

Classrooms as “living labs”: the role of commercial games¹

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Abstract

One of the challenges facing us when we try to use commercial materials in the classrooms, i.e. video games at the moment, is to identify appropriate strategies of collaboration with designers, creators and distribution agents. Recently, we are working on a collaborative project with Electronics Arts to introduce specific video games to classrooms so that they can be used as educational tools by teachers and families. We create multimedia contexts, where children turn into active participants in a digital universe in which multiple technologies are present so that video-games are just one of several digital tools. We understand these media context as “living labs”. Moreover it is important to consider much more than just the technology part; we also need to take into account the specific content. This is where the concept of popular culture turns out to be particularly interesting, especially when we consider that schools have traditionally worked according to an established curriculum that is very detached from everyday life. Several preliminary results are clearly appearing in these workshops. For example: a) multiple media and platforms need to converge in classrooms; b) in collaboration with teachers, we are discovering progressively certain specific educational uses of games c) a big attitudinal change is taken place in teachers and families as they learn to appreciate digital games or other media as educational agents. Our main goal at this moment is to design digital materials capable of supporting teachers’ and families’ use of games, and specially to reveal the rules that organize their structure, codes and symbolic universe.

Key words: commercial videogames, new literacies, educational contexts, Bakhtin, formal and informal learning.

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Digital games play a meaningful and natural role in the everyday life of children and young people. The worlds of games provide them with new experiences, interesting stories, social events, fun, challenges, excitement and also many moments of learning. Considering the cultural universe of computer games, we focus on the concept of "folk and participatory culture" interwoven with representations accepted by individuals or groups, all of which contribute to pleasure and amusement. The fact of entering a world of leisure is peculiar to this type of culture. However, the learning potential and manifold possibilities of gaming associated with folk and participatory culture are still not widely understood. The paradox of digital games is that their use opens up educational opportunities that move these tools towards the immediate goals of those for whom they have been designed. *Our general aim is to explore the design and use of commercial digital games in educational contexts.* These are the main ideas which we will be approaching in this presentation.

1. *The "living labs"* concept offers us the challenge of examining new technologies in everyday contexts as used by people according to their own goals. In these contexts, people from different generations explore innovative tools by interacting with them and discovering new and unexplored ways of acting. We are interested in showing how this perspective has roots in social researchers, especially those who have found inspiration for their work in sociocultural psychology and anthropology.
2. The concrete situations, in which we have been working, in the framework of a *collaboration project with Electronic Arts* in Spain, are described later. Our aim is to investigate how specific commercial video games can be used as educational instruments, and we focus here on social and cultural contexts

within and outside the classroom, where families, researchers, teachers and, indirectly, the people from EA, all work together.

3. Video games are an essential element around which different educational situations have been organized. In that context our work has been inspired by the concepts of *Folk Culture* (Bakhtin, 1965/1984) and *Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 2006). We believe that it is important to show how this background justifies the importance of bearing in mind the specific culture in which the citizens live, in order to make it easy for their communities to participate. This culture demands that we pay attention to the development of certain social and individual capacities that enable people to participate in virtual and real activities of their communities.
4. Finally, and in view of this background, we introduce some questions that we try to answer in this study, orienting our analysis so as to demonstrate *specific patterns that will orient the design of educational innovative settings*, where commercial video games could be used as educational and even as in-school tools, as important as traditional books, Internet sites, or many other technological tools.

CLASSROOMS AS LIVING LABS

One of the challenges facing us when we try to use commercial materials in the classroom, i.e. video games in this instance, is to identify appropriate strategies of collaboration with designers, creators and distributors. Recently, we have been working on a collaborative project with Electronics Arts to introduce specific video games to classrooms so that they can be used as educational tools by teachers and families. We create multimedia contexts in which children turn into active participants in a digital

universe in which multiple technologies are present, so that video-games are just one of several digital tools. We regard these media contexts as “living labs”.

The concept of "living labs" has been introduced in Europe in a social and economic framework that looks to favour technological innovation. It overcomes the idea of a traditional laboratory, though the purpose of constructing such environments is to facilitate deep connections between technology and everyday cognition that will generate new knowledge that can be applied to the physical and social environments, thus ,making life easier and offers people new challenges. “Currently, within the emerging knowledge-based economy, the most successful European regions or city-areas seem to be those that operate as if they were full-scale urban laboratories or regional proving grounds for prototyping and testing new technology application and new methods of generating and fostering innovation processes in real time.” (<http://www.livinglabs-europe.com/livinglabs.asp>).

