

# Connecting Levels of Experiences with the WW1 Video Game Valiant Hearts: Reception and Sentiment Analysis from Auto-ethnography to Distant Reading of YouTube Comments

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This paper endeavors to explore a mixed method approach that combines three different types of data on the analysis of people's experiences with and reception of the video game Valiant Hearts, set in the First World War. These are the auto-ethnographical analysis, close reading of paratextually related (Švelch 2020) Let's Play videos,<sup>1</sup> and finally, distant reading of comments under these videos. Each of these levels presents a specific value but also limitations. The auto-ethnographic approach can be considered the richest when it comes to understanding the context of the analyzed experience. Being a complete member researcher (as used by (Anderson and Austin 2012) originally defined by (Adler and Adler 1987)) one has the most complete understanding of the individual case of connection with the cultural object. It however is the least representative, as it is based on a reflected but still only the experience of a single person. On the other hand, tens of thousands of comments provide a much broader pool of perspectives. These are however only available through very limited and context-poor traces consisting of often only a few sentences. The close reading of Let's Play videos lies somewhere in between these extremes when it comes to both of these characteristics.

The paper aims to show how these approaches, ranging from the micro to the macro level, can be used in a complementary way — creating a coherent insight into the complex phenomenon of how people interact with the medium of historical video games. Specifically, it demonstrates how we can observe the importance of the emotional side of the interaction and overall experience that can be confirmed across all the levels of analysis. This is done by examining three separate parts of the game and corresponding areas of the player reception-experience process. Looking first at how the video game manages to remain a pleasant, enjoyable experience which provokes positive emotions while tackling a very gruesome subject of the First World War. Valiant Hearts is a noteworthy case for the anti-war framing and fairly brutal representation of the impact on both combatants and civilians. The second area that is explored is the historicizing ambition of the game, how it successfully presents itself as a legitimate source of historical knowledge — whose history and of what kind. Thirdly the ending of the game with narrative and emotional climax is centered as the key moment of the game. Here, people who interact with the game process their overall experience and establish the framing of the WW1 they take away from it.

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<sup>1</sup> A popular genre of online videos where people record themselves playing and commenting on video games.

It is important to keep in mind that any data regarding the reception of any medium can never provide direct access to this process. Still, the paper argues that these indirect types of data (with all their issues related to limited representativity, biased samples, and the performative nature of Let's Play videos (Nguyen 2016) ) provide a valuable way for better understanding how people interact with complex pop culture media representations of the past video games or other ones. The second aim of the paper is to show that Digital Humanities (distant reading) analysis and data do not have to be isolated and can be connected to other non-Digital Humanities analytical approaches in a way that is meaningful and mutually enriching. The complex nature of historical video games as cultural artifacts and the processes of negotiating their consumption are particularly inviting to be analyzed with the use of this multiscale approach.

The specific case study of the video game *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) has been chosen because it can be considered a commercially successful and overall impactful WW1 video game title (Hartman, Tulloch and Young 2021). The quite uniquely rich Let's Play video culture around it in various language contexts makes it a suitable candidate with a big enough data set of comments under these YouTube videos, which can be scraped and examined through sentiment analysis using the VADER (*Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner*) tool (Hutto and Gilbert 2014). The case study is part of a greater research project of the author's dissertation thesis, which deals with multiple case studies of video games of multiple genres. The submission is a work-in-progress in the phase of working out and finalizing how to exactly link the different levels of analysis in the most optimal way.

The ambition of this contribution is to not limit the analysis to the usually most readily available and least difficult to process, English language data, which, while being very important on its own, does not present a comprehensive perspective on the diversity of people's interaction with the video game medium. For this reason, both the close and distant reading analysis also deal with material in French and German (from the 4 most significant channels for each of the two languages, over 140k comments in total across all three languages). The auto-ethnographic level of analysis provides another, specifically Czech language and culture context, which brings a non-Western, if still a European, perspective. In this way, the contribution, unfortunately, remains quite heavily biased with the focus and predominantly European and overall English-speaking audiences at large.

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