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Chapter 6
Empathy and Historical Learning
in Assassin's Creed Valhalla Discovery Tour

Abstract: This chapter explores the integration of empathy and historical learning in Assassin's Creed Valhalla Discovery Tour (VDT). By introducing mission quests in VDT, the game establishes empathic connections between players and historical characters, presenting new educational opportunities in the classroom. The paper argues that this engagement can lead to a deeper understanding of the everyday lives, beliefs, and motivations of people from the past, moving beyond simplistic explanations. To effectively engage learners, VDT must evoke cognitive and emotional investment in the characters and their narratives. The paper suggests enhancing the experience by providing more extensive character background stories, presenting alternative courses of action, and portraying social relations in a nuanced manner. In light of these considerations, the chapter proposes a sequential model for using VDT in history classrooms, encouraging students to treat the game as a historical document and research space.

Keywords: Empathy, history, game-based learning, game design, Assassin's Creed

1 Introduction

With the release of Assassin's Creed Valhalla, Ubisoft Montreal made available a new version of Discovery Tour, an experience aimed at making the game's rich virtual historical world available for education. As with the previous Discovery Tour experiences, this version removed all the violent combat mechanics, focusing instead on exploration and learning in the vast reconstructed environments of medieval Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon Britain. This version also introduced a mission quests system in which players can build an empathetic understanding of the Viking Age by following the storylines of representative characters from this period: a family of Norse merchants, an Anglo-Saxon monk, and King Alfred the Great. The introduction of mission quests followed the project's active involvement and consultation with historians and educators, and a critical assessment by the team of previous Discovery Tour experiences. As Maxime Durand, a historical researcher at Ubisoft Montreal, explains:

> In Discovery Tour Viking Age we really focused on two new paradigms, which is learning by doing and history through stories. [. . .] And the idea behind that is that empathy leads to learning because we care about the characters, and also doing the things with the character, with the avatar, actually leads also to greater learning and greater comprehension.[1]

With previous Discovery Tours, players could freely explore worlds and interact with information nodes; the experience was built to resemble the type of user interaction commonly found in museum exhibitions, with significant limitations in terms of immersion and interaction. In contrast, in Valhalla Discovery Tour (VDT) players can embody the identities of fictional and historical characters with whom they can relate at a personal level. A fundamental design goal for the building of these narratives was to establish a closer connection with the characters' lives and predicaments.

In this chapter, I intend to analyze VDT, focusing on historical empathy and care. I will begin by briefly revising the literature on these concepts, with the aim of understanding them better in terms of their application to historical learning settings. I will then discuss the educational significance of empathy within history curriculums. Following that, I will focus on games as generators of empathic connections, examining their capacity to drive players to relate with characters through ludic and narrative devices. Finally, I will critically analyze VDT, drawing suggestions for further development and proposing a framework for its practical implementation in history classrooms.

2 Historical Empathy and Care

It is generally recognized that empathy is a difficult concept to define. No academic consensus has been reached on how to separate it from other communication and psychological attributes. In broad terms, empathy refers to a capacity to put ourselves in somebody's else position, approaching the way they might be thinking and feeling in a certain situation. Two basic categories of empathy are generally distinguished in the literature: cognitive and emotional. Most authors situate the concept on one side of the spectrum or the other or as a combination

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1 Maxime Durand, "Discovery Tour: Viking Age Is a Fantastic Way to Immerse Yourself in the History of Assassin's Creed Valhalla," interview by Wald, Heather, gamesradar.com, 2021. https://www.gamesradar.com/uk/assassins-creed-valhalla-discovery-tour-viking-age/.

of both.[2] In this scheme, cognitive empathy, which some authors also refer to as "perspective-taking,"[3] is concerned with the experience of intentionally taking another person's point of view, while emotional empathy refers to the spontaneous and emotional responses trigged by identifying ourselves with another person's circumstances. For some authors, the latter can be subdivided into parallel empathy, the "vicarious experience of another's emotional state,"[4] where the feelings of another person are to a certain extent mirrored in our own feelings, and reactive empathy, where the emotional response does not resemble what other person might be experiencing.

