

Exploring the Cognitive, Social, Cultural, and Psychological Aspects of Gaming and Simulations

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Chapter 8

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”: Videogames and the Cognitive– Affective Model of Historical Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Historical empathy has increasingly been recognized as a multidimensional construct that involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. Research suggests that engaging learners with diverse historical perspectives in activities like debate, writing, and role play can be more effective for historical empathy than traditional instruction. Although several studies have investigated the effectiveness of these strategies, little is known about the effectiveness of games in promoting historical empathy. Through observation, recorded game play, and semi-structured interviews, this chapter examined how historical empathy manifested as eighth graders played a videogame about World War I (Valiant Hearts). The findings indicate that specific elements of game play may foster particular dimensions of historical empathy better than others, and that some dimensions tend to arise spontaneously while others require (or even resist) prompting.

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INTRODUCTION

Wineburg (2001) has written that mature historical knowing can teach us “to go beyond our own image to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born” (p. 19). Entertaining and understanding perspectives outside of our own, and coming to know others, can be a difficult endeavor whether those others lived hundreds of years ago or are currently seated across the aisle from us. Engaging with history offers opportunities to develop the kind of dispositions that allow us to better perceive the experiences of others (Wineburg, 2001). In the context of history education, this construct is generally identified as *historical empathy*: Understanding the historical context, attitudes, cultural norms, belief systems, and other factors that may have shaped the actions of people and institutions in the past.

The persistence of traditional instructional approaches tends to encourage students to rely on history texts to provide answers to historical questions (Wineburg, 1991; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson, & Morris, 1998). On the other hand, students exposed to rich, multimodal activities are more likely to not only recognize multiple perspectives but see the value of doing so (Brooks, 2009; Lévesque, 2008; Levstik & Barton, 2011). Similarly, students who actively engage with different points of view in activities such as historical debate tend to have greater understanding of historical context and stronger perspective taking abilities (Jensen, 2008).

By fostering awareness that diverse and contradictory viewpoints existed within past societies just as they do today, historical empathy can encourage students to examine how their own values have been shaped by societal and historical contexts (Russell, 2011). Such awareness has implications beyond the classroom in the development of engaged citizens able to acknowledge the merits of differing opinions within a pluralist democracy (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

Although research has investigated the effectiveness of activities like debate, role play, and writing/reflection (Levstik & Barton, 2011)—only a few studies have explored the potential of videogames in this regard. Videogames are immersive, multimodal experiences involving text, video, music, and imagery, and many current titles allow players to engage with content from more than one perspective. As such, they may offer affordances to prepare learners to engage in historical empathy—giving players the ability to look “through the eyes of people in the past” (Levstik & Barton, 2011, p. 121).

This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of those affordances. Through observation, recorded game play, and semi-structured interviews, I examined how children demonstrate historical empathy in a videogame that allows them to play from multiple perspectives, and whether particular types of game play tend to elicit historical empathy more often than others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators have increasingly recognized that learners are left out of the interpretive process when history is put forward as a metanarrative to be memorized (Levstik & Barton, 2011). History, many argue, is not an inert chronicle of events but rather more like what documentary filmmaker Ken Burns has described as a dynamic chorus of voices (Ward & Burns, 1994). Current trends in history and social studies education urge educators to avoid universal, unchallenged metanarratives, instead promoting dialogue that engages with diverse viewpoints and encourages historical thinking (Russell, 2011). These skills and dispositions have genuine relevance in democratic education, as they are crucial to the development of critical consciousness necessary for informed political engagement.

Historical Empathy

Learners tend to ascribe past actions they don't understand to inferiority, stupidity, or moral deficit—limiting their ability to understand why people in the past acted as they did (Lee & Ashby, 2001). Historical empathy, in contrast, can help learners gain a better understanding of how perspectives, intentions, beliefs and contexts shaped the actions of people and groups in the past (Ashby & Lee, 1987). As such, it facilitates awareness and understanding of alternate perspectives.

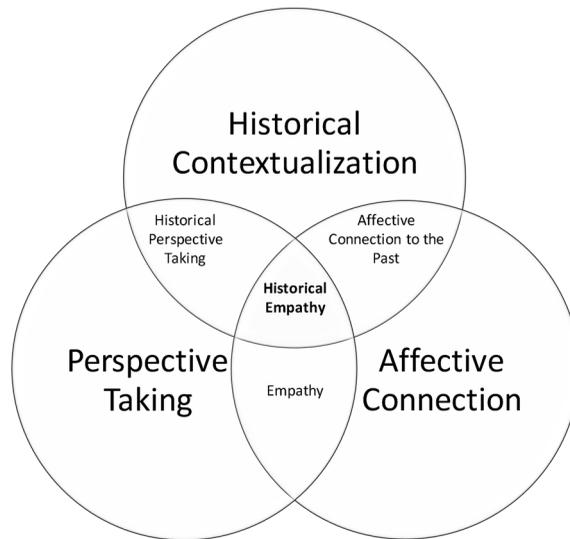
Contemporary research suggests that historical empathy involves both the cognitive exercise of recognizing the perspectives of others as well as affective engagement, or caring with and about people in the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and is therefore an activity that requires “imaginative intellectual and emotional participation” (p. 207). This imaginative process should be supported and informed by historical contextualization grounded in evidence (Lévesque, 2008). History education, in this view, entails more than taking on the perspective of another person—it requires the recognition of a multiplicity of historically contextualized perspectives and a sense of “care” that involves an emotional connection with the past. Importantly, forms of caring lead to more active engagement and interest in historical subjects and figures.