In any case, the relationships among different methodological traditions have been examined by social researchers. For example, according to Cole, Scribner (1976/1997) long ago introduced the idea of ‘locating the experiment’:

“(...) to address the relationships between experiments and indigenously organized activities. Her point was that the experimental tasks themselves always occur as constituents of a context (...), so the objective of the research should be to design experiments that can be ‘naturally located’ with respect to the activity being analyzed.” (Cole, 1996: 250)

The same idea has been introduced by other researchers who dealt with knowledge as it is present in everyday life, and considered the contextualized nature of human activity. They were concerned with the ecological validity of experimental

research as an approach to problem-solving activities in situations which are not prefabricated and which occur in natural settings.

“(…) Constructing research in terms of mythological views of scientific thought insures blindness to questions of structuring of everyday activities themselves” (Lave, 1988: 174)

The exploration of activity from that perspective demands an integrated approach to specific activities by considering their integral nature in relation to contexts and the mutual interdependence of mental, physical and social activities. These researchers proposed an analysis of cognition in context by considering that learning, thinking and knowing are relationships among people who are engaged in activity and that these relationships emerge from the socially and culturally structured world. In this theoretical perspective, the interdependence of agent and world is emphasized.

Adopting this framework, cognition appears as a situated process interwoven with material and cultural tools, and the relationships between the laboratory and natural settings emerge as two potential ways of exploring cognition. Summarising these new perspectives may play an important role in changing the psychologist's mind. Studies carried out in the laboratory were the starting point of the research, but for us, working in the field, they opened up new windows for looking at the learning process and human activity which started to appear to be involved in practice and to need to be defined in relation to the specific goals of individuals, as proposed by the community and even from an institutional perspective. It seems to us that not only the was earlier methodological framework too narrow but, moreover, new theoretical perspectives would need to be introduced in order to understand new dimensions of human activity.

A COMMUNITY PROJECT

In the course of the past ten years we have developed several lines of collaboration with teachers and families with the aim of planning educational settings together. Much more recently we began a joint project with EA (<http://www.aprendeyjuegaconea.com/>). Why this Electronic Arts's support? We believe that schools need to develop educational uses of many of the instruments that have not been specifically designed for this purpose, but which form part of children's everyday life. Schools cannot refuse to introduce innovations that appear in the external, foreign world, to get to know them and to take advantage of them. Only in this way will pupils become really motivated to learn. Besides, across this collaboration, which includes different educational levels and social institutions we have explored together with teachers and children, some of these material instruments are capable of generating practical and theoretical resources that help us to confront the challenges that a responsible citizenry living in the XXIst century has to face.

In that context, taking historical-cultural theory as our point of departure, we draw up activity systems mediated by symbolic tools, combining new and old technologies, in order to build bridges between formal and informal education. In that way, and looking for something relevant that would enable us to establish relationships between various facets of children's lives, we approach popular culture in Spain through the traditional stories that parents tell their children, or those that they create at school, as well as their favourite television programmes, video games and the Internet. In these settings and especially *through collaborative situations, we have learned to tell stories using new and already consolidated technologies.*

Figure 1. The videogame workshop. Madrid, November 2007



But what were we working on? Why, as university teachers, have we spent so many hours with boys and girls between 8 and 13 years old or collaborating with their teachers, even sometimes adopting the teachers' role? Because we believe that schools must use many of the tools that are present in everyday life, even when they have not been specifically designed *for educational purposes*, but this task is not always easy for teachers. In this sense, the situation of sharing goals with teachers has given us the opportunity to be close to the everyday life of children. In turn, we offer teachers some theoretical tools that may help all of us to think together about the educational challenges that we need to deal with.

Who take part in “the workshop” and what are their goals? Teachers and children in third or fourth grade of primary school, and the research team as participant observers. Our educational goal, shared initially by all the adults, is to introduce mass media, analogue or digital, to the classroom, assuming that children are not only passive recipients of media contents but also producers and disseminators of information. We also anticipate that children’s productions will move away from the world of school or that, at least, that they will make sense away from there. We particularly wish to generate in children a consciousness of close or remote audiences, in many cases consisting of people that they do not even know, but who will be their potential readers. We emphasize that on several occasions in the school we noticed the difficulties of the children when they tried to move from oral communication to written discourses in the digital, analogue or written world, as well as the challenges they faced when they were trying to produce material for remote audiences.

How do the activities of the workshop happen? At the beginning of these workshops we had in mind some ideas of two classical Russian thinkers, Lev Semionovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975). Both of them worried about why people try to transform the world by constructing scientific, artistic or moral knowledge, etc. From their perspective, language and thought interweave and decisively contribute to these transformations. Adopting their ideas as a starting point we work with children to develop a certain consciousness of the tools they use as human beings, especially oral, written and audio-visual discourses. In that context we are interested in the design of educational contexts in which a dialogue with the mass media is possible, though always supported by other people in the workshop.