The question of whether empathy, or what sort of empathy, should be regarded as a critical component of historical learning and understanding remains open. Keith Jenkins,[5] highlighting the impossibility of translating our present-day minds to past ways of thinking, dismissed the entire enterprise as futile. His argument does not hold up well under closer scrutiny, however; even though a perfect approximation to past ways of feeling and thinking is indeed unachievable in absolute terms, explanations about how people acted the way they did can still be drawn and proved more defensible than others.[6] For Lee and Ashby, the exercise is not only worthwhile but necessary:

> If history is to be possible, historians must understand past meanings, whether of documents or artifacts (Is this find a cup or a cult object? Is this document a minute or a report? Does it make a threat or a promise?). If they cannot do this, then there can be no historical evidence. Historians must also be able to give sense to actions, social practices, and institutions in terms of people's reasons for doing or believing what they did.[7]

To make sense of the past, we need to contextualize the actions of the people who lived in it. This demands that we dedicate our efforts to understanding their world in the way they saw it, no matter how imperfect or hypothetical our ex-

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2 Anne Dohrenwend, "Defining Empathy to Better Teach, Measure, and Understand Its Impact," *Academic Medicine* 93, no. 12 (December 2018), 1754–1756. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000002427.

3 Nancy Dulberg, "Engaging in History: Empathy and Perspective-Taking in Children's Historical Thinking," *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association,* 2002.

4 Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan, "Designing Games to Foster Empathy," *International Journal of Cognitive Technology* 14, no. 2 (2009), 6.

5 Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991).

6 Davis, O, Elizabeth Yeager, and Stuart Foster, *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social* Studies (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

7 Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee, "Progression in Historical Understanding Among Students Aged 7–14," in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Samuel Wineburg (New York; London: New York University Press, 2000), 23.

planations might end up being. When making this effort, a number of scholars have differentiated empathy and sympathy. While empathy refers to imagining the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspectives, sympathy imagines them as if they were our own, judging or reacting emotionally in response. A number of authors regard this process of identification as counter-productive. Time, culture, and individual experiences produce fundamentally different world views, and so thinking about people from the past as sharing our own goals, values, intentions, and beliefs renders historical understanding a problematic endeavor.[8]

Ultimately, reaching an empathic understanding of the past requires high-order cognitive skills that are difficult, and take time to develop. In the most comprehensive study to date on learners' historical empathy, Ashby and Lee[9] mapped the following five stages of progressive achievement:

1. *The 'divi' past:* the past is perceived as generally obscure and unknowable.
2. *Generalized stereotypes:* students use stereotypes to explain the how the people from the past behaved.
3. *Everyday empathy:* students attempt to explain the past rationally according to their personal views.
4. *Restricted historical empathy:* students can discern intentions and beliefs from predecessors within narrow historical contexts.
5. *Contextual historical empathy:* students can detach modern from past perspectives and are able to situate the phenomena under study in wider historical contexts.

In the first stage (the 'divi' past), children made a complete abstraction of the contextual factors leading to characters' actions or decisions, regarding them naively as mentally inferior for not taking obviously better courses of action. In the second stage ('generalized stereotypes'), children explained people's roles and actions according to simplistic stereotypes without attempting to situate them within their historical contexts. In the third stage ('everyday empathy'), students were able to understand actions concerning specific situations in which people found themselves but failed to spot the differences between past and present perceptions. In this stage, students assessed situations by imagining how they would have acted, thought, or felt in similar circumstances without acknowledging their present

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8 Keith Barton and Linda Levstick, *Teaching History For The Common Good* (Mahwah; London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008), 207.

9 Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee, "Children's concepts of empathy and understanding in history," in *The history curriculum for teachers,* ed. Christopher Portal (London: Falmer Press, 1987), 62–88.

minds. In the fourth stage ('restricted historical empathy'), learners were able to situate their understanding of the situations people found themselves in, noting that they were perceived differently in the past. Their understanding remained narrowly focused on specific situations, however, and they did not apply their understanding to broader learning contexts. In the fifth and final stage, students were able to apply the learning strategies from stage four to wider contexts, establishing differences and similarities between people's beliefs, values, and material conditions across historical societies.

