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RESEARCHING DIGITAL GAME PLAYERS: GAMEPLAY AND GAMING CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

In order to build upon, further and contest text-based paradigms of students' video gameplay, this research utilises an ethnographic approach that presents a nuanced and multifarious framework. This study, part of a larger project¹, combines, and then draws upon both quantitative and qualitative methods; a large longitudinal survey sample, narrative analysis of popular games, interviews and participant observation over three years. In this article we suggest strategies for researching and teaching about these digital spaces through collaboration with high school teachers and cultural and educational institutions. This presents a play and player centred approach to researching gaming capital in educational contexts that posits researching video games be grounded in the practices of game players.

KEYWORDS

Video games, gaming capital, gameplay, curricula, education

1. INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the role of videogames in adolescents' lives in order to consider the technologies' impact on non school-based learning. Galarneau and Zibit (2007) locate a key paradox in contemporary education that the skills that are demanded for the increasingly technological and changing work place are not being learned in schools; rather they are being learned through youth's 'engagement' in virtual worlds. Unlike contemporary studies that tend to focus on MMORPGs and similar virtual social worlds (Taylor, 2006; Consalvo, 2007), this research works to understand young players' development of a critical vocabulary to talk about their subjectivity in the game world. This explores the relationship between their actions and the repertoire of potential actions and anticipated and unanticipated outcomes in virtual worlds. The purpose of the study is to create an understanding from a curriculum and educational perspective of what these gameplay actions entail and initiate classroom based research to possibly incorporate them into teaching and learning.

Learning more about how adolescents interact with videogames (computer, console and hand-held) has the capacity to provide insights to strengthen teaching and to increase engagement for students currently disinterested or marginalized. Drawing on Consalvo's (2007) concept of the 'paratext' where game players interpret information from multiple media channels during play, we are interested in how adolescents are learning to take up different pieces of information at the same time. This is not just about entertainment, but supports the idea that the skills that they're learning through gameplay may transfer to work in the future. To date, little research exists that investigates how adolescents interpret the semiotic principles at work in games and the kinds of social functions they aim to achieve in producing texts relating to games (Pelletier, 2005). The project will investigate tactics for education (primarily literacy and English curricula) that might benefit from examining youths engagement with virtual worlds, and the ways in which they make use of it, to make teaching and learning more relevant to their experiences outside of school.

¹ Beavis, C., Bradford, C., Omara, J. and Walsh, C.S.: *Literacy in the Digital World of the Twenty First Century: Learning from computer games*. Australian Research Council, 2007-2009. Industry partners: The Australian Centre for the Moving Image, The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, The Department of Early Childhood and Education, Victoria. Research Fellow: Apperley, T.

The research views video games as examples of global, digital popular culture, where meaning is built from multimodal elements, and where adolescents, through playing, actively explore, risk-take and collaborate in gameplay. This research investigates and documents the ways in which adolescents are positioned within global culture and the implications of their immersion in digital popular culture for literacy, pedagogy and identity. It explores the ways in which they 'read', interact with and play games, and the kinds of literacies and literacy practices they are engaged in with paratexts, as they play online at school, home or in community spaces. This research is also concerned with the role of games, particularly multiplayer games, in young people's developing sense of identity and community.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

This project brings together a team from Deakin University, the Research and Innovation section of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEE&CD), the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). The team is working with four schools and sixteen teachers to develop an idea about how adolescents use video games and how this might inform the inclusion of games and related texts into the English curriculum.

In order to explore the role that videogames play in the lives of students', to reflect on how these experiences could be utilized in the classroom, and initiate experimental projects utilizing games in the classroom, the project developed a multipronged research method drawing on three particular methodologies, quantitative, in the form of a survey, and two qualitative methods – ethnography and action research. Of the qualitative methods, ethnography will be primarily used to gather information about the role of games in students' lives, while action research will be used in partnership with the educators in the schools to develop short projects for use in the classroom that would demonstrate how computer and videogames could be effectively incorporated into the curriculum.

The aim of the survey was to get a broad picture of student's engagement with videogames across relevant age groups in the schools involved with the project. Drawing on scholars who have emphasized that ethnography acts as an excellent tool for gathering data about videogames that will supplement large blocks of quantitative data (Williams, 2005), our survey was designed in order to provide a backdrop of adolescents' technology use focusing on computers, both in and out of school. Half of the questions pertained directly to gaming, as the intention was to build a detailed broad picture of the milieu in which videogames are consumed. Classes at the four schools involved in the project completed the surveys.

Studies based on ethnographic research have taken a central place in scholarship on videogames (Consalvo, 2007; Steinkhueler, 2006; Taylor, 2006). The key impact of this move towards ethnography has been an understanding of the situated and contextual elements that comprise gameplay, as well as an emphasis on the variously social (Apperley, 2008; Beavis & Charles, 2005; Morris, 2004), collective (Consalvo, 2007; Jenkins, 2006), and pedagogical (Galarneau & Zibit, 2007; Seely-Brown & Thomas, 2007) spaces that gameplay may produce. Ethnography as a methodology – particularly the practice of participant observation – has been endorsed by anthropologists as appropriate for the study of videogames (Boellstorff, 2006). The ethnographic methods used were participant observation, across a variety of sites, and also individual and group interviews. In order to establish an understanding about student's videogame play both at school and in other spaces, three sites of contact were established with each school.

