Avery, and I prefer she/her. I don't have any accessibility concerns at the moment, other than dealing with a migraine. The big question I hope this workshop answers is -"*

## Exercise: Gaming Touchstones

(six minutes)

Each participant takes two index cards. On each card, they write something that games taught them about other people's lives and experiences - a kernel of empathy that they would not have had otherwise.

This exercise is important because it reminds people that empathy practices are a two-way street. They aren't present only to learn how to foster greater empathy in others, but also to recognize the ways that games have fostered greater empathy in them.

Before doing this exercise, let everyone know that one of their cards will be kept secret, and the other will be passed around the circle.

Once everyone has written their two cards, instruct them to pass one to the left. After a moment for reading, pass again. After a moment for reading, pass again.

You can continue passing several more times if desired, but end with everybody holding someone else's card.

*Cards might include topics like:*

*"How assimilation works."*

*"What it's like to serve in the marines."*

*"How losing a child might feel."*

*"Daily life in medieval France."*

## *Six Discussion Questions*

(twelve to eighteen minutes)

People have had an opportunity to get settled, introduce themselves, and warm their brains up to think about the potential that games have.

Now, transition to a discussion centered around the following five questions. Mention that while you have some answers of your own, you first want to hear other people's thoughts, before jumping in yourself.

If some people are dominating the conversation, you can refocus the spotlight by asking questions like, "Does anyone who's been quiet so far want to jump in and answer this one first?"

The answers below these questions aren't definitive, or even right. They're just thoughts that you can contribute to the conversation, alongside participants' and your own. All answers are invited.

### **WHAT IS EMPATHY?**

*Empathy is fundamentally an imaginative act.*

*Empathy departs from sympathy in that it is about relating to, immersing in, or identifying with someone else's experiences and truths.*

### **HOW ARE GAMES POISED TO BUILD EMPATHY?**

*Empathy and games are both imaginative acts that involve putting yourself in new shoes, making your own decisions, and making your own interpretations.*

*There's a phenomenon called bleed – the transfer of emotional states, fears, and ideals between a player and their character.*

### **CAN GAMES ABOUT LASER SPACE ELVES BUILD EMPATHY?**

*There are ways that the fantastical and impossible are helpful in building empathy – they feel easier to approach than real-world circumstances, there's less fear of "doing it wrong," and we can conveniently skirt some of our real-world biases.*

*There are ways that the fantastical and impossible are counter-productive in building empathy – they depersonalize violence and consequences, they obfuscate the real-world people we're learning to care for, they often nudge us to telling stories that go gonzo.*

### **DO GAMES HAVE TO BE FUN?**

*I think the answer to this question depends, in part, on how you define 'fun.' Are exhausting or difficult experiences that leave you feeling rewarded considered to be fun? Are we talking about a definition of fun that makes space for activities like jogging?*

*There isn't necessarily a single answer that's correct.*

### **HOW DO WE FOSTER SINCERE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN GAMES?**

*Games let people experience choices and consequences. If we're going to design games to foster empathy and give people sincere emotional experiences, that means letting them make choices that aren't moralizing or pedantic.*

*One of the ways that games can create sincere emotional experiences is by introducing fraught situations and letting the players disentangle them and come up with their own solutions.*

### **WHEN GAMES EXPLORE REAL-WORLD SITUATIONS AND EXPERIENCES, WHO SHOULD THOSE GAMES BE FOR?**

*If you're writing about the experiences of real-world people, what responsibilities do you hold to those people?*

*Do our design concerns change when we cater to an in-group versus an out-group? Can games be for multiple audiences, when those audiences have different needs in terms of context, depth, accessibility, and authorship?*

*These are complicated questions, and I think the answers are going to vary from game to game.*

## *Brief Talk: What Is Game Design?*

(four minutes)

Give people a short talk about what game design actually is, and what good game design practices entail. Your goal is to contextualize the exercises that follow. You're welcome to use the italicized text below or write your own to replace it.