Following in this line of thinking, Endacott & Brooks (2013) proposed an updated theoretical model for historical empathy as a dual-dimensional, cognitive-affective construct, noting that such a view is widely accepted in psychological approaches to empathy. Unlike everyday empathy, however, historical empathy is historically situated. As such, it involves three interrelated elements: Historical contextualization, perspective taking, and affective connection.

Historical contextualization requires an understanding of the historical context, attitudes, cultural norms, and belief systems that may have shaped the actions of people and institutions in the past, as well as other events and perspectives relevant to

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

Figure 1. Theoretical model for historical empathy
(Endacott & Brooks, 2013)



a particular time period. *Perspective taking* is trying to understand what a historical person or group may have thought, and why they acted as they did, based on their lived experience, beliefs, and attitudes. Finally, an *affective connection* involves finding common ground between the lived experience of a person in the past and one’s own similar (yet different) experiences, beliefs, and affective responses to situations and events.

Videogames for Learning

History is a content area for which videogames have shown a good deal of potential. For one, the gaming industry has continually shown great enthusiasm for commercial games with historical context. Many best-selling videogames, such as the *Civilization* and *Assassin’s Creed* series, contain socio-historical themes. Researchers have recognized that this medium provides a “dynamism and capacity for interaction with socio-historical facts...that would be impossible to achieve any other way” (López & Cáceres, 2010, p. 1344). Squire’s (2011) work with students playing *Civilization III*, for example, showed that although students initially interpreted historical game events in terms of their preexisting notions of colonization, playing the game fostered more nuanced, expanded understandings of history. Encouraging players to reflect on their game play and to compare a game’s representation of history to primary and secondary sources also has the potential to help learners achieve more sophisticated understandings (Charsky & Mims, 2008).

Emerging research investigating the use of videogames to promote historical empathy has begun to offer promising results. In their study of the game *Mission US: For Crown or Colony* (a web-based educational adventure game set in pre-Revolutionary War Boston), Schrier, Diamond, and Langendoen (2010) found that many students developed richer understandings of the motivations and context behind historical characters’ alignment with Loyalist or Patriot causes, demonstrated an affective connection to the past, and were better able to provide explanations of different perspectives. The researchers noted that many students were able to “identify emotionally with at least some of the characters and develop feelings about how they were treated and what became of them” (Schrier et al., 2010, p. 267).

A more recent study of the same game (Diamond, 2012) used player think-alouds, semi-structured interviews, and game play observations to investigate how 8th graders demonstrated historical empathy. The findings indicated that, after playing the game, learners developed more nuanced and context-driven understandings of the characters and that players with greater prior knowledge of the time period were better prepared for the types of game activity that might lead to historical empathy.

As research in this field continues, there appears to be a need for future studies to explore the potential that more robust videogames—those not developed primarily for educational purposes—may hold for historical empathy (see Diamond, 2012). This leads to the primary research questions for this study:

1. In what ways does historical empathy manifest through play of a commercial videogame?
2. Do some components of the videogame appear to elicit evidence of historical empathy more frequently than others?

METHODS

The Videogame

The videogame used in this study was *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft, 2014), a World War I themed game available across a variety of platforms that was developed in consultation with historians from Mission Centenaire, the French Commission overseeing the WWI centenary commemorative program (Zimet, 2012). Somewhat atypically for a war-themed game, *Valiant Hearts* combines features of the adventure and puzzle videogame genres and uses relatively simple mechanics, potentially making it more appealing to a wider audience (including less experienced players or those not attracted to first-person shooters). Facts and archival photographs that contextualize the experiences of the war can be unlocked as the

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

game progresses; additionally, collectible artifacts (accompanied by description) can be discovered throughout the game environment. Players experience multiple perspectives, including both soldiers and civilians. Diary entries can be unlocked as play progresses, revealing the main characters’ motivations and feelings. In sum, the game balances educationally relevant content with entertainment value, is easy to learn to play, and incorporates elements from different game genres. As such, it has potential to serve as a conduit for players of varying levels of experience to engage with a complex and multifaceted historical period, and seemed an appropriate choice of game for this study.

Research Design

This study maintained a qualitative focus consistent with the nature of my research questions. My research design was informed by Endacott’s (2010) call for future research on historical empathy to employ methods that capture learners’ stream of consciousness, allowing us to see more of their meaning-making and decision-making processes and by Squire’s (2006) argument that research must account for the mechanisms by which players interpret meaning from the experiences they have in videogames. Therefore, through a case study approach, I collected a rich set of qualitative data to develop an in-depth understanding of the case in an effort to illuminate the central research questions (Creswell, 2008).