When and where do workshops take place? We usually work for four or five months with the same teacher and in the same classroom. The workshop involves weekly sessions of approximately two hours each. In any case, the duration depends on the nature of the tasks. We emphasize that though the workshops take place as part of the school timetable, the children seem to understand this activity as a complementary or extracurricular programme, probably because the didactic methodology that we use and the instruments that they handle are not the ones they are used to in other school tasks.

A FOLK AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Traditionally, culture represents a set of social codes in which those people who are cultured read specific books, visit museums and maybe interact in suitable ways with material tools socially valued. Pierre Bordieu (1972) considered that these people are privileged because they are in touch with what he calls “cultural capital”. But during the twentieth century such culture came under review, and popular culture, very far from this traditional perspective, began to have a much more dramatic influence on how Culture is defined (Weaver, 2005). Considering the cultural universe of computer games, we can focus on the concept of “popular culture” interwoven with the mass media. In that context, specific cultural tools, accepted by individuals or groups, contribute to pleasure and amusement. Entering a world of leisure is peculiar to this type of culture and may well be far from the more elitist perspective. Buckingham & Scanlon (2003) distinguish between popular and official culture, and suggest in this way the need to introduce in the classroom what pupils experience outside school. To go into depth into these ideas we focus here on the concept of popular culture as presented by Bakhtin in a classic work dedicated to this topic, *Rabelais and his world*. We also look at one of Jenkins's last works, which approached this culture by opening up new ways

of looking in relation to the possibilities that opens us to the fact that we live in a virtual universe.

Folk culture, Carnival and Videogames

Bakhtin was a literary critic who believed that the power of revolutionary change could be found in the nature of language and the culture of the people in their everyday life. From his perspective these are not neutral words and forms, but are rooted in people's lives, while meanings are not independent of their everyday life. Bakhtin opened the door for scholars to value the language of popular culture as a form of knowing and meaning (Weaver, 2005). In *Rabelais and his world*, Bakhtin explored how the vitality of a society could be found in the everyday traditions of people, and he discussed the role of carnival in the political, social and cultural context of the Sixteenth Century. Reading some of Bakhtin's texts can be a surprising experience, as many of his ideas are relevant to current attempts to interpret the universe of popular culture as presented by video games. Moreover, Bakhtin sought, during much of his life, to create an open language with which approach dynamic and popular culture; in that context he was opposed to Stalin's regime and, even lived outside of Moscow, the official intellectual centre, almost under exile conditions, for much of his life. In our opinion, Bakhtin's texts enable us to interpret not only the culture surrounding video games but also the position and activities of the player in the face of many of their messages. His work embodies three central concepts from which to approach video games.

The first is "*embodiment*". Reading "*Rabelais and his world*" the body image is related to freedom and dynamism; we need to think of carnival as something free, unconfined and overcoming limits (...) plants, animals and human forms are fancifully interwoven in them. This description could also refer to the aesthetics of videogames and to the way in which they introduce images, an aspect that often appears grotesque to

those who do not take part in this form of popular culture. Moreover, Bakhtin refers to carnival as having both the effect of plunging our certainties into ambivalence and uncertainty, as a result of their emphasis on contradictions and the relativity of classificatory systems. Ambiguity allows Bakhtin to chart the relationship between body expression and speech. Carnival has not only its own space and time but also its own language (Clark & Holquist, 1984).

Let us now focus on *the time idea*: “the body of the people on a market square during carnival is first of all” *aware of its unity in time* (Bakhtin, 1965/1984) We should remember here how important in Bakhtin's thought was the concept of “chronotope” and explore it now as a link in space and time to the carnival. “Just as the space and time of the official world enforce restraints, the coordinates of the carnival world conduce to freedom and fearlessness”; “the individual feels he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through changing costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material, bodily unity and community” (Bakhtin, 1965/1984) 255. This is the reason why the mask is so important.

What then does the presence of the mask mean? The mask, which is “the most complex theme of folk culture ... is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with joyful relativity and the happy *negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to one’s own self*. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries” (Bakhtin, 1965/1984) pp. 39-40. We are faced with a new kind of culture opposed to the official world and that forces us to look for new ways of going further than this formal, rational and established culture. According to (Clark & Holquist, 1984) *Rabelais and his world* presents “a critique of contemporary

Soviet ideology. It offers a counter ideology to the values and practices that dominated public life in the 1930s.” Bakhtin proposes to seek new models of knowledge, different from our habitual ones, to introduce a need for creation and a way of departing from established values. It turns out to be difficult, when we are immersed in the culture of videogames, not to interpret it on the basis of these Bakhtinian ideas. How are we not to think, for example, that also these cultural instruments enable us to go beyond a real and static to a much more dynamic life? Videogames move us on to a virtual reality, in which players are conscious of belonging to a community that transforms traditional ideas of leisure or even old ways of knowing, looking for other new and much more exciting ways of thinking and doing.

