Playful Learning Experiences: Meaningful Learning Patterns in Players’ Biographies

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ABSTRACT

Players use digital games as playgrounds for their interests, passions, values, and beliefs. Computer games entertain us, please our needs, challenge our abilities, make us engage with other players, and confront us with novel experiences. Today, video games foster learning, but how players connect their learning through playing games to their biographies is a question yet unanswered. This paper outlines basic theoretical assumptions on playful learning experiences and empirical insights into meaningful learning patterns. On this basis it presents the central results of an innovative qualitative study on playful learning biographies undertaken in 2010, and thereby aims to provide a reflected understanding of how today’s generation experiences deep and meaningful learning in their playful biographies. Furthermore, this paper examines the question on how games foster transformative learning and discusses consequences for educational settings and future research.

Keywords: Educational Science, Game Studies, Learning Biographies, Meaningful Learning Patterns, Qualitative Research, Transformative Learning, Video Games

INTRODUCTION

I think [...] both of them [playing and drawing] were answers to the same problem. But... you know. On different ends of it. – Olivia, student, 21

I think that it was... I don’t know...I would say that my life would be really different if I’d never played that game. – Sarah, student, 25

The game is like a medium to hang out with other people. – Tim, student, 21

In some cases mediated experiences may transform our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. We may watch a movie that opens up a new perspective on a topic, read a book that twists our prior beliefs, look at a painting that changes the way we perceive things, see a play that touches us deeply, or listen to a song that opens previously unexperienced emotions – we all go through these kinds of meaningful learning experiences. Certain media-based experiences may strike our minds in particular phases of our lives, in relation to the space and time we inhabit, and in the context of specific subjective experiences. Statements such as “This book has changed my life” or “That movie has opened my eyes” document how experiences made

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through media can foster the transformation of ourselves. However, transformative learning processes cannot be standardized; they do not happen to everyone through the same type of media or at the same time and place. A book that one person might call “life changing” might be boring or implausible to the next. The reasons for this discrepancy are founded in the taste, habits, pre-experiences, and the state of mind of a particular person. Also, different forms of media hold different potential for transformation. Therefore each type of media provides its own specific potential to foster the transformation of its users. We learn differently through different forms of media, as they foster specific forms of attention, activity, interaction, connection, reflection, and transformation. Nowadays video games are a central part of our culture and they accompany our lives. Digital games entertain us, please our needs, challenge our abilities, make us engage with other players, and provide us with novel experiences. But, as I will outline in the present paper, the question as to whether games encourage us to set meaningful learning processes in motion is a question that remains unanswered. We therefore need to investigate in greater depth how players reflect on deep and fruitful experiences in games and how they connect their learning through playing games to their every-day lives. This paper will outline basic theoretical assumptions on playful learning experiences and meaningful learning patterns developed through playing digital games. It will share central insights provided by a novel qualitative study on learning biographies in games undertaken in 2010. Finally I will reflect on and discuss the question of how computer games evoke the players’ transformation.

**Meaningful Learning Patterns**

The first part of this paper will focus on the theoretical basis that helps understanding learning in games in general, and meaningful and deep learning in particular. Thereby the following research questions will be addressed: Do learning experiences in computer games transform the player’s body of experience? How do players recognize and reflect on meaningful learning patterns that they experience in games? Today we assume that computer games are ideal learning environments (Gee, 2003; Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004; Van Eck, 2006; Klopfer, Osterweil, & Salen, 2009), but does their promise to foster new ways of learning imply a deep and meaningful dimension? Do we connect the patterns developed and learned in the game to our lives? Or are these forms of learning just related to the game spaces themselves? To answer these questions we first need to understand how “meaningful learning” in games proceeds.

Defining learning is a difficult task – much more difficult than most people would think. While in the field of game studies the differentiation between game, play, narrative, and rules/mechanics has been discussed extensively (Aarseth, 2001; Wolf & Perron, 2003), the phenomenon of learning has remained a blind spot until today (Bogost, 2007). Although researchers and designers like James Paul Gee, Eric Klopfer, Scot Osterweil, Katie Salen, David Shaffer, Kurt Squire, and many others have made evident that “game design is not accidentally related to learning, but rather that learning is integral to it” (Gee, 2008, p. 24), the process of learning is often reduced to a linear act of acquisition of information or data (Mitgutsch, 2009, 2011). But learning is much more than that. It is a complex phenomenon that allows us to reflect on experiences and to connect experiences between different contexts. Learning is grounded in experience and, vice versa, we make sense of experiences by learning from them (Buck, 1989). The learning process is contextualized in a particular setting and into specific frames of reference that structure our expectation and can be transferred to other settings in meaningful ways (Mezirow, 1996). However, it is not only the experienced content or information that is “saved” in our body of experience, but also the frames as structures or patterns that contextualize these experiences are stored or remembered (Breiter & Scardamalia, 1993). As Choi and Hannafin (1995) state “context provides the framework for learning,
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