“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 fleeing 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.
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