A participatory culture

At present Henry Jenkins's contributions extend, without denying it, this Bakhtinian perspective. We explore now the theoretical and applied dimensions of the concept of “*participatory cultures*”. Among other aspects, its interest is rooted in the fact that it offers us an interesting approach to educational situations, much more clearly than the Bakhtinian contributions do. Let see how Jenkins approaches this concept:

“A participatory culture is a culture with relatively *low barriers to artistic expression* and *civic engagement*, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of *informal mentorship* whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created”. (Jenkins, Purushotma, Ciinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006: p.3)

Reading the text as an active participant I underline the most relevant ideas regarding the digital world, insisting above all that video-games may act as educational instruments, always bearing in mind that they form part of this popular culture of which Bakhtin wrote. Their relevance is due to the fact that they present us with a universe in which digital tools offer new challenges, not only to users of this virtual world, but also to educators.

- *Low barriers to artistic expression.* Why do schools traditionally limit children's forms of expression? How can we change this situation? Jenkins offers us interesting ideas when he explores the potential of the digital universe for education; i.e. new ways of creative collaboration supported by digital tools.
- *Civic engagement.* We need to be conscious of how a digital universe transforms the idea of a civic compromise associated with the creation, production and distribution of media content.
- *Informal mentorship.* Surely this concept is not very far from that which other authors have long been using (Jean Lave & Wenger, 1991), for example, introduced it in referring to "peripheral participation" as a way of learning among the interactive participants in a community. Analysis of the special features of this concept, linked to transformative action in real and virtual worlds, may be an unsolved problem for the moment.
- *The idea of social connection* also acquires in the digital universe new forms of collaboration that offer new challenges to the relationships between the individual and the social world. This new virtual setting will undoubtedly

change the processes related to the “author” concept, which is much closer to individual than collective activity.

We now look at how these ideas inspired our educational approach when we worked in the video-games in and outside the classroom. This was a general framework that asked specific questions, allowing us to introduce some examples and reflect on how videogames can be used as educational tools.

NOT JUST A GAME: BETWEEN REAL AND VIRTUAL LIFE

1. How can we help children to approach the media in order to enable them to be citizens capable of dealing critically with them? How to design specific materials that could make this task easier for teachers?

Helping children or adults to uncover the rules that organize the structure of mass media information is not a simple task, and teachers expect to receive different types of support, associated as far as possible with the school curriculum. This question leads us to the need to design strategies to help them in the classroom. Our problem now is how to help children and teachers to use such games to discover specific media content, focusing on the codes that are used and the rules and structures by which they are organized.

Looking for an answer to this question we have been exploring some materials and projects developed at MIT; a particularly interesting one uses “The Sims”, one of the most popular video-games used to teach foreign languages. This is an excellent example that demonstrates some of the peculiarities of virtual material and its differences from traditional didactic tools. Several characteristics stand out: a) some things that virtual material enables us to do that would not be possible with traditional textbooks or other non-digital materials; b) the strategies that orient its use are not

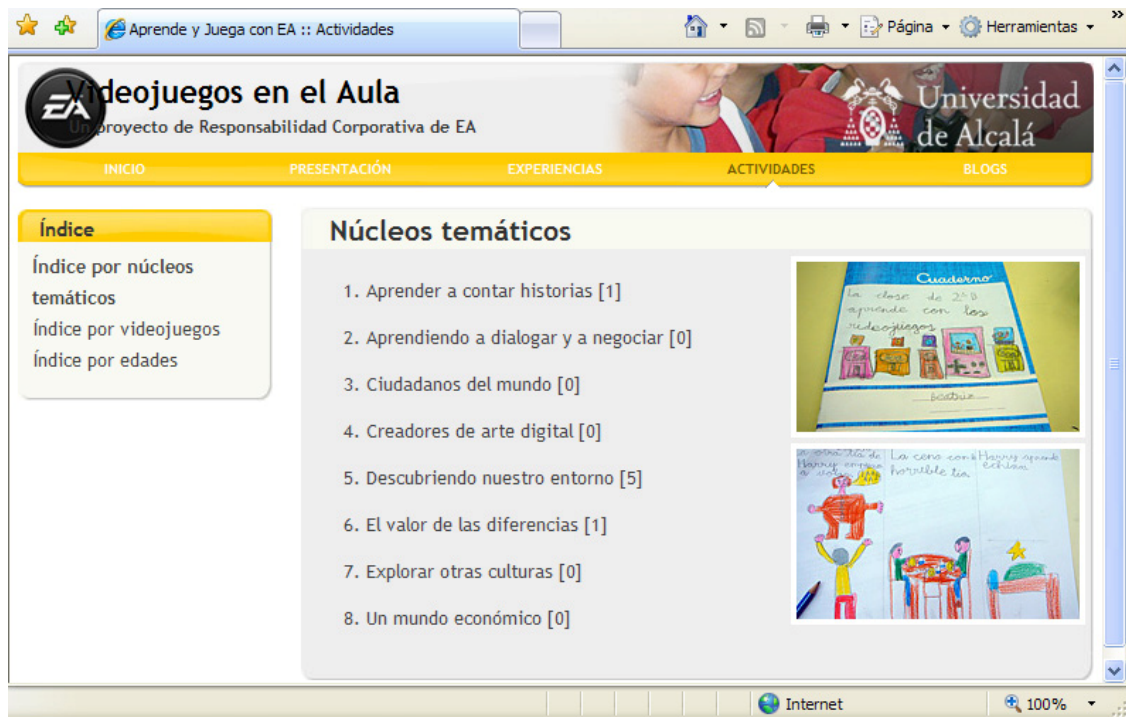
linear; on the contrary, its most relevant property is that its content can be constantly manipulated and remade; c) the fact of re-making the content helps the learner to master its rules and codes.

