After speaking to developer Aleksandra Korabelnikova about her studio’s upcoming detective adventure, Backbone (see page 14), one phrase has stuck in my head ever since: “empathy simulator”. Those were the words she used to describe the conversation-heavy computer adventures that partly inspired Backbone – the types of games where talking to (virtual) people is as much part of the experience as picking up items and solving puzzles.

It immediately reminded me of the late film critic Roger Ebert’s suggestion that “movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts”. But Korabelnikova’s words made me wonder whether video games might give movies a run for cinema’s money on the empathy front: in games, uniquely, we get to inhabit the lives of characters rather than merely observe them from afar. We can see the lives of (virtual) people unfold. We can learn about their hopes and fears, often in real time.

Ebert wasn’t a massive fan of video games – when it came to the exhausting question of whether games could be art, he came down firmly on the ‘no’ side. But I wonder if that was because he simply hadn’t encountered the right games. Whether games can be regarded as ‘art’ or not, there’s one thing most people who love the medium can agree on: they’re as capable of creating emotion as any other medium. Games truly can be empathy simulators.

Enjoy the new issue.

Ryan Lambie
Editor