Chapter 10
Using the Sims 3 for Narrative Construction in Secondary Education: A Multimedia Experience in Language Classes

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore an innovative educational classroom scenario where commercial video games are used as an educational tool. They analyse an experiment involving students between the ages of 12 and 13, during the second semester of 2010, in a “Language and Literature” class of a Spanish Secondary School. The main aim of this chapter is to develop new literacies through new educational strategies. These relate commercial video games with the curriculum in order to improve students’ specific cultural competences and social skills. The authors show how the social simulation video game “The Sims 3” can be used as a learning resource for students to create narratives and descriptions using a variety of media.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of today’s participatory digital culture, schools need to find an educational application for many tools that may not have been originally designed with such a purpose in mind, but which are meaningful in the students’ everyday life. In so doing, we approach popular culture through collaborative situations; learning to tell stories using both new and already consolidated technologies. In this regard, the educational potential of simulation games has become a subject for discussion and research (de Freitas & Oliver, 2006; Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004) and has en-
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couraged us to develop different research projects in this area, taking a different approach from the perspective of ‘serious gaming’ (Djaouti, Alvarez & Jessel, 2011).

In this chapter, we explore an innovative classroom setting created through the use of a commercial video game as an educational tool. This investigation forms part of a larger research project, developed during the 2009/2010 school year by a group of researchers from the University of Alcalá and UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia) with members of the Culture, Technology and New Literacies Research Group (GPII http://www.uah-gipi.org/). Research was carried out in collaboration with Electronic Arts, a leading company in video game design, within its corporate social responsibility program.

The whole project involved 204 students aged between 11 and 16, and their teachers, in a Secondary School in Coslada (Madrid, Spain). The students used a variety of commercial video games in workshops, coordinated by teachers, and were related to different subject areas: Biology, English, Spanish Literature, Physical Education and Sociolinguistics. These games were selected by researchers, teachers, and the students themselves, resulting in the following choices: Spore, The Sims 3, The Beatles Rock Band, FIFA 10, and NBA 10.

In this context, we are of the opinion that commercial video games can become learning tools when used in an educational context, although their original purpose is leisure. In our research, video games become an appropriate element of a comprehensive multimedia setting, in which the participants combine a variety of technologies such as digital cameras, software for audio/video edition, or the Internet.

During the project, each set of activities was organised as a workshop coordinated by the teachers. The teachers defined the learning objectives and shared them with the researchers and students. In each session, the design of classroom activities was divided into three stages: discussing a topic in relation to the learning objectives, playing with the video game in small groups, and teacher-lead, whole group sessions, where group members assessed the activities.

We analyse a trial where we show how some simulation video games, specifically The Sims 3, can be used as learning resources that help students create narratives and descriptions in the ‘Language & Literature’ class. The data for this trial comes from a specific workshop where the teacher used The Sims 3 to develop curricular content, such as descriptions and narratives, and also encouraged the students to create audio-visual productions using multimedia resources.

Basing our work on an ethnographical perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983/1995; Spindler & Hammond, 2006), we analyse how students working in small groups develop narratives when participating in situated learning activities. We use a sociocultural approach, based on the relationships between the context of the activity and the students’ cognitive skills. Scribner (1976/1997) reflects on the relationship between the expression and development of cognitive skills, and how the cultural setting plays an important part in this (Jenkins, 2006). The use of participatory digital culture requires us to question which social and cultural competences young people need to master to be able to function fully in the new media landscape.

Everyone involved in preparing young people to go out into the world has contributions to make in helping students acquire the skills they need to become full participants in our society. Schools, afterschool programs, and parents have distinctive roles to play as they do what they can in their own spaces to encourage and nurture these skills (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4).

Our principal objective, then, is to develop new literacies through educational strategies, connecting commercial video games and the curriculum, in order to improve our students’ specific cultural competences and social skills.