3 Games as Empathy Machines

By putting players into specific situations in which they can inhabit the perspectives of characters, games seem to be an advantageous medium for triggering empathic historical encounters. By means of role-playing character mechanics, games allow players to explore their particular circumstances, taking decisions and actions without suffering the impact such actions would have in the real world.[10] The elevated sense of immersion from enacting situations in this way has the potential to trigger strong emotions and deeply personal experiences.[11,12] However, it is important to note that not all games or immersive experiences generate empathy, most notably due to their incapacity to trigger the level of psychological involvement the experience demands.[13]

In Katherine Isbister's view,[14] the potential of games to move us to feel emotion depends on two of the medium's unique qualities: choice and flow. While other forms of media can certainly trigger strong emotional responses from their audiences, games are unique in the sense of giving players the ability to control what unfolds. This capacity is a defining feature of games. As Sid Meier, the designer of the acclaimed Civilization series put it, "a game is a series of interesting

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10 James Gee, What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy (2nd ed.) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

11 Manuela Hafner and Jansz Jeroen, "The Players' Experience of Immersion in Persuasive Games: The Players' Experience of Immersion in Persuasive Games: A Study of My Life as a Refugee and PeaceMaker," International Journal of Serious Games 5, no. 4 (2018), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.17083/ijsg.v5i4.263.

12 Belman and Flanagan, "Designing Games to Foster Empathy," 11.

13 Patricia Manney, "Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling Is the Key to Empathy," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 19, no. 1 (2008), 51–61.

14 Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

choices." By offering alternative paths of action, players are driven to make decisions and to deal with the consequences that unfold. For Isbister, this capacity unlocks a set of affordances to generate emotion. "Ultimately, these possibilities exist because our feelings in everyday life, as well as games, are integrally tied to our goals, our decisions, and their consequences" (p. 2).

Isbister's second defining quality of games is flow, the state of mind theorized by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and applied to the video game design context by game designer Jenova Chen. Flow "represents the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfillment,"[15] and is prompted by activities in which challenges are adequately balanced with the ability of the performer. According to this framework, if the challenge is too far beyond the player's ability, the activity becomes overwhelming and generates anxiety. On the other hand, if the challenge fails to engage the player, he or she quickly loses interest. When finding the balance, players enter a "zone" of optimal experience in which they experience a deep sense of immersion and pleasure.

While Isbister's insights are indeed useful for understanding how games "move us," arguably a necessary condition for triggering emotional empathy, her focus remains on gaming mechanics, and she pays little attention to the narrative dimension of games. From this perspective, Gerrid[16] presents two useful metaphors to characterize these types of engagement: the reader or interactor as being "transported" to narrative worlds and as a participant of the experience as a performer. By being transported, the metaphor emphasizes the kind of experience described as becoming "lost in a book," deeply immersed in the story, even when it is delivered in plain text. While Gerrid focuses mostly on written text, the processes he describes are relevant to any other form of immersive narrative engagement, such as movies, television shows, representational artworks, and indeed video games. In all these forms, the author points out similar core processes of narrative immersion. However, he also warns that narrative worlds are not always successful in generating this sort of experience or work in the same way with all audiences. In his words, "a text cannot force a reader to experience a narrative world."[17] Even carefully constructed narrative worlds can fail to produce the active participatory engagement characterized as transportation.

The second metaphor proposed by Gerrid is that of the reader acting as a performer. Here, he describes their engagement as an exercise akin to actors putting

15 Chen, Jenova. "Flow in Games (and Everything Else)." *Viewpoint* 50, no. 4 (2007), 31.
16 Richard Gerrid, Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
17 Gerrid, Experiencing Narrative Worlds, 5.

into effect their skills to interpret other human lives. While performing, actors "must use their own experiences of the world to bridge gaps in texts. They must bring both facts and emotions to bear on the construction of the world of the text."[18] This process can be thought to operate differently in games compared to non-interactive narratives. In this regard, the literature on character identification brings valuable perspectives. Generally, a distinction is made between dyadic and monadic patterns of identification. In the former case, readers keep themselves psychologically distant from characters, acting as witnesses, observers, or evaluators, while in the latter, they imagine themselves *being* the characters, adopting the fictional identities described in the texts.[19] This form of identification does not stay stable, however, and is the product of an active process of distance management on the part of players, who deliberately expend effort to either come closer or remain distant from characters, even when performing actions through their avatars.

