Empathy in the Context of Video Games and Condolence Letters

Melina Renzelberg s2480123

Bachelor Psychology

Conflict, Risk & Safety 202000377

Dr. M. A. Friehs

M. J. M. Haandrikman

University of Twente

APA 7th Edition

26th June 2023

Word count: 9529

Abstract

This research investigates how empathy influences the writing of a condolence letter and compares the results to real life contemporary condolence letters, and letters written in the video game Radio General 1. All of which were written in the context of informing the families of fallen soldiers in World War 2. Participants filled out an online survey with three questionnaires, then they were given the context of World War 2 in a scenario and asked to write a letter to the family of a deceased soldier. A final sample of 56 participants was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, by coding the letters, evaluating the questionnaires, and analysing their correlations. 3020 Game letters from Radio General 1 were coded, and the percentages were compared to the survey percentages. Additionally, the contemporary letters were compared. This comparing of three data streams allowed for a better validity of the findings. The results only showed a significant correlation between emotional content and empathy. However, the comparison of extreme groups showed that the more empathetic individuals wrote more extensive and complex letters. The game letters, despite having more Meme/Insulting/Sarcastic content, showed similar trends. Also, the contemporary letters showed similarity to the survey letters. Overall, the connection between empathy, condolence letters, and video games should be further investigated, but this research reveals the presence of common themes in condolence letter writing, and it also offers first evidence for the validity of game-based analysis of empathy and condolence letter writing.

Keywords: Empathy, Video Games, Condolence Letters, World War 2

Contents

Introduction

Empathy

The death of a loved one is a highly emotionally distressing event that external parties should handle with care. Beneficial actions that can help someone with their grief are to be understanding or to connect with them, which are strongly related to empathy (Cacciatore et al., 2021). Empathy is the ability to understand and experience another person's emotions from one's own experiences or by imagining someone else's feelings (Cuff et al., 2014). This does not mean projecting feelings but rather recognising that the feelings of the other are unrelated to one's own (Cuff et al., 2014). It is a skill that can be acquired, and therefore people may have different empathic abilities (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). Also, individuals with higher empathy find it easier to connect with someone and communicate about their emotions and experiences (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). So, empathies characteristics of understanding and relating to others allow easier communication, making empathy a necessary aspect of adequate communication skills, whether verbal (Hardee, 2003; Kelley & Kelley, 2013; Maguire & Pitceathly, 2002) or written (Stepien & Baernstein, 2006).

Communication Skills

Effective communication skills and empathy are essential for meaningful human interaction. As social beings, humans rely on social abilities and interpersonal relationships to navigate daily life (Buys & Larson, 1979). These skills become particularly crucial when dealing with grief, a challenging emotional experience. Studies have shown that empathetic support and understanding from others are vital in helping individuals cope with grief and loss (Love, 2007). When grief is insufficiently addressed or inadequately handled, it can lead to a range of negative consequences. Symptoms associated with depression may arise, and individuals may have difficulties with sleeping, such as insomnia (Bylund-Grenklo et al., 2016).

Therefore, it is crucial to approach grief in a sensible and supportive way, and communication is integral to navigating grief effectively, because individuals can promote healthy coping strategies and strengthen interpersonal connections by developing empathetic and communicative skills. In summary, the importance of empathy and communication skills cannot be overstated. These abilities help to navigate grief, offer support to others in times of loss, and promote stronger relationships. In this context, a kind of communication that provides special insights into a person's demeanour, ideas, and emotional expression is letter writing.

Letter writing is a way to assess a person because it offers insight into mannerisms and thoughts (Nevala & Palander-Collin, 2005). Further, King (2012) showed that someone's personality traits could be assessed by inspecting the letters they wrote by focusing on preferred words and writing style. Additionally, the analysis of written text allows one to assess someone's emotional expression, as was done in the study by Polce-Lynch et al. (1998), who analysed written narratives. Hence, it is plausible to investigate whether a person's empathy also relates to how they write a letter, even more so when it is a condolence letter addressed to a grieving person, because grief, as aforementioned, should be handled with empathetic communication.

Writing letters is quite important in many situations, and one situation where letters about grief are very common is during war. Letters provide soldiers with comfort during times of combat, or the military needs to communicate information about the soldier's well-being. While today communication can also happen over mail or phone calls, letters may be less frequently used but are still a method of communication (Carter & Renshaw, 2016). Letters written during deployment can signify support, are used to distribute information, and convey emotions (Carter & Renshaw, 2016). Because of letters written during war usually being so rich in affectivity and empathic communication, especially with the added aspect of grief, this setting is sensible to explore how empathy and grief are correlated. Research including letters is often focused on letters written during wartime (See: Beasecker, 2020; Holmes, 2003), and

examining how empathy manifests itself in those letters, particularly in condolence letters from the front, helps illuminate the connection between empathy, communication, and the written word. That leads to the research question: *"Does the level of empathy as a Personality Factor influence the content or extent of the condolence letter written?"*

Video Games in Research

In addition, using video games as a research instrument might clarify how empathy and verbal communication styles are related. While video games have been increasingly implemented in research only recently (Halbrook et al., 2019; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2003), they offer many benefits for conducting research. Those benefits are the ability of video games to create an environment in which to conduct studies that would otherwise not be possible. An example of this is that of Piper et al. (2006), which describes how a computer game, a cooperative multiplayer tabletop game, was used to generate effective social skills in the target group of adolescents diagnosed with Asperger's. The mentioned study explores the mechanics of empathy and communication while showcasing the potential of video games for attaining desired results.

When researching in the context of war, a digital environment is safer and more accessible. In addition to the potential of video games to create safe environments to investigate topics that would usually be difficult to research, it is also necessary to look into how empathy can be explored with video games. To clarify why using video games as a research tool to study empathy and its effects makes sense, the relationship between video games and empathy is explored in the section after this.

Empathy and Video Games

To understand why video games are a suitable method for examining empathy it can be helpful to look at previous studies that showed the ability of video games to connect with it. An

example of a study that wanted to examine in how far games are able to encourage the desired behaviour of money donating is the research by Steinemann et al. (2015), who used the role-taking ability, which is closely linked to empathy, in the game *Dafur is Dying.* The results showed that playing the game encouraged donating money. An instance in which video games aimed to generate empathy is the study by Kors et al. (2016), in which Mixed-Reality was used to simulate a scenario in which the participants take the role of a refugee being smuggled in a truck to escape the war in their country. The results indicated that the game's immersive experience caused participants to empathise with the character they played.

Additionally, given that earlier examples have shown video games' capacity to generate and explore empathy, it is crucial to consider their potential for clarifying the intricate nature of the related topic of grief. Insights on how video games could assist with comprehending emotional understanding and coping mechanisms are gained by looking at the subject of grieving through the lens of video games. One example is the study by Nicolucci (2019), which gives insight into the potential of games and grief by analysing how grief is experienced in adolescence and if a game can influence this experience. The study showed the positive effect of games on cultivating healthy exploring and coping with grief. Another example is the work by Harrer and Schoenau-Fog (2015), who designed a game to portray real-life grief accurately. So, while the exploration of grief with the research medium of video games can still be broadened, there have already been instances in which video games were shown to be effective measures for researching topics as complex as grieving.

Empathy and Fictional Characters

Discussing fictional characters is also vital to understand how video games and empathy interact and, subsequently, why video games as a research method are suitable in this context. Not only understanding but also successfully using games for research benefits from comprehending how individuals relate to fictional characters because research shows that

people can feel empathy for fictional characters (Laffer, 2021). For instance, readers are said to talk about fictional characters as though they were real individuals. They tend to forgo the author's intent behind the character design and instead focus on whether they like a character, deciding based on social norms (Laffer, 2021). Additionally, empathy towards fictional characters in video games was also common and encouraged by game design (Jerrett et al., 2021). Jørgensen (2010) explains that developing empathy for a fictional character in video games depends on multiple factors, such as whether the character has depth and is interesting. Depth describes the diversity of the fictional character's mind and feelings, while interesting describes a distinctive, creative, and imaginative character. One way to achieve both is to create an intriguing backstory for the character (Jørgensen, 2010).

Further, related to empathy for fictional characters in video games is game immersion. This means that, depending on factors such as personality traits, a person may feel more or less as if they are part of the game environment, for example, that they are the character they play in a video game (Lukka, 2014). One key factor in immersion is empathy, as it allows a person to take the perspective of another (Lukka, 2014). A study by Ho and Ng (2020) also showed that perspective-taking indirectly increases an individual's immersion in a game or the degree to which they are transported into the fictional environment and, subsequently, their empathy towards fictional characters. Further, players not only view and take on the perspective of the characters, but they also have to act from that perspective within the game environment (Boltz et al., 2015). That way, the narratives of video games allow the perspective of the player and the perspective of the character they play to merge in a way that is unique to video games, consequently leading to emotional investment (Boltz et al., 2015). Empathy is an essential aspect of this because video games often point out overlapping characteristics between the player and the character played or featured, which promotes taking perspective and possibly results in affective responses (Boltz et al., 2015).