The first site of contact was between the researchers involved and the individual schools, this involved the researchers travelling to schools and interviewing groups of 3-5 students about their game playing habits. The intention of this part of the project was to develop a nuanced understanding of the variety of activities, which occurred during gameplay, and how gameplay was insinuated into other students' everyday activities. In several cases this led also to observations of the children playing games on school computers, and of the affordances and constrictions of the particular facilities.

The second site of contact was at the Games Lab at ACMI, where groups of 10-12 students from each school played a selected PC game – *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) – while members of the research team observed them playing. The sessions lasted for two hours each, and the researchers had taken time beforehand to familiarise themselves with the start of the games so they could appreciate the player's actions during play. During the session, groups of three or four were interviewed in another room while play continued in the Games Lab. Questions in this segment of the research focused on the reasons and

motivations behind particular actions taken in the games that were observed. Some student's games were also filmed for the project's archives. It is important to emphasise that the project researchers also engaged in gameplay with popular games to be able to ask informed questions about the heterogeneity and complexity of participation and play in game worlds.

The third element of ethnographic research will involve case studies of individual students or groups of students playing games outside of schools. This phase will involve participant observation and individual interviews, and we anticipate investigating at a variety of sites, both public and domestic. The purpose of this part of the research will be to build a more detailed lexography of the variety of gaming practices in which youth engage.

Simultaneously, the teachers involved in this project will initiate cyclical action research projects with students in their school. They will work to develop models for other teachers to use in the classroom to teach with and about computer games, including frameworks for analysis and the development of pedagogies and approaches to maximise engagement and more effectively teach both print and multimodal texts and literacies. The researchers will work with the teachers during this process to assist in project design, data gathering and analysis and to facilitate the compiling of data for a teacher professional development conference where they present their research and findings to other English teachers in Victoria.

2.1 Gaming Capital

Drawing on Bogost (2006) who suggests that videogames, like other art forms, have the power to influence and change human experience, we also want to focus on what games do, or more precisely how they inform, change or influence human behavior. One approach we will use to do this is to draw on Consalvo's (2007) notion of gaming capital. She describes gaming capital as highly flexible and able to adapt to different kinds of gameplay, various games and changing notions of what is important to know in games (p. 186). We intend to interview gamers and uncover how they accumulate various forms of gaming capital not only from playing games but from participating in and with the 'paratextual' industries that support them in order to create personal systems of distinction within gaming culture. We might ask gamers how they relate to, participate in, extend and think about other kinds of texts or artifacts in relation to the games they play (Bogost, 2006). We believe by revising our interviews, it will better help us understand a player's social circle and the kinds of capital available in building a reputation to acquire different capital in the material world. It is our belief that these redesigned interviews will uncover how players express their identities in manners, which are not necessarily normatively proscribed, and potentially a site of resistance to dominant discourses (Apperley, 2006). Uncovering young players resistance to dominant discourses through their gameplay might better help us "understand how videogames reveal what it means to be human" (Bogost, 2006, 53) because gaming capital is a contested site (Consalvo, 2007). It is anticipated through the ethnographic process that we will come to understand gaming capital, and its acquisition, as it operates in the context of our study. We hope to explore the iterations of gaming capital in both institutional and non-institutional contexts. Our aim is to understand and value gaming capital, as one way to inform reconceptualizing curricula design.

2.2 Gameplay Practices Interpretation for Curricula Design

This research hopes to explore the value of studying games in school because they play a vital role in young people's lifeworlds and in the development of their sense of self as well as their relations with others. This is true whether students are passionate gamers/readers of such texts or more detached critics. The value of researching games and gameplay to inform teaching and learning is not only to motivate particular students to be more engaged with learning, but to develop understanding of the kinds of texts which students' experience in forming their identities and subjectivities. This includes examining how games provide enjoyment and pleasure while simultaneously playing a large part in the social networks of adolescents. The educational argument for studying games, therefore, is that students use these texts to make sense of the world and that it is also possible and desirable to intervene in this process of interpretation and production (Pelletier, 2005). We view gaming capital as a useful perspective for understanding gameplay and the ways it can be understood in light of pedagogy, curriculum and possible shifts in teacher identity as they engage in their action research projects.

3. CONCLUSION

The growth of the networked society and proliferation of virtual spaces combined with the central role technology plays in contemporary education has significant consequences for how educators conceive pedagogy. Educators need to extend their repertoires to understand how video games and virtual social environments are used and why they are used so they can make teaching and learning relevant to students' lifeworlds. It is anticipated that this project will assist students and educators in understanding how the process of play involves organising and prioritising knowledge and information and to recognise and be critically informed about the global context in which gameplay occurs. This is part of schools' larger challenge to build robust connections between school and the world beyond, to meet the needs of students, and to counter problems of alienation and marginalisation, particularly amongst students in the middle years. With respect to literacy education, engagement and technology, we urgently need more information as to how this might be best achieved rather than by ignoring the gaming phenomenon.

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