0184

Valorising gaming literacy and digital game paratexts: A Gameplay Model for teaching and professional development

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Background

The fact that digital games remain outside the curriculum is not a new phenomenon. Current research ignores the inclusion of digital games, their paratexts and gaming literacy in the English classroom. Paratexts are print and digital texts ancillary to gameplay, production and design. They are significant for literacy education because they simultaneously engage children and young people in traditional literacy and multimodal design practices. Playing digital games requires gaming literacy: a level of technological expertise about game software and hardware; well-developed problem-solving capabilities (Greenfield, 1996; Prensky, 2000; Squire, 2002); conceptual understandings of active learning strategies (Kirriemiur and MacFarland, 2004); collaborative social engagement skills (Manninen, 2002; Squire, 2003); and – an albeit informal – knowledge of game design (Buckingham and Burn, 2007; Salen, 2007; Zimmerman, 2009). This paper describes the research design and rationale of positioning digital games and their paratexts and gaming literacy as central—rather than periphery—in the English classroom. We also put forth a Gameplay Model for teaching and professional development which emphasizes a conceptual framework for educators interested in connecting curricula that valorises young people and children's gaming literacy and gameplay practices.

Research Questions

Drawing on three case studies exploring the introduction of digital games into the English and literacy curriculum, the paper explores how researching, designing, and playing digital games can enhance English and literacy curriculum and pedagogy. We engage with literacy research and digital games studies in order to rethink young people and children's participation in digital game cultures as a valuable, integral meaning-making activity. This paper discusses collaborative teacher action research projects that successfully integrated digital games, gameplay, and paratexts into the classroom to teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and multimodal design.

Methods

Many young people and children participate directly in digital game cultures through gaming communities that involve accessing, researching, and designing paratexts. Typical activities include using FAQs, hacks, cheats, and mods to develop/advance their expertise in particular games; and sharing similar resources with other gamers, often representing their accumulation and exchange of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007; Walsh & Apperely, 2008; 2009). Both consuming and designing paratexts are powerful examples of gaming literacy—where players draw on an accumulated and shared set of skills, competencies, literacies and paratexts—creating specific meanings and understandings through their actions of gameplay.

Researchers acknowledge that digital games motivate young people in ways formal education does not (Dondlinger, 2007; Facer, 2003; Gee 2003, 2005; Swartout & van Lent, 2003). In the European Parliament, the Committee on Culture and Education's (2008) resolution on media literacy called on the Committee of Internal Market and Consumer Protection to incorporate the suggestion that digital games – played by children – can have substantial educational advantages and be beneficial in developing linguistic, creative and strategic skills, and intellectual capabilities. However even with strong advocacy from policy and research, few teachers include digital games or their paratexts in their curricula.

Frame

Paratexts are important to educators because they are often texts, (print, digital, multimodal, game-based, etc.) already familiar to pupils through gameplay and they have a key role in sustaining the culture of games, the digital games industry, and associated sub-industries (Consalvo, 2007; Kline et. al.. 2003; Newman, 2009). The text-based and visual nature of many paratexts allows teachers who are initially uncomfortable with the idea of including digital games themselves into classroom teaching and instruction to use them to teach more traditional literacies

This allows paratexts to act as a useful segue into a more comprehensive inclusion of digital games in the curriculum and the valorisation of pupils' gaming literacy. Educational policy makers, and educators understand how the classroom construction of literacy occurs through the legitimation and valuing of particular texts and interactions with and around them. The theory of multimodality and literacy in school classrooms is familiar to many teachers and already challenging the current literacy organisation and English instruction inherent in traditional schooling (Flewitt, 2006; Kress, 2003; Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Kress & van Leeuween, 2001; Jewitt. 2008). Teachers' inclusion of multimodal digital texts is palpable in classrooms, considering how information communication technologies blur the boundaries between school, home, and work, digital games provide teachers an excellent opportunity to draw on pupils' out-of-school digital literacy practices (Jewitt, 2008; Lam, 2006; Leander 2007; Marsh 2003; Pahl, 2007; Sefton-Green, 2006; Walsh 2009).

Research findings

We argue it is important to address young people and children's gameplay on its own terms, by valorising their gaming literacy and the multimodal meaning making arising through the actions of gameplay. In order to do this effectively, we believe that it is necessary to provide teachers with a basic understanding of gameplay, gaming literacy and videogame paratexts. This means that teacher professional development is essential to the ongoing, viable inclusion of videogames and gaming literacy in educational systems. Our 'Gameplay Model for Professional Development' furthers these understandings through descriptions of the situations, designs, systems and actions involved in young people and children's gameplay. Working with high school teachers who incorporated digital games into the English curriculum in order to engage pupils who struggle with literacy, we came to understand that valorising gaming literacy and including digital games and their paratexts in the literacy curriculum helps students acquire traditional school-based literacies, and supports their formal and informal learning which is increasingly mediated by pupils' IT expertise and multimodal design and redesign practices (Walsh, 2007, 2009).