Sample

Participants for this study were recruited via email using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2008). Because of the large amount of qualitative data to be collected and the exploratory nature of my research questions, only 4 participants were involved in the study. I recruited participants from the Midwestern United States in same-gender pairs (two self-identified as female, two as male) with the objective of encouraging more interaction and conversation. In the background survey, all participants self-identified as White. The resulting group of participants offered opportunities to compare and contrast across similar cases; by collecting a rich set of qualitative data, I hoped to better illuminate the central research questions (Creswell, 2008). In all coding and data analysis, participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (see Table 1 for participant information).

Data Sources

Data collected for this study included a background survey / pre-test; game play (which included player statements, recorded observations, and game play data; and

Table 1. Self-Reported Participant Demographic Information

	Age	Gender Identity
Deanna	13	F
Beverly	13	F
Julian	13	M
Miles	14	M

a post-test. I used different means of data collection to help inform a more in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008).

The background survey collected basic information including age, gender identification, and grade level. It included Likert-scale questions asking students to rate their frequency of game play and how much they liked social studies/history. In the pre-test, participants answered 5 multiple-choice and 2 true-false questions that assessed their declarative knowledge of WWI. These questions assessed, for example, participants’ awareness of the countries involved in WWI, changes in numbers of women entering the workforce as a result of the war, and the weapons/technologies used at the time. This pre-test was modeled on the one used by Diamond (2012), and adapted for the WWI time period.

The use of *Valiant Hearts*, which allows players to inhabit the roles of four different fictional characters (based on historical evidence and artifacts) was a response to Endacott’s (2010) suggestion that future research should examine historical empathy with different historical figures, rather than the well-known characters who are typically represented in textbooks and documentaries. Given that players can inhabit characters that would have been marginalized during that time period (including Anna, a woman; and Freddy, a Creole-American), the use of this game also seeks to address the call for history education to incorporate the viewpoints of individuals who have traditionally been excluded or stereotyped due to their race, gender, class, or other factors (Russell, 2011).

The game play observation sessions were held in the summer of 2015 in a lab setting. Each participant pair played *Valiant Hearts* on a Windows-based laptop for one 2-hour session. Participants took turns as the active player so that each spent a similar amount of time controlling the game. The sessions were recorded on video, including recordings of the laptop screen during game play, to collect observational data characterizing the way students play the game, the choices made during game play, and to examine any evidence of students who struggled with game mechanics. At specific points, I used a semi-structured interview protocol to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, their awareness of the historical context, the characters they had encountered and inhabited, and the content of the

game level. For example, after playing as the character of Freddy, I began by asking general questions (modeled on the protocol used in Diamond, 2012) such as: “Can you describe Freddy’s situation, or what he was dealing with?” and “What were his reasons for being in the war? How do you know?” I then moved to more specific questions related to historical empathy (modeled on Endacott, 2010) including: “What can you tell me about Freddy’s beliefs, values, and what was important to him?” “Do you think everybody believed these things at the time, or were there people that may have had different perspectives?” “How might Freddy’s perspective have influenced his decisions in the game’s story?” At the end of the game play session, I asked participants general questions about their experience and what they learned from playing the game.

The post-test included the same questions as the pre-test, with the addition of an open-ended question asking participants to reflect on what (if any) historical content and/or characters in the game made an impression on them. I compared post- and pre-test responses to see if any shifts occurred in content knowledge, historical contextualization, and/or historical empathy.

Data Analysis

My analysis was guided by a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in which I systematically identified and coded incidents, compared them for similarities and differences, and aggregated conceptually similar incidents together. Similar incidents were then labeled using higher-level descriptive themes. Approaching the data in this way allowed me to identify the unique properties and dimensions of each theme to distinguish them from each other. Importantly, this process also incorporated theoretical comparisons. Drawing from existing literature on historical empathy, I used informed induction to guide my initial coding process, facilitating a focus that extended beyond mere description to the level of abstraction (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Established practices in discourse analysis guided my process for segmenting data. Individual sentences or phrases spoken by participants during game play, as often happens in conversation and discussion, were often part of a larger chain of thoughts and statements. As participants spoke, shifts frequently occurred between the pair (including instances in which one might finish the other’s sentence, add to it, or correct it) and between participant and researcher before participants stopped speaking and/or returned to game play. This type of discourse, involving inherently contextualized units of language production, has been described as utterances (Schiffrin, 1994). Statements, or adjacent chains of statements relating to an event, idea, prompt, or game play event, were considered utterances for the purposes of this study, and used as the unit of analysis.

I began by reviewing all of the video recordings carefully to get a sense of the data, taking some initial notes about what it showed. I then began my initial round of coding by identifying historical discourse in the think-aloud statements and semi-structured interviews. Historical discourse included statements relating to the historical content of the game; statements relating to history in a general sense; statements relating to the game’s historical characters; statements relating to how it might have felt, or what it would have been like, to be one of the characters or to live during the time period in which the game is set; and statements relating to how technology, communication, etc. were different during the game’s historical time period than they are today.

I continued this process by identifying game discourse, which was separate and distinct from historical discourse. Game discourse included statements relating to the game (mechanics, genre, difficulty, etc.) that were not directly related to its specific historical content or characters but could potentially reflect the players’ level of engagement with the game. I then transcribed all data identified in the mutually exclusive categories of historical discourse and game discourse. Utterances identified as historical discourse and as non-historical, game-related discourse were pulled out and coded as such.