In sum, what is really interesting is that students turn into generators of new digital content. The concept of Remix culture appears here as a central one. It describes the way in which youth culture today more visibly orients itself around creating media by extracting individual components of other people's media creations, then connecting them together to form something new. (Purushotma, 2006, <http://lingualgamers.com/thesis/>). That is, digital media introduce children to a very different universe than traditional school media. Perhaps one of their most important characteristics is related *to their potential for creating new content by transforming others*. We will show now how we have been working in Spanish schools, looking at a specific example. Within the framework of the workshops that we have described in previous paragraphs, we generated a set of activities that helped children to turn into critical authors when they are facing mass media by enabling them to actively combine and reconstruct diverse cultural productions. We show how we have worked with the Sims Pets video game, which we regard as a production of popular culture. Taking its contents and structure as a starting point, we focus not only on the family concept, something that might turn into just a curricular content, but what emerges from it to produce something new.

We need to contextualize our example in a more general frame with in which these activities of the children and their teachers took place. All these activities were organized around specific topics, as shown in Figure 2. Each of these nuclei includes about 15 activities. The specific aim of these activities is to show in a visually appealing way what video games can teach us.

Figure 2. Learning from videogames to be a citizen. Thematic topics

<http://www.aprendeyjuegaconea.com/>



These are the main topics around which the activities are organized

1. Learning to tell stories. 2. Learning through conversations. 3. Global citizens. 4. Creating digital art 5. Discovering our environment 6. Valuing differences 7. Exploring other cultures 8. An economic world

1. Contextualizing the activity in the game

After exploring some ideas that relate different contexts of learning we try always to approach children's activity in a virtual world by creating in the classroom a multimedia context. In the following example the game, digital pictures and publishing children's texts in a weblog (blog) are introduced. Figure 3 shows the first two materials used to perform this task.