Empathy, and subsequently taking the perspective of fictional characters, is also connected to the identification with all humanity (Hamer et al., 2019). The identification with all humanity means that a person that is high in identification with all humanity feels strongly connected to other individuals around the world, view them as part of their ingroup, and cares for them (Hamer et al., 2019). Thus, it can be expected that individuals with high levels of identification with all of humanity are quicker to identify with fictional characters and empathise with them. One argument for that is that, as aforementioned, people tend to talk about fictional characters as if they were real individuals (Laffer, 2021), and video games can make the players' perspective and the perspective of the game character merge (Boltz et al., 2015). Beyond that, Gilbert (2021) conducted a study in which players of a video game that uses historical aspects reported that entirely fictional characters improved their connection "with the humanity of people in the past" (p.122). Specifically, the empathetic bonds to these characters often encouraged this (Gilbert, 2021). Therefore, fictional characters can be similarly identified with as actual people, and thus identification with all of humanity could also apply to fictional characters. So, one part of understanding empathy concerning video games and fictional characters is understanding a person's level of identification with all humanity.

This Research

Overall, empathy research can benefit from video games or video game scenarios. However, the implementation of video games is still relatively new and hence can benefit as well from further research, such as, how empathy as a personality factor influences player behaviour in a video game scenario.

A big part of previous research regarding empathy and communicative capacities is focused on medical settings such as doctor-patient communication (See: Evans et al., 2006; Hardee, 2003; Maguire & Pitceathly, 2002), so research in the direction of communicating with someone in grief, and precisely its empathetic aspect, helps to broaden the knowledge of

empathy and its effects. Further, letter writing is a good research tool for understanding and assessing a person's characteristics and emotional expression abilities. The findings also showed that letter writing in the setting of war is a context in which compassion and providing comfort are common. Also, letters written during war are often related to grief, for instance, due to the death of a soldier. So, this study makes use of a letter-writing task to assess empathy and communication and does so in a war setting.

The research is a way to expand on the existing research in the communication field concerning grief and its empathetic aspect. Additionally, it offers further research on video games, specifically in combination with empathy and letter-writing topics. An online survey will be conducted, which is computed of multiple-choice questionnaires to measure the level of empathy, a scenario depicting a situation with the potential to elicit empathy and a letter-writing task connected to this scenario. Also, this data will be compared to game data, namely qualitatively analysed in-game letters from Radio General 1. This will allow for two data streams to be compared, the obtrusive data from the questionnaire collected in a controlled environment and the unobtrusive data from the game, and hence an uncontrolled environment. Two hypotheses are formulated to answer the research question: *"Does the level of empathy as a Personality Factor influence the content or extent of the condolence letter written?"*

Hypothesis 1

It is assumed that those with higher empathy will write lengthier letters because prior research has shown that those with higher empathy often show better communication, understanding, support, and effort (Martin & Hodgson, 2006; Slote, 2017). Therefore, the first hypothesis claims: *'People with higher empathy write longer letters than those with lower empathy.'*

Hypothesis 2

The communicative abilities of someone with high empathy also possibly influence how complex or detailed the letter's content is. According to Ioannidou and Konstantikaki (2008), high empathy is linked to powerful communication skills like emotional comprehension, the capacity to consider others' views, genuineness, self-exposure, and resolution. These communication abilities probably encourage those with high empathy levels to write more complex letters, explaining things in greater depth, giving more context, and demonstrating their comprehension of the other person's predicament. Furthermore, according to a study by Kelley and Kelley (2013), showing that one understands and empathises with the emotions of others is an effective way to demonstrate empathy. In order to show their sympathetic understanding in their letter writing, those with higher empathy levels are therefore more prone to use emotional terminology, adding to the letter's complexity. This also encompasses the abilities of compassion, sympathy, and pity, which entail emphasising similar experiences, expressing one's feelings on the circumstance, and expressing regret for the recipient's suffering (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). As a result, individuals are expected to utilise these emotion-focused communication abilities when they have greater empathy and formulate letters with more complex and extensive content. Thus, the second hypothesis states: *'People with higher empathy write letters with more complex and detailed content compared to those with lower empathy.'*

Methods

Design & Procedure

In order to investigate empathy in games, a combination of naturalistic and survey data was used, and thus this study consists of two different parts. The first part is an analysis of

letters written by players of the video game "Radio General 1", developed by "Foolish Mortals Games".

Survey Data

The second part of the study consists of a survey filled out online, so the participants could do it from anywhere. In the survey, participants are asked to give their consent (see Appendix B for the full form) and about their demographic data, namely their age, gender and nationality. Furthermore, the participants are asked about their level of English proficiency on a scale from A1 to native speaker, the amount of hours they play video games per week, their knowledge about the events of WWII on a scale of 1 to 10, and if they have played "Radio General 1" before.

The next part of the survey consists of two scales, the Toronto Empathy Scale in order to measure the participant´s level of empathy, and the Identification with all Humanity Scale in order to measure the participant´s identification with their own community, their nationality and all of humanity, respectively. Included at the end of the Toronto Empathy Scale was a question about the participants´ attention, where participants had to select the option "always" if they were still paying attention. Failure of this question led to exclusion from the study during data processing.

Next, the participants were asked to read a short narrative in which the role of a commander that has to command his troops in the fight against the Nazis is described. This narrative was written with the aim to make the participant feel immersed into the role and was designed so that the participant has a similar role to what a player experiences in "Radio General 1". The narrative can be found in Appendix C.

After the narrative, the participants were asked to close their eyes for 45 seconds and imagine themselves in the scenario. The actual time that participants took until they continued with the survey was timed by Qualtrics, so that it could be compared to the transportation score

and assessed for an effect. Then, the participants were led to the next scale, namely the Transportation Scale - Short Form, consisting of six items, in order to measure how much they actually felt transported into the narrative they just read. The Transportation Scale consists of two subscales. The first subscale entails the items one to four and focuses on the emotional and transportation into the narrative. The second subscale entails only items 5 and 6 and describes how much the participants could portray themselves in the characters of the narrative, namely the soldier(s) and the commander.

The last task of the survey is to write a letter to the family of the soldier "Sgt. Wilson" who has died under the participants´ command, following the events of the narrative. Similar to Radio General 1, the participants are free to choose the length and content of the letter they write.

Lastly, the participants could take part in a lottery by typing in their email-addresses in order to win one of the two games "Radio General 1" or "Kaiju Wars", both developed by Foolish Mortals Games. The free games were provided by the developer studio.

Survey Material

In order to be able to take part in the survey, participants need to have access to either a smartphone or a computer with a working internet connection. The survey was built using Qualtrics. The Toronto Empathy Scale was taken from Spreng et al. (2009). The Identification with all Humanity was taken from McFarland, Webb & Brown (2012), and the Transportation Scale - Short Form was taken from Appel et al. (2015). As for the letters from Radio General 1, players had to be in possession of a Windows computer or laptop and of the game itself.

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

To assess the participants level of empathy the self-report measurement *The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire* (TEQ) by Spreng et al. (2009) was chosen. It has 16 items, such as

"When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too", of which eight are reverse coded, for instance "Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal". Participants are asked to indicate how much they agree with those items by choosing a score on a 0-4-point Likert scale, ranging from Never (0) to Always (4), and the higher the score, the higher the participants empathy. The TEQ was chosen because of its psychometric qualities. The construct validity was examined by comparing the questionnaire with the Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) and the Autism Quotient (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), showing a positive correlation with the first $r = .80$, $p < .001$, and a negative correlation with the latter $r = -.33$, $p < .01$. Further, Item-remainder coefficients were analysed and found good with values ranging from .34 - .71, as well as a sufficient test re-test reliability of $r = .81$, $p < .001$. Further, the internal consistency is high with a Cronbach's alpha of .85 (Spreng et al., 2009). The questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Identification with all Humanity Questionnaire

In order to assess the participants identification, the identification with all humanity scale is used. The scale by McFarland, Webb & Brown (2012) was chosen. For this research the subscales bond, concern and pure are left out while the overall identification is measured. The Identification with All Humanity (IWAHS) scale consists of nine three-part items, in which participants are asked to reflect on the extent to which the item applies to people in their community, people of the same nationality and for all humankind. The identification with all humanity was adapted to refer to your nation instead of the Americans. For example, the first item reads, "How close do you feel to each of the following groups? a. People in my community; b. People with the same nationality c. people all over the world". The scale is using a 5-point likert scale, where the higher the score, the stronger sense of identification. The identification with the community items were found reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .87, similarly to the identification with nation items, with a Cronbach's alpha of .87. Further, the identification with

all humankind items were found reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. The questionnaire is listed in Appendix E.

Transportation Scale

In order to assess the participant´s transportation into the narrative, the Transportation Scale - Short Form by Appel et al. (2015) was chosen. It consists of six items, for example "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.", which are answered on a 5-point-Likert scale, and the higher the score is the more the participant felt transported to the narrative. The original scale does not differentiate between subscales, however, for this study the first four items were compiled as one subscale to analyse identification with the story itself, and the last two items as another subscale to analyse identification with the characters. The scale has a good test-retest reliability with an alpha ranging from .77 to .88. The TS-SF furthermore has good construct validity, showing correlations between the short form and long form of .93, $p < .001$ to .96, $p < .001$. A Cronbach's alpha of .80 to .84, respective to the condition, shows good internal consistency (Appel et al., 2015). The questionnaire is included in Appendix F.

Participants

Participants were acquired using mostly social networks such as Instagram and internet forums for players of Radio General 1. There were no requirements for taking part in the survey, other than being proficient in English and at least 18 years old.

