Chapter 13

Multiliteracies and Games: Do Cybergamers Dream of Pedagogic Sheep?

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ABSTRACT

Digitalization of modern society has lead to rapid changes and innovative ways of communicating. Changes in the way people perceive belonging to society are reflected in the multiple methods of participation, communication, learning and engaging. Knowledge has become synonymous with how we can locate, use and find new information in a networked world rather than what it is we already know. The quest for knowledge in this digital and globalized society forces interaction with multiple modes of information. In this multi-literate society, educators must find opportunities for students to interact and interpret the multitude of new literacies. This chapter discusses how multi-literacies are bound up in computer games and how educators can employ these games through play, study and creation to shift students from consumers to creators of interactive narratives. The chapter provides some strategies for implementing the games in the curriculum. It also raises questions about computer game use in the primary classroom, and calls for an integrated approach to teacher and trainee teacher professional development in the area of computer gaming.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on commercial computer games within the primary curriculum and the various learning opportunities that these can provide. It additionally explores trainee teacher attitudes towards the use of such games in the classroom and goes on to explore how the development of multi-literacies, when using these games, can be extended through both modifying and creating computer games.

When technology becomes more abundant and seamlessly woven into our daily lives, new types of literacies are emerging (Buckingham, 1993; The New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The New London Group (1996) brought, to our attention, the
notion of multiliteracies. They explained that in modern society there were emerging a number of different types of literacies, which were equally as important (if not more so, as they require new approaches to pedagogy and curriculum) as our traditional understanding of what it means to be literate. These emerging literacies are often made up from a multitude of media and may incorporate many different media at the same time. Some of these new literacies can be defined as: audio, visual, film, computer, TV and web.

However, it would be a mistake to view any of these in isolation since there seems to be cross over between the different mediums. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is currently collecting ‘new’ words that have developed from gaming, texting and street language in order to produce an alternative dictionary. It is argued that ‘youth culture’ has a big influence upon the social learning of developing adults. Such influences are often dismissed as ‘fads’ or ‘seven day wonders’, but the long term influence cannot be denied. Consider the 1970s’/1980s’ impact of the Dungeons and Dragons series. Initially presented as comic books they went on to inspire Fantasy Weekends and then computer games. People actually carried their fantasy identities into the real world and those ‘included’, i.e. other players, would acknowledge this identity. Skidmore (1994) argues that such rituals are used to communicate inclusivity and exclusivity to onlookers. Given the demise of ‘popular’ comic books, the publication ‘Shoot’, a football magazine aimed at 9 – 16 year old males in the UK, was discontinued in June 2008 because of faltering sales (Daily Mail, 18/6/08), other outlets have developed to replace them. There are so many computer games on the market that this publication is no longer of youth interest. In the UK and USA the demise of comic books and the rise of computer game engagement have led to serious concerns about school leavers’ reading abilities (Goldlove, 2008). What is not recognized is the evolvement of literacy in this argument. Some academics have recognized the impact of youth culture and are producing the works of Shakespeare in text-speak and experimenting with computer games, the results have yet to be released (Daily Express, 17/5/08).

BACKGROUND

The New London Group (1996) argue that literacy learning in this century needs to take account of new media that shape the way language is used. Technology has changed the way we not only operate in a globalized society, but also our means of communicating and subsequently the language we use. Often educators are in a dilemma; between ‘txtng and your sincerly’. According to O’Rouke (2002), educators need to provide opportunities for student engagement at a critical level. She suggests that to prepare multiliterate students they need opportunities to both express themselves and make sense of the world through multiple modes of communication (linguistic/textual, visual/graphical, musical/audio, spatial, gestural) sometimes all operating simultaneously.

Using computer games in the classroom can help to provide these opportunities. Computer games, particularly commercial computer games, tend to present themselves in a multimodal fashion, combining linguistic/textual with engaging visuals and seamlessly weaving audio and mood music into the game. Through game play, students can develop their spatial awareness in an alternative way to the traditional means. That isn’t to say that it is better, just different. In today’s technological world, this is a useful skill particularly with geographical information systems becoming more commonplace and affordable.

Traditional literacies can be supported by playing computer games in the classroom. By carefully selecting a commercial game such as those based on books (there are numerous games of this type; the Agatha Christie series or Jules Verne series) students can enhance their literacy learning. These types of games can help aid comprehension and