

Instructional technology students explore how video games can trigger emotional responses

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Jeff Kuhn, left, and Donelle Batty, right, are students in the Patton College of Education. Photo by Kimberly Barlag/Patton College of Education.

Every video game's narrative has a start and finish: Kickoff and the last

whistle for a football game; Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Hiroshima in a World War II game; or just eating all the dots in Pac-Man. Two Ohio University graduate students, however, have broken the mold and created a location-based videogame that starts at the top of Baker University Center, and if all goes as planned, ends in tears.

Jeff Kuhn is a Ph.D. candidate in instructional technology in the Patton College of Education, and Donelle Batty is pursuing her master's degree in the same field. Together, they're working on "The Things We Carry," a location-based [video game](#) that takes its users on a journey of the protagonist's (a fictional Ohio University graduate) last lap around Athens before catching a flight to Australia.

"We've seen a lot of games where people find something; we see a lot of games where you discover something," Batty says. "But could you actually generate an emotional experience from a phone-based game? ... So we thought, 'What could we do to see if we could actually test for that? Could we get someone to cry?'"

The videogame is essentially the crossroads between a guided tour and an iPhone app. To play, users download ARIS, the location-based host app for the game, and then download its subsidiary, "The Things We Carry." The game—its title, a play on words from the Tim O'Brien novel *The Things They Carried*—takes players from the top of Baker University Center to University Gate, Jeff Hall, Emeriti Park and other Athens locales. The tear-jerking narrative ties these familiar locations with the protagonist's nostalgic stories of her late father, her ex-boyfriend, her best friend and other experiences relatable to any college student.

There are more similarities between O'Brien's novel and the game than just their names. Both share a theme of the weight that people carry on their shoulders, both literally and figuratively. The theme ties into the

designers' goal of creating a more emotionally complex game than the most popular apps of the day.

"Mobile games are really popular, but they tend to be 'Angry Birds,' that sort of thing," Kuhn says.

To keep users physically involved at every plot point, players are instructed to pick up a physical object pertinent to the game's narrative. Without giving away the ending, suffice to say that some, if not all, of the physical items come back at the game's end as a knockout blow to any bottled up tears.

Kuhn and Batty, whose graduate program is part of the Patton College of Education, are exploring the possibilities of using video games as learning tools. "The Things We Carry" could be a prototype of a vehicle that could trigger reflections in a writing class, Kuhn suggests.

This type of game also has potential implications for the entertainment industry.

According to Seann Dikkers, an assistant professor of educational studies who advised the students on the project, "The Things We Carry" could be a prototype for a mainstream version of narrative and location-based gaming.

"Prior to industry adoption, projects like this can playfully test the limits or expansiveness of a media format," Dikkers says. "This particular game is taking advantage of using relatively new personal media devices and GPS location together in a story that includes the player in the space they are walking in. Particularly, our interest as a research community is to explore the idea that local narratives like this can draw an emotive response from a consumer."

And if nostalgia isn't a powerful enough sensation, Batty and Kuhn want to see what other universal aspects of the human condition—from jealousy to alienation—a video [game](#) can tease out.

More information: "The Things We Carry" is available through the free ARIS educational app on iTunes.

Provided by Ohio University

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