“Like Hearing From Them in the Past”: The Cognitive-Affective Model of Historical Empathy in Videogame Play

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ABSTRACT

Historical empathy is a multidimensional construct that involves both the cognitive recognition of the perspectives of others as well as affective engagement with the lived experiences of people in the past. Actively engaging learners with diverse historical perspectives in activities like debate, writing, and role play has been shown to be more effective than traditional instruction in the promotion of historical empathy, but less is known about the effectiveness of videogames in this regard. This case study article examines how historical empathy manifested during play of the videogame Valiant Hearts. The results indicate that certain types of game play may promote particular dimensions of historical empathy better than others, and that some dimensions tend to arise spontaneously while others require (or even resist) prompting.

KEYWORDS

Affective Connection, Education, Empathy, Historical Contextualization, Historical Empathy, History, Perspective Taking, Valiant Hearts

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges in developing mature historical thought lies within what Wineburg (2001) described as the “tension between the familiar and the strange” (p. 5). Coming to know others, and being able to entertain and understand different perspectives, is a difficult endeavor whether those others lived hundreds of years ago or are currently seated across the aisle. History, Wineburg argued, provides opportunities to practice the kinds of related skills that educate our sensibilities and develop the dispositions that allow us to better perceive the experiences of others. In the context of history education, this construct is often called historical empathy.

Mere knowledge of historical facts does not automatically lead to an understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed. In fact, 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). Making sense of behaviors and ways of thinking that may at first seem incomprehensible is a difficult intellectual endeavor that requires high levels of thinking (Lee & Ashby, 2001). This, essentially, is 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.

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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 several studies have investigated the effectiveness of some instructional practices—most notably debate, role play, and writing/reflection activities (Levstik & Barton, 2011)—little is known about the effectiveness of videogames in promoting historical empathy. 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 gameplay, 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 gameplay tend to elicit historical empathy more often than others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students are left out of the interpretive process when history is put forward as a metanarrative to be learned (Levstik & Barton, 2011). As education has shifted from didactic to more constructivist approaches, educators have recognized problems with presenting history as a factual, objectively true narrative. 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). History education, therefore, should be an active and interpretive learning experience. Further, the skills honed in the active process of “doing history” have genuine relevance in democratic education, as they are crucial to the development of critical consciousness necessary for enlightened political engagement. Contemporary 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).

Historical Empathy

Historical empathy results in a better understanding of how perspectives, intentions, beliefs and contexts shaped the actions of people and groups in the past (Lee & Ashby, 1987). As such, it facilitates awareness and understanding of alternate perspectives. Learners tend to ascribe past actions they don’t understand to inferiority, stupidity, or moral deficit—limiting any real progress toward understanding those actions (Lee & Ashby, 2001). Historical empathy, in contrast, is “the ability to see and entertain as conditionally appropriate, connections between intentions, circumstances, and actions, and to see how any particular perspective would actually have affected actions in particular circumstances” (Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 25).

Barton & Levstik (2004) noted 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. It is therefore an activity that requires “imaginative intellectual and emotional participation” (p. 207). 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
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