Game Data

Radio General 1 is a real-time strategy game playable on a computer and set in a WWII scenario in which the player plays the role of a Canadian commander. The player has to command his forces through various battles of WWII by giving them orders (e.g., to attack,

retreat or move position) through a radio connection. Decisions made by the player lead to higher or lower casualties amongst his soldiers. After each battle, the player is asked to write a letter to the family of the deceased soldiers, although length and content of the letter are up to the player. The player can also decide not to write a letter. The developers of the game provided the research team with a total of 3020 of those letters written by players.

Coding

In order to find themes and topics the players write about and to establish a codebook for efficient analysis of the letters, the analysis incorporated deductive and inductive methods within an abductive system and was conducted in four phases. First, each of the three researchers read 100 letters by themselves and wrote down themes that were mentioned often in the letters in their own precursory codebook. Second, the researchers verbally discussed these themes, deciding which they agreed with and which overlapped, and came up with a first draft of the final codebook consisting of themes such as "Sorrow/Sadness", "Condolences" or "Type of death". Third, this first draft was then applied to 250 other letters to see how well it would work with the letters and each individuals coding style. It was coded by coding "1" if the specific theme emerged and "0" if it did not. After finishing this step, the researchers lastly discussed the results, determining the meaning of each code in specific terms and how they usually emerge. Further, some redundant codes were dropped, and missing codes were added. The results of this compile the final codebook which can be found in Appendix A. The total amount of letters was then divided among the researchers and coded according to the codebook. Each coder looked over 100 letters coded by both other researchers to ensure cohesive coding. Afterwards, single codes that were similar in their theme were put together in overarching categories which can also be found in the codebook. Distributions and total scores of the single codes and overarching themes were then computed.

Data Analysis

After data collection the data was cleaned. Specifically, participants that did not consent to the participation or did not consent to more than two of the specific consent questions, as well as those that did not fill out all three questionnaires included in this study were excluded. Further excluded were those that did not pass the attention question, those below the age of 18, and those who had an English Level of A, resulting in a sample of 78. Further, participants that did not write a letter, or that did not write in English, were sorted out leaving a data frame of 56.

After cleaning the data, all remaining letters written by the survey participants were coded according to the codebook. Furthermore, the means and total scores of the three scales and corresponding subscales were computed, and items were reversely scored if necessary. Next, correlation analyses between the demographic variables/other questions and the respective scales were conducted. In addition, correlations between the scales and subscales were computed in order to see if the possession of these traits influences each other. Lastly, the participants´ score on each scale was put in relation to their specific content and length of the letters and correlations were drawn between this.

The survey and in-game letters were compared both quantitatively and qualitatively. The prevalence of the overarching themes described in the codebook in both sets of letters was compared by computing their respective percentages. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of themes and topics that emerge in both sets of letters was conducted in order to establish if participants of the survey thematize other aspects than the players of Radio General 1.

Results

The data frame that was analysed consisted of 56 participants (M age = 23.57, SD = 5.72; M Hours per Week Playing Video Games = 12.68, SD = 16.80; M World War 2 Knowledge = 6.43, SD = 1.57; Females = 24, Males = 32, Non-binary = 0, Prefer not to say =

0; Played Radio General = Yes = 6, No = 50; English Level = B1 = 4, B2 = 14, C1 = 20, C2 = 11, Native Speaker = 7; Nationality = Canada = 4, France = 1, Germany = 24, Greece = 1, Italy = 2, Netherlands = 14, Poland = 1, Portugal = 1, Russian = 1, Singapore = 1, Spain = 4, Tunisia = 1, USA = 1).

Empathy Questionnaire

First the empathy questionnaire was examined, which showed a sufficient Cronbach's alpha of .77. The distribution of the sample's empathy scores is shown in Figure 1. Moreover, the mean is about 2.92 with an estimated standard deviation of .37, the correlation to the other scales, as well as the descriptive information for all scales can be seen in Table 1.

Figure 1

Distribution of the Empathy Scores
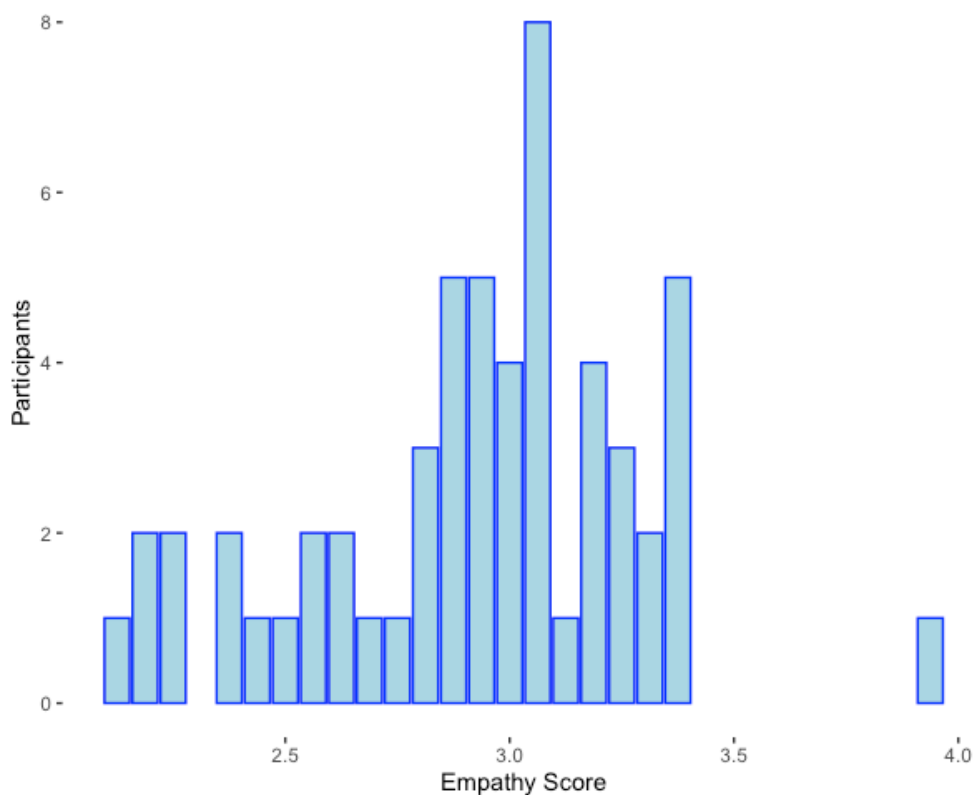
Note. The Figure shows the distribution of the empathy scores. The x-axis shows the score and the y-axis shows the count of how many participants received which score.

Table 1

Descriptive Data and Correlations.

	Mean	SD	2	3	4	5
1 TEQ	2.92	0.37	0.37**	0.42**	0.45***	0.52***
2 TS	3.83	0.83		0.10	0.35**	0.46***
3 IWAHS (C)	4.09	0.60			0.24	0.13
4 IWAHS (N)	2.98	0.68				0.73***
5 IWAHS (A)	2.83	0.72				

Note. Mean and Standard Deviation for all questionnaires; TEQ, TS, and the subscales of the IWAHS, Community, Nationality and All. Further, the correlations between the scales. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p > .001$

Comparing the empathy scores to the score from the other questionnaires, all show positive correlations, meaning that transportability, and also identification with one's community, nationality and also with all of humanity, are positively correlated with empathy. So, the change in one score, affects the score of the other factor. Empathy has the highest correlation with identification with all of humanity, and the least impact on transportability. There are no significant correlations between transportability and identification with community, identification with nationality and identification with nationality, as well as all of humanity. Further, Table 2 shows the correlations between the participants' empathy scores and the letter codes.

Table 2

Correlations between Empathy and Letter Scores

Letter Content	TEQ
1 Emotional Content	0.27*
2 Soldier Details	0.19
3 Purpose	0.07
4 Richness	0.24
5 Wordcount	0.23

6 Religion		0.05
7 Responsibility Player		-0.11
8 Responsibility Enemy/Germany		0.05
9 Military Jargon		0.08

Note. Correlations between empathy scores and the numeric letter scores Emotional Content, Soldier Details, Purpose, Richness of the letter, and Wordcount, as well as the binary letter scores Religion, Responsibility Player, Responsibility Enemy/Germany, and Military Jargon. Excluded are Meme/Insult/Sarcasm and Soldier Details, because there are not enough values to analyse. *p < .05

The only correlation with a significant *p*-value of .049 is the correlation between empathy and emotional content. Empathy has a positive influence of about .27 on writing emotional content, meaning that participants were slightly more likely to include emotional content in their letters the higher their level of empathy. Richness of the letter, so how many overall themes or codes were included, and the wordcount have *p*-values of respectively .07 and .09. The results of a linear regression with the dependent variable empathy and the predictors emotional content, richness, and wordcount can be seen in Table 3. Those predictors were chosen because of emotional content having a significant correlation, and the other predictors because their *p*-value had only been slightly above .05.

Table 3

Linear Regression Empathy Scale Versus Predictors EC, Richness and Wordcount

	B	SE	t	p
Intercepts	2.61	0.17	15.24	<.0001
1 EC	0.07	0.06	1.15	0.25
2 Richness	0.02	0.03	0.67	0.51
3 Wordcount	0.0004	0.001	0.30	0.76

Note. Linear Regression of the Empathy Scale versus predictors emotional content, richness, and wordcount. Included are the estimate (*B*), standard error (*SE*), *t*-value and the *p*-value. *R*-squared: 0.09 and Adjusted *R*-squared: 0.04 and *p*-value: 0.17.