To summarize, games can be an advantageous medium for triggering emotion and empathy. By providing players with meaningful and interesting choices while dealing both cognitively and emotionally with their consequences, games can elicit players' feelings of guilt, potentially increasing their sensitivity to moral issues.[20] Moreover, these emotions become magnified by the capacity of the medium to "transport" players into narrative worlds, which they inhabit through their avatars.[21] While narrative immersion varies between players and is subjected to an active process of distance management, this feature of games may support the production of cognitive and emotional empathy. In the next section, we will center the discussion on the Valhalla Discovery Tour, analyzing how the newly-introduced mission quest system drives players to connect empathetically with Viking and Anglo-Saxon characters. For this purpose, we will closely examine how these systems are designed, analyzing them critically from an educational and design perspective.

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18 Gerrid, Experiencing Narrative Worlds, 10.

19 Christoph Klimmt, Dorothée Hefner, and Peter Vorderer, "The Video Game Experience as 'True' Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception," *Communication Theory* 19, no. 4 (2009), 351–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2009.01347.x.

20 Matthew Grizzard, Ron Tamborini, Robert Lewis, Lu Wang, and Sujay Prabhu, "Being bad in a video game can make us more morally sensitive," *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking* 17, no. 8 (2014), 499–504. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2013.0658.

21 Chad Mahood and Michael Hanus, "Role-playing video games and emotion: How transportation into the narrative mediates the relationship between immoral actions and feelings of guilt," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 6, no. 1 (2017), 61–73. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000084.

4 Historical Empathy in the AC Valhalla Discovery Tour

Through the new quest system added to the Viking Age Discovery Tour experience, players are presented with the opportunity to role-play a set of historical characters. As Durand[22] explains, the selection of which characters to include was a process where an initial list of more than twenty-eight characters was reduced to just a few: a family of Viking merchants making their way from Scandinavia to Britain, an Anglo-Saxon monk forced to move after a Viking raid, and Alfred the Great in his struggles to defend Wessex and consolidate the English Kingdom. Although markedly different in terms of the characters' motivations and cultural backgrounds, all the storylines coincide in that they present players with a conflictive situation that they are required to solve.

The design of the learning experience therefore hinges on the characters' conflicts. As Lankoski and Heliö explain: "In the center there are the needs of the characters. Their conflicting interests are the basis of action; there can be no game without conflict."[23] In my view, in order to be used productively in education, the design of these conflicts requires compliance with two important goals: First, they need to connect with students' knowledge and personal experiences so that the conflict "makes sense" and motivates them to take action, and second, they need to provide opportunities for enhancing their previous understanding with substantive and disciplinary knowledge. This is better explained through the concrete example of Ealric, the Anglo-Saxon monk, in one of the first quests. While playing this character, a fellow monk falls ill with a mysterious disease. The conflict is set from the very human and arguably universal motivation of helping other people in trouble, leading to a sequence of actions in which medieval science and religion become available for exploration.

Ealric's efforts to help a fellow monk serve as a good example of how by driving students to engage with the experience personally, the game makes a deliberate effort to trigger emotional empathy. While we can undoubtedly defend this goal as a primary and necessary component in any drama, can we also justify it as part of a historical learning experience? For some scholars, emotion should not be regarded as part of historical understanding. Stuart Foster, for example, claims that historical inquiry "remains primary a cognitive, not an affective, act

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22 Maxime Durand. "Discovery Tour Viking Age Interview with Maxime Durand!," AC Landmarks, October 19, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qoRq4DacOk.

