Chapter XI
Telling Stories with Digital Board Games: Narrative Game Worlds in Literacies Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the context of computer games, learning is an inherent feature of computer game playing. Computer games can be seen as multimodal texts that connect separate means of expression and require new kinds of literacy skills from the readers. In this chapter, the authors consider how the computer-based learning tool Talarius, which enables students to make their own digital games and play them, lends itself to literacy learning. The learning subject is a children’s novel, and thus it is narrative by its nature. In addition, the learning tool provides the potential to interweave narrative contents into the games made by it. The focus of this chapter is on the relationship between narrativity and learning in computer games, in this case, digital board games. The research question is: How do the narrative functions of the learning tool support learning in game creation and game playing?
INTRODUCTION

Computer games are a substantial part of the contemporary youth culture. Nowadays, games are seen from the perspective of contemporary entertainment, in which activity and social participation are essential characteristics. In the context of games, learning plays an important role. It is an inherent feature of game playing. That is why computer games seem to offer promising support for school learning in the future. At the same time, computer games can be seen as multimodal texts. These new kinds of texts connect separate means of expression and require new kinds of literacy skills from the readers. Computer games can include narrative contents but, in comparison with traditional storytelling, there are also notable differences. Altogether, we believe that computer games can be connected with literacies learning as effective learning tools, but also as learning objectives.

In this chapter, we discuss how the computer-based learning tool Talarius, which enables students to create their own digital games and play them, lends itself to literacy learning. The learning subject is a literary text, a children’s novel, and thus it is narrative by its nature. Additionally, the learning tool includes the potential to incorporate narrative contents into the games made within it. The focus of this chapter is on the relationship between narrativity and learning in computer games, in this case, digital board games. Thus, the most important research question is how the narrative functions of the learning tool support learning in game creation and game playing.

First we will briefly consider literacy learning with computer games, and connections between narratives and computer games. In the empirical part of this chapter, we will discuss a use experiment of Talarius within literature studies, as well as textual literacy and game literacy practicing. As one result of the experiment, we propose a classification of various possible relations between a story and a computer game. In the conclusion, we will highlight the successes, but also the considerations that should be taken into account during the use and design of this kind of a narrative learning environment in the future.

As such, the topic presented here is little discussed in the literature. Digital board game-formed learning games and environments are quite sparsely researched. There is already some research in the domain of the educational usage of computer game-making process. In this chapter, we are going to join in these discussions by uniting and extending them.

The discussion about game making and its effects for learning is in its early stages yet. The educational effects of game creation from the pedagogical perspective have been discussed by Kafai (2006). She reviewed the use of computer games for learning from two pedagogical perspectives, instructionist and constructionist. The first one, instructionism, deals with educational games that, in most cases, “integrate the game idea with the content to be learned” (Kafai, 2006, p. 37). On the contrary, the constructivist perspective has highlighted the value of a game creation approach, which allows students to learn and examine knowledge through a creative process. Researchers have also discussed what kind of motivational and learning affordances are inherent within the game creation process (Good & Robertson, 2006), how the game creation process can develop one’s narrative skills (Robertson & Good, 2004; Szafron et al, 2005), and what the model of game literacy could be when it is observed through the students’ creative authoring practices (Buckingham & Burn, 2007).

In the previous works, the researchers primarily considered game creation practices in which the games belonged to the computer role playing game (CRPG) and adventure game genres that are mainly based on three-dimensional presentation. Our case study differs from the previous works in that the games made in this experiment were board games in digital form. Previous works show promising results regarding the use of game cre-