Figure 3. Working in a digital universe. From virtual to real life & vice versa

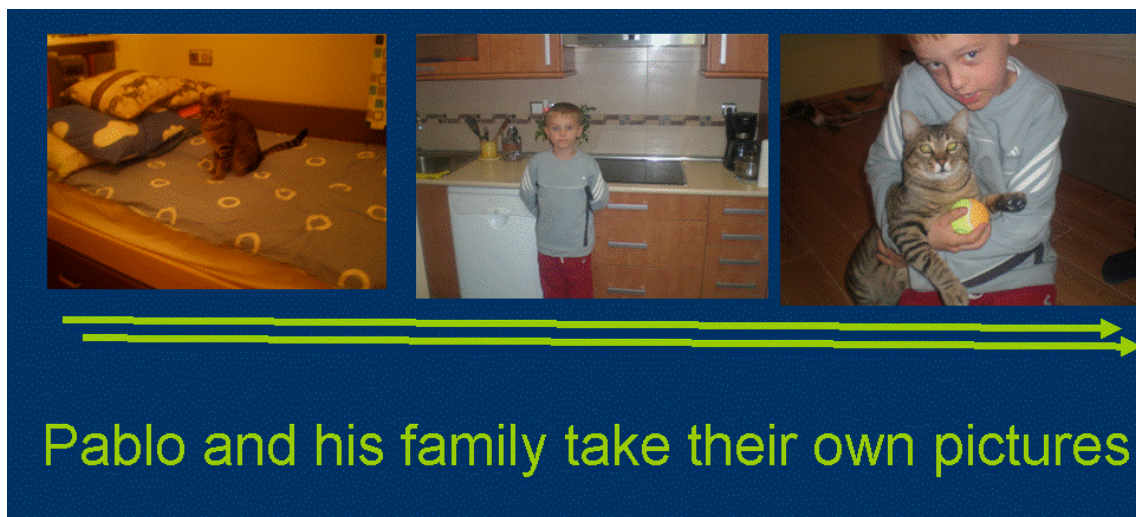


Of course, people interested in The Sims know that they live in a virtual world. When we begin to create figures or the housings for our family's Sim the children approached the activity in a mechanical way, probably unthinking, surely because they interpreted the situation as a playful activity. When we worked together on it, both adults and children, we began to discuss how important it was that the family was living in a space that was really convenient for it. That is to say, it seemed to us that children need to establish clear relationships between the persons and the spaces that they inhabit. To facilitate a reflective process, after the play session we present family models who also "came from a digital world" though in fact they were pictures of "real" families that a famous photographer, Uwe Ommer http://foto.studio.de/_gallery/2/first_ga.htm, had obtained from very different families all over the world. After playing the game during class time in a spontaneous way and having a group discussion about "families and their spaces", we began to think seriously about the most suitable housing for our Sim family.

2. Remaking and reconstructing

We try to act in a creative way; not only the children but also the teachers and investigators. This is not a question of repeating the same activity, but having departed from the video game we can “reconstruct”, “remake”, and “rethink” it. This is a way of re-making creatively what others have done. In that context it was necessary to look for new resources. In this case each of the children performed his or her own activity. We suggested that they take pictures of some very significant spaces for them, for example their own houses, or those aspects that would be significant for the persons who live in them, for example family members. We can now concentrate on the pictures taken by Pablo and his family. Anyone who knows The Sims Pets will find similarities between the sequence in which Pablo and his family took the pictures and the virtual reality in which The Sims’ life develops.

Figure 4. Games and digital pictures: Between fiction and reality



3. Writing as a way of helping for reflection

After chatting and thinking about homework activities, the third part of the activity was introduced. At that time we used writing as a way of helping for reflection. In figure 5 we show the blog of one of the girls assisting t the same class than Pablo, she told us how it was her Sim family. Let us see what she wrote in her blog.

Figure 5. Nadia's blog.



“This is Nadia and now I am going to tell you whom she looks like in the SIM family that I have created and what I am going to do with her. The family that I have created looks like mine, because the Sim and the other person work and also have pets. I have a small kitty called "Mini" that is very affectionate and very tidy. My Sim can be employed as a postman. He can do many things.”

Analyzing the content and the structure of Nadia's text we observe that we may be looking at a “school text” by means of which the girl tries to respond to adult expectations. For example, the girl justifies why she created her Sim’s family, and she probably anticipates her own answers to possible questions that the teacher or the researchers ask her; in their class interventions the children are always asked to justify their opinions. Moreover, she refers to her cat and describes it. This raises the question about how video games can contribute to a generalization of knowledge in non- school situations or even to make creative thinking easier. That is, we still try to get the children to act in a creative way, and they give stereotyped answers even as they are justifying them.

2. How can we establish relationships between formal and informal learning environments?

This question has been one of the motives that have stimulated our investigation for a long. Today we think that it needs to be formulated using new concepts; in other words, it is not so much a question of differentiating specific environments as trying to unite them. *How can we successfully combine education and entertainment?* Some years ago we designed a research project that aimed to find out how *homework practices* allow relationships among literacy practices to be established. We wished to know whether such activities could contribute to the establishment of relationships between what children learn at home and at school. *We regarded families and classrooms as communities of practice*, in which learning and understanding are assumed to take place through apprenticeship as a context-embedded process, socially and culturally constituted (Rogoff, Topping, Baker-Sennett, & Lacasa, 2002). We approach these settings by focusing on discourse practices as goal-directed actions and as processes that include interaction as a central component, all of them involving the participants, texts and artifacts employed in implementing the action (Lacasa, Reina, & Albuquerque, 2002). But contrary to our expectations, and even though we turned traditional homework into meaningful practices for children and families, the outside world did not enter the school; on the contrary, people at home began to adopt the roles of the school; for example, parents acted as teachers and children like pupils. These phenomena encouraged us to radically change our way of approaching literacy practices and we found ourselves desperately looking for other tools to establish relationships between contexts of learning considered as communities of practice (Lacasa *et al.* 2006).

Now that we have tried to move from school to home not via notebooks and books, we might do better by taking the opposite direction, so mass media were introduced into the classroom. In that context we understood that analysing media is much more than merely studying its technology. This is important when we wish to construct new knowledge, but without forgetting the content. It is not enough to involve schools in TV, videogame platforms or computers; we need to take into account the specific content of each medium. It is here that the concept of popular culture turns out to be particularly interesting. Schools work according to a well-established curriculum that is very distant from everyday life. We focus now on an example that allows us to observe how similar tasks carried on outside the school context generate different types of enclosed text, even though the activity is similar.