Looking at the results of the regression, it shows that while the estimate of the empathy scale is highly significant, the predictors do not display significant or strong relationships with

empathy. In other words, although the entire model shows that the combination of predictors is highly related with empathy, when the predictors are looked at separately, they do not have a strong or statistically meaningful relationship with empathy. This implies that the individual contributions of each predictor variable are not as strong as the overall effect of the predictors, when considered together in the regression model. Specifically, emotional content, which had a significant relationship when analysed on its own, has become insignificant in this model, characterizing it as a suppressed variable. This is likely due to its statistically significant and rather high correlation with wordcount and richness both, leading to the correlation of emotional content to empathy being suppressed when all three are put in one multiple regression model. Therefore, a closer look will also be taken at the relationship of empathy and emotional content as the only predictor. Hence, Table 4 shows the linear regression of empathy as the dependent variable and emotional content as the predictor.

Table 4

Linear Regression Empathy Versus EC

	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Intercepts	2.72	0.11	25.13	<.0001
1 EC	0.10	0.05	2.02	0.0483

Note. Linear Regression of the dependent variable empathy versus the predictor emotional content. Included are the estimate (*B*), standard error (*SE)*, *t*-value and the *p*-value. *R*-squared: 0.07 and Adjusted *R*-squared: 0.05 and *p*-value: 0.0483.

The results show that not only the estimate of empathy is highly significant, but also the predictor emotional content has a significant relationship with the outcome variable. Further, the overall model is statistically significant. All in all, emotional content and empathy have a significant relationship, even if it is moderate.

Qualitative Analysis of Extreme Groups

One reason for the p-values being insignificant might be the sample size, which is why a qualitative analysis of extreme groups could allow for better insight. The highest empathy scores in this sample are 3.94 and 3.38, and the lowest scores are 2.13, 2.19, and 2.25. Five participants with the highest scores, and five with the lowest are picked out to analyse and compare their letters. These letters and their respective empathy scores are listed in Appendix G. The first thing that stands out is that the letters from individuals with higher empathy are on average longer than the ones from the extreme group with low empathy, which does imply that more empathy leads to writing longer letters. So, it can be assumed that despite the insignificant p-value of the correlation between wordcount and empathy there appears to be a connection. Another aspect that stands out is the way the letters of the high extreme group tend to address the relatives of the soldier, by for instance, showing understanding for how the family might feel about the news they are receiving. While this is also touched upon in the low extreme groups, it happens way more extensively in the higher empathy letters. For example, "If you wish to talk about Sgt. Wilson or you require assistance during your mourning period, I can refer you to your communal centre […]" (Appendix G) from the high empathy group. Also to be pointed out is the difference when describing the soldier. In the low empathy group only two letters mention positive traits of the soldier, such as "honorable" and "bravely" (Appendix G). In contrast the high empathy group not only mention positive attributes more often, but also tend to go into more detail when describing the soldier's relations to other soldiers, his family or even the writer themselves. Often it is mentioned that the soldier thought of his family, or that they could be proud of him, one instance is "He always talked about his family with pride and love." (Appendix G). These mentions seem to really emphasize the familial bonds between the soldier and his family and are missing in the lower group. Furthermore, the vocabulary used by the higher empathy group is stronger emotionally charged in comparison. For example, "bloody war", "outmost grief", "devastated" (Appendix G). Additionally, it can be seen in the

letters from the high extreme group that descriptive terms are used more often. The participants describe the soldier, the battle, their own grief or the grief of the family more detailed then the low extreme group, such as "it is with outmost grief […]. He served the army to his best abilities […] I hope that you can be proud of him, even in such difficult times." compared to the low group "We unfortunately have to inform you that your son Sgt. Wilson is fallen on battlefield. We share our deep compassion with your lost, […]" (Appendix G).

Radio General 1 Analysis

The data from Radio General 1 was also coded and analysed, showing that about 1170 people wrote letters, and each person wrote 2.64 on average, with 25 letters being the highest amount by a person. The code percentages in comparison to the survey letter code percentages can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Code Percentages for Survey and Game Letters

Codes	S	RG
1 Formal Components	98.21	42.32
2 Meme / Troll	1.79	17.15
3 Harsh / Insults	0	12.00
4 Sarcastic	0	4.64
5 Wordcount	*74.38*	*16.67*
6 Military Jargon	66.07	18.19
7 Sorrow / Sadness	62.50	27.53
8 Apology	55.40	20.88
9 Condolences	71.43	9.01
10 Aggressive	1.79	1.56
11 Religion	7.14	2.08
12 Responsibility Player	14.29	2.14
13 Responsibility Enemy/Germany	10.71	2.76
14 Responsibility Soldier	0	1.56

15 Soldier Details (Heroic Actions)	14.29	3.47
16 Positive Attributes	69.64	16.83
17 Location of Death / Battle	14.29	21.30
18 Type of Death	23.21	6.91
19 Soldier Name	87.50	36.09
20 Purpose / Sacrifice / Greater Good	23.21	7.10
21 For the Country	50.00	4.96
22 For the Fellow Soldiers	12.05	3.73
Overarching Categories		
23 Richness	100	68.28
24 Emotional Content	96.43	38.64
25 Soldier Details	94.64	36.85
26 Purpose	62.5	11.46
27 Meme / Insults / Sarcasm	1.79	22.19

Note. This table shows the percentages of the codes and overarching category codes from the survey letters (S) compared to the Radio General Game (RG) letters. The *wordcount* is indicated as a mean rather than a percentage. Percentages of overarching categories were calculated by counting if the subcodes were present, not by how often they were mentioned.

One of the aspects standing out is that the percentage of letters having content that is a meme or troll ("F"), harsh or insulting, or sarcastic ("your son is dead lol") is way higher than the survey letter percentile. Meme or troll content is below 2% in the survey letters, while close to 20% of the game letters show these contents. The other two codes are not included in the survey letters at all, while they are present in the game letters. About 12% of the game letters shows harsh or insulting elements ("We regret that I was not able to kill this son of a bitch myself"). Moreover, the average wordcount of the survey letters is higher, with a mean of about 74 compared to the games' of about 17. To add, positive attributes of the soldier ("he was a true hero") are mentioned with a frequency of 70.18%, which is more than the almost 17% of the game letters. Additionally, condolences were expressed very differently between both groups, as only less than a tenth of game letters included this theme ("We are sorry for your loss"), whereas the survey letters includes condolences in about three quarters of the letters. The

apology theme shows a lower gap, where the survey letters used this in more than half of the letters, and the game letters show this in close to a fifth ("I regret the death of your husband"). Another big variance can be noted between the mentions of the soldier dying for the country, as about half of the survey letters mention this, compared to below 5% of the game letters ("he served with great distinction for king and country"). When considering the topic of sadness and sorrow, almost 30% of the letters that included this from the game are coded for this ("I inform you with a heavy heart"), which is about half of the amount of the survey letters. And, the percentile of aggressive codes for game and survey letters are both close to 1.5%. The overarching categories show the same pattern, as meme/insults/sarcasm have a percentage of below 2, while in the game letters it is over a fifth of letters presenting this theme. Also, over 95% of survey letters include some form of emotional content, compared to the below 40% of the game letters. There is a similar distinction for soldier details, with about 95% for the survey letters and about 37% for the game letters. Purpose is also more frequently used in survey letters, with over 60% compared to a little over 10% of game letters. Also mention worthy, every survey letter has included at least one of the singular themes, as seen by the 100% of richness, in contrast to the 68% of the game letters.

Considering the letter analysis, it can be said that some themes emerge more frequently than others. The expression of sorrow or sadness, as well as being apologetic. While these themes appear more often in the survey letters than the game letters, they do show more frequently than other themes in the game letters. Further, military expressions can often be found, whether in the survey letters or the game letters. Similarly to the aforementioned themes, military speech is present in the survey letters more than the game letters, but it is a theme that stands out. Also, while the subcodes are distributed slightly differently between survey and game letters, often included are details about the soldier. Whether the soldiers name, the location of the battle or his death, the circumstances of his death, his characteristics, and his relations to others. The previously mentioned differences between survey and game data for

this theme include for instance that game letters rarely mention heroic actions, while survey letters mention the theme not quite as much as others, but more often than the game letters. The same can be said about the description of the type of death, while location of death or battle is pointed out more often in the game letters.

Comparison of Contemporary Letters

Also interesting to look at are actual condolence letters addressed at military families during war, to see whether similar themes emerge as from the analysis. The letters were selected from MacKinnon (2023), and the transcripts of the letters that are referred to can be found in Appendix H. When reading the contemporary letters, many themes can be recognized from the letters written by participants of the survey, and the players of Radio General. For one, all letters show condolences, for instance "Though the details of his death may give you pain […]" (Appendix H). Further, the letters give concrete details about the soldier's death, for example "[…] poor husband with his skull completely split in two by a bullet […]" (Appendix H). Moreover, heroic actions are mentioned, "[…] he could not have died for his country in a finer way than by leading the section he commanded into the attack […]" (Appendix H). In this quote the theme of dying for their country comes up as well. To add, there are also mentions of the enemy, in this case the Germans, as the ones who are at fault for the soldier's death, described as: "[…] hit by a burst of German machine gun fire […]" (Appendix H). There are no instances of harsh, insulting or sarcastic themes. Sorrow and sadness are also mentioned, for instance "We feel it here ourselves because we have had a few good years together and as for myself he was my greatest friend […]" (Appendix H). Standing out the most is that the letter writers explain the way the soldier died, whether the exact way he was killed, his last moments, or how the body was handled. Those explanations often appear extensive and seem to have a comforting character, for example that the soldier did not have to suffer, or that he thought of his family.

