

A Messy Endeavour: Unravelling English Students' Experiences of Ludonarrative Empathy

Gerard Altura

The University of Sydney
Sydney Games and Play Lab
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia

gerard.altura@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

Videogames, ludonarratives, empathy, digital game-based learning, *A Short Hike*, *FAR: Lone Sails*

INTRODUCTION

There are countless varied experiences of empathy that players can have through videogames, especially of those that involve storytelling. In these digital experiences, what is necessary is a form of 'bridging' through imagination, where instead of a videogame acting as an 'empathy machine', there is a clear awareness of an 'Other' and understanding of experiencing a game-world through that point-of-view (Andrejevic & Volcic, 2020; Carter & Eglinton, 2024). Compared to print texts, videogames involve participatory forms of textual imagination, making them distinct from traditional literary forms such as the novel or playscript. Keen (2007) explored *narrative empathy* as a phenomenon of readers experiencing empathy through its representations in literary fiction. However, videogames exist as procedural systems where meaning can be interpreted through both their gameplay and story elements within the player's surrounding cultural context and so are called *ludonarratives* (Ajoranta, 2015). Thus, experiences of player-empathy through videogames can not only just occur through controlling the player-character, but the player-character's perspective of others, with non-playable characters themselves, and in dynamic interpretations players can conjure. In this way, videogames are distinct from other forms of storytelling, involving a participatory form of narrative empathy which can be called *ludonarrative empathy*.

If there is propensity for engaging with empathy in multiple and varied ways as players, what are the potentialities for this within education? The classroom provides a stage or context for which to explore empathy with games. Prior research has highlighted positive impacts with the study of ludonarratives as texts in literacy engagement and learning (e.g., Altura & Curwood, 2015; Bacalja & Nash, 2023; Gee 2007). Whilst there have been previous empirical studies that note the presence of empathic interactions with ludonarratives (Ehret et al., 2022; Theodoulou & Curwood, 2023) what is yet to be detailed are the empathic connections existing within and between ludonarratives, student-players, teachers, play-incorporated pedagogy within a classroom context. Through a sociocultural and postdigital lens, the aim of this paper involves exploring how empathic engagement occurs in high school English, whilst critically examining engaging empathy for educational purposes. Empathy is part of human lived experience, however, there is risk of it

being geared toward outcome and reward. By examining and exploring ludonarrative empathy in the classroom, we can understand how these dynamic interpretations and experiences of empathy emerge.

A key problem that emerges out of exploring ludonarrative empathy within educational environments is the tension between empathy as a developmental outcome and as an ordinary process. Experiencing empathy through literature in English can be messy (Horton, 2024). Experiencing and especially moralising empathy through textual study of videogames can be even messier. This paper seeks to untangle these empathic representations and connections that form through case study methodology of English classrooms engaging with commercially available videogames. In doing so, theoretical understanding of empathy through videogames can be advanced, which in turn can assist critical pedagogies of videogame use in education.

Two independent Sydney metropolitan secondary schools were recruited to explore separate case studies of English classrooms using games as texts for study. Teacher-participants in each school worked with the researcher in collaborative planning to integrate a videogame into an existing learning program. Games were chosen for study based on their appropriateness for Years 7 and 9 English, seeking: accessible themes and gameplay, short time to complete, and relevance to existing programs. These include open-world adventure game *A Short Hike* (2019) by Adam Robinson-Yu and side-scrolling adventure game *FAR: Lone Sails* (2018) by Okomotive. Teachers were provided resources such as textual information, as well as teaching strategies to consider, discuss, and implement according to their needs. Both teacher and student participants were interviewed before and after classes, and lessons involving videogames were observed. Semi-structured interview questions focused on empathic interactions with videogames and critical perspectives of empathy with videogames as texts. Following interview and observation data collection, thematic analysis was used to examine emergent themes and concepts.

In this presentation, I will detail the student experiences of ludonarrative empathy as they conceptually engaged with and played videogames in the classroom itself. This involves their experiences of engaging with the game before, during, and after explicit use of the game within lesson time. Emergent themes involve students engaging with empathy independently, engagement with empathy initiated by classroom learning, and non-engagement with empathy despite opportunity. Videogames are found to be culturally significant and hold literary and personal value within the eyes of the participants. However, there exists pedagogical, structural and curricular constraints which act as barriers for ludonarrative empathy. These findings suggest that ludonarrative empathy is not merely autonomic, nor can it be taken for granted; it is contingent on the individual player, framing, process and context within which it emerges when playing videogames.

BIO

Gerard Altura is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, researching empathy and pedagogical use of videogames in secondary education. After writing his honours thesis on videogames as cultural texts within Australian classroom contexts, he taught junior and senior English in Western Sydney high schools.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship through the University of Sydney.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altura, G. J., & Curwood, J. S. (2015). Hitting restart: Learning and gaming in an Australian classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(1), 25-27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.438>

Andrejevic, M., & Volcic, Z. (2020). Virtual empathy. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 13(3), 295–310. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz035>

Arjoranta, J. (2015). *Real-time hermeneutics: Meaning-making in ludonarrative digital games* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Jyväskylä). Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities, 250. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-6164-0>

Bacalja, A., & Nash, B. L. (2023). Playful literacies and pedagogical priorities: Digital games in the English classroom. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 22(4), 447-461. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-01-2023-0002>

Carter, M., & Eglinton, B. (2024). *Fantasies of virtual reality: Untangling fiction, fact, and threat*. MIT Press.

Ehret, C., Mannard, E., & Curwood, J. S. (2022). How young adult videogames materialize senses of self through ludonarrative affects: Understanding identity and embodiment through sociomaterial analysis. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 47(3), 341-354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2066125>

Gee, J. P. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Horton, A. (2024). ‘Empathy is a Better Emotion’: The Trouble with Empathy in High Stakes English Classrooms. *Changing English*, 31(3), 291-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2372859>

Keen, S. (2007). *Empathy and the novel*. Oxford University Press.

Okomotive. (2018). *FAR: lone sails*. [Video game]. Mixtvision.

Robinson-Yu, A. (2019). *A short hike*. [Video game]. Humble Bundle.

Theodoulou, J., & Curwood, J. S. (2023). Play the game, live the story: pushing narrative boundaries with young adult videogames. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 22(2), 234-246. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-08-2022-0105>