23 Petri Lankoski and Satu Heliö, "Approaches to Computer Game Design – Characters and Conflict," *CGDC Conference* Proceedings (2002), 315.

and one that is chiefly dependent upon knowledge, not feeling or imagination."[24] Similarly, Knight claims that "[o]bjective understanding is the goal, sympathizing with each and every character is not, for it would endanger that objectivity."[25] In contrast to these views, Barton and Levstik emphasize the need to drive students to care about historical matters. They write:

> Care is the motivating force behind nearly all historical research, and it shapes our interest in its products; we attend to books, articles, movies, documentaries, museums, and historic sites only because we care about what we find there. Careless history strikes us as a soulless enterprise, a constraint on motivation that warrants reconsideration of the subject's place in the curriculum.[26]

Ultimately, if the purpose is to engage with history in such a way that naive or stereotypical forms of understanding are challenged, students need to be exposed to situations in which they face cognitive disequilibrium and resolution.[27] This process, where pre-existing forms of knowledge are restructured or "accommodated," relies on learners becoming sensitive to the new material. Students are required to "dive in[to]" situations rather than look at them from a distance.[28] In the view of Belman and Flanagan,[29] if games are not required to significantly challenge previous forms of understanding, a short burst of emotional empathy would generally work well; however, if these shifts are a design goal, the gaming experience should integrate both cognitive and emotional empathy.

Emotional empathy can thus be considered to be an important part of historical learning and is a type of engagement triggered by conflictive situations in which previous forms of understanding are challenged. From this perspective, VDT mission quests do a good job of providing a well-structured background to immerse players in the nuances of the medieval world. Despite the definite improvement from the previous Discovery Tour experiences, some possible paths for improvement pointed out.

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24 Stuart Foster, "Historical Empathy in Theory and Practice: Some Final Thoughts," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, eds. Ozro Davis, Elizabeth Yeager, and Stuart Foster (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 167–181.
25 Peter Knight, "Empathy: Concept, Confusion and Consequences in a National Curriculum," *Oxford Review of Education*, 15, no. 1 (1989), 42.
26 Barton and Levstick, Teaching History For The Common Good, 228.
27 Richard Van Eck, "Digital Game Based Learning: It's Not Just the Digital Natives Who Are Restless," *EDUCAUSE Review* 41, no. 2 (2006), 16.
28 Edith Ackerman, "Perspective-Taking and Object Construction: Two Keys to Learning," in *Constuctionism in Practice: Designing, Thinking, and Learning in a Digital World*, eds. Yasmin Kafai and Mitchel Resnick (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 25–37.
29 Belman and Flanagan, "Designing Games to Foster Empathy," 5–15.

I will begin this critical review with the quest's linearity. Presently, the gameplay is limited to only one course of action: the player finishing one task cannot unlock the next until the quest ends. When alternative options are presented, they do not deviate from the quest storyline, no matter which option is chosen. We must acknowledge that this was possibly implemented in this way because of budgetary constraints; however, there is reason to propose adding "interesting choices" to the quests. By having different outcomes or endings emerging from player decisions, the system would become a counterfactual historical device and a way of proposing challenging historical dilemmas. What possible options did the historical King Alfred the Great have at his disposal for securing the approval of the Witan to build fortifications (burghs) to defend Wessex and Mercia from the Danes? While in the VDT quest, the king does this by adding Bishop Denewulf's influence to his side, other options could have been presented, thereby opening up a debate on their possible consequences. The simplified ending of this quest follows on from the historical assumption that King Alfred saw members of the Witan more as names that could be manipulated than as counselors from whom he could seek advice on important matters. Contrary to this view, historical scholarship shows that at least some of these men held a position of trust and honor and assisted the monarch with the government of the kingdom.[30]

The second line of criticism refers to the capacity of the quest system to promote players' identification with the game's characters. As discussed in the previous section, while in non-participative forms of historical mediation readers tend to follow the characters' story arcs from a distant perspective, in video games, players are more naturally driven to act as performers, adopting a much more intimate stance toward their roles and motivations. Let us suppose that the goal of a game is to promote a closer degree of character identification. In this case, characters need to be developed to motivate players to be their avatars. To this end, the characters' personality and background story must be presented with enough depth for players to care about them. In this sense, my contention with VDT quests is that the amount of narrative background offered for each character is not nearly enough to spark an adequate level of identification. With a very brief introduction at the beginning of the quest, the game simply does not provide enough motivation to care and empathize with the characters' conflicts. This could be resolved in classrooms by complementing the game with other media components, such as richer character backgrounds delivered by text or a graphic novel.