I had previously identified the following game components in the game *Valiant Hearts*: Action/Adventure, Puzzle, Cut Scene, Historical Fact, Diary Entry, and Artifact. Some of these elements are relatively specific to this particular game; others are more common and generally recognized components found in videogames:

- *Action/Adventure* entails taking action within the game; for example, hiding while German patrol passes by, or running across a battlefield trying to avoid enemy fire.
- *Puzzles* often involve a single correct answer or a set of steps that must be completed in the correct order (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003); for example, turning the nozzles on a variety of underground pipes in order to disable a gas leak.
- A *Cut Scene* is an animated sequence that moves the plot forward and helps to explain the characters’ backgrounds, motivations, and inner thoughts (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003).
- *Historical Facts* are unlocked during game play in *Valiant Hearts*; each includes an archival photograph and related historical facts; for example, a photograph of a soldier wearing a mask, and a text description of the use of the first chlorine gas attack in 1915.
- *Diary Entries* contain a short written diary entry from one of the game’s main characters, often related to their feelings and motivations—such as an entry from Anna expressing her desire to help as many of the wounded as possible.

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

- *Artifacts* are collectible historical items hidden throughout the game environment. Once collected, the game interface displays an image of the Artifact as well as a description; for example, a deck of cards and an explanation that soldiers played games to alleviate boredom in the trenches.

I performed a content analysis to determine which game components players had encountered when (or immediately prior to) engaging in historical or game discourse. I also flagged utterances as either prompted or unprompted: I coded statements that were elicited by my questions as prompted; spontaneous, unsolicited statements that participants made on their own while playing the game were coded as unprompted.

I continued to use an informed inductive process to code utterances in the data. I carefully reviewed the transcripts and video, developing categories, and revised them through an iterative process in order to reduce overlap and redundancy, in keeping with a constant comparative method. My resulting final themes thus included a combination of emergent categories and categories rooted in existing theoretical frameworks for historical empathy.

Building upon my initial coding criteria, historical contextualization also included utterances relating to contextual details (such as technology, communication, transportation, etc.) that tend to shape historical events, actions, and attitudes. Perspective taking included statements that indicated participants were thinking about what a character’s experiences may have been like, what their motives might have been, and an awareness of the “otherness” of that historical character (in other words, a sense that the historical character was differentiated from the player). Affective connection incorporated utterances that reflected participants’ recognition of the emotional states of game characters (an essential step in identifying with their feelings and the situations they faced), as well as evidence that the participants cared about the game’s historical characters and what became of them. Consistent with previous research, codes for the dimensions of historical empathy were not mutually exclusive.

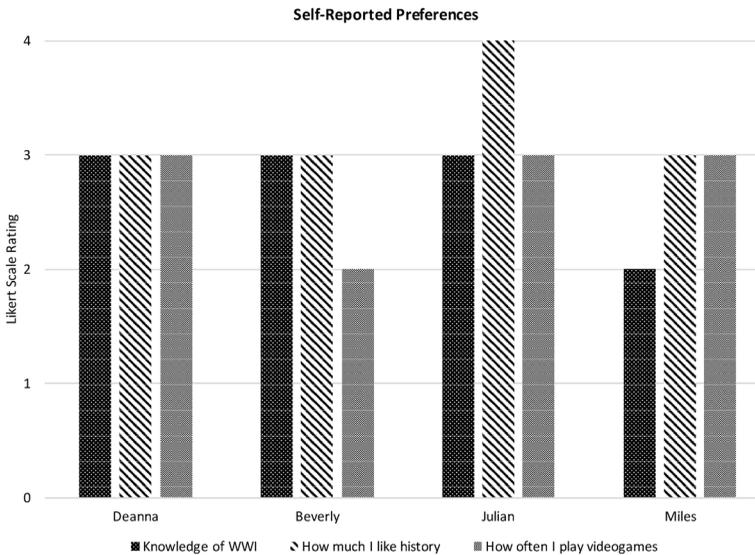
To establish reliability, I conducted an inter-rater agreement check. After reviewing my coding manual and discussing the coding scheme with an independent rater, I randomly selected 20% of the transcribed utterances. After the rater and I independently coded this selection, I calculated reliability using two indices: the kappa coefficient and percent agreement. The average kappa coefficient for our inter-rater reliability check was .9287, and the overall percent agreement was 99.28%. These statistics indicated that overall agreement was quite high. All disagreements were negotiated and resolved.

RESULTS

Data captured in the background survey reflected recent history/social studies grades that ranged from Julian’s A to Deanna’s B-. On a scale of 1 to 4, the majority of participants reported that they “know some things about WWI” (3 on the Likert scale). In terms of preferences for history on a scale of 1 to 4, the majority reported “I like social studies/history” (a 3 on the Likert scale). Videogame experience was rated on a scale of 1 to 4. The majority of participants chose 3 on the scale = “I play videogames often (once a week or so)” except for Beverly, who reported that she has “only played videogames a few times” (a 2 on the scale). The results of the background survey are summarized in Figure 2.