Discussion

This research wants to examine how the personality factor empathy influences the letters written from the perspective of someone that has to communicate the death of a soldier to the soldier's family, with the addition of comparing it to letters written in a game context, and actual letters expressing condolences to the soldier's family. While the survey results only indicated a significant correlation between empathy and emotional content when quantitatively analysed, a qualitative analysis of extreme groups, a comparison between code percentages of survey and game letters, and qualitative analysis of contemporary letters showed that certain themes overlap and do emerge more commonly than others. So, there are specific themes that are frequently used in condolence letters. Moreover, because the themes overlapped in all three different data streams, the letters collected in the survey, as well as the letters written in the game, are suitable sources to investigate condolence letter writing in a controlled setting.

Two hypotheses were established and tested with the previously mentioned analyses. First, *'People with higher empathy write longer letters than those with lower empathy.',* is partially supported by the findings. The quantitative analysis of the survey letter wordcount and empathy showed a non-significant low positive correlation. A further analysis with a linear regression also did not argue for the hypothesis which is likely caused by wordcount being strongly correlated with emotional content, however, its connection to empathy is non-significant. Hence, the quantitative analysis did not speak for individuals with higher empathy writing longer letters than those with lower empathy. Similarly, prior research about empathy's impact on wordcount by Tettegah and Anderson (2007) did not show a meaningful correlation between an individual's empathy score and how much they write either, they also found that wordcount had no indication for how much empathetic content was included. However, there seem to be wordcount differences between the extreme groups, with the high empathy group appearing to have more words per letter on average so further research might allow for a clearer picture on the role of empathy on wordcount. The analysis of Radio

General letters in comparison to the survey letters showed a higher mean for wordcount in the survey letters, which can be due to the circumstances of data collection, as survey participants were aware that their letters would be analysed in depth while Radio General players only experienced the letter writing as a sub-task of a video game that did not hold much meaning for them. Thus, as aforementioned, further research into this is advised, as this research was not able to provide a clear and conclusive picture on this topic.

The second hypothesis states, *'People with higher empathy write letters with more complex and detailed content compared to those with lower empathy.'*, and can be proven with the findings of this study. For one, while most themes did not show a significant correlation with empathy, the overarching theme of emotional content, consisting of the themes sorrow and sadness, apology, condolences, aggression, and religion, had a statistically significant positive correlation with empathy. This means, that emotional themes are used more often when writing condolence letters by individuals with higher empathy, compared to those with lower empathy. The linear regression with the predictors emotional content, wordcount, and richness, indicated emotional content is a suppressed variable. To clarify, the impact of emotional content on empathy was reduced by wordcount, and richness, because emotional content is also related to both of them. Hence, letters with high emotional content also seem to be longer and have more complexity, namely, more overall themes. This could be related to the fact that richness counts the overall number of themes mentioned, and emotional content also groups some of the themes together, so if there is a lot of emotional content included, the letter gets richer. Further, including more themes takes more words, so the letter will be longer when more themes are present. The linear regression with only empathy and emotional content also argue for writers with more empathy to write more emotional content.

Additionally, as seen in the qualitative analyses of the extreme groups and the contemporary letters, the themes of condolences, and sorrow and sadness are very frequently used, which are part of emotional content. A study by Pfeil and Zaphiris (2007) that

qualitatively assessed messages for empathy from an online forum where elderly people discussed depression also found emotional content to be widely used and also an important key aspect of empathy and empathetical communication, whether verbal or written. The themes defined as making up emotional content of their study included, but were not limited to, general feeling, deep emotional support, and reassurance. Those are comparable to themes found in this study, meaning general feeling describing the overall expression of emotions such as feeling sorrow, deep emotional support, and reassurance are comparable to the letter writers directly communicating understanding for the addressee's grief, here in terms of condolences for instance. Also, being detailed about the circumstances of the soldier's death, as seen specifically in the contemporary letters can be compared to deep emotional support, and reassurance. To add to these themes, are also the detailed descriptions of soldier details, whether heroic acts, positive attributes, or the soldier's connection to his family. All of this is what a parent might need when coping with the grief of losing a child, as for instance Titlestad et al. (2020) show in their study about parents dealing with the death of their child due to drug use. Their research speaks about the parents need for talking about their children, as well as their need for information about the child's death, in that case about what might have caused the drug addiction. High empathy is related to better perspective-taking abilities (Lukka, 2014), hence, individuals with more empathy are likely to use more emotional and detailed content such as the above mentioned, because their ability to take perspective allows them to understand the addressee's needs. That is causing them to emphasize with the addressee's grief, share their own emotions, and be extensive in their descriptions about the soldier.

Limitations

The generalizability of the study's results is influenced by limitations. For one, the sample size of the study. The sample could have been a cause for the insignificant results, so a bigger sample would have allowed more certainty on possible correlations. Moreover, a more

diverse sample including, for instance, more nationalities or gender representation, could result in more generalizable results. Further, the game data did not include empathy scores for the writers of the letters, so the letters from the game could not be examined for the correlation between empathy and the themes the same way the survey letters were. Also, there was a greater amount of game letters compared to the survey letters, a similar data size would allow them to be more comparable, though that was circumvented by comparing percentages. Nonetheless, a bigger survey sample is advisable. Additionally, neither the players from Radio General 1, nor the survey participants were actually in the situation of having to write a condolence letter for a soldier deceased under their command. While the players were likely immersed in the game and thus could have been transported to the situation more intensely, they were still aware of the fact that they were playing a game, and due to that, as was possible to see in the game letters due to the great amount of meme or sarcastic content for example, did not always take the task seriously. To add, the participants from the survey were conscious of the importance of the task, as they were aware of being part of a study and that their letter would be analysed, but the circumstance of them solely reading the scenario could have impacted the degree to which they were able to feel part of that scenario. Further, the questionnaires were self-report measures, which could have been influenced by social desirability bias, meaning the participants give responses they assume are socially expected, rather than being truthful. Also, it is not possible to be certain whether the participants answered truthfully or accurate. To add, the results could have also been influenced by previous knowledge of World War 2, or whether the participants have played Radio General before, because these factors could have made it easier for the participants to be transported to the narrative given compared to those that did not. While these factors were part of the data collected for the study, the in-depth analysis of them were be beyond the scope of this particular research.

Conclusion

All in all, this research not only shows that there are themes in condolence letters that occur frequently, such as emotional content and providing details about the deceased person, but it also adds on to the existing research body that empathy is necessary when supporting someone in grief. It does this by showing that individuals with high empathy address someone in grief differently in comparison to individuals with lower empathy. Also, this research speaks for empathy as a facilitator for communications and for improving connections with others, by showing how varying empathy levels lead to different communicative patterns.

Moreover, the results of this research also added to the previous findings that letters are a source to analyse an individual's personality, because it indicated emotional content and the characteristic empathy are correlated. In turn, the validity of letters as a medium to analyse a person's personality characteristics also legitimizes the findings of this study.

Beyond this, this research also has significant implications for video games as a research tool. As previously mentioned, the analyses of survey letters, game letters, and contemporary letters showed overlapping themes, so despite some difference such as more insulting or harsh letters, the video game did not have major distorting influences on the way people wrote condolence letters. That means using video games as a research tool, as long as aware of possible effects, is a suitable and recommended method. Recommended because video games allow researchers to generate safe and controlled environments for studies that otherwise would be difficult to conduct. In this case, collecting letters addressed at families of deceased soldiers, while also testing the empathy score of the writers, for example, is problematic. Furthermore, video games have a great potential for empathy research because its aspects of game immersion and fictional characters are not only strongly related to empathy, but also allow the participant to become immersed in the game and with that the participant will likely find it easier to take the perspective of the research narrative, allowing for more accurate results.

Hence, video games are practical and effective as research tools. Considering this argues for utilizing them more in descriptive research, but also highlights the possible influence video games can have in areas related to applied research. One example is that of persuasive games, that utilize empathy to encourage desired behaviour or that aim to generate empathy. An instance of a study that wanted to examine in how far persuasive games are able to encourage the desired behaviour of money donating is the research by Steinemann et al. (2015), who used the game *Dafur is Dying.* The results showed that playing the game encouraged donating money. An example for persuasive games aiming to generate empathy is the study by Kors et al. (2016), in which Mixed-Reality was used to simulate a scenario in the participants take the role of a refugee being smuggled in a truck to escape the war in their country. The results indicated that the immersive experience of the game caused participants to feel empathy with the character they played. These studies showed how persuasive games, specifically in the context of empathy, can be useful in research. Taking into account the findings of this study implicating that video game data can be comparable to survey and contemporary data, it can be said that video games hold a lot of potential for improving research.

Lastly, grief is an aspect as integral to life as it is emotionally distressing. Also, the way grief is coped with and how grieving people are supported by others is important to understand, because of the repercussions, such as depression, if not dealt with correctly. Hence it should be extensively and adequately researched to help individuals going through this emotionally intense experience. While grief has already been researched, there are still gaps, such as the most effective support for grief, cultural differences in grieving, and possible influences due to technology.