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30 Alfred Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198229896.001.0001.

Finally, I would like to look at the social interactions represented in the game. While the game does not give players the freedom to choose which characters to play while following the game memories, different characters are enacted at some points in the quests. For example, while playing the memories of the Viking traders Thorsteinn and his wife Gunnhilda, the game switches between the characters to bring the genre imbalances in Viking society to the fore (for example, women should not ride horses or be part of a longship crew). However, the relationship between both characters is maintained as an idealized representation of a husband-wife relationship, with both characters sharing equal weight on critical decisions. While written sources portray Viking Age women as independent and possessing more rights than elsewhere in the same period, they were still not allowed to hold political power, appear in court, or receive a share of a man's inheritance. Furthermore, studies show that normative practices of polygyny and concubinage were common, legitimizing behaviors that reinforced male domination and power.[31]

Following this argument, representations of social relations could be developed further, introducing elements from other commercial titles with narratives centered on character relations. As an illustration, we might refer to the game God of War, which focuses on Greek mythology. In the last game of the series, the narrative of the game shifts from a single-player story of rage and revenge in previous releases to that of a father and son. As the game progresses, the player engages with and participates in the evolving relationship between the two characters, empathizing with their story both cognitively and emotionally. The game director Cory Barlog explains how they seek to align the game's sense of progression with the emotional connection emerging between the characters:

> I try to lean into it as much as possible to make sure that we are mechanically and narratively aligned. [. . .] The relationship between these two characters, it's the way you get to see it change from the beginning to the end. The way you participated and kind of guided him. By the end, the kid's not a burden; when he gets better, you feel responsible for that. In other games, you feel like all you're doing is upgrading. In this one, I feel like you're proud of the kid.[32]

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31 Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, "Polygyny, Concubinage, and the Social Lives of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13, no. 2017 (2017), 165–209. https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1429969/FULLTEXT01.pdf.
32 Cory Barlog, interview by Mike Williams, In God of War, Your Sense of Progression Is Measured by Being Proud of Your Son, usgamer.net, 2017. https://www.vg247.com/in-god-of-war-your-sense-of-progression-is-measured-by-being-proud-of-your-son.

This kind of story opens up possibilities to explore more complex social dynamics in a way that immerses them and motivates them to care about their fates.

5 Historical Game Empathy Model

In this final section, I intend to outline a historical empathy model for using VDT in history classrooms. I will rely on existing instructional models as referents, adapting them to best use the game's affordances. The first model I would like to refer to is the one proposed by Endacott and Brooks,[33] which is aligned with conceptualizations of historical empathy as a cognitive-affective construct with both dimensions acting interdependently. The authors emphasize the need for a structured process to help students understand the social, political, and cultural context and connect cognitively and affectively with the people's lived experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. The second model I will refer to is Colby's historical inquiry narrative model, which was designed to facilitate students' historical understanding by developing their historical thinking, historical empathy, discipline enquiry, and narrative analysis skills.[34] This model works through a cycle of well-defined steps to guide students from an introductory understanding of the historical contexts in which people lived to the development of informed philosophical and argumentative reflections about their experiences.

Generally, both models share a similar underlying structure and emphasis, despite differing in the number of phases and proposed activities. Both begin with an introductory phase in which contextual information about the historical period, characters, and events is studied. This is followed by an investigation phase, in which relevant primary and secondary sources are selected and analyzed. In the next step, students engage in a production phase, during which they are asked to communicate their findings and arguments in the form of historical representation. Finally, there is a reflection phase, when students are expected to make connections between past and present while also pondering how their views have changed or have been impacted by the learning experience. I will now propose ways in which VDT can be used within this general framework to engage students empathetically with the Viking age.

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33 Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, "An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8 (2013), 41–58.
34 Sherry Colby, "Energizing the History Classroom: Historical Narrative Inquiry and Historical Empathy," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 3, no. 3 (November 2008), 60–79.