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*I think game design is about creating frameworks through which we can explore choices, and the way that choices lead to consequences and experiences. It's about saying, "okay, now you try" to strangers.*

*Movies are really good at instilling sympathy in a viewer, because they let you see someone else making choices and experiencing the consequences. But, games are really good at instilling empathy in participants, because they let you make choices and then navigate the consequences.*

*When you design a game, you're making personal-and-political decisions about how those choice-and-consequence loops work, and about what choices are important, and about the lens through which people should experience your subject.*

*The design of tabletop games is exciting because if you've ever read a game manual, if you've ever played a game, you already know how to make your own. This isn't true of every art form - you can play a thousand video games without learning anything about coding. But when you play a roleplaying game or a board game, you see how it's put together and what those rules produce in play. All of this to say: you're already qualified to make games.*

## *Exercise: Things Worth Sharing*

(six minutes)

Have each participant list, on an index card, 2-5 topics or themes that matter to them, that they've got a personal stake in, and that they want to build dialogue and understanding around.

These can be difficult things (sex work, being in abusive relationships), lovely things (being in multiple loving relationships simultaneously, being the first person in your family to graduate college), little things (riding a train for the first time), or huge things (your tour of duty in Afghanistan).

Each participant should write their topics on an index card. If they have any topics they want to record but not share, they can add it to the secret card that they're still holding onto from earlier.

*Cards might include topics like:*

*"Invisible disability"*

*"Working through trauma"*

*"Coming out"*

*"Paganism"*

*"Dating as a parent"*

## *Exercise: Finding The Game*

(six to ten minutes)

Divide workshop participants into groups of 3-4. Encourage people to sit with people they haven't met before if they feel comfortable doing so.

In these groups, participants should share their index card lists, and discuss which topics naturally lend themselves to games. Encourage them to interrogate their own assumptions: why do some topics seem better for gamemaking than others? How might they turn even the most inaccessible of their topics into a game?

Ask each group to settle upon one (or several) of the topics on their index cards that most or all of the group participants have a personal stake in, and that everyone is excited about brainstorming a game outline around.

## Exercise: Designing and Interrogating

(twelve to twenty minutes)

At this point, each group should have a topic to build a game around, and likely several groups have begun to brainstorm what their games might be like.

Read aloud the following list of questions, reminding participants about the various components of game design that they should keep in mind:

- Does your game start with character creation? Are there pre-made characters to choose between?
- Does your game take place in the real world? Is fantasy world-building part of playing the game? If a setting is provided, how is it provided?
- Are there rules for conflict? How are these situations resolved?
- What do the characters in the game do? What do the players sitting at the table do?
- How will you know when your game design is working as intended?

Ask each group to continue talking about their game, answering whichever of these questions they find interesting, answering whatever other questions arise, and together designing a game.

Hand a Design Considerations envelope to each group. Let them know that inside the envelope are six things to consider when designing a game. Invite them to draw and read as many as they'd like, throughout this exercise. They're welcome to ignore the envelope altogether, or to center their conversation around it.

Let them know that you'll be circulating, and they can ask you for assistance or perspective if they get stumped at any point.

## Design Considerations

For each Design Considerations envelope, print out this page. Cut out the six text boxes, and put them inside the envelope. On the front of the envelope, write the words "Design Considerations".

### Metaphor

Metaphor and allegory can make ideas feel safer or more accessible, as well as conveniently skirting a lot of our preconceived notions. But it also allows us to bypass some of the emotional impact and real-world empathy built into a situation. When does your game use metaphor? What does that metaphor add? What are the potential pitfalls in relying on those metaphors?

### Incorporating New Ideas

You're creating a game that incorporates your lived experiences and your ideals. Is there room for players to do the same? Where? Does your game give structural relevance to the experiences and ideals that players bring to the table, even the ones you didn't anticipate?

### Blank Space

Designing games involves leaving blanks, unanswered questions that the players can explore through play. What are the blanks in your game? Why does it feel risky to leave those things up to player interpretation/choice? Why does it feel right?

### Supporting New Players

You're going to get players who feel unfamiliar with the subject matter and who are worried about "messing it up." How does your game support those people in creating characters, playing scenes, and in all the other moments of your game? What does your game require of your players that might be difficult or scary?

### Context and Accessibility

To build empathy, we need to establish a rich & robust sense of context. But to be playable, games need to be accessible and digestible. These needs can be at odds sometimes! How does your game navigate the need for both context and accessibility? What are the potential pitfalls in this solution?

### Some Final Questions

Where does your game risk being pedantic? Where does your game risk being obtuse? Where does your game risk being harmful? Where does your game risk being indulgent?