References

Appel, M., Gnambs, T., Richter, T., & Green, M. C. (2015). The Transportation Scale–Short Form (TS–SF). *Media Psychology*, *18*(2), 243–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2014.987400

Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., Skinner, R., Martin, J. E., & Clubley, E. (2001). The Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ): Evidence from Asperger Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism, Males and Females, Scientists and Mathematicians. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *31*(1), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1005653411471

Baron-Cohen, S., & Wheelwright, S. (2004). The Empathy Quotient: An Investigation of Adults with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism, and Normal Sex Differences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *34*(2), 163–175. https://doi.org/10.1023/b:jadd.0000022607.19833.00

Beasecker, R. (2020). *This is a War for the Utter Extinction of Slavery: The Civil War Letters of James Benjamin Franklin Curtis, Hospital Steward, 1st Michigan Colored Infantry*.

Boltz, L. O., Henriksen, D., & Mishra, P. (2015). Rethinking Technology & Creativity in the 21st Century: Empathy through Gaming - Perspective Taking in a Complex World. *TechTrends*, *59*(6), 3–8. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-015-0895-1

Buys, C. J., & Larson, K. B. (1979). Human Sympathy Groups. *Psychological Reports*, *45*(2), 547–553. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1979.45.2.547

Bylund-Grenklo, T., Fürst, C. J., Nyberg, T., Steineck, G., & Kreicbergs, U. (2016). Unresolved grief and its consequences. A nationwide follow-up of teenage loss of a parent to cancer 6–9 years earlier. *Supportive Care in Cancer*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00520-016-3118-1

Cacciatore, J., Thieleman, K., Fretts, R., & Jackson, L. J. (2021). What is good grief support? Exploring the actors and actions in social support after traumatic grief. *PLOS ONE*, *16*(5), e0252324. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252324

Carter, S., & Renshaw, K. D. (2016). Spousal Communication During Military Deployments. *Journal of Family Issues*, *37*(16), 2309–2332. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x14567956

Cuff, B. M. P., Brown, S., Taylor, L. K., & Howat, D. (2014). Empathy: A Review of the Concept. *Emotion Review*, *8*(2), 144–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914558466

Evans, W., Tulsky, J. A., Back, A. L., & Arnold, R. M. (2006). Communication at Times of Transitions. *The Cancer Journal*, *12*(5), 417–424. https://doi.org/10.1097/00130404-200609000-00010

Gilbert, L. A. (2019). "*Assassin's Creed* reminds us that history is human experience": Students' senses of empathy while playing a narrative video game. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *47*(1), 108–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1560713

Halbrook, Y. J., O'Donnell, A. T., & Msetfi, R. M. (2019). When and How Video Games Can Be Good: A Review of the Positive Effects of Video Games on Well-Being. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(6), 1096–1104. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619863807

Hamer, K., McFarland, S., & Penczek, M. (2019). What lies beneath? Predictors of identification with all humanity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *141*, 258–267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.12.019

Hardee, J. T. (2003). An Overview of Empathy. *The Permanente Journal*. https://doi.org/10.7812/tpp/03-072

Harrer, S., & Schoenau-Fog, H. (2015). Inviting Grief into Games: The Game Design Process as Personal Dialogue. In *Digital Games Research Association Conference* (Vol. 12).

http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/262_HarrerSchoenau-Fog_Inviting-Grief-into-Games.pdf

Ho, J. D., & Ng, R. (2020). Perspective-Taking of Non-Player Characters in Prosocial Virtual Reality Games: Effects on Closeness, Empathy, and Game Immersion. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, *41*(6), 1185–1198. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2020.1864018

Holmes, D. R. (2003). Stylometry and the Civil War: The Case of the Pickett Letters. *Taylor & Francis Journals*, *16*(2), 18–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/09332480.2003.10554844

Ioannidou, F., & Konstantikaki, V. (2008). Empathy and emotional intelligence: What is it really about? *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, *1*(3), 118–123. http://www.internationaljournalofcaringsciences.org/docs/Vol1_Issue3_03_Ioannidou_Abstract.pdf

Jerrett, A. M. L., Howell, P., & Dansey, N. (2021). Developing an Empathy Spectrum for Games. *Games and Culture*, *16*(6), 635–659. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020954019

Jørgensen, K. (2010). Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of Dragon Age: Origins and Mass Effect 2. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *4*(2), 315–331. https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6051

Kelley, K., & Kelley, M. E. (2013). Teaching Empathy and Other Compassion-Based Communication Skills. *Journal for Nurses in Professional Development*, *29*(6), 321–324. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.nnd.0000436794.24434.90

King, D. E. N. (2012). The four Pauls and their letters: a study in personality-critical analysis. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *15*(9), 863–871. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2012.677591

Kirriemuir, J., & McFarlane, A. (2003). Use of Computer and Video Games in the Classroom. In *Digital Games Research Association Conference* (Vol. 2). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05150.28025.pdf

Kors, M., Ferri, G., Van Der Spek, E. D., Ketel, C., & Schouten, B. (2016). *A Breathtaking Journey. On the Design of an Empathy-Arousing Mixed-Reality Game*. https://doi.org/10.1145/2967934.2968110

Laffer, A. (2021). When readers talk about characters as if they were real, how do they talk about them? Empathy and gossip in reading group discourse. *Poetics*, *85*, 101503. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101503

Love, A. W. (2007). Progress in understanding grief, complicated grief, and caring for the bereaved. *Contemporary Nurse*, *27*(1), 73–83. https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.2007.27.1.73

Lukka, L. (2014). The psychology of immersion. *The cutting edge of nordic larp*, 81-92.

MacKinnon, R. (2023). *'I have lost my best pal I had': Military condolence letters, love and traumatic and sudden loss*. Soldiers of Shropshire Museum. Retrieved June 1, 2023, from https://www.soldiersofshropshire.co.uk/i-have-lost-my-best-pal-i-had-military-condolence-letters-love-and-traumatic-and-sudden-loss/

Maguire, P., & Pitceathly, C. (2002). Key communication skills and how to acquire them. *BMJ*, *325*(7366), 697–700. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.325.7366.697

Martin, K., & Hodgson, D. (2006). The role of counselling and communication skills: how can they enhance a patient's 'first day' experience? *Journal of Radiotherapy in Practice*, *5*(3), 157–164. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1460396906000215

McFarland, S., Webb, M. L., & Brown, D. S. (2012). All humanity is my ingroup: A measure and studies of identification with all humanity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *103*(5), 830–853. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028724

Nevala, M., & Palander-Collin, M. (2005). Letters and Letter Writing: Introduction. *European Journal of English Studies*, *9*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570500067903

Nicolucci, V. (2019). A death-positive videogame for death education of adolescents. *Italian Journal of Educational Technology, 27(2),* 186-197. https://doi.org/10.17471/2499-4324/1071

Pfeil, U., & Zaphiris, P. (2007). *Patterns of empathy in online communication*. https://doi.org/10.1145/1240624.1240763

Polce-Lynch, M., Myers, B. J., Kilmartin, C. T., Forssmann-Falck, R., & Kliewer, W. (1998). Gender and age patterns in emotional expression, body image, and self-esteem: A qualitative analysis. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 38*(11-12), 1025–1048. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018830727244

Slote, M. (2017). The Many Faces of Empathy. *Philosophia*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-016-9703-1

Spreng, R. N., McKinnon, M. C., Mar, R. A., & Levine, B. (2009). The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire: Scale Development and Initial Validation of a Factor-Analytic Solution to Multiple Empathy Measures. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *91*(1), 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223890802484381

Steinemann, S. T., Mekler, E. D., & Opwis, K. (2015). *Increasing Donating Behavior Through a Game for Change*. https://doi.org/10.1145/2793107.2793125

Stepien, K. A., & Baernstein, A. (2006). Educating for empathy. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, *21*(5), 524–530. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2006.00443.x

Tettegah, S., & Anderson, C. J. (2007). Pre-service teachers' empathy and cognitions: Statistical analysis of text data by graphical models. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *32*(1), 48–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2006.10.010

Titlestad, K. B., Stroebe, M., & Dyregrov, K. (2020). How Do Drug-Death-Bereaved Parents

Adjust to Life Without the Deceased? A Qualitative Study. *Omega - Journal of Death*

and Dying, *82*(1), 141–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222820923168

Appendix

Appendix A

Codebook with Explanations

English or not – Exclusion of letters that are empty, unintelligible, or written in a language other than English.

Nonsense - Letters consisting of unclear words or sentences are excluded.

Formal components - Formal speech or sign offs. Example "The Canadian Army"

Meme/Troll (F) - Letters that included known internet humour, such as "F", "RIP", "he ded". Or letters that showed signs of being written with provocative intent, such as "Attn Mrs. Leblanc. hes dead jk. double jk, he is actually dead lmfao "

Harsh/Insults - Letters that had insults such as in this example or that were particularly unemphatic, for instance "Attn Mrs. Lee. We regret to inform you about the death of Earl Lee. He was kind of an asshole but a good one. Mostly because we used him as cover. Fuck you."

Sarcastic - Informal way of saying sorry, trolling and being very sorry at the same time. For example: I am so very sorry your son was is dead, he was such a great soldier but he is dead.