Contextual Introduction

The aim of this phase is to make students excited about the Viking world, providing them with the contextual knowledge required to immerse them and let them understand this period. While VDT is an engaging way of connecting with historical events, characters, and material culture, students should also be encouraged to play the game critically and should be supplied with multiple opportunities to develop foundational skills in procedural knowledge and historical narrative analysis. For this purpose, they should be exposed to alternative accounts and interpretations, while also being encouraged to test the authenticity of the game stories, posing questions and critically assessing the game's historical representations. As discussed previously, identifying with the characters plays an important role in empathizing with their storylines. This goal can be enhanced with improved background information so as to gain a better understanding of their conflicts and dilemmas, for example what motivated characters to take the courses of action represented in the game and what options they had. In addition to this type of question, students can be asked to reflect on their personal standings on these conflicts, what they would have done in a similar situation. When answering this question, students should be pushed to identify and reflect on their personal biases, mapping their conceptions, values, and beliefs in relation to the characters presented in the game.

Investigation

In this phase, students review and analyze primary and secondary historical sources with the aim of answering the questions posed in the previous step. Critically, students should be provided with a wide array of sources depicting different perspectives.[35] VDT provides a good starting point with a series of "behind the scenes" entry points scattered in the game's environment, where students can peek into the historical sources consulted by developers and follow their decisions to produce the game world and narratives.

This is a useful resource for gaining an awareness of the competing interpretations and historical debates that guide the development of the game's storylines. A good illustration of this takes place in the fourth chapter – "Into the West" – in which the Viking couple Thorstein and Gunnhilda prepare to sail on an expedition to England. As Gunnhilda attempts to convince villagers to join the crew, she

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35 Colby, "Energizing the History Classroom."

is interrogated about their reasons for leaving Norway. At this point, players can choose from two possible pre-scripted answers: because of the weather, which does not allow for sustainable farming; or due to overpopulation, which has left no land for everybody to make a living. Like other instances of dialogue throughout the game, these options reflect ongoing historical debates, opening up opportunities for further investigation and discussion.

Production

In this phase, students demonstrate the understanding they gained from the previous activities by applying it to a novel form of historical representation. While the chosen representations can range from common coursework materials such as essays and keynotes to artistic representations and multimedia, the game itself offers interesting opportunities for historical production. Although the Assassin's Creed series does not come out of the box with tools for modifying or extending the game's environments and narratives, students can nevertheless be encouraged to act as game designers, proposing changes to the game's missions or developing new game experiences. In the course of this, a range of pre-production material can be developed, including written narratives, storyboards, dialogues, game maps and new characters, among other things. The testing and iterative development of these materials can be organized in participatory theatrical performances during which the students designing the experience involve others in playtesting the scenes.

Reflection

In this final phase, students are invited to reflect on their learning experience, revisiting and reformulating their notions about the past. During this process, they should be driven to use their empathic understanding to draw connections between the past and the present, distinguishing elements of historical change from the backdrop of continuity. They should also be encouraged to reflect on how their views have changed with this process and recognize their previous naive assumptions and personal biases. Finally, they will use this last phase to plan for future investigation, outlining the areas they would like to revisit in further depth.

6 Conclusion

Assassin's Creed Valhalla's newly-introduced mission quests utilize narrative conflicts to establish empathic connections between players and historical characters. This engagement creates new opportunities for learning in the classroom, potentially leading to a better understanding of the everyday lives, problems, beliefs, and motivations of people from the past. Looking at the world in which they lived from their unique perspectives has the potential to unlock more sophisticated levels of historical understanding, moving away from simplistic, stereotypical explanations of why people acted the way they did in the past. To be effective, this experience must engage learners cognitively and emotionally, driving them to care about the characters and their stories. This critical part of the learning experience in VDT could be enhanced by a better introduction of the characters' background stories, the presentation of alternative courses of action, and a more nuanced representation of social relations. These aspects can be developed further in the classroom by a structured process guiding students to use the game as a historical document and research space. For this purpose, I have outlined a sequential model to use VDT in history classrooms, relying on the game's characters and narratives to gain a more nuanced and empathic understanding of the past.

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