

Chapter 16

Using Mission US: For Crown or Colony? to Develop Historical Empathy and Nurture Ethical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors describe Mission US: For Crown or Colony?, a history game for middle school students that they collaboratively designed, developed and tested. The authors argue that empathy is an important component of ethical thinking, and that history games, if well designed, can support the practice of empathy. The authors analyze how they designed Mission US to encourage the development of historical empathy and ethical thinking skills. Moreover, the authors also relate their design challenges, and the ethics of representing the past in games. They conclude with real world results from classroom implementation of the game, and design recommendations for creating games for historical empathy.

INTRODUCTION

How can we use games to foster the development of ethical reasoning skills and encourage citizenship? Ethical thinking and reasoning—the ability to analyze, assess and reflect on our decisions and actions, and understand the consequences and complexities of social issues—is essential to navigating

our globally interconnected, rapidly evolving world. We need to be able to successfully understand others' perspectives—whether locally or internationally—to properly place ourselves in their unique contexts and be able to judge their actions, build relationships with them, and interact appropriately. Therefore, it is important to understand how we can better support the learning and practice of these skills in educational environments.

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In this chapter, we argue that one critical aspect of ethical thinking is the ability to empathize, or to understand another individual or group's feelings and perspectives and employ another's frame of reference. Within primary school curricula, the development of empathy is often pursued through studying drama and literature, where students explore other's internal states of mind, character motivation, and points of view (Greene, 1995; Verducci, 2000). But history and social studies classes are also areas in which students can develop and practice the skills associated with empathy and moral reasoning. History as a discipline requires the practitioner to take on the perspectives of those who lived in the past, and try to recreate and reinterpret what happened in the past (Schrier, 2006, Lee, 1983; Seixas, 1996). This involves being able to put oneself in someone else's historical shoes, and understand their frame of reference and analyze their point of view accordingly. Achieving historical empathy includes understanding the actions of those who lived in the past given the historical context in which they lived. That is, when possible, judging past actions without imposing present cultural norms and mores or assuming those in the past were somehow less developed or less rational than those who exist in the present.

We contend that historical empathy involves a similar subset of skills that relate to and inspire ethical reasoning and thinking, and that the history classroom is a worthy site for the practice of these skills. While there is more to moral reasoning and ethical behavior than understanding others' points of view and the context in which they develop, its development seems unlikely without them (Hoffman, 1976, 2001). We believe that these skills can transfer to other areas of students' lives—namely, in arenas in which they must contemplate others' feelings and points of view—and that the practice of historical empathy in school should be an important objective in promoting ethical thinking (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton & Levstik, 2004) in schools.

This chapter presents a case study of the design and implementation of *Mission US: For Crown or Colony?*, a history video game for middle school students, and its potential for enabling the practice of historical empathy in middle school social studies classes. We begin by first explicating the relationship between ethics and empathy, and the importance of ethical thinking in citizenship and civic engagement. Next, we show how games might be particularly compelling ways to enable the practice of empathy and ethical thinking. The following section of the chapter reviews in detail our design decisions surrounding *Mission US*, specifically focusing on how we supported historical empathy, as well as the limits of designing for empathy. As part of this, we take a step back from our game's design, and analyze the limits and implications of representing the past within a video game, and how choices about representing the past in a game can reveal our own ethical assumptions and beliefs. By studying how history is represented in media such as games, and making transparent our game design decisions, we can better understand the ethical implications of our creations, and become better able to reflect on our own ethics. In other words, the very act of designing a game can itself support the practice of ethical thinking and reflection skills. Finally, we include recommendations for the future development and research of games that support ethical reflection and historical empathy.

Defining Ethics and its Role in Citizenship

Ethics, in general, is the practice of enacting choices and moral judgment to achieve the life of a good human being (Sicart, 2005)—that is, the process of making choices according to one's own conception of how to be a "good" person. This includes diverse, complex skills such as reflection and metacognition; decision-making and information management; evaluation and analysis; an understanding of systems, social behavior and

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