Wordcount – The wordcount of the letter.

Military Jargon – If the writer used military terms, such as Missing in Action (MIA) or Private (Pte), this code was used. An example is "We regret to inform you of the death of Pte Herbert Allen"

Sorrow/Sadness - Letters that express sorrow or sadness of the person writing them, mostly in the context of "I regret to inform you […]".

Apology - Explicitly stating or indicating that the player is at fault or partly at fault for the death of the soldier and apologizing for it. An example is "Attn Mrs. Poirier. We regret to inform you that my bull headed stubborness to hold a key position resulted in the death of Pte Francis Poirier. Sorry.".

Condolences – Explicit statements of condolences and implicit signs of understanding that the addressee might feel sorrow receiving the message. For instance, "Attn Mrs. Lewis. Dear Mrs. Lewis, We regret to inform you that your son, Leonard Lewis, was killed in the Dieppe Raid. We are sorrowful for your loss. Your son was a brave man.".

Aggressive – Aggressive letters are characterized by aggressive speech against the enemy, for example the announcement of harsh retaliation or insulting of the enemy. Also included are letters that use aggressive speech against the soldier, the soldier's family or the game. An

example is "Attn Mrs. Taylor. Your son got nae naed and 360 noscoped from across the map lmao and he lost the gulag too what a fucking autist"

Religion – Mentions of religious aspects or spiritual notions for example "[…] may god rest his soul."

Responsibility Player – The player/author gives the responsibility of the soldier´s death (partly) to himself, either because he/she was for example new in the game, or because he/she commanded the troop, such as "Attn Mrs. Poirier. We regret to inform you that my bull headed stubborness to hold a key position resulted in the death of Pte Francis Poirier. Sorry."

Responsibility Enemy/Germans - The player/author gives the responsibility of the soldier´s death to the enemy because they, for example, set up an ambush. For this to be coded, the author has to specifically mention the enemy as the reason for the soldier´s death because a soldier being killed by the enemy is a usual occurrence in war. Example: "He died how he lived killing germans […]"

Responsibility Soldier – Includes the notion that the soldier himself is at fault for his death. This code is often used in combination with codes of meme/insult/sarcasm as authors, for example, write that the soldier died because of his own stupidity or because he did not listen to the orders. "Your son died… skill issue"

Soldier Details (Heroic Actions) - Letters containing information about a heroic action the soldier committed before his death, for example, saving fellow soldiers. "His bravery saved the lives of his comrades,"

Positive Attributes – Letters containing positive attributes about the soldier, such as bravery, honour, greatness and likeability. "[…] he was the bravest soldier in the army."

Location of Death/Battle - If the writer mentioned where the Soldier died or where they are currently stationed, for instance "[…] killed in action at valguarnera"

Type of Death - If the letter describes the circumstances of the death, either by mentioning the soldier was killed in action or more specifically, such as described in this letter "Attn Mrs. Gauthier. It is with my deepest regret to inform you that your son was lost in battle today. He gave his life defending against odds that were known to be too great, his knowing sacrifice ensured many others could live and for that we honour him."

Soldier Name – Used when the name of the Soldier was stated. For example, "robert nadueau was a man that […]"

Purpose/Sacrifice/Greater Good – Mentions of sacrifice that were not disclosed further or sacrifices for a bigger concept such as humanity or democracy (if not specifically stated that it is the own country´s democracy). For instance: "His sacrifice shall not be in vain."

For the country – Includes mentions such as "For the King" or "For the country"

For the fellow Soldiers – Mention of a sacrifice that allowed fellow soldiers to live or that will allow fellow soldiers to keep fighting. "[…] his knowing sacrifice ensured many others could live and for that we honour him."

General comment – If one of the coders wanted to specifically point something out, they were able to leave a comment.

Overarching Categories

Some of the codes were considered to have associated topics, and thus were grouped together.

Emotional Content – Consists of the codes "Sorrow/Sadness", "Apology", "Condolences", "Aggressive", "Religion"

Soldier Details – Groups together all codes that offer details about the soldier; Location of Death/Battle, Soldier Details

Purpose – All codes related to the theme of 'what the soldier died for', either for the greater good, his country, or for his fellow soldiers

Meme/Insult/Sarcasm - Made up of the codes "Meme/Troll", "Harsh/Insult" and "Sarcasm"

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Dear participant, thank you for your interest in this study!

Goal of the study
The aim of this research is to investigate the personal connections formed in video games and how people relate to virtual characters in a game environment. For this, we ask you to answer some questions about yourself, fill out a few short questionnaires and write a short text in relation to a given scenario. This research will help us understand how people interact with games and as a result potentially design better games.

How long will it take?
The whole survey should not take longer than 10-15 minutes.

What can I get out of it?
You may enter your email address to participate in a lottery and gain an access code to a game on the platform Steam. Your email will not be linked to the questionnaire scores.

Was this study approved by an ethics committee?
The BMS Ethics Committee at the University of Twente (Netherlands) has reviewed and approved this study. Consenting to this study means that we can use your responses for the purposes of this research. Further, you can withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. The entire process and data will be anonymized. Data will only be presented in the aggregate and any individual user comments will be anonymized prior to presentation in academic venues.
On the next page you'll be provided with a detailed consent form.

Does this study involve any risks for me?
Some parts of this survey include sensitive topics. Specifically topics such as death, grief and World War 2 will be addressed. If you feel distressed or you feel like thinking about these topics may cause discomfort, feel free to not participate in this study.

Who are we?
We are three students from the University of Twente writing our bachelor thesis in Psychology in the Department of Psychology of Conflict, Risk and Safety in collaboration with Foolish Mortals Inc.. This project is supervised by assistant Professor Dr. Maxmilian A. Friehs.
If you have any further questions, feel free to contact one of the researchers:
m.a.friehs@utwente.nl, n.busche@student.utwente.nl, y.w.j.vanpraet@student.utwente.nl, m.renzelberg@student.utwente.nl

Specific Consent Questions

I have read and understood the study information.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves the risk of mental discomfort due to difficult subject matter, specifically topics such as death, grief and World War 2 will be addressed.

I understand that information I provide will be used for research purposes. This entails the publication of a research article based on the data as well as the publication of the anonymized data online in a database.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, will not be shared beyond the study team.

I agree that my replies to survey questions can be quoted in research outputs. The quotes will not have any names attached to them.

I give permission for the questionnaire data that I provide to be archived in the Open Science Foundation repository so it can be used for future research and learning. Note that transcripts will NOT be stored publicly.

Study contact details for further information:
m.a.friehs@utwente.nl, n.busche@student.utwente.nl,
y.w.j.vanpraet@student.utwente.nl, m.renzelberg@student.utwente.nl

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl

Appendix C

Narrative used in Survey

Please take your time to read the following narrative carefully and try to imagine yourself in that situation.

It is the beginning of August 1944. Some weeks after the invasion of the Normandie. You are a Commander reponsible for a large number of soldiers. Your commando tent is set up somewhere in France. You are only a couple of kilometres behind the front line, and consequently you can hear the shooting and explosions that come from where your unit and other allied forces are fighting the Germans.

Still, you are too far away to give direct orders. The only way to contact your troops is via radio signals but that does not always work. You give them orders – attack the enemy, push back, hold the position – but what exactly is happening in every moment is impossible to know. Sometimes, you don´t hear anything from your troops for hours. Have they just lost signal or did their radio break? Are they preoccupied fighting the Nazis? Did they get captured or even killed?

The consequences of your commands have wide-reaching implications. Every day, a soldier brings a list of casualties to your tent. Most soldiers that were wounded or died under your command were only in their early 20s or just over 30, some even younger. Most had families at home, desperately waiting for their return. It is now your job to write letters to the families of the deceased.

Appendix D

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

1. When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too

   0 = Never

   1 = Rarely

   2 = Sometimes

   3 = Often

   4 = Always

2. (R) Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal

   0 = Never

   1 = Rarely

   2 = Sometimes

   3 = Often

   4 = Always

3. It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully

   0 = Never

   1 = Rarely

   2 = Sometimes

   3 = Often

   4 = Always

4. (R) I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy

   0 = Never

   1 = Rarely

   2 = Sometimes

   3 = Often

   4 = Always

5. I enjoy making other people feel better

   0 = Never

   1 = Rarely

   2 = Sometimes

   3 = Often

   4 = Always

6. I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me

   0 = Never

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

$$4 = \text{Always}$$

7. (R) When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else

$$0 = \text{Never}$$

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

$$4 = \text{Always}$$

8. I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything

$$0 = \text{Never}$$

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

$$4 = \text{Always}$$

9. I find that I am "in tune" with other people's moods

$$0 = \text{Never}$$

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

$$4 = \text{Always}$$

10. (R) I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses

$$0 = \text{Never}$$

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

$$4 = \text{Always}$$

11. (R) I become irritated when someone cries

$$0 = \text{Never}$$

$$1 = \text{Rarely}$$

$$2 = \text{Sometimes}$$

$$3 = \text{Often}$$

4 = Always

12. (R) I am not really interested in how other people feel

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

        2 = Sometimes

        3 = Often

        4 = Always

13. I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

        2 = Sometimes

        3 = Often

        4 = Always

14. (R) When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

        2 = Sometimes

        3 = Often

        4 = Always

15. (R) I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

        2 = Sometimes

        3 = Often

        4 = Always

16. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

        2 = Sometimes

        3 = Often

        4 = Always

Attention Question:

17. If you still pay attention, select the answer "always"

        0 = Never

        1 = Rarely

2 = Sometimes

3 = Often

4 = Always

Appendix E

Identification with All Humanity Scale

Refer to the Nationality you identify with most.
Community is defined as a group you feel close to, for example: friends, sports club, neighbors, church group, etc.