At that time the activity was carried out in an informal educational context, a science festival in which the goal of the research teams was to show the educational power of video games. We created activities similar to those that we have already described. One example can be observed in Figure 6 People approach the stand and after talking with the investigators, use the Playstations, and later write their personal impressions in a blog.

Figure 6. Adolescents' blog in the Science Festival



Nicolas Povo 2ºA ESO

13 de abril de 2007 3:42

viii feria ciencia gipi 2007 dijo...

Blanca:

A mí los sims me encantan, sobre todo porque no me gustan que controlen mi vida en los sims tengo una forma de desahogarme controlando yo la de los demás, donde puedo hacer lo que a mí me parezca bien y tengo libertad de opinión. He creado un personaje a mi semejanza.

Zahara:

A mí los sims también me gustan están genial es una forma de jugar pero a la vez tu controlas lo que haces, lo que dices, lo que te parezca a ti, nadie te dice que tienes que hacer ni con quien tienes que juntarte es una forma de desahogarte de todo. A mí me gusta hacer los sims a mi semejanza.

Somos del instituto Ana María Matute de Velilla de San Antonio. La clase de 3ºB.

13 de abril de 2007 3:49

Blanca:

I Love the Sims, especially because I don't like anybody to control my life. With the Sims I have a way of relaxing by controlling other people myself, and here I can do what seems OK and I am free to give my opinions. I have created a person similar to myself.

Zahara:

I am also like the Sims, they are wonderful. It is a way of playing but at the same time, you control what you do, what you say, what seems right to you, nobody says what you have to do, nor whom you have to join up with. It is a way of relaxing from everything. I like to make the Sims like me. This is from the Secondary school "Ana Maria Matute" in Velilla of San Antonio. Class 3 B

Blanca and her friend Zahara are two 16-year-old adolescents. They told us of their own experience of playing with the Sims. It is interesting to observe that they write altogether almost simultaneously, in fact their opinions are included in the same comment and they transmit the same idea. Both of them play the Sims because it gives them a feeling of freedom, a sensation of freeing themselves from control even while they can control virtual people. They would probably not have written anything similar in school; they would not have been so sincere. But the important thing here is that they have written and thought about what they were doing.

In some way we can say that we are faced with an example of how we can understand a participatory culture among adolescents (Jenkins, 2006). In a certain way people participate in a community and all of them establish relationships among their contributions, and even feel *some degree of social connection* with each other. In that

case these two children participate in the same universe of freedom, something that would probably be much more difficult at school.

3. How can we break down intergenerational barriers by creating shared digital learning situations?

We can continue to explore in depth the meaning that video games can take in informal educational situations, especially relevant in that context is a question that frequently appears when we consider games as educational tools. Parents and teachers worry about how to use these tools that children seem to understand much better than they do. In the previous example we looked at how video games create a context that encourages peer collaboration, probably because they share attitudes and common values as persons who come from the same generation. We see now how these cultural artifacts can also been used as a tool to share a set of common interests when their users belong to different generations.

Considering the nature of the knowledge associated with the use of computer games, in the last fifty years *audio-visual discourses* have been shown to be particularly relevant as supports in the generation and transmission of knowledge, much as printed matter has been in the past. The social and cultural practices associated with the use of computer games in the family context facilitate *changes in intergenerational relations*, particularly changes in the transmission of knowledge between generations.

At present, many people are raising critical voices against computer games, especially concerning the violent or sexist values that they transmit. It is by considering their narratives rather than merely their prominent images that we will be able to turn them into mediational instruments for promoting communication between children and adults and also to facilitate relationships among different generations. Computer games could be the tools that invite us to study the world through powerful lenses that transmit

information about the historical nature of human beings. Stories help us to enter into the life of people. Telling histories in classrooms or families, playing and reconstructing the game, enables us to extend the limits of these communities of interpretation. To invite children and adults to write and share histories will open the way for the analytical and reflexive interpretation of their content. The drama that some computer games offer can involve children and their families in processes that may facilitate intergenerational relationships more than other traditional printed materials do.


We concentrate now on another example that shows how these relationships between two persons from different generations were established. A brother and sister, with a 14-year difference in age, came together to a Playstation in the science festival. Together they thought out and built the main person of their Sim family and then they described their own experience in a blog. Let us explore this interaction by looking at figure

Figure 7. Brother and sister from different generation share “virtual Sims”

Linking generations

We are brother and sister. There is an age difference of 14 years between us and we hardly ever find things to do together to amuse ourselves, but now, by creating the personage of Bartolo, a fat man, bald and short, we pass the time very nicely. We are sure that we will buy the game. Greetings, Virginia.

