Video Games and Accessibility: New Perspectives on Inclusive Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims, through a hermeneutic-argumentative approach, to present some ideas for inclusive teaching, starting with an educational re-evaluation of video games, for years considered a mere form of entertainment. Their use as educational mediators is a useful response to the needs of a school that is increasingly aware of the educational needs of all pupils. Through the recovery of the recreational dimension and the Accessibility paradigm, it is possible to offer teachers guidance and design insights in order to create educational itineraries of inclusion, finding in video games a possible tool capable of engaging the class in common activities, on the basis of equal opportunities and active participation, additionally for the development of digital skills.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, Digital Literacy, Disability, Education, Inclusive Education

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the concept of teaching as a science of mediating processes (Damiano, 1993; Moliterni, 2013), the didactic relationship between teacher and pupil is not a direct one, but gets filtered through signs, knowledge and culture, offering itself as a media action (Moliterni, 2013).

The mediation conducted by the teacher can make use of didactic mediators, which act as “devices” that are arranged between reality and representation, transferring the direct experience from the original external context to the scenario prepared for teaching (Moliterni, 2013).

A teacher, who invents devices, creates possibilities to allow the other to engage in new activities, to find contacts with their own desires, points of support for one’s own will, resources for one’s elaboration work, help for one’s own realization (Ibid., p. 26).

In order to make learning meaningful for all, the teacher must make use of all those mediators who can facilitate the circulation of knowledge, ideas, the elaboration (each in their own way) of cognitive and practical experiences, so as to link learning in an inseparable way with the existence outside the school.

The school, in fact, must present itself as an effective laboratory to help each student to better live their existence, with all those tools that are practised and experienced in an artificial way at school.

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In this direction, the use of video games can be very useful, above all, to set up a mediating and inclusive teaching, aimed at everyone, which aims at the active participation of all students in an educational project, which taking into account the differences manages to use accessible and usable tools, according to the logic of universal design, guaranteeing everyone the same opportunities.

The didactics that opens up to digital, education technologies, media education (Rivoltella, 2001, 2017; Faggioli, 2011), in an active way, makes the students protagonists, puts them to the test, suggesting non-traditional ways of development of knowledge, favouring the acquisition of digital skills, as called for by Law 107/2005 (The good school).

The use of video games in learning is a little studied phenomenon, a legacy of the beliefs that have long discredited video games in an educational setting. Recent studies have shown that depending on the content of the video game, playing video games can of course be harmful, but can also benefit social relations and the development of pro-sociality (Greitemeyer, 2011).

Moreover, video game play itself is a form of digital literacy practice. If we define digital literacy as it is framed by O’Brien and Scharber (2008), then game play might readily be considered one particularly good case in point. Gaming is the production of meaning within the semiotic resources of the game (Gee, 2007). Gaming is a narrative, hewn out of the “verbs” made available within a game design. Unlike television, books, or any other media that came before them, games are narrative spaces that the player inscribes with his or her own intent (Steinkuehler, 2008). There is, however, a second important sense in which games and literacy are related. If we widen our focus from the “individual player + technology” to the online community that emerges around any successful game title, we find that video games lie at the nexus of a complex constellation of literacy practice (Steinkuehler, 2007). Members of fan communities collectively read and write vast cascades of multimodal text as part of their play, from communally authored user manuals to online discussion threads to fansites, fan fiction, and digital fan art (Black & Steinkuehler, 2009).

Among the various types of video games, it is useful to distinguish between serious games, which arise with the aim of “educating, training, and informing” that have “an explicit and well-balanced educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for fun” (Abt, 1987) and entertainment (Benassi, 2013).

The objectives of the two types of games are different, but the didactic use, aimed at an intentionally educational goal, makes it possible to be used at the teacher’s choice without degrading the aspect of fun and pleasure, which represents a significant aspect of learning itself.

What needs to be emphasized, from the didactic point of view, is that the intentionality and the purpose that each teacher intends to convey can make any activity ‘educational’. In this case, video games act as interesting analogue mediators, very useful in the case of students with learning disabilities.

To this purpose, a research conducted by the University of Padua and Bergamo published with the title “Action video games improve reading abilities and visual-to-auditory attentional shifting in English-speaking children with dyslexia” highlighted the close correlation between video games and reading speed, even in English native speakers children with dyslexia (Franceschini et al., 2017). This Study followed another research on the effectiveness of these types of games in accelerating reading and visual attention in Italian children with dyslexia (Franceschini et al., 2013). The research tested the reading, phonological, and attention skills of two groups of children with dyslexia who were not habitual video games users.

The children were assessed in their attentive and reading abilities, before and after playing with action or non-action video games, for nine eighty-minute sessions. Children who had used action video games were able to read faster, without losing accuracy and also showed progress in other attention tests. These results on reading skills were also maintained after two months at a later check-up. In the wake of studies begun in Pedagogy and special teaching on games (Besio, 2010) and some research conducted on video games in the educational and didactic field (Limone, 2006; Annarunna et al, 2015; Di tore et al, 2016), this essay proposes to underline the importance of video games as
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