1. How close do you feel to each of the following groups?

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

    1 = Not at all

    2 = Not very close

    3 = Just a little or somewhat close

    4 = Pretty close

    5 = Very close

2. I often use the word "we" to refer to the following groups of people?

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

    1 = Almost never

    2 = Rarely

    3 = Occasionally

    4 = Often

    5 = Very often

3. How much would you say you have in common with the following groups?

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

    1 = Almost nothing in common

    2 = Little in common

    3 = Some in common

    4 = Quite a bit in common

    5 = Very much in common

4. Sometimes people think of those who are not a part of their immediate family as "family." To what degree do you think of the following groups of people as "family?"

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

    1 = Not at all

    2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

5. How much do you identify with (that is, feel a part of, feel love toward, have concern for) each of the following?

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

1 = Not at all

2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

6. How much would you say you care (feel upset, want to help) when bad things happen to:

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

1 = Not at all

2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

7. How much do you want to be:

a. *A responsible citizen of your community*
b. *A responsible citizen of your nation*
c. *A responsible citizen of the world*

1 = Not at all

2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

8. How much do you believe in:

a. *Being loyal to my community*
b. *Being loyal to your nation*
c. *Being loyal to all mankind*

1 = Not at all

2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

9. When they are in need, how much do you want to help:

a. *People in my community*
b. *People with the same nationality*
c. *People all over the world*

1 = Not at all

2 = Just a little

3 = Somewhat

4 = Quite a bit

5 = Very much

Appendix F

Transportation Scale – Short Form

1. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.

> 1 = Not at all
>
> 2 = Somewhat disagree
>
> 3 = Neither agree or disagree
>
> 4 = Somewhat agree
>
> 5 = Very much

2. I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it.

> 1 = Not at all
>
> 2 = Somewhat disagree
>
> 3 = Neither agree or disagree
>
> 4 = Somewhat agree
>
> 5 = Very much

3. I wanted to learn how the narrative ended.

> 1 = Not at all
>
> 2 = Somewhat disagree
>
> 3 = Neither agree or disagree
>
> 4 = Somewhat agree
>
> 5 = Very much

4. The narrative affected me emotionally.

> 1 = Not at all
>
> 2 = Somewhat disagree
>
> 3 = Neither agree or disagree
>
> 4 = Somewhat agree
>
> 5 = Very much

5. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of the Commander I portrayed.

> 1 = Not at all
>
> 2 = Somewhat disagree
>
> 3 = Neither agree or disagree
>
> 4 = Somewhat agree
>
> 5 = Very much

6. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of the soldiers I commanded.

1 = Not at all

2 = Somewhat disagree

3 = Neither agree or disagree

4 = Somewhat agree

5 = Very much

Appendix G

Survey Letters of the Qualitative Analysis

High

1.

"Dear Wilson family,
As a commander of the troops involved in this bloody war I have to inform you that your dear son Sgt. Wilson has passed away. I cannot imagine how you must feel right now, but I am deeply sorry for your loss. Your son was a great boy and soldier, always willing to help and provide for his country. I can empathize with your deep pain and If I could exchange places with him, I would."

Empathy Score: 3.94
Wordcount: 79

2.

"Dear Family of Sgt. Wilson,
it is with outmost grief I must tell you that Sgt. Wilson has died in battle. He served the army to his best abilities and died protecting his country and I hope that you can be proud of him, even in such difficult times. I want you to know that Sgt. Wilson was loved by his comrades and took his responsibility very seriously. I wish you strength in these times and hope you know that your loss is not wasted. If you wish to talk about Sgt. Wilson or you require assistance during your mourning period, I can refer you to your communal centre where weekly meetings take place of people who lost someone in battle. All the best, ..."

Empathy Score: 3.38
Wordcount: 125

3.

"Dear Wilson family,
With a great pain in my heart I have to inform you that our beloved Sgt.Wilson has died in battle. We will remember him as the hero he was, and will dispense him with the honors deserved. Yours truly, Major Duvent"

Empathy Score: 3.38
Wordcount: 44

4.

"Dear Sgt. Wilson's family,
Unfortunately this letter does not bring the greatest news. I am sorry to say that your beloved Wilson did not resist to the injuries caused during a fight. I want to ensure you that he always kept his honor and fight for the lives of a nation with courage and fellowship. He always talked

about his family with pride and love. My deepest condolences for all the family. The commander.”

Empathy Score: 3.38
Wordcount: 74

5.

“Dear Family Wilson,
I am devastated to have to tell you that unfortunately your son died under my command in France. The only thing I can assure you is that I acted to my best knowledge of the situation and never anticipated an outcome like this. Expecting you to forgive me would be too much to ask, but know that I will mourn the life of Srgt. Wilson who did everything he could to protect his country. He sure was thinking about You while fighting and loved you wholeheartedly. Words cannot describe how sorry I feel for what happened and I cannot even imagine how you feel reading my letter. The only thing left for my is to offer my condolence and deepest apologies. Yours faithfully, …”

Empathy Score: 3.38
Wordcount: 127

Low

1.

“Dear Wilson Family,
It is with pain in my heart I have to write you with news of the passing of your son. I wish you strength in this challenging time.”

Empathy Score: 2.13
Wordcount: 31

2.

“Dear family Wilson,
We unfortunately have to inform you that your son Sgt. Wilson is fallen on battlefield. We share our deep compassion with your lost, The Army”

Empathy Score: 2.19
Wordcount: 28

3.

“Dear family of Sgt. Wilson
Due to unfortunate events at the front, Sgt. Wilson lost his life defending our beloved country. He was an honorable man and died in dignity. We will do best to end what sgt. Wilson fought for. We express our deepest condolences. Sincerely yours”

Empathy Score: 2.19

Wordcount: 48

4.

"Dear family,
We are deeply sorry to tell you your beloved child has died for our country. he fought bravely"

Empathy Score: 2.25
Wordcount: 20

5.

"Dear Sgt. Wilson's Family,
I offer my condolences for the loss of Sgt. Wilson, who served under my command. His sacrifice and service to our country will never be forgotten. Your family is in our thoughts and prayers during this difficult time. Respectfully"

Empathy Score: 2.25
Wordcount: 43

Appendix H

Contemporary Condolence Letters

1.

'It may be of some consolation for you to know that (…) He was at the time leading his section across a corn field in an attack and was hit by a burst of German machine gun fire (…). As you will see he could not have died for his country in a finer way than by leading the section he commanded into the attack.'

2.

ˊDear <u>Mr Davies</u>

I regret to inform you that your son Pte Frank Davies 25274 passed peacefully away in this hospital this afternoon April 16/17. All that medical skill could do was to no avail, he was given every care & attention and made comfortable. Your boy will be laid to rest in the "Etaples [Étaples] Military Cemetery". I am enclosing your boys [sic] bible and a few little cards which I know you will treasure.

Assuring you of our sincere sympathy in your great loss

Sincerely Francis E. Ellwood (Sister) […?] Matron Willoughby RRC'

3.

'After taking his clothes off and before removing them from his bedroom I asked him if he wished anything out of his pockets. He said 'Yes only one thing, my wife's photos and my little boy'. It was so sweet of him and I was so thankful to think he had someone to love him and just wished I could have called you to his bedside (….) we lifted him tenderly into his coffin, putting his head on a comfortable pillow and wrapping him carefully in nice soft sheets. On his face was a beautiful smile, as if he were speaking to you. He was not conscious very long and once or twice he addressed you 'my darling wife, that's lovely, that's lovely', as I pour Eau de cologne on his honoured head (…)' [7].

4.

'Though the details of his death may give you pain, I cannot help telling you all that happened (…) your husband was walking along the trenches to see about some ammunition, & was to have opened a box close to me. Just then one of the men said, "The Colour Sergeant has gone". I said "Gone where?" He replied "Killed". I looked to my left, & there lying by my side was your poor husband with his skull completely split in two by a bullet. I laid him on his back, with his head against a valise, but I saw that, although he was still convulsively breathing, it was no use even bandaging the head up. One satisfaction I had; I saw where the shot came from, that is to say from a sniper in a ditch, who was every now & then showing his head enough to shoot at us. I laid myself out to get that man, & at the fifth shot I got him. I did it with my legs astride across your poor husband's body as there was no where else to stand, & there was he gasping his life away. Death was of course perfectly painless, & such a death as I always think the most desirable (…)'.

5.

'Dear Mrs Norton

I have just been able to get your address and am writing on behalf of myself and the other Sgts [Sergeants] we are sorry in the bottom of our hearts for the greatest loss you can ever bare. We feel it here ourselves because we have had a few good years together and as for myself he was my greatest friend, so my feelings go with you. There is not a lot I can say I am afraid I am not a letter writer, but you know how I feel so please Mrs Norton please grin and bear it our thoughts are with you so for now God bless you with all my sincere thoughts yours

Brammer

If you go to Shrewsbury go to my home and see my wife 63 Winfield Close Ditherington.'