The open-ended and short answer questions on the pre- and post-tests were intended to gauge participants’ sense of historical empathy and their awareness of the differing perspectives existing during a given time period. I had planned to analyze these responses interpretively, using existing rubrics for historical empathy as a guide. Given the brevity of these responses, however, they provided limited insight into participants’ sense of historical empathy. This data was nonetheless retained as a potential source of triangulation to support the other data collected in this study.

Figure 2. Participants’ Self-Reported Knowledge, Preferences, and Experience



Research Question 1: In What Ways Does Historical Empathy Manifest Through Play of a Videogame?

Due to its highly contextual and multifaceted nature, attempts to quantify or measure the non-linear and evolving process of negotiating historical empathy can be problematic (Endacott & Brooks, 2018). Indeed, it is a complex construct that has been difficult for researchers to characterize even in structured educational settings. Such studies (such as Endacott, 2014) tend to follow a defined instructional model to scaffold students through the process of negotiating historical empathy. Therefore, examining how it may manifest through videogame play—in the context of this study, as a relatively isolated activity without instruction—presented some unique challenges.

Endacott (2014) has posited that “historical empathy is always an iterative process of building and connecting knowledge” (p. 6). The spirit of this argument, combined with an acknowledgement of the affordances and constraints of videogames, informed the broader way in which I operationalized the dimensions of historical empathy in this study. As mentioned previously, my initial coding criteria was rooted in existing theoretical and empirical literature. Taking into account the content of the game and the idea that historical empathy involves connecting knowledge led to some slight adjustments, I expanded the criteria for historical contextualization to include utterances that address relevant contextual details (such as technology, communication, transportation, etc.) that tend to shape historical events, actions, and attitudes. For perspective taking, I included statements that indicated participants were thinking about what a character’s experiences may have been like, what their motives might have been, and an awareness of the “otherness” of that historical character (in other words, a sense that the historical character was differentiated from the player). I also expanded the criteria for affective connection to incorporate utterances that reflected participants’ recognition of the emotional states of game characters (an essential step in identifying with their feelings and the situations they faced), as well as evidence that the participants cared about the game’s historical characters and what became of them. Consistent with previous research, codes for the dimensions of historical empathy were not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in keeping with Endacott & Brooks’ (2013) Venn diagram, I expected to see overlaps between the three dimensions of historical empathy.

In addition to the initial codes described above, I also identified several emergent themes and sub-themes from the data. Since a major goal of this study was to explore what historical empathy looks like in videogame play, it was important to consider patterns that appeared to shape participants’ experience of playing *Valiant Hearts*. Within the category of historical discourse, the emergent themes I identified included

stereotypes (with sub-themes for applying and recognizing stereotypes), knowledge application (with sub-themes for accurate and inaccurate/lacking), and engagement with historical content. Table 2 lists and describes each theme.

Of the historical discourse themes I identified, historical contextualization, perspective taking, accurate knowledge application, and engagement with historical content appeared most frequently. Table 3 summarizes number of times each code appeared, as well as the way each was distributed across the three prompting categories.

Table 2. Description of Emergent Historical Discourse Themes

Theme	Description
Stereotypes	Utterances relating to stereotypes
Applying stereotypes	Applying stereotypes to individuals or groups represented in the game; oversimplifying historical characters or groups
Recognizing stereotypes	Noticing/identifying stereotypes within the game
Knowledge application	Evidence of participants’ content knowledge
Accurate	Applying relatively accurate content knowledge
Inaccurate or lacking	Applying inaccurate content knowledge, or indicating a lack of content knowledge
Engagement with historical content	Indicating a sense of interest in, or curiosity about, the historical content of the game

Table 3. Number of Times Each Historical Discourse Theme Appeared (by Prompting Category)

Themes	Unprompted	Prompted During Game	Prompted in Post-Game Interview
Historical empathy			
Historical contextualization	29	48	18
Perspective taking	10	23	51
Affective connection	18	5	16
Stereotypes			
Applying	8	1	0
Recognizing	1	3	0
Knowledge application			
Accurate	35	35	17
Inaccurate/lacking	2	11	6
Engagement with historical content	40	21	14

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

Some relevant utterances may help to illustrate these historical discourse themes. An example of applying stereotypes occurred when the character of Emile—who was being held captive in a German camp when it was attacked—had to pull a German soldier from the rubble. Upon realizing that the game required her to rescue an enemy, Deanna’s response was, “Okay, I’m supposed to help this demon person.” Participants also recognized stereotypes while playing, as when Miles commented that many Germans in the game were depicted as “kinda evil,” and Julian noticed that their frequent associations with drunkenness and alcohol were “almost stereotypical.” Evidence of background knowledge being brought to bear on the game experience came about when participants applied relatively accurate content knowledge—for example, when Julian mentioned a relevant detail he had learned prior to playing: “One of the cool things about trenches that I learned, it was because of this war that the French and British put helmets into their uniforms, because there were so many head injuries in the trenches.” In contrast, evidence of a participant’s lack of background knowledge arose when Beverly asked, “Was this the time of The Holocaust, too?” indicating that she was confusing WWI with WWII. Finally, an example of engagement with historical content occurred when the topic of trench warfare appeared to arouse Julian’s curiosity, sparking the question, “I just wonder what, for the guys who made it through most of the war, like what did their back structure look like? Because before the British and French put helmets into their uniforms, to not get head wounds you had to be crouching the entire time.”