What I like the most about this Sim is that my sister wanted to create 'an Iberian macho'. I preferred a bald, fat and short man; I preferred to do a complete “chihuahua”.
Regards, Julián
On April 13, 2007 10:27



Madrid, April 2007.
Science Festival
<http://sims-feriagipi07.blogspot.com/>

As we can read in their blog, during all their lives they didn't find many things to do in common, before they discovered a shared and interesting activity by building the main person in the Sims family. They could not agree about what they wanted to be the main characteristics defining this character, "Bartolo"; the younger sister want a fat man, bald and short, while the older boy wanted just the opposite, "*An Iberian macho*".

Looking for theoretical concepts that might help us to interpret these examples we found very interesting the idea of semiotic domains as proposed by (Gee, 2003); these are defined at least by four main dimensions:

- *New approaches to the world*, using new kinds of discourses. Looking at this brother-and-sister conversation, what we found is that the game allows them to discover some "every day models of knowledge" in which both of them participate, even assigning to the model very different values.
- *Participating in a social group* that shares this domain. In the conversation between Julian and his sister we discover a shared world of meanings and also some common interest.
- Obtaining resources that *prepare people for new ways of understanding* and solving problems. Looking at our example, maybe we can anticipate more interesting conversations in the future, at least as they seek to build "Bartolo", their new shared hero.
- Finally, Gee refers to the idea of the semiotic domain in relation to videogames as involving an active process of "*critical thinking*", in which people can be situated on a meta-level that allows them to establish relationships among the parts of a global system. We think that this process is evident in the web log of these two members of the same family, brother and sister even coming from different generations; when

they wrote about “Bartolo” after playing the Sims they were much more conscious than they had been about they have in common.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS: LOOKING FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

These pages have tried to show how commercial video games can be turned into educational instruments. It is clear that this goal has deep roots in the fact of considering multiple resistances generated among people that they sometimes prefer to be established in static models of society as a way of explaining how social relationships are mediated by new and old technologies. Three fundamental ideas seem to us to be important when we attempt to utilise this work to look at the future without forgetting the past, especially by considering interesting authors who faced similar situations several centuries ago.

First, we emphasize that we wished to search for a theoretical model which justifies why there is resistance to new universes or even tools and, more concretely, why that happens in relation to video-games. Bakhtin’s ideas give us some answers in *Rabelais and his World*. In that book he explored the liberating power of popular culture, that of the carnival, which tries to go beyond established, static values. Looking in somewhat more depth at the concepts of embodiment, time and mask, he helped us to understand how many of the ideas from which he justifies the carnival are also useful as a means of showing the creative power of video-games. Using these cultural tools, gamers leave concrete space and a time, being liberated from the sometimes oppressive worlds of their daily life in the real world. A good example of how these ideas continue to be valuable in the present appears when we try to interpret the texts that Blanca and Zahara, two teenagers visiting a science festival, wrote after having played the Sims Pets.

Having explored the power of videogames to generate a creative thought, therefore, we have shown how we introduced them into the classroom when we collaborated with teachers and families in order to create innovative educational settings. In a project shared with Electronic Arts, we have been using videogames with the goal of educating new citizens who will be capable of facing critically the structure and contents of these powerful tools for thinking. Following the work of Jenkins (2006) and Gee (2003), and on the basis of concrete experience gained in the classroom, we have discovered the importance of “leaving” in digital worlds, creating context multimedia, and offering new ways of thinking and reasoning. In the context of these experiences we have designed several activities organized around various thematic nuclei, from which we try to raise challenges that turn out to be attractive not just to children but also to families and teachers. The previous pages have also attempted to show how these activities acquire different meanings when they are carried out in educational formal contexts as classrooms or in play situations that indirectly also lead to a process of reflection.

Finally, it is important to point out differences in using videogames in formal or informal educational situations. From this perspective we need to say that, for example, the school context generates stereotyped texts that imply processes of thought often generated by adults’ interventions in the classrooms. In contrast, in informal situations the power of video-games to generate creative ways of thing and writing is much more clearly revealed. It is from this perspective that we must interpret the texts of the two teenagers who experience their own power of control when they create and play with digital persons in a virtual universe, or also when the brother and sister, coming from different generations, manage to find a world of shared interests playing with the Sims.

Of course it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a definite conclusion from the above discussion. What we prefer to think is that games open new ways of learning, teaching, and especially of participating from a creative and dynamic perspective in new universes. If the twenty-first century needs to look for innovation, videogames are turning out to be one of the most powerful cultural tools which populate our real everyday lives.

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