

## Call | FSP-Fellowships 2023

### “Played Empathy” (June 1-30, 2023, University of Innsbruck)

Fellowships for doctoral students and post-docs in Innsbruck

Research focus *Cultural Encounters – Cultural Conflicts*, University of Innsbruck

Research group *Game Studies*, University of Innsbruck

**Deadline:** March 15 2023

The Game Studies research group at the University of Innsbruck invites up to three fellows (**doctoral students** or **post-docs**) to Innsbruck for a month (**June 1-30, 2023**). Fellows will pursue their own research and connect with local colleagues and students. The proposed thematic focus on “played empathy” allows for and invites a multiplicity of disciplinary approaches.

#### Topic

Already the first discussions of serious games in the 2010s suggest, video games are said to have the ability to convey and evoke empathy, compassion, grief, anger, etc. These effects are potentially enabled and favored by their mode of reception which relies on agency and involvement. There was even talk of computers as “empathy machines.” This hyperbolic perspective may seem like a counterpoint to the debates on violent video games of the early 2000s, in which the negative influence of games was widely discussed, but actually this perspective extends this particular context. In fact, more and more games in the last decade dedicated themselves to creating empathy or were at least received in these terms. Such games include for example *Dys4ia* (2012), *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), *Depression Quest* (2013), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), *Bury Me, My Love* (2017), or *#Feminism* (2016), which deal with gender-transitions, cancer, mental distress such as depression or schizophrenia, with (forced) migration or with gender roles. This development towards serious topics has already been recognized by scholarly research in the fields of game studies and game design.

Yet at the same time one must question the notion of games as a didactic medium, as this kind of empathy creation may be understood as merely a way of customer retention which does not actually change players' attitudes towards the presented topics but rather serves a form of cathartic voyeurism. These effects would contravene the declared goal of such games. This illustrates how complex the relation of empathy and games really is. However, this very complexity has often been unduly reduced by decidedly positive understandings of empathy that charge the term with ethical significance; furthermore, related research has so far focused mainly on digital games and not on analogue forms of games in the broadest sense.

Thus the issue of empathy and games requires research from a multiplicity of inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives including game studies and fields such as pedagogy, philosophy, history, cultural studies, sociology, aesthetics, psychology, and many others, to address a variety of questions

- Which different concepts of empathy can be applied to games? How can they be distinguished from theory of mind?
- How do games create empathy, and how is this connected to their specific mediality?
- How does the concept of empathy change in machine-mediated digital play?

- Why and in which contexts does it seem to be a desired goal to have games create empathy?
- How does empathy relate to concepts such as flow or immersion?
- How is empathy negotiated, represented, staged, and mediated?
- How are games conveyed as didactic tools?
- How do different dimensions and levels of playing impact the creation of empathy?
- How do media ethics evaluate the relation between empathy and voyeurism?
- How do the medical humanities assess the representation and construction of illness and health?

In order to pursue these and other questions regarding the relation between (digital and analog) games and empathy, the Game Studies research group – represented by Franziska Ascher, Magdalena Leichter, Dejan Lukovic, Sascha Pöhlmann, Christoph Singer, Felix Tenhaef, and Tobias Unterhuber – invites up to three fellows (doctoral students / post-docs) to Innsbruck for one month.

### **Structure and schedule**

During this month, fellows will have the opportunity to work freely on their own projects while they also participate in common events. Fellows meet on a regular basis with each other and with local colleagues and students to exchange ideas and develop their own approaches to the topic at hand. These will be presented as part of a public lecture series and a public workshop at the end of their stay, and they will be published as part of a special issue of the journal *PAIDIA – Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung*.

The fellowships are not thematically restricted beyond the focus on “played empathy.” We invite applications from all relevant fields and ask applicants to briefly state which resources they would wish for during their stay, and to outline how they intend to contribute to the topics and formats at hand.

### **Funding**

The research focus *Cultural Encounters – Cultural Conflicts*, supported by the International Relations Office of the University of Innsbruck, will pay for travel costs (400€ within the EU, up to 800€ outside the EU). For the duration of the stay, we will pay for accommodation and subsistence costs for up to 900€; we can support applicants in looking for a place to stay.

### **Application**

Please apply with the following:

- a brief summary of your research project and potential formats and/or topics for the public lecture or the workshop (1 page)
- a CV (including a list of papers and publications)
- Please send your applications to [fsp-kultur@uibk.ac.at](mailto:fsp-kultur@uibk.ac.at) no later than **March 15 2023**.