One trend that can be seen in this data is the role of prompting in relation to utterances coded for each dimension of historical empathy. Historical contextualization utterances tended to be prompted during the game, perspective taking utterances tended to be prompted in the post-game interview, and affective connection utterances generally arose unprompted during game play. Utterances relating to historical contextualization and affective connection were more likely than perspective taking to come up unprompted during game play.

An example of a prompted utterance, co-coded for all three dimensions of historical empathy, occurred in the post-game interview. After they had finished playing the game, I asked Julian and Miles to describe what it was like to live as a soldier in WWI based on what they experienced in the game:

Julian: Well I think there would be, in the beginning I think there would be a little bit of pride. Because, because like war was like a big thing to do, like to go fight in a war. But towards the end I think there would be, because it was dragging out so long, I think there would be nervousness, and...

Miles: Maybe even, like, some regret.

In this instance, Julian showed an awareness of the public sentiment surrounding the war, as well as recognition that those perspectives were not monolithic and may have shifted (Endacott, 2010). Both Julian and Miles also seemed mindful of the emotional impact the experience may have had on individual soldiers. This confluence of all three dimensions seems less likely to have been elicited during game play, or unprompted; asking the question appeared to encourage the players to reflect on the whole of their experience during the activity, and to consider the impact the war may have had on people living at the time.

Moving on to game discourse—which was mutually exclusive from historical discourse—I identified the emergent themes of engagement (with two different levels, high and low engagement, within that theme), and blending of player/character. These themes, in a general sense, reflect how engaged players were with the game and the nature of their relationship to the characters they inhabited during play. Table 4 summarizes each theme.

Of the game discourse themes, the most frequently-appearing were high engagement and blending of player/character. These themes tended to appear unprompted during game play. Table 5 shows the number of times each theme appeared, as well as the way each theme was distributed across the three prompting categories.

Table 4. Description of Emergent Game Discourse Themes

Theme	Description
Engagement	Evidence of the participants’ level of engagement with the game, divided into mutually-exclusive sub-themes (high/low)
High	Indicating a sense of enjoyment, immersion, and/or interest in completing game objectives
Low	Indicating boredom, lack of enjoyment, and/or lack of interest in completing game objectives
Blending of player/character	Indicating that the player is “inhabiting” the character; a sense that player and character are one

Table 5. Number of Times Each Game Discourse Theme Appeared (by Prompting Category)

Game Discourse Themes	Unprompted	Prompted During Game	Prompted in Post-Game Interview
Blending of player/character	44	0	0
Engagement			
High	92	4	6
Low	5	0	2

To illustrate these game discourse themes briefly with some exemplars: Julian and Miles showed unprompted evidence of high engagement during the game when a new character, Anna, suddenly appeared driving a car. Visibly excited, Julian exclaimed, “What is that?? Oh!” while Miles shouted, “Oh! Car. DANG. Get hit by the car,” before Julian chimed in with “Whoa!” Beverly, in contrast, indicated low engagement when I asked her whether she enjoyed playing *Valiant Hearts*. She answered, “I didn’t like when we were under the bridge thing. I was like, it’s getting boring!” An example of the blending of player/character occurred when Deanna, playing as the character of Emile, needed to obtain a bottle of wine from a French soldier. While doing so, she spoke to the non-player character in the first person (as if she were Emile), asking: “Okay sir, I’d like your wine?” She then thanked him afterwards: “Okay. Thank you! Now, goodbye.”

In summary, the themes I identified under the main category of historical discourse included the existing themes rooted in Endacott and Brooks’ (2013) framework as well as several emergent themes. Of these, historical contextualization, perspective taking, accurate knowledge application, and engagement with historical content appeared most frequently. I also noted patterns with respect to the role of prompting for historical discourse themes. Additionally, I identified game discourse themes, which mainly arose unprompted during game play. High engagement and blending of player/character appeared much more frequently than low engagement.

Research Question 2: Do Some Components of the Game Appear to Elicit Evidence of Historical Empathy More Frequently Than Others?

Some components of the game did appear to promote historical empathy more than others. Overall, the largest number of codes (72) for historical empathy were applied during, or shortly following, encounters with historical facts. Encounters with artifacts accounted for 33 of historical empathy codes during game play, cut scenes for 21, action scenes for 16, and puzzles for a mere 2.

Codes for historical contextualization were most often applied in relation to historical facts (46) or artifacts (21). Codes for perspective taking occurred most frequently in connection with historical facts (21) or artifacts (9). Notably, perspective-taking codes were more likely to be associated with cut scenes (7) compared to historical contextualization codes (4). Codes for affective connection tended to be associated with cut scenes (10), action scenes (7), or historical facts (5).

In sum, several findings helped to illuminate my second research question: Historical facts tended to be effective for historical empathy in a general sense, while puzzles and diary entries were not particularly effective at all. Through the lens of Endacott & Brooks’ (2013) framework, several components of the game

stood out in eliciting the different dimensions of historical empathy. Historical facts and artifacts tended to be associated with evidence of historical contextualization and perspective taking, and cut scenes and action scenes tended to be associated with affective connection.

DISCUSSION

Endacott and Brooks’ (2013) cognitive-affective model proved to be a helpful lens for analyzing the ways historical empathy can manifest through videogame play. I found that evidence of historical contextualization and perspective taking occurred more often than affective connection. Additionally, I noted differences with respect to prompted vs. unprompted utterances. Most of the utterances coded as historical contextualization were prompted during the game, most of the perspective taking utterances were prompted in the post-game interview, and most of those coded as affective connection arose unprompted during game play. Utterances relating to historical contextualization and affective connection were more likely than perspective taking to arise unprompted during game play. Game discourse themes tended to emerge unprompted during game play (which was not surprising, since engagement tends to align with an activity). These findings have implications for research. Some dimensions of historical empathy may be elicited more directly by videogames; in fact, affective connection seemed to resist prompting. On the other hand, perspective taking—which was less likely to manifest spontaneously—may need to be encouraged and explored through discussion during or after the learning activity.

Playing the game from more than one perspective provided opportunities for participants to consider the motivations and backgrounds of different characters. At the same time, the participants in this study recognized several problematic stereotypes and oversimplifications in *Valiant Hearts*, such as the villainous, drunken caricatures of some German soldiers. However, these need not disqualify a videogame from being a valuable learning activity. Videogames, like most media, present players with certain models of the world; educators can help students learn to examine and critique those models (Bogost, 2008). Caricatures, oversimplifications, and stereotypes can be used as opportunities to discuss historical interpretation, and bias. For Julian and Miles in particular, oversimplifications tended to spark conversations about the importance of multiperspectivity in history education.

Another consideration illuminated by this study is that, to foster historical empathy through videogame play, it helps if players are engaged with the game itself. Players need to be comfortable with a game’s mechanics, so that it provides an appropriate balance of challenge and fun (Squire, 2011). The first participant pair, Deanna and

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

Beverly, took much longer to complete game objectives, discovered fewer artifacts, and did not progress as far in the game as Julian and Miles. For example, Deanna and Beverly took approximately 11 minutes to successfully complete Emile’s first battle sequence, while Julian and Miles took less than 2 minutes to complete the same sequence. The first participant pair also appeared to be less engaged in the activity in general (based on researcher observation and as indicated by the application of game engagement codes). It seems likely that these differences were related to varying levels of experience—some of which were captured by the self-reported data in the background survey, with more variation possible in terms participants’ preferred videogame genres and platforms. Casual mobile games, for example (like *Candy Crush*) may not prepare players for a side-scrolling adventure as well as other types of games.

These findings relating to engagement have practical implications: Players who are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with videogames in general, or specifically with certain genres or platforms of games, may tend to focus on getting through the game rather than its historical content. In other words, if players struggle with the mechanics of a game, they are likely to have lower levels of engagement with both the game itself and with its educational content. Therefore, educators would be well advised to consider this when implementing a videogame as a learning activity—perhaps by surveying students about their game experience and preferences, and also by providing initial opportunities for students to become comfortable with a game’s mechanics to mitigate the impact of any differences.

In terms of game components, cut scenes and action scenes appeared to be more effective in promoting affective connection within the context of this study. Unprompted evidence of affective connection arose following an action sequence in which Walt, the mercy dog who assists the main characters in the game, becomes entangled in barbed wire and starts yelping:

Julian: What?? What’s wrong??

Miles: Oh shoot!

Julian: Oooohhhh... (*tapping furiously at keys trying to rescue the dog*)

Game fades out to cut scene

Julian: Well...but what happened to the dog??

Both players became visible and audibly concerned at this point in the game, and continued to focus on the question of Walt’s fate (until, thankfully, he was rescued in a later sequence). Although Walt is not a human character, participants’ utterances, behavior, and facial expressions showed clear evidence that they cared about him, how he was treated, and what became of him (Schrier et al., 2010). Other instances of affective connection that emerged during game play suggested

that players might be imagining what it felt like to experience particular historical situations, and making connections with similar experiences they may have had themselves (see Boltz, 2017).

Historical facts and artifacts, on the other hand, tended to elicit evidence of historical contextualization and perspective taking. For example, after Julian and Miles read a historical fact about the 10 billion letters and postcards exchanged during the war, I asked the participants to consider how the experience of a soldier communicating with family and friends might have been different during that time period:

Julian: What would happen is like, you could like, send a letter, but it doesn't get to your family for the next week.

Miles: Yeah it could take longer.

Julian: And by then you could actually be...be dead. And they think you're still alive.

Miles: Yeah.

Researcher: And what about from your perspective if you're waiting on letters from home?

Julian: It would be kind of nerve-wracking because you don't really know what's going on there. So for all you know they've been...taken.

Miles: Yeah it would be seeing, like, hearing from them in the past. Rather than emails, which are like, pretty instant.

In this exchange, Miles and Julian began by engaging in historical contextualization, noting the constraints of the primary means of communication available at the time, and how this would have shaped the experiences of soldiers and their loved ones—an example that typifies historical contextualization as described by Lévesque: “contextualized, historical imagination grounded in evidence” (2008, p.149). That exchange led into perspective-taking as the participants reflected on what this experience might have been like for people waiting for letters, as they attempted to put themselves in that position. Their statements suggested that the participants were considering the perspectives of people in the past as different from their own, but also valid and worthy of consideration. They also indicated an awareness of the social and familiar networks of which historical characters would have been a part, their attitudes and positions (including how these would have been strained by war and the slower pace of communication), and the ways these factors could influence what people may have thought about their situation. For example, Miles' interesting statement that it would have been like “hearing from them in the past” reflects a contrast to the near instantaneous methods of communication often available today. The exchange also briefly touched on affective connection when Julian explained

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

how “nerve-wracking” it would have felt, emotionally, not knowing whether loved ones were still alive.

This preliminary evidence lends support to the argument made by Kapell & Elliott (2013) that videogames which incorporate “historical artifacts, characters, settings, or events, either as a mode of storytelling or as a function of play, create a unique opportunity to affect historical understanding and improve its conventional interpretation” (p. 34). Indeed, it was interesting that historical facts were so effective in promoting historical contextualization and perspective taking, while puzzles and diary entries were not. To extend conclusions made by Diamond in his 2012 work with *Mission US*, it may be that providing players with background knowledge—in the case of *Valiant Hearts*, even in the form of in-game components—better prepares them to engage in particular dimensions of historical empathy. Taken as a whole, these findings may be instructive for those interested in selecting or designing videogames for historical empathy; it may be that each dimension of historical empathy is best promoted by a particular combination of game components.

LIMITATIONS

This was an exploratory study designed to illuminate a complex construct; as such, there were several important limitations. A small sample size was necessary to maintain feasibility in light of the large amount of data to be collected and analyzed. Findings therefore have limited generalizability due to the small number and limited diversity of the study’s participants, since culture, country of origin, age, and other factors are likely to influence the ways in which players may engage in historical empathy. Additionally, although it shares common elements and features with other videogames, *Valiant Hearts* is just one example of a game about history—one that has its own unique qualities and structure. Therefore, the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to all videogames with historical content.

Another limitation relates to technical issues that occurred during the first game play session. The screen capture software used in Deanna and Beverly’s session slowed down the pace and responsiveness of the game. These participants seemed to be focused on when the activity would end, asking several times how much time was remaining, and demonstrated lower levels of engagement overall. Although there is insufficient evidence to confirm whether the underlying reasons were related to game play experience, the technical issues, or other factors, the result was that Julian and Miles progressed much further into the story than the other participants; being exposed to more content provided more opportunities to engage in discourse.

CONCLUSION

In their book *Playing with the Past*, Kapell & Elliot (2013) ask, “Do different kinds of games engage with history in different ways?” (p. 4). The results of this qualitative study put forward modest answers to that question. Certain game components appear to be more effective in promoting particular dimensions of historical empathy; players tend to be more likely to engage in historical discourse when they are engaged with the game itself; and some aspects of historical empathy tend to arise spontaneously while others may require prompting. Educators may therefore wish to select games that feature the most effective game components, to monitor how engaged students are with the game, and to provide opportunities for discussion in order to address all aspects of historical empathy. Similarly, developers may wish to design games that combine the most effective types of game components and, when possible, to provide players with in-game opportunities for reflection.

This study’s findings also raise interesting questions about intersections between the blending of player/character and affective connection themes. Given that the affective connection dimension of historical empathy reflects a shifting focus between the self and the historical figure (Endacott & Brooks, 2013), and since emerging research suggests that highly-engaged players who identify with playable characters come may develop emotional connections to those characters (Li, Liao, & Khoo, 2013), might there be a “sweet spot” at which players form a connection with the videogame character they’re inhabiting both in terms of engagement and also in a historical sense? Several examples, including my observation of Julian and Miles during the poisonous gas scene, seem to point to such an intersection as a potentially powerful conduit for developing historical empathy through videogame play. With a more robust data set, future studies might engage in a more in-depth analysis of historical empathy that incorporates a theoretical framework for player–avatar identification (Li, Liao, & Khoo, 2013).

In a more general sense, researchers could extend the utility of this study by determining whether these findings can be replicated with a larger and more diverse sample. Additionally, it would be helpful to collect more information about players’ experience and preferences for videogame genres and platforms to determine how these prepare players to engage with game content. Ideally, future studies would integrate videogames into the investigative phase of an instructional model to more accurately reflect a pedagogical implementation. A game like *Valiant Hearts* could be used to supplement primary and secondary source activities, allowing learners “to explore the nuances of historical context in depth as well as the thoughts and

“Nervousness and Maybe Even Some Regret”

feelings” of characters (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 48). This approach would help researchers to obtain more qualitative data—perhaps through writing activities, debates, or other assignments—so that a deeper analysis of confounding elements could be conducted. Ensuring that learners are sufficiently introduced to the historical period before playing the game should also provide a stronger foundation for them to engage in evidence